

MISS DOROTHY'S CHARGE.

A Novel.

185310

By FRANK LEE BENEDICT,

AUTHOR OF

"MY DAUGHTER ELINOR," "MISS VAN KORTLAND," "JOHN WORTHINGTON'S NAME," &c.

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BY FRANK LEE BENEDICT.


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I Dedicate this Book

TO

JOHN BOX, Esq.,

CHEVALIER OF THE LEGION OF HONOR, &c.,

ONE OF THE

DEAREST FRIENDS I POSSESS,

AND

ONE OF THE BEST MEN I HAVE EVER KNOWN.

FLORENCE, ITALY, 1873.



MISS DOROTHY'S CHARGE.

CHAPTER I.

COMING HOME.

THE June sun lay warm and bright about the old farm-house, sheltered like a mammoth bird's nest among the blossoming vines and green forest-trees. The thrushes sang, the maples murmured softly, a brook ran laughing past the door and hid itself in the orchard beyond. Every thing united to form a picture of such entire peace that an imaginative person might almost have believed the homestead some enchanted dwelling set in a Happy Valley, undisturbed by the ordinary world's tumult and troubles.

Susan Brent came out on the porch for a breath of fresh air after her long night's watch, which had worn and aged her countenance more than the whole forty years of her previous life. She was a plain, unlettered woman; not given to embroidering her commonplace existence with fancies; nevertheless she drew back from the sunshine as if it had been a mocking face, and turned hastily away to conceal her misery from its sight.

Twelve months of doubt and anxiety, culminating in the horrible agony of the last twenty-four hours, which seemed endless to poor Susan, had thrust her so completely out of her usual groove of thought that the very dwelling where she was born looked changed and unfamiliar.

No possibility of struggling against her anguish; no hope that time could mitigate the suffering; nothing to do but bear with what fortitude she might the undeserved shame forced upon her. Even the old faith in God was hard to find in the darkness. She had to shut her lips tight to keep back the moan of complaint against His cruelty which surged up from her burdened soul.

So old a story—only a girl's broken heart—only the ruin of an honest name. Let me tell it as briefly as I can.

A year previous Lucy Stuart disappeared from her sister's house, and had now as unexpectedly come back. The whole neighborhood knew she lay dying in the home she had deserted, and that for the present at least pity must check the harshest tongues. From the first every body understood who it was she had followed, or by whom she had been taken away

—a man very young still, but only too well known in many places besides that quiet country nook for vices which the most tolerant friends found it difficult to screen under the title of youthful follies. Lucy had come back—come to seek shelter beneath the roof which she had desolated; and whatever they might have felt before, neither John nor Susan Brent could remember any thing except that she lay there helpless, probably dying—could feel nothing beyond the anguish of this knowledge.

The sad news was carried to Miss Dorothy Conway, lately returned to spend the summer in the old mansion where she had dwelt alone since her father's death. She lived twelve miles away from John Brent's farm-house; but evil tidings travel fast. One of her servants whose home was in that neighborhood brought back the mournful story, and it soon reached Miss Conway's ears.

Dorothy ordered her ponies and drove over to the farm in the early morning, never pausing to reflect what her reception might be, remembering only that it was her duty to go and find the helpless infant; for she knew very well whose child it was that had been ushered into existence under this cloud of shame.

Oh, that brother, who had brought her such grief, whom they had all so loved and indulged, from whom they had hoped so much, and who during the last years of her father's life had darkened his age with such bitter disappointment and grief! It was of her brother she thought most during that solitary drive—of the years which lay beyond—the retribution which must overtake him at length. It seemed to Dorothy that those who loved the poor girl were to be envied, since they could sit by her bed certain that this world's sorrows and sins and expiations were coming to an end.

There had been bitter self-reproach in Miss Conway's mind during the past year, though it was not easy to see how any blame could attach to her. From the time she was a little girl Lucy had lived a great deal at the Hermitage in a sadly ill-defined position. She amused Mrs. Conway in her long, tedious illness, read to the old gentleman, had a wonderful knack of dressing hair, was skillful with her needle, and so pretty that nobody could help petting her. She picked up a desultory education of just the

sort to do her the most harm; fed on novels and poetry, and finding it necessary as she grew into maidenhood to have a hero, made one of Philip Conway.

Handsome Philip—little wonder that she did not look farther for her ideal! He had a fatal power of winning love; and worse than all, for the time invariably believed himself in earnest, only to grow so weary as the freshness wore off his passion that he would be capable of cruelty or any other great wrong to free himself from the consequence of his temporary insanity. But it was not until the last winter of her father's life that Miss Dorothy or he dreamed of any danger to Lucy from the companionship into which their mistaken kindness had brought her. Then they perceived that the girl loved Philip; hoping that he was ignorant of it, or at least careless, they sent her away at once; it seemed the best thing to be done. Old Mr. Conway did not long after; Dorothy traveled for a time; on her return she found that Philip had sailed for Europe, and in two days more learned that Lucy Stuart had also disappeared. Of course when too late she was overwhelmed with every detail of the story. Philip had paid many visits to the neighborhood of the farm during the winter and early spring; and Lucy had been so often seen with him that her good name went long before she vanished. Still a few added weeks of doubt and suspense, then Miss Dorothy learned for a certainty that the girl was in France; Philip there likewise. But she was powerless. Philip had quarreled with her fiercely from the day Lucy left the house—had never spoken to her after their father's funeral.

She was as helpless as Susan Brent herself; though in her first despair Susan came to the house and wildly upbraided her as the cause of all the trouble. Miss Dorothy could not even be angry, and for a brief season tried to think that Susan's one hope might have a foundation. In the short, incoherent letter Lucy left for her sister she said that she was going to one who loved her; in spite of the cruelty she had endured, in spite of Susan's harsh treatment, she should remember her kindly in the new and far-off life she was seeking. After that, Dorothy wrote to her brother, telling him every thing which had occurred, imploring him, if he had any feeling of humanity and Lucy were with him, his wife, to clear her character from the stains which rested upon it. He answered the epistle by a harsh, cruel note; he was not married; as for the girl, what should he know of her, since Dorothy had taken the matter into her own hands and driven the creature from her roof? But Miss Conway had never told Susan Brent of that response—had not seen her since. She could only wait and promise herself that if she ever found Lucy, the poor soul should at least have protection and kindness.

All these memories were in her mind; and more bitter than any other, the reflection that

she ought to have gone to Europe, rescued the victim, and forced Philip into some atonement for his crime. She knew how insane it was, how idle the attempt would have been; still it wrung her heart with keen remorse that she had not made the effort.

She drove up to the gate of the old farmhouse in the bright morning, and looking about, it seemed for an instant impossible any trouble could have penetrated those peaceful surroundings. John Brent, seated on the porch, saw the carriage approach; the sight was so unexpected that, not knowing how to act, he hurried away to consult his wife, according to his habit in any emergency.

Susan had lain down on her bed; the doctor on leaving at day-break announced that there would be no change for some hours; so the neighbor who had been allowed to share that awful watch persuaded Susan to leave the room and go out into the air. The sunlight, the songs of the birds, the very beauty and peace of the scene, had driven the wretched woman back into the gloom of the dwelling. She was struggling toward the broken sleep of exhaustion, with only a vague consciousness of misery following her, when roused by her husband, who leaned over the pillow and said,

"I don't know what to do, Susan—here comes Miss Conway! Could you get up again?"

"Miss Conway!" repeated Susan. "What does she want? Oh, send her away—don't let me see a face that's kin to his—I can't, I can't! I should curse her, I believe—I—"

She ceased speaking, for the tears began to come now into her eyes which had been so hot and dry during the long night. Some softer feeling stirred in her mind—it could scarcely have been otherwise at a moment like that. She recollected how Miss Conway had suffered—how tenderly she had spoken of Lucy—and then, without giving herself time to think further, she pushed past her husband and reached the little sitting-room as Miss Dorothy entered.

The two women looked steadily into each others' faces; it was no time to remember any difference in position. The one could only recollect that her sister lay with death watching in the chamber above; the other, that one of her own blood had caused this woe.

"I heard Lucy was here," Miss Conway said, finding it hard to get at any fitting words. "Oh, Mrs. Brent—oh, Susan—don't look like that! I am so sorry—let me do something for you in this trouble!"

The lines about Susan's mouth relaxed; she could not resist the sympathy and the gush of womanly tears. She sat down in the nearest chair and said, in a hoarse, choked voice,

"There's nothing to be done—Lucy is dying."

"Is she conscious? Does she know you?"

"Sometimes, just for a few minutes; then she rambles off again into all sorts of wild talk."

"And the baby—the poor little baby—will it live?"

"Who is to wish it might live?" returned Susan, in the same repressed voice, which showed how near she was to a passionate outburst of grief. "The best that can happen is for me to follow them both to the old graveyard out yonder."

Her listener could make no answer; there was nothing, at least for her, to say; nothing she could do beyond proving that she meant to take upon herself whatever portion of this burden it might be possible to share. "Susan," she said, after a little, "you know I came here to-day in all kindness."

"I know it," interrupted Mrs. Brent; "but oh, Miss Conway, you can't wonder it is hard for me to believe! You're not to blame—no more than I am—don't I feel that? But I shouldn't be human if it wasn't impossible for me to keep the bitter thoughts out of my mind, and Lucy dying up there. Oh, Lucy, Lucy!"

A spasm of agony shook her from head to foot; she threw her apron over her head and cried silently for a few moments. Miss Dorothy could only go to her, hold her hands, and weep in the same silence. Perhaps this mute sympathy soothed the woman as no words could have done. Something like composure succeeded the tears that drove away the choked, breathless feeling which had oppressed her during the night. She grew quiet enough to talk; able to tell Miss Dorothy that the poor baby was a girl, who looked as strong as possible, in spite of all the mother had suffered, after the habit of babies which have no business to be in the world.

"If it lives," Miss Dorothy said, "it must be my care—always—remember that, Susan."

Naturally enough Mrs. Brent's first impulse was to declare that neither she nor any body belonging to her should ever come near the child. But even in the height of her bitter wrath and pain, Susan could not entirely lose sight of her common sense. She felt how much easier the little creature's fate might be made in such hands than it could possibly under her protection.

"Always my care," repeated Miss Dorothy. "May I see it, Susan?"

"Yes; come up stairs. Be careful and don't let Lucy hear your voice; maybe she's asleep."

They crept up the old winding staircase, which seemed constructed expressly to prove a trap for the unwary; and Miss Conway waited in the outer room while Susan stole softly into the chamber where Lucy lay. Presently she returned, holding the helpless roll of flannel in her arms. With a keener pang at her heart than she had often suffered, though God knew her thirty years of life had not been upon roses, Dorothy Conway bent over the sleeping innocent which had come under such dismal auspices into this hard old world.

"The poor baby!—the pretty little thing!" she said, pitifully, below her breath, pressing it close in a passion of tenderness at which Susan marveled.

"I can't feel so," she said—the stern ring in her voice again. "I know it's wicked—poor little one, it's not to blame; and oh, it'll have enough to bear!"

Enough indeed! Any woman's life was sufficiently difficult, Dorothy Conway thought, bitterly; but for this creature with its double heritage of woe, what misery might not the future hold in store!

At this instant Lucy's voice sounded from the inner room, uttering broken sentences which were unintelligible, and the more painful to hear for that reason. It was as if she had lost the power even of making her suffering known in any language which mortal sense could comprehend.

"That's the way she's been going on for hours," Mrs. Brent whispered. "If she's rational a few minutes it's worse still, for then—"

She left her words unfinished from pure inability to articulate, but Miss Dorothy could easily fancy what the girl's conscious talk would be. There was only one thing to wait and hope for—the moment when, the last words spoken, the last pang over, the freed soul should go out to its Maker, who might mercifully judge it as man would never do.

The two stood there for a few seconds in silence, then the voice died away.

"She's got into a doze," Susan said; "it won't last, though—she drops off like that every little while."

The woman whom she had left to watch came out of the room with a cup in her hand, whispering to Mrs. Brent as she passed, the errand which took her down stairs.

"I must go in and sit by the bed in case she wakes," Susan observed to Miss Conway.

"Yes—I wanted to say so many things—it's so difficult—Oh, Susan, Susan!" half sobbed the other.

"There's no amount of talking would do any good," returned Mrs. Brent, and her voice sounded cold and stern once more.

"But oh, Susan—"

"Yes, I know you mean it kindly. I'm ashamed to behave so, Miss Dorothy, but I can't help it—I can't help it."

She took the babe from Miss Conway, walked to the door of the other room, pushed it a little open, and, after an instant's hesitation, motioned to her visitor. Miss Dorothy moved softly forward and looked through into the gloom of the chamber. It had been Lucy's apartment whenever she staid with her sister during the old days; and after her flight no human being except Mrs. Brent ever entered it. She carried the key in her pocket, and her husband knew that each night she sought the deserted room and remained there sometimes for hours; but not a word concerning the habit ever passed his lips, and the first days of misery over, Lucy's name was never uttered by either. Only God and his angels beheld what Susan Brent suffered during the solitary watches she held. Perhaps the very abandonment of grief which

she could permit herself in those vigils gave her strength to preserve the cold, unmoved exterior she maintained before the little world below. She went about her work with orderly diligence, receiving such old neighbors as ventured into her house with a taciturn civility which kept the boldest gossip from any but the most ordinary themes, and bore her burden in silence and unaided.

It was a pretty apartment. The furniture had been a gift to Lucy from Mrs. Conway, and though unsuited to the rest of the dwelling, seemed too much in keeping with the girl's delicate, fairy-like beauty for her patroness to smile at her wish to possess it.

As Miss Dorothy's eyes became accustomed to the darkness, she could see Lucy quite plainly as she lay stretched on the bed. Oh, the piteous sight!—the poor, sweet face, which ought to have been still so young and innocent, worn and seamed with suffering—seeming all the more haggard from the fever-crimson on her cheeks!

