THE MILLIONAIRE GIRL

AND OTHER STORIES

BY

"RITA"

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LEIPZIG

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CONTENTS.

PART I.

PART II.

THE MILLIONAIRE GIRL.

I.

"I AM in despair! Absolutely in despair. No, my dear Rawdon, you need not smile. I mean it. Had I imagined what an undertaking this was to turn out I would never have consented. Never!"

Lady Cynthia Carlisle settled her small, comfortable person into a more comfortable position in her deep, cushioned chair, and gazed appealingly at the amused face of the man to whom she was complaining. His glance wandered from point to point of the charming room; noted trifles as observantly as he noted luxuries. He remembered how shabby it had been; how threadbare the carpets; how worn the old satin damask of the old-fashioned chairs! That was three years ago, when he had called to say farewell before going out to West Africa.

Rawdon Forbes was Lady Cynthia's favourite nephew. She was a small, charming, somewhat inconsequent person: a woman born to be petted, adored, and made much of. Her husband had done all this, and then died, leaving her in circumstances she described as "straitened." In reality the circumstances were well enough—but Lady Cynthia had not the faintest idea of managing. Her servants did as they pleased; her tradesmen cheated her right royally. Her expenditure was always in excess of her income, and her banking account in that parlous condition termed "overdrawn."

When, therefore, a certain well-known firm of solicitors asked her to undertake the chaperonage and charge of a rich young orphaned client, Lady Cynthia felt that the chance was providential!

Two thousand a year was a very respectable addition to her income; and it was not saddled with stringent restrictions or conditions. The girl was American, of course; but she had been educated at a convent in Paris, and finished in England. She was nineteen years of age when Lady Cynthia consented to receive her. She had now been two years under her guardianship. She was fabulously rich and extraordinarily generous. The improvements in the household which Rawdon Forbes' quick eyes had detected were improvements suggested and carried out by the young heiress. Lady Cynthia's life had rolled on Cee springs of ease these

last two years, and yet her first word on the subject to her nephew had been one of complaint.

"I am in despair!" she had said when he had inquired how the arrangement was going on—and the contrast between her words and the luxurious comfort surrounding her had brought an incredulous smile to his lips.

He drew up another chair beside her own. The bright fire, the shining brass fender, the white, soft rugs, the dainty tea equipage, seemed to him in admirable contradiction. Her plump white hands with their flashing rings and her pretty pink-and-white face framed in snowy, silken hair bore no history of trouble that might match those tragic words. With due appreciation of feminine exaggerations he suggested tea.

"And then you can tell me all about it," he added.

Lady Cynthia raised herself from her cushions and gave her attention to duties notified by five o'clock. She poured out two cups of tea, bade him cream and sugar his own, and then settled herself once more for the feminine consolation of confidences.

"Yes—you may laugh, but I assure you I don't know what to do with her. She has made friends with an extraordinary woman who belongs to a sect of Philanthropic Socialists—or Scientists—or something of that sort. She goes to meetings in their temple instead of to balls and parties. She reads the most terrible So-

cialist books instead of Mudie's novels. She gives away heaps, absolutely *heaps* of money, my dear Rawdon, and spends scarcely anything on herself. She has found out a colony of poor working girls, and lets them make her *lingerie* instead of going to Bond Street and Sloane Street, as I do!"

"But probably these very girls work for Bond Street and Sloane Street," suggested her nephew.

"Oh! of course they don't. Big, expensive shops wouldn't employ poor half-starved wretches like these! I've seen them—so I know. But that's not all. She won't go to church parade, or to Sunday luncheons, or on the river. She says one day in the week should at least be given up to doing good to the poor and unfortunate. Then about animals—she's perfectly mad on the subject of the cruelty they receive at the hands of man. I'll give you an instance. We were driving down the Embankment one day. We were going to a luncheon at the Savoy. Well, just toiling up one of those steep streets was a huge waggon drawn by one of those great powerful cart-horses. You know? They're bred and trained for that sort of work. It was a hot day, I remember, and the horse was straining and trying; but his foot slipped—and the driver began to lash him with a whip. Well, in a second the girl had opened the carriage door, flown up the street, and was at the head of the great powerful brute. The way she spoke to the

driver—I shall never forget it! Threatened police and all sorts of things. Declared the load was too heavy, and forced the man to back the waggon and let the animal have a rest. And when I joined her (because a crowd began to gather) she had actually got her arms round the horse's neck and was crying over it like a child. 'Oh! you dear, beautiful, patient thing,' she was saying, 'I hope God will make it up to you in another world for all you have suffered in this!' And really, Rawdon, if you had seen the way that horse *looked* at her with its great, patient eyes, you would have thought it understood every word she said. And she was quite indifferent to the scene, and gave the case to the policeman as coolly as possible; and the man was forced to take the horse out, for the load *was* too heavy, and—well, I forget how it all ended—I'm not sure she didn't buy the horse and send it to her 'Animals Rest Home' at Uxbridge. You must know she has bought an immense piece of land in the country, and sends all sorts of broken-down cab-horses and cart-horses, and dogs and cats there. Oh! my dear boy, it's getting positively dreadful. I'm afraid to go anywhere with her for fear of a street scene."

Lady Cynthia paused for breath. A glance at her nephew's face showed it as gravely attentive. She put forth a new claim on his sympathy.

"But this is not half what I have to endure. She

will never accept anything for what it *is*. She must pry underneath the surface to discover all that goes to make up either a pleasure, or a business, or—or—any undertaking—however frivolous or however serious it may be."

"For instance?" queried Rawdon Forbes, as he put down his tea-cup, and turned again to that absorbed study of the fire.

"Well, they are past counting—really! If we went to a theatre (for the last six months she has refused to do that!)—she would begin to pity the scene-shifters, the programme-sellers, the orchestra, the call-boy. She would watch for the tired-looking creatures who come out to cover the stalls and boxes and seats, *after* the performance! Instead of enjoying the play, she would talk of how weary the actors and actresses must be, saying the same words, doing the same things, night after night. Of course, when you begin to *think* of what makes up your amusements, you cease to enjoy them. It's as bad as looking at your face in one of those awful magnifying mirrors that show the texture of the skin like a sieve of little holes, and make your eyebrows into shoe-brushes, and your lines and wrinkles into positive sword slashes! And that's just what Priscilla does with everything. If she sees a Sunday paper, she draws a harrowing picture of compositors, typesetters, and press men, haggard and worn, stepping

from their cellars and work-rooms in the grey dawn of a Sabbath morning. Fruit on the table brings up the details of the market carts—the weary horses, the weary drivers, the tired packers. A butcher's shop is worse! She never touches meat—or anything that has been killed or trapped for food. I am at my wits' end to keep her from starvation, and my cook gives notice every second month!"

Rawdon Forbes was conscious of vivid interest in a vivid personality. Having permission to smoke, he besought further particulars of this strange young enthusiast who had so troubled the serenity of Lady Cynthia's aforetime existence.

"She has one theory, and she is always preaching it," continued his aunt. "It is that 'one half the world suffers so that the other half may enjoy.' That is an underlying conviction; the root of her strange idiosyncrasies. She would like the two halves to change places. The frivolous to work, and the workers to be frivolous. A time of rest and pleasure for the poor as well as the rich. In fact, she has drawn up a scheme for a modern Utopia madder than Tolstoi's, and framed a moral and spiritual code for humanity that might turn Maeterlinck into a Court jester and make Bernard Shaw a Christian scientist!"

"How did she get hold of such ideas?"

"I don't know; unless, of course, it was that dread-

ful woman—Madame Swazzi, as she calls herself. A most extraordinary person! Something between an Indian squaw and a Spanish gipsy. A big, impressive, swarthy Juno, with great flashing eyes that terrify me to death."

"You know her, then?"

"I have been to some of the meetings. It was my duty. I could not allow Priscilla to go about unchaperoned."

"Where is she now?"

"Priscilla? Oh, I don't quite know. In her room, I believe. Would you like to see her? Shall I send?"

"I should very much like to see her."

"I wish with all my heart you could talk some commonsense into her. I don't know what to do. The worst of it is, I can't argue. And she's so clever. She has a host of reasons, and good ones too, and she has that deep religious instinct—almost fanatical—which perhaps is inherited from the Puritan side of her family. I'm sure I don't know. But she makes me feel ashamed of my life, and yet so dreadfully angry with the way she spends *hers*."

"Has she control over her money?"

"Not yet. But her allowance is enormous. And next month she comes of age and will have it all. I am so dreadfully afraid this awful woman will wheedle it out of her. It's impossible to convince Priscilla that

she might be an impostor, an adventuress! She firmly believes in her mission, and is bent on helping her schemes."

"But all said and done, the girl is really doing good with her money. It is unusual, I grant, but also it is a very praiseworthy proceeding. Of course it is your duty to see that impostors don't get hold of her, but on the whole it is an extremely rare occurrence to find a millionaire's wealth benefiting anyone but himself and his belongings, or that class of toadies and sycophants to whom wealth appeals as a means to their ends."

Lady Cynthia rang the bell and sent a message to Miss Priscilla B. Garton requesting her to come down to the drawing-room, if disengaged.

Rawdon Forbes threw away his half-smoked cigarette, and once more resumed his upright position by the mantel-shelf. He was both curious and interested. He had often laughed and teased his aunt about her chaperonage of the "millionaire girl," as he had termed her. But he had never imagined that that same millionaire girl would turn into so strange a combination of female philanthropist and Hallelujah Jane as she promised. He remembered now, as he waited for her appearance, that he had never questioned its nature; never asked if she were plain or beautiful, fascinating or brilliant, as most of her prototypes. The girl's character and idiosyncrasies seemed to dominate her

personal attractions. Even in Lady Cynthia's mind they took a second place.

It was with a sense of surprise, therefore, that he saw how very beautiful was the young, vivid face that met his introduction. What a world of feeling, passion, and enthusiasm lay repressed, as it were, under the grey, nun-like garb of the demure figure!

He stammered out a few conventional words, but her quiet smile checked them.

"I am very pleased to meet *you,* anyway, Mr. Forbes. I have heard a great deal about you from Lady Cynthia. I expect she has been confiding what a trouble I am to her. I meant her to clear the decks before I came down. I hope she has done it."

"My aunt has been telling me a great many interesting things about you, Miss Garton."

"She has told you I'm a sort of crank? Well, natures don't always assimilate—do they? I confess I have strong opinions, strong feelings, and I can't hide them. That was the initial catastrophe, wasn't it, Lady Cynthia? Am I to have some tea?"

She sat down and lifted her soft eyes to Rawdon Forbes' attentive face. Their gaze was calmly curious; not in the least abashed. She was studying him as she studied most people with whom she came in contact. He was conscious of the fact, though not conscious that he stood before this young judge as an Admirable

But at last, when he drew her into a confession of her sister philanthropist's mission, he was conscious of a vague uneasiness. Reminiscences of Lake Harris, of Mormon prophets, of the modern "Elijah," flitted before him. This young, passionate enthusiast would prove a fitting victim for such cunning schemers as these. When her whole vast wealth was at her own disposal, it would become a serious matter to play at guardianship. He was ignorant of what arrangements his aunt had made, or for how long or short a period the girl was to remain under her roof.

When at last she did speak of Madame Swazzi, it was with the reverence of disciple to master—of devotee to saint.

"You must come to the next meeting," she urged. "Oh! if you heard her speak! It is wonderful. It is inspiration. It is as if God's own spirit rested upon her. And she is as wise as she is good. She is the very soul and temple of charity! Her followers worship her. She is a saint. She breathes nothing but the crystal-clear purity of a soul at one with its Creator. After one of these meetings everything in life seems poor and insignificant. Wealth, rank, power, ambition —mere dross. I am only thankful to be rich because I can bestow help on those who need it. For myself——"

Lady Cynthia gave a little gasp, and woke suddenly.

"Why, it is quite dark! What have you two been discussing? And the tea-things not removed! Priscilla, my dear, you *are* so forgetful. I was going to ask Rawdon to take us to dine at the Carlton to-night. I haven't been there for ages. Of course I know you never dine like any Christian person, but I daresay they could give you a salad, and some figs or dates. Why are you shaking your head? Surely you're not going to stay at home again?"

"There is a meeting to-night," said the girl. "I must go to it."

Lady Cynthia groaned. Her nephew smiled.

"Suppose we all go to it?" he said.

II.

Rawdon Forbes attended the meetings of the Swazzi Sisterhood with a persistent regularity that delighted Priscilla and alarmed Lady Cynthia. But his persistence had a method and an object known only to himself.

Always a man of strong purpose and honest instincts, he felt that there was a considerable amount of method behind this madness of the Swazzi propagandists. He took the measure of their proceedings from chance views of Priscilla's cheque-book, and from the simple confidences of herself. As a personal consideration, her

enormous wealth was unimportant, but he was not so unwise as to regard its uses in the same light. The girl's great-mindedness and pure, innocent charity filled him with a worshipping admiration. Yet he felt it his duty to point out that even a combination of all the world's wealthy forces could not set aside that truism, "The poor ye have always with you." They were a necessity of civilisation, as well as its outcome. Labour was as much a law of life for one class as luxury for another. To cleanse the slums of London would not in any measure cleanse their mode of life, or their inherited instincts. A coat of whitewash may render rotting walls more sightly; it cannot replace the rottenness with a sound superstructure.

The great and awful riddle of human misery is one that has passed from age to age unsolved. Could a mere girl hope to answer what all the wisdom of centuries had pronounced unanswerable?

"Not I only," she exclaimed eagerly, "but a combination of helpers! Think—if all the rich people in every town and district set themselves to effect a change! To house and feed the poor; to give work and wage to all who needed them; to waken better feelings, higher instincts; to be real friends, not mere patrons or rulers! Oh, indeed, indeed it *is* possible! It only needs——"

"A miracle," he interposed; "and miracles don't

happen nowadays. The world is selfish. Human nature is selfish. Myself first, and king and kingdom may take their chance, is the unwritten law of individualism. Your poor, my dear child, have to combat a different kind of selfishness. That of hereditary and unpleasant instincts. Use and habit have brought about a certain amount of content with what really shocks and disgusts another class. In your Utopia you would require your subjects to bring a new set of feelings and instincts to a new sort of existence, otherwise they would not be happier, believe me."

"But they are happier—some of them. The work-girls; the factory hands; the hospitals. Have I not done something for them?"

"You have, indeed!" he said gently; and had not the heart to tell her that the "something," great as it was in a total of yearly expenditure, meant but a mere drop in that ocean of human poverty which rolls around the world's wealth.

"I do hope you are influencing her," said Lady Cynthia to him that evening as they sat waiting the signal for dinner.

The little lady had her own ideas about this intimacy between her nephew and her ward. She was too wise to give hints. But she was pleased to find Priscilla growing more thoughtful, more amenable to advice. Rawdon's influence could not but be a whole-

some one. Men were so much more sensible than women, and could always tell you things about "statistics" and "averages" and "investments," when you wanted to spend money in rash and undesirable ways; such as Priscilla's, for instance.

"Influencing her?" echoed Rawdon Forbes. "Why should I? I merely try to leaven her enthusiasms with a little commonsense. Above all, I want to prove that the Swazzi woman is an impostor. I have found out—something."

"No! Really?" cried Lady Cynthia eagerly. "Do tell me."

He shook his head.

"Not yet, my dear aunt. I want all my proofs to hand first."

Priscilla entered on his last words—Priscilla in virginal white, instead of her usual grey, with flushed cheeks and soft, eager eyes, and an open letter in her hands.

"Oh! I am so happy," she cried, "so happy! This is from the dear Madre. Her Christmas gift. The scheme is complete. The ground is secured for our new City of Hope. The title-deeds only await my signature. Then the work will begin. At last I shall feel I have done something. That all this money won from hard labour and toil and suffering will go to benefit other labourers, other sufferers! Oh, Lady Cynthia,

how cross you look! Do read what the dear Madre says."

"May I read it?" asked Rawdon Forbes.

"Of course you may. There is no secret about it. Oh! I never felt so happy before!"

Rawdon Forbes took the letter from her eager hands. The sight of that radiant girlish face awoke in him a storm of feeling: indignation against the villainy that would rob and slay that lovely faith; and pity, tremulous and passionate withal, the outcome of his own sympathy with sorrow soon to follow, and absolutely unsuspected.

He read the closely covered sheets carefully. Lady Cynthia saw his face grow very serious.

"How much are you to give this—work?" he asked abruptly.

"The ground and the buildings will cost just upon half a million," she said. "Then, of course, there will be the endowments of the two colleges; and meeting-houses, and hospitals."

"You are very eager to beggar yourself!"

"In such a case I have no thought of myself, except as an agent in the hands of God," said the girl solemnly.

He rose abruptly from his seat.

"You are not of age till———"

"Till to-morrow," she said joyfully. "The 24th. My birthday falls on Christmas Eve."

"There is still time," he said. "Priscilla, promise me you will sign nothing—be induced to sign nothing until after to-morrow."

"My word is given for all I intend to do," she said simply. "That is bond and seal enough for me."

"Happily not for the law," said Rawdon Forbes, "and happily not for Madame Swazzi!"

III.

"But I don't understand. Oh! it *can't* be true! It's impossible! She would never have done such a thing! Never! Never!"

Rawdon Forbes was looking down at a pale, piteous face. He and Priscilla were in the private office of her solicitors, and before them on the table lay a heap of documents, cablegrams, cheques, and counterfoils. Behind the head of the firm who had had the guardianship of Priscilla's affairs stood a pleasant, grey-haired man. "Detective Officer," unexpressed by any rules of fiction, gave the credentials of his presence on the scene.

Slowly, carefully, formally, the story of a gigantic fraud was told. The able and philanthropic Swazzi had been twice convicted and twice imprisoned—once in New Zealand and once in New York. Rawdon Forbes

had set an able sleuth-hound on her track what time Priscilla in her innocent confidence was puzzling over various discrepancies in her own bank-book. A month had not meant a long period for investigation, but in days of telephones and cables and wireless telegraphy the work had been accomplished.

It was hard upon the poor "millionaire girl," with her vast schemes, her world-wide sympathies. It cut Rawdon Forbes to the quick when he saw her lips quiver, and heard the splash of tears upon those fatal forgeries. She was such a child, and this was her first disillusion. In his heart he vowed it should be her last, could a man's love and care and devotion assure it.

He took her home in the carriage. He led her, a weeping, disenchanted enthusiast, to his aunt's arms, and bade the old lady mother her and be good to her until the first pain of disillusion was over.

* * * * *

But Lady Cynthia professed more faith in a man's method of consolation. She did not forget to point out that but for Rawdon the girl would have been robbed and cheated of all she possessed, with no benefit to anyone but the impostor.

Perhaps it occurred to Priscilla that Utopian schemes are the better for a solid background—that the most beautiful and desirable charity needs skill as well as sympathy for its administration. Be this as it may, the

world, a year later, was marvelling at the simplicity of the life led by the beautiful Mrs. Rawdon Forbes, the tranquil happiness of her husband, and the extraordinarily useful and charitable works that kept them both so much employed, so much together, and so indifferent to the society that welcomes—millionaires.

THE OTHER WOMAN.

THE scene was a garden-party.

It was not an ordinary garden-party—by which I mean it was not one of those chronicled by ladies' journals as being "smart." On the other hand, it was very exclusive. It was given by a really great lady—a lady who abhorred vulgarity and noise and slang, and had steadily set her face against American millionaires and the moneyed horde who storm the gates of Society.

Her name was not in everybody's mouth; her dresses were not chronicled in every fashionable periodical; her sayings were not quoted at clubs by fast men; and no one had ever seen her displaying her prowess as a motorist. But then, on the other hand, she was a power in a "set" known to be the best and the most aristocratic of the day. It was a limited set. It did not readily throw open its doors to people. They had to be well-born, well-mannered, clean-souled, honourable — men and women alike. It did not matter whether they were rich; they were entertained and made welcome for their own sakes—a very unusual proceeding, and one at

which many "smart" people, left out in the cold, laughed consumedly.

The strangest part of all was that the leader of this set was quite a young woman. She had the "stately grace" of which poets sing, and which painters love to give to duchesses and "Serenities" in their portraits. She was beautiful, too, but it was not a beauty that appeals to vulgar eyes; not the beauty of paint and powder, of *chic* and devilry, of fastness and *risqué* speeches. But a few women, and many men, thought her the loveliest, queenliest creature that ever trod the miry pathways of this wicked world. If she had a fault, it was that she was too grave; that she took things too seriously; that she vexed her soul over the problems of life instead of following the example of other social beauties, and enjoying it.

Of course there was no reason why she should not have enjoyed it. She had a splendid position. Indeed, so high-born and so splendidly married was she, that minor Royalties had been known to breathe envious sighs when they visited any of her beautiful houses, or watched her dispense her gracious hospitality. It was better to be Countess of Beaumanoir than a Royal Highness, they said. She had an adoring husband, who was a power in the political world; two lovely children; boundless wealth, and the knowledge of how to use it with wisdom and discretion that is given to few. Her

charities were justly and deservedly distributed; her stewards, housekeepers, and controllers were personally known and judged by her before she entrusted the carrying out of any scheme to their hands.

She was highly intellectual, and never had an idle hour in her days. And yet with all her beauty, and her social success, and her influence and wealth, Lady Beaumanoir was a very lonely woman. Into her heart of hearts, the inner sanctuary of her nature, no one had ever penetrated. And there was something there which she felt, which she *knew,* and which made her conscious of failure, when all praised her success.

She had started in life with very high ideals. Self-sacrifice, self-denial, earnestness of purpose, the desire to "live greatly and do well"—these had been her purpose and aim. When she looked back from the pinnacle on which Society had placed her, she saw herself a girl in an old country garden, living a simple, earnest, studious life; knowing nothing of the restless, feverish circles in which the great world swims and splashes, and for ever whirls round and round, till each circle touches that outer boundary of the dark, deep sea beyond, and is known and seen of man no more!

She had believed in life as a place for great deeds; a studio for art, a library for study and thought, a training, not a forcing-house for human energies. Her tastes were simple, her judgment critical. Anything

loud, vulgar, ostentatious, hurt her as a discord hurts the ear of a musician, or a crude colour offends the eye of an artist. Her delicate, fastidious taste had been made yet more fastidious by training, by isolation, and self-culture.

She had an even, gracious temper, which anger only affected to an additional touch of haughtiness, or cold contempt. She made very few friends. She was considered cold and unemotional, simply because she was undemonstrative. It is a common mistake of a world that judges us by externals.

When she was seventeen she looked twenty by reason of her gravity and the absence of all petty, feminine coquetries and devices. Then her people brought her out. She was plunged into the waters of Jordan for that baptismal ceremony Society terms "Presentation."

She looked so lovely, so white, so *spirituelle,* that her Sovereign noticed her amongst a crowd of nervous, awkward *débutantes;* and her Sovereign's son remarked that she reminded him of a lily, by her slender form and her swaying grace of movement.

So she was approved and noticed even then, and sent forth to conquer hearts and coronets as beseems a lovely maiden of rank.

This was all of her past history that the world knew anything about; and it brings us back to the garden-

party which everyone was saying was quite one of the best things of the season.

It was an ideal day—neither too hot nor too cold. A June day, tempered by soft haze and soft wind.

The lawn was covered with costumes fresh from the hands of fashionable *modistes*. A band discoursed exquisite music from some unseen nook shut out by a shrubbery. The refreshment tent was a dream of beauty and dainty trifles. There were more seats than there were people to occupy them, which proved conclusively that there was less "smartness" than elegance present.

There were many great men and great ladies—notable beauties and notable geniuses. There was an utter absence of noise, riot, crowding, and loud laughter. Each group of talkers was drawn together by a natural affinity of interests. Church dignitaries, political leaders, great artists, military men who had earned their laurels —heroes, leaders, thinkers; and amidst it all moved the beautiful young countess and her husband: he radiant and genial, as was his wont; she serene, gracious, queenly, in her snowy gown and plumed Gainsborough hat. She had a word for everyone, a memory of all they had done or said, a graceful recognition born of perfect tact and innate good-breeding.

Lord Beaumanoir paused before a tall, elderly man, iron-grey of hair and moustache, and with the sort of face that novelists call "bronzed," for want of a better

definition. "Why, Forester!" he exclaimed, "you have managed to come. Delighted to see you—delighted! Thought you'd have looked me up at the club before this. Too busy, eh? Well, well, you've said good-bye to the Service for good and all; it's to be hoped you'll get your reward. By the way, I'm forgetting you don't know my wife. Let me present you. Colonel Forester, Olive—an old friend of mine; not met him for—how many years is it, Forester?"

"Ten—I fancy," said the deep voice of the iron-grey man.

He had bowed to Lady Beaumanoir, but she had frankly extended her hand. "An old friend of my husband," she said, "must become a friend of mine."

And she smiled—her soft, serious smile.

He thought what a beautiful woman she was, and his frank blue eyes showed undisguised admiration. Her husband talked on rapidly—of India, of sport, of "wars and rumours of wars," of things past, present, and to come, according to the political prophets of the day.

Lady Beaumanoir lingered there listening, and now and then speaking. The warm sunlight fell on her lovely hair, and lit up her dark grey eyes. The strains of a German waltz from the band beyond came soft and low on the air. The crowd of well-bred, well-dressed people walked to and fro, or sat under the trees eating ices and drinking claret-cup and tea.

Then her husband hurried off to speak to the leader of his party, who had just shaken himself free from the attentions of a "Primrose Dame," and Lady Beaumanoir was left alone with the Colonel.

They also began to walk to and fro under the trees —he speaking, she listening.

"It is all so pleasant," he said, "and so strange. In India, you know, our social functions are chiefly indoor ones. The climate makes us indolent, and we only tolerate exertion in our brief spells of cold, or up at the hill-stations."

"I know very little of India, or the life there," she said. "Of course one always hears stories——"

"Stories!" he said quickly. "Ah, Lady Beaumanoir, I wonder if you ever hear *real* stories—the plain truth of men and women's lives? What deeds of silent heroism, what acts of renunciation and martyrdom; what sufferings and sorrows;—are shut away among those hills and plains? There is a popular idea in this country that India is chiefly the home of selfish Government officials grabbing rupees in order to save a 'retirement fund,' or idle, useless military men, who spend their lives in polo-playing, drinking 'pegs,' and making love to their neighbours' wives. Since I have been home nothing has amused me so much as the questions I have been asked, and the opinions I have heard, of life out

there. Perhaps we have Rudyard Kipling to thank for this awakened interest."

"I like his books," she said; "there is a touch of reality, of human interest, of pathos, about the tales, that make them stand out like living pictures."

"They are very correct pictures too," he said grimly, "of types—male and female. Some are easy enough to place. The women, certainly, have not much to thank him for."

"What was your regiment?" she asked abruptly.

"Mine? The 69th Royal Light Infantry. Perhaps you have heard of the Frontier Expedition—in eighty-six. That was a ghastly affair. A young fellow who had just come out, and whom I took a great interest in, almost lost his life in that 'brush.' The men behaved badly; we had a terrible time of it. Young Carew was a great help to me. He was a born soldier, that boy—good head, nerve, pluck. I loved him as if he had been my own son! . . . You look pale, Lady Beaumanoir. Are you fatigued? Take this chair."

She seated herself in silence. There was another seat close beside it. After a moment's hesitation he took it.

"Pray go on," she said presently. "You have no idea how anything about India interests me. I—I had a friend who went out many years ago. I have lost sight of him."

"Ah! my dear lady," he said sympathetically, "that is the requiem to many a lost career. The friends left behind chant it in their own hearts unheard. But if you wish me to talk of India and my experiences you will never have time enough for all the stories I could tell."

"I think," she said softly, "you mentioned someone —a young man in whom you were much interested?"

"Gerald Carew—Jerry Boy, as we all called him. Yes; he was a fine young fellow. There are not many 'nice' boys nowadays, Lady Beaumanoir—nor nice men either, if it comes to that. If we talk of honour, or decency, or self-respect, we are laughed at as 'fogies' in the mess-room or the club. But this boy had all the old-fashioned virtues. He was a clergyman's son, and had been brought up in some quiet country place till he went to college, and then to Sandhurst, and finally got a commission in the 'Royals,' and came out. I liked him from the first. A genial, clean-minded, honest 'sub.' as ever it has been my chance to instruct in the mysteries of warfare and the traditions of a regiment. I was captain of his company when he joined. My promotion was a later thing."

He paused. His companion was still very white, and very silent. She slowly opened a sunshade like a white-plumaged bird, and rested it against her shoulder. She looked so lovely with that delicate, billowy frame-

work behind her graceful head that he forgot his story for a moment or two, and only looked at her.

"You were saying——" she gently suggested.

"I beg your pardon. Yes, I was saying that Jerry Boy became a universal favourite; but as time went on, and we changed from cantonment to camp—not to mention spells of leave among the hills—I perceived he had some secret trouble weighing on his mind. Out there we soon know which of our friends are heart-whole, or which of them has come out fresh-bound by the chains of the 'Other Woman.' There is a great deal of jealousy unexpressed, but acute, of that unknown rival in the old country. The fair campaigners of the hill-stations want fresh victims perpetually, and they object to an allegiance in the background. So it was that, noticing how popular and how pleasant Jerry Boy was, I began to wonder why he turned ever a deaf ear to the charmer; even to the seductive and appropriated charmer who is always the rock of danger to 'subs.' I came to the conclusion that here was a clear case of the 'Other Woman,' and I smiled at the unavailing wiles which lured not Jerry Boy from that sheet-anchor of his youth. And yet he was never anxious for mail-day, and he received very few letters. I could not quite understand him, but he kept his own counsel—and with all his frankness and *bonhomie,* he was not a boy one could question too closely. By some fluke—but I am

boring you, Lady Beaumanoir. . . . Why should I inflict this story on you?"

"Indeed," she said, "you are not boring me at all. Please go on."

The band had changed its waltz air to a spirited march. She lifted her head and looked out straight before her; but the moving figures were shadowy and indistinct; she seemed far away from them all—far away, in an old garden. The sunlight fell on a broken sundial; a boyish, youthful figure was by her side, pleading for remembrance during years of absence soon to come—pleading for her patience while he strove—for her sake—to win glory, and fame, and honours.

"Well," said the Colonel, "there is not much of a story after all. We were on leave together—he and I. I needn't specify the place; but it was a very gay and very fashionable one, and grass-widows were numberless, and pretty girls too; and picnics, and dances, and rides, and tennis-parties, and all the usual frivolities of life of the Hills, were in full swing. Jerry Boy was in them all. There was a woman who took a desperate fancy to him—a pretty woman, most men said, and none too scrupulous. But she succeeded no better than others. He seemed to have some talisman about him.

"'It is the "Other Woman,"' we said. 'A clear case. He comes out well.'

"Then the pretty siren lost her head a bit, and I

must confess he took fright. At last he fled, and spent the rest of his leave in some remote region where 'rickshaws and women were unknown. Suddenly we were recalled. Cholera had broken out in the regiment. Philandering was at an end. I returned at once; but none of us knew where Jerry Boy was. Orders were left behind in case he should turn up, and we all went into camp.

"It was an awful time. The death-list swelled. The men lost heart and spirit. The rains were upon us, and hope began to fail as the terrible scourge swept through our ranks. And when the disease was at its height, and the doctor at his wits' end to cope with it, Jerry Boy returned. He rode in at dusk one wet evening, a drenched, wretched-looking object. Glad as I was to see him, it struck me that there was something different about the boy. His face had lost its bright, hopeful look. His eyes were the eyes of one who has looked sorrow in the face. . . . Lady Beaumanoir, I am keeping you from your guests, I fear. Never mind the end of the story. It is not fit for a scene like this."

"No, no! Go on!" she said hoarsely. "I must hear it. Perhaps it is more to me than you think!"

He looked at her in honest wonderment; and then —his face slightly changed.

"I will go on if you wish," he said coldly. "The boy said nothing and I asked nothing, only he set to

work like any hospital nurse. He was for ever among his men, cheering, nursing, guarding against fresh infection—helpful and gentle as a woman, yet strong as a man; and all the time, all the time, poor lad, his heart was broken—broken by the 'Other Woman.'"

The billowy sunshade fluttered ever so slightly, yet no breeze shook the chestnut boughs. But the white face looked on—straight at the restless crowd—seeing still that old garden, with its wealth of roses, and the sundial on the lawn.

"I don't know," he went on, "whether the days were many or few before a message came to us that he too was down with the fatal thing. My mind misgave me as I took my way to his tent. 'Amidst so many, could not this one be spared?' I said in my heart. . . .

"He was very bad; but then, I had seen others as bad, and cholera is a disease that takes an almost miraculously sudden turn. You are at death's door one moment—it is either collapse or recovery. There were so many prayers and hopes for Jerry Boy, that it seemed as if Heaven must relent, and give him back to us. I was beside him when the crisis was at hand. . . .

He paused a moment, wondering what could have induced him to tell this grim story in a scene like this; to bring the horrors of that pestilence-stricken camp, that dying boy, before this lovely woman, whose costly

dress swept his feet, whose calm, colourless face had all the exquisite repose of a statue.

She turned her head and looked at him. Something in the look startled him almost painfully. The eyes were dilated; through the half-open lips the breath came with soft quickness. The hand that clasped the pearl-handled sunshade trembled.

"How—did it end?" she whispered. And for a moment the sunshine and the trees, and the floating dresses, and gay figures, swam hazily before her. She could not have told if it was morning, noon, or night. She only saw the white canvas of a tent—a boyish head on the pillow, fighting for life.

"It—ended," he said, simply. "I think he wished it. He whispered so to me, in those dark hours when I watched beside him.

"'I don't want to live—now,' he said. It was different a month ago; . . . but when I got back to the station I found a paper waiting for me—sent from home . . . from my people. She had married. There was no use waiting, you see; and I—I don't care for promotion any longer.'

"One can do a great deal for a patient who *wants* to live," went on the Colonel; "but when the spring is broken, as with Jerry Boy, the whole mechanism tumbles to pieces. I did my best. I gave him the trite old consolation that one woman is as good as another; that

we are fools to break our hearts for them; light butterflies—for ever seeking sunshine and ease. I painted all the glories of service—the hopes of better things to come; but I don't think he even listened. Just—when the end was near, he took something from beneath his pillow and gave it to me. A plain little gold locket, with the likeness of a girl's face inside one cover . . . and opposite it—his own. And then I knew that she must have been the 'Other Woman.' I never heard her name. She didn't look one of the inconstant sort. Her face was grave, and yet sweet, and very lovely. . . . She had grey eyes."

Then—like a flash it came to him. For he was looking straight into two grey eyes, deep and clear as well-water; and as he looked he saw the great tears rise and fall in slow, hot drops upon her white gown.

"My God!" he said, below his breath, "what have I said—what have I done? It can't be that——"

"That I am the 'Other Woman?'" she said. And he saw her hands relax, and the white, feathery sunshade slipped against his own shoulder. He took it and closed it; his pained, bewildered eyes turned from side to side, for the crowd were coming in their direction.

"There are people coming," he said. "Let me beg of you to control yourself. I am grieved beyond measure that I told you this story. How could I dream that it would affect you like—this——?"

"For ten years," she said, "I have been controlling myself, as you said just now. I think I shall be able to do it—a little longer. Open that sunshade, and do not speak to me for two minutes."