Yet even in this moment, as Dorothy caught sight of Susan Brent standing near the doorway holding the sleeping babe, she could but feel that the woman was most to be pitied. Lucy was passing away from her trouble; her heart had broken, as the hearts of the feeble can do; but Susan was vigorous and strong; she must live and bear her misery and shame, and Miss Conway knew that no crowned queen could have more abhorred the disgrace than this woman with the instincts of her Puritan blood.

There was nothing to be done—no words could avail—Dorothy must depart and leave Susan to the last sad duties she would ever be called upon to perform for the girl whom she had loved with a mother's tenderness. She wanted to speak again about the child; Susan might not tolerate a second visit from her, and Miss Dorothy could not bear to go until it was distinctly settled that the babe should be sent to her as soon as every thing was over—even in her own thoughts Dorothy had not courage to put the words more plainly.

The infant woke and began to cry. Before either could move, Lucy opened her eyes—saw her sister—saw Miss Conway beyond, and called—

"Miss Dorothy, oh, Miss Dorothy!"

It was impossible not to obey the summons, but firm as she was of will, few things had ever been so difficult to Miss Conway. Involuntarily Susan Brent motioned her back, afraid of any excitement for the sufferer; but Lucy rose among her pillows and stretched out her hands, crying wildly,

"Miss Dorothy—I will speak to Miss Dorothy!"

Miss Conway hurried toward the bed; Susan retreated into the shadow of the doorway and stood watching. Suddenly the eagerness died out of Lucy's eyes—a spasm of shame and remorse swept even the fever-crimson from her

cheeks. She sank helplessly back, extending her arms still, but with a gesture of supplication, and trying to hide her face from the visitor.

"Miss Dorothy, oh, Miss Dorothy!" she moaned, in such passionate entreaty that it seemed the demand for pardon her poor soul needed here and hereafter.

By the time she reached the bed Miss Conway's good sense and self-control re-asserted themselves. She put her lips to the girl's forehead, saying,

"You must not try to talk, Lucy! I shall come to see you again—lie down now and rest."

Lucy turned her head with a smile more painful than any tears, but at that instant the child cried out again in Susan's arms.

"My baby—I will have my baby!" she almost shrieked. "You shan't keep it from me, Susan. Oh my baby, my baby!"

Mrs. Brent came silently in; Dorothy took the infant and put it on the pillow beside the mother, who for a few moments lay quiet, covering the little face with soft kisses and caressing it tenderly, so weak after the brief excitement that she was not able to speak.

Her sister and Miss Conway stood there in silence; presently Lucy's eyes closed, and they thought she had dropped asleep, but as Dorothy tried to move softly away she opened them again, saying brokenly,

"Don't go—wait—don't hate me—for baby—for baby! When—when I'm gone—you must take— Oh, Miss Dorothy—Miss Dor—"

The words died in a gasp; a slight convulsion shook her whole frame. The features worked painfully; the head rolled from side to side, showing that the trouble was deeper seated than a mere nervous spasm. The doctor's worst fears were realized—the malady had attacked the brain.

He had left remedies to be applied in this case, and Susan Brent went methodically about her task. Miss Dorothy aided as well as she could, wondering, through the dizzy horror which half blinded her, at the woman's awful composure and the gray stillness of her countenance, which looked almost more death-like than that of the sick girl.

The spasm passed as suddenly as it had seized her. Lucy began again to talk disconnectedly, though it did not seem so much that her mind wandered, as that she was in haste to say something for which she could find no words.

"Miss Dorothy—the baby—all the voyage I was thinking that—there is nobody else—Susan can't! Oh Susan, Susan—pardon—maybe God will."

The lips moved always, but no further sound was audible. The wasted hands twined themselves about the infant—the two watchers believed the last moment had come. Susan groaned once in horrible agony—holding fast the post of the bedstead to keep from falling.

Lucy's eyes watched her, strained and dilated with a wild supplication for pardon which she had no strength to utter.

"I love you, Lucy—I love you! My lamb, my little one—my sister— Oh my God, have mercy on us!"

She threw herself on the pillow and clasped her arms over mother and child. It was useless now to try for self-restraint; nothing remained but to make the suffering creature understand that she was loved and forgiven.

A smile crept slowly across Lucy's lips, effaced the physical pain and fairly transfigured the whole countenance, as if the light from another world already shone upon it.

"Miss Dorothy," she whispered, feeling uncertainly about, though she still kept her hold of the babe; "Miss Dorothy!"

Dorothy reached down and put her hand on the girl's. Lucy pressed it upon the child's head.

"Baby—for baby!" she whispered again.

"It shall be mine, Lucy; I know what you want. Try to understand. I will take care of it—always. Don't be troubled, Lucy."

The infant woke with a low wail; Miss Conway lifted it from its mother's embrace and rocked it softly to and fro in her arms till it stopped crying.

"It's my baby, Lucy," sobbed Miss Dorothy, beginning to cry for the first time; "I love it—I will always."

The girl put her arms about her sister's neck and would not let her rise; she lay regarding Miss Dorothy as she hushed the babe, and still that smile of ineffable peace glorified her face into such loveliness as it never wore even in the height of the girl's beauty which had brought her to this dismal strait. Then for a few moments she sank into a dreamy stupor, breathing so softly that more than once they thought she had lost her faint hold of life, and stood there in a reverent awe too solemn for grief. But she roused up suddenly; her eyes opened wide in delirious fright, and she cried,

"My baby—oh, you've taken my baby!"

Miss Conway replaced the little thing beside her on the bed and she grew quiet, saying more naturally,

"I know you—it's Miss Dorothy. Tell Susan not to cry—it hurts me here," and she pressed her hand to her forehead. "You promised—it seems a great while ago—but you promised—poor baby, poor baby!"

"I will keep my word, Lucy, you may be sure," Miss Conway answered as well as she could speak.

"Yes—always—I remember," the girl said, brokenly. "And baby's name—don't forget—the things are marked—it was all in the dream, you know—and she has dark eyes—they said she would—baby Valery."

Her breath grew too difficult for further speech, but her hands pulled feebly at the blanket which covered the sleeping infant.

"It's marked so on the clothes she brought

for it," Susan whispered, joining Miss Conway at the foot of the bed. "It sounds like a boy's name, but she said it over and over; and in the night when she was out of her head she kept saying the Virgin had told her it would be a girl."

Miss Conway did not answer. If she could ever have hoped to trust her brother's assurance that he had no share in Lucy's flight from her home, it was now impossible. She knew what Susan did not (a fact the friends of his manhood were ignorant of, as he never wrote the middle name), that he had been christened "Philip Valery Conway." Dorothy could understand too, how, finding herself alone with her misery and remorse in that far-off Italian clime, Lucy maybe sought comfort among the gorgeous ceremonies of the Roman Church. Perhaps some Madonna of Raphael took such hold of her already disordered mind that the heavenly face haunted her dreams, and the creations of her own disturbed fancy seemed actual promises uttered by the benignant shape. Delusion of a wandering brain though it was, Miss Conway could not help believing it mercifully granted to keep her from utter desperation in the darkness.

The history of that year none could probably ever know; whether Lucy was deserted by her betrayer or left him in her agony of remorse on finding her hope of becoming his wife utterly vain; how she accomplished the long journey across land and sea—no details of all those terrible months would ever reach the loving hearts to whom she had returned. But Dorothy Conway could picture the whole, and felt for the instant that a curse must follow not only the man who had wrought this misery, but relentlessly pursue herself and every creature bearing his name.

John Brent crept up the stairs and called to his wife from outside the door, having no courage to come in and see the girl who had been as dear to him as his own child.

"The doctor has come back," Susan whispered to Miss Conway, as she returned to the bed after listening to her husband's message.

At that moment Lucy began to cry out again; the spasms recommenced with more violence. The only thing Miss Conway could do was to obey Susan, who said,

"Take the baby down stairs! John, John, call the doctor!"

One glance Miss Conway caught of John Brent's face; it was like looking at the ghost of the good man she had known all her life. She wanted to run away and hide; her presence seemed an added wrong to these suffering creatures, in spite of the kindness which had prompted her visit.

She remained below stairs watching the woman who had taken the babe, until Susan entered the room for something that was wanted.

"I wouldn't stay," she said kindly enough, as she passed; "it can't do any good, Miss Dorothy; you ain't fit for this."

She walked on into the outer kitchen; Miss Conway ran after her, and closing the door behind them, gave free vent to her anguish, so that Susan was forced to comfort her, and the necessity did her good.

"You ain't to blame, Miss Dorothy," she said; "you're a good woman. God bless you! There, I can say it now."

"And you'll let me keep my promise by the baby?" Miss Conway asked.

"Yes; I know it's best," Susan answered, struggling with herself. "I expect we shall go away, but we can't yet; we'll have to sell the old homestead first. It would kill John to live here! We ain't used to disgrace, Miss Dorothy, and we can bear it easier off in some place where nobody knows us."

"All that is for future consideration," Miss Conway said. "And, Susan, if there is any thing I can do—"

"There ain't," interrupted Mrs. Brent, quickly. "Don't make me feel hard and wicked again! You may have the baby when—it's all over; but John and I have two hands apiece—we don't want any thing, and we can give my poor girl a grave. It don't sound right, but I can't help it. You're a good woman, Miss Dorothy!"

They were interrupted by Brent's voice.

"Hurry, Susan, hurry!"

She hastened up stairs; Miss Conway sat down and waited for a time, but neither husband nor wife appeared, and she had not the courage to follow them. Finally she decided to go home; she could be of no use in the desolate house at present; indeed it was better that she should be gone before the end came.

CHAPTER II.

THE OLD NEWSPAPER.

SUSAN BRENT'S resolution to forsake the old home and go with her husband to some spot so distant that nothing but memories of their great trouble could disturb the new life, was not carried into effect at the end of a few weeks as she proposed.

Contrary to the doctor's expectations Lucy Stuart still lived, though the terrible fever which set in the day of Miss Conway's visit left her mind so weakened that neither remorse nor suffering could retain any deep hold. It was not so much insanity as a strange failing of memory. She knew every body about her; at times was fond of her babe, but usually forgot any one who passed from her sight for a little and often spoke of the child as dead.

Susan managed to attend to its needs, besides doing the work of the house and nursing Lucy. John Brent met with an accident in the harvest-field which left him lame for nearly a year, so he was almost always within-doors, and Susan often declared that he proved more helpful than a woman. Indeed, he took the

care of both mother and babe on himself in a way which would have been fairly ludicrous, had not his patience and zeal lent a touch of pathos to his devotion.

The life which they led during the next two years was so barren of incident or important event that the details would sound uninteresting enough were I to chronicle them, yet quiet as it was it held all the elements of a tragedy to those who watched its course. Susan Brent grew old and bowed and gray; a certain hardness which had always lain at the bottom of her character becoming apparent as time went by. Not that she was either harsh or fretful in words, but she endured existence as a disagreeable burden no power could ever lighten. Born one of those constitutionally industrious women who can only be found in perfection among the descendants of the New England Puritans, she exaggerated the inheritance into a positive sin; toiled early and late, grew saving to parsimony, though more because work and economy gave constant employment to her thoughts than from any satisfaction she found in having her house look like the abode of the goddess of order, or from a desire to accumulate a competency for the future.

She had never been in the habit of going much among her neighbors, but from the day Lucy returned to her roof Susan was not seen beyond it, unless to appear at rare intervals in the Dissenting meeting-house at the Corners—as the hamlet near the farm was called—or to offer her services in the home of some acquaintance which chanced to be visited by illness or trouble.

Lucy's health was so frail that it seemed wonderful she had vitality enough to live on. Very often she was confined to her bed for weeks together, and even in the intervals of better health it was difficult to persuade her to leave her chamber. Occasionally she took pleasure in reading the old romances of which she had been so fond years before, but John Brent noticed that any thing painful in a story appeared to confuse itself in her mind with her own half-forgotten troubles, and he carefully put only light, cheerful books within her reach. She had possessed a great love and talent for music, and Miss Conway sent her a piano in the hope that she might retain something of her old skill. But the first time she sat down and allowed her fingers to stray over the keys the familiar sounds roused her to a spasm of such acute suffering that she was ill afterward, and bade them cover the instrument with a dark cloth, though she would not consent to its removal.

She was always somewhat afraid of Mrs. Brent, in spite of the latter's unvarying kindness. Her sister's gloomy aspect affected the poor creature unpleasantly; she would often call out that Susan was angry with her and weep like a frightened child, though seldom connecting the fancied displeasure with that black history which had desolated their lives.

Mrs. Flint, the one woman whose aid Susan permitted when Lucy came back, had a little daughter of whom the invalid became so fond that her mother allowed her, toward the end of the second year, to remain at the house. Hetty was the most helpful, grown-up thing of nine summers that ever lived, and quite capable of attending to Lucy's needs, so they were left a great deal together after John Brent recovered his health sufficiently to resume work. The baby thrived and grew, and was so beautiful that Susan wondered at her own inability to love it; but though her patience and devotion were unfailing, she could never become familiar enough with the shame which had so deeply smitten her pride to find any pleasure in its charming infantile ways and rapid development.

Sometimes for days Lucy kept the child in her room, took care of it as deftly as possible, petted and wept over it; then, one of her nervous attacks ensuing, she would completely forget its existence, or else insist that it had died; and if Hetty brought it, fall to shivering and crying that it was only a ghost, and that they were wicked to terrify her by the sight.

So two whole years went by, during which Miss Conway had been a good deal absent from her country home. She wished to take the child from the first, but this Susan would not permit; it must stay with her till it could walk and speak; after that, if Lucy was willing, she would give it up.

Philip Conway returned from Europe in the mean time, and he and his sister met in New York. He received her passionate outburst of sorrow and wrath in his usual heedless fashion; anxious only to escape a scene; never denying the baby's paternity, but absolutely inclined to think his sister a mad woman when she told him that his only hope of peace and pardon here or hereafter would lie in setting right the shame and misery he had caused.