He obeyed her, bending slightly forward, so that people passed discreetly, thinking an important *tête-à-tête* was going on under the chestnut trees.

Then he heard her speak. Her voice was low and even; there was no tremor in its clear tones. Society rarely does its work by halves. Lady Beaumanoir was not an earl's daughter, and an earl's wife, for nothing. The vulgar intrusion of "feeling" on public occasions was, of all things, the most tactless and foolish.

"I should like to tell you one thing," she said. "It was not my fault altogether. We were brought up as children—we were rarely apart—until—until he left his home—for foreign service. But my people would countenance nothing between us. There was no promise —only a hope; and a year after he left I—married."

"And he broke his heart and—died. . . . We take those things badly when we're young, Lady Beaumanoir."

There was a moment of dead silence. Then she rose.

"I fear I must return to my duties now," she said slowly. "Some of the people are leaving."

He rose also, and moved his chair aside. With a

grave bow she left him, and passed on over the green, velvety sward.

He watched her until his eyes grew dim with the strain, or—so he explained to himself—the mist, that hid the graceful figure from his sight.

"Ah, Jerry Boy, Jerry Boy," he said softly, "was the cholera kinder to you than the heart of a woman of the world?"

* * * * *

For it is rarely given to us poor, blind, ill-judging mortals to read each other aright, in the light of our own wilful misrepresentations!

THE BOOTS AT No. 40.

ALL down the long corridor of the Hotel the boots stood in rows or pairs. Sometimes large and small together, betokening matrimonial couples, sometimes only a single pair of either size. At one door the small boot of a child stood eloquently beside the guardianship of a No. 4: Woman's. (Very few modern women take anything smaller than No. 4 nowadays; twos and threes have gone out of fashion since hockey and golf came *in*.)

A man wandered down the dimly lit passage, with his room key in his hand. His eyes roved carelessly over the waiting ranks of shoe-leather. Yet not so carelessly as to be unobservant, even to the noting of apparent uniform increase of size since youthful manhood had been his portion in life, and all the world had lain before him as an unexplored land of romance and hope.

His face was lined now, and bronzed by Eastern suns, and stamped with the sign-manual of hardships and endurance. The face of a man whose forty years were not borne lightly, and assuredly not reminiscent of

ease or freedom from anxiety. There was humour in the eyes and about the lines of the mouth, and a keen alertness in the expression, as of one quick to note, and observe, and remember. So it was that life made constant stories for him. Even its simplest things were set in a gallery of living pictures, whence he helped himself to scene or incident or situation at the need or whim of the moment. For him, this long corridor, the closed doors, the waiting rows of boots, held a meaning.

He pictured the hands that had placed them there, the life-story of each individual unit. The passion, or grief, or joy, or ache in each heart as the door closed upon them. The happy or unhappy couples, dissimilar, perhaps, in nature as was their very foot-gear in shape and size. The happy child—heart expectant of a tramp through London streets on the morrow, asleep now beside the mother heart; protected by love and care, even as those No. 4's seemed to protect and hold in charge the smaller "1's" beside them. All such fancies were his as he passed slowly along, finally pausing before his own door.

He was just about to place the key in the lock when he glanced at the number. Then his eyes turned to the key in his hand. Its number was not that on the door—No. 40. His room was the one adjoining—No. 41.

"Lucky I didn't put it in the lock. Might have startled somebody," he thought as he moved away.

His foot struck something. A boot. He bent down to replace it beside its fellow. How small it was and neat. How eloquent of the type of foot he remembered in those old days when Fours were considered an "extra" size, and Fives and Sixes impossible of acknowledgment.

Very carefully he put that slender, twelve-buttoned, Louis-heeled *bottine* down beside its fellow; then he opened his own door and let himself into the comfortable fire-lit bedroom he had ordered on his arrival that afternoon.

Very comfortable it looked, and specially inviting to one who had long been travelling and knocking about the world, as had been the fate of its present occupant. Julian Gray drew the chintz-covered easy chair up to the fire and threw himself back in it, after lighting a cigarette. All around silence reigned. It was half an hour since he had heard midnight strike from Big Ben, after supping at a restaurant. He thought of how he had loitered on the bridge and watched the lights of the Houses of Parliament flicker over the river; remembered, too, another loitering figure and a white desperate face that had looked up at him for an instant, and the impulse that had made him speak, and the pitiful story he had heard. He had saved a human soul that night.

"Perhaps she would have been better off at the bottom of the river—after all," he thought now, as he sat and smoked, lazily content with the *bien-être* of the immediate moment. "I wonder if she will be grateful—to-morrow? Heavens alive! What sins and shames and tragedies a city holds. Beside what I have seen to-night the desert is a paradise of purity! . . . I wonder who are the worst offenders—women or men? I wonder if they suffer for us as they make us suffer for them——"

His thought ended abruptly to the sound of a sudden sob—a choking, passionate sob. Someone was weeping close at hand. Weeping in a pitiful, heart-broken way such as women have. Weeping in unhappiness and loneliness, with only a wall's dividing space between her misery and a fellow creature's wonderment.

He sat very still; the cigarette burnt itself out unnoticed. His eye was resting on a door that divided his own apartment from that other.

"She is in No. 40," he told himself. And once again he seemed to hold in his hand the dainty boot of arched instep and slender shape.

Did that pretty boot claim ownership to as pretty a personality? Was the owner maid, or wife, or widow? And what sorrow so racked and disturbed repose that she should lie weeping there, while peace and slumber waited on the midnight solitude? These questions

tormented him. For above all else Julian Gray possessed the gift of sympathy, and had that knack of throwing himself into others' joys and strange sorrows which often characterises the literary temperament. Nothing in life, however simple or humble, was insignificant to him. Humanity possessed infinite charms as well as infinite variety. It seemed always capable of novel developments; always varying; always full of interest. Here was one of those interests. The mere accident of a choice of rooms, the mere observing of those dainty boots, had brought him into sudden acquaintance with an unknown sufferer. Each racking sob, each stifled murmur that came to his ear, touched him to keenest sympathy. He hated that a child or woman should suffer. It seemed to him unnecessary cruelty on the part of Fate. And to sit still and gaze at that door and be an unknown auditor of grief positively hurt him. He rose at last and pushed aside his chair, making some noise of purpose. But the sobs were still audible. Unable to bear it any longer, he knocked.

"Are you ill? Is anything the matter?" he asked brusquely.

There was a sudden dead silence.

He repeated the question. Then a faint, husky voice murmured "No—o . . . so—so sorry . . . Toothache."

He gave a short laugh as he turned away. "So

like me," he reflected. "Making tragedies out of pure bathos! Well, well, I wish her relief, poor soul, if only for the sake of those pretty feet!"

* * * * *

The next morning, as he sat in the coffee-room waiting for breakfast, Julian Gray examined the faces and general aspect of his fellow breakfasters with considerable interest. He was trying to deduce facts from appearances—to discover the sufferer of the previous night in one of the commonplace or charming faces at or around the many tables.

There were pretty women and pretty girls. There was a charming widow with a little daughter of nine or ten years of age. They sat at the table next his own, and involuntarily he placed them as owners of the two pairs of boots about which he had woven a romance of protection. He thought how sweet a pair the owners made. How pleasant and fresh looked all these English faces after fourteen years' absence. But, with all his efforts, he could not establish the identity of the No. 40 occupant, the owner of those boots he had specially admired. Finally he gave up the effort, and devoted himself to the substantial delights of an English breakfast. That finished, he sauntered up to his own room for a preparatory "brush up" ere leaving it for the day.

Chambermaids were bustling about; doors in the long corridor were opening and shutting. Some gave

revelations respecting feminine apparel, dress-boxes, portmanteaux. Others jealously closed against an intrusive glance. Involuntarily his eye sought No. 40. It was ajar, and, as he passed, a chambermaid was speaking to the occupant. He heard a voice, low, plaintive, vibrant—a voice that recalled some past and long-banished memory. Involuntarily he stopped. The surprised face of the chambermaid recalled him to his senses. With a muttered apology he passed on and entered his own room.

Yet that action was purely mechanical. For quite five minutes he stood before his dressing-mirror, utterly oblivious of purpose or interest, unconscious even of the fact that he was looking at his own face, for his heart was showing him another and a very different one; the face of a girl, her dark eyes drowned in tears, her mouth a grieved and quivering entreaty; wet cheeks, disordered hair. He started, and drew his hand swiftly across his own eyes.

"What has come over me! What in heaven's name should make me think of—her!"

With a short, angry laugh, he commenced his toilet for the street. That vigorous brushing of garments and hat and hair, and general noisy arrangement of boots flung off and on, so typical of manly patience with trifles!

There came no sound from the adjoining room, and when he repassed it the door was closed.

Once out in the streets, amidst the noise and traffic and crowds of busy London, Julian Gray thrust that haunting memory aside. He did not believe in coincidence, except as a useful tool in the novelist's workshop. Life itself, strenuous, purposeful, human life, did not employ trickery for its complicated conjuring. Its effects were the *bonâ fide* product of a special purpose; links in the chain of circumstance. Thus assuring himself, he faced the ordeals that at present made up the circumstance of his own presence here. They represented a successful career of journalism, and permitted him to claim the honours of an equally successful author.

He found Paternoster Row keenly aware of his existence and relative value; interested about future work; hopeful of his choice as to a special publisher, producer, or advertiser, when next that brilliant pen should furnish them with materials. Julian Gray was sincerely appreciative of such recognition. His work had been done abroad and sent home for publication. The absolute results and the recognition of his personal claims were sweet, by reason of novelty. He felt entitled to hold his head high amongst his fellows as he walked the streets; a handsome cheque in his pocket and a banking account to his name. A certain elation and satisfaction gave brightness to his somewhat serious face. In youth it had never been youthful, boasting

merely of a certain "clever ugliness" not without its charm to women, and esteemed far above mere handsomeness by men.

Time was at his own disposal to-day; he planned his hours to his own pleasure. A long absence from theatres sent him Strandwards that night, as on the previous night, and again it was after twelve o'clock before he was walking down that same corridor, and, also, found himself looking for those slender, dainty boots, as one looks for something grown familiar and friendly by mere force of custom. They were there as on the previous night.

While repeating his programme of armchair and cigarette and reflection, Julian Gray instinctively kept ears alert for any sound in the adjoining room. That communicating door became a thing of vital interest. His eyes wandered from the evening paper in his hand to the closed and locked portal behind which lurked a mystery of sorrow and a memory reawakened. Odd that such things should meet him on the threshold of this home-coming. Still more odd if——

His heart gave a sudden, quick throb. Then his lips framed a contemptuous "Impossible!" Fancy played on the strings of Memory, and the laws of Chance took up their say in the matter and argued "for," while commonsense pleaded "against."

How long the trial went on was unimportant, for

sleep seemed far removed from those wide, dreamful eyes that searched the map of speculations. Again, as on the previous night, he heard a faint, low sob. It was stifled by a valiant effort, and for a time all was silent. He, on his side, kept very still also. Presently he heard the sound of tearing papers, a monotonous, irritating sound. He lit a fresh cigarette, and pursued other fancies into realms of improbability.

Again his attention was arrested. This time by a smell of burning. Sounds of confusion followed. He heard a chair overturned, hurry-scurry of feet, the hiss of water on fire. Then a volume of smoke swept through the cracks and apertures of that dividing door. He sprang to his feet, and rapped at it loudly.

"Is your room on fire?" he thundered. "What is the meaning of all this smoke?"

Then came a frightened cry. The door was unlocked. He was conscious of a vivid light, a woman's terrified face!

He pushed her within his own room and rushed into hers. A mass of papers was burning on the floor. They seemed to have fallen out of the grate, and in doing so had set fire to the window-curtains, which were of flimsy muslin. The proximity of fireplace to window was partly responsible for the accident. With the readiness of one to whom danger is quickly realisable, and resource an instinct, Julian Gray tore down the

curtains, crushed them into the grate, and snatching up the woollen hearthrug, threw it on the top of all and stifled the flames. In another moment all danger was over, and the fire extinguished. The smell of smoke and burning was painfully evident, but the adjoining room to No. 40 was unoccupied, and Julian Gray's own room was the only additional sufferer. His rapid glance around showed him no further danger or damage, and he threw the window open to clear the air. Then he turned to the shivering figure standing by the communicating door.

"It's all right now," he said cheerfully. "And I'm thankful we haven't alarmed the hotel. How did you do it?"

"I was burning some letters and papers," she said. "And suddenly a paper blew out, and the next thing I saw was a sheet of flame running up alongside the window. And then——"

She paused. He was looking at her intently—at her dead-white face, her wide brown frightened eyes, the streaks of grey in the loosened hair. His glance wandered to the little slippered feet, then claimed and held her eyes. Their terror faded into a sudden joy, timorous and childlike; born of quick recognition of something long hoped for, and yet—impossible.

"You are Julian Gray!" she cried faintly.

"And you?" he said hoarsely. "You are . . . My God! it's not possible—it can't be!"

He made no movement to touch or greet her. Only looked and looked, and looked again—yet always half incredulous and wholly shocked by change such as rendered almost unrecognisable the beauty and gladness of a once joyous girlhood.

"Monica!" he cried at last. "Surely—surely——"

He could say no more.

Such a world of memories—such a host of things pitiful and pitiable, sad and mad, hateful and happy, surged up within his heart, and rolled on waves of sympathy to hers, that speech seemed a vague and hopeless channel for their release.

"Yes—I am Monica," she said, and that vibrant, touching note in her voice set every nerve of memory a-quiver with mingled joy and pain. She smiled faintly, and pushed back the thick, soft hair from her temples.

"You would not have known me again. I see it in your eyes. I am not surprised. Fourteen years of suffering——"

He made a hasty gesture.

"Was it *that?* The life you chose, the life for which I was cast aside, forgotten——"

"It was not the life I *chose,*" she said very low. "I told you I could not help myself. I was obliged to obey."

"Well, well," he said bitterly. "It is an old story. Why recall it? I am pleased I have been of service to you to-night, but honestly you cannot expect me to say I am pleased at discovering to *whom* I have played rescuer. I have long years of hardship, poverty, exile, to forget—first."

Her lips quivered, but, with an effort at self-command, she kept back the threatened tears.

"It is so strange," she faltered, "to meet like this—again."

"It is not at all strange," he said somewhat harshly, "for the things we never wish for are always the things to fall to us. The undesired is always the 'unexpected that happens.' I only returned from banishment yesterday. I came here by pure chance. I——" he paused abruptly. "Why were you crying last night?"

Her pale face crimsoned. She stammered out some vague confession of pain, but he knew that no mere physical suffering had caused that grief or wrung from her those piteous sobs. It would have been ungenerous to press her for the truth, so he professed himself satisfied.

Then that strange sense of the proprieties, of rules to be observed, of other opinions on unconventional behaviour swept over them both. She became conscious of a dressing-gown, he of slippers and a smoking-jacket; both—of the lateness of the hour, the overthrown

barriers of communication. He stepped aside, and motioned her to enter. The smoke was gone now, the room habitable.

She tried again to thank him, but before the coldness and hardness of his face her courage failed. She had always been weak and timorous, had Monica St. George. So, with a few stammered words, she passed from room to room, and he, watching, saw the door close slowly; surely very, very slowly—as though the guiding hand were reluctant to complete a new banishment. Then, suddenly, how or why he never knew, and never cared to ask himself, an impulse swept him from the frozen calm of his standpoint to the tremulous current of hers.

"Stop—one moment!" he cried. And the door was held ajar, and the sweet face, so mournful, so tragically sad, looked back to his own. Something, too, of the girl he remembered looked back through those brown eyes, and in the memory they awakened, his soul melted, and grew pitiful.

"Why did you break my heart, Monica?" he said slowly.

Her head drooped. She had waited on this moment for years. Waited to explain, to extenuate, and yet the opportunity found her speechless.

"Promised to me," he went on, "my hope, my joy

in exile, and then—that cruel letter—your marriage. Where is the man who stole you from me?"

"Dead," she said in a stiff, breathless way, as she clasped her trembling hands together. "Dead—three years ago."

He looked at her down-bent head and quivering fingers. "Poor child," he muttered involuntarily. "Then—that was your grief——"

"My grief!" She raised her head and looked at him with something of defiance, of shame, of desperation, but certainly not of regret.

"My God!" she cried. "If you only knew what my life has been; of the shame, the misery, the humiliation——"

"Was it—so bad? I am sorry. I thought you happy. At least you had this world's good things, Monica. It was better than waiting on the fortunes of a struggling journalist!"

"You knew what my people were," she said. "I was forced, tormented, persecuted. And then came threatened disgrace to my father, and he told me I alone could save him, and so—and so——"

"I know," he said. "I have used the subject a dozen times. It cannot boast of novelty; only of individual treatment."

"I was only a girl," she said. "And you know I never had much courage; so I gave in—at last."

She shuddered. "I have so longed to ask your pardon, Julian, for that cruel letter. But I knew that only by persuading you I was worthless could I make you give me up."

"Oh, my dear," he said pitifully. "Is that true? Hadn't you more belief in me?"

"I never heard from you—again," she went on brokenly. "And then I knew I must have offended you beyond all pardon. And yet——"

She came a step nearer, and a sob broke from her.

"And yet it seems as if Fate had planned this for us," he interpolated. "I saw your little boots outside your door last night, Monica, and with or without my will I was back in memory with you; treading the old ways, re-living the sweet hours. I sat here and dreamt and thought of you, and then I heard that piteous sobbing, and—well, I *had* to speak, even though I pictured a stranger's grief. Not in my wildest dreams yours, Monica, or you. Why were you grieving so? For the sake of that dead man?"

He paused. They were closer to each other now, and in that moment neither thought of conventionalities or proprieties, or anyone of those cold foolish barriers that civilisation has raised between human hearts and all they most crave and most desire.

"I was weeping for you, Julian," she said, quite simply. "I had seen your name in the papers that very

morning. I—I could not sleep, or rest. I was tired of suffering. The years had been so long."

"Yes," he said. "About a million of them, I think."

She looked up—smiling through her tears.

"That was so like the old Julian," she said.

Then for a few seconds neither spoke.

His voice asked the next question.

"Why were you burning those letters to-night? Were they—his?"

"*His*—no! They were yours, Julian. I had kept them so long; always going to destroy them, yet could not bring myself to do it. And then, as I was leaving England, it seemed——"

"Leaving England! Why—and when?"

"To-morrow," she faltered. "I—I am going out to South Africa as a nurse."

He looked at her. She saw his mouth tighten, and a light leap into his eyes.

"You poor little woman," he said. "Why, *you* want someone to nurse and comfort and look after you! A nurse—preposterous! We will talk it over to-morrow, Monica—you and I."

She drew back a step, white and trembling. "It is the only thing left for me to do. I am poor, very poor, Julian. I have had to earn my own living. He gambled away all his fortune. Nothing was left, and I

was not sorry altogether, for everything belonging to that time held some shame—some horror."

"Ah, don't speak of it, don't think of it," he cried passionately. "Let us make the best of what remains, dear heart. Since I have not forgotten you nor you me, and Fate has played so clever a trick for our joint benefit, surely we cannot pretend indifference any longer. Tell me you will come back to me, Monica. Let all this horrible past be buried—and forgotten."

"You can't mean it," she said. "Why—I am so changed. I have grown old. . . . My hair is white."

He laughed, and put his arms about the slender figure, and drew the maligned head down upon his breast and kissed it as it rested there.

"I only know I can't part from you again, Monica," he whispered. "It cost me enough before. One doesn't pay such a price twice in a lifetime. You have fourteen years to make up to me. You had best begin at once!"

THE PASSING ON OF MISS FLINT.

WHEN Elfrida B. Flint came over from the New World to the Old, she came with a distinct purpose. But then she was one of those fortunate persons who know exactly what they want and how to set about getting it. Her mind was strong and active, like her body. She had never weakened either by taking shares in the lottery of marriage. She despised men, and was inclined to patronise women. She had, however, a praiseworthy intention of helping them along the stony road of life by her superior sense and experience. That good intentions are not always productive of good results is merely one of those lamentable facts which swell the universal discontent with life, and produce a spurious philosophy that tries to show a hitch in the great scheme of creation.

Had Miss Flint bestowed as much attention on the art of plain cooking as she had given to the study of such spurious philosophy, she might have been more of a help and less of a nuisance to those families into whose services she entered. The difficulty of getting

her to do any work, combined with her own admirable opinion of herself and her contempt for directions, had made Miss Flint's domestic experiences somewhat varied. It was impossible to dismiss her on the grounds of incapacity or insolence, because she had a ready fund of arguments to draw upon; arguments that proved her capable of doing *anything,* only she must do it her own way. Unfortunately, that way generally differed altogether from that of her employers, which only proved, according to Miss Flint, how foolish and blameworthy *they* were. When she had argued them into loss of temper, she invariably recommended them to pass her on somewhere else. As a rule they were only too eager to oblige her. In time the result of such "passing on" left Miss Flint with a character that chanticleered "Household Treasure," and to which each new place added a triumphant note of praise. It had also assisted her to make a tour of Europe at other people's expense, and might have wafted her back to her own land of freedom but for one unfortunate incident. The incident is not material to this history, but its results left Miss Flint for once stranded on her own resources, and her bundle of eloquently worded testimonials.

For the first time this "Paragon of Helpfulness" found a difficulty in securing a suitable situation. She also discovered two prejudices in English minds: one, an objection to the free-and-easy manners of Trans-

atlantic fame; the other, a foolish preference for personal instead of written recommendation. At first Miss Flint had laughed such "foolishness" to scorn, but by the time she had sampled various high-class agencies and registry offices, and had seen her hard-earned savings disappear under the administration of lodging-house harpies and servants' homes, she grew uneasy.

Her demand for a situation as "help" to any needy duchess or countess in the played-out British Isles became less a command than a request. Finally, the request humbled itself into a willingness to take service in a less important household. But even commoners, business magnates, or mayors and aldermen showed no very great anxiety to benefit by the services of this American paragon, and finally she passed into the family of a Congregational minister, in a quiet seaside resort, as "lady help."

Miss Flint liked the sea; she also liked ministers—they were such good subjects for controversy, and their wives might be trusted to take up a fair share of household labour. Miss Flint also preferred to have no rival in her "parlour," as she termed her official department. Pert housemaids or parlourmaids who wore jaunty caps and flirted with the young men who called for orders were an abomination unto her. She could not understand how any mistress could put up with such "trash." She had always steadily refused to wear a cap. It was

a badge of servitude such as no free-born citizen of a colossal empire would tolerate. Also, it was unbecoming to her style of hairdressing. The said style was of the smooth, tightly drawn and hard knob order. Miss Flint was feminine enough to admit personal arguments into her avowed liberal views, so she was sternly consistent where caps were concerned.

The minister's wife at St. Swithinsea was a gentle, delicate woman, devoted to husband and child, and anxious to settle the vexed "servant question" with the valuable aid promised and guaranteed by Miss Flint and her testimonials. She had not stood out for a personal reference. Her introduction to the American paragon had taken place during a brief visit to London. It had been brought about by her married sister, who had discovered the said paragon at a registry office while searching for a cook for her own service. The superior manner and general appearance of Miss Flint struck her as eminently suitable to a quiet clerical family, and she forthwith invited her to interview Mrs. Brook. The result was the adoption of the American "help" into Corinthia's peaceful household.

Her husband was a man of deep religious feeling, but he had never allowed that feeling to degenerate into bigotry or narrowness. He was a pleasant, genial friend as well as a sympathetic minister, and his wife and

child were dear to his heart, as God's gifts of sweet human love and natural ties should be dear.

The child Ruth was wonderfully useful and intelligent in her small way. The advent of this new "help" was of engrossing interest. She had been accustomed to study domestic types with considerable benefit to herself and amusement to her mother.

The first evening of Miss Flint's arrival she allowed the little girl to get the tea for "both" parlours—her own and the dining-room. She was tired after her journey and professed herself desirous of a "spell of rest." She watched the child's deft womanly ways with some surprise—how she boiled the kettle, made tea and toast, and arranged the tray.

"I guess you *are* spry," she remarked patronisingly. "Go to school?"

"No," said Ruth. "Mother teaches me."

"I guess you'd as well butter some o' that toast for me," suggested the paragon irrelevantly. "You won't eat all that in the parlour."

"You seem a funny sort of servant," observed Ruth. "Mary, the one before you, only had bread and dripping for her tea. If you want toast, can't you make it yourself?"

"I reckon I will, another time," answered Miss Flint. "I'm tired to-night. Besides, little gels like you ought'er help their elders. My sister's little gel used always to

do chores for her mother and family. But there, I reckon English children aren't brought up *that* way. The things I've seen 'em do! Abso—lutely crazy, I call it."

"Mother said you hadn't been in any situation in England," remarked Ruth, setting the newly filled tea-pot on the tray. "So how can you know anything about English children?"

Miss Flint stared at the small, intent face and questioning eyes for a long moment. *"Situation!"* she repeated. "No, I reckon *I* don't call it that. I give my *help* to folk—rich, titled, or just ord'nary. No matter what they are, I help 'em just the same. I don't mind their being grateful for the privilege. We aren't *all* ekarlly gifted in this world."

"When did you first begin to help?" questioned Ruth, in danger of forgetting that the tea was drawing, in the excitement of this new interest.

"When I was 'bout sixteen. That was down Boston way. Mis' David Porterhouse G. Stubbs was *her* name. I went in to help the lady who cooked for her. But I didn't stay long there. She'd peculiar views about vegetables. Wanted all the kitchen folk to do without meat for supper. I guess that didn't suit *me*. I left. Next I went into Senator Gadsby's mansion, Washington. Mis' Gadsby, she wanted a sewing-maid. She was a nice eno' sort o' woman, but her political opinions

weren't *mine.* So she passed me on to a friend of hers, wife of one of *the* most remarkable men in Congress. I got along all right for awhile. But then I kind o' grew sick of Washington, and went with a friend of Mis' Gadsby's to N'York. I guess that suited me better. Lawyer folk they were, but kept too much company—and Mis' Josh' Sherman, she warn't o' much account, tho' she'd pretend she war. Always sort o' climbin' ladders and kickin' 'em down when she'd no call for 'em any more. I passed on through a good few N'York fam'lies, take it all round, but——Law, child, you're clean forgettin' that tray! The tea'll be only fit for your 'pa' to write his sermons with!"

"Oh, you must take in the tray!" exclaimed Ruth. "Mother would be very annoyed if I carried it. It's too heavy. Besides, you're the servant!"

Miss Flint tilted back her Windsor chair to an acute angle, and surveyed the small speaker with a glance of outraged majesty.

"Now *you* just look here, Ruthie," she said; "I ain't goin' to stand no nonsense from kids. Fust place, I'm a 'help,' not a servant. Second, I'm not goin' to take *orders* from anyone. If I *oblige* folk it's 'cause I choose to do it, not 'cause they *tell* me. See?"

Ruth evidently did see. She walked into the dining-room and informed her mother that the "lady" in the

kitchen had asked her to make toast for her, and had refused to bring in the tea-tray.

Little Mrs. Brook looked dismayed, and even her good-natured husband seemed surprised by such unwonted behaviour on the part of a domestic.

"Never mind, dear," he said to his wife: "I'll go out and bring in the tray. Perhaps a *help* is different from an ordinary servant!"

He left the room, and found that Miss Flint had poured herself out a large cup of tea, and was now robbing the toast-rack of most of its crisp slices.

She nodded familiarly.

"Ah, minister," she said, "I guess you're just in time. It's pretty lonesome sittin' here. Take a chair yourself, and pour out a cup of tea. It's a trifle stronger than I approve of, but I allow your little gel knows your taste. She's cute, ain't she?"

The astonished minister looked at the new importation in utter bewilderment.

"I—really! Well, I think I'd better take the tray into the sitting-room," he stammered. "We—ah—usually have our meals there."

"Oh, you kin please yourselves about *that!*" said Miss Flint graciously. "I find this quite good enough for me. Won't you want some boilin' water? There's plenty in that kettle on the hob."

He made no reply, but bore off the tray, and put it down on the table before his wife.

"My dear Corinthia," he said, "what a very extraordinary person your new servant seems! She actually asked me to sit down in the kitchen and have tea with *her!*"

"But you must remember, Charles, she's not a servant in the accepted meaning of the word: only a 'lady help.' I confess it's an experiment, but Carrie seemed to think she would suit us admirably, and her testimonials were really wonderful. She has lived with some of the most influential people in the States."

"Yes, she began service when she was sixteen," interposed Ruth eagerly, pouring out and sweetening her mother's tea to suit her taste. "And she called the mistress a *woman* and the cook a *lady*. And then she was passed on to a senator's wife. What is a senator, papa?"

"It's an American political title, I believe," said Mr. Brook, taking his own tea-cup. "This is perfect tannin, my dear," he added. "Do get some hot water. It seems to me we are expected to wait on ourselves, at least for to-night."

That was evidently Miss Flint's idea. She took no notice when the bell rang; and finally, getting tired of waiting, Mrs. Brook herself carried out the tea-tray into the kitchen. Her new "help" was still sitting before

the fire tilting her chair to and fro, and taking a leisurely survey of shining tins and snowy shelves and well-covered dresser.

She watched her mistress put down the tray.

"'Twould save you *con*siderable trouble, Mis' Brook, if you'd have meals in here. I don't hold with on-necessary labour. Carryin' trays in and out seems just foolishness. I'm not above joinin' in with your family. There ain't no pride of that sort 'bout *me*. And I'm used to conversation with my meals. 'Equality makes all men and women noble-minded,' as the senator used to say. I expect I could tell the minister a good few experiences, spiritual and otherwise. What's his particular line? I'm a Dunker-Baptist at present, but I've sampled a few more sorts o' religion. I'm liberal-minded —that's what *I* am. A plantation hymn don't come much more amiss to me than a *Re*vival, or a shoutin' Methodist, or a Freethinker, or a Mormon Elder. No, I growed up that way, and I'm not ashamed to own it. Oh, you're standin' all this time, Mis' Brook! I guess you're waitin' to wash up them tea-things."

Corinthia plucked up spirit at last.

"I understood when I engaged you, Elfrida," she said, "that you were to perform all usual domestic duties. I included washing up the plates and dishes among them."

"Well, I can't help what you *in*cluded and what you

didn't," responded Miss Flint cheerfully. "*Help* is a word of *con*siderable variation. I reckon there warn't no specification of what help, and *when* to help, or vicey-versey. If *you* like to bring in a bowl o' hot water, I'll oblige with a hand at *helping* you wash those tea-things, just to pass away the time—tho' I didn't reckon you'd expect me to work to-night, after a long spell of travel. But never mind: I'll do it if it's *got* to be done."

This was a fair specimen of Elfrida B. Flint's behaviour for the next few days. When she chose to do any special work, she did it without reference to the time or style of her doing it being convenient to her employers. If she prepared a meal, she would take it straight into the dining-room and set it on the table, regardless of the absence or presence of the family. She also translated one of the many meanings of "help" into a generous contribution, self-levied, on joint or pudding before bringing them to table. She never addressed her master or mistress except as Mr. Brook or Mis' Brook, and Ruth was always "Ruthie." When a visitor called, she showed her free and independent training by announcing "A woman in the parlour to see you, Mis' Brook." On the other hand, the itinerant vendor of fish, poultry, or vegetables was always the "lady" or "gentleman" with their respective goods.

Taken as a whole, the paragon who had been "passed

on" through the length and breadth of the most remarkable continent in the world, and whose value and accomplishments were, on her own showing, as priceless as they were varied, soon became somewhat of a white elephant in the minister's simple household. There were so many things Elfrida Flint *could* do that were of no possible use, and so few she would perform that in any way suited her employers' tastes or wishes. Yet it was not easy to *prove* her deficiency. She had an apparently inexhaustible stock of arguments, and a flow of speech that would have done credit to a stump orator.

The fashion in which she tackled Mr. Brook after family prayers left a pious, but very natural, regret in his mind that she had ever been invited to join in them. Afterwards he remembered that on the first occasion she had not stood upon the ceremony of an invitation, but had walked in after supper, and seated herself on the nearest approach to a rocking-chair the parlour could boast of. When the simple form of reading and prayer was over, she turned to the minister and addressed him in her usual frank, unbiassed manner.

"I guess, Mister Brook, your religious views aren't exactly strong enough to suit *my* fancy," she observed. "When it comes to a girding up of conscience, and putting on the armour of the Lord, it's just no kind o' use prayin' mild same as you did. But p'raps your persuasion don't need no *special* gift. Now I reckon a hymn

or two would kind o' liven things up. I'll bring down my hymn-book to-morrow night, and set you goin'. I've a gift of voice that's verry stirrin', so I've been told. Out West once——"

She looked round, then sank back into her chair, prepared for anecdote, much to little Ruth's delight.

"As I was about to say, out West once I stayed with a superlative, non-ecclesiastical science man, who had started a society for debate on uniform devotion. Preach!—why, that man could make your hair stand up with strong doctrine. Clever! . . . the great Confucius was just foolishness to him! I didn't agree with *everything* he'd say or hold. That's never my way." (Mr. Brook knew that well enough by this time.) "But I'd as lief hear him talk as any archbishop or dissenting parson in *this* country. Wal, *he'd* never start any sort o' meetin' without singing. You try it, too, Mister Brook."

So on the next night Elfrida appeared carrying a large hymn-book in her hand, and forthwith started what she insisted on calling "the meetin'" with one of those aggressively fervent outbursts peculiar to the Salvation Army or a revival camp of unregenerate blacks.

She seemed so desperately in earnest that Mr. Brook had not the heart to stop her, so he and Corinthia meekly followed suit to the alternate enthusiasm of high soprano and deep bass. Miss Flint's voice partook of

the worst qualities of each, but certainly deserved her own description of "stirrin'." She was so pleased with her innovation that for the next week she considerately refrained from criticising the minister's reading of the Scriptures or extempore prayers. But he saw disapproval written on her face, and became positively nervous.

In fact, that first week was a trial to all concerned. To Miss Flint, as being of most importance, it was simply the ordeal she usually faced in every new situation: a silent struggle between emyloyer and employed; a determination to get her own way and do exactly what she pleased, yet do it in a fashion that left no loophole for positive complaint—complaint strong enough to jeopardise her position in the household or warrant dismissal. On every occasion of "passing on" Miss Flint had taken care that *she* gave notice of that catastrophe, or prepared for it by such inducements that reference or recommendation was not only assured, but eulogistic.

She had insisted on Mrs. Brook's agreeing to engage her for three months *certain,* unless she chose to break the bond on any plea of "overwork," ill-health, or want of consideration on the part of her employers. Often Corinthia regretted that agreement even in the brief space of that first week; but she could plead no reasonable excuse for breaking it, and with true feminine philosophy tried to make the best of a bad bargain and

keep the worry and stress of Elfrida's ingenuous methods from her husband's knowledge.

At last she unburdened her soul to an old and valued friend, who was also an influential member of the congregation, and lived at the Manor House.

Lady Ferrars was a cultured and well-read old lady, full of humour and intelligence. She was godmother to little Ruth, and devoted to Corinthia and her husband. The troubles of her sensitive friend struck her in a less serious light than their narrator had expected.

"American, and a 'help!' Oh, my dear Corinthia, what else could you expect from such a combination of perfection! I should like to interview the young lady. I suppose she *is* young?"

Corinthia suggested any age from thirty-five onwards.

Lady Ferrars pondered.

"I'll tell you what. The working-party meets at your house to-morrow, doesn't it? Of course, I'll be there as usual. When this Miss Flint brings in tea I'll 'draw' her on her views, and see if I can't show up the other side of the question. You see, I've been to America myself, and know something of what a republic produces."

"Very well," agreed Corinthia, "I'll tell her to bring in tea, but I can't answer for her doing so. It entirely depends on the view *she* takes of a request whether she'll comply with it."

Lady Ferrars laughed.

"That's so like them," she said. "And you can't persuade them that their view may not be altogether convincing."

The working-party had been instituted by Corinthia Brook for the purpose of making up warm and useful garments for the poor of the parish, which were distributed at Christmas-time. The charitable members gave two hours a week to the cutting out and sewing necessary for the purpose. They met by turns at each other's houses, varying the monotony of work by the discussion of mild scandals and weak tea. The next meeting was due at the minister's house, and Mrs. Brook cautiously instructed Elfrida on her duties for the occasion.

"I shall want you to prepare and bring in tea for about a dozen ladies," she concluded; "and please cut the bread-and-butter a little *thinner* than you usually do for ourselves."

"Wal, I'll try," said Elfrida. "Tho' I *do* reckon it's kind o' *mean* to give your visitors less to eat than your family. But that's the way with Christians: words plentiful as calamity but deeds——" She shook her tightly hair-pinned head meaningly.

Mrs. Brook coloured with a near approach to justifiable anger.

"I don't think you understand, Elfrida. I want the bread-and-butter cut *thin*——"

"There you go again! Isn't it just what I said? There ain't no call for you to empha*sise* it."

"Thin," persisted Mrs. Brook, "because it's considered more suitable for afternoon tea. That's all. I never said you were to reduce the quantity."

"I reckon you'd better cut in yourself," observed Elfrida with spirit. "It's against my conscience to treat folks inhospitably. If you'd asked me, I'd have made corn-cakes, and buck-wheat cakes, and pies, and sponge sandwiches; but as I'm in arrears with the confidence of *this* family, why, it's not to be expected that I kin rise to the occasion!"

Poor Corinthia sighed despairingly.

"I'd tell Miss Ruth to cut it," she said, "only you let her scald her hand yesterday lifting saucepans; and I can't do it myself, for I've to dust the drawing-room and arrange flowers, and get out the best china; and to-night the raisins *must* be stoned for the puddings. I always give away a number on Christmas Eve. We're quite behind with everything *this* year."

"I'd as lief have nothing to do with Christmas puddings," observed Elfrida calmly; "they're not *our* style. I'd just as soon have a plate of hominy myself."

"Does it never strike you, Elfrida, that other people

have views and opinions deserving consideration as much as your own?"

This was an unwise remark. It brought down an avalanche of the valued doings and the lavish appreciation bestowed on Miss Flint by all the great and notable people in her own country. Experience counselled a hasty retreat. Corinthia retired to the china cupboard, and sent Ruth out to buy cakes and biscuits, so as to be independent of her help's bread-and-butter.

The question of answering the hall door continuously was a fresh trouble. However, Miss Flint simplified matters by leaving it open after the appearance of the first visitor.

"I conclude they know their way into the parlour without my showing it," she observed to little Ruth, who was in the kitchen. "It's foolishness pretendin' they don't, and me a-tellin' your ma their names, just as if she'd never heard them before. I'm clear-headed enough about what's *due* to folk. No one can ever say that I've gone back on *my* privileges as to free and equal terms for everyone."

"Our servants before you," observed Ruth, daintily setting out the best china after covering the tray with a snowy tea-cloth, "always wore pretty caps and muslin aprons of an afternoon, and they'd show the ladies in nicely. I think your ways are very rude, myself."

"Oh, you *do?*"

"Yes; and mother has to work twice as hard since you came; and I never got tea ready before for the working-party. But mother said I'd better see to it, for there was no knowing what you'd do."

Miss Flint seemed to regard that remark as a compliment.

"I reckon I *am* a bit original in *my* methods," she answered cheerfully. "Stickin' bits of muslin on *my* head don't come within an appreci-*a*-ble distance of my principles, Ruthie; but I do sport an apron, plain and clean, and of some use for frock-covering, which I hold is *what* an apron was meant for. Oh! drat that bell! Why can't folks understand that when a door's open they kin just walk *through?* You run along, child, and count up how many's come into the parlour."

For Miss Flint had a scheme by which to enliven her own leisure time and the working-party also.

When the requisite number had assembled, she proceeded to make the tea, although Mrs. Brook had specially desired her not to bring it in until she rang for it at four o'clock.

Then Elfrida carried in the tray, having piled the saucers in one row and the cups in another, and heaped the various little cakes and biscuits together in a pie-dish, in order to save herself the trouble of what she called "sortin' out."

Straight into the drawing-room she walked, a gaunt

figure in a black gown and large white linen apron. Her shrewd black eyes took in the circle of workers with a rapid glance. She deposited the tray on the centre table, sweeping away such impedimenta as books, reels of cotton, or work-rolls with an unceremonious shove of her elbow.

"I guess you won't mind havin' your tea to suit *my* time," she observed genially. "Mis' Brook, there she ha'n't introduced any of you, but I'm Miss Flint—Elfrida B. Flint, from Kansas City—come over here to have a look round. I guess I don't mind takin' a hand at your sewing-class this af'ernoon. I kin fix up a seam with anyone."

Not in the least abashed by the gaze of twelve pairs of feminine eyes, she took a chair near the fireplace and drew a thimble from her pocket.

Poor Corinthia Brook was utterly dismayed for a moment. Then she faced the situation on its merits.

"This—lady," she announced hesitatingly, "is Miss Flint, as she told you. She has kindly consented to stay with me for a time . . . as help."

Then she turned to the tea-tray to cover her confusion, and, by the diplomatic aid of Ruth, contrived to arrange cups and saucers and the misused cakes and biscuits in a more inviting fashion.

Lady Ferrars, who was the only person acquainted with the idiosyncrasies of Miss Flint, glanced at her

with some interest. She was close to Elfrida's chair, and, turning, she handed her the flannel petticoat she had just cut out. "You may as well herring-bone that seam, Miss—Flint," she said, "if you really wish to assist."

"Ruth," said Mrs. Brook at that moment, "take this cup of tea to Lady Ferrars."

Elfrida's ears pricked like the ears of a war-horse at the trumpet's call. She turned in her chair and surveyed the owner of a despised British title with a critical glance.

"Wal," she exclaimed, "I *did* think as how we were all on one footing in the minister's house, same as in chapel. No, I did *not* expect to find the cloven foot of precedence plumped right down in the midst o' folk as are only used to recognise personal merits."

Lady Ferrars turned her smiling eyes on the frank speaker.

"I assure you, Miss Flint," she said, "I am too great an admirer of your nation and its wonderful people to wish to assert any right of precedence here—or elsewhere. A title is such a mere accident of birth—or worthlessness—nowadays that the true aristocrat would prefer to dispense with one."

"All the same," observed a pretty young widow, by name Mrs. Arthurson, "one has had rather strong evidence that the said 'wonderful people' who abuse us for

possessing an aristocracy, have displayed considerable eagerness in annexing these absurd titles for their own daughters or sons."

Then Miss Flint arose in her wrath, and gave vent to opinions born of a liberal-minded press and various disorganised debating societies. There had never been such an exciting afternoon since first the guild of workers formulated its meetings, nor one in which so little work was done.

Miss Flint, however, like most lovers of progress, and denouncers of such things as do *not* seem good unto them, gave vent to more freedom of speech than polite society usually indulges in, at least in public. Also, as is not infrequent with female orators, she ignored facts for generalities, and verbally stormed perfectly innocent institutions, as though an entire reorganisation of the growth of centuries was the only possible salvation for Great Britain, and the easiest thing in the world to accomplish!

Lady Ferrars was the chosen target for her arrows of scorn, but Lady Ferrars never showed that even one of the many shafts aimed at her prerogatives hit the mark. The flow of eloquence with which Miss Flint deluged aristocracy and royalty for a sham pretence of inequality afforded her untold amusement. When one's ancestors have come over with William the Conqueror and been the friends and defenders of kings and king-

makers, it is impossible to regard the yelpings of latter-day democrats with anything short of commiseration. Besides, Lady Ferrars had visited America, and was a great reader of American literature and a great admirer of the humour of Samuel L. Clemens. The arguments gradually closed into a sort of word-duel between herself and Miss Flint, while the other ladies listened and wondered and applauded.

"Now listen to me, Miss Flint," she said, as she rapidly turned down the hem of a flannelette garment: "you have just said that in America *everyone* is equal. You've been brought up to believe royalty is a sham, and an aristocracy pure nonsense. For any man, woman, or institution you haven't a grain of respect *individually*. However, as a nation, or a community, you *do* appreciate wealth, power, or position, even in your land of liberty. But to blind yourselves to this fact you give the title of lady or gentleman indiscriminately. Am I not right?"

"Wal, if we like the sound of one word more'n another, what's it matter *how* we call folk?"

"Oh, it's only a matter of sound, not irreverence? An odd distinction to an English mind! It's simply this, then. *All* women are ladies in your country, whether they ride in carriages, or clean a doorstep, or wash one's linen?"

"They are *so*—if they're respectable."

"And do the *rich* ladies call the poor ones or the

working or the domestic class by the same title they apply to themselves?"

Miss Flint hesitated. "I reckon there ain't no hard-and-fast rule 'bout *that,*" she allowed. "There's nothin' much in what you *call* a person—don't matter a red cent. It's what they *think* they are that signifies, not what anybody else thinks them."

"Then if a servant calls herself a young lady, what does she call her mistress?"

"An old one, maybe," said Elfrida smartly.

"But supposing she's not old? Are they both young ladies? Equals in the social scale? If so, entertaining must be a somewhat perilous enterprise."

"I don't know any 'bout entertaining," admitted Miss Flint. "Folks I've lived with ha' been mostly of a homely sort, 'cept the senator's wife, Mis' Lincoln S. Gadsby, and *she* had coloured folk to do waitin' and such-like. *They* don't count."

"Oh! the broad recognition of caste isn't universal then? You don't call niggers 'ladies and gentlemen' even in a land of professed equality?"

"Guess you're drivin' at somethin', Lady Ferrars, but I don't see daylight anyway near it yet."

"I'll try to explain myself better. If you take up any, let us say, employment, you would expect your employer to treat you fairly; house and feed you, and all the rest of it, wouldn't you?"

"I guess so," agreed Elfrida, with an involuntary look at the pale face of her mistress, who had let her work drop onto her lap, and was giving anxious attention to the discussion.

"Well, haven't you an equal duty to perform on your side? Is it any more your right to neglect or disobey orders than it would be for your master—I beg your pardon—the 'folk' you profess to help, to refuse you bed or food when the fancy takes *them?* If there is only one law for both parties, both parties must abide by that law."

"I guess that's what we do," interposed Elfrida.

"But, according to your own showing, you've acted pretty much as you pleased hitherto. Been a law to yourself, so to speak."

"I guess that's what every freeborn, *en*lightened citizen of the *U*-nited States has a right to be!" ejaculated Elfrida emphatically.

"Then, had any one of your mistresses chosen to ill-use *you,* or insult *you,* she had a perfect right to do so?"

"They'd better ha' tried it," said Elfrida grimly.

"That's hardly an answer," persisted Lady Ferrars. "Taking your own code of conduct as an example, the senator's lady, the lawyer's lady, or the lady of the boarding-house, or any of the ladies in whose employment you have been, were quite entitled to treat you as you treated them?"

Elfrida paused, and looked keenly at her questioner.

"You kind o' freeze one into a corner. I don't 'low as I've treated *any* lady different to what I'd expect her to treat me."

"Very well. If Mrs. Brook asked—I won't say *ordered*—you to go straight into the kitchen, and take your supper, and go to bed, what would you do?"

"Guess I'd smile. I ain't no child to go to bed with the dicky-birds."

"But if she *insisted?*"

"She couldn't."

"She could. You are in her service, and must abide by her orders as long as she pays your wages and carries out *her* side of the contract."

Miss Flint rose with stately dignity, and laid down the flannel petticoat.

"I reckon there's been enough o' *this* talk," she said.

She straightway collected the cups and saucers and replaced them on the tray. Then she carried it back into the kitchen, returning in a few moments with the lighted lamp, which she placed on the table. It was the first time she had done so unasked. It was noteworthy, too, that she lingered in the hall to show the visitors out, and returned their "good evenings" with unwonted politeness.

Lady Ferrars came out the last. She was astonished

at the subdued demeanour of her quondam antagonist, but permitted her to assist in the adjustment of a sealskin cloak with her usual graciousness.

"I guess you're a *real* lady, for all you've got a title," observed Miss Flint gravely. "And *that's* what I've been huntin' for all my life. Strikes me I've been and muddled up distinctions *with* differences. But seein' as how there can't be any real abolition of an aristocracy same as you b'long to, I reckon I wouldn't mind studyin' their ways and manners first hand. You don't happen to need a servin' maid, Lady Ferrars?"

"I do not."

"Or a cook's help, or a waitress, or—say, m' lady, can't we strike it off somehow? I guess I've taken a fancy to you, and *this* place don't suit me—I kin tell Mis' Brook that to-morrow mornin'. 'Twon't break her heart, that's sure."

"But I understood she had engaged you for three months?"

"Optional with me to break it off."

"And not with *her?*"

"Oh no! I don't hold with too much freedom in these sort o' contracts."

"In spite of your laws of equality and liberality? I'm afraid, Miss Flint, service with me wouldn't suit you, then. For I like a bargain to be kept by both parties to it, and if you are ready to desert your present

mistress for a mere baronet's lady, before long you might be deserting her in favour of a duchess, and the duchess again might be supplanted by a Royal personage. On the whole, Miss Flint, I should advise you to remain where you are and fulfil your side of the obligations incurred with a little more regard for those obligations than you displayed this afternoon. But I really have enjoyed meeting you *im*mensely! Will you shake hands?"

Elfrida stared aghast at the extended hand, the smiling, gracious face, on which the rays of the hall-lamp fell.

"Wal!" she ejaculated, "they *do* say you kin never know what sort o' folk English folk are till you've lived a spell in their country."

Lady Ferrars laughed.

"Suppose you go in now," she said, "and help stone the raisins for the Christmas puddings. I heard your mistress say they had to be done to-night."

The door closed upon her. Elfrida turned slowly away to her own "parlour."

"Wal, to *think,*" she said confidentially, "that Elfrida B. Flint should ha' condescended to *ask* a member of the British aristocracy to take her into that played-out old institution as help, and bin refused. Guess they'd laugh *some* out West. . . . Wal, I don't know as how I hadn't better lend a hand with those raisins."

THE CRANK.

He believed that bread was the staff of life, and carried his views to the extremes of simplicity. Man only wanted a staff to support him down the vale of years. Here was one satisfactorily provided. No horrors of slaughter, no shedding of blood, no impurities of adulteration. The simple diet to nourish the simple life. Oh! happy humanity if only it would believe and accept such pure and wholesome facts.

Like all cranks, Bertram Sallicrust was not content with self-endured martyrdom. He wanted followers, disciples, believers. He wanted to preach and be accepted. So he set to work. Being fairly well off as to this world's goods, he was able to do this on a prepared system. He opened a small and daintily suggestive restaurant, and he advertised it! Being eager for a novelty as well as for the noblest form of serving humanity, he also set about such advertisement in the approved American methods by aid of an American agent.

The agent had very original ideas, and was willing

to impart them for a handsome salary. He also claimed complete freedom of opinion—and diet—as far as he himself was concerned. Bertram Sallicrust felt that this was somewhat unpartnerlike, but his will was weaker than his philanthropy, and he succumbed.

Once the business was fairly started it was Bertram's delight to visit his unique restaurant daily. To revel in its artistic simplicity; its wholesome frigid cleanliness; its spotless purity. The floors and walls were tiled and washed down every morning. The tables were of metal and covered with spotless napery. The attendants were dressed in Jaeger underwear and wore lilac prints and white linen aprons and caps as outward presentment of simple, unadorned grace. The selection of these attendants had been Bertram's chief difficulty. The usual waitress was a pert, self-opinionated person, averse to hygienic rules and indifferent to their standard. She refused to believe in the sustaining properties of brown bread, lentils, haricot beans and hot water. That a cabbage contained as much nutriment as a mutton chop also presented obstacles to faith, and when nuts and dried almonds came into the menu she scornfully dismissed them as "firewood."

Bertram Sallicrust being young and full of noble ideals was naturally sublimely ignorant of women. As yet they had not entered largely into his plans or his life. At twenty-four a young man either knows every-

thing about a woman, or nothing at all. To Bertram she merely entered into the scheme of creation as necessary and took the form of neat-handed Phyllis. These pert quick-tongued claimants for situations disturbed that idea considerably. Finally he took counsel with his agent, Mr. Wharton B. Choke.

"Gals!" observed that individual, "wal, I guess they're kind o' skittish. You can't expect them to accept your fads as well as your wages. Better leave 'em to me. If the place has got to be run you haven't got time to go foolin' around after waitresses. If you can get 'em to agree to your style of dressin' 'em that's as much as you need calc'late on just yet awhile."

So Mr. Choke had engaged two as being ready and handy for the opening day and Bertram Sallicrust kept a look-out for a principal young lady who would and should agree to adopt his mode of life, and his mode of diet, and be clerk and book-keeper as well. As yet he was obliged to perform those offices himself. But also, as yet, they were not very onerous. Indeed he found he had a great deal of spare time on his hands, and the cashier's desk knew more of the daily press than it did of the restaurant's bills and checks.

The "Simplex," as he had named his unique establishment, did not seem to "draw." A chance customer would look in and ask for the menu card, and then remark he'd like a chop! The young proprietor

would wax indignant and point to the title-page of his enterprise. Occasionally, if the customer were patient, Bertram would take the opportunity of expounding his views and hold forth on the iniquitous cannibalism of mankind with the vigorous eloquence of a Bernard Shaw. But these methods were apparently not methods to success. There was still a majority, a large working-class, ill-nourished majority, who sighed for chops as midday sustenance and refused to believe in the sustaining forces of lentils and haricot beans.

For a month the "Simplex" had made eloquent appeal to the enlightened; had shown its purity and simplicity to the callous passer-by; had cooked and presented hygienic diet in various attractive forms, and for a month the cashier's desk had been unbesieged for change, and the waitresses left to such duties as befall the unemployed.

It had opened on May 1.

June 1, being a Sunday, the young proprietor resolved to make holiday. He took a late Saturday-night train to a quiet retreat by the Thames. An idyllic spot he had discovered, unfrequented by the river-tripper—a place of rustic cottages, green meadows, sedges, and willows. He put up at a rustic inn, a place sweet and simple and countrified. He slept the sleep of the just and the non-dyspeptic. He woke to all the poetic sounds of twittering birds and crowing cocks, of lowing

cows and barking dogs such as Nature and an open window provided.

Six o'clock and a June morning, and the river flowing beneath his casement. Up he rose and drew long breaths of fragrant air and walked the limited space of his chamber; performed many strange antics which came under his system of "health exercises." Then off to the riverside for plunge and swim and back once more to the simple fare of home-made bread and new milk. Fortified and invigorated he could afford to pity all such as know not, or heed not, the simple life, and the simple diet. Clad in flannels and bareheaded to the genial day he adventured for a boat. The sunny hours should be spent on the river. He would be his own pilot and coxswain and his own company too. Sculling and drifting and dreaming he at last found himself in a dusky retreat where willows arched over the stream, and he seemed the only intruder on solitude. He moored the little skiff to an outstretched bough and then threw himself on the bank in lazy enjoyment of peace and a cigarette. With half-closed eyes he meditated on his great project for improving the human race and abolishing the Fiend of Patent Medicine from the British Household.

Suddenly he was conscious of an intrusion. A young voice was carolling a song. He caught the words and recognised the air. It was one made familiar by the

skill of piano-organs and the retentive memories of street boys. He raised himself on one elbow and stared through the green shade at an advancing figure. A girl was coming through the glade. The sunlight on her bright hair, her hat swinging on her arm. Her head was bare to the airs of heaven as Bertram deemed all sensible heads should be. She was quite unconscious of his presence and he made no movement to betray it. But within a few feet of himself her eyes fell on the skiff. She paused abruptly. He saw her glance around for a possible owner. He met the glance and stood acknowledged as explanation of it. At no time a stickler for conventionalities, it did not occur to him to commence to learn that lesson now. He smiled frankly and rose to his feet.

"I hope I am not trespassing," he said. "I was warm with rowing and this spot looked too restful to resist."

"I believe the owner does not mind," she answered. "This glade is quite a long way from the private grounds and gardens. You would have come on to the boat-house a little higher up the stream."

Bertram Sallicrust felt that he had no desire to penetrate further into the mysteries of proprietorship unless this fair maid was in some way concerned in them. He put the question guardedly. A merry laugh answered it.

"Related to Mr. Fothergill! Good gracious no! But my father is head gardener here, and I am allowed to walk in the park or grounds on Sundays. The rest of the week I'm working myself."

"Working!" He looked at the dainty figure. The youthful face. Seventeen summers could have scarcely set their impress on its girlish beauty.

"At what do you work?" he went on abruptly. "You look as if——"

But work was one of his theories for improving, and regenerating. He could scarcely say it was unbefitting; he did not know that it was unnecessary. Now that he was standing upright he caught sight of a rude bench made from a fallen branch. He noted too that she held a book in her hand. It occurred to him that she had come to this spot for rest and mental recreation and that he was an intruder. Yet he felt inclined to linger. He scarcely knew why. Girls had possessed no interest for him as yet. They were irrational giggling beings, addicted to floral hats and small waists and unhygienic garments. But this maid of the meadows wore her own sunny tresses as crown and covering, and a figure of such gracious curves and goddess-like bearing gave Nature's sweet denial to any hint of "straight-fronted" or "swan-bill." He looked and looked, and forgot her embarrassment in the wonders of his new powers of appreciation.

She was first woman to his manhood as revealed by the magnetic force of a hitherto unrecognised attraction. Yet in spite of, or perhaps because of that fact he was awkward, speechless, disconcerted. She came to the rescue at last. Not boldly or with any pretence of forwardness. She was just merry nature ready for jest and quip, and he young enough to be held in check by her adventuring arts. So they made friends and learnt of each other, and grew almost confiding as the golden day drifted onwards.

Yet the romance had no great subject to work on. She was but book-keeper at the little draper's shop in the village beyond, and he played at being no greater hero than the "Simplex" and the simple life propounded. But she found him heroic enough in contrast with previous experiences and he deemed her the fairest and wittiest and loveliest of her sex revealed to him by some kindly fate of which that morning had given no warning.

Their talk lasted long and yet was all too short, so much remained untold and unspoken. There came a gentle hint of waning sunshine, and it emboldened him to ask if he might not row her homewards, thus sparing fatigue and prolonging delight. She hesitated, dimpled, blushed and doubted. Then gave bashful permission as far as the gardener's cottage went, but even then expressed fear of parental wrath. Her father was

very strict, and kept the family in due observance of its duties. Heroism laughed such fears to scorn. Guardians and dragons go for nothing when young manhood claims its mate, and to Bertram it seemed that the whole meaning of life had only sprung into knowledge with the unfolding of this June day.

She faced him as he sent the boat down stream with slow and powerful strokes. Bare head, strong arms, strong chest, firm muscles. She noted all. And such things were products of the simple life! Of Nature's cereals; of temperance and discretion. Truly they spoke well for their exploiter and his mission.

"I should like to see your restaurant," she said, suddenly, and then smiled. "I—I suppose you don't happen to want another attendant?"

Bertram paused and let the skiff drift at the river's will. Was ever temptation set in such a guise? Visions of warning and wages floated before his eyes, and conscience failed to prick with hints of injustice.

"Attendant? no. But I do want a book-keeper. I —I've had to do it myself, because I couldn't find anyone to suit. Are you—could you——?"

She laughed softly. "I could. I am not at all satisfied with my position at Tafferton's. I have given notice several times, but stayed on to oblige them. I thoroughly understand book-keeping, cash entries, and all that. The only question is the distance from town.

My father would not let me stay in London. I should have to go in by train."

He assured her the service was excellent and the hours might be adjusted for her convenience. She looked down thoughtfully, her hands linked idly in her lap.

"Oh, no! You mustn't alter your system for me. Besides that's not all——"

He begged to know what else stood in the way. She gave him frank gaze and franker speech. "I——I don't believe in vegetarianism, and I shouldn't care to have to follow out your rules of living."

It was a blow. There was no doubt of that. He tried the old specious arguments. But she had answers. She was young, healthy, frankly hungry, and fond of wholesome sustaining food. Chops and roast beef were even mentioned and he did not—faint. To look on that lovely pink and white; that full and vigorous form gave the lie to scientific faddism. The warm rich blood flowed free and healthy; her clear eyes and dewy lips spoke of the body's virtues. And she was frankly fearless in her confession, nor would she promise trial. "I must go out every day and have my own lunch, and eat what I please. If you can't take me on those terms——"

Take her! Did he hear aright? He was too charged with emotion to speak aught but wonder at her con-

descension! That she should stoop to commonplace desk service, his service, was altogether too marvellous for contemplation.

At last he was conscious of a challenge from the bank, of a grating keel. She suggested landing and tea. Tea at the cottage with her. Oh, rapture! True there was mention of the "father and mother," of a sister, a hoyden of fourteen, but such trifles scarcely made themselves evident. He gave her his hand to help her out of the boat. An arched foot in shoe of russet leather, a flutter of snowy frills: were these things of Jaeger utility, or mere fitting attributes to frivolous feminine youth? He did not ask the question. It answered for itself.

* * * * *

Certain things in life happen easily. Others present obstacles at every turn. The simple system, however, seemed destined to vanquish all that did not appeal to its founder.

The fair Sylvia (her name was Sylvia Berry) was installed as cashier and book-keeper at the restaurant before another week had run its course, and the worthy Choke had been bidden by his chief to beat up clients at any cost. She must not be permitted to gaze at empty spaces and blank tables. Something must be done to prove the system an existent and flourishing one. Mr. Wharton B. Choke agreed that the idea had

a certain soundness for its basis. But what was one to do if the blind besotted public clung ostentatiously to its chops and steaks, its "boiled and roast," its pint of "bitter," its beloved "half-and-half?" The neat Hebes and Phyllises stood at attention. The strange "chef" attended rigorously to his duties, and yet the restaurant witnessed no hungry crowd, no waiting claimants, no eager acceptance of hygienic diet and Spartan wholesomeness. And then came a day heralding a to-morrow of mighty import.

She was to arrive and be on duty at eleven o'clock. It seemed only polite to Bertram Sallicrust that he should await her at the station, and if employers did not usually engage hansom cabs as a means of conveyance of their lady clerks, well, that only proved a lack of chivalry on their part.

"It's awfully good of you, you know," said the river maiden. "I could have found my way quite well. And I like riding on the tops of 'buses!"

She was so fair, so sparkling, so exquisite that Bertram could only fall deeper in love. Could only gaze and falter foolish words and marvel how the world had ever existed for him before she came into it. That was no ordinary drive—through a golden world and enchanted streets. Sometimes her smiling profile set him wondering at curves of cheek and dimpled chin. Sometimes the whole sweet face turned frankly to his own.

"I wish you would tell me what made you think of doing this?" she entreated.

"Doing—what?"

"Setting up this restaurant. You don't look a bit the sort of—of——"

In confusion she hesitated for a word. He gave it.

"Crank—I suppose you mean?"

"Oh no! Surely you're not that?"

"Every man of strong individuality, and who has the courage to maintain his own opinions is called so," he answered sadly.

Sweet sympathy shone out of her eyes, and fell from her lips. Oh, happy martyr, to be so sweetly pitied! Oh, why was Oxford Street so near. He saw the green and white of the model restaurant. Its sign, its open doorway. Yet what was this? People going in! Not merely looking at the sign, reading the bill of fare on the board, but entering!

The cab stopped. He sprang out, helped her to alight, and flung reckless shillings into the driver's hand.

She, all curious, was looking around. "How charming! So fresh, and clean, and dainty! And people at the tables already!"

He could not explain that that was unusual. He led her in, scarcely able to credit his senses. The tables were full, the waitresses busy, Mr. Choke bustling

and important, hovering between duties of master of the ceremonies and cashtaker.

"Oh, I am late!" cried the charming official. "It is all your fault, Mr. Sallicrust. You said eleven, but it's nearly twelve now!"

She hurried in. She threw aside hat and coat, and went to her desk. Bertram followed to explain and direct and give change—an altogether new experience.

And still the people came, and the waitresses bustled and the clatter of plates and forks went gaily on and Bertram Sallicrust, had he not been too occupied with his self-imposed duties as assistant cashier, would have wondered what in the world had set his Simplex "booming" at last. But he had to explain the book for entries, and the system of "checks." He had to indulge in the wonder of watching those busy white hands. Sometimes he touched them in accident of direction, and then the world faded into indistinct dimness and his pulses beat a new and wonderful march of triumph. Luncheon time brought yet more customers and kept the cashier's desk busy. It was very wonderful. But all the world seemed wonderful now.

"You have brought me luck," he whispered gaily, and heard her laugh to the echo of clattering plates and hurrying feet, and wondered if Fate could hold aught more of blessing or delight.

Yet not all his prosperous advertisement made him

oblivious of the fact that the fair goddess of his worship might also lay claim to a natural desire for sustenance on her own part.

"You must be tired. You will want your own luncheon?" he whispered tenderly. "I—I remember what you said. There is a place not far off where ladies may safely go. I will show you the way if you permit."

Dimpling saucily, she asked if she was not capable of being escort to herself?

"You are my employer. You must keep me in my place. We are not on the river now," she added.

For significant signs had not escaped her. The lilac-clad damsels had eyed her askance. Mr. Choke had more than once to call his employer to attention. It seemed that her duties would be more complex than his system if they needed so much individual attention. So she firmly refused his company for luncheon.

She left the desk. She put on her hat. She was half-way to the door when a sudden amazing, unexpected sight arrested her attention. On one of the tables stood a plate. The neat waitress was just removing a cover. Before Sylvia's astonished eyes loomed a chop! A veritable succulent mutton chop. She stared at it as if it were a ghost. Then turned, and hurried back to the desk. He was there all eagerness and wonder as to why she had returned.

"I thought this was a vegetarian place!" she exclaimed.

"So it is——"

"Then why—why—do you serve chops to customers?"

"Chops!" he faltered, and followed her glance across the room, and caught sight of Wharton B. Choke guilty and unabashed.

"Impossible," he murmured, and yet noted that she was unpinning her hat.

"Where there's one, there's sure to be more," she said gaily. "I'll stay here to lunch, Mr. Sallicrust, and give you the benefit of the time I'll save. I suppose there is a room for the staff here?"

There was not one that day although the fact did not preclude them from lunching together. But before another month had run its course Sylvia Berry had converted both restaurant and master, and turned the one into a flourishing business conducted on rational principles, and the other into a husband instead of a crank!

RIVIERA STUDIES.

I. THE BRAVE MARIANA.

"MONSIEUR will take a drive this morning? See, the day is fine. The sun makes himself to shine in the sky so blue! See too, Mariana; she awaits monsieur's choice. Mariana, she is swift. She is brave. She is of the gentleness of the lamb, and the speed of the desert. Nowhere will monsieur find a better horse or a better driver. Let him then decide—on the instant."

The young Englishman who was thus addressed looked at the persuasive face, the smiling mouth, the brown eyes that held something pathetic in their entreaty. He had been debating the question whether to drive or walk as he stood at the gate of his hotel. All around were the glory and light of spring, the spring of Italy; the spring of the Riviera as it comes to this coast under shelter of its vast hill-range and grey olive groves. Perfume filled the air. The breath of violets and narcissi, of roses and heliotrope, all the glowing and glorious profusion of flower-filled gardens bordering the road.

The liquid gold of sunshine flooded street and sea; the sky was a radiant sapphire. The persuasion of Nature blended with the persuasion of that voice. Again it spoke.

"I will take monsieur to San Martino. It is beautiful, that road. By Poggio we go, and by the coast return. Mariana—she will fly. She will not make herself to *crawle,* as the compatriots of monsieur say of those others. And behold, I speak the language of monsieur, or I converse in the French if he so desires. I communicate the history of what one sees. Ah, monsieur makes up the mind! Let him then seat himself. For sixteen francs I drive him, and give him the leisure of rest."

The young Englishman laughed. There was something so gay, yet so determined about his self-appointed charioteer. He so completely took possession of the tourist mind, which for ever hesitates and is for ever lost. The other drivers, lounging in a lazy row on the opposite side of the street, had scarcely discovered that an English "fare" had been driven off before their eyes, ere Mariana's white coat and silky tail were becoming a mere reminder of such loss.

"Carcaran again! Ah, the scoundrel! What chance has one against him?"

They shrugged and swore and laughed, and then settled back into a lazy enjoyment of hot sunshine,

tempered by no chill breath of the *mistral,* early in the season as it was.

Meanwhile Carcaran let Mariana fly as she would down the street until the wide Corniche road divided into two stages of ascent and descent. The driver turned upwards, and his fare contemplated the beautiful bay below them as Mariana plodded with slow dignity up and ever up to the olive groves of Poggio. Here the driver stopped for a few moments. The carriage-road lay on the right, and a stony footpath crossed the centre of the promontory. On the opposite side lay Bussana.

The Englishman put a few questions in the fluent French of the boulevards. He knew his Paris well, and was so far blessed with this world's goods as to be able to pursue travel in a leisurely and self-interested manner. He had come to San Remo from Genoa, with Monte Carlo as an agreeable stopping-place in prospect for next week or next day, as the fancy took him. Ignorance of the Italian side of the beautiful coast had pleaded for amendment. Hence his halt at the Hôtel Méditerrané.

He lit a cigarette. He commended Mariana, and he began to "draw out" his Italian driver, in whom he had discovered signs of character. Also, it had struck him as unusual that the man should be so strongly attached to his horse. He never used the whip to the

pretty animal. His voice alone encouraged, persuaded, or commanded exertions. And that voice had all the tenderness and manifold inflections of a lover addressing his mistress. The Englishman was surprised by this intense affection. He began to question its reason.

"Are you a native of the place? Were you born here?"

"But certainly, m'sieu. I know no other. It is there I live." He pointed in the direction of the old town perched high on the hills above the tourist conception of San Remo. "I and my mother," he added. "My father, he was of Marseilles. That is why I have the French."

"You are not married, then?"

The man shook his head.

"But no, m'sieu. It is that I am too poor. I cannot support two of a family—and Mariana. My father, he was a driver of carriages as myself. But he is no more. He died—it is now four years—and left to me the charge of my mother and the heritage of Mariana."

"You seem very fond of your horse?"

"M'sieu has reason. And why not? She is all I have to love. She wearies not. She tires not. Brave is she, and well she works. See you, then, m'sieu"—he turned his brown face and dog-like eyes to the young man—"see you, the season is but short for us of this side of Bordighera. We have not the tables, as of

Monaco. Short it is, and then arrives the long, hot summer. The hotels, they are all closed. The stranger, he comes not. Mariana, she is to the stable, or the field, or one lets her make the *course* if it is desired. The mother—ah! she is old, and works no more, and all that is earned of this season so short, it has to suffice for the long months that follow."