This happened in the winter: spring came; Miss Conway went up into the country again, and was soon followed by news which filled her with anger and trouble such as the first bitterness of knowing her brother's unworthiness scarcely brought. He was about to marry Marian Tanner, who had created a sensation in society during the previous season as the greatest heiress of the day, and was as celebrated for her silly frivolity as for her money and her pretty face. Dorothy Conway learned the truth of the report and was not long in deciding what it would be right to do. She descended upon her brother cold and determined as an embodiment of one of the old Grecian Fates, but neither angry words nor expostulations produced the slightest effect.

"I will go to Marian Tanner and tell her the truth," she said, in horror and disgust.

"I don't think you'll do much harm," retorted handsome Philip. "At least five hundred gossips have repeated to her these charming scandals you have helped to foster. What

a sisterly nature you have, Dorothy! I believe you are what they call a Christian—"

"If I were a better one I might be able to keep from cursing you!" she interrupted, her hasty temper getting the advantage of the stern composure with which she had promised herself to fulfill her task.

"At your pleasure," he answered, leaning back in his chair and looking unconcernedly up with that mobile, insolent face whose beauty was absolutely revolting to her at this moment. "May I smoke? It will be a sort of kindling the incense for your incantations."

"Do you mean to say that Marian Tanner knows you disgraced and ruined an innocent girl—that you have a child living—that—" she could not go on with the degrading catalogue of his crimes. She put her hands over her face and began to sob; and as she was not given to the weakness, it proved so tumultuous a performance that Philip was disturbed. Not that her grief awakened a feeling of remorse in his heart, neither tears nor reproaches could do this; but he hated to see a woman cry, as he hated illness, ugliness, or any other unpleasant sight.

"Now do be reasonable, Dorothy!" he exclaimed. "One would suppose you might be glad to see me safe out of my troubles—a pretty wife—oceans of money to pay my debts—"

"And God's retribution to go with you into your new life," she broke in again, more passionately.

He took his cigar from his lips and regarded her with an expression of amused wonder.

"Upon my word, Dorothy," said he, "I am surprised to hear a woman of your good sense talk such old-fashioned, superstitious rubbish! One would think you had just been dug out of some convent of the Middle Ages, instead of having only lived about thirty-two years in this nineteenth century."

She saw plainly how impossible it was to make any impression upon him, simply because he had deadened heart and soul until he had no power to feel acutely upon any subject, except where his selfishness or his love of pleasure were concerned.

She rose abruptly from her chair and turned to go.

"What now?" he asked, relieved by these tokens of departure. "I suppose you are off for your hermitage; you'll have a chance to look at the matter more quietly then. What if all your suspicions were true? I couldn't do any thing."

"You could marry that poor girl; you could right your child—"

She stopped short. He had interrupted her by a burst of contemptuous laughter. If his handsome face had turned into the head of Medusa she could not have regarded him with more horror.

"Don't say another word," he exclaimed, in the midst of his merriment; "it's too ridiculous! Oh, Dor, Dor, go home and try your

favorite hydropathy till you get your head cool enough to be fit for this wicked world."

"I'll tell you where I am going," she said, speaking very quietly; he had convinced her at length that it would be simply idiocy to waste emotion of any sort upon him.

"So you shall, Dor! For your own sake, I hope it is to a private lunatic asylum, because you really need to be taken care of."

"I am going to tell Marian Tanner the truth," she continued.

"I'm only afraid she will think there is insanity in the family," he replied, brushing the ashes off his cigar. "At least set your bonnet straight on your head, Dor; it's cocked up like a helmet."

"If she has any claim to womanhood she will refuse ever to see you again, after I have told her the whole story," said Dorothy.

"That shows how little you know about women," returned Philip, composed as before. "All heaven and earth couldn't keep her from marrying me when she finds you want to break off the match in order to bestow me upon another daughter of Eve."

"Who is your wife in the sight of Heaven?" cried Miss Conway.

"I don't know any thing about their regulations up there," he answered; "but if a man is to play husband to every pretty girl that has pleased his fancy, what a set of Mormon establishments they must—"

His sister was out of the room and had closed the door before he could finish the sentence, so he threw down his cigar, turned his head easily on the cushions, and dropped into a pleasant doze, having been up at a gaming-table nearly the whole of the previous night.

Miss Conway kept her word. She drove straight to Marian Tanner's home and told her story, and Marian, who knew her slightly and felt it her duty to hate her future husband's sister in advance, indulged in mild hysterics, abused Dorothy in the most outrageous fashion, wound up by declaring that she did not believe a syllable of the history; that if it was true, she did not care! She would marry Philip tomorrow if he wished, and the sooner Miss Dorothy walked out of her presence, and the longer it was before they met again, the better she, Marian, would be pleased. Conduct so unnatural had never come under her notice, she vowed; and her old simpton of an aunt (who looked like an intoxicated cockatoo) declared the same; and Miss Conway departed, having received the contumely and scorn people usually do when they try to keep their neighbors from folly or sin.

All this happened in April; in the middle of June, little more than a year from the time Lucy Stuart brought her broken heart back to the shelter of her sister's love, Philip Conway married the heiress. Society crowded eagerly to do them honor, and Marian felt herself lifted into the seventh heaven of delight at throwing aside forever the plebeian cognomen which she

hated so intensely, because it had been not only her father's name, but that of the trade whereby he laid the foundation of his vast wealth.

She had always found cause for congratulations in the fact that she was an orphan, recollected very little about her father except his carrying an odious yellow silk pocket-handkerchief and suffering perpetually from catarrh; as if there were not diseases enough to choose and avoid a malady so outrageously vulgar! Fortunately she had an uncle who insisted on tying up the bulk of her fortune so that neither she nor Philip could waste it; and in the midst of her romantic fancy for her betrothed, her small crafty head—just wide enough to hold cunning plots—rejoiced at the power this act would give her over Philip. As for him, he was too heedless to think much or to attempt any stand against the position forced upon him; besides this, so accustomed to ruling absolutely every woman who had ever had the ill-luck to care for him, the possibility of proving less potent with his rich wife did not occur to his mind.

Miss Conway of course refused to be present at the wedding, but nobody missed her except Marian; she had meant to snub her before the whole world, and invited her for that express purpose; it was the one spot on her sunlight that Dorothy did not allow her the opportunity.

The newly-wedded pair went away to Europe. It was a relief to Miss Conway when she heard that they had sailed with the intention of remaining absent at least two years. She spent the summer in her quiet country home; and a sad, lonely season it was, for poor Miss Dorothy, firm and self-reliant as she appeared, cheerful and content too so far as regarded her own life, was not a happy woman.

She was only two-and-thirty now, but had grown to consider herself old, and it was true that of the hopes and aims which help to preserve youth she had none left. Years before she had dreamed her dream and lived her romance; it ended in a grave to which she yearly undertook a pilgrimage; but no incident of that past happiness would be of importance in my history, so let it lie forgotten, as it was, except by the faithful heart which treasured it and bore the burden with uncomplaining patience.

Nothing less like an elderly maid with a buried romance could be conceived than Miss Dorothy. Rather handsome, bright, agreeable; somewhat too determined on having her own way, careless about allowing oddities of expression and deportment to grow upon her; charitable and kind-hearted; a real, true, noble woman, faults and all. She went occasionally to the farm-house—whenever Mrs. Brent sent her word that Lucy was in a state to receive visits—but it was only a pain to go, and she could not help feeling that it would be easier for herself and Susan if they need never meet

again. No syllable in regard to Philip's marriage was exchanged between them, but as soon as she set eyes on Mrs. Brent's face after the news of the wedding filled the country papers, Dorothy knew that she had read every word. Summer drifted on to autumn; September came, with its gorgeous skies, its purple haze, its soft airs that are so beautiful in our New World, and each day only added to the perfect loveliness which held no warning of the decay and change waiting just beyond.

It was a still, peaceful afternoon, and John Brent's old dwelling looked so quiet in the midst of its picturesque surroundings that it might have been some enchanted spot in a fairy tale. Susan had gone out into the orchard with her husband; Lucy, who had been unusually rational during the past fortnight, even sometimes joining the family below stairs or resting in the garden, was up in her room seated at the piano, to which she had of late overcome her repugnance. As Hetty Flint went about her task of washing the dinner dishes and getting the kitchen into the proper state of afternoon precision and neatness, slow, broken strains of music floated through the house in a dreamy, ghostly fashion, which had an odd charm to the womanly girl, already more troubled with visions and fancies than wise people might have approved.

The child was playing in the open door with the old house-dog, and Hetty was never too much occupied, busily as she worked, to keep a watch over the little creature whom she loved with extreme tenderness. Such a pretty creature as it was; past two years old now, able to toddle about and talk that mysterious baby-language which holds so few words we, who have outlived the recollection of angelic speech, can comprehend. A strong, healthy child, large for her age, with hair like a mat of yellow floss silk which Hetty could not keep in order; a mouth dimpling with smiles; great solemn brown eyes; fair and fat, and so full of mischief that she needed constant vigilance, and charming with an infinitude of coaxing, imperious ways which even Susan could not resist. She was seldom quiet, but her small tumults usually expressed perfect good-nature, and she certainly walked miles and miles each day in her journeys about the house; toiling from cellar to garret twenty times if permitted; every now and then narrowly escaping some danger; a constant trouble, and all the more lovable on that account. Oh, it was so beautiful to see her, but so sad to think of the scores of homes where yearning hearts ached for the children God's mysterious providence had claimed, and to remember that in spite of her brightness and health a mournful cloud must hang over her childhood and go with her into youth!

The music ceased to float down the winding staircase; the lame robin that lived in a cage on the kitchen porch, and was cherished by Hetty as if she had no other care in the world, burst into a shrill aria, perhaps as a response to

the strains he had followed so attentively. Baby Valery talked to the dog, to Hetty moving about the room, to the sunshine—maybe to the angels who watch God's little ones—and was each instant in fresh excitement at some miracle offered to her notice, whether a butterfly dancing overhead or a mysterious shower of motes playing in the sunlight at her feet. Hetty answered the child, sang snatches of old songs, and worked on, eager to have the kitchen in order before Mrs. Brent returned. Presently, during one of her hurried visits to the pantry, she heard the baby say,

"See 'oo, Lucy—see 'oo!"

Hetty was sufficiently accustomed to the little creature's dialect to know what she said, and peeped into the kitchen. Lucy had come down stairs—such a pale, beautiful shadow—so like the ghost of the girl who once brightened the old house with her loveliness, that Hetty, carried away by her fancies, felt almost as if the phantom music which stirred her soul just before had floated down in this phantom-like shape.

"See 'oo, Lucy—see 'oo!" repeated the child.

"Pretty baby," Lucy answered, absently; "pretty baby."

The quiet voice was not attractive, so the child went on with her play. Hetty watched them both from the half-open door while she continued her occupation of arranging certain rows of dishes on the pantry-shelves, for it was necessary that each article should have its particular place in order to please her fastidious eye. Lucy moved about the kitchen aimlessly for a while; every now and then Hetty saw her regard the child with a puzzled glance, as if not certain what connection there was with it in her mind, though only that morning she had dressed and played with the little creature.

"Tum play, Lucy!" ordered Baby, in her imperative fashion.

Lucy stopped suddenly in her slow march; the child toddled up to her and pulled at her dress, laughing like a tiny peal of bells to see the dog jump and frisk about them.

"Dance, Lucy!" cried baby. "Bad, bad!"

The dazed, wondering look faded out of Lucy's face; one of her seasons of acute remembrance troubled her. She stooped, snatched the child in her arms and began to weep over it, saying softly,

"My baby, oh my baby!"

The child fought and struggled to get down, half angry, half frightened by the tears and distress, and soon Lucy put her on the floor and tried to soothe and pet her into composure.

"Pretty baby!" she said, "pretty baby! Doesn't baby love Lucy?"

"Baby love Lucy, 'Etty, dog!" pronounced the child. "Tum play!"

Lucy walked on into the other room and sat down. Hetty could still see her. She was crying yet, but very quietly; and wise Hetty knew that it was best to leave her undisturbed.

At length she rose and walked about the little parlor in the same aimless, absent manner; but now Hetty had finished her task in the pantry, and the child claimed her attention with a pretty imperiousness inexpressibly bewitching; so Hetty allowed herself to be led out on the sunny porch for a game of romps, in which Sampson the dog took his part with a ludicrous gravity.

The old-fashioned apartment had cupboards with glass doors set in the wall on either side of the mantel, and a pile of newspapers in one of them attracted Lucy's attention. John Brent was not a much greater reader than the generality of his class, but he had a profound respect for books, extending it in his happy ignorance even to newspapers, of which the cupboard shelves held a goodly store; and though John seldom had leisure to pore over these, no sage ever gloried more in the possession of his Elzevirs than the good man in his carefully-treasured journals.

Turning over the pages, Lucy read a few paragraphs here and there, throwing down with a shudder any paper in which she happened to notice the name of a European capital—the surest proof that her memory was this day sufficiently acute to make her past suffering an actual and poignant reality.

After a while she discovered a journal torn and crumpled up behind the others—a journal which Susan Brent believed long since destroyed; but Hetty's unadvised care, or what we call chance, had preserved this portion of it. Lucy unfolded the leaf, smoothed out the creases as if the soiled sheet were of vast consequence, then her eyes fell on a leaded column, and she began eagerly to read.

In another moment there broke from her lips a groan of anguish such as illness or mental pain had never before wrung from them. She attempted to rise—to call aloud—but after that one dismal moan had no strength to articulate, and sat gazing in mute horror at the paper clutched in her quivering hands. She knew that the last control over her troubled faculties was forsaking her—struggled violently to keep back the nervous spasm which already shook her limbs and distorted her face. Again she held the journal close to her eyes, read once more the fatal lines, tried anew to get out of her chair, fell forward upon the floor, and an awful shriek startled Hetty playing with the child upon the porch, and smote, full of dread, on Susan Brent's ears as she slowly approached the house.