The Englishman looked thoughtful. It always struck him as odd that money should be most necessary where it is hardest to gain. That the poor who need so little find it so difficult to earn that little. Well, some day he would be in Parliament. He would question these matters, and get to the root of them. Meanwhile——

He lay lazily back against the cushions of the little carriage. He looked at the loveliness of land and sea; at the queer higgledy-piggledy roofs and walls that meant a village; at the church spires, the tall, dark cypresses. Then his eyes returned to the shining satin of Mariana's coat; to the smiling face of her master.

"*La brave* Mariana!" sighed that master, noting his glance.

The horse lifted its head, and shook the bells of its harness.

"One would think she understood," said Felix Joyce absently.

"That is truth what monsieur speaks. She does comprehend every word that I say to her. And why

not? Day for day, month for month, year for year, it is I that feed her, care for her, tend her. Better than my life I love her. My beautiful Mariana! My brave Mariana!"

"Why—brave?" asked the young man, curious as to the repetition of that word.

"Ah, m'sieu, for the heart of her; the will of her. See you—when money there is little, and I have scarce anything for her to eat, she comprehends, does Mariana. She is patient—ah!—it is unbelievable how she is patient. Half of her food she has put aside to assure me she is satisfied and content. Could one of humanity do more? And work—ah! she will work from sunrise to sunset, will Mariana. But, again, she is brave for one more reason. I tell monsieur of that reason. Mariana —she likes not the new *voiture* of petrol; the car of noise and stench that rushes as a mad devil along the so beautiful Corniche road, and spoils it for those who make the *course* as monsieur. Ah! great is the wrong they have done for us, those devils! For see, monsieur, the visitors like not to drive these roads, and the horses they like not also. They are startled, and have terror of the noisy, rushing, hooting thing that is on one before one knows where to turn. Of accidents there are many, but they care not, those creatures with the masked faces, and the devil's eyes, and the speed of defiance. Now I tell monsieur why Mariana is so brave. She likes

not the devil-car, does Mariana. She shivers and starts, and even I have known it of her that on her hind legs she will dance for very terror. But yes, monsieur. And they care not, those *chauffeurs du diable.* No; they laugh—laugh at Mariana, so beautiful and so full of courage. For again, let monsieur regard well. She knows she must accustom herself to those *voitures infernales,* seeing that everywhere they now come and go. She cannot escape. And so Mariana tries to be brave, and she is brave. Shiver she will; but yes, with the *tremblement* of terror is she overtaken, and she would fly even as the devil-car flies, but that I restrain her, almost to the breaking of my wrist. Ah! monsieur, did you but see how she tries to be all that is most courageous, though her poor heart is like to burst, and her eyes—ah, those eyes! how shall one say of them what they tell of fear and of effort? Yet she answers to me, does the brave Mariana. She trembles as one leaf that is whirled in the *mistral.* But she holds herself. She does not fly from the road of passage. She stands not on the legs that are behind. She tries to believe that I will hold her from harm; that for sake of the *course,* and the francs one seeks to gain, she must even face the devil-cars—the dust, and the stench, and the hooting noise that brays the arrival of those *voyageurs* of commerce. Now it comes that when I speak, when I say, 'Be brave, Mariana—for my sake be brave,' that Mariana *is* brave.

Let it be proved to monsieur if the chance arrives. Not here will that happen. For they come not often to the hills and the olive groves, and the old, old towns that are hidden. No, it is the great wicked cities they seek, and those roads that are of them. But now, monsieur, Mariana has well rested herself, and there is before us the valley road to Ceriano."

He cracked his whip, and the gallant little horse trotted swiftly off once more. Her head held high; her snowy skin glittering in the bright sunlight.

Felix Joyce was still thoughtful. The man's words had set the match of ignition to a train of memories. None too pleasant it would appear, for a troubled look came into his eyes, and his brows knitted themselves into furrows that were too deep and anxious for years that numbered only twenty-six. He tried to detach himself from a difficulty that had threatened his peace of mind—threatened it so dangerously that flight had appeared its only solution. Up to a certain moment, a certain episode, life had seemed to Felix Joyce just the satisfactory, unexacting sort of thing life is to most young men who possess means to enjoy it. A certain poetic faculty, a gift of seeing picturesque things picturesquely, had led him into artistic channels and preferably artistic intimacies. In London he had come out scatheless from such intimacies. It was in Paris, and in this past winter, that the atmosphere of glamour had been dispersed by

a thunder-clap of jealous passion. The story was such an old one. Hot youth entangled in the mesh of beauty, and a personality gifted by the audacity of French *chic* and French morality. Both beauty and personality claimed the comedy stage as their exponent. A friendly introduction had done the rest.

Camille Desanges was as enchanting in private life as she appeared on the stage. But Camille Desanges was also shrewd and circumspect, and utterly heartless. She lived for herself, but she lived also for her life and its successes. Love was of no account beside the kaleidoscopic changes of brief passions, exotic jealousies, and disbursed fortunes that fell to her lot. These made up the sum of her existence. The infatuation of Felix Joyce was but another factor in that sum. That he should be desperately in earnest was all very well, but that he should expect *her* to participate in the earnestness, that was a very different pair of shoes indeed! In the conflict that ensued Felix was perfectly conscious of folly, and equally conscious of a penalty in store for it. There had been a desperate scene, a quarrel, a parting—and then silence. That blank, dead wall of impenetrability which human nature will at times erect as self-defence or—vengeance.

Cursing himself, and his folly, and the seductions of Paris as embodied by Camille Desanges, he had fled to Italy. But Italy had only presented him with picture-

galleries and snowstorms as a panacea for heart-ache and general disgust with life. He rushed back from Rome to Florence, and from Florence to Genoa. Then came a sudden determination to while away some idle weeks on the Riviera with a sketch-book for amusement, and Baudelaire and Verlaine and Anatole France for company. His first glimpse of San Remo delighted him. Sunlight and warmth had given him greeting. The magic of beauty set amidst rose-laurels and aloes, and perfume of carnation buds, and glowing banks of geraniums, had appealed to his senses. Peace as a prospect of the waning season wooed him to the comparative isolation of the Méditerrané, and this first morning at its gates had introduced him to Mariana and her driver.

From passion to pain; from pain to peace. He wondered how long that peace would last: if any drug in Nature's pharmacopœia would bring him lasting forgetfulness. The very novelty of suffering had lent it a sharper edge, and as his eyes roved from point to point of the landscape he only longed for escape from one torturing memory. It was not even as if she had been worth the torture or the memory. He knew that well enough; knew that by this time his place had been filled, and his devotion made a theme for mockery; knew, too, that his bank balance would suffer severely for that brief "success" in *la ville lumière*—a success

which his friends had pretended to envy, even as now they pretended to sympathise. He gave impatient interjection to the thought. What use was life, love, friendship, wealth? What did they give one of happiness, or peace? Nothing. Less than nothing. Bitter grew his strictures on the problem of existence. In his ears rang the mocking words of de Musset:

La vie est vaine:
Un peu d'espoir,
Un peu de haine,
Et puis, Bonsoir!

So it was. Just a brief dream; love that proved faithless or wearisome; disappointment—and then good night to it all; to the illusions and the hopes; the beauty and the feasting; the mirth and the despair.

Suddenly, like a pistol-shot, came the crack of a whip, the jerk of the little carriage, and the cheery voice of his *cocher* admonishing Mariana in varied tones of endearment.

"How the fellow loves that horse!" he thought.

And there fell across the thought the reflected bitterness of his own loveless life. He had not even an animal to be the happier for his presence; the gladder for his voice. With a sort of pang it suddenly occurred to Felix Joyce that he had never loved an animal, however faithful, as this poor *cocher* loved his horse. That he had scarcely remembered his dead mother

through those years of wandering and careless self-indulgence. She had believed in him and loved him, as mothers do believe in and love their only sons. He owed everything to her, and yet—how rarely had he spared a thought to her memory; a regret for her love.

He shook himself impatiently. The mood of bitterness was growing apace, and he was intolerant of all that saddened or disturbed. One reason of his present irritation against Camille Desanges was the fact that he could not forget her; could not throw off the touch of memories that were like a burr to the sensitiveness he deplored. Though he knew her to be worthless, she had still power to haunt him with a charm that excused the worthlessness; a charm that was soulless and sensual and obsessive all in one.

The sudden halt of the little carriage at last broke on his thoughts and changed their current. His driver was inquiring whether he would get out and see the Madonna, pointing out a little chapel among the cypress-trees as he spoke.

The young Englishman dismounted, and looked with indifference at the noted landmark. He had seen so many chapels and Madonnas. Why should he trouble about this one?

"I'd rather you talked to me," he answered, lighting another cigarette and perching himself upon a fragment

of broken wall. "Tell me some more about your life, and what you do, and about Mariana."

Even as he spoke her name the gentle creature lifted her head, and looked with intelligent interest at her master's companion.

Nothing loth, the master began a fresh history of her sagacity and her perfections.

"You love her as if she were your sweetheart," said Felix Joyce. "By the way, have you one?"

Carcaran shook his head regretfully. There was someone—a girl down in the new San Remo. She lived with her aunt, who had a small shop where one sold fancy articles—photographs, cards, inlaid olive-wood. She was a good girl and pretty, industrious too, and her name—was it believable?—that also was Mariana!

Monsieur nodded. Ah! perhaps the coincidence meant the attraction. But, no. Pierre Carcaran had loved her before he knew her name at all. He wished to pay his court, but the aunt—well, was it not always so with those female relatives of an age? Monsieur doubtless knew what they were. It was not the man they looked at, but what the man possessed. And well was it known there below how he, Pierre Carcaran, had to support his mother, and in these times so hard it was not possible to keep also a wife, even if she would live in the little hovel in the old town, which was all Pierre could boast of as a home.

"How much, then, would you need before you could marry?" inquired the Englishman.

The surprising fact that a sum far less than he had squandered on a jewel for the thankless Camille would mean untold wealth to such a bride and such a bridegroom came almost as a shock to Felix Joyce. Good heavens! To think that a few hundred francs could buy happiness for two human hearts. Ah, well! he would consider the matter before he left San Remo. After all, it would be a better investment for his money than the tables at Monte Carlo, whither he was bound.

The trifling incident of his choice of a vehicle, and his morning's drive, suddenly took on an aspect of importance. He had been lazily drifting on the stream so long, without troubling to ask how his fellow voyagers fared, that it surprised him to find they possessed interest and tragedy. Here was an honest soul, working hard in a hard and joyless life, devoting his earnings and sacrificing the best years of manhood to an old feeble woman who seemed trying enough for mortal patience. The contrast between his own uselessness and this patient content struck sharply on his sense of contrasts. He wondered why it should. He was not wont to feel such things or trouble about them, but resting here in the golden warmth of the day, and looking at the face of the man and the dog-like fidelity in the eyes of the horse, he almost envied him. Here at least was

a power unknown to himself—the power of content with little, and of patience with much.

In the interest of the conversation the time had passed quickly. It was with a murmured apology that Pierre Carcaran suggested the return journey. Monsieur would otherwise be late for the lunch at midday. And, with regrets be it said, he, Pierre Carcaran, had at two o'clock the appointment to drive two English ladies from the Victoria. Every afternoon they made a *course* with him, for greatly they loved Mariana, and better than any horse of the town would that admirable creature make the pace of gentleness and yet of speed, despite the occasional dance of the legs behind, when the petrol devil so atrocious met them on the road.

So Felix Joyce got into the carriage again, and Mariana gaily tinkled her bells down the long, steep descent winding back to the new town, and leaving Martino and Poggio and Bussana to the glory of solitude and sunshine.

Swiftly and gaily flew the little horse. Perhaps she too had visions of dinner; of rest and refreshment in store for her when the good francs were paid into her master's hand, and his cheery voice confided to her that she had won them for him. She so good, so loving, so brave.

Brave! Ah! what was that?

A shiver of terror ran through her supple body; her

eyes distended, the sweat broke out from every pore. The hooting signal she so hated and feared brayed with sudden wild discordance as she turned the curve of the winding road.

There—facing her, and rushing up the incline at the speed of an express train (so it seemed) was a huge car—the "devil-car of petrol," as Pierre had named it.

For one breathless moment she felt the well-known hand tighten on the reins. She heard the well-known voice with its entreaty, "Be steady; be brave, Mariana!" But the huge thing was on her, and terror mastered her. She swerved—stumbled. There came a crashing sound of splintered wood, and down the rocky side of the unprotected road fell horse and carriage, and driver, and fare, a forlorn and frantic heap!

Felix Joyce found himself flung wide of the vehicle; after a confused, blind moment he struggled to his feet.

He saw another figure a few yards off. It was quite motionless—motionless as the white, broken creature that a few moments before had trotted so bravely down hard road and sunny slope to the gay words of a voice that would never again call her the "brave Mariana."

With something near akin to tears in his eyes the Englishman looked from the dead horse to the dead man. With something of hate and horror he turned

those same eyes upwards, to where the challenge of a voice demanded if they "were hurt"!

The voice was a woman's voice; the face peering down was a woman's face. The woman who had been driving the car up that incline; the woman reckless of speed and forgetful of rule of road. He met the gaze. He saw the face beneath its lifted goggles. It was the face of Camille Desanges.

The recognition was mutual. There was a ring of surprise as well as of defiance in her voice.

"So it's *you,* is it! Well, it wasn't my fault! You were on the wrong side, and your horse wasn't under control. You can have our number and address for the authorities. But I'm not going to stop. We're bound for Monte Carlo."

He stood there dazed and shaken. He heard her, saw her, yet without anything save a nightmare-like consciousness of her face and her voice.

The vanity of human life and human love confronted him, as his eyes turned from the mocking beauty above to the stricken creatures below.

All over; all finished. All the plans of Pierre Carcaran, all the gay, brave days for Mariana. All his own plans to dower that other Mariana, and make two hearts happy by the first act of self-sacrifice his life had known. The irony of the situation struck home to him as nothing of life's ironies had ever done. He stood there

shaken and dumb; the bare, bald sense of tragedy slowly penetrating his dazed senses.

He bent over the man. He was quite dead. Far above the road sounded the hoot of a motor horn. For once it neither troubled nor affrighted Mariana!

RIVIERA STUDIES.

II. THE *TREMBLEMENT* AT BUSSANA.

"It is only the old Biondina," said the girl. "Madame should not heed her. She is mad, they say. Always, always she comes here. Up the steep, long hill, all this stony, rough road that madame has traversed, where the carriages cannot drive, and whence the travellers make their way to old Bussana.

"So that is old Bussana," said the English lady.

Her eyes rested on a circular mass of yellowed stones and broken walls set high upon a hill. The sunshine rained its gold upon the scene as if its living warmth were an atonement for the destruction that had in a few brief moments changed a village to a ruin some twenty years before.

There were woods of olive and chestnut; the curves of mountain spurs girdled the valleys at their feet. On either side the rough road, wildflowers bloomed in gay profusion. The strong, cool wind blew aromatic scents of pines from the heights to the valleys. It was not a

pleasant wind altogether, and the luxurious, idle crowds who had made the Riviera a pleasure resort found its boisterous visits a welcome subject for abuse when existence offered no other crumpled rose-leaves.

But the Englishwoman who stood gazing out at old Bussana was indifferent to its boisterous greeting, or its gusty opposition to her progress. Her thoughts were far away, peopling that strange old ruin with life once more. Wondering why in so unexpected and undeserved a fashion Nature should have wreaked summary vengeance on this quiet, harmless spot.

"Madame has heard of the *tremblement,* is it not?" questioned the pretty brown Italian girl beside her. "To me my grandmother has spoken of it often, for there, in that church of which the tower still shows itself, my father was killed."

The Englishwoman turned compassionate eyes on the pretty, childish face. The girl had appeared suddenly on the road with an offering of wild-flowers and an entreaty to act as guide to the stranger. It was while Lyle Egerton was debating the point that a bent, dusty figure had passed them, muttering and talking to herself.

The girl having volunteered information on one point, proceeded eagerly to another. She told her quiet listener of that tragedy of 1887 as connected more especially with this spot and the little communes of

Baiardo, Bussana, and Castellaro, set on the hills above that beautiful seaboard of San Remo. Glibly the childish voice recounted the disasters of that terrible shock of earthquake, when the whole Riviera from Cannes to Genoa had been affected more or less. She had heard the story so often that it had lost its sense of horror. She lived in the new Bussana, and to her the old one was but a playground of incidents. A landmark to be pointed out, exploited and explained by way of earning a few francs in the short Riviera season.

Lyle Egerton listened with interest to the pretty *patois*. She understood it well enough to accept the proffered guide. A natural kindliness of heart and an instinct of all things beautiful, simple and intelligent made her appreciative of any and every sort of information that came in her way.

That first question as to the frail, bent old woman, toiling painfully in the same direction, had elicited the explanation that it was only "old Biondina" who had startled the Englishwoman by peering into her face, and muttering strange words as she passed. The incident had been startling, for the face of the peasant woman was a strange one, and in her eyes shone the madness of a quest, or an obsession.

She too seemed bound for old Bussana. She too faced dust and wind and stony road with the ardour of a pilgrim bound for a shrine. Why should she go

thither, Lyle Egerton wondered? Had she a story? Did those yellow walls possess a secret? She turned to her self-appointed guide.

"Tell me, child, who is the old Biondina, and why does she walk all these miles every day to that ruined town?"

The girl's face grew grave. "I will tell madame the story if she desires. I have heard it over there, where they live who once lived here in old Bussana. Many died—oh, very many, as doubtless madame knows, and many went away to other parts and other places. There was great distress and great poverty everywhere. See you, madame, how they lost all, those poor ones! Houses and goods, children, wives, husbands, friends. The cattle, too, and the fields, and fruit gardens, all were injured or destroyed. And the churches——"

She paused. Her big brown eyes grew puzzled. "Often have I wondered as to that, madame, for see you it was the *Mercredi des Cendres* when this awful thing happened. Now in old Bussana yonder all those good and pious folk were at Mass when first the *tremblement* commences. And not only at Bussana, but at all the churches and chapels of the whole commune. The *arrondissements* of Porto Maruzio and San Remo, behold, then, they have almost six hundred deaths. Of the most part in the churches. Was, then, the *bon Dieu* not pleased with them? I have heard it said.

But I—I fear to repeat that to the priest. He would be of an anger most terrible if one so said to him. But Bussana, it is small. Of that time not eight hundred people live there, I am told. And of those people, madame, one is old Biondina. Young then and beautiful, it is said. More beautiful than any of the maidens of Bussana, or Baiardo, or the commune around. She was poor, was Biondina; but then are not all of us poor, here in these valleys? She lived with her mother, a hard and stern woman, who kept her at work from sunrise to sunset the year round. Many of the young men would have wedded her, but the mother—she would hear of none, and drove them away with harsh words and insults. She had an eye for a man with money in his pockets, and a farm or a trade to help support a wife."

The little maid, garrulous as she of Almesbury fame, paused a moment for breath, for the ascent was steep and very rough. The English lady, now deeply interested, still watched that bent figure so far ahead; moving surely and swiftly now, as one who sees the goal in sight and speeds to it.

"Yes?" she said presently. "So the mother was ambitious and the daughter beautiful. It is not unusual, little one. There have always been such mothers and such daughters in the world, and in all ranks of life."

And being a maker of stories herself, Lyle Egerton wondered if elements of fiction might possibly separate themselves from elements of fact, and make her visit to Bussana of double interest.

It is the fate of writers—or their misfortune—to see in happiness or woe, in tragedy or comedy, merely the materials of their art. Tools for their own handling and the credit of workmanship.

"Madame, of course, knows the great world. For me, I am but little Marietta of this place. I know no other. All the springtime I sell flowers to the people who come up the valleys, or to see the ruined towns or the old churches. Sometimes they are kind as madame, and let me show them the places. Sometimes they are rough and rude, as the *Americanos,* and buy nothing and give nothing. Only grumble that their big, ugly, smelling cars of no horses cannot traverse these roads and hills. But I learn much. I have the words of English, as madame perceives. For the French—it is my mother's tongue. See you how on this side of Ventimiglia one speaks more Italian than French?"

"Because it is on the Italian side of the frontier," said the Englishwoman.

"True, madame. But many of us are French by birthright. My mother lived at San Remo when she was young. She was of service to one of the big hotels there. But when she married my father he brought her

to live there in old Bussana. Thus it is I know the story of the *tremblement* and of old Biondina."

"We shall get to her in time, I hope," said Lyle Egerton, with a smile.

The girl looked up quickly. "Ah—madame must forgive. It is my tongue that so runs to and fro. I am scolded often for that. But madame desires to hear of the old Biondina. It is thus, then, her story continues itself. The husband of suitability appears at last. He is old, and ill-looking, but also he is rich, as one of us counts riches. He lived in the valley below. He had fields and orchards and cattle. He had been married, but was a widower of many years, with but one son. The son was not as the father, madame, so the story goes. He was brown and ruddy and tall. He had a face to love, and eyes that laughed always; and seeing them as they looked at her on Sundays and *festas,* was it a wonder that Biondina should laugh too? Ah, but she was fair to see, they say, with eyes blue as the skies in summer, and fair, bright hair, and the figure slender as a young sapling. Often and often have I heard them say there was no girl so pretty or so fair of face as Biondina. So they laughed when they met, these two, and the girl did not know that it was the old Antonio to whom her mother had promised to give her while the young one was stealing her heart. Not often could they meet or have speech together, for

the mother was sharp, and suspicious of so fair a daughter, and fearful of the young men who came about the place. Yet in some way Biondina and the young Antonio grew acquainted, and on the Saints' days and after Mass on Sundays it was to Biondina that the young man would give the roses or carnations from his father's garden, or the fruit from the orchard, that he brought up the hillside on pretence of an errand. But of a sudden there was an end to it all. The old Antonio and the mother agreed together that Biondina should marry the father, and the girl was told of the arrangement. She said nothing, for she greatly feared her mother, and as yet the young Antonio had not spoken to her of his love. But she was sure he did love her. They say one knows these things, madame, without need of words. Be that as it may, one night she heard a voice beneath her window singing softly one of the *stornelli* that the people love. She opened her window, and there in the little dark street below was the Antonio whom she loved. He had heard from his father what she had heard from her mother. He prayed her to come out and listen to him, but she dared not. For her mother slept in the room, and would have missed her. But he swore to have speech with her, though he died for it, and he waited there in old Bussana, knowing she would go to early Mass the next morning. The Ash Wednesday it was, madame. The

day when the *tremblement* shook the town into the ruins that one sees *there,* so close at hand."

They were very near that ruined town now, and the Englishwoman gazed wonderingly at all the mass of fallen walls and roofs, and narrow, tortuous stairways. Deserted and forlorn the whole place looked, as some nightmare-like picture looks to the wondering dreamer. An impossible kaleidoscope of broken fragments and shattered wood, interspersed with the riotous colours of wild flowers and wild vines; the fresh, bright luxuriance of Nature triumphant over man's destroyed workmanship.

But a few years and some eight hundred souls had habited these ruins, climbed these streets, sat in the deep, dark arches of those doorways. Now ruin and ravage alone claimed them. Not a house but was a forlorn wreck of broken stones and fallen walls and shattered roofs. Above them all the church tower still lifted itself.

The roof was gone, the walls were wrecked, but the tower still pointed heavenwards in melancholy pride.

Lyle Egerton forgot her curiosity respecting the old peasant woman in the sudden interest awakened by the scene before her.

She was in the church amidst a mass of broken stones and woodwork. The altar stood amidst it all in gaudy colouring of stucco and paint. Broken columns

and pillars gave melancholy attestation of strength. But it was not on these records of disaster that Lyle Egerton's eyes rested so long. It was on a figure, shabby, dusty, feeble. The figure of the old mad peasant woman who had passed her on the road some half-hour since.

She was kneeling before the altar, hands and eyes upraised to the broken crucifix. Her lips moved and muttered, and her face was transfigured by a weird, unnatural beauty. Half the years seemed to have fallen from her, even as the dusty shawl had fallen from her snow-white hair.

The Englishwoman felt a light touch on her arm. It was the hand of her little guide. "Madame, that is where she comes always. Every day of her life, so they say. That is where he was killed."

"Who?" inquired Lyle Egerton.

"The son—the young Antonio of whom I have told madame. He came here that dreadful day. And she also. The mother did not guess, she did not know, and there, as they knelt, so I have heard, came the first shock, and then yet another. Madame sees what it must have been. The roof, the walls, the pillars. Fifty-three of those who knelt in this church were killed, and one of them was the young Antonio——"

"Hush, child; she will hear you!"

"No, madame. She heeds us not. She thinks he is still here. That he is kneeling by her side. They

dragged her forth as she held him in her arms that dreadful day, and ever since she lives but in its memory."

The listener's eyes grew suddenly dim. The pathos of that scene flashed back to her as the memory of a tragedy set within a picture. She seemed to see it all. The crowded church; the chanting choristers; the officiating priests; and then, in a moment, darkness and horror and death.

A tragedy indeed. And one that had left a living echo behind it in the faithful memory of that faithful heart.

Involuntarily the Englishwoman moved towards the altar. As she did so the kneeling figure rose. Two dim blue eyes looked back to her; dim with the tears of blighted youth and blighted love. Sad as is all human life when age and loneliness are its only portion.

And then suddenly the old woman spoke. "He will come soon," she said. "The first Mass he promised to be here. . . . It is him I am to wed, not his father. That was all a mistake. . . . The bells are ringing, and he is waiting there at the church. I must hasten. He has waited all the long night through . . . for me . . . for me—*Antonio mio!*"

She glanced from side to side. Then suddenly fell at the feet of the Englishwoman. "Mother—mother!" she implored. "Say it is him I am to wed.

He loves me, and I love him. God has given us to one another."

Pityingly the stranger's eyes looked down at the upraised face. Twenty years—and still faithful to a memory! Does the world hold such fidelity? she thought.

"If heaven has given you to Antonio, and Antonio to you, be satisfied, Biondina," she said softly. "No one can part you in life—or in death."

Into the distraught eyes crept a sudden look of awe. Perhaps in all those twenty years she had heard no such answer to her prayer. Perhaps in all those twenty years the troubled brain had met with nothing save the obstinate denial of its own entreaty. But now, in a moment, it seemed as if Hope spoke to Despair. A tender wave of gladness broke over that strand of discord and disorder representing her shattered mind.

Still gazing at the speaker, she rose to her feet. Her dim eyes turned from the compassionate face to the ruined altar. From thence to the roofless aperture above, where the blue sky spread its canopy and the gold of April sunlight shone.

"Antonio!" she whispered. *"Antonio mio!"*

And as she spoke a change came over her, transfiguring face and form. Her eyes grew bright; a sudden life and ardour seemed to give back her youth and her

lost beauty. She began to tremble greatly. Then with a cry that rang through the silent spaces she fell forward at the foot of the ruined altar.

They raised her from amidst the broken stones, and laid her gently where the warm sun-rays fell. Awe-struck they looked at the face from which age and sorrow had fled like an evil dream.

For death is kinder sometimes than life, and death had given back her youth and her love to "the old Biondina."

RIVIERA STUDIES.

III. THE HAUNTED BEDROOM.

To be *né coiffé,* as the French idiomise our proverb of a "silver spoon in the mouth," is sometimes a disadvantage to the possessor of the spoon. Fortune is a fairy godmother, whose endowment needs the finishing-touch of discipline, and, in spite of many natural good qualities, Paul Enderby would have been all the better for such discipline. He had always been self-willed, and more than a little inclined to extravagance. But he was still young enough to learn wisdom and amend his ways, and those who loved him were hopeful of such wisdom and amendment.

Yet when two seasons of Monte Carlo had made inroads not only upon a substantial income, but upon cherished securities that represented capital, his lawyers and his bankers began to look grave.

The former, as guardians of that capital, took upon themselves to hint to Mrs. Enderby that a word of remonstrance from her might have good results. But

what widowed mother of an only and beloved son can ever bring herself to believe that his manhood is aught but a glorified boyhood, full of noble impulses and excusable faults? So the hint fell on stony ground and produced—no results. Not even the mildest remonstrance reached Paul Enderby, spending feverish hours over those fatal green tables, and safely enmeshed in unscrupulous hands bent on proving the infallible success of a "system" if only the tyro in gambling would be guided by advice. Unfortunately for himself, Paul Enderby was just foolish enough, vain enough, and confident enough to drop to the lure which has accounted for so many "plucked pigeons." Things went from bad to worse. He not only gambled on the "system" himself, but he entrusted large sums to his partner in folly; and when he saw one supply swept away, only wrote or telegraphed for another.

Waking one day to a stern refusal on the part of bankers and lawyers to advance any more money until he quitted this plague-spot of the Riviera, Paul woke also to the fact that his quondam guides and instructors had departed, leaving him to work out the system or abandon it as he deemed best.

There is a certain stage in life when one knows oneself as the fool others have known one. It is a wholesome and hopeful stage. Also it is a humiliating one. Reckless youth hates a sudden check to desire;

that vision of what is lost and forfeited, that sudden desperation which is the death-grapple with egoism and its long blindness and callousness.

Paul Enderby hated these truths, but he had to face them, and face them in the surroundings of forfeited luxury. He could no longer afford the palatial suite, the extravagant restaurant prices. He was in a small room in a comparatively insignificant hotel. He had scarcely any money. He had parted with all his valuables, and had lived for days on the hope of this new remittance. Now it was refused to him.

He sat on the edge of his bed and read those cold, curt lines with eyes half incredulous of their full meaning. Ruin! Was it possible? How could he be ruined? They only wanted to frighten him, these slow-witted, cautious men of business.

Ruined!—he who had never known a wish ungratified; who had been the spoilt darling of the world of pleasure, whose years numbered but twenty-four today!

He crushed the flimsy sheets of paper angrily, furious at the refusal they had conveyed. He could not, even on a second reading, credit them with really meaning what was written.

Then, with sudden desperation, he emptied his pockets. They had been full of notes and gold pieces the previous night. Before that last *"Rien n' va plus,"*

he had plunged his hand into the crackling fire of frenzied hope they represented. Where were they now? Not a vestige remained. Not a solitary gold piece showed its welcome face to his search. Not an insignificant franc was to be found in purse or pocket-book or pocket.

He got onto his feet, pale and sick and trembling. How was this? What had chanced? Had he been robbed as he left the Casino, or that *café* where he had sought to drown memory of "ill-luck" by copious draughts of bad champagne? He had but a vague, confused idea of how he had reached his room—this wretched garret, whose only recommendation was cheapness. Now he would have to stay on in it, until——

He gave a sudden wild laugh. What could they mean, these people, to refuse him his own money? There must be plenty left. It was nonsense to say he had run through a fortune in three years!

He sat down and leant his aching head on his hot hands and tried to interpret the unreal and ghastly parable. But his brain refused to aid him. For weeks past he had lived only for two things—the intoxication of gambling and the intoxication of wine. Now Nature called him to the bar of self-judgment, and demanded her dues.

Moments passed. He sat on, dazed and confused, seeing only the phantasmagoria of those past weeks:

the ever-recurring scenes at those tables, hearing the ever-recurring sounds of the croupiers' voices, or the clink of the coins captured by the croupiers' relentless rakes—poured into the greedy maw of the bank which claimed its tithe of human folly and frenzy and despair with the unsparing relentlessness of hell itself.

As he sat there shivering and hopeless and desperate, he was startled by the sound of a faint cough. He lifted his head and looked around. The curtain was drawn; only a feeble ray of outer daylight crept into the room. Its shabby furniture stood out in various angles and nooks; the usual furniture of a third-rate hotel bedroom. No one was there but himself.

His haggard, bloodshot eyes turned from place to place. Who had coughed? Was it someone in the next bedroom? But it had certainly sounded *here,* in that corner near the window.

Believing that imagination was playing him a trick, he threw himself back on his bed and buried his aching head in the pillow. What use to rise, or dress, or go forth into that stream of glittering life beyond? What use to face the daylight, knowing that, as far as he was concerned, life was over. All that had meant life; its pleasures, gaieties, extravagances; that whirl of gold and fire represented by the fever of gambling; those crowds of loveliness and sinfulness and extravagance drawn here as moths to flame, and, like the moths, heedless of

scorched wings so long as they might circle round that flame.

He groaned aloud as he thought of it all. A sudden wave of hopelessness overwhelmed his aching senses. What folly it all was! What folly had been his, and now what a future he had to face! Those stern words rang in his ears and danced before his eyes. *Ruined*—and by his own madness, his own recklessness. How was it that he had not paused to think? that he had never asked himself how long he could go on in such a career without facing a day of reckoning?

And again, as these thoughts rushed through his brain, there came, like an echo of physical suffering, that ominous sound: a hollow, racking cough—the cough of the consumptive. He started angrily up and glanced about him. This time he felt sure someone was in the room. The cough had been distinct enough for certainty. The intruder, by test of that sound, must be standing by the window to the right of the bed where he lay.

But there was no one there.

Angry and irritated by this second interruption, he sprang from the bed and drew up the blind. Then, with shaking hands and a recurring sense of nausea and giddiness, he began his toilet.

It was long before it was completed—before he felt able to face the daylight and the gay throng of life that

he must meet in the streets below. Even when he was at last dressed he hesitated. What use to go? What use to seek restaurant or Casino? He was penniless. He had not even a watch or ring that might claim the aid of the local *mont-de-piété.*

"Oh!" he groaned again, "if only I had enough money to take me away from this cursed spot—if only I could get straight off to England, I swear I'd never touch a card or look at a roulette table again!"

And even as he said it there sounded faintly but distinctly once again, that strange, ominous cough.

The young man rushed to the door and threw it open. No one was there. His glance flew to the door of the room adjoining his own. With scant ceremony he opened it: the room was vacant; the bed undisturbed. It had evidently no occupant. Whence, then, could that sound have proceeded? Could imagination or racked nerves play one such a trick?

He laughed the idea to scorn, and yet turned back again to his own room and gazed around it as if for the assurance he desired. He went to the window and looked out. It showed him only roofs and gutters; the sloping slates of attics like his own. No sign of life or adjacent tenant to account for the disturbance that had so annoyed him.

Impatiently he closed the window. He stood for a moment in the middle of the shabby room wondering

what he should do. Pride forbade his applying to his mother for help, since that must mean full confession of his career of folly. He could not so pain and distress her. He must find some other way out of the scrape.

As he considered the point his eyes fell on the ragged strip of carpet at his feet—a grey, ordinary felt carpet with nothing to attract notice save one dark stain in the corner by the window. An ugly stain it was —a splash of dull crimson that might have been blood.

Blood! He wondered why he should think of that in connection with it; why, following the train of thought, he found himself saying, "It was the cough of a consumptive I heard a moment ago."

The idea was repellent—uncanny. He shook it off. He was not given to morbid or superstitious fancies. He assured himself his nerves were at fault.

Again he seized his hat and prepared to leave the room. But at the door itself that sound echoed once again. Feebler, fainter, yet so *real* that he could no longer doubt its actuality. As once again he turned and looked, it seemed to him that where that stain lay crimson in the sunlight, the carpet was moved or lifted as if by a draught from beneath.

"Of course! Why, what a fool I am!" he cried aloud. "It was from *below* the sound came. What an idiot, to fancy there was anything unnatural about it!

There must be a crack in the boards. The person who coughs must be below me. Sound *ascends*. That is why I heard it so distinctly."

And he went down the stairs satisfied that he had solved the mystery. In the entrance the *concierge* was sunning himself. The young man spoke to him.

"That is a troublesome guest you have in the room beneath me," he said. "His cough disturbs me. Who is it?"

The man gave a quick, furtive glance at his interrogator.

"Cough? Has monsieur been thus disturbed? One cannot help these things. Monsieur desired a room high, and cheap. Monsieur has such a room. It is not possible to select also the neighbours of monsieur."

The young Englishman flushed at the mild insolence of the tone. A few days ago he would have resented it by instantly quitting the hotel. Now prudence mastered anger. At least he had here a refuge, a hiding-place until such time as his affairs were arranged. So merely shrugging his shoulders he passed out and went through the narrow street of Les Moulins to the more fashionable quarter of Monte Carlo.

The air was so fresh, the sky so blue, the sun so bright that a certain revivifying sense of health and life stole back to him. He forgot the shock of the morning, the barefaced horrors he had confronted in that hour

of awakening. He was young, and to the young hope is a constant friend. It whispered to him again, and he listened to the whispers. Something would be sure to turn up. It must. He could not be ruined. He could not be penniless. And yet—his pockets were still empty!

* * * * *

In a place like Monte Carlo it is always possible, in fact it is probable, that one will run up against friend or acquaintance. A common interest in a fascinating vice bears many interpretations. Paul Enderby had his meals provided for that day by the "good luck" that had deserted himself. But he shunned the gambling-rooms for once, despite friendly invitations. They seemed suddenly to have lost their fascination. But the hours were long and empty and brought him no definite plan. If he wrote to those hard-fisted men of law it would mean eating humble pie, accepting his fare to England like a whipped schoolboy, and going back to face all the worries and bothers summed up in that phrase "investigation of affairs."

As night drew on he became conscious of an intense sense of fatigue and bodily weakness. It reminded him that he had been living at high pressure. It left him with an intense desire to sleep, and finally sent him back to his room at an hour which had usually signified beginning the night instead of ending it.

He lit a candle and undressed himself, and then with a yawn of weariness threw himself on the bed. A moment, and he was asleep. It seemed to him that he had scarcely closed his eyes when he was conscious of being suddenly wide awake again—awake and sitting up and listening to the echoes of that hollow, consumptive cough. How distinct it had seemed! How *near!*

It was that consciousness of nearness which half terrified him as he gazed towards the window. The curtains were not drawn. The moon shone on the white blind, and one long clear ray fell across the floor of his chamber and showed him the stain on the carpet. Surely it was brighter than it had seemed that morning. It glistened as if still liquid; it seemed to *flow* towards him. Furious at his own fancies, he sprang from the bed and rushed to the spot.

The carpet was not fastened down. He lifted it and looked beneath. The flooring was smooth and even. There was no apparent crack or aperture through which a draught might blow or a sound might echo. He dropped the carpet, and went to the window and drew up the blind. The bright moon-rays fell across the painted sill. It was rather a wide sill, standing out from the recess that framed the window. As his eyes rested on it he was struck by the appearance of the boards. He tried them one by one. It seemed to him

that the centre piece fitted less evenly than those on either side. With an impulse for which he could not account, he seized a shoe-lift close at hand to act as lever, and by its aid wrenched the board upwards. Beneath it was a hollow space, in which lay a small leather pocket-book. He drew it out and opened it. Within lay a bundle of French notes to the value of 50,000 francs!

He stared at them as one incredulous of a reprieve that means restoration to life.

Life! Why, here *was* life. The means to win back his fortune; to restore him to his place in the world; to buy back joy and pleasure; to——

He started. The book fell from his hand. In his ear, so close as to fan his cheek with exhaled breath, sounded yet again that hollow, horrible cough. Shuddering, he looked around at the vacancy which material senses could alone detect. What did it mean—this ominous cough, which had forced him from rest to wakefulness, from incredulity to fear? His bodily sight assured him of mere empty space, but something—*something* that had nothing to do with corporeal senses—whispered that there was another presence in the room; that this presence had a motive and a reason for its visit; that the clue was in his hands and he must follow it.

At his feet fluttered the bank-notes. Close by lay the worn leather pocket-book. He stooped and picked them up. He crossed the room and lit the candle, and seating himself on the edge of the bed began to examine the book for sign of ownership. In one of the pockets was a card bearing the name of Sergius Borizoff, and covered with minute writing in French. He tried to decipher it.

"I have risked all, and lost all save this. It is yours, Vera—your fortune that I seized in my madness, and I now restore. For twelve bright hours I stood on the summit of success. The bank was broken. I had millions! I put this resolutely away—your portion. I played on and lost *all*. Death is nigh—very nigh. I have not slept or tasted food since I woke to the ruin I had challenged. I hide this away lest it should tempt me. To-morrow I will send it you—to St. Petersburg——"

That was all, save a faint splash of—ink—or was it blood? Had the writer died after concealing the book; died there on that strip of carpet, where a crimson stain glistened in the moonlight?

Cold and sick and shuddering, Paul Enderby put back the card and the notes. What a ghastly tragedy faced him in their dumb revelation! What a mockery of human hope and human weakness! Then, like a

shock, came to him the vision of his own hopes, his own madness, his own weakness—the dishonouring memory of that moment when the money he had found seemed only an incentive to further folly.

He had no right to this treasure. It belonged to a girl—a girl who might even now be suffering or starving for want of it. But how was he to find her? How restore the money? He paced the room with feverish energy. He argued with himself, and fought right manfully the insidious tempter who whispered, "Why not use these notes to recover your own losses?"

Who would know? Not a soul—save himself. A hundred, fifty, even ten francs had before now won thousands for the lucky gambler. Look, too, how this had come to him—almost supernaturally, one might say, as if he had been *meant* to find it!

In that sordid room, in the silence of the night, his good and evil angel fought for the soul of Paul Enderby.

Never had he known temptation so sharp; never had physical and spiritual senses battled so fiercely for victory.

In the grey morning light he was still sitting there, the pocket-book in his hands, a strange leaden heaviness weighing down his limbs. Then at last his eyes closed; he fell back and slept.

* * * * *

Had he dreamt it? What did those voices mean outside his door? Who was knocking? He started up. A woman was speaking.

"Perhaps the gentleman is still in his room. He may not wish to be disturbed."

Paul rubbed his eyes.

"Who is there?" he demanded.

"It is a lady, monsieur. A lady who desires much to view this room. *Numéro treize.* Can monsieur admit her?"

"Certainly not. That is to say, I am not yet up. Later, perhaps."

"Later—madame departs herself for Russia."

"Russia!" Paul Enderby started up. "If madame can wait—in a quarter of an hour I shall be dressed," he stammered.

"Can Madame la Princesse wait for the quarter-hour?" he heard that obsequious voice murmur. "Perhaps she will honour the *salon* for those few moments?"

Again that sweet languorous voice. "You will explain to the gentleman my reasons. I regret having to disturb him."

Reasons? A princess! What on earth did it mean? Paul rushed through a hurried toilet, flung back the bedclothes and smoothed the coverlet, man fashion; threw wide the window to air and sunshine; answered

a fresh impatient knock with politeness and yet—curiosity.

"Of course admit Madame la Princesse. But what the —— does she want to see *this* room for?"

She entered—a graceful, sad-faced woman, a woman in whose dark eyes spoke the weariness and tragedy of the Slav race.

Frankly she gave explanation.

"Ah! monsieur, it was in this hotel that my poor brother died. I—I only learnt it by accident. He went away to Paris. He was ill—I never heard from him—years passed. Then I married. At last in the papers one day I saw his name. He had died—here. Broken a blood-vessel, so they said."

Her deep eyes filled with tears; searched the room tenderly—sadly. Perhaps they saw the face she loved and pictured. Paul Enderby watched her in breathless wonder. Could she be the "Vera" spoken of in those lines he had deciphered? Was it possible that the mystery——

She was speaking again. She had moved to the window.

"He must have stood here so often. He must——"

Her eyes fell on the carpet—on the dull red stain. "What is that?" she said breathlessly.

Then Paul found voice. He snatched up the pocket-

book. He showed her the card. He thrust into her passive hands that tempting package of notes. She looked at them—at him—a wondering horror in her eyes.

"Yes. I am the 'Vera' he speaks of. But that I should be drawn here now—to this room—to hear of this discovery——"

She looked at that haggard young face, and womanly intuition told her its story.

"And you, monsieur—you too have gambled; lost perhaps? Tell me, was this money a temptation? Would it have helped you?"

"Yes——" he faltered.

"Then why did you return it to me? I—I should never have known."

The red blood of shame dyed his face: this was the way one looked at gamblers—as men destitute of honour, unworthy of trust. The look of those questioning eyes cut him to the heart. "I am not wholly vile; I have some sense of honour left. When I knew that money was yours I had but one thought—to restore it. I should have searched the world to find you!"

A little sad smile touched her lips. She looked at the young eager face. Just as young, just as eager had been that one she loved and would never see again.

"To find *me?* Ah! monsieur, perhaps it is a better thing you have found—self-conquest, self-dependence;

the power to resist temptation. If he had been as fortunate!"

Paul Enderby started. Had she heard it? Apparently not. Only a sigh that trembled on the air, and afar—very far and faint now—a hollow, broken cough!

RIVIERA STUDIES.

IV. THE SEALED DOOR.

"I HAVE taken a fancy to it," said Lady Battlesea. "Offer him anything. He is old. He is not well off, so I am told. He should be glad of such a chance."

The polite agent shrugged his shoulders. What could he say? The rich English lady wanted a particular villa between Beaulieu and Monte Carlo. The said villa was small, but picturesque. It boasted of one of the best positions; for that region had been named "Petite Afrique," so sunny and so sheltered it was. The steep, high mountains protected it from cold. The sun shed all its warmth and glory there even in mid-winter.

High woods, and hedges of myrtle, and groves of orange and lemon-trees, all conspired to shut in this retreat from prying eyes.

The English lady had seen it from the sea, learnt its name and its owner, and now desired to rent it for the season. She was rich enough to afford herself any whim. It did not occur to her that money's golden key

could not fit any and every lock distinguished by those whims. She had made persistent inquiries as to this villa. She had learnt that the owner himself lived in it always; that he refused to let it, or even admit any stranger to view its beauties.

He was old, eccentric, parsimonious. Of the life and sociality of the Riviera he would have none. Its gay crowds, its luxury and extravagance, its allurements of the Casino and the Terrasse were nothing to him. Occasionally he was seen driving along the Corniche road towards Nice or Mentone. Oftener the old-fashioned carriage and the two steady-going horses wound their slow way up the heights to the Tête de Chien, or Eze. It was curious taste to prefer the narrow streets and ancient houses of La Turbie or of Roquebrune to the modern brilliance of Monte Carlo or Nice. But such was the fancy of Count Gotto, and such his title to be called "eccentric." Eccentric he was, if isolation and simple tastes mean eccentricity; a desire to shut out the whirl and conflict of the world, and live one's own life irrespective of its opinions.

Often when the Riviera season created its demand for houses and accommodation, agents had written or approached the Count with offers for his picturesque villa. But to one and all he had the same reply. It was not to let. It was not to be viewed. Privacy and exclusiveness had set the seal of distinction upon it, and

such distinction defied even a millionaire's gold. All this the polite agent repeated to the wealthy importunate claimant, who had set her heart on that particular villa for the three months of her stay in the neighbourhood. And to all this she listened with the intolerance and impatience of one for whom desire and possession have gone hand in hand since life meant anything worth the meaning.

"Write to him again. Say a lady wishes it—a lady of the English Court. Money is no object. He can have whatever he asks. It is the only place I like. Quaint, picturesque, private. Beautiful grounds. Easy distance from Monte Carlo."

"The grounds are indeed beautiful, and the distance is convenient," said the agent. "I will, of course, write again, if her ladyship so desires. But"—he shook his head—"so many have offered—Russian princes, the millionaires of America. It is always the same—no, no, no!—and anger, great anger, if we persist."

The quiet, gentle-looking girl standing beside the importunate lady spoke then, half apologetically.

"Do you think it is any use to trouble this gentleman, Aunt Helena? Why not look at some of the other villas?"

The English Countess flashed an indignant glance at the suggestion of her companion. "Hold your tongue! I didn't ask for your opinion. I don't choose to look at

other villas. I don't want them. I want Torelli—and I mean to have it!"

She swept out of the office. The girl followed. Lady Battlesea got into the waiting motor, and gave an order to her footman.

The girl was too surprised to speak. She had caught the words plainly enough.

"Drive to the Villa Torelli. It is some five miles further on. I will stop you."

Jeanne Charteris said nothing. It was not her place to remark on her relative's whims, or her occasional lapses into a vulgarity rather significant of modern society. She was only a poor relation taken on as companion for such duties as writing letters, reading out novels and newspapers, attending to the caprices and requirements of two small lap-dogs, and fulfilling any other tasks or duty that Lady Battlesea deemed desirable.

As she glanced at the face of the Countess she saw in it now all those signs of petulance and self-will she had learned to read as danger-signals. Jeanne Charteris therefore made no effort at conversation. She simply sat patiently there while the Daimler car sped swiftly on, and thought to herself how unsuited the ugly modern conveyance was to all this lovely region. She wondered what the Riviera had been like when *châlets* and villas were few and far between. When this famed

Corniche road had been but a mule-track between hills and sea. When the miasma of vice and luxury and folly had not as yet spread along the lovely coast and turned its meaning into the fevered excitement of the gambler, the passions and excesses of the gay *mondaines* who fluttered here with the season, caring nothing for the place itself.

"How glum you look, Jeanne! What is the matter?" said the sharp voice of Lady Battlesea, breaking suddenly on the girl's thoughts. "I suppose you are thinking I oughtn't to storm this hermit in his den. But I mean to try personal persuasion. We'll see how that will work."

"I wonder why you want this house so very much," said the girl.

The Countess laughed. "Oh! a whim, and—perhaps because it is difficult to get. You know I hate opposition."

The girl knew it right well. She had not lived a year under this ostensible guardianship without learning a good deal of the nature and life of her relative.

"I was thinking that this old nobleman might not care to be visited so unceremoniously," she said.

"Nobleman!" sneered Lady Battlesea. "An Italian count. Why, they are as plentiful as blackberries—and as poor as their own priests," she added. "This old eccentric is only pretending to be exclusive in order to

get a big price. Perhaps I can persuade him to sell if he won't let. I should like a place of my own here. I've often thought of buying one. England is absolutely impossible now. You can't live in it from August to May! Why, last year I wore furs at Ascot."

Jeanne said nothing. She was of a somewhat reticent nature, and preferred the *rôle* of listener when with Lady Battlesea. They had so little in common that she was always afraid to air her opinions, or brave an argument.

The Countess rattled on regardless of her silence until they reached the coveted villa. There the motor stopped, and the footman rang at the iron gates, set in thick impenetrable hedges of pyracanthus and myrtles, and topped by boughs of orange and lemon-trees.

It was some time before the gate opened. When it did, it revealed a strange figure—that of an old man, with long white hair and beard, and piercing dark eyes, set in a face yellow and lined as parchment. A long rusty green coat hung to his knees, a broad, flopping straw hat shaded his face. His bright, keen eyes glanced from the liveried attendant to the occupants of the car.

"What do you want?" he demanded in French.

Lady Battlesea leaned eagerly forward. "We want to see your master, the Count Gotto. Is he within?"

A grim smile twitched the corners of the old man's mouth. "I am Count Gotto," he said.

The English lady stared at the apparition. "*You!* Are you sure? I mean—I am delighted to see you! Will you permit me to enter? I—I have a business proposition to make."

"I do not care for visitors," he said curtly. "And I have no business that needs discussion."

"But surely you will permit us to see your lovely gardens. I was so enchanted with them from the sea that I have ventured to call in hopes——"

While she was speaking the old man's eyes had wandered to the flushed, strained face of the girl. It was eloquent of the annoyance and disgust she felt at such ill-bred persistence.

"Are you Americans?" he demanded suddenly.

Lady Battlesea drew herself up with offended dignity. "Certainly not. I am an English peeress. I——"

She opened her card-case. The old Count waved her intention aside.

"No matter. You have the curiosity, the persistence one remarks in those people. I have told you, madame, I desire no visitors, and I do not show my gardens to the inquisitive tourists of the Riviera."

"The agent told us so," interposed the girl. "Pray, monsieur, forgive us. It is so unusual in these days to find anyone so exclusive, that Lady Battlesea——"

"Are you her daughter?" he asked brusquely, his

ear keenly appreciative of the purity of the girl's accent as compared with that of the English Countess.

"No; I am her niece."

Lady Battlesea leant forward again, eager to gain her way.

"Ah, Monsieur le Comte, you will permit us just one peep through those gates. Just one little promenade through that walk I see beyond. You, whose nation is so courteous, so polite, you will not refuse a lady's desire?"

There was little courtesy or admiration in the glance that swept her face and form, taking in their admirable "make-up," their close attention to the fashion of the hour. From them to the simple serge-clad figure beside her, his eyes turned. "Does mademoiselle also desire to see my poor residence?" he demanded.

The colour left the girl's face. She was annoyed. She could not approve this method of treating a private individual's property as if it were a show-place for Cook's tourists.

"No, monsieur," she said quietly. "I am not curious or interested in the matter."

Lady Battlesea turned on her angrily. "How dare you speak like that!" she said in English. "Just when I was getting round the old fool too!"

Again she began her persuasions. "Of course,

Monsieur le Comte, mademoiselle would be as proud of that honour as myself."

"She can speak of her own wishes. I would permit *her* to enter if she really desired it," was the cool rejoinder.

"But, monsieur, I—I could not allow her to go in there alone. What a very strange idea! Besides it is I who want to take your villa, to make the offer——"

"To take my villa? You mean rent it?"

"Of course. That is the business I wished to discuss."

He was silent; his head bent, his eyes on the ground, as if meditating the subject. Lady Battlesea signed to the footman. He opened the door of the car. In a moment she was out and close to the strange old man.

He looked at her, and suddenly flung the gate wide. "Enter, then," he said in a voice of command, "and let me hear your offer."

Triumphantly Lady Battlesea glanced at Jeanne. "Come," she said. "I told you I should succeed."

Slowly and reluctantly the girl dismounted. She followed that imperious figure through the entrance, and they found themselves in a wide pathway, dark with interlaced branches of thick trees—a melancholy, mystic avenue of perpetual twilight, sombre and grey as the ilex and olive woods around. Silently the Count led

the way. At certain spots he waited patiently for the rapturous exclamations of the proposed tenant, but his eyes always went to the face of the girl. She rarely spoke, but her face showed appreciation.

It was some time before the towers of the villa appeared above the tall magnolias and ilex-trees. The paths wound in and out, bordered with datura and geranium. Here and there a seat of majolica or the pure marble of a statue broke the sombre green. A wild, luxuriant garden spread itself over the level spaces above the sea. The house stood back, opening on to a broad stone terrace, from whence the lovely bay and curving coast were plainly visible for miles. Endless shrubs, a wilderness of camelias, azaleas and carnations surrounded them on every side. The perfume of orange blossom was heavy on the air.

"Good heavens! how lovely!" exclaimed Lady Battlesea for the fiftieth time. "And what possibilities!"

She was picturing the terrace with a gay crowd scattered over it; with basket-chairs and scarlet canopies, and the laughter and murmur of her envying guests. What a paradise it was! Why, three—even six months would not tire one of such a place.

"Now—for the interior," she cried gaily. "If it is as perfect as this I would give you two thousand Napoleons for the season, Count!"

"You desire to see more?" he questioned.

"Of course! I wish to see the house. To know the accommodation."

A cynical smile touched the lips of the old man. "You will be disappointed. The interior is just a bachelor's retreat. There is nothing to suit ladies of the gay world inside these walls."

"Oh—one could always furnish more rooms!" said Lady Battlesea, with that air of effrontery and self-will so peculiarly her own, and so particularly irritating to her young companion.

"Enter, then," said the old man sternly. "My servant will show you the house."

He summoned an elderly major-domo in shabby livery, and gave him some orders in a low voice. The man looked surprised, but he said nothing. The Count seated himself on a chair on the terrace, and took no more notice of the intruders.

It might have been some fifteen or twenty minutes before the English Countess returned. She was all gush and praise. Why had he disparaged the house? It was perfect. Perfect. A store of old-world treasures; of artistic beauty. It would suit her admirably.

"But I must have all these front rooms," she rattled on. "Your man would not let us see *one* in the left wing. He said it was never opened except by yourself.

Won't you show it me, Count? As you have been so kind——"

His face grew suddenly dark with anger. "No," he thundered. "And this house—if I let you have it—is only yours on condition that that room does not exist for you!"

"Why—how extraordinary! You can't mean it."

"Madame, I always mean what I say. You have been somewhat importunate. You have forced your way here. Very well. Since you so ardently desire my house, you may have it at the price you name for three months. But that room will be locked. It is not included. It is not to be opened."

For a moment or two Lady Battlesea considered the matter. She was too worldly and too matter-of-fact to believe in occult mysteries. She did not credit anything but eccentricity behind this refusal. She glanced at Jeanne Charteris; but the girl's eyes were on the old Count's stern face. She showed no sympathy with this dilemma.

"It is a very odd condition to make," said the Countess at last.

"It is my condition," answered the old man simply.

"I suppose that is why no one would ever take the place before," muttered Lady Battlesea crossly. She hated contradiction of any sort. She glanced from point to point. After all, there were other places to be

had. Other villas more commodious and with no restrictions. But then the desire to triumph over the agents, the people who had tried to get this particular house and failed, swept back. Did it matter so much if one room was taboo? She need tell no one. And if there was a mystery——

Again her eyes travelled from point to point. From the terrace to the gardens. From thence to the sea-wall below. Then to the wide blue waters dancing and quivering in the hot sun; to the bay, with its fairy yachts and pretty steamers, bound for Nice or Monte Carlo. It certainly was a paradise, and so secluded, so picturesque. Even the *bise,* that terror to the frequenters of the Riviera, could scarcely trouble one much. These thick woods were at once shelter and defence.

"Well, I accept your condition," she said abruptly. "I like the place. I will rent it for three months, and you may lock up your Bluebeard chamber if you will."

The old man looked at her.

"It is not only that I lock it and seal it, madame. It is also that I exact from you a solemn promise that under no circumstances or conditions whatever do you permit that room to be opened or entered."

Lady Battlesea stared. "Why—you don't mean that it's haunted? But even then I'm not afraid. I don't believe in ghosts and nonsense of that sort."

"That is well," said the old man. "Though your assurance is born only of ignorance. To those who are wholly material, life and Nature have but one meaning. However, set your mind at rest. That room is *not* haunted. Only I permit no one save myself to enter it."

"All the same, I will enter it before I leave," thought the wilful woman as she bade him farewell.

* * * * *

A week later Lady Battlesea was established in the much-coveted villa.

She was entertaining a few of her "smart" friends at tea on the terrace just as she had pictured herself doing. The *mise en scène* was complete. The basket-chairs, the scarlet canopies, the gay dresses, the incessant laughter and chatter of the small, restless crowd. All the rest was Nature's handiwork. Azure sea and sky; the glow of creepers; the green and gold of foliage and fruit; a wealth of flowers; tall palms against the long sea-wall below.

The hostess, beautifully gowned and in the best of spirits, was describing with feminine exaggeration the battle for possession of the coveted domicile. Her story and her experience had just that charm of the *bizarre* calculated to impress her audience. The old Count was a well-known character. The possession of the Villa Torelli was an equally well-known difficulty. Their hostess, familiarly addressed as "Batts," was supposed

to have acquired it through outrageous bribery, or some mode of persuasion never before employed. When she reached that point in her narration dealing with the forbidden room, the listeners burst into excited interrogation.

"But didn't he say why?"

"And did you really promise him, Batts?"

"What an extraordinary whim!"

Then a languid, rather impertinent voice drawled, "And do you mean to say you're *not* going to open it?"

Jeanne Charteris, who was standing by the tea-table, turned and looked at the speaker.

She was a very pretty, very fair woman, with cold blue eyes and an expression at once insolent and sarcastic. The girl's amazed glance annoyed her. She hated girls. They were so tiresome; so self-assertive; so indifferent to heat or cold, or *coiffure,* or the latest decree of fashion. Jeanne, as a girl, embodied all these defects. She wore the inevitable simple white gown. She possessed the pure colouring and natural wavy hair which are youth's dowry. Then she had a certain calm, high-bred look which lent dignity to her eighteen years. Besides, she not only looked rebuke at that suggestion, but voiced it.

"Lady Battlesea has given her promise not to open that door. It was the only condition on which she secured the house."

"Oh! a fig for promises and conditions! I shouldn't dream of keeping one if it interfered with my wishes!"

The girl said nothing, though indignant words trembled on her tongue. It was not her place to rebuke one of Lady Battlesea's friends. She turned her attention to the tea-table again. But something in her look had angered her Grace of Hazledeane. She returned to the charge.

"Of course Batts was right to promise anything the old fool asked if it stood in the way of her getting the place. But now she's in possession—well—I know what *I* should do."

Eager voices questioned of intention. Lady Battlesea's the most eager and insistent of them all.

"I should just force the lock and see what the mystery was."

"Do you not consider that that would be dishonourable?" exclaimed Jeanne indignantly.

The duchess shrugged her shoulders and laughed scornfully. The men were silent. A few of the other women broke in with suggestions or remonstrances. But none of them seemed to think that the honouring or dishonouring of a given promise was half so important as the satisfying of one's curiosity.

Lady Battlesea acknowledged curiosity of the most intense and troublesome description. "The idea of *what* is in that room positively haunts me. I can't forget

that it's there and that I mustn't enter it. Even in the garden I find myself looking up at the tower."

A dozen eyes followed her gesture.

"Is it *there?* In that tower?"

"Yes. You see the window is covered up. One couldn't see anything even from the outside."

"And you say the door is locked—and *sealed?*"

"Sealed with the Count's own seal," answered Lady Battlesea.

There was a moment's silence. Then the duchess rose abruptly from her chair.

"Let us all go up and look at it," she said. "There must be some way of besting the old miser. I daresay he keeps his money and treasures in that room, and he's afraid anyone would steal them."

"Yes. Let's all go—eh, Batts? We may hit on an idea!"

"Very well," laughed their hostess. "Only I warn you there's nothing to see, except a door and a big red seal each side of the lock."

They rose and shook out skirts, and threw aside sunshades, and then, all laughing and talking and jesting, went in through the wide-open French windows to the interior of the villa.

"You don't approve, mademoiselle?" said a voice close to Jeanne Charteris.

She turned, and saw an elderly man whom she had

casually heard mentioned as Monsieur Duvellroy. He was leaning on his stick. His eyes, amused and curious, were on her face as the quick colour flamed to it.

"Approve? I? It is nothing to me, monsieur. My word was not given."

"If the promise had been yours?"

"Ah! monsieur, can you ask? Surely one's word of honour is not to be lightly disregarded?"

"It should not be. But we live in base times. Honour has lost its significance, almost its meaning."

"Not to everyone," she said. "Tell me, did you know Count Gotto at all?"

"I have known him for years. Yes. He is not a man who makes many friends, or cares for his fellows. He has had a very sad life. He found all he needed of companionship in Nature and in books. At one time he was devoted to science. One of the most famous chemists in Italy."

"Then perhaps that room was merely a laboratory —a place for experiments or research?"

"That is not unlikely. But our friends prefer to give it the charm of mystery. It is curious what an attraction there is about a locked room. Everyone suspects a secret, or a ghost, or a Bluebeard's cupboard. By the way, did the Count leave any of his servants here?"

"Only the gardeners. The others left with him."

The Frenchman nodded. "He had his reasons, no doubt."

He turned his head suddenly and looked up at the tower. "They are a long time away," he said.

A look of uneasiness crept into the girl's eyes. "I hope," she said, "oh! I *do* hope they will not persuade Lady Battlesea to break her word!"

"Is she so easily persuaded then?"

"Oh, no! Only she hates being laughed at, and likes to get her own way."

"Is not that a failing of your sex, Mademoiselle Jeanne?"

The girl coloured. "You know my name?" she said in surprise.

"I heard Lady Battlesea call you that. Besides——"

He stopped abruptly. "No matter. I cannot tell you yet why I am interested in you, apart from your sense of honour and obligation. You—are not quite happy, I imagine."

"Is anyone?" asked Jeanne.

"It is the privilege of youth."

She was silent. Again her eyes went to the tower. "It is very lovely here," she said. "I do not wonder that the Count wished no strangers to live in his home."

As the words ceased there came a sudden clamour of voices and confusion. The party was returning from

that visit of curiosity. They were all talking at once. All urging upon Lady Battlesea her right as temporary *châtelaine* to open that sealed door and give them the benefit of its secret.

Jeanne looked and listened with indescribable contempt. But she was glad they had done no harm. She had almost expected to hear that someone among them had been daring enough to disturb the seals or force the lock.

At last they took themselves off, and peace and quiet fell once more over the beautiful grounds.

Jeanne heard the parting words of the duchess as she adjusted her motor-veil.

"You're too absurdly scrupulous, Batts! I told you it could be done quite easily, and not a soul would ever know!"

Then she went. But the echo of her words and their sting remained behind.

Jeanne found herself repeating them. "It could be done quite easily, and not a soul would know." She watched her aunt's absorbed face. It betokened a strange preoccupation. From time to time she glanced at the girl as if desirous of questioning her. But she said nothing of what was in her mind.

When they met at dinner Lady Battlesea was her usual talkative, dominating self. She told Jeanne she was going to the Casino with the duchess and some of

her friends, and that she could retire as early as she pleased. It would be midnight or later before she returned.

Jeanne was not sorry for the promised quiet. She had a very charming room of her own in the opposite tower to that containing the closed room. She went there as soon as Lady Battlesea had departed. A young moon was shining brightly over the sea. The stars were brilliant in the clear sky. A scent of orange flowers and pinewoods came through the window as the girl threw it open. She leant forward and looked out at all the beauty around with glad eyes. Then the chill of the December air warned her of imprudence. She withdrew, intending to get a wrap for her shoulders, when a sudden gleam of light caught her eye.

It was an odd light. It flashed out across the terrace and path in one long ray. Then disappeared. She snatched up a golf cape and drew the hood about her head, and once more leant out to watch. But all was dark again.

"I wonder where it came from!" she said to herself, conscious of a certain uneasy conviction that she knew perfectly well. But she did not care to express it even to herself. Besides, it was impossible. That room in the opposite tower was unoccupied. No light could flash from out an unoccupied room.

She lingered until the chill of the night air proved

a rival to its loveliness. Then reluctantly she closed the casement and drew the curtains, and rang for her maid.

The maid was a Parisienne, and talkative. She made no secret of her objections to this villa. Of its domestic inconveniences. The small, sombre rooms of the servants' quarters. One could see that a man was responsible for all *that.* Had madame only considered well, only visited these dismal quarters herself, she would never have taken such a house. Besides there were stories. Had mad'm'selle heard? Oh! of a truth there were stories whispered about that owner so eccentric. He was *un peu fou,* one would say. He had lived so strangely. Half the rooms had been shut up. And now that tower of seclusion yonder. Had mad'm'selle assured herself of the seal on the door? Had she too heard the instructions to all the servants? No one was to go there on any pretence. Certainly a strange proceeding when one took over a house at the rent of these Riviera villas! Were she rich as madame—and so on.

Jeanne listened, saying little. The servants' gossip did not interest her any more than their complaints. They were all the pampered, supercilious menials that fashion and wealth have created for their own discomfort. But her attention was arrested when the girl went on to say that the locked-up chamber was haunted.

Everyone said so. Noises were heard, especially at night. Lights had been seen to flash and disappear. Jeanne started so abruptly that a long tress of hair was wrenched from the maid's hands.

"Lights!" she exclaimed. "What nonsense are you talking, Marie? How could lights shine from a room closed up? Sealed as that is. Impossible!"

But the girl persisted in her tale.

No one would sleep in that wing at all. Of that they were determined. There was a bedroom underneath that closed chamber, and a small *salon.* But there they might remain. Sooner would the women crowd together, share each other's rooms, if need be, than take one of those so *triste* and dreadful chambers yonder.

Jeanne dismissed her at last, and for long sat by the wood fire in her grate, reflecting on all the girl had said. The memory of that flashing light seen by herself coincided oddly enough with this tale of sounds and mysteries.

Had the old Count really some strong reason for closing that wing? Were these noises produced by some agency employed by himself in order to scare away his tenants, and secure the price of his villa all the same? She dismissed that thought as unworthy of him. She thought of that strange, noble old face; the sad eyes. Of his gentleness to herself, and the con-

trasting contempt of his manner to Lady Battlesea. What was the mystery of this villa of his?

She lay down, but she could not sleep. She watched the shadows on the white blind. She heard the rustling of the wind-stirred boughs in the garden. Deep silence reigned throughout the house. Probably the servants had retired, with the exception of those who had to sit up for their mistress. It was midnight now, and yet sleep was far from her eyes.

Impatient of this unusual wakefulness, she at last sprang out of bed. She resolved to get a book and read herself into drowsiness. She lit a candle and looked at the clock on the mantelshelf. Just twelve. Perhaps Lady Battlesea had returned? She went to the door and opened it. The house was perfectly quiet. The corridor before her was all in darkness. She returned to her bed, and began to read the volume she had selected. It was a dull and unexciting tale, and before long her eyes closed. It seemed to her she had slept for hours, when she suddenly sprang up in startled confusion, conscious of some noise or clamour. There was a sound of knocking at her door.

"Yes—yes, what is it?" she cried.

A voice answered. "Can you come down at once, mad'm'selle, to your aunt's room? She needs you."

Jeanne sprang out of bed, trembling in every limb. That voice—surely she knew it?

The only light was the grey clearness of dawn struggling through the window. In some confused way she answered that she would come. She hurriedly threw on a dressing-gown. Then she opened the door. Her eyes assured the evidence of her ears.

It was no other than the Count Gotto who stood there waiting for her. He carried a lantern in his hand, and she saw his face, cold, pale, and wrinkled. A sardonic smile touched his lips.

"Don't be frightened," he said. "I am not playing the ghost, though your good aunt seemed to think so. Will you come to her? She is lying in a dead faint at the door of the sealed room."

The girl's face grew hot with indignation. The sealed room! Could it be possible? Had her aunt broken that promise? Allowed mere feminine curiosity to get the better of reason and honour?

Silently she followed the old man. She had ceased to wonder at his presence here at such an hour. She was bewildered, yet calm. The keen eyes watching her from time to time approved that self-command.

Across the dark corridor, and into that deserted wing of the villa, the two strange companions went. They mounted the staircase to that mysterious room. The old man lowered the light he was carrying, and Jeanne saw its rays flash upon a woman's figure stretched before the door. Yet even before her eyes took in the

ghastly face, they sought the sealed defences of that door.

The strip of paper was broken, and hung loose, clasped still by the seals on either side.

"Yes," said the voice of the old Count, "that is how a woman keeps a promise, mademoiselle."

"Is she—dead?" faltered the girl in sudden terror.