The two reached the room, forgetting the little one, who followed with sobs and screams of terror. Lucy lay on the carpet, writhing in horrible convulsions. Her hands were clenched in the beautiful hair which she had pulled over her shoulders, and at intervals she uttered wailing cries, mixed with broken sentences that sounded like no human language, save when twice Susan caught the name of the man who had worked this ruin, joined even then to a

half-finished ejaculation which seemed an attempt at prayer—a prayer for him!

In the midst of her alarm Susan remembered the child and ordered Hetty to take her away—to run to the orchard and call John Brent. As she stooped to raise Lucy's head she saw the torn journal on the floor. One glance was enough to explain the whole scene. Lucy had read the announcement of Philip Conway's marriage, and Susan knew that the doctor's worst fears were realized. He had said that any sudden shock would either kill her outright or leave her hopelessly insane.

John Brent came in. Between them the husband and wife carried the helpless creature up stairs, happily unconscious now of her own misery, though she still shrieked and tugged at her disheveled hair, and tried to utter words of which only one name was audible—that of the man upon whose soul lay this ruin of her body and mind.

It was fortunately about the time of day when the doctor usually passed the house on his wearisome rounds; Hetty, stationed at the gate, saw him driving up the road and told him of the need of his presence.

Two dreadful days and nights elapsed; then Lucy lay weak and helpless on her pillow. It was not yet permitted her to die, though as far as she was personally concerned the rest of her life would be less pitiable. The physician said she could never recover her reason, unless, in case she lingered several years, it might return partially for brief moments.

These sorrowful details reached Miss Conway in her solitary home—indeed John Brent was himself sent by his wife to carry them, because the period had now arrived when she must permit Philip's sister to redeem her pledge. Poor Dorothy could only weep in silence with the heart-broken old man who loved Lucy so fondly. There were no words of sympathy which would have sounded other than a mockery at this moment.

"Susan says you may have the little girl, Miss Dorothy," John Brent continued, more calm and able to talk than the grief-stricken woman. "It's mighty hard somehow to give the dear creature up, but it's best; it'll be easier for Susan when she's once out of her sight. Susan ain't one to live over things or get used to them, you see, as a good many folks can."

"I am ready to keep my word," Miss Dorothy answered, wiping away her tears, "and I'll do my duty by the child, Mr. Brent."

"We know that, ma'am—'taint to say to us—if every body did their uttermost like you, it would be another sort of world."

"Don't, don't!" exclaimed Miss Dorothy. "If I had been wiser in the old days, who knows but I might have saved all this trouble?"

John Brent shook his head and replied slowly,

"Don't you ever go to think that, Miss Conway—you couldn't have done nothing! You wanted to do what was right, and the Lord knows we did—we've got to hold fast to that."

"I believe I should go mad if I could not," returned Miss Dorothy. "It is all I can do to bear it now! But I'll send for the child; I have a good, kind woman to take care of her. I suppose you need Hetty Flint, else I would take her too, as Valery is so fond of her."

"I expect Hetty'll have to stay with us yet awhile, any how," John said. "You see, there's nobody can manage Lucy like she can. The poor lamb's somehow awful shy of Susan now and always thinks she's angry at her, and I'm busy; so Hetty must stay, for she's more helpful than a grown gal."

"Does Susan still wish to sell the old place and go out West?" Miss Conway asked.

"That's all had to be put by," John said. "The doctor says Lucy must be kept as quiet as we can—not see new faces, or have any sort of commotion around her. Living as we do, she'll generally stay quiet and happy, but there mustn't be any changes."

Miss Dorothy drove over to the farm for the little girl. Valery had already paid several brief visits to the Hermitage, accompanied by Hetty, and was delighted at the idea of going to the beautiful house again; in order to accustom her to the change, Miss Conway decided to take Hetty too for as many days as she could be spared.

Susan Brent received her visitor without emotion; she had suffered so much and so long that she was seldom nowadays shaken out of the chill apathy she had acquired. She looked almost as aged as her husband, though he was many years older. Her black hair had turned nearly white, and her face was seamed with the curious tiny wrinkles which usually only come from advanced age.

While the two sat talking, Lucy's voice rang down the stairway faint and tremulous, but marvelously sweet still, warbling a song which Mrs. Conway had taught her in the days when it pleased the kind lady to cultivate the pretty creature's love for the beautiful, believing that she did a good work. The tears welled into Miss Dorothy's eyes as she listened, but Susan Brent betrayed no agitation except in the nervous twitching of her hands as they lay folded in her lap.

"She often sings that way to herself—she's generally very happy and quiet, Miss Dorothy," Susan said, in her cold, repressed voice, as she observed the other's trouble.

"At least, that is a great mercy," Miss Conway replied.

"Yes, if there's any mercy from first to last."

"Oh, Susan—"

"I know—don't, don't say it! John tells me often, and I try! I'm hard and wicked; but it ain't easy, Miss Dorothy, always to believe in mercy, when a body sees what I do before their eyes, but I try; I do mean to try!"

"I am sure of it, Susan!"

"I wish she wasn't so 'fraid of me," contin-

ued Mrs. Brent, in the same odd, painful tone, which had grown habitual with her. "I've tried to be kind, but I expect she's seen my stony heart in my face, and now she'll never be able to know how I love her!"

She stopped speaking, and turned her head away for a few seconds, in a silence which Miss Dorothy could find no words to break. At length Susan looked up, with the dead quiet restored to her features, and said, "Maybe you'd like a sight at Lucy; you mustn't let her see you, but perhaps you'll find it a kind of comfort to see how peaceful she is; John often does, he says."

John did, but she could not add the assurance for herself; hers was a martyrdom which only the glory of the life beyond might ever efface from her tortured soul, and there could have been in the whole round of human misery only one suffering worse—the inability to believe this truth, and to look forward to the hereafter. That was the thought in Miss Conway's mind, but she did not attempt to express it, for Susan added,

"Would you like to go up, Miss Dorothy?"

"Yes; don't come—I know the way."

"Then I'll be getting baby's things together," Susan said. "There ain't many of 'em, and they ain't sewed as nice as I could wish, but my eyes begin to hurt when I use them at night."

Miss Conway had risen from her chair; she only laid her hand for an instant on Susan's shoulder, by way of response—the scenes in a real tragedy never hold many words. Mrs. Brent went about her task, dry-eyed and quiet, while Hetty dressed little Valery, and the child shouted and laughed, till the gleesome sounds echoed through the house and mingled with the soft strains of Lucy's song, which still floated down like spirit-music from her shadowy chamber.

Miss Conway went up stairs and looked through the half-open door into the room where the demented creature sat. She was dressed in white, her attire scrupulously neat, and her long yellow hair falling in heavy waves about her shoulders as she had been accustomed to wear it in the old days. She was plaiting straw—the only task Susan could ever persuade her to undertake as a child. Her fingers moved swiftly and skillfully along the shining woof, and still she sang in that absent fashion a quaint melody about sunshine and showers, in a tremulous, veiled voice, even more touching and sweet than in its full strength and power.

The face was worn and wasted, but singularly lovely; so pale with such a strange pathetic appeal in the wandering, vacant gaze, that Miss Dorothy started back after the first glance, as if she had unwittingly intruded upon some beautiful phantom haunting the scenes of its mortal sufferings.

It was not for Lucy that the throb of agony burned at Miss Conway's heart; she was past the need; but for her own reckless, wicked

brother, with his future of retribution; for the child whose glad laugh quickened through the distance, with years and years before her—a whole youth and womanhood oppressed by the sad burden of inherited misery and shame.

Then Miss Dorothy tried to remember in whose hands it all lay, and stood watching Lucy, thankful to carry with her this picture of quiet and rest. Sometimes the girl—she looked so young still—would pause in her song, listen intently as if she caught the sound of melody inaudible to other ears, whisper questioningly, seemed to await for a response, then smile softly, as though it had reached her and brought renewed peace. Again her song burst forth in sweeter cadence, and her raised eyes gleamed with such devotion that it was like watching the ecstasy of some rapt saint. Miss Dorothy crept away and left her there, not ashamed to believe that perhaps in God's mercy sights and sounds from a brighter sphere were allowed to keep her company in the shadowy room into which had narrowed all of life this world could give her.

CHAPTER III.

MARIAN'S REVENGE.

VALERY STUART was seven years of age; a bright, self-reliant little creature, but altogether too precocious; able to read and enjoy books far beyond her comprehension, in the odd way not uncommon with imaginative children. Fortunately for the proper development of her faculties, she was physically very strong, and had any quantity of superfluous energy, so that daily exercise and amusement in the open air kept her from growing morbid, and mentally unhealthy, as a more delicate child would have done.

This sunny, happy disposition proved a great blessing; for, pretty and interesting as she was, no one except Hetty Flint had ever really been fond of her from her babyhood until now. The wistful, eager face reminded John and Susan Brent so constantly of their misery and shame, that in spite of their efforts, it was a relief when circumstances rendered it necessary for them to give up their charge. The child found a pleasant home under Miss Conway's roof; but through all these years the lonely spinster had not been able to divest herself of a sentiment similar to that which oppressed the other two kindly souls. She was heartily ashamed, and strove religiously to overcome the feeling, but never a day passed that some look or gesture did not recall her brother Philip so vividly, that a woman who tried less hard to do right would have positively disliked the poor innocent for keeping fresh in her mind those bitter memories which it was the study of her life to forget.

The consciousness of this half-repulsion induced Miss Dorothy to indulge Valery after a fashion which would have drawn down her se-

verest condemnation in the case of another. Unaccustomed to small people, she scarcely understood how different this child was from most of her age, and did not dream that in allowing her to pore over books of which she ought not to have heard the names for years to come, or fostering her early marked artistic talent, she might be doing the tender nature irreparable injury. But the spinster had no perception of the little soul's visionary tendencies. Bold and courageous enough in most things, she was singularly timid and reticent in regard to her thoughts and fancies, and never talked of the strange imaginings which already filled her mind. The only passionate fit of sorrow she had yet known was caused by Miss Dorothy stumbling on her first attempts at portraiture, and unwisely exhibiting them to the rector and his sister.

Of course every body in the neighborhood knew whose daughter Valery was; but such histories lose their interest as rapidly as every thing else, and Lucy Stuart's mournful story was already half forgotten. She still lived, tenderly watched as ever by the loving hearts about her, though she was considered hopelessly insane, and only her constant attendant Hetty Flint perceived how often gleams of memory stended her distraught brain. From listening to her wandering, fragmentary talk, Hetty had a clearer idea of the poor creature's past than was possessed by any other human being; but she never repeated, even to Mrs. Brent, a syllable heard or imagined during those long conversations held while she and Lucy sat together in the shadowy upper room whither Susan seldom intruded.

Miss Dorothy resided usually at the Hermitage; the farm was only twelve miles distant; still, she had never visited it in all these years—it could only bring added pain to the Brents and to her. She sent Valery once, but Susan did not ask to have her come again. The child was only between four and five years old at the time, and nobody dreamed how clearly she remembered the details of that day. Hetty Flint alone knew that the little guest strayed up stairs and found her mother; of course no more conscious of the relationship between them than was poor Lucy, who smiled at the new-comer and asked Hetty if she too could see the angel God had sent to bring sunshine. She often saw, or fancied that she saw—let us not try to decide which—such visitants, and would inquire of Hetty if they were not visible to her also. On this occasion the impression upon the sufferer's enfeebled mind was no deeper than that left by the phantoms of her delirium—if phantoms they were.

The autumn previous to Valery's seventh birthday Philip Conway and his wife returned to America, bringing with them a little daughter born across the sea. Miss Dorothy was in town for a few weeks in winter, called thither by some business, and her brother came to the house, composed and *insouciant* as if they had

only parted a few days before, and parted the best possible friends. In spite of her stern judgment of the crowning sin of his life; in spite of her contempt for the manner in which he had wasted and flung away golden opportunities of distinction in some noble career, Miss Dorothy loved the man still, and while in his presence could not entirely resist the wonderful fascination wherewith he subdued his severest censors.

"I thought you would rather like to see me, Dor," he said, beginning to laugh and jest as her eyes filled with tears, in order that he might avoid the least approach to a pathetic scene. "You didn't send me word you were here, and I suppose most people would have remembered their dignity; but you know I never was troubled with any."

"I am very glad to see you," Miss Dorothy answered; "I hope your wife is well."

"Oh, Fairy is never very well," returned he, carelessly; "she's fond of little illnesses—they amuse her, and don't trouble any body but her doctor and her maid."

"Is that Mrs. Conway? I thought her name was Marian," said Miss Dorothy, unable exactly to keep the peace.

"I always have to give every body a pet name," said he; "and you know Marian was awfully pretty; she's faded somewhat now—these American girls go off so fast."

"And you have a little daughter," continued Miss Dorothy, hesitatingly.

"Oh yes; she's a marvel too. I am dreadfully fond of her," returned Philip. "Why, she'll be four years old in the spring! I'm getting as ancient as the hills, Dorothy; it's horrible to think about."

"If you were as near forty as I am, you might moan; but for my own part I'd rather grow old."

"You always were the oddest woman in the world, Dor," cried Philip, in astonishment; "but you look about the same as ever."

"You mean I never looked young—slight wonder."

"I suppose you live as much like a hermitess as usual," said Philip, hastily, afraid the conversation was approaching dangerous ground.

"Yes; I have Lucy Stuart's child with me," replied she, abruptly.

He changed color for an instant, and his eyes sank; but speedily recovering his self-control, he said, carelessly,

"That's better than living alone; it will keep you from growing old."

Miss Conway had determined long before never to be angered into another harsh speech toward him, so she made no answer whatever.