"Oh, no. She is only insensible. The result of her own imprudence. As I wished no scandal or disturbance, I thought it best to summon you. It seemed to me possible that we could get her to her room, and no one need know anything."

The girl knelt down and looked at the white face and closed eyes. It seemed to her that the atmosphere around was full of a strange odour. A heavy, sulphurous smell permeated the air. She lifted her aunt's head and supported it against her knee. The old Count watched her.

"Do you think you are strong enough to help me?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. She is not very heavy. And, as you say, it would be better not to disturb the household."

The old man put down his lantern and showed Jeanne how to support the head and shoulders of the unconscious woman. He took her feet. Slowly and with many pauses they reached her bedroom, and laid her on the bed.

A lamp burned on the table. Her jewels and evening dress were thrown about as if she had hurriedly divested herself of these superfluities before getting into the dressing-gown she wore.

"Can you get her out of these clothes?" asked the old man. "You need not be alarmed. She knows nothing and feels nothing. If she were in bed—— But I will retire. See what you can do."

The girl heard the door close. She then gave all her energies to the by no means easy task demanded of her. It took a long time to get off skirts and corsets and put the helpless woman into her loose night attire. But it was done at last, and she lay in the same ghastly helplessness on her pillows when the faint rose of day showed itself through the window.

Then Jeanne went to the door. The old man was sitting on a seat in the passage. He looked up inquiringly. "Is it done?"

Jeanne nodded. She was too over-wrought for speech. He rose and came back into the room, and stood for a moment or two looking down at the unconscious form. The girl stood beside him, her face almost as white as that on the pillows. All her self-control could not keep back the signs of inward terror harrowing her nerves. That ghastly face and rigid body were so like death that it seemed impossible to believe life could ever revisit its forsaken citadel.

Presently the Count took from his pocket a tiny glass phial. He held it up to the light as if measuring its contents. Then he uncorked it, and, stooping over the rigid figure, slowly let a few drops fall on the lips. Colour stole back to them. They parted. He repeated the dose, and gradually the ashen face took back the hues of life. The eyelids trembled, lifted themselves. The eyes stared vacantly at Jeanne, who was bending over the bed. There was no recognition in them. They looked past her, beyond her, around the room, but their expression betokened neither interest nor remembrance.

"Speak to her," said the old man gravely.

Jeanne did so, calling her by name. But without result. She looked at the Count. "What has happened?" she implored. "She is like one stunned."

"She is suffering from shock," he answered. "The result of her own act; her own imprudence. I am sorry for this. But I can do no more. She had her warning. She chose to disregard it. She must accept the consequences."

"But what did she do, and why are *you* here?" asked Jeanne, trembling greatly.

"She tried to open that door I had locked and sealed. My reasons for forbidding entrance were simple enough, mademoiselle. I am a chemist. I have for years made a study of poisons. The atmosphere of that room is often very dangerous to those unacquainted

with precautions such as I use myself. I must tell you that there is an underground passage in that tower, with an outlet on the seaboard below. For long I have kept a small boat there, and gone to and fro at will. When I stipulated that that room should not be at my tenant's disposal I considered myself free to use it if I desired. I was experimenting on a new and subtle essence whose fumes affect the memory. To complete my discovery I needed a few more days. You, mademoiselle, will remember how importunate your aunt was. How she insisted on coming here at once. Well, I agreed. At the same time I resolved to test the strength of her honour, and bound her by promise, as you know. Last night was the night I had fixed for the completion of my test. I worked for hours in my laboratory. Shortly after midnight I heard a strange sound outside the door. I shut off my dark lantern and listened. Someone was trying to unfasten it, that was clear. I heard the rustle of the paper as it was lifted from the seal. Then I knew how cunning a scheme was to conquer my precautions. The seal on one side of the lock would be lifted from *beneath* by some sharp instrument. Then the lock was free. In a moment I had made up my mind to teach the intruder a lesson. I put on the mask I wear when dealing with dangerous poisons. It is a glass one, and a sufficiently terrifying thing in its way. Then I stood waiting for

the opening of the door. Key after key was tried. At last one appeared to fit. It turned in the lock. I stood there and flashed my light on—that good lady yonder. No doubt I frightened her, for she shrieked and fell there on the threshold. At the same moment my hand inadvertently knocked against my bottles. One or more fell on the floor. The vapour spread through the room. I had only time to drag the fainting woman beyond the door and close it before we were both in danger of asphyxiation. I saw she was unconscious. I thought of calling for help. Then I remembered you. I had learnt you were to occupy that room in the opposite tower. I resolved to summon you. I removed my mask. I went to you. That, mademoiselle, is the whole story."

Jeanne was shocked and distressed beyond expression. Her aunt had brought this misfortune on herself. Of that there was no doubt. But how was it to be explained?

"Had I not better call up the servants and send for a doctor?" she asked.

The Count scrutinised the vacant eyes and impassive face on the pillows for a long moment.

"He could do nothing," he said at last. "She will sleep presently—perhaps for some hours. When she wakes it will be time enough to decide what you will do.

Her life is in no danger, I can assure you, but her memory—for that I cannot answer."

"She did not seem to know me," faltered Jeanne.

"No, nor me. The shock and those treacherous fumes have entirely dulled her faculties—for a time."

"For—how long do you think?" inquired the girl timidly.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Can one say? A week, a month, a year even."

"A year! . . . But what can we do? What will become of me?" cried Jeanne.

"Of you? Had madame no husband? no relations?"

"None that I know of, except a sister in Canada," said Jeanne. "She has been a widow two years. That was why she had me to live with her. I have never heard her speak of any relations except this sister, and I am ignorant of her address."

"Do not distress yourself before there is occasion," said the old man kindly. "It is a tragedy of self-will, this—but one is sorry all the same that it should be tragic. Let us wait on events a little while, mademoiselle. You and I will get better acquainted. I know that your earnest desire was in favour of your aunt keeping her promise. You would never have broken one so solemnly given?"

"I? No—a thousand times no! Oh! how foolish it was of her, and what a price to pay for her curiosity!"

"It may be a heavy one," he said. "See, now she is asleep. There is nothing more to be done. It would be well for you to watch her throughout the day, mademoiselle. And if you are uneasy send for a physician. But you must tell him the whole story; and believe me—there is no scientist living who understands that drug, or has any antidote for it."

Jeanne wrung her hands helplessly. "What use, then, to send for a doctor? Besides——"

She broke down then as she thought of the humiliation, the scandal that her confession would arouse. That a lady, a peeress of England, should break her solemn word, violate a pledge, steal like a criminal at midnight to that forbidden door, try to break those seals in such fashion that they might be refastened when her curiosity was satisfied! What a hateful, ugly story it would be, and how the whole Riviera would ring with it!

The old man seemed to read her thoughts. He spoke them one by one, and agreed with them.

"What shall I do? Oh! can't you advise me?" she pleaded.

"I have counselled. Wait. That is all. If mind and memory come back there is no harm done. If they do not——"

"That is what I dread. Think, monsieur, what a fate! She was a brilliant, beautiful, admired woman but yesterday. Now——"

"She rushed on her own fate, mademoiselle. It is not for you to blame yourself, or me. I warned her. You, by word and example, as I know, pleaded for honour and its rights. We are all the instruments of our own fate. See—how life warns us and arrests us. Had she listened to you this afternoon——"

"This afternoon?" exclaimed Jeanne.

"Yes. I had a friend here who told me of your words—your indignation with these people. He alone knew my secret."

"Then he may guess?"

"He may. Probably he will. But he would keep his own counsel, mademoiselle, even as I shall, for the sake of one woman who has shown us that she knew the meaning of honour."

* * * * *

Days lapsed into weeks, and Lady Battlesea was refused to all her intimates and friends. She had sunk into semi-invalidism. She remembered nothing of that tragedy. She accepted Jeanne's devotion in a passive, childish fashion. She was quite content to sit in the sun or be wheeled in an invalid chair through the beautiful grounds. Physicians saw her, but could make nothing of the case. Her men of business were equally at a loss. The only sign of the old self-will she manifested was a rigid determination not to leave the villa. She believed it to be her own, and the old Count suf-

fered her to remain, for sake of Jeanne's companionship, and as some compensation for the injury he had wrought on his tenant.

* * * * *

It was to Jeanne he left the place, with all his wealth, when he died a year later. The wording of the bequest was accounted as a further proof of his eccentricity. Thus it ran:

"To the one woman I have been fortunate enough to meet who has shown that she understands the meaning of a promise."

* * * * *

The Riviera wondered and gossipped and laughed. But Jeanne Charteris did not laugh. She accepted the meaning of her legacy as she had accepted the charge of the foolish, babbling woman, who believed it hers until memory and death met in one last spark of consciousness.

Then—she knew all. Her sin and its penalty, and the shield of Jeanne's protection thrust between herself and that outer world for whom dishonour had held no harsher meaning than feminine curiosity!

THE TREACHEROUS MOUNTAIN.

A TALE OF THE ERUPTION OF VESUVIUS, 1906.

ALL his young life Beppo had lived at the foot of the great mountain.

He was only a little lad of some twelve years of age, orphaned early, and guardianed by relatives poor and hard-working; none too loving or careful of their own children, less loving and less careful of the child left in their charge. They made him work, they gave him poor food, hard words and harder blows. No one cared if he were ill or well, tired or hungry, sad or merry. He laboured in the vineyards and olive fields on the slope of the mountain, and tended the few hardy goats belonging to Sandro Piale, his uncle. In summer he rose with the dawn, and went up the mountain slopes. That wonderful mountain, towering against the blueness of the skies. The mysterious thing, with its smoking cone and its hidden fires and its wondrous history, which he never tired of hearing. He knew of its dangers and its powers. He knew of the lovely,

laughing city it had once wantonly destroyed and buried beneath its fiery lava floods. He knew of the modern enterprise that brought hundreds of curious or careless sightseers to the hideous funicular railway, crawling like a huge centipede up the steepest part of the cone to within a hundred yards of the summit.

There were old people in the village who had seen it built, and looked upon its audacious enterprise as a work of the devil. There was old Teresina, for instance, feeble and witchlike and almost sightless, who lived with her daughter and her daughter's child, and had seen the mountain under all aspects. Angry and vomiting fire, and dashing rocks and stones upon the roofs and vineyards and churches lying below. Quiet, too, under winter snows and summer moonlights, but always breathing a certain air of unrest, as of some giant imprisoned and resentful, and for ever rebellious against a force stronger than his own will, but incapable of conquering it for always.

The mountain made up summit and boundary of Beppo's thoughts and imaginings. He could not explain its fascination; he only knew how strong and strange it was. The other lads of the village laughed at him when he spoke of it. They cared nothing for its history; recked nothing of its dangers. It brought people to the neighbourhood; rich *Inglese* and *Americanos*, and such people were always fools enough to

throw a few *centesimi* or a half-franc piece to a persistent beggar or a flower-seller, or even to any brown, bare-footed imp whose antics or impudence took their fancy. So the grim, ugly cone had its uses; but as to its history, or structure, or possible dangers, what use to trouble one's head about such matters?

Few of the populace on those lower slopes ever dreamed of climbing the mountain. Fewer still could understand what brought people from far-off lands and foreign countries to visit it. There it was, there it had been—that was all that Poggio or Ottajano or Somma cared. But then the Italian peasant seldom does care for aught that is not concerned with the good of his stomach or the laying up of money, or the outwitting of his neighbour in some bargain. Necessity obliges him to work, but he never ceases to abuse the necessity, or he gets someone weaker or poorer to do the work for him.

From the age of four Beppo had had tasks found for him; had known blows and hard words and scanty food; had slept on straw, and risen early, summer and winter, to toil through long hours, or run errands, or tend the goats, or do some of the hundred and one things demanded. He was always cheerful, always ready, always patient. And through all these years of toil and servitude he had had but one joy. It was the companionship of a child of his own age, the grand-

child of old Teresina, who had told him so many stories of the mountain.

Pippa was a lovely, little, careless creature. Her mother was a strange, sad-faced woman, of whom her neighbours were shy and somewhat scornful. For once, in her youth, she had left the village and gone to the bright, lovely city beyond, and there had married—or so she said. But everyone knew she had returned with no husband—only a child of a year old, and that she would never give any account of those years or their happenings, or say if she were wife or widow. So the women gave her scornful looks and scanty sympathy. As for old Teresina, she was accounted half a witch, and had always been hated, so that little Pippa had almost as lonely a childhood as Beppo himself. Perhaps that fact accounted for their affection and interest.

Old Teresina's tiny cottage lay farther up the mountain-side than did the dwelling of Sandro Piale, Beppo's uncle. But every day Beppo passed it, and every day the sunny head and laughing brown eyes of Pippa seemed to him as sunlight on that dreary road, which wound like a grey snake up and ever up to the lava fields and desolation above. Sometimes when he drove his flock of goats homeward he would stop to talk to old Teresina where she sat on a stone bench by the cottage door. He was often hungry and weary, but never too weary to do any useful job for the old

woman, or carry water from the well to save Pippa trouble; never so hungry but that he would give away the wild currants or the first ripe fig to his little playmate. All that his young heart knew of love and devotion was lavished upon her. She seemed to him the loveliest thing that breathed or blossomed in that crowded hive of humanity. That she was selfish and idle, that she never lifted hand to do one single task that might save her mother or assist the witch-like old dame who gave them shelter and home, he never thought. All he knew was that her face was like a flower, and her hair gold as the sunshine, and her eyes dark and deep and wonderful, as the eyes of Italy so often are. For her saucy tongue and rebellious, idle ways he cared nothing. In his dreary life she shone as a star. She was the one thing of beauty and joy it held.

One evening, near sunset, as he toiled homewards he saw a stranger sitting on the well-known bench in old Teresina's garden. He had an easel before him, and was making a sketch of Pippa.

The boy knew something of artists. He had seen them with knapsack and colours and folding easels, travelling on foot through the country; pausing to sketch some stormy sunset, or some aspect of the mountain; light-hearted, gay of tongue, easily pleased, ready to throw a silver piece to a desirable model, and seeming

to the boy as wonderful as magicians when with a few strokes of brush or pencil or charcoal they transmitted to their white canvases the likeness of some scene or face around. It was an alchemy of art of which he understood nothing, and, like most incomprehensible things, possessed a strong attraction. He stood silently at the cottage gate and watched Pippa, the sunlight on her golden head; her trim skirt upheld and filled with wild flowers; her charming, mutinous face, half shy, half saucy as she looked at the painter and watched his quick, skilled fingers at work. Beppo remained at the gate, afraid of disturbing the picture. Old Teresina sat just within the doorway, shelling beans for supper, her withered face and lean brown hands, and the bowl on her lap, making a weird background to the lovely, laughing child.

The light began to fade suddenly, and the artist paused in his work. He was studying in Paris, he told them, and had been on a sketching tour through Tuscany, and thence over the Campagna and the Alban Hills, through all that wondrous country, devastated by Hannibal, on to Napoli—Napoli the beautiful, the divine, the world-famed, world-praised city that once in a lifetime all the world should see.

He waxed enthusiastic as he spoke of it. The subject had been introduced by some careless word of Pippa's mother—the quiet, sad-eyed woman, whose life-

history was bounded by tragic episodes in the fair city beyond. To Beppo the stranger's words were a revelation of some wonderful life of which he had been in ignorance. When he quoted *"Vedi Napoli e poi mori,"* the boy experienced a sudden keen sense of life; a desire hitherto unguessed, yet close at hand, for the adventurous or the wilful. As for Pippa, her great eyes widened and sparkled as she listened to those ardent, eager words, painting another picture of beauty and magic—something lovely and desirable, and filled with the enchantment that youth and ignorance bestow on the unknown. Oh! to go there—to see the lovely city for oneself: its quays and gardens and churches; its wonderful buildings and gay shops; its fountains and statues and palazzos. And the people. That ever-passing, ever-curious crowd of all nationalities—all this the children heard of and marvelled at, and tried to picture for themselves, until with gay laugh and careless *"Addio"* the stranger departed.

But the memory of him and his words lingered behind, and fired Pippa's breast with envy and desire and set her importuning her mother, as they sat at their frugal meal. Why should they not go to Napoli? If only for a day—just to see it once, as the stranger had said. There it lay, so near, so beautiful, only a few leagues off, and yet an unknown territory. She was weary of this old and dreary village; of the dark, frown-

ing mountain; of the sameness of days and weeks that knew no *festa* save a Church holiday or some saint's procession. Besides, in Napoli there was money to be made; the stranger had said so. She could sell flowers, or pose as model to the artists. Had not the painter declared her face was a little gold-mine, if she but knew how to use it? And so on and on the child clamoured and chattered, and would not be pacified save by a reluctant promise of her mother that she would try and take her to the wonderful city some day in the near future.

How near that day was neither of them guessed.

It was some half-hour later, when the child lay curled and asleep on her little straw bed, that the old woman spoke her first warning.

"Nita," she said, "my mind misgives me. Trouble is at hand. Night after night the warning comes. The thunder mutters for ever in the ground, and the smoke rolls in clouds as the wind blows over the mountain crest. We are used to it, you say. Oh, yes—I know; but I have memories that you know nothing of. Danger is at hand; the mountain is wrathful, and its wrath is ugly and destructive. For me, I am old, and my days are numbered. I care little when the end comes. But you are young, and you have the child to think for. I tell you, Nita *mia,* there is danger. Get out of this place. You have friends over in Napoli yonder. Seek

them. When the red light breaks, and the sulphur clouds mass themselves on the heights, and the stones and cinders fall, as Beppo says they fell to-day, there is danger. Be warned. Take the child and go to Napoli."

"But you, mother—what of you? You must not stay here alone."

"Have I not said for me it matters not? I am too old to wander forth. I could not walk to the village, leave alone to the station. And of the iron way I have a terror, as you know. Never have I travelled by one of those monsters that breathe fire and steam. Sooner would I die."

"Then I do not leave you," said the daughter firmly. "I am no coward, the Blessed Mother knows; but to save my own skin and leave you here to the perils of which you speak—never. I would not do it.

"There is the child—the child," persisted the old woman.

Her daughter's dark face paled a little, but her lips set themselves together. She said no more. Only assisted the old, helpless creature to her bed, and then went out and climbed a steep path to a point where the upper crest of the great mountain was in full sight. The chill spring air was full of muttered thunders; the sky above was dark and heavy with the rolling clouds for ever rising and spreading like some monster's

poisonous breath. Even there, so far below, Nita felt its taint and its hot and noxious odour. She had never seen it in such guise as this. She was awed and startled, and could not understand why such things should be.

Like so many of the peasants and villagers around its base, the volcano was to her nothing but an incident of the landscape. What the eyes of childhood and youth behold, becomes to later years a thing of little importance. To none of those people of Ottajano and Palma, or Torre del Grecco or Nola was the fiery mountain of more account than any other feature of the landscape. It had frowned and threatened so long that they had lost any fear of either frown or threat. But certainly Nita had never seen its aspect so dark and terrifying in any memory of its existence. She told herself this was probably but a phase of its mysterious activity. In a day—a week, perhaps—it would calm down again. She put her mother's words aside as meaningless, and went within and shut the door on the cool airs and the new-born springtime with that negligence of its beauty and its healthfulness so typical of the peasantry of all countries. Fresh air seems always to them as an enemy to be guarded against, instead of one of Nature's most generous gifts, for which to be eternally grateful.

Day followed day, and a week had passed since the

advent of the stranger. But his visit had been a landmark in saucy, wilful Pippa's life, and she never ceased to talk of him and of his picture of her, and of how many artists in Napoli would be glad that she should sit for them if only her mother would take her there. It saddened Beppo to hear her talk so. He felt that life would be yet more blank and cheerless if she were not in it. The other children were coarse and rude and unfriendly, or he, perhaps, was of finer fibre than they. In either case, he had no friends or associates amongst them, and all of love and devotion his little heart could hold was lavished upon Pippa.

To the little lad, as to others who read—or misread—the signs of the great cone, some fear at its threats occasionally flashed a warning all was not well. Never had the mountain been so strange, or its crest so shrouded. And ever and again came stories of falling showers of cinder and rock, and of weird electric flashes like jagged rents upon the mountain-side.

Still daily needs clamoured, and daily life went on. The people worked in the vineyards, and dug the red earth, and manured and sowed, and tended their little plots of land, while to and fro the girls passed with their bronze water-pitchers poised on their heads, and gay songs on their lips. For the winter was over, and spring was at hand, and the sky was blue and soft, and the wind held perfume of field and woodland, even if

some shift or change of it was ominous of those hateful sulphur fumes. In old Teresina's cottage all went on as usual. Day by day the old woman crept out to her bench and plied her knitting-needles, and basked in the warm sunlight; and day by day came crowds of sightseers and tourists and scientific men to travel by the funicular and view the phenomena of widening cone and flowing lava.

Warnings were uttered and printed, but few gave heed to them. Some, more foolhardy than their travelled kind, only uttered boasts of "seeing the spectacle" under aspects of danger, as if it were some show-piece of pyrotechnic fame set blazing for their pleasure. And every night the great crater glowed more fiercely in the darkness, and the streams of lava rolled ever in wider and more threatening masses down the mountain-side. Sometimes Beppo left his straw bed and crept out to watch the wondrous spectacle. It held terror as well as fascination now. Chance words he had overheard warned him of its destructive powers, spoke of the buried cities below and their history of past centuries. Had the mysterious mountain some such project in view? Would it rain fire and ashes and those dreadful vapour poisons over the nestling villages and fruitful fields, careless of life or ruin or aught but that savage insolence of freedom which at long and rare intervals permitted such destruction?

He wondered and trembled.

He thought of Pippa and old Teresina, nearer to the danger than himself, and therefore likely to prove earlier victims. But what was to be done? His uncle and aunt seemed to have no fear. The neighbours, though they watched and spoke of a possible catastrophe, yet made no effort to avoid it. Indeed, what could they do? Their homes were here. Here they had laboured and lived all their lives, and past generations had done the same and known no harm. They must trust to the Saints for protection—that was all.

But as the days drifted by, the omens of disturbance became more marked. The ground would tremble suddenly. The walls of the little houses would shake. People walking over road or field-path grew suddenly sick and giddy as the earth seemed to rock and sway beneath their feet.

Then came a night when the wind was high, and the dense black volumes of smoke spread and rolled over earth and heaven in masses so heavy that all light was darkened and every twinkling lamp obliterated by fine clouds of falling dust. With daybreak came crowds of terrified villagers from higher up the slope, speaking of wild and utter destruction, and bent on fleeing to the town. Beppo heard his uncle swearing and raging, and calling on the authorities to provide shelter and award compensation. But no one paid any heed to him.

The panic spread rapidly. Crowds assembled in the square before the church, and the priests besought them to pray, and be patient, and all would be well. Yet to pray with that dense, foul air heavy about one, and the grit of the falling dust blinding one's eyes and filling one's mouth and ears, was a task demanding more fortitude than many of the terrified creatures possessed. To Beppo it seemed a sad waste of time, for his brain was afire with anxiety respecting the fate of Pippa.

In the darkness and confusion he escaped, and made his way up the familiar path to old Teresina's cottage. It amazed him to find the road all strewn with rocks and cinders, some still hot to his feet. But he struggled bravely onwards, guiding himself by instinct through the ever-increasing darkness. The mountain itself was quite invisible. Above his head were only those rolling clouds of smoke, and around him only that ever-falling snow-storm of blinding dust; fine, impenetrable—dense as snow is dense—but unlike snow in that it was brown and pungent, and at times laden with coarser atoms of cinders.

Battling his way through it all, the little lad at last reached the cottage. He pushed open the wooden gate and went up to the closed door and unlatched it. The interior was thickly powdered with the same ever-falling lava dust. No fire burned on the hearth. It was

desolate and deserted. He called up the wooden stairway to where they slept, but no answer was returned. Then he stumbled eagerly up the narrow ladder, and knocked at a closed door. A feeble voice bade him enter. He found old Teresina lying back on her mattress, with clasped hands and sightless eyes. He rushed forward.

"It is I—Beppo," he cried. "Oh, where is she? Where is Pippa?"

"Pippa has fled to Napoli," croaked the old woman feebly. "She was wild with terror, and vowed she would reach the railway and get to the city. Nita shut her in, but she escaped. Then I made Nita follow. . . . For me, what does it matter? But they are young, and life is still dear to them. It is best they should try and save themselves. I warned her—long ago. I knew the fire-mountain was unsafe. And you, child? Why are you here? Every hour the danger increases. Get you gone, and bid your kinsfolk flee also."

She had gasped and panted out the words in broken sentences. Her breath came with difficulty, for the sulphurous fumes were heavy on the air, and creeping in through the doorway which Beppo had left unclosed below. As the little lad listened a wild fear seized him. He forgot all and everything but that Pippa had fled alone, and knowing nothing of the way where that strange funicular went to and fro to Napoli and its

vicinity. Would she find it? Would she go to the town—without money or food or protection? Oh, why had she not waited, or summoned him?

He glanced at the old woman. She lay back, very grey and still, with closed eyes and folded hands. When he spoke she made no answer. He thought she slept, knowing nothing as yet of that last sleep which falls on the aged with little sign or warning. He crept silently down the stairway and went back over the rough path he had traversed, shutting the door behind him and leaving the cottage and its inmate to the shrouding pall of this strange night.

Once out and away, he ran with all possible speed in the direction that Pippa must have taken. They both knew the zigzag line and its stations. He wondered if indeed she had succeeded in reaching one and getting away to the provisional safety of the sea-coast below. But even as he ran and stumbled through the darkness, a rush of air, fierce as a gathering cyclone, came sweeping down from the heights above. Then followed loud detonations—a cannonade of hidden forces, and above and around fell swift and thickening showers of blinding dust and cinders. Shrill on the heavy air came the cries and shrieks of women and children and the hoarse imprecations of men; and suddenly, without warning, Beppo found himself caught up and penned amidst a crowd of panic-stricken fugitives. On they fled, and he

had no choice but to flee also, or be trampled under foot. They swept onward like a tempestuous sea, and fight or struggle as he might, the boy could not escape them.

They stormed the wayside station and clambered into the carriages regardless of order or command. They rent the air with shrieks and cries and imprecations. The train swept on, and they with it, and the little terrified lad with them. In a way he was glad, if indeed the train was bound for Napoli. Perhaps he would find Pippa there. As the distance lessened he took courage, and questioned a *contadina* near him. He heard that her village had been swept by a flood of burning lava; that many were killed, and all were homeless. She had a child in her arms. Her husband had been parted from her in the crowd. She was weeping and calling on the Saints, but too terrified to give him any other information. There was nothing for it but to wait. Surely, if he had been able to get to the iron way Pippa might have done the same. No one could have refused her beseeching. Or perhaps her mother had overtaken her, and both were on their way to safety. He heard people say that his own little village would assuredly be the next victim of the lava flood. It lay in the direct route.

He thought of his kinsfolk, and wondered if they

would take warning and fly before the destructive avalanche swept them aside.

And still the brooding darkness thickened, and the storm of ashes fell, and through every nook and cranny of the carriages crept that suffocating vaporous dust. The windows were closed, and the packed crowd made the air still more suffocating. It seemed as if the journey would never end. There were long pauses and weary waits and incessant quarrels and altercations with officials, to all of whom the crowd asserted its determination to proceed to Napoli and lay its pitiful condition before the authorities.

Faint and weary and half stifled, Beppo crouched there in his corner. A terrible sense of helplessness and hopelessness oppressed him. He had left his kinsfolk behind. To whom could he look for food or aid? His heart beat violently, and his limbs shook. But he thought of Pippa, and took courage. Besides, he would at least see the lovely city of which he had heard so much. And—who knew?—he might chance on some friendly soul there who would give him advice or help. So presently, when the air grew a little clearer and houses and fields began to show themselves, and someone opened the carriage window and cried they were nearing Napoli, he plucked up courage, and let his thoughts drift from their tangle to some clear purpose.

The purpose was only to find Pippa. Surely in that great wonderful city it would be possible?

The railway station was one whirl of uproar and confusion when the train emptied itself. Here too the dust lay thick. A red fine ash powdered everything in its ceaseless impalpable fall. It lay on the platforms, and covered the uniforms of the officials and the dingy blue blouses of the *facchini*.

When the little lad staggered out into the street all was dark as night. He had no idea of the hour, and there was no sky-sign to aid his guesses. Between the heavens' radiant blue and the dingy grey ground at his feet there drifted that ever-falling shower of dust; an impenetrable, suffocating sand-storm, that shut out light and air and loveliness with fiendish malice. He went blindly on, thinking to reach some place of light or some street of beauty. He saw hurrying crowds, all grey and ghostly, as figures in a dream. He saw huge piles of that noisome dust swept aside to the corners or byways, yet ever falling, ever increasing. A wide, vast street opened out before him. He saw ghostly vehicles passing. He watched the flying trams with bated breath, not knowing what they could be. He saw lights flickering and glimmering amidst the increasing gloom, and here and there a shop window gleamed, and all its treasures showed for a few moments and then were blotted out by some thicker shower or change of wind.

On and on he went, peering into strange faces, hurrying after any small figure that by happy chance might be Pippa's.

He knew nothing of the names of streets or piazzas. The long, long Via Roma seemed to him an endless pilgrimage. He was very weary, and began to feel faint and giddy from long fasting. A dry crust and a drink of goat's milk had been all the food he had tasted since daybreak.

He noted churches and statues and great hotels, and the whizzing electric trams, and the incessant shouting, praying, gesticulating, cursing, of the surging crowds. But his brain was too confused to take in the meaning of it all. The only recurring persistent thought he held was the discovery of Pippa.

A sudden sense of overmastering fatigue compelled him to rest. He saw a flight of stone steps reaching up to the portals of a great church. He staggered blindly towards it, and was caught and arrested by a kindly hand. A familiar voice sounded in his ears. He looked up into the face of the artist who had sketched Pippa in her cottage garden a few weeks before. As the mists cleared from his brain and eyes he was conscious of another face. A little figure, grey with that powdering dust, was clinging to the artist's other hand.

"Pippa!" he cried, and then everything seemed to reel and sway once more before his eyes. He had

found her. She was safe. His heart could scarcely hold its gladness and relief. Involuntarily he stretched out his hands. "You are safe. . . . I have found you!" he muttered, and thought she would come to his side as of old. But the child shrank back and clung more closely to her new friend.

"I did not want you to seek me," she said. "I am not going back to the village any more. I stay with the signor, and go with him to Paris. He has promised."

Beppo stared at her, and then at the cool, smiling face of the young Frenchman.

"To Paris!" he gasped. "And with this stranger! Has your mother permitted it?"

"Her mother is dead," said the artist. "She is quite alone, and quite friendless. But she has a will of her own—the *bellina*. She refuses to be left; and, after all, what could she do here? In Paris, now——"

He looked at the lovely, saucy face upraised to his. In three years she would be a woman, and if her beauty held to its promise she would be lovely, and Paris was the paradise of lovely womanhood—if it knew its own value.

But Beppo could not fathom such thoughts. He only knew that his idolised playmate, the one human thing he loved, was going away from him to a strange land and with a stranger; going willingly, gladly—while

he faced hunger and desolation and loss. He burst into entreaties; the tears rained down his cheeks, and made little channels amidst the dust and grime his face had gathered.

Pippa laughed.

The laugh hurt the boy more than any blow. To be mocked, despised—by her! Pride stayed his tears. He felt suddenly old, and as if his childhood had vanished for ever. Perhaps Pippa's laugh had killed it.

He thought of his desolated home; his utter friendlessness. He knew at last that Pippa, whom he had loved as a sister, cared naught for his troubles, or what might chance to him. There was the blackness of night in his young soul—a memory of blows, and hunger, and bitter words. And Pippa was going away. Pippa could laugh at his grief.

He choked back his sobs, and lifted his head and looked at her. Had she seemed even a little sorry—— But she was pulling impatiently at the young artist's hand. She was only eager to be away, journeying on and onwards to that fair and wonderful city he had told her was his home.

The artist looked at the boy's sullen face and the girl's mutinous one. "You would rather come with me. You will not stay with your friend there?" he asked.

"With Beppo?" she screamed. "But no. I hate them all—those people—that life. To be hungry—to

have to work—oh, take me with you, signor, I beg and pray of you."

He looked at her and smiled.

"You see," he said to the little lad, "she is wilful, as I said. But have no fear. She will be well cared for yonder; and who knows some day she may come back?"

"Come back?" The boy laughed in bitterness of heart. What use to come back in future years? It was now he needed her companionship, her love. He turned aside, too proud to utter fresh entreaty; callous even of hunger and want, of the need for shelter from the terrors of the coming night.

"*Addio,*" called out the artist, and he pressed a silver piece into his hand. But Pippa said nothing. She was too eager to be gone, and too afraid her mother might discover her. For she had lied—Nita was not dead.

The little lad flung the money down into the grey dust at his feet. It seemed to him as the price of Pippa's faithlessness. He would not have taken it to save himself from starvation! Blindly and stupidly, and sick with misery, he staggered on. The dreadful night was all about him. The dreadful blinding dust still fell.

He let his feet bear him whither they would, through all those strange places of muffled sounds, of suffocating air. Now and then a word, a sob, a curse, fell on his

ear. Foreign tongues hissed abuse and disgust of the catastrophe and all it meant. *"Vedi Napoli e poi mori,"* grumbled an English voice. "See Naples and then die —they may well say it!"

The words brought to the weary little lad a memory of the beautiful bay; that blue, blue curve of lapis-lazuli of whose fame he had heard.

He wondered where it lay. Might he find his way there and see it, and then perhaps die, as the proverb said?

He summoned courage to ask its direction, and found the quay was at the end of the narrow rough street in which he stood. Had he given thought to the matter he might have known that in this dense dust-storm neither water, nor vessel, nor quay would be visible. But he was too faint and heart-sick to think clearly about anything. A child's sense of sorrow is always hopeless, for its life is bounded by narrow limitations. It cannot look forward to happier morrows while enduring the misery of to-day.

Blind and footsore, Beppo staggered on. The wind was blowing in sultry, stormy gusts. A great cloud of dust and lava blinded his eyes, choked back his laboured breaths, sent him panting and half suffocating to where the shrouded water lapped the stony sides of the quay.

He knew nothing of where he was—only was conscious of leaning forward—still forward—while he gasped

for breath and felt the suffocating dust all hot upon his eyes.

There was a buzzing sound in his ears. He felt himself falling.

"Pippa!" he whispered; and then, as a stone falls, he fell into the deep, cool water, shrouded by the ever-falling pall of that awful dust.

THE VALLEY OF DESOLATION.

CHAPTER I.

SILVER-WHITE the moonlight gleamed over the majestic loneliness of a world of rock. Huge columns, fallen pillars, scattered masses, standing weird and desolate like the ruins of a world upheaved. For countless ages they had so stood—mighty sentinels keeping silent watch over the desolate valley and the strange-looking, conical-topped mountains.

Lonely and cheerless even in the sunlight, the valley looked doubly cheerless under the cold radiance of the moon. The whispers of the wind were like the sighs of lost spirits, breaking ever and again into a wail of pain. For here, perchance, in years forgotten and out of mortal ken, might human life have played its tragedies, and human love have spent its passion and its strength. And here might the universal Mother have heard the cry of her rejoicing and suffering children, while the mountains kept guard over a mighty city, or barred a dangerous foe.

What had marked the passage of the centuries? Whose history was recorded by these stone monsters? None could say.

Wondering eyes gazed at their motionless majesty; wondering tongues speculated as to the nature and cause of their existence. Grave and learned scientists came from all parts of the civilised globe to explore and explain and theorise, but the lonely valley and the mighty rocks, and the protecting mountains only looked with dumb, unanswering eyes at the puny faces of men, and held their secret safe.

In that space of silence which holds back the meeting of day from night, a man came from among those towering rocks and stood gazing at the desolate valley.

It was no new thing for him so to stand and watch in summer dawns and winter twilights. No new thing to match his own loneliness against that of Nature. No new thing to cast himself down on that stony breast which was all of motherhood he had ever known, and groan in spirit over memories of happiness forfeited, and wrong committed, and love foregone.

He lived alone.

A mystery to savage and white man alike. A mighty hunter—a man without fear. A man who had discarded all trappings and fopperies of civilisation; a man who had taught himself to be independent of all that his

own hand could not supply. The rivers gave him fish; the wild game of the veldt or forest was all he asked for food. The kindly earth yielded stores of fruit or grain with little trouble save that of planting or sowing. For shelter and habitation he had cave, or rock, or tent, as the fancy or the season prompted. He spoke the language of the Boer and Zulu and Basuto with equal ease, and went his way among the savage tribes with unchallenged independence. To them he was known only by the name they had bestowed on him—"Umsiligass."

He was a tall man, slight and sinewy; his face tanned and bronzed by exposure to all weathers. His eyes dark blue and piercing—the eyes of one who carries his life in his hands and has trained the sense of observation to its finest possibilities.

He might have been any age from thirty to fifty. His thick hair was sprinkled with grey in a curious fashion that gave to it the glitter of steel. As he stood now in the full radiance of the moon, and lifted his uncovered head to the radiant heavens, he seemed to absorb and give forth something of their brightness.

A striking figure in a place so desolate—yet a figure with something akin to that very desolation. For the upraised face was ghastly as with pain, and the eyes held the unspeakable agony of a tortured soul.

Engulfed in a whirlpool of thought, he was living

over again the tragedy of his life. External senses had grown deaf and blind. What he saw—what he felt—what he heard—had nothing to do with his present surroundings. Ever and again, amidst adventure and peril, and even death, this memory would overtake him. The torture of it would rend his very soul, and nothing served him but to fly to desolation that might match his own, and fight out his agony as strength permitted. So ever and again he came to this valley to which desolation had given its name, and spent his dark hour amidst its kindred darkness. And here his tragedy lived and acted itself, and here his remorse burned from living agony to dull despair; from fire to grey ashes. And here, when that fire was slackening and cooling, as such mortal fires must needs do, he would draw from its resting-place the pictured face of the woman he had loved and—murdered.

He called it murder in those hours of self-reproach, though it was but the fatal result of accident. A man does not murder the thing he loves best—the bride of a week. Yet untoward fate had led him to do this, and the blood upon the little case that held her picture was her own life-blood shed by him.

Within that case was a fragment of newspaper—a paragraph cut from a South African journal, giving the history of that tragic incident.

As he stood alone now amidst the weird majesty of

that wonderful valley, he took the case and the paper from an inner pocket where they rested against his heart, and read over for the hundredth time the description of his deed.

It was headed: "Tragic Event at —— Hotel. Husband Accidentally Shoots his Wife."

The flaming vulgarity of the headlines hurt him even as they had hurt him when first his stunned senses took in their meaning.

He thrust the fragment of paper away, and gazed long and silently at the lovely face that looked back to his own. Gazed till the blinding tears shut it out from his straining eyes, and all the pent-up agony of his heart went forth in one exceeding bitter cry.

Desolation to desolation. Appeal to kindred appeal. The cold and callous rocks gave back the echo of his own broken heart. Other answer there was none.

* * * * *

It had been no light love that had prompted Ellaline Keith to keep her troth to an absent lover. To turn a deaf ear to countless flatterers, rigorously to oppose all obstacles, to wait patiently and trustingly till such time as he should claim that promise, and then, abandoning all the luxuries and pleasures of her life in England, go forth to a new life, a new home, a new protector.

He had hardly believed it possible she would come even at his summons.

He had waited in fear and trembling at Capetown for news and sight of the vessel that was bearing his treasure to him. He had knelt in a passion of gratitude and thanked God and life for the great good gift of which he felt so unworthy. He had given all he had of manhood's love and faith and devotion to this girl, and she had given back measure for measure.

At such happiness Fate frowns. It is too great for mortals. A glimpse and a memory is all they dare claim, and that glimpse was all that was apportioned to Lawrence Kerr.

One week—one week of perfect happiness—one draught of pure, intoxicating bliss—and then all the light of day went out for him, and the blackness of an endless remorse was left in its stead.

A rough life—a life among miners and Kaffirs—had accustomed him to keep some weapon always at hand, if not always on his person. Ella's dread of fire-arms, and her horror of the revolver that he persistently placed under his pillow, were to him only the dread of timorous femininity—something to laugh at, and soothe, or treat as a jest. Only in the dark afterwards did they become prophetic, speak of that short-sighted confidence of man which the history of accident has framed again and again for his warning.

In those hot November nights the windows were left wide open, and his knowledge of Kaffir honesty prompted precaution. Their room had two windows opening onto a balcony. One night he was startled by a sound, and, springing up, caught sight of a black figure by the dressing-table, on which lay scattered his wife's trinkets. Quick as thought he was out of bed, but the wily Kaffir was quicker, and slipped through the window and down the pillars of the verandah ere he could do more than shout a warning.

He came back to find his wife pale and trembling. "I declare I'll shoot one of those black devils," he muttered angrily. "It'll be a warning, if nothing else. They're thieves incarnate. Nothing is safe—even one's clothes. I've been stripped of my entire wardrobe before now, while staying at an hotel, and could get neither justice nor satisfaction. You see now, Ella, why I have a revolver handy."

"But if you had shot that man," she pleaded, "it would have looked like——"

"Like what, sweetheart?" as she hesitated.

"Like murder. He is only an ignorant savage."

"Ignorant," he repeated. Then laughed and gave her a few Transvaal experiences.

They had the effect of reconciling her to the presence of a revolver.

The night following this incident was one of those

hot, breathless nights that makes sleep almost impossible to those unaccustomed to a tropical climate.

Ella lay wide awake—feverish and miserable. She had insisted on having the windows closed, and now bitterly regretted it. At last the torture grew unbearable. She felt as if she must get a breath of air or she would suffocate. Lawrence's placid breathing showed no sign of discomfort, and not liking to waken him she crept softly out of bed and stole over to the window.

There was no light in the room, and without the night was dark as pitch. Her hot fingers trembled unsteadily about the fastening, then suddenly pushed it up, and the window flew forward. The noise awoke the sleeper. With a dim recollection of previous intrusions he seized the revolver and fired in the direction of the sound.

There was a faint cry—the flutter of a white garment—a heavy thud.

All his life it seemed to him he would remember that fall, and the sickening thrill of horror which for a moment left him powerless and inert.

When his senses returned he was holding in his arms his dead wife.

He had shot her through the heart.

* * * * *

Through dark chasms—through a whirling chaos of tortured thoughts, dreams, fancies, through semi-madness,

and then through the despair that all vain self-remorse entails, Lawrence Kerr passed, and struggled, and lived. Undesirable as existence seemed, it was given back to him. With all his recklessness, with all his disregard of danger and death, yet was he doomed to life. He shunned companionship, he faced every hardship, the perils that most men avoid, but again and again was that undesired gift flung back to his thankless hands.

Sometimes, in momentary desperation, he had turned the weapon that had destroyed his innocent victim against himself, but something stronger than his own will had held him back; had forbidden such a refuge even to the despair that was sapping the springs of existence. He lived on. He led the life of a wanderer. Rarely did he come into the towns or mix with his fellows. Never was he known to look with favour on the face of a woman, however fair. It seemed to him that he carried a stone in his breast where once a man's heart had pulsed and throbbed with love unspeakable.

Such was the man who stood alone in the desolate valley and fed his sorrow on memories unforgotten; the sting of undying pain still keen to pierce his very soul. For to some natures forgetfulness is impossible, and of such fibre was this nature of Lawrence Kerr.

He put aside the little case at last, and seated himself on one of the huge blocks scattered around. He had not noted the passage of time, but now the quiet

dawn began to stir from out the dimness of the clouds. First a spear of golden light struck the far-off mountain range, and quickly following came rays and shafts of radiance from the glittering armoury of the sun. The sky grew blue and tender save where the morning's kiss left it flushed as the cheek of a waking child; the grey clouds rolled back; silver mist and sparkling dew hung briefly on the fringe of passing night ere they too were swept aside by the fuller glories of the day.

Peace and beauty, quiet strength and endless miracle, all spoke out in that mysterious change. But the man's head was bowed on his folded arms. He was blind and deaf and unheeding. He was like a carved figure among those huge columns and fallen rocks, and only when a sudden exclamation broke the long silence of his vigil did he raise his head and look around.

He saw two figures on horseback gazing with wondering eyes at the picture Nature had painted for them.

He rose slowly to his feet. For a second or two they looked at each other over the cold barrier of stone and the equally chilling one of unfamiliarity. The riders were a girl and a man, both young, both holding that buoyancy and brightness of untried lives in face and bearing that spoke of a time distant enough to be ancient history to himself. His glance passed over them with indifference; he placed them as two of the curious

tourists who came occasionally from Graaf-Reinet to visit this valley.

The young man spoke first.

"A strange place," he said. "It's worthy its name. We wanted to see it by sunrise. I see you're before us."

The involuntary savageness which prompted Lawrence Kerr to answer an unwelcome interpretation of his presence, was suddenly checked by the sight of the girl's face; the soft sympathy of her eyes. What she had read in his he could not tell, but at least her words soothed the offence of her companion's brusque greeting.

"I fear we disturbed you," she said, and the very faint touch of the New World in her accent had a quaintness and charm for ears long callous to feminine voices. "I am sorry. You were sitting so still we never saw you until you moved."

Her eyes, as they met his, were so like the colour and the softness of those other eyes over which he had seen the cold mists of death gather, that his heart throbbed with sudden sharp pain. She saw his face change and quiver. That spasm of agony branded itself on her memory and set this meeting apart from any other that had chanced to please or amuse her girlish fancy. For in that moment she faced something of life's tragedy, and looked into the gulf of a man's despair.

Her companion was not observant. He had all the restlessness and curiosity of his nation underneath a

certain languor that wealth and New York had taught him was effective. His eyes had only noted a roughly dressed figure that might have been labelled "miner" or "explorer" without fear of contradiction.

"It is a desolate place," Lawrence said at last. His voice was slow and deep, as if speech were unfamiliar. "You were wise to pay your first visit to it at this hour," he went on.

"Do you—can you tell us anything about it?" asked the young man, with that laudable desire for information that will surely immortalise his nation. "That mountain now—curious sort of top, isn't it? Looks as if an earthquake had reversed its habits and pitched up a world instead of swallowing one."

The blue eyes of the stranger glanced scornfully at him. What they read of blonde good looks, irreproachable tourist dress, and general satisfaction with himself and all mankind was not of striking interest. Their next flash of interrogation took in the girl as she sat so easily and gracefully on her horse. Eye answered eye in mute sympathy, and a mutual comprehension that no words could have explained.

To the desolate man it seemed that he had never seen a face so expressive of perfect youth and perfect happiness—never since that one face had passed from life to outer darkness.

He averted his glance, and it fell on the soft, wide-

brimmed hat lying at his feet. Only then he remembered he was bare-headed. He stooped and picked it up. Then he glanced around with a certain restlessness and impatience. He had no wish to indulge in further conversation, and something in the cool assurance and self-satisfaction of the young man irritated him.

"I will wish you good-day," he said constrainedly. "If you want to examine these rocks you had better tether your horses. You can't ride among them."

"I don't exactly yearn for a nearer acquaintance with them," said the young man. "What say you, Mamie?"

"Oh! I mean to dismount," she said quickly, and, suiting the action to the word, slipped from her saddle and tossed the reins to him. "Wait a few moments," she continued. "I'll just have a look round."

Standing thus, Lawrence Kerr saw she was rather above the middle height; extremely slender, with the grace of youth and dawning womanhood in the lithe and supple ease of her figure. Her riding-habit and hat were of fine dust-coloured material, and their neutral tint showed off the rich russet hues of her hair and the lovely colouring of face and eyes. The charm of her smile was like an expression of the joy and sweetness of her nature. It allured and compelled by its very unconsciousness of power.

So sweet was the look she bent on the sad-visaged

man beside her, that for the first time for long and weary years a little of the hidden meaning of life seemed to flash before him.

"Won't you come with me?" she asked. "I'm sure you can tell me something about this place. I hate guide-book explanations. They're so perfectly clear and self-satisfied. They leave nothing to the imagination."

He found himself wondering afterwards how it had come to pass that he, of all men, should be wandering to and fro in this marvellous valley, talking, listening, explaining; beguiled out of long self-restraint and morbid reticence by the charm of a young girl's fancies.

It was not of the valley she asked, so much as of himself; his life and adventures. He spoke of a few, won to a quite extraordinary expansiveness by her wondering interest and quick comprehension. He sketched for her the wanderer's life. The strange adventures among strange tribes, the freedom and the danger that alike lent their charm to days such as he had shared with savage races; in regions the white man had left unexplored as yet. He pictured the wide veldt, the ever-rolling hills, the mysterious seas of bush, the trackless density of forests. The ruling passion of the wanderer spoke in his words, and lent them force and eloquence. Yet through them all she seemed to trace one dark thread of despair that set no value on existence, that tasted no triumph of conquest, no pride in

vanquished danger. The man fascinated and repelled her. She felt that no common grief, no common fate had driven him to such loneliness and such peril, and suddenly looking up into his strange face she asked him if he never lived the life of civilisation, never sought the pleasures of the cities that his own race had built in this strange land.

Then, like a curtain, darkness and immobility descended upon the man's whole aspect. Cold and hard and stern, he atoned to himself for that brief expansion by a rigid disregard of her innocent curiosity.

She could gain nothing more. It was evident that by touching on some forbidden subject she had shut herself out from his confidence. A space of silence fell between them as she turned her steps to where her companion was awaiting her.

Involuntarily she glanced at that strange, stern face. "Forgive me," she said softly, "if I seemed inquisitive. I was only—interested."

He looked down at her. "There is nothing about me," he said, "to interest one of your sex, or youth. I am a lonely man—a man cut off from life, as you know it, and enjoy it. I have to thank you for bringing me the first bit of human sunshine I have known for many a long year. But we shall part and go each our separate ways. You to the brilliance and joys that are rightly your portion. I——" He paused and looked around.

"I——" he said, his voice dropping to the low-toned dreariness of old, "to the Valley of Desolation."

"You do not—cannot live here?" she cried amazed.

"Sometimes," he answered. "I have no abiding place. From north to south, from east to west of this land I have wandered. Some day I shall grow tired, and my strength will fail. Then, perhaps I shall rest—at last. Sometimes I think it may be here," and again his glance wandered round; "but that's as Fate wills."

"Oh!" she said involuntarily. "How sorry I am for you—how you must have suffered!"

Beneath the tan of sun and clime she saw the paling of his cheek; the sudden quiver of his lips.

"Thank you for those words," he said hurriedly. "Sympathy is sweet, but sometimes it is also dangerous. I have to harden myself against such danger."

"I dare not ask you why? But if I could help you, cheer you up——"

"You have done both to-day," he said. "Good-bye now. The blessing of a desolate heart go with you."

"May we not meet again? My mother and I and —my cousin yonder—are making a tour through South Africa. We are at Graaf-Reinet for a few days. Won't you come and see us? Ask for me—my name is Lowell —Mamie Jessica Lowell. I have no card. Can you remember?"

"I have not so many burdens on my memory to fear the weight of such a pretty one," he said with a faint smile.

"And you will come? Do promise."

"I never make promises. If aught takes me there I shall see you. But it is scarcely possible."

"Oh! I shall hope for it and expect it. I always get what I want."

She laughed gaily, then waved her hand and returned to her horse. He remained standing by the side of the fallen block of stone where she had first seen him.

CHAPTER II.

A NEW sense of loss and bewilderment oppressed the lonely man throughout that day.

Graaf-Reinet was but two miles from the valley, and Graaf-Reinet held the first cheering ray of human sunshine that had lightened the darkness of years. Should he throw aside this burden of vain remorse and painful memories? Should he steep himself once more in the kindly warmth of human sympathy? Those lovely eyes had seemed to hold a message from the past, and the ice of hardness melted at their memory. There seemed no disloyalty in his new feeling. It was the

natural outcome of long-checked emotion. Anything so young, so radiant, so tender-hearted as this girl had long been unknown to him. He thought of that vigil in the desolate valley and of the glorious dawn that had followed. Might not his long penance have ended —the night of sorrow wakened to the dawn of hope?

Why should he not see her again, as she had so urged upon him?

The soul's life is measured by its own sufferings more than by actual existence. He had felt aged and lonely beyond all words to express, but this divine child had given him a glimpse of hope and beauty, and blessed peace.

A picture of startling clearness she stood before him through the days and nights that followed, and always her eyes spoke of his dead love's pardoning eyes, and her smile wooed him back to human life and human joy.

At last he saddled up, and rode into Graaf-Reinet. He had his hair and beard trimmed, and exchanged his worn, rough clothes for a riding-suit reserved for his rare visits to the towns of the Transvaal. Then he went to the hotel, and, entering the bar, asked for her by the name she had given him. He had never realised the confidence and pleasure with which he had looked forward to meeting her again till he received the unex-

pected answer that she was not there. The whole party had left the previous day.

"Do you know where they have gone?" he asked the "boss."

That intelligent gentleman opined it was to Bloemfontein, but was not sure. Kerr turned away impatiently. After all, what did it matter? She had gone. That was enough. He could not be tracking her all over the country, though certainly there was some business Pretoria way which required his attention. Suppose he went to Bloemfontein *en route.* He was walking quickly, his eyes on the ground. Suddenly a rough figure jostled him, and a voice bade him get out of the way for a *verdommed rooinek.*

He looked up at the burly form of a Boer farmer. There was something unusual in the swaggering insolence of the Dutchman's aspect and the tone of his voice. Lawrence paused, and half raised his riding whip as he bade him mind his manners.

The man was evidently excited and had been drinking heavily. He gave vent to a volley of boastful threats sprinkled liberally with oaths. The concluding words struck sharply on Lawrence's ear. He caught the man by the arm.

"What do you say—are you mad? War!"

"It is coming. The President will have no more of your English insolence. What are you? A beggarly

little lot of islanders to dictate to a free country what they shall do or not do. We've had enough of it. Oom Paul says so. You shall do what we say for a change—do you hear? And our guns will soon pick off your poor little *rooibaatjes.*"

He got no further with his speech, for Lawrence Kerr's hand choked back the insolent words in his throat. To and fro he shook him as a terrier shakes a rat, till the man's teeth rattled in his head and his burly form was breathless. Then, tossing him aside as he would have tossed any useless lumber, Kerr strode on, his head held high, his eyes ablaze, while the crowd that had gathered, scattered before him with muttered curses on a courage they had no wish to emulate.

"War," the man had said. Could it be possible? Lawrence had heard vague rumours of political differences, of smouldering wrongs bursting into the flame of demand for redress. But he had given them no heed. He had so long shunned his fellows that matters of social import had passed him by as the passing of a wind that stirs the leaves.

But this Boer had come from the seat of government; had seemed confident of his announcement. War —imminent—about to break forth?

His mind was made up. He would ascertain the truth. He had no fears for himself. He scarcely remembered that he was of that hated nation whose re-

presentatives had so long combated the ignorance and obstinacy and vindictiveness of the Boers. He had held his life in his own hands too often to give individual peril a moment's consideration.

He ordered out his horse, took a change of clothing from his old leather valise, saw to rifle and revolver, and then left the town.

Not till his fleet steed had borne him miles across the veldt did he remember a girl with a face of sunshine and a smile of hope. Would she remain in the country or hurry off at first news of coming disturbance?

"She ought to go. She must go," he told himself, and resolved that he would be pilot and escort in one till she was safe back at Capetown. He knew the hatred that filled the breasts of these people against anyone or anything English. They would not look upon a scattered party of Americans as belonging to an independent State. Allies in colour, in blood, in friendship, and commerce, the one would side with the other. They were equally hateful to the enlightened mind of Transvaal and Free State.

She might be subjected to insults, obstacles, difficulties of all sorts—she and that handsome boy who seemed her only protector, and whose very dandyisms and self-sufficiency would rouse the ire of the people

amongst whom they must pass, and on whom they would be dependent for food, shelter and transit.

A half-smile shadowed the bronzed face of the wanderer. "I may be of use to somebody at last. I may be able to help, perhaps to protect her," and he wondered at the little thrill of satisfaction aroused by the thought.

At Lootsberg he left his horse and took train. On all sides now he noticed excitement, discussion, vivid interest. The stolid, sleepy populace, the railway officials, the very Kaffirs seemed moved by some new and wonderful intelligence. He bought some newspapers at the Junction, and learned that the Boer had been perfectly correct in his statement. The long-slumbering fire had broken out. Diplomacy and patience had striven to avert positive hostilities, but "Oom Paul" had set them at defiance.

He should have reached Bloemfontein by noon the following day, but the train did not get in till much later. Here the excitement was intense, and there was no longer any doubt as to the President's intention. The English inhabitants were all leaving for Capetown. Business was at a standstill. Shops were closed. The streets were thronged with armed burghers, and he had considerable difficulty in making his way to the principal hotel.

Again he found himself too late. The Americans had left for Kroonstad.

He remembered it but slightly, having stayed there but a day and a night some years before. However, he went back to the station after a hurried meal, and continued his journey through the Free State.

Kroonstad was comparatively quiet. It is a small, picturesque town of white stone houses, situated on the banks of a lovely little river, and surrounded by woods. The chief hotel looks over the river, and the town itself is a favourite resort of invalids.

Again he was too late. The girl and her party had gone on to Potchefstroom.

It was impossible to get a train that night, so he went to the hotel and tried to convince himself that she was, after all, perfectly safe. At all events she seemed determined on continuing her tour, in spite of the disturbed state of the country. He thought it a strange and somewhat foolish freak, but he knew something of Americans, and was scarcely surprised that a spirit of enterprise should make still more alluring what had only promised to be the prosaic results of a Cook's book of tickets.

He wandered forth into the misty night, too restless for sleep. The change that had come to him held a certain element of surprise. He wondered at the interest he had taken in this girl from the first moment of their

meeting. Her eyes had never ceased to haunt him. They seemed full of some message unspoken yet, but whose import he was bound to learn.

He was not a fanciful man, nor by any means imaginative, yet his brain ran riot when he thought of her. She had come into the desert of his life, and once more the sun shone and the flowers bloomed, and the cold deadness of his heart awoke to feeling.

To see this girl again had become an insistent desire. The sweetness of her smile, the soft sympathy of her eyes were living memories now.

* * * * *

Potchefstroom is not a place soon to weary of. It is full of beauty and quaintness. The streets are wide and shady, and through them run the little tributaries of the splendid Mooi river.

Evidently the old-world charm of the place had stayed the travellers' feet at last, for when Lawrence Kerr arrived he heard they were still at the Royal Hotel. The girl, however, was out, so he refused to go in, but wandered restlessly through the streets, hoping he might meet her.

Here again the stir and tumult of the prophesied campaign were evident on all sides. Its position made it a meeting-ground for the Boers and burghers who had been commandeered, and were crowding in from all parts of the country, awaiting orders.

Lawrence grew seriously uneasy as he heard the insults to his country so freely scattered abroad. This was certainly no place for English-speaking subjects or visitors. What could have possessed these people to travel on into the very heart of the capital when they might so easily have reached the coast, and either awaited the issue of the coming struggle or returned to their own country? For men it would not have mattered, but it was different for a girl, young and tender and beautiful, exposed to the trials and discomforts that were now inevitable!

His opinion of the dandy cousin took a shade of anger, as well as contempt. Surely he must have known to what danger he was exposing her.

Turning aside at last from the crowded streets, Lawrence got out of the town and wandered along under the willow-trees that shaded the river-bank. The stream was widening now. The hot sunshine fell aslant its shining surface.

Before him, under the welcome shade, fluttered a white dress. Instinctively his step quickened.

The figure turned as he drew nearer. The surprise in a girlish face changed to wondering welcome.

Both hands were outstretched in greeting. "You! Have you dropped from the clouds? I never hoped to see you again!"

"I did go to Graaf-Reinet," he said, and felt sud-

denly how brusque and stupid he must appear before this shining grace and glory of girlhood.

"You did? Ah, then you remembered me?"

"Why should I not?" he asked, and then the further stupidity of such questioning came home to him, and he changed his ground abruptly. "Do you know," he said, "you are running a great risk? The country is up in arms. Travelling will soon be impossible."

"But we are not English," she said gravely. "The quarrel is not of our making. I am rather pleased to be on the ground. It promises adventures. Besides, I am enchanted with this country. I don't want to leave it. I persuaded mother and my cousin Tom to go on. We were to have spent six months here, and we haven't been one yet."

"You are not afraid to remain?"

"Oh, no. I don't see how any harm could come to us," she said confidently.

"You are young and beautiful — and a woman," he said gravely. "These Boers hate all the English-speaking races. When war is declared, when their passions are aroused, the whole country will be your foes. I travelled after you to warn you, to beg you to return to the coast. Delay may be dangerous. The railway will be commandeered, so will riding-horses, mules, ox-waggons. Travelling will be well-nigh impos-

sible. Food, too, will be scarce, and treble its present price."

She only laughed.

"I do believe," she said, "you are trying to frighten me. But I decline to be frightened. I came to see South Africa, and I mean to see it. If the Boers are on the warpath, surely there is some way of avoiding them. We can go by side routes, and leave them the main roads and railways."

"I wish you would not jest," he said almost sternly. "To travel out of the main routes means slow progress, difficulties, and hardships unfit for delicate women. It is all very well for men. An ox-waggon, a team of horses, a bag of mealies——"

She clasped her hands in sudden ecstasy. "An ox-waggon," she cried. "Oh, heavenly! The prose of trains and railway-stations destroys all one's illusions. I have dreamt of veldt and karroo lying cold and mystic in the moonlight. Of wild tribes, and mighty hunters, and Zulu chieftains——"

"Yes," he said dryly. "Rider Haggard has much to answer for. Believe me, the life of his books is not the life you will find in this part of the country. Your savage tribes will be those who have grafted the vices of civilisation on their own primitive virtues—who would sell their dearest possessions for drink. Don't look for heroism or respect among the Kaffirs of to-day."

Her bright face grew grave. "Oh! you are destroying all my illusions," she said. "There seems nothing left—even an ox-waggon, and inspanning."

Then he laughed. It was so long since he had done so with any sort of amusement that he was surprised at himself.

"If you are absolutely bent," he said, "on a taste of South African travel in its most comfortless and dilatory form, I can promise you an ox-waggon and an escort, and show you what 'inspanning' and 'outspanning' really mean."

She gave a little cry of rapture.

"Could you really? Oh! I should be eternally grateful. You must allow," she went on in her pretty, coaxing way, "that it is hard on an enterprising Bostonian to have come all this distance, and then be ordered back home with the main object of her journey unaccomplished."

"If a journey in an ox-waggon will bring you nearer that object," he said gravely, "you may command my services."

She seemed to him such a child—so young and innocent and heedless—that to please or serve her was almost a duty.

"But——" he continued, "I must discuss the matter fully with your—cousin, is he not? He ought to know what there is in the way of risk, enterprise, expense."

"Oh! that all counts for nothing against a wish of mine," she said. "Besides, he is rich enough to buy up half the Transvaal!" And she laughed merrily. "As for my mother, she has never said 'No' to me in my life. Fix up a few cushions and things for her, and she'll be quite right."

"I can see," said Lawrence gravely, "that you are a long way from realising what an ox-waggon is. However, there's one comfort—we can easily dispose of it, if you tire of the business."

"Might we not take our horses?" she urged. "A gallop now and then would be so delightful as a change."

"Certainly we could. It will mean provender for them—an extra 'boy' or two. However, when I have planned the route I will arrange all that."

Her radiant gratitude almost vexed him. There had been an element of selfishness in his ready consent, something of thankfulness for this kind trick of Fate. She was unconscious of that, as she was unconscious of the discomforts and annoyances that lay before her.

They sauntered on by the river-side, she talking, he listening. She told him of her life, that white page with its innocent records and innocent dreams. A quaint expression, a whimsical phrase, relieved the monotony of its uneventful records from time to time.

She was one of the spoiled darlings of fortune. An

only child with a mother who idolised her, and a lover, undeclared as yet, but whose feelings were not difficult to guess, even from her careless allusions. "Some day she would marry Tom," she supposed—Tom who had been brother, friend, adorer, all his life. But not yet, not for a long, long time. She must see the world first. She must taste some of its wonders and joys. There must be so many things to see before one—well, before one settled down into the more important duties of womanhood. She would have a "lovely time;" a time to remember in all the years that came after; and he, listening, asked himself, with a sense of quiet irony, whether this "loveliness" was to commence with a journey across the African veldt in an eighteen-teamed ox-waggon.

But he let her pretty speech run on, and watched the charming smile come and go, wooing the dimples in her soft young cheeks. She was as a breath of spring to his winter of sorrow and sad years; the long winter that had sprinkled his hair with its frost, and kept chill rigour in his heart.

They turned their footsteps townwards at last, and he gently urged upon her the risks of going out unprotected into the thronged, excited streets.

"They're not fit for women alone at any time," he said. "But now, you must promise me not to go out

without your cousin or myself—if you permit it—with you."

"Tom went for a ride," she said, "and I came out on the river-bank through a side street. No one interfered with me. Besides, American girls are used to go about alone. I never gave the matter a thought."

So frank and free and independent did she look that he could well believe her statement. But, all the same, he laid stringent precautions on her native fearlessness ere he bade her good-bye.

CHAPTER III.

It took Lawrence Kerr four days to arrange the purchase of oxen and waggon, and the hire of the Kaffir "boys," as they are called, no matter what their age may be.

Tom Jefferson had entered into the spirit of the matter with an eagerness quite in keeping with his young cousin's own excitement. Mrs. Lowell, a placid, sweet Bostonian, with beautiful manners and a temper to match, made not a single objection.

The route Kerr proposed was by Heilbron and Harrismith to Estcourt, thence to Pietermaritzburg and Durban. They would avoid as much as possible the railway lines and main thoroughfares. It would be slow

and circuitous, but he hoped safe. Neither time nor money seemed of great account to the Americans, and as for himself he was free to do what he pleased.

The Boer loves money, and Kerr had little difficulty in procuring a suitable waggon and a fairly good team. These he knew he could readily dispose of at any town on the way to the coast should the girl or her mother get tired of such a mode of travelling. They would always be in touch with the railway, as he explained to Tom Jefferson, who nodded vaguely, and was more concerned about the set of his riding breeches and the marvels of the latest thing in revolvers than the prospective route. To him South Africa was only a country, and the veldt was only a veldt, and the rivers and mountains suffered hugely by comparison with those of his own great land. As for the towns, hotels, and public buildings, he was always desirous of bringing one of that great land's astounding architects over, to show what ought to be done in these several lines. That being impossible, he gave Kerr the benefit of an enlightened criticism, for which the uncivilised wanderer did not appear extraordinarily grateful.

When the waggon at last appeared, its eighteen oxen inspanned—yoked in double row, and the Kaffir driver shining like a polished ebony image on the box —the girl gave a cry of rapture. The greater part of their luggage had been despatched by rail. Two leather

bags were all they took with them in the big, clumsy vehicle, and such rugs and blankets as Kerr had told them were necessary. Lanterns, candles, and provisions were also stored within, and Mrs. Lowell took her seat on the *kartel* amidst a pile of cushions.

Kerr and the two young Americans mounted their horses, and the party started shortly after sunrise to avoid the great heat of the day. A few Boers loitering in the bar entrance made insolent and untranslatable remarks on the party, but Kerr deemed it prudent to take no notice.

He was more anxious than he pretended about this expedition, and almost envied the coolness and confidence born of belief in a great Democracy. Tom Jefferson and his cousin jested and laughed like thoughtless children. Once out of the town they gave rein to their hardy little Basuto ponies and raced each other over short ranges of rising ground, while Kerr walked his own horse beside the waggon, listening to Mrs. Lowell's placid talk and cheerful reminiscences.

With the growing daylight the land took a new beauty. Birds piped a morning salutation. A little breeze swept softly over the low bushes and shook the dewdrops from the bending boughs. Peace and loveliness were the morning's gift; only in the cruel heart of man raged fierce passions and that hate of race that rivers of blood may not wash out.

For it was the dawn of the declaration of war. The glove of defiance had been thrown down at last, and from all sides the sons of the soil were pouring into township and capital; ready armed, bombastical, self-assured; eager for the fray and confident of result.

Kerr recognised the difficulty of the task he had undertaken long before they reached Heilbron. Large forces were on their way to Ladysmith and Estcourt. Shops were closed, farms deserted or left to the care of Boer women and Kaffirs. When they rode into any towns for provisions, passports were demanded. Lawrence had seen to these before leaving Potchefstroom, knowing that they would be requisite; but even their production and warranty did not preserve the party from insults and comments that made his blood boil. His own tall, well-knit form and superb horsemanship found ready favour with the Boer officers, and again and again he was asked to volunteer into one or other of their companies. He pretended he was a guide bound to conduct this eccentric party of Americans to Natal. When his duty was fulfilled, well—there was no knowing.

The girl, however, guessed nothing of his growing uneasiness. To her it was all a delightful picnic. The passage of the great waggon along grass-covered plains, the meals, the sleeping at night on the *kartel,* when the tired oxen were tied to the yokes, and the Kaffirs smoked their *dagga* by their watch-fire; the wonderful

moonlight that turned veldt and kopje into a magic world where anything might happen that savoured of mystery and romance. And, unknown to herself, the silver gleam of rivers, the line of rolling hills, the blue of distant mountains took an added charm from a comradeship by which all these things were translated, and whose silent, ever-watchful care was like a special guard about her from dawn to dawn.

Often she wondered what his own history could be; what fate had made him a wanderer in this strange land, and left such traces on his stern, sad face. That he was a gentleman, cultured, and of no ordinary intelligence she discovered in the long talks they had together; but never in any such talk did he betray his own life's sorrow. Like a sealed book his past lay behind this brief space of peace and absolute content. He would not think of it, still less betray it to her.

Their progress was slow, almost to tedium, but none of the party seemed anxious to hasten it. Sometimes a halt would be called for a whole day, and Kerr and Jefferson would go after game or fish to vary the monotony of the cuisine. Sometimes, too, they would outspan their team and horses at a farmhouse, and Mamie and her mother would exchange the *kartel* of the waggon for a bed and a roof. But hospitality was given more and more grudgingly as time went on, and even gold spent lavishly brought but sullen service and poor fare.

For now the rumours were actual facts. The tide of battle was rolling far and wide. Kerr found he must avoid Estcourt, and difficulties grew apace. The Boers seemed everywhere. Now and then a Kaffir scout gave them news, or by chance they secured a newspaper a week old, and learnt of siege and battle and varied successes; and still Kerr urged in vain the abandonment of this project and the advisability of taking train to the coast.