"I must send Cecil to visit you," he continued; "she's a spoiled little thing, but very pretty. I suppose you'll not come to see me? It's a pity you and Marian can not hit off better; but I never interfere between two women."

"I should like to see your daughter," she replied, ignoring the latter part of his sentence. "I shall only be in town a week longer, so you must send her soon. I'm always in of a morning."

There was a little more desultory talk, then Philip went away. His face began to show signs of wear; and, handsome as he still was, it saddened Miss Dorothy to see the change, and know that his reckless, dissipated habits were the sole cause.

The spinster had no idea that she should ever set foot in her sister-in-law's dwelling; but it was only two days after his visit that her brother came again in great haste. The child had been taken suddenly ill, and Marian was as eager as he that Miss Dorothy should go to her at once. She did not hesitate for an instant; Philip was nearly mad with grief and fright; he could feel with terrible acuteness for a time, and was more helpless and absurd than the weakest woman. Miss Dorothy staid several days and nights in the house, and between him and Marian it certainly seemed that she must go distracted. They raved, wept, and quarreled; Marian had hysterics; and finally Miss Dorothy's patience gave way, and she treated them both to a lecture so severe that they were fairly shamed into behaving rather more sensibly. The child's illness only lasted a short time, and as soon as she was better Miss Dorothy went away. Marian conceived without warning one of her brief spasms of admiration, pronounced her sister-in-law an angel, and vowed that she should love and worship her forever—a theatrical outburst which Miss Conway estimated at its exact value. After her return home, she received letters from Marian begging her to come again, really anxious to cultivate the spinster's acquaintance, simply because she found it difficult to do so. But Miss Dorothy was too wise to be deluded into any attempt at friendship; she knew that if she were to accept any of the numerous invitations Marian might indulge in a perverse fit, or a jealous fit, or a hysterical fit, and insult her outrageously before she had been forty-eight hours under her roof. So she made the excuse that spring had come; she was a farmer, and very busy; there could be no visits thought of until the planting-season was over at least.

Marian owned a beautiful country-seat on the Hudson, some thirty miles distant from Miss Dorothy's home. She was seized with a whim to pass a portion of the summer there, writing again to her sister-in-law to inform her of the fact, and threatening to descend upon Miss Conway some fine day, since that was the only means of seeing her. But Dorothy had no idea she would remember the plan; probably the frivolous creature's love of change would drive her away from the quiet in less than a month to make the round of the watering-places in search of fresh excitement, and Miss Conway devoutly hoped this might happen.

But one beautiful July afternoon, as Dorothy sat in her favorite room which commanded a view of the winding road to the entrance of the grounds, she saw an open carriage drive rapidly up, and in it were Marian, the nurse, and Cecil, with the odious Swiss man-servant perched on the box.

Miss Dorothy mentally repeated a hearty refrain from the Litany—in too disturbed a frame of mind to savor of irreverence—got up resolutely, and went to meet her guest with such courteous hospitality as she could manage. Philip was not with her—that was one comfort—the two together would have been more than she could endure! But the child—little Valery—she might make her appearance at any moment—what would Marian say? All these thoughts flashed through Miss Dorothy's mind as she walked down the hall; then her usual determination rose to put an end to her troubles. It was Marian's own fault; she had come knowing perfectly well that the girl was there, as Miss Dorothy had not hesitated on several occasions to speak of her during the days she had been with her relatives in town. If Marian would be friends, she must grow accustomed to the sight of Valery—she had known the truth before she married. These rapid reflections gave an added stateliness to Miss Conway's demeanor as she marched out on the broad veranda in haste to have the meeting over, for it was a habit of hers to face any difficulty as speedily as possible.

"Here I am, you perceive!" cried Marian, with a girlish laugh which did not suit her faded prettiness. "I told you I should come—and here are baby and nurse and Pierre Joseph—you must take us in—and I do hope you've some sort of a maid who can do my hair, for I've sent Léontine and all the other servants on to Saratoga with the big boxes—see how thoughtful I am!"

Pierre Joseph, looking like the Wandering Jew in a livery, opened the carriage-door, and Marian had kissed her sister-in-law, stepped on her dress and torn it, told her she looked older and grayer than ever, scolded the nurse, fretted at Pierre Joseph, issued many conflicting orders, and all in less time than most people would require to breathe twice. The only things she was not lazy about were talking and going into tempers.

"Well, don't you mean to say you are glad to see me?" she continued, not having stopped speaking long enough for her hostess to utter a salutation of any description. "Nanine, you'll let Cecil fall—I never saw such a careless woman! Oh, Pierre Joseph, where's the brown bag? What a pretty place you have here, Miss Dor—I wish you could see Elm Hill—it would make ten of this."

Miss Dorothy gave up trying to speak, and remembered that at least the small woman's garrulity prevented the necessity of telling fibs, which she must certainly have done if she had attempted a speech about the pleasure of

receiving her. She busied herself with Cecil, who talked an odd mixture of French and English almost incomprehensible to every body except her nurse, and was too clamorous for bread-and-butter to care about making the acquaintance of a new relation.

"I dare say she'll not kiss you," cried Marian; "she's the strangest child—unless people are pretty, she never will go near them."

Cecil had struggled out of Nanine's arms and was walking toward the entrance-doors; she stopped short and gave her mother a mischievous, rebellious glance.

"Will kiss her!" cried she. "Prettier zan you!" and ran and put her hand in Miss Dorothy's.

"Oh, you bad, bad child!" returned Marian. "Oh, you wicked, unnatural thing! That's the way I'm treated! Just let me find out who teaches my own child to speak to me in this way!"

She divided an angry glance between her sister-in-law and the nurse, while Pierre Joseph smiled in serene contempt at a little distance, congratulating himself on the fact that his mistress was so anxious to retain his services that he never came in for a share of her ill-temper. Marian was preparing a flood of tears, and to avoid this scene Miss Dorothy turned a deaf ear, and said,

"Come in, come in! You must be tired to death; we'll have luncheon at once. I think it is a pretty place Mrs. Conway, though of course Elm Hill is much finer; but I'm a solitary old maid, and don't need a great deal of room."

She could not help smiling at herself for trying so hard to keep the silly creature in a tolerable mood, and was glad to think that they were not likely very often to meet. She got Marian into the house, and presently the faded beauty was all smiles and affection again.

"You haven't said you are glad to see me," cried she. "If you don't say so, I will drive straight back to the station."

Miss Dorothy smothered a sigh; she hated to tell a fib, but there seemed no escaping one now.

"I should be very sorry if it was necessary to make that declaration, Mrs. Conway," said she, rather Jesuitically. "Will you go up stairs before luncheon?"

"No, I'll just throw my hat off here. I'm dying for some tea or wine or lemonade—any thing." Then the divesting herself of her jaunty head-gear and outside wrap set her off on a new train of ideas. "How do you like my dress?" she asked. "They've just sent me a great box from Paris. I would have brought it to show you, only it ruins things so to pull them about."

Miss Conway's attire was always confined to black or gray silks, and the subject of toilets interested her perhaps the least of any in the world. It required an effort not to demand upon the instant if Marian supposed her as

tremendous a fool as herself that she began such nonsense. But the spinster was on her best behavior, so she praised the marvelous French costume, and got away from the matter as fast as possible.

"How is Philip?" she asked.

"Oh, just as he always is," returned Marian, "as aggravating and provoking as he can live! I wanted him to come with me, but he got up a trumpery excuse about having promised some club-men to go to the Adirondacks. I've no doubt he's at some mischief; but I'll find him out—I always do."

This before the servant and the child. Miss Conway was too much shocked to attempt any answer whatever. Cecil, busy making friends with a beautiful Maltese cat, caught her father's name and called,

"Papa—papa—si beau—love papa—loye, love!"

"Oh dear, yes," moaned Marian; "she just worships him! What a tiresome child you are, Cecil! That dress looks as if you had worn it a week."

The little creature was tricked out after the absurd fashion in which I am ashamed to say American mothers are famous for arraying their offspring, and Miss Dorothy could not greatly blame her when she pouted her lips and answered,

"Don't care! don't care!"

"Tut! tut!" said her aunt, feeling it necessary to utter the reproof which, according to her old-fashioned ideas, the child deserved. "Little girls mustn't talk like that—it's very naughty."

"Excuse me," said Marian, leaning back in her chair and assuming her most affected voice and manner, "I never allow any one to reprove my daughter—it's a principle with me."

Miss Dorothy did not speak, looked as if she had not even heard the senseless, insolent words, so all Marian could do was to add, still more affectedly, "Come to mamma, Cecil darling; mamma's beautiful, beautiful love!"

"Ain't!" retorted Miss Cecil. "Me love papa—ou est papa? Nanine, j'irai trouver papa."

Marian's face showed that a burst of tears was again imminent; but, to Miss Conway's great relief, the luncheon-tray appeared at this moment and created a happy diversion for both mother and child. The meal proved a season of agony to the hostess; the way in which Cecil was allowed to eat cake and all sorts of indigestible things filled her with horror, and she determined that while they staid in the house no such opportunity should again be afforded the spoiled creature. Marian ate, and chattered, and waxed good-natured and affectionate anew. When she had finished her luncheon, Cecil insisted that Nanine should take her without delay to see certain marvelous white peacocks of which her aunt had told her. Marian stretched herself on a sofa, declaring that she was tired to death and must rest before she

moved a step; so of course Miss Dorothy had to remain and keep her company. Fortunately Marian required very little besides a listener; the monologue flowed unceasingly on until Miss Dorothy's head fairly buzzed, and she felt as if she had been held under a slow drizzling shower-bath. Marian wandered from one subject to another, mixing them up in so incomprehensible a fashion that her hostess half the time could not follow her, and was uncertain whether she complained of her dresses or her husband—whether it was herself or the housekeeper suspected of a fondness for drink; and when, after the habit of her kind, she got telling stories about her intimate friends, and grew scandalous, Miss Dorothy sat mentally lifting the hands of her soul in dismay, wondering where on earth a woman of her age had borrowed such dreadful ideas.

Presently outside in the hall sounded children's laughter. Miss Dorothy recognized Valery's voice, and shuddered. She had forgotten the child in attending to Marian's wants, listening to her conversation or trying to avert a tempest; now it would come in spite of every thing! If she had only remembered to send Valery away until after the departure of the guests—taken any measure to keep Marian from a disgraceful outbreak. If before the arrival of Mrs. Conway this state of feeling had been prophesied to Dorothy she would have scouted the idea in scorn; but a single hour of Marian's society enabled her to understand why her brother so hated scenes and indulged in provocations or lies to any extent to avoid them.

She rose with a vague intention of doing something desperate to detain the intruders outside; but before she could move, the door opened, Cecil danced in, holding Valery's hand, and calling,

"Mamma, mamma! Pretty girl—si belle—si belle!"

"Don't make such a noise," returned Marian, fretfully, without looking toward her or noticing what she said. "Mamma's head aches; run off and play. Nanine! Where's Nanine?"

Her sofa was turned so that she could not see the new-comers, and Miss Dorothy started forward. It would be something gained to avert the storm even for a little.

"Be good—run away now—see, Nanine is making a wreath," she said, and signed Valery to go out.

The child, accustomed to obey, drew Cecil into the hall, saying softly,

"Come and play—the lady has a headache."

Cecil was half pulling back, not ready exactly to yield her own will without a struggle—the older girl stooping over her and pointing toward the lawn. They made such a pretty picture standing there—such an odd resemblance in the two faces, dissimilar as they were. Cecil had handsome Philip's perfect mouth, and Valery his glorious brown eyes; perhaps it was more that each reminded her of him in certain ways than that they looked alike. A sharp

pain stung Miss Dorothy's heart; she closed the door hurriedly to shut out the sight, feeling an almost superstitious dread that some terrible fate hung over one or the other of those innocent creatures, both of whose lives were burdened in advance by the darkness of a father's sin.

Miss Dorothy went back to her visitor and did her best to be an attentive listener to the ceaseless drizzle of talk she poured forth; complaints of her husband and elaborate descriptions of her new dresses forming the principal part, and getting themselves so inextricably confused that, in spite of her weariness and irritation, Miss Conway was compelled to smile. In truth she never felt less like finding amusement in the follies of another; the faces of those two children kept rising before her, and roused so many sad memories—created a host of such vague fears for the future—that it was difficult to sit passive and unoccupied. She was more undecided what to do with Valery while Mrs. Conway remained than she had often been where a decision in regard to matters of real weight was concerned. Even if she kept the little girl out of Marian's way, Cecil was certain the moment she came in to volunteer a polyglot account of the playmate she had found, which would bring on the storm as surely as the intrusion of Valery herself. So Miss Dorothy sat and endured her sister-in-law's unwearied discourse, wondering what it was best to do, and allowing the opportunity for action to slip by in a weak fashion very unusual with the energetic lady. The afternoon wore on; she might get Marian up stairs to attend to the important duties of her toilet before dinner, and so not only avert Cecil's disclosures, but give herself a little rest from the onerous business of entertaining this, the most peculiar cross between a grown-up child and a peevish idiot, that Miss Conway had ever encountered. But of course the instant she proposed her arrangement, Marian was prepared to receive it with disfavor, though just before Miss Dorothy spoke she had been contemplating the idea on her own account, remembering that among the luggage she had brought was a marvelous pink gown calculated to make her look so young and girlish that the old maid's heart would be wrung with envy.

"I'm sure it is not worth while to bother," she said. "If you knew how weak I am, and how much I need rest, you wouldn't ask me to make any exertion."

"I only thought it might—amuse you," answered Miss Conway, hunting in vain for some other verb, and finally bringing this out with a bang.

"I'm not like most women, always thinking of my dress," pronounced Marian, pompously. Then, seeing an opportunity to be disagreeable, she descended suddenly from majesty to a fretful whine: "Upon my word, Dorothy, I don't think it's quite civil in you to hint that I am not dressed well enough to please you! Real-

ly, you ought not to shut yourself up so much in this dreary old place—you are getting all sorts of odd ways—the idea of making a speech like that!"

"I assure you I did not mean to be rude," returned Miss Dorothy, good-humoredly; "I was only afraid, Mrs. Conway, that you might find it tiresome sitting here quietly with a plain old body like me."

"There you go," sighed her sister-in-law. "Why do you call me Mrs. Conway, and keep me at a distance? It's cruel of you, Dorothy, when I am trying so hard to be fond of you—after my forgiving all your dreadful conduct to me, and—every thing!"

Miss Dorothy's face of amazement was a sight to behold; she felt inclined to pinch herself to be certain that she was not dreaming. To receive a lecture from this small sparrow, and bear the weight of her forgiveness for imaginary crimes, was something Miss Conway had never believed she would live to endure; but after all it was too ridiculous to excite anger.

"Very well," replied she; "you must be amiable, and pardon this last error too; I assure you it was unintentional."

"You don't expect visitors?" asked Marian, abruptly.

"Let me see—Thursday—yes; the rector usually comes this evening. I hope he will not fail to-night, for he is a very agreeable young man indeed."

Marian decided to go up stairs and induce herself in the pink gown. Admiration in these later years did not come in her way so frequently that she could resist trying to dazzle the parson.

"Perhaps you had better ring for your maid," said she; "I suppose she can be of some use to me. I'll change my dress, since you insist upon it; any thing for peace, I always tell Philip. You Conways must have your own way—it's a dreadful misfortune to have such tempers."

Dorothy had never given her brother credit for resisting any sin; but it occurred to her now that he must have had a constant struggle during the years of his married life to overcome the temptation to strangle this impossible creature, as the only means of curbing her tongue.

She led the way out of the room in silence, and Marian followed grumbling. As they crossed the hall to go up stairs, little Cecil's laugh came ringing in from the lawn, and Marian, who never could resist interfering with everybody's pleasure, said hastily,

"Cecil must not stay there—she will make herself ill. I wonder at your not thinking of it, Dorothy."

"Do let the child alone," replied Miss Conway, remembering the danger which menaced her. "Come up stairs and get dressed, else you'll be too tired to enjoy your dinner."

"I know my duty," exclaimed Marian; "as a mother—as a wife—nobody can say I ever forget it!"

She walked toward the entrance-doors, and Miss Dorothy hurried after, by this time too weary to care what Marian saw, whether she stormed, wept, or left the house directly.

"Cecil! Nanine!" called Marian, stepping out on the veranda.

"Mamma, mamma!" answered Cecil.

"Where is she?" cried Marian, impatiently. "That dreadful Nanine; I do think she is the wickedest woman in the world!"

"They are on the lawn at the side of the house," said Dorothy. "I'd let the child stay, Marian; it is shady and pleasant there."

"If you would have the goodness not to interfere between me and my daughter," returned Marian, puffing herself up like an angry pigeon. "You're just like Philip—always meddling! Do you suppose I am to be dictated to? Cecil shall come in; she shall not stir out-of-doors again while we are here! My daughter shall not be taught to rebel; don't hope it, Dorothy; don't attempt it!"

To save her life Miss Conway could not have avoided laughing outright, and Marian rushed dangerously near the verge of hysterics at once.

"I know you, Dorothy Conway," cried she; "I know you well! Just like your brother—two such incarnate fiends were never before allowed to trouble any poor woman's peace!"

But there was the pleasure of thwarting her hostess by calling Cecil in, so she deferred her fury till she had done this. She ran down the veranda, and Dorothy followed, unable to resist the feeling that if the woman forced a really painful spectacle upon herself it would be only a proper retribution.

"Cecil! Nanine!" she called again, more imperiously. "Come in this instant! You horrible woman, how dare you disobey—"

The words ended abruptly; she had reached the end of the veranda, and come in view of the two children dancing back and forth on the green turf, their arms twined about each other's waists, their bonnets off, their long curls streaming in the breeze—a picture lovely enough to have been a realization of the old mythological fancy which gave the hours human shapes, floating flower-crowned over the dull old earth.

Marian stared for an instant in silence, then turned excitedly upon Miss Dorothy.

"Who is that girl?" she asked, in a trembling voice, whose emotion there was no mistaking—it shook with anger only.

"The child that lives with me," replied Miss Dorothy, meeting her eyes with stern composure.

"I asked her name!" Marian fairly shrieked. "I tell you I will know her name!"

Her raised tones attracted the attention of the two children; they stopped their dance, and stood, still with their arms interlaced, looking up to the veranda in a wonder which Nanine did not share. She knew that something had roused her mistress's temper, and waited with the indifference most people acquire when

forced to endure daily exhibitions of an undisciplined nature like Marian's, grown little less than temporary insanity from long indulgence.

"Who is she—what do you call her?" repeated Marian.

"Her name is Valery Stuart," replied Miss Dorothy, quietly.

Marian sprang forward with her hand lifted as if she would have struck her sister-in-law in the face, but Miss Dorothy stood regarding her with such menacing firmness that, furious as she was, the creature's natural cowardice asserted itself, and she stopped short, bursting into a torrent of hysterical sobs.

"You vile woman! you wretch! Oh, you—there's no word bad enough to call you—I wish—"

"Stop!" interrupted Miss Dorothy, coldly; "let me hear no more such language. You knew that child was here. I told you so last winter. You came unasked; I am willing to receive you; but while you stay under my roof you must treat me and all belonging to me at least with decency."

Marian was cowed; she uttered louder sobs, and by this time Cecil struggled loose from Nanine, who had sensibly tried to coax her away, only partially comprehending what was said, but feeling that the mother's rage was not a thing for the child to witness. Cecil began to sob and shriek wildly in terror, and ran up the steps of the veranda, followed by Valery, who said to Miss Dorothy,

"What is the matter? Shall I call Benson?"

"Run away," returned Miss Dorothy; "don't call any body—she will be better soon—go away, Valery."

"Mamma, mamma!" screamed Cecil, catching hold of her mother's dress. Marian broke from her so roughly that the child fell on the stone floor. Valery had turned to go, in obedience to Miss Dorothy's command, but she hurried back and lifted Cecil, who shrieked more loudly than ever from pain as well as fright.

"You dare to touch my child! You little wretch—you infamous, nameless little wretch!" shouted Marian; and before Dorothy could reach them she had dealt the girl a blow so violent that it made her stagger. "I'll kill you!" added the infuriated woman, raising her hand to repeat the cowardly assault; but it was caught firmly in Dorothy's iron grasp, and Dorothy's face, livid with a cold rage, terrible from its composure, confronted her.

"Don't dare to stir," said Miss Conway, in a voice slow and icy. "Nanine, come and take Cecil into the house."

Marian sobbed, Cecil clung with frenzied shrieks to Valery, and, even in the midst of her anger, Miss Dorothy could not help watching the little girl as she stood, white as a ghost, her eyes, dilated with passion and astonishment, fixed upon her tormentor. She had received the insult as a woman might; it was the insult, not the blow which stung, and it was the

first-time in her remembrance that any thing save kindness had befallen her.

"Let Cecil alone; you sha'n't touch her!" shrieked Marian; but Nanine wisely obeyed Miss Dorothy's imperious gesture, caught up Cecil, who was almost in convulsions from terror, and ran into the house. "My child—you want to kill my child!" moaned Marian.

"She would run the risk of dying from fright if she was allowed to stay here and watch you," returned Miss Dorothy, still in that icy voice which awed Marian a little, beside herself as she was. "Make an end of this; my patience is exhausted!"

Marian sank into a chair with renewed screams and sobs and madder abuse of her husband, Dorothy, and Valery, who still regarded her in breathless bewilderment. The miserable woman was almost in spasms by this time, her features and hands working convulsively, so Miss Dorothy knew that she must have help.

"Run up to my room," she said to Valery, "and bring down the hartshorn and red lavender and a *carafe* of water; don't call any body, and be quick."

Valery darted away, and Miss Dorothy stood over Marian, holding her hands, and ordering her sternly to make no resistance, while Marian sobbed and gasped. From the distance Cecil's frantic cries were still audible, and Nanine's caressing tones, as she tried to comfort the frightened child.

Valery came back with the remedies, and waited silently while Miss Dorothy bathed Marian's forehead and forced her to swallow a huge draught of red lavender, giving Miss Dorothy whatever was needed, her face deathly white still, save on the left cheek, where the print of that dastardly blow burned red and hot.

"Let me go!" cried Marian, as soon as she could speak. "I'll not stay another moment in your house! Don't you ever dare to come near me—to speak to me, Dorothy Conway."

"I am not likely to feel any desire to do so," returned Miss Dorothy, calmly. "You are at perfect liberty to leave my house the instant you are able. If you will try to control your temper a little, you will have strength to go the sooner."

"I curse you!" cried Marian, in a horrible voice. "I curse you—may the vengeance of Heaven light on you and Philip! May that child there live to bring you the sorrow you deserve—a nameless brat you keep here to blazon forth your brother's infamy—a creature that you would have strangled in her birth, if you had had any decency—a vile woman's child—a—"

Miss Dorothy's hand closed firmly over Marian's mouth, and choked further utterance.

"Go into the house—go up to my room, Valery, and stay there," she ordered.

Valery was not crying even now; she shook

from head to foot, and an expression of trouble and pain far beyond her years agitated her features. She moved away a little, then crept back to Miss Dorothy's side, whispering,

"What have I done? What makes her so angry with me?"

"Go away! Oh, Valery, go away!" cried Miss Dorothy, still holding her hand on Marian's mouth; but at that instant the creature got free, caught Valery's dress, and hissed out,

"I heard you! I'll tell you who you are! Your father was the most dreadful man in the world—your mother worse! She's dead and gone to hell, and you're a living disgrace to every body you come near—not fit to play with decent children—without any name or home—always to be hated wherever you go, and avoided by all respectable people—can you understand that?"

Miss Dorothy had caught her again, and it was all she could do to keep from murdering her on the spot. Valery Stuart pulled herself loose from Marian's hold, and stepped slowly backward, watching her tormenter always. In the midst of her rage, Miss Dorothy was conscious of thinking that when Marian came to die, this child's face of anguish, forced suddenly and forever out of a child's ignorance into a misery which she felt without comprehending, must haunt the wicked woman like an avenging ghost.

"Go away, Valery—go away!" repeated Miss Dorothy.

"I've told her!" cried Marian, with a dreadful laugh. "She'll not forget; she's old enough to remember. You're a disgrace—you've no father—no name! this woman loathes the sight of you as much as I do—do you hear?"

"Valery, go—go!" urged Miss Dorothy.

"I'll tell her—you may kill me, but I'll tell her!" screamed Marian, struggling fiercely in Miss Conway's hold. "Little wretch—devil—bastard—that's the word—hunt it up—find out what it means—bastard!"

Miss Dorothy pushed her back into her chair, ran toward Valery, who stood utterly incapable of movement, and drew her onward.

"Go up stairs," she said, quickly; "go."

The child clung to her with such pleading agony in her face that it seemed to Miss Dorothy her own heart must break under its appeal.

"Do—do—you hate me?" whispered Valery.

"I love you—I love you! My darling—my pride—my good, good little Valery," sobbed Miss Dorothy, tearless and dry-eyed though she was. She stooped and kissed the upturned face with a passionate tenderness she had never before shown the shrinking creature.

"Thank you, Miss Dor," Valery said: she released her hold of her protectress's dress, and went slowly up the stairs, clinging to the banisters, as she tottered on, like a person weak from long illness.

CHAPTER IV.

THE NEXT MORNING.

ALL this while Cecil's voice could be heard from the library in loud lamentation: Miss Conway entered for an instant, saw that Nanine was doing her best to quiet her frightened charge, then went back to the veranda, where she found Marian in worse hysterics than ever. There was nothing for it but to get her indoors, undress, and put her to bed. Miss Dorothy accomplished the work herself, to prevent any of the servants witnessing the disgraceful scene. Marian sobbed and choked; whenever she could find voice, indulging in the most horrible invectives; declaring that she would not be detained in the house; ordering Cecil to be brought; an instant after vowing that she never wished to set eyes upon her; the father might take her; she would never see either of them again.

It was sunset before she forgot her ravings in a heavy slumber. Miss Conway remembered the children. Nanine met her in the hall and said Cecil was sleeping; so Dorothy went on into her own room. Valery had climbed into an easy-chair, and was sitting upright, holding fast to either arm, looking like a spectre of the joyous creature she had been that morning.

"Are you ill, Valery?" Miss Conway asked.

"My head aches," she replied, "here."

"You must have your supper and go to bed—that's my good little girl," Miss Dorothy said.

The white face worked tremulously, but she only answered,

"I don't want any supper; shall I go to bed now?"

Miss Dorothy rang, and ordered some milk and bread; sat down by the child and persuaded her to eat a few mouthfuls, though she could see that her throat was so contracted with nervous suffering that she could hardly swallow.

"Come," Miss Dorothy said, gently, "I'll put you to bed myself to-night, because you're my good, good little girl."

Oh, the piteous, troubled eyes which looked up in her own! It was all Miss Dorothy could do to keep back her tears; but she was thoughtful enough to remember that any show of emotion would only increase the poor child's distress.

Valery's bed-chamber was separated from Miss Conway's dressing-room by a side passage off the great corridor—a pretty nest, connected by a recess with her nurse's apartment, though she was a brave little thing and knew nothing about the nervous terrors which torment so many unfortunates of her age. Nurse Benson had taken a holiday, and was not yet returned; Miss Dorothy hoped by the morning that the sufferer would have slept away the first violence of her grief.

Never since the first time she took Valery in her arms, a helpless, new-born babe, had Miss Dorothy felt so tender toward her as on

this night. She said very little while undressing; occasionally a heavy sob broke forth, and as she knelt by Miss Dorothy's side to say her simple prayer, the spinster knew she was crying, but very quietly; behaving throughout so much like a grown person patient under a great wrong, that it troubled her companion more than a violent display of feeling would have done. Miss Dorothy put her in bed, smoothed the pillows, told her a quaint little story about a pet robin she once owned, and did her best to give the child pleasant thoughts to take with her into sleep.

"Now be a dear goody, and get to dreaming as fast as you can," said Miss Dorothy, stooping to kiss her. Such demonstrations of affection were rare; in spite of the sympathy and pity with which she regarded her protégée, scarcely ever until now had Miss Dorothy kissed her without a dolorous pang at her heart; sometimes a sterner emotion of repulsion, which always brought her shame and remorse to reflect that she was thus helping to visit the sins of the father upon the child. Valery clung to her hands and whispered, hesitatingly,

"Do you—do you—" she said; "that lady, you didn't—"

"I love you with all my heart," broke in Miss Dorothy. "Don't remember what that woman said—she's very little better than crazy; but we won't have her here again to tease us."

"What made her so angry with me?" questioned Valery. "I hadn't been naughty! I played as nice as I could with the little girl, and—and I was so glad—I thought she had come to see me."

"Never mind; we'll find somebody nearer your own age," replied Miss Dorothy. "Now don't worry yourself any more—you're not been naughty—you are always my good, good child."

"She—she said my mamma was naughty too," sobbed Valery. "Where is mamma? Nurse Benson said she was up among the angels—she couldn't be naughty, you know, up there."

"She was not, Valery—I loved her too," answered Miss Dorothy.

"And I haven't any papa—little Cecil has—she told me so, and she says he's nicer than her mamma."

"You have me always," said Miss Dorothy, sitting down on the bed and laying her arm caressingly over the child. "God loves little girls who have lost their father and mother, and sends somebody to take care of them and love them, as I do you."

"Are you sure?" demanded Valery, with a persistency she seldom showed.

Miss Dorothy could only reply by another caress.

"I've got an aunt, too, somewhere," persisted Valery; "she's not dead—why doesn't she come to see me?"

"Bless the child!" cried Miss Dorothy, in

astonishment. "Who told you so? I never heard you talk like this."

"Don't you remember when that big girl came here one day—Hetty Flint; oh, two or three months ago! She said she lived with my aunt; I know that was the house I went to once a great, great while off, and Hetty lived there—I recollect."

Miss Dorothy sat speechless with surprise: like most people unaccustomed to children, she had no idea of their powers of memory, or the way in which they will dwell upon vague recollections without ever mentioning them.

"But you don't want aunts or any one—haven't you me?" asked she, trying to laugh.

"Oh yes, and I love you—how I do love you!" cried Valery, putting up her two hands and squeezing Miss Dorothy's face between them. "I remember that woman," she added; "I do, though it's ever and ever so long ago, and the pale lady up stairs."

"What woman?" demanded Miss Conway. "And there's no pale lady up stairs; you're dreaming, Val."

"No, it couldn't have been here," replied she, thoughtfully, "because I climbed up into the garret once—it wasn't here; she lived with Hetty Flint too."

Miss Dorothy understood now, but would not help the child to clear away the mists which obscured her remembrance of that visit to John Brent's house.

"If she was my aunt, I don't believe she would love me as you do," said Valery. "I know I asked her to play, and she sent me out-of-doors with Hetty, and said she didn't know how to play with little girls, and I was afraid, because she looked so—so solemn, and she had gray hair."

"Oh, you goose, I am getting gray too! There, don't be trying to remember nonsense," returned Miss Dorothy, cheerfully, "Go to sleep."

"I forgot to feed Kitty," Valery said, suddenly.

"Very well; he shall come in and eat dinner with me—will that do?" questioned Miss Dorothy, hoping to see her laugh once more in her old gleeful fashion.

"You're so good—so good," returned Valery, her lips quivering, and the strange shadow of pain dimming her eyes anew—those wonderful brown eyes, whose wistful eagerness often caused Miss Dorothy thrills of keen anguish, from their resemblance to handsome Philip's.

"Then you be good too," she said; "don't talk now."

But Valery clung fast to her, and half rose in bed, saying,

"Kiss me, please—I sha'n't see you any more."

"To-night, you mean," returned Miss Dorothy, trying to speak gayly. "But I'll come in before I go to bed, and kiss you in your sleep."

"Will you?" she asked, eagerly. "Sure—you won't forget?"

"No, indeed. Go to sleep, else I shall have to send for the sand-man to come and throw dust in your eyes."

It was an old jest between them, which always excited Valery's merriment; but she did not notice now, holding fast to Miss Dorothy's hands, while her great eyes seemed looking a thousand strange questions which she did not know how to put in words.

Miss Conway laid her gently back upon the pillows, smoothed her sunny curls, and kissed the lids over those solemn orbs whose language filled her with such vague trouble and fear.

"Good-night, birdie," she said, softly, as she reached the door.

"Good-night," Valery answered, almost in a whisper; and Miss Dorothy crept quietly out, hoping that the child was already overcome with slumber, after her unwonted excitement.

Miss Dorothy had her dinner alone that day, having seen that Cecil and her mother were both asleep; and glad she was of a little quiet, for it seemed a hundred years since her repose of the morning had been so unexpectedly broken in upon.

The rector came up in the evening, and brought his sister. If ever there was an astonished woman, Miss Dorothy was she, when, about nine o'clock, the drawing-room door opened, and Marian entered, in the pink dress, smiling and pleasant as if nothing had ever caused her a moment's annoyance or care. Miss Dorothy sat like one half petrified for the rest of the time the guests remained, but Marian talked incessantly, and the moment the visitors departed Miss Conway hurried off to bed, lest she should be treated to another bit of impromptu melodrama.

The last thing Miss Dorothy did before retiring was to steal into Valery's room and kiss her. The child slept soundly, and she could go to rest and be thankful that the terrible day had ended so peaceably.

With the first gleams of the early summer dawn Valery woke, and the last eager thought which had gone with her into her dreams came back and roused her as suddenly as if an actual voice had spoken. To get away from the house—away from the dreadful woman who had frightened and outraged her—away from Miss Dorothy, since her presence brought constant pain to that kind friend. These were the ideas, put in her childish fashion, which filled Valery's mind and kept strong the resolution she had formed before falling asleep.

Often and often she had been tempted to set forth in search of the old house where she had seen that pale lady whom she had never mentioned until the previous night, and now to go to it was her fixed determination. Hetty Flint's visit in the spring had freshened all the recollections of that former journey, and she always remembered the road Hetty had taken when she drove off in the old one-horse chaise in which she had made her pilgrimage. Of

course all Valery's plans and thoughts were childish and vague, but they were none the less clear on that account. The solemn woman was her aunt—Hetty had said so; she would go and find her, and ask if she might live there, so as not to be a trouble to Miss Dorothy, and never run any risk of seeing again the woman who had struck her and called her dead mother such wicked names.

Nurse Benson, tired after her day's visiting, slumbered heavily in the gray light of the morning; but had she been ever so light a sleeper, Valery's movements were too cautious to have roused her. The child got out of bed and began to dress; she was accustomed to helping herself a great deal, so got through the operation without much difficulty. She knelt and said her prayers—asking God to bless Miss Dorothy, and in her childish way begging him that the new lady might not call her naughty any more; and Marian Conway slept on a few rooms beyond, undisturbed by any thought of the petition which went up to Him, one of whose little ones she had offended.

Valery opened the door, crept softly down the stairs into the side passage where her garden hat and shawl always hung, and passed out through the silent kitchen, which was never locked at night. On the table were bread and a bowl of milk, left there by some careless servant; they reminded Valery that she was hungry, so she mounted into a chair, and ate and drank, doing it all in the quaint, old-maidish manner about which Nurse Benson often laughed.

The Maltese cat leaped in through the open window, and mewed and danced with delight at sight of his playmate; so Valery gave him a part of her breakfast and a hasty lecture about being a good Kitty, and not making Miss Dorothy any trouble.

"I've taken Dolly with me in the basket," she said, while the cat looked sagely at her, his tail sticking straight into the air like a small watch-tower, "but you can't walk so far—I know Nurse Benson will be kind to you."

She had to stop and cry a little over her favorite, and Kitty responded with a dissatisfied mew, perfectly conscious there was something unusual going on, and not by any means easy in his mind. Valery picked up her basket, which always held the special possessions required each day—a miracle of ugliness in the way of a small, jointed wooden doll named Cleopatra, and cherished with a tenderness never bestowed on the beautiful waxen lady Miss Dorothy had given her on her last birthday. She offered as a reason that Cleopatra was not a favorite—even Kitty didn't like her—so it was necessary to love her very dearly to keep her from finding out how plain she was. A much-worn book of fairy tales, a broken pencil, and a few scraps of paper; some bits of sewing supposed to be a bed-quilt for Cleopatra (but it had lain a long time in the basket, because Valery, precocious as she was about

most things, found needle-work a sad stum-bling-block), completed the list of her treasures.

The Maltese cat followed his mistress resolutely to the outside door, his tail more erect than ever, and saying as plainly as if it had been a tongue that he fully intended to make one in the expedition, whatever it might be.

"You can't go, Troubadour," Valery said, regretfully. "Oh dear, how I wish you had the white cat's boots—don't you?"

"Mew!" answered Troubadour, and the stiff tail went up higher—it was all the same as if he had said that with boots or without, he meant to accompany her.

Valery shut the window to keep him from making his exit by that—kissed him again—begged his pardon, and asked him not to think she would ever forget him. Some sound in the chamber overhead warned her of the danger of further delay, and she hurried out, pursued by a long wail of mingled grief and wrath from the disconsolate Troubadour.

Valery ran down through the kitchen-garden, took a path along the shrubberies at the side of the house, and reached the entrance-gates without meeting or being discovered by any one.

The sun was just beginning to throw a golden light over the eastern sky, the soft mist played about the distant hills, and the child went quickly forth through the glory of the new day, fearless, confident, and watched by those happiest of all the blessed angels, the guardians of little children, because to them it is granted always to see His face in heaven.

Once in the while there will come a morning in the most orderly household when every member of it oversleeps himself, and it chanced that this was such a one in Miss Conway's dwelling. From Nurse Benson down to cook, each servant was behind time, and oddly enough, their mistress did not wake and appear at some unholy hour, according to her wont, and so become conscious of their dilatoriness. Nurse, horrified to find how late she was, and anxious to finish sewing a new dress before Valery woke, hurried down into the kitchen regions to use her needle and have a gossip at the same time with cook concerning her pleasures of the previous day.

Eight o'clock sounded as Miss Dorothy left her apartment, an utter contempt for the services of a maid keeping her in happy ignorance of the fact that this late rising had been imitated by her whole staff of dependents. She descended to the breakfast-room, and the sight of Cecil, engaged with her bread-and-milk, reminded Miss Dorothy that in her disgust of her own indolence she had forgotten to look into Valery's chamber. She tried to talk with Cecil, but Cecil was in one of her perverse moods, and would not be friends on any terms. Nanine had not seen the other little girl, she said, in answer to Miss Conway's inquiry. Thinking that perhaps the child had not yet wakened after her unusual excitement, Miss Dorothy

ran back up stairs, to be certain nothing was the matter. In the upper corridor she met Nurse Benson.

"I'm just going to wake little Valery—she hasn't slept so long, I don't know when," said Nurse.

"Don't wake her," returned Miss Dorothy; "let her sleep as long as she likes."

So they both went into Nurse's room and listened; the white muslin curtains that hung before the alcove were drawn; there was no sound, and Miss Dorothy motioned the servant away.

"She was overtired yesterday," she said, when they were out in the passage again; "it will do her good to sleep. Hark! there's Mrs. Conway's bell. Go and see if she will have her breakfast now—I know she always likes it in bed."

Of course Nurse had heard all about the visitor the evening before, but fortunately none of the servants witnessed Marian's outbreak except Nanine, whose command of English was confined to a very few remarkable words of her own coinage, which conveyed no meaning whatever to any body's mind but hers.

Miss Dorothy walked on down stairs, ate her breakfast with composure, and presently Nurse Benson came in to fill a tray for Mrs. Conway, and reported that lady as complaining of a bad night.

"Indeed, ma'am," pursued Nurse, with an inflamed countenance, "she says the bed was hard as a stone, and she didn't believe it was clean—and I had 'tended to the room myself, and it was just as nice as a pink."

"Never mind; Mrs. Conway is not well—invalids are always fanciful," returned Miss Dorothy, rather amused at Nurse's indignation.

"Humph!" said Nurse; struggled an instant between her sense of propriety and her wrath, then the latter got the upper-hand, as it usually does with people of every degree. "I don't like being called an awkward zany, Miss Dorothy, and that's the truth," she burst out; "and if I was a lady, I wouldn't go to see my husband's sister and talk about her to—"

"Benson, Benson!" interrupted her mistress, and Benson came back to her senses.

"Excuse me, Miss Dorothy," said she. "If you please, the madam will take chocolate."

"Go and tell cook to make it, and be sure it is nice," said Miss Dorothy. "Give my compliments to Mrs. Conway, and say I will come in to see her after she has breakfasted."

Nurse went away; the head farmer asked to see Miss Conway, and for the next half hour she was so much occupied that she did not recollect Valery, and Benson was suffering too severely in the task of waiting on Mrs. Conway to have leisure to think of her.

Mrs. Conway had wakened firm in the determination to make a fresh scene with her sister-in-law in regard to Valery. She felt a little afraid of Miss Dorothy, it was true, but so accustomed finally to have her own way with

every body about her, that she did not doubt her ultimate success in teasing or forcing the spinster to send the child among her mother's relations to live. She fortified herself with a hearty breakfast, got ready either for coaxing, tears, or ill-temper, and when Miss Conway had finished her interview with the farmer, Benson informed her that the madam—and it was delicious to hear the manner in which Benson jerked out the two words, as if she were spitting forth something excessively nasty—wished her to come up stairs.

"Has Valery had her breakfast?" asked Miss Conway, reminded of her by hearing the Maltese cat wail dolorously in the back regions.

"Bless her dear heart!" cried Nurse. "If I hadn't been so busy trotting up and down, trying to suit the madam, that I teetotally forgot the little thing."

She followed her mistress up stairs—once more they both entered Benson's chamber—the white curtains still hung before the alcove. Miss Dorothy crossed the room quickly and drew them aside.

"She's not here," she said, with an odd feeling of alarm, though it was somewhat checked by Nurse's exclamation,

"Dear heart, she's got up and dressed herself, knowing I'd have more on my hands than common! Did ever a body hear of such a thoughtful young mouse!"

"Go down and see if she's had her breakfast," said Miss Conway. "Is that her voice? Valery, Valery!" She stepped out into the corridor as she uttered the name—only a burst of laughter from Cecil answered her. "Is the other little girl there?" she asked in French of Nanine, looking over the railing into the hall below.

But Nanine had not seen her that morning, and Nurse said, "She's out in the garden, I'll be bound! Why, she must be half starved! What on earth was I thinking of?" and away she ran down stairs, out in the veranda, calling, in her turn,

"Valery, Valery!" and still Cecil's laughter, as she rolled a ball to and fro in the passages, was the only sound that answered.

Miss Dorothy stood in the upper hall and waited, while Benson went into the kitchen, asking if any body had seen the child, searched the garden hastily, and returned, saying,

"It's really odd, miss, but she ain't anywhere about—there ain't a soul given her any breakfast or set eyes on her this morning."

Miss Dorothy turned very white, and leaned heavily against the banisters. "Call James," she said; "send the men to look."

"Don't be so scared, Miss Dorothy," urged Benson; "there ain't nothing the matter—it's too far off for her to go to the river—she'll come back in a few minutes."

"She will not come back," exclaimed Miss Dorothy, in a strange voice; "I know she will not."

Benson's inquiries had roused the other serv-

ants; search had been made; Jane the seamstress came to say that Valery's hat and shawl were gone from their usual place.

A sudden thought struck Miss Dorothy; she remembered the child's conversation of the previous night.

"Tell James to harness the horses," she said, "quick—I will drive myself."

"What on earth—" began Benson.

"Hush!" said her mistress. "She has gone to her aunt's, I'm sure."

"Who is gone?" cried Marian's voice: she had been ringing her bell in vain, and, attracted by the sudden tumult, got out of bed and stood in her chamber door.

The sight of her not unnaturally roused a very heathenish wrath in Miss Dorothy's mind, but having the good fortune to be a well-bred woman, she controlled herself perfectly.

"Who is gone, I say," repeated Marian, sufficiently upset by the scene she had enacted the day before to rush into an excitement on the slightest show of an opportunity.

"I hope you are better this morning," said Miss Dorothy, mindful of the eyes that were watching her from Jane and two other servants had joined Benson in the hall. "I was just coming into your room—what a lovely morning it is!"

She walked up to the door so decidedly that Marian involuntarily stepped back into the chamber, because, though Miss Conway's voice sounded elaborately civil for the benefit of those stern domestic judges, there was a look in her face, which Marian only could see, not by any means pleasant to encounter. Dorothy turned toward the group in the corridor, and said,

"Order the pony-wagon at once, Benson. There is nothing for you to do here, Jane—go down stairs, every one of you."

Miss Conway entered the bedroom and closed the door; it was highly probable Marian would raise another tempest; at least she should not disgrace herself before witnesses.

"What's the matter with you?" whined Mrs. Conway; "I'm not to be glared at like that—Philip all over—but I'm not afraid of him or you either!"

"I was in hopes a night's rest might have restored your reason a little," said Miss Dorothy, rather coldly.

"I've not closed my eyes—the worst bed I ever slept on!" snapped her sister-in-law. "I want to know what is going on in the house—there is something you wish to keep from me."

"Nothing, I assure you," replied Miss Dorothy. "I am greatly troubled and alarmed—Valery can not be found."

"I hope she's in the bottom of the river!" cried Marian, venomously. "I'm glad—glad—I hope you'll find her dead!"

"If I did, you would be her murderer in God's eyes," returned Miss Dorothy, sternly. "She was a happy child till yesterday; if you have a gleam of conscience, you ought to be tortured by the thought of your cowardly outrage—you, a mother!"

"It is I who was outraged," exclaimed Marian, "in the most abominable fashion. You did it—letting my child play with Philip's illegitimate bantling—going in the face of all decency by keeping her here in your house!"

"You force me to remind you that I did not ask you to come and meet her," replied Miss Dorothy.

"I was a fool to set foot inside your doors—ever to speak to you."

"Of that you are the best judge; at all events, you knew the child was under my care."

"And a disgrace it is," broke in Marian. "Every body says so! Helping your brother in his wickedness—aiding him to insult and deceive his lawful wife."

"I am at a loss to know how you were deceived," answered Miss Conway. "You knew of this child—you told me yourself you would marry him if he had deserted twenty silly women. But all this recrimination is useless! I shall have to ask you to excuse me for a few hours. I am obliged to leave home."

"A pretty way to treat a guest! And where are you going?"

"To find my brother's child," replied Miss Dorothy; "to bring her back—to love and cherish her more tenderly than ever—to stand between her and the suffering such cruel hearts as yours would bring upon her."

Marian broke into a torrent of passionate words and reproaches, but Miss Dorothy had relieved her mind and did not answer a word.

"Let me out of the house," cried the woman; "I'll not stay here another moment! Where's my child? You'd steal her in hopes to make room for that thing—give me my child!"

"The carriage shall take you to the station at once," cried Miss Dorothy; "you will just be in time for the next train. I will send Cecil up with her nurse; but if you have the least love for your daughter, I would advise you to control yourself!" She was very near convulsions yesterday from fright, and I warn you that an active brain and a high-strung nervous system will not bear tampering with."

Marian was a little frightened by Miss Dorothy's voice and manner, but too much in the habit of indulging her temper to restrain herself. She gave vent to much violent language, and, ringing the bell fiercely, reiterated her determination to depart immediately.

"The carriage will be at the door when you are ready," was all the reply Miss Dorothy vouchsafed, and went down stairs to give orders for the coachman to drive Mrs. Conway to the station, and return as quickly as possible, that she herself might have the ponies.

When the trio appeared on the veranda, where Miss Conway waited, it was plain to be seen that the sojourn up stairs had been any thing but quiet; Nanine was crying, Marian scolding her, and Cecil in a great rage with her mother.

"You dreadful, wicked child—I'll tell your papa!" Marian said.

"Don't care—don't care!" shouted rebellious Cecil.

"Kiss me; good-bye, baby," said Miss Dorothy, going toward the group.

"You shall not touch my daughter—your very kiss would be an added insult to us both," cried Marian, sweeping between them with her most tragic air. "Cecil, don't look at that wicked creature—don't speak to her!"

"Will!" pronounced Cecil. "Let down, Nanine, let down," and she turned into a small tiger-cat so suddenly that the poor woman was glad to put her on the floor. "Will kiss Aunt Dor!" she added, and ran to Miss Conway, while Marian stormed and raved more like a newly-escaped Bedlamite than any thing else.

The whole scene was too humiliating and degrading; Miss Dorothy patted Cecil hastily on the head and stepped back into the hall, saying,

"Good-bye, Mrs. Conway—a pleasant journey to you."

It was so decided a defeat, in spite of finding herself mistress of the field, that Marian was glad to get into the carriage, do her best to soothe Cecil, whose screams by this time were appalling, and drive off as fast as possible.

Miss Dorothy went up stairs for her bonnet and shawl, put them on, and walked uneasily up and down the veranda, waiting for the carriage to return, divided between her anxiety, regard to Valery, and sad thoughts of what the future might prove to Philip's other daughter, reared under the care of such a mother. The nameless creature who had just received the first cruel blow to which her mournful destiny must always leave her exposed in this hard world, actually seemed less pitiable than that petted little beauty whose childhood must be passed in the companionship of a woman like Marian. And Philip too—she could not help thinking of him—she loved him still, and it was heart-breaking to reflect that, allied to a wife such as he had chosen, there appeared no hope any good principle left in his heart should be able to develop and help him (if nothing could be done to atone for the past), at least, to make the future less barren and useless.

James was a long time gone; Miss Dorothy glanced at her watch, and was horrified to find that almost the whole morning had been wasted. She saw the ponies dash up the road at length, and learned from James's excuses that, as she expected, Mrs. Conway had detained him on one pretext or another—it was her last bit of petty revenge.

Miss Dorothy stepped into the carriage and started the ponies at the top of their speed, while James stood on the steps looking discontentedly after, and muttering to himself,

"Just like a woman—never seed one that had a bit of mercy on horseflesh—though Miss Dorothy's a queen to most on 'em."

James was at all times a decided misogynist, but an hour and a half under Mrs. Conway's sway had left him more bitter than usual, and

he snubbed Jane, who came out for a bit of gossip, in a merciless fashion, and shambled off toward the stables, too much irritated even to solace himself with the wheezy, strangled whistle wherein it was his habit so constantly to indulge, that Miss Dorothy often declared he reminded her of a dissipated blackbird in a chronic state of moult.

CHAPTER V.

RUNNING AWAY.

VALERY STUART walked rapidly away through the brightness of the morning, crying softly as she went, not from fear, but at the recollection of Miss Dorothy, whom she was never to see any more. Childish and indefinite as the resolution might be that inspired her, it was none the less firmly established in her mind, and the idea of renouncing her purpose and going back never once troubled her.

She took the dilapidated doll out of the basket, kissed its wooden face, which wore a discontented, hopeless expression, as though existence had been very hard on the many-jointed thing, told it all her plans, promised for both that they would never forget Miss Dorothy, and found a deal of consolation in Cleopatra's silent acquiescence.

On she went down the winding road, shaded by maples and elms, climbed a hill nearly a mile beyond the house, and stopped to get a last view of the old mansion, which looked so quiet and picturesque in the midst of the beautiful landscape. Two or three stray cattle standing by the brook glanced up at her with eyes of mild wonder; a great dog, who had perhaps been beguiled into an early ramble by a wandering rabbit or weasel, stopped to sniff his surprise at the sight of her; but Valery had no idea of fearing any dumb animal, and patted his head as confidentially as if he had been Miss Dorothy's big Ponto.

"I can't stop," she explained, "because I'm going ever and ever so far, and Cleopatra's going with me."

The dog whined his doubt of the wisdom of her journey, and followed her a little way as she walked on, apparently half inclined to constitute himself her guardian; but Valery had her own views on the subject, and expressed them as candidly as if she supposed him capable of understanding the whole matter.

"You'd better go back," she said; "you're a very nice doggie—almost as nice as Ponto—but I don't want you. It's a long way, and maybe Hetty Flint and the lady wouldn't like my bringing so large a party; you know I've got Cleopatra."

The dog whined again, and put his head meditatively on one side; but a short reflection seemed to convince him of the justice of her remarks. He expressed his sentiments in a series of gruff barks, which probably held

any quantity of sage advice as to taking good care of herself, and allowed her to pass on, though, when she reached the foot of the hill, he was sitting on the end of his tail and looking wistfully after her, as though not exactly decided in his mind that it was right for him to desert her.

She had not walked more than a quarter of a mile further when the sound of wheels attracted her attention, and glancing back, she saw a one-horse wagon approaching, driven by an odd little old man. Just as she reached a second brook, which had a wooden trough placed to catch the water, the vehicle overtook her, and the man stopped to let his horse drink.

"Ho, the little girl, the little girl!" said the stranger, kindly. "Where does she go, the little girl?"

"Ever and ever so far; to see Hetty Flint and my aunt," replied Valery, unhesitatingly.

"Himmel!" ejaculated the small man, dropping the reins in astonishment. "And the house-mother lets a butterfly like you set off alone? But I suppose a quarter of a mile is ever and ever so far to your small legs. Is that where you are going?" he continued, pointing with his whip toward an old red building down the road.

"Oh no, no," explained Valery, shaking her head; "it's farther, farther—miles." Then a word she had lately seen in some story occurred to her, and as it expressed a vague sense of great distance to her comprehension, she added, "more than that; leagues—leagues!"

"Ach!" cried the old German; "what you know of the leagues, small one? And you go alone thus fashion? I am outside of myself with the wonder!"

"Oh, I brought Cleopatra with me," replied Valery, in a tone as satisfied as Telemachus could have used in naming Mentor to any chance person who might have met him on his journey.

"Cleopatra?" repeated the German, glancing about to catch a sight of her Egyptian majesty; "where she find herself?"

"Why here, of course," returned Valery, pulling the wooden lady out from under her shawl.

"The doll!" exclaimed the little man. "Oh, I think she is quite mad, the small one, else she is one of the fairies such as people meet in the Hartz Mountains; but I never knew they journey so far from the Vaterland," he added, thoughtfully.

"Oh, I've read all about them!" cried Valery, at home in the subject at once. "And there's witches there, and ugly dwarfs. Oh, did you ever see them? But I'm not a fairy, you know; I am just Valery Stuart, and Cleopatra and I are going to see Hetty Flint and my aunt."

"And where she live, this Hetty Fleent and the aunt?"

"Ever and ever so far," repeated Valery.

"And who let you go all alone with yourself?" he asked, gravely.

Valery thoroughly comprehended that she ran great danger of being put in his wagon and driven back to the presence of the woman who had struck her, but with her head full of the legends his words about the Hartz Mountains had recalled, she answered very much in the fashion she remembered the wandering princess in her story-books always replied to similar inquiries.

"It's a great secret," she said, gazing up at him with her solemn eyes; "I mustn't tell a word, else the wicked fairy