But the girl's firmness had of late taken a new expression. Its quiet strength had something of regret, of fear almost, in its silence as in its speech. Her "I will" meant more to her than the determination it spoke. For why, or wherefore, she knew not, but the end of this journey had ceased to be desirable. She wanted it to go on and on, and yet hold nothing so hateful as termination.

In some soft fit of petulance she told Kerr so. It was one night when they were strolling together a little distance from the camp-fire, out of reach of the Kaffirs' harsh chatter.

"What is the use of being rich if one can't have what one wants," she had said. "A little liberty, a little joy. It's not much, is it?"

"No," he said gravely. "Not much when one is too young to see results, and too happy to fear them. But your joy goes with you. It is not as if there was a

question of parting. Do you think it quite wise to trifle with chance? If—if anything happened now you would both—regret."

"Both?" she questioned, and a little puzzled frown drew her pretty brows together.

"You," he said—"and Tom."

Suddenly her colour faded. Her eyes sank. He saw her lips quiver and part, but the smile for which he watched did not touch them with its old brightness.

"Tom," she repeated faintly. "I was not thinking of Tom. Of course, he will be there—always—as he has been." She gave a little nervous laugh. "There seems no time in my life when he has not had some share in it. You see, I never had brother or sister."

"Nor I," he said gravely.

"Ah! you," she echoed softly. "I wish I knew what makes you so unhappy—some dreadful sorrow, I am sure. Oh! I hate to think of sorrow. Why does it come—why must it? Why can't God let us be happy in these little lives of ours?"

"Ah! why?" he said grimly. "If we knew that, child, we should know the world's great secret—human destiny. But we are not to know that while humanity holds us in bondage."

She turned to him, her eyes strangely bright. She laid her hand lightly on his arm. It seemed to him that a white flower mocked the white moonlight.

So long, so many weary years since a girl's soft fingers had sent a thrill to his aching heart! And now the thrill left but a keener ache behind it.

They had wandered on, further than they thought or knew. The watch-fires were but as a glowworm's light; above their heads some drifting clouds shut out the radiance of the moon.

They stood quite still, quite silent. "Bondage," she said at last. "The bondage of humanity. How cruel it is—how it exacts, and demands, and conquers."

Her voice was low and tremulous. He scarcely caught her words, but suddenly she looked up, and as he met her eyes he saw——

He drew back. Her hand dropped from his arm; the colour flew from throat to brow in crimson waves.

He had passed through many moods of resentful misery of late, but now he told himself there was something harder to face than even misery. Danger—danger for her.

"How have I blundered?" he asked himself. "How?"

For he saw the precipice before her unconscious feet; he saw and remembered, and a wave of anguish swept over him. In all he had thought and fancied he had never foreseen this. Never dreamt that a girl with her future assured, with beauty, wealth, love crowning her youth, would ever bestow a thought beyond the

common thoughts of friendliness on such a man as himself.

He stood there dumb perforce; blind and deaf to all save just the self-revelation of that moment. His eyes were on the veldt. They seemed to have gazed at it for hours before the actual consciousness of moving figures and dusky shapes stood out from its moon-swept spaces. Suddenly he started and came back to life.

"Look!" he said. "Those are mounted Boers. We had better return."

She glanced hurriedly around. What a long way they had wandered! The Kaffir fires were but a spark. The great waggon an inky shadow outlined against a small solitary kopje, by which they had outspanned for the night. He seized her hand and hurried her back, but before they were half-way he saw the horsemen in hot pursuit.

"It is no use," he said. "We had better wait and see what they want."

She stood by his side, too conscious of his quiet strength and courage to feel a throb of fear. Whatever happened they would still be—together. A circle of riders surrounded them, and a rough voice demanded their business.

Kerr gave his usual answer. The leader asked if

they had horses or oxen, and, being informed that they had, rode off in the direction of the camp-fires.

"What are they going to do?" asked the girl breathlessly.

"I don't know. Perhaps commandeer our waggon and horses," said Kerr savagely. "It would be just like them."

He hurried her on, but he could soon see that his fears were realised. The frightened Kaffirs obeyed their tyrannical rulers from force of habit. Young Jefferson stood looking on in hopeless bewilderment. He could not understand the language of either Boer or Kaffir, and Lawrence was still far off. Make what haste he could, he only arrived in time to see the tired oxen inspanned to their waggon, the horses being led off by armed men, the frightened Kaffirs, huddled together like sheep, accepting orders from a race they owned as masters. With savage wrath Kerr demanded his goods, but was only met with jeers and insults. Amerikanders and Uitlanders were alike *verdommed,* in Boer parlance. Devils, cheats, sons of——

The blood rushed to Kerr's face. He snatched his revolver from his belt and levelled it at the foul-mouthed speaker. An aim that was death flashed from that tiny barrel, but ere he could fire the girl's hand was on his arm.

"Don't!" she pleaded; "it would be murder! And,

after all, what does it matter? We are only a few miles from the town. We can easily walk."

Murder! The word spoken by her lips turned him cold with sudden memory.

His arm dropped. She was wiser than he. If he had fired he would have been arrested. God only knew what then might happen to her and those with her. These lawless, insolent ruffians showed scant respect to women at the best of times. Now, smarting under defeat and defiance, it would fare ill with anyone of the hated nation who fell into their power.

He muttered a curse in his wrath as he stood helpless and saw the lumbering waggon rolling over the plain. Their bags had been thrown out, but all else—blankets, stores, cushions—had been coolly appropriated, along with the Kaffir driver and the "boys" he had engaged.

"It's only the fortune of war," laughed Jefferson, in his light-hearted fashion. "Don't look so savage, Kerr. Things might have been worse. You said we weren't far from the next town. We'll have to tramp it, that's all."

"But mother," lamented Mamie, piteously.

Mrs. Lowell rose to the occasion with the spirit and courage of a descendant of the Pilgrim Fathers. She could walk; she was not afraid. Indeed, the adventure

was rather amusing. How it would astonish her Boston friends!

Kerr was surprised at such cheerfulness in face of calamity. He did the best he could for them by raking the fire together and making some coffee for the women in a tin which had been overlooked by the marauders. His flask was fortunately full of brandy, and he and Jefferson fortified themselves with that.

Then they set out on their tramp, Kerr supporting Mrs. Lowell on his arm, Tom walking beside his cousin. The night was still young. The rolling plain held all the magic of moonlight. Here and there some hill or bush or rock stood outlined against the deep and wonderful blue of the sky. The buzz of mosquitoes, the faint swish of the dry grass, the echo of their feet in the silence—these were all they heard. Sometimes they spoke—not often, for the girl was strangely quiet, and Lawrence Kerr seemed deep in thought. At the end of two hours he called a halt. His face was calm and impassive, but there was an anxious look in his eyes.

"Those brutes have gone off with my map," he said in dismay, "and I'm half afraid we're not on the right track."

There was a moment of absolute silence. Not all the inherited courage of the Pilgrim Fathers could re-

sist the consciousness of aching feet, tired limbs, eyes deprived of desired slumber.

Mrs. Lowell tottered to her daughter's side. "Oh, I'm so tired!" she said faintly. "I could just go to sleep standing up."

Kerr started. Sleep—sleep with no cover from the night dews, no protection against the deadly chill that heralds dawn on these unsheltered plains. It must not be thought of. Already the dews were on grass and bush, already the day's great heat was changed to pleasant coolness that in another hour would have lost the pleasantness and become discomfort—and so on to the dawn.

His eyes searched the veldt for farm or homestead. There must be something of the kind near, even if he had missed the direct road to the town. But nothing met his eye but the ever-rolling hills, the treeless, unsheltered plain, that make up so much of South African landscape.

"You may rest," he said, turning to the waiting trio, "but I wish you would not sleep. It is a risk in this heavy dew, with no rug or covering—a risk for women," he added hurriedly. "Do you think, Mrs. Lowell, you could possibly lean up against this rock and yet keep your eyes open?"

Mrs. Lowell gave it as her opinion that it might be

possible, but she wouldn't like to take odds on the event. Besides, she was quite warm. She had her loose waterproof cloak. She would draw the hood over her head and——

So quickly had she suited the action to the word that Kerr found himself responding to Mamie's smile and the faint music of a snore before he could produce another argument. Tom followed his aunt's example with an alacrity that defied opposition.

Lawrence and the girl stood alone by the little kopje, silent, and with eyes that—for once—shrank from meeting.

* * * * *

"You—must not sleep," he said hurriedly. "I have something to tell you."

She made no answer. Only turned her gaze on him at last. He stretched out his hand, and, like a child, she placed hers within its strong clasp and let him draw her away from the sleepers. Then the hand was dropped. Perhaps its conscious tremor had uttered a warning. At all events, his face was very quiet, and his voice stern almost to coldness as he walked beside her—up and down—a slow, monotonous march of which she was vaguely conscious. For to-night everything seemed like a dream, and this most of all was a dream, the loneliness of her heart and his, speaking in

some unknown tongue of pain in the moonlight silence of the veldt.

"What I want to tell you," he said at last, "is the story of a crime—a man's crime. A crime that has shut him out from human lives and human sympathy for nigh twenty years."

That he added the years was but an intentional blow, struck at the romance of a girl's tender fancies.

He felt the tremor that shook the slight young form so near his own, and, feeling it, he drove the knife of disillusion a shade deeper.

"To-night," he said, "you stayed my hand from a righteous vengeance. You called it—murder. What would you say if I told you that that hand was dyed long ago with the stain of blood—that I have taken an innocent human life?"

She swayed slightly; he saw her face grow death-like in a moment of incredulous horror.

"An enemy's?" she gasped.

"No—no enemy's. The life of someone that loved me and trusted me. My wife!"

As cold water on hot steel, as snow on the glowing fire of a furnace, so those words fell on the first impassioned romance of a girl's heart.

How cruel was the shock he hardly realised. He had set himself a task, and he was not the man to shrink from it. Perhaps some impulse of heroic frenzy

prompted this exaggerated statement of an incident over which he had so long brooded in morbid self-condemnation. Perhaps in what it cost him to utter it he offered the atonement that for years he had prayed and longed to offer.

But this she could not know. She was only conscious of that terrible agony of awakening which comes to self-blindness. She only felt that all the dreams she had woven out of pitiful youth were shattered at the feet of unworthiness.

There is nothing quite so stern and quite so clear-sighted as the judgment of youth, when as yet it has passed through no fire of temptation, faced no possible sin. The higher its ideals the harsher is that judgment. It cannot excuse deviation from right, because it has no sympathy with wrong.

The girl stood there cold and sick with horror. The echo of one hateful word filling all the night with discord. Murder—a murderer—this man she had so pitied. And the murderer of his wife. That word struck her to the core of her sensitive heart. A wife! Marriage! How far apart it set him suddenly from the romance of innocent imaginings.

One sharp-edged thought cut through all others. A gulf yawned between them as they stood now. A gulf impassable by any bridge of pardon or comprehension.

"You have chosen a strange time for confidence,"

she said at last. Her voice was cold and constrained. The old joyous ring, the faint tenderness, would never sound in it again for him. "Was sleep really so—dangerous—that you thought such a confession preferable?"

It was not Mamie who spoke, he told himself. It was something hurt, and proud, and bitterly ashamed. He had rent for ever the veil of illusion; but as he turned and said with measured coldness, "Yes . . . it was preferable," he saw in her eyes something more piteous than his dead love's last glance, and it killed for ever in his breast what life had seemed to promise once again.

* * * * *

She asked no more. He had no need to fear that sleep would steal remembrance from her brain. Coldly and silently she passed from his side to where her mother lay. He saw her sink down and lean her head against the cold stone.

"I had to do it," he told himself, pacing to and fro in restless guardianship. "If that bud of fancy had bloomed into a flower, what use to me its beauty or its bloom? Who am I that I should seek or take a girl's love? . . . What have I to give in exchange? Had I told her the facts of my story, had I gilded its tragedy with romance, she would have deemed me a hero. It is so easy for a girl to glorify a man's deeds . . . and

her pity was easy to win. . . . She will soon forget—now. She asked no explanation. My self-chosen loneliness, my friendless life, are accounted for. I have saved her from the Valley of Desolation."

* * * * *

Dawn broke grey and chill. He roused the sleepers, and again commenced the journey. Fatigue and anxiety accounted for silence, and slowly and wearily the little party dragged themselves along the recovered track.

Mamie never left Tom's side. She took all blame to herself for this foolhardy expedition. Once she gave an odd little laugh. "All my life," she said, "I think I shall hate the sight of an ox-waggon!"

Tom was too spent and footsore to utter more than an appreciation of the sentiment, and express a hope that she would agree to conclude the journey in the useful if commonplace "car."

But many days, each filled with disaster or delay, had yet to pass before the welcome sight of the Natal colony promised relief.

Without Kerr's knowledge of the country and diplomatic zeal, the delay would have been even greater, but it seemed to Jefferson as if the man's whole soul was spending itself on one object. To get them away—out of the country.

When they reached Durban he still allowed no pre-

text for any stay there. He had found a liner, and engaged cabins while they were enjoying the welcome comforts of a decent hotel breakfast.

Tom Jefferson was inclined to remonstrate with such very expeditious methods. Mamie stayed his words. "I—for one," she said, "shall be thankful to get out of this country. I am sorry we ever came to it."

"Now isn't that like a woman!" remonstrated Tom. "A week ago everything was glorious and delightful and romantic. Then comes the first touch of hardship, just one night without a bed, or a bath, or a supper, and presto! all is changed. Nothing is too bad to say of the country. Now, for my part, I thought that that night on the veldt was the only genuine bit of South African experience we managed to get hold of. It will always be a matter of self-congratulation as far as I am concerned."

She rose abruptly. Her eyes met those of Lawrence Kerr. He watched her as she crossed the room and went to the open window. Her head was as proudly poised, her figure as gracefully erect as on that morning when she had sprung from her horse to his side in the lonely valley of rocks. Yet his heart ached at the change he read. He wondered what made his eyes keener than the eyes of those who loved her. Did they see—nothing?

* * * * *

"I will go through it to the end," he told himself bitterly. What did a little pain more or less matter to one whose life would be all pain henceforth?

He shirked nothing. He was the same useful, capable, clear-headed guide he had been through all that disastrous journey. Even when he stood on the crowded deck, and heard Mrs. Lowell's tearful regrets and Tom Jefferson's hearty thanks and warm invitation to that land of the Free and the Blest whither they were bound, he made no sign of what his tranquil coolness cost.

The last words had been spoken; the last farewells uttered. She had always evaded giving him her hand since that night. He wondered if she would do so now.

It might have been chance, or Fate, that brought her close beside him in that momentary isolation of two entities in a crowd which is almost solitude. For once she looked at him as she had been used to look before that hateful confession. Often as she had recognised the change it had made in herself, it came like a new shock to realise that there was a more terrible change in him. The long weariness, the hopeless pain of his past had spoken to her the first hour they met, but now an added pain swept suddenly to the surface, and his deep eyes spoke to hers as never yet they had dared to speak.

It was beyond human strength to keep back that appeal; with one swift glance of comprehension she answered it.

"Oh!" she whispered, "it was not murder—tell me?"

"No," he said. "It was accident."

"Oh! I might have known," she sobbed breathlessly. "Why did you let me misjudge you—so long?"

"Was it long?" he asked tenderly. "Oh! don't think of it—don't grieve. I am not worth a tear of yours. Think of the life before you. Hope, love, pleasure. All that you spoke of——"

But the anguish of the uplifted eyes stayed his words.

She too had faced the Valley of Desolation.

* * * * *

An hour later he stood on the high bluff above the blue expanse of waters, where sometimes stand the lonely watchers who are learning the first grief of parting in two words—"Left behind."

Afar off the great steamer sped. Her smoke lay like a white streak against the blueness of the sky.

His strained eyes gazed and gazed till the glare of blazing sunshine burnt and blinded them.

"He will be tender with her," he said brokenly. "He loves her. She will soon forget. For me—what does it matter?"

* * * * *

On the still air came the sound of a bugle-call, the clash of arms, the tramp of many feet. A sudden flush rose to his brow. He turned and looked at the white beauty of the town below.

"There is something left to do," he said. "And thank God it is *my* countrymen who need me."

A TEST OF ENDURANCE.

I.

A LOVE match, everyone said. A love match pure and simple; and, unlike most love matches, other suitable adjuncts were there: money in plenty, good looks on both sides; a position assured by financial and mercantile antecedents. For once the situation was reversed: it was the wealthy American wedding the titled English girl, not the impecunious lordling selling himself to the American heiress.

Lady Jessica was the youngest daughter of an impoverished peer with a large and expensive family. Every member of that family was astonished when Mr. Amory B. Mafferton appeared on the scene as a suitor.

How it had come about was answered by a good-natured aunt to whom the "cure" at Homburg had been recommended. Lady Jessica, as favourite niece and somewhat of a Cinderella at home, had accompanied the invalid. If the Hon. Mrs. St. Aubyn was

not a very careful chaperon, she at least had proved useful in that capacity. The chance introduction of Mr. Amory B. Mafferton had led to greater intimacy than might have been possible on English soil. He and Lady Jessica played tennis, and walked, and rode, and lunched, and even gambled a little in each other's company; but each knew from the first hour of meeting that the whole round world and "they that dwell therein" had narrowed to the limits of just—a man and a maid.

There was no possible explanation of so extraordinary a fact; it merely impressed itself upon each separate individual consciousness and turned Homburg into Paradise, where never serpent crept or crawled for two at least of its inmates.

The "wooing that's not long a-doing" is happy, says the proverb. The responsibility of chaperonage at last dawned on Mrs. St. Aubyn. But as her niece's welfare was concerned irretrievably, she sent glowing accounts of the eligible suitor to those in authority. Being interviewed by a gouty and irascible peer of the realm as to his somewhat audacious intentions, Mr. Amory B. Mafferton acquitted himself with all possible credit.

The peer remained on at Homburg for a time; drank the waters, observed the diet, and with the pressing memory of five other expensive and unmarried Cordelias in the background gave his consent. There was a

halcyon time of presents and preparations. There were cheques and diamonds from the elder Mafferton, who was a millionaire in a small way, and lived but for the happiness of his only son. He also wrote that he was in treaty for a mansion in Fifth Avenue for the bridal pair, and hoped it would be ready when they arrived in New York. Never had wooing sped more smoothly or promised greater happiness. The two principals in the business were so engrossed with each other, so hopelessly in love, that it gave Society quite a shock to see them together. Homburg society, that is to say. For it was apt to be cynical in the matter of love matches, and did not quite approve of so bad an example to other engaged couples, where suitability of income or position deposed minor considerations.

The two had met in August. They were to be married in October, as Mr. Amory B. Mafferton was obliged to return to New York by that time.

Both entreated that the ceremony should be as quiet and simple as was consistent with a debt-encumbered reputation. Lord Bevis had no objection. He had been a widower for five years, and that plea excused many useful economies. Jessica wished to be married from her own home and birthplace—Bevis Towers in Berwick. The details of the trousseau were left chiefly to her aunt and her eldest sister. Even dresses and French millinery were as nothing in com-

parison with the companionship of her American lover. It must be ceded to Amory Mafferton that he was in every way worthy of such adoration. He was extremely cultured as well as extremely clever. His education had been the best that New York could offer and Harvard complete. He had then stepped into a business of gigantic enterprises with which he had little sympathy, but which held all the obligations of an only son. He knew himself the beloved and sole object of his father's ambitions, and he had not the heart to disappoint them. In reality his tastes were refined and his talents of the scholarly order. But to have said so would have been to deal a blow at a stupendous structure of human enterprise and commercial pride. He could not do it.

Since leaving college he had gone abroad each year. His father had always refused to accompany him, taking his own holiday in Virginia or California, but never really happy away from desk and office and the brazen turmoil of the city of millions. Great as was his wealth, his life was only the strenuous, feverish, unenviable existence of a worshipper of Plutus. To what end he so strove and persisted and tired himself was probably his own concern. His son certainly had no desire for the doubtful blessing of millionairism, and told him so. But there is a "tide in the affairs of wealth" when its own weight is the impetus which sets it rolling and

keeps it on the move. And old Cyrus W. Mafferton had reached this stage of hopeless prosperity.

There was no prouder man than he when the news of his son's engagement reached him. It seemed at once the fit coping-stone of a self-erected edifice; the crown of a lifetime of energy and enterprise. For the first few hours after the news reached him he was absolutely drunk with pride. He would like to have called all his friends and neighbours together and shouted the glorious news! He walked the streets as one on air, ready to shovel out gold like water for the most magnificent of mansions, where "my son and Lady Jessica" might take up their abode. Towards night he cooled down, however; and having forwarded the information to the principal journals, and feasted a few special friends on the choicest fare of the Waldorf, he let himself into his own modest mansion and turned in at his study door for a quiet cigar and a quarter of an hour's leisured meditation on the great news cabled that morning.

He was still chewing the end of delectable fancies, resting, as he rarely rested, in a large easy-chair, when a knock startled him.

His black butler—a relic of long and faithful service—opened the door at his permission.

"I'se very sorry, sah, to trouble you, but ole Mammy Jue, she's bin mighty miser'bul all day. Doctor say

she's gwine ter break up. And ever since dark she's bin a-cryin' an' a-callin' for you, sah. I promussed to tell you moment you'd be to home. She kan't rest noways if she don't see you this blessed night, sah."

Cyrus Mafferton raised himself from his position of ease.

"I'll come at once," he said. "I hope you had a good doctor?"

"Doctor Jeff'son Wright, sah. She done ask for him—speshally."

Mr. Mafferton paused for half a moment. A slight quiver, the merest ripple of restrained emotion, crossed his usually impassive face.

"You know I said he was never to enter this house!"

The negro servitor bowed apology.

"Sorry, sah, I'se sure. But ole Mammy, she said she was a-dyin', and she asked for Doctor Jeff'son Wright, and the coloured gal who waits on her she sent off for him straight. I don't 'low no blame to myself for the cir-cum-stances, sah."

Cyrus Mafferton rarely wasted words over a purposeless argument. But when he was left to himself he looked harassed and perplexed, as no critical moment in Wall Street had ever seen him look. He walked to the door, and then back to his chair in pitiable indecision. His face was grey and set; his hands shook.

Cyrus Mafferton took up the burden of his days once more. He bought and furnished his son's house. He sent money and jewels to the betrothed pair. He held his head as high as ever, and worked as hard. No one saw his dark hours. None caught that furtive look around his study walls, or questioned his sudden fear of night, of silence. Wherever he sat lights flooded every space; a lamp burned in his bedroom all night long. At times his soul was racked by unspeakable terrors; at others he exulted as if some clever trick might reap a harvest of reward. He had refused to go to England for the wedding. He could not leave his business to the mercy of clerks, however faithful. Persuasions and entreaties left that resolve unaltered.

A large photograph of his future daughter-in-law reached him. He had it framed in costly style. It stood always on his study table. Every night it was the first thing to greet his eyes when he entered the room. Every morning it was the last thing on which he looked ere he left it. And yet closer and deeper he buried the grim secret of his life, and yet closer crept the fear of retribution in the future. Anxiety began to tell on him. The lines deepened on his brow. The unhealthy pallor of his cheek changed to the yellow hue of dyspepsia. His head was only carried high by a supreme effort; it drooped low enough when there were none to see. Perhaps never so low as when a letter

came to him from the English bride; loving, playful, charming as the girl's own nature; telling of glad expectation at meeting a second "father;" saying how she loved him for Amory's sake already (seeing him only through those eyes of her beloved), till she should know and love him for his own. Had she seen the agonised face lifted from that page of innocent confessions, she would have been puzzled to account for it; unable to discover any connecting-link between the letter and its effect.

One night a desperate resolve seized Cyrus Mafferton. While in its throes he forced himself to write what he knew should have been written long ere this. The agony it cost to write those brief lines stamped itself indelibly on his face; brought great beads of sweat to his brow; turned his stiff frame to ice, and yet could not deaden his senses to the haunting cry for ever in his ears:

"Swear to promise!"

He had not sworn or promised; yet that obsessing force was for ever in his life, turn where he would, do what he might to purchase forgetfulness.

What drove him to bargain for peace by a written confession? What promised him peace at last, as he cowered there at his desk; a furtive glance for ever

turning to one corner of the lighted room—the glance of a haunted man?

"Go—go! For God Almighty's sake, *go!* I've done what you asked."

Strange words to echo in the silence. No living soul to hear them save the speaker and the phantom conjured up by broken faith.

"To-morrow I'll mail it to him," he muttered, sealing the large square envelope with a shaking hand. "It'll break his heart, God forgive me! But it may save him from a worse thing to come."

Morning dawned. Before the locked door of that study a crowd of frightened servants gathered. Lights gleamed from underneath; lights shone through the curtained windows that looked upon the street; but the master of the house would never again come forth from that room. The sealed letter was still on the writing-table. Across it lay Cyrus Mafferton's dead body!

II.

THE doctor summoned hastily by frightened servants was the very man to whom Cyrus Mafferton had objected in his lifetime. One glance at the motionless figure told him aid was hopeless; nothing could be done

save notify the death to the authorities and cable the news to his son in England.

Other doctors came. There was universal excitement and corresponding clamour in the share market. How quietly that ashen face surveyed it all now! What stern rebuke had gathered about that grim mouth and sealed its eternal silence! How potent a sermon the dead man preached to deaf ears as the turmoil of the city went on in the busy streets without, while the only requiem to his memory was spoken by hoarse voices and eager speculators, to whom his sudden death meant change, or loss, or panic!

The news reached his son with all the shock of the unforeseen. It spelt grief and loss beyond expression; it faced him on the borderland of his new dreams of joy, and painted life's tragedies against the background of life's hope. The preparations for the wedding were in full swing. This meant immediate postponement, or —— that thought came back to his heart as the pendulum of grief swung him to and fro; as he saw his love's tearful eyes and heard her sweet sympathy.

No speed on earth could bring him back to New York in time for the funeral—that he knew; and yet how incongruous seemed the joy of union, the mingling of cypress and wedding blossoms!

It was Jessica herself who finally decided for him.

They would be married quietly in the early morning and go straight to Liverpool, and thence to New York —together.

None opposed the wish. Lord Bevis saw no reason to object. Sisters, relatives and friends were equally complaisant. Amory himself could but recognise in it the devotion of that true heart he had won. He had no will or power to deny himself such consolation. Grief hallowed love; drew them into yet closer harmony; brought them face to face with forces stronger than mere ideals; turned shadows into deep reality.

The sorrow of the mourner is not always proof against the tender whispers of joys yet left to earth. Such whispers stole to Amory Mafferton's heart. Love and youth fought with Death's grim shadow, and conquered. Once the inevitable was faced, life grew easier. When he set foot again in New York's familiar streets, his wife was by his side.

That voyage had held an idyll of its own. Joy tempered by sorrow is ever tenderer, holier, than joy alive in sensuous selfishness. Dependence on the one side, strength on the other, sympathy on both had given two hearts full knowledge and full comprehension of each other. Grief had only shadowed the glory and gladness of that hasty union; it had no power to chill its passionate ardour. Every day was an inspiration of

fresh hope and fresh happiness. Into the heart of youth and love even Death can cast no arrow.

To Mafferton his young wife was yet half angel and half goddess: she appealed, she awed, she enchanted; best of all she never lessened her own value; never cheapened herself or her caresses. Loving him with all her soul and heart, she yet kept his love at the white heat of adoration. Always in her he felt there was a reserve to be respected, a purity to be worshipped, an ideal to realise.

The halcyon peace and glory of their wedding trip landed them at last on the prosaic ground of household cares and responsibilities. Young Mafferton found his hands full, and his hours occupied, and little leisure left, once he took up the reins his father's grasp had released. He grew sick and weary of it all. He told himself that wealth was too costly a possession for any man who desired mere happiness. He talked to Jessica of giving up this vast business, tied with a hundred complicated knots to other businesses and other firms; of turning it into a company and taking a nominal sum as income. Then they would be free to wander where they would, to live life as they pleased. They would not be burdened with the huge mansion in Fifth Avenue, the endless worries of a household staff; the perpetual strain and excitement of visitors and social functions.

Thus he talked, and she agreed. A little longer, a few months, and then liberty and life lived for love and each other.

Does heaven, or earth, or some other undetermined place of undeserved punishment decide the hour in which the unexpected shall happen? The golden months had hurried by, harmless and happy, and blessed as surely never months were blessed, when the first cloud set itself to hover over the sky of happiness; boding a "together" that should mean something to be dreaded instead of gloried in; when, having drunk of the cup of bliss with lips not half assuaged, Amory Mafferton should behold in it but the draught of Tantalus for evermore.

The accident that revealed the secret was more of set purpose than had at first seemed to be the case. It was inaugurated by a visit from Dr. Jefferson Wright.

Amory Mafferton had been aware of his father's prejudice against this man. He had wondered at the reason; sometimes questioned it. The answer had been as a rule evasive, or a hint that, spite of white skin, education, gentlemanly bearing, and professional skill, Jefferson Wright was possessed of that fatal taint which many generations may not obliterate. No eye could detect it, yet the man himself knew, and others knew. It had embittered life to him; it had made the love of woman a thing to dread instead of to glory in; it

had kept him adamant to any thought of wedded felicity; it had made him a man pitiless as his own fate, and relentless as the justice which proclaimed him—Pariah!

When, one night his card was brought to Amory Mafferton, it occasioned him some surprise. Their acquaintance hitherto had been limited to professional civilities. But he ordered the servant to show the doctor into his study, and followed almost on that admission.

The two men faced each other with a perfunctory greeting. They did not shake hands. Something in the young doctor's face sent a quick thrill of fear to Mafferton's heart. He offered his visitor a chair, and took one himself. Look and attitude were expectant.

"I've no doubt you are surprised at my call?" began the doctor. "You may remember I was the first medical man summoned to see your father the morning of his sudden death?"

"Yes. I heard so."

"There was nothing to be done. He died from heart failure. He was lying across his writing-table as if he had fallen there after—some exertion."

"Yes?"

"I had the body removed to the couch, while the butler sent for his own medical adviser."

"To what purpose is all this? The papers gave the details even before——"

The doctor raised his hand.

"I won't claim your attention many moments. Did you know that a few weeks previous to his own death your father had lost the old nurse who had lived in the family from before your birth to that time?"

"Mammy Jue? I knew she died. The news reached me in England."

"On the last day of her life she sent for me! She knew she was dying, and—she had something weighing on her mind. Your father had neglected her, so she fancied. He paid no heed to her messages. That very morning the news of your engagement to this young English lady had reached us. The servants carried it to her; it excited her strangely—in my opinion it hastened the end. Terror and longing mastered her. In default of other confessor, she confessed her secret to me."

"Still I fail to see——"

Again that gesture stayed his words.

"I could only listen. I had no influence with your father. I bade the servant tell him the old woman's hours were numbered, and—I left. She died that night. The next occasion that I visited the house was to find your father dead also. But before his death he had been employed in writing a letter. It was sealed, but

not addressed. It lay almost beneath his hand as I lifted him up. I took possession of that letter."

Sudden indignation flashed into Amory Mafferton's eyes.

"You? By what right——"

"By the right of—a common misfortune," answered the young doctor.

His hand went to his coat pocket. He drew out the square blank envelope sealed with Cyrus Mafferton's seal and laid it on the table.

Amory sprang up.

"You take a great deal upon yourself, Doctor Jefferson Wright!" he exclaimed. "May I ask what business you had to detain a letter never meant for you?"

"It may have been meant for me. It has no superscription."

"Explain yourself!"

"I may have had reason to suppose that the old nurse had told your father of her confidence. He knew *my* secret—I by chance gained the knowledge of his; so I detained that letter. I have always determined to give it into your hands myself. I would have done so before now, but I was called away to California. I thought your marriage would have been put off. I was astonished, on my return, to find that your wife was in New York along with you."

Amory seized the letter with an angry gesture.

"As you have fulfilled your mission," he said, "I can dispense with your company."

The young doctor looked steadily, compassionately, at the angry face. He took up his hat and walked slowly to the door.

"Remember this," he said, "I would have spared you even as he wished; but there is no power on earth that shall avert the curse of such a heritage as—*ours!*"

At that last word the blood flamed through Amory Mafferton's veins, suffused his temples, held him in such a passion of wrath, shame, denial as touched on madness."

The door closed. He sank back in a sort of vertigo. The blood-red seal of that fatal letter seemed multiplied a thousand-fold by his dizzy senses.

Whence arose that little cloud no bigger than a man's hand on the heaven of love?

Jessica wondered and grieved, and then again told herself it was but fancy—fancy born of her own delicate health and her husband's anxiety. But again and again fear took possession of her. He was colder; he shunned and avoided her—or was it but morbid sensitiveness that made her fancy it?

He had urged her to leave New York. But she shook her head.

"My child must be born in my home, or in yours,"

she told him, and in his silence and white-faced terror she read some fear she dared not name.

"What had changed him?" was the question for ever torturing her mind. She had heard of husbands whose jealous love made the thought of fatherhood abhorrent. But surely he was not such a man as these! her lover—her husband—of all men the kindest, the most courteous, the most beloved. Restraint tied her own tongue. The novelty of situation and surroundings kept her timid and restrained; and yet she longed, as she had never longed before, to throw herself into his arms and break down the unknown barrier that had opposed itself between their once perfect confidence.

She did not like the doctor he had chosen. Skilful she knew he was, and with a well-earned reputation; and yet—who can account for a woman's antipathies?

The months lessened to weeks. She faced the woman's ordeal with all the bravery of her sex and her race. She would have faced it yet more joyfully but for her husband's ill-concealed aversion to discuss or dwell upon it. His moods varied from passionate tenderness to frigid calm. How could she guess that that calm held for him the tortures of the damned; the mingled shame and horror of a secret evaded, or denied by previous generations; a secret that had been his father's legacy and now made of his life an abiding horror? Even if God were merciful, even if in this in-

ce nature forbore her vengeance, who could tell that blow was anything but withheld—that it might not fall on lives innocent as his own?

And so in terror that wrung his very heartstrings, mory Mafferton awaited what would have been his ide and glory but for that fatal letter. Only one uman being knew of his anguish—knew it because he was a fellow sufferer—because in his veins lurked, too, that faint, far-off, yet never-to-be hidden strain that has cursed the white man for his sins and avenged the black.

The blow fell at last. It was Dr. Jefferson Wright who faced the stricken man as he sat huddled, shaken, terror-racked in his chair. For hours he had sat there praying blindly to a God whose savage justice the laws of man challenge with every generation that draws breath.

As the doctor stood on the threshold and looked at the blanched, agonised face, his own curse lightened by contrast. At least he had always known of that taint within himself; to Amory Mafferton it had come as a bolt from heaven's blue.

The question asked and answered by those two men was one that needed no words.

A world of hours and days whirled madly by; thought plunged into chaos and returned to plunge into yet deeper anguish. Above stairs, in her darkened

room, a woman lay, silent—and at rest. The babe t
her breast had wailed its secret to her ears. In
shame and terror of that moment, the innocent paid t
debt of the guilty.

Not all the passion and sympathy of love might
piate an old sin. Life's injustice was answered only
an unassailable silence!

THE END.

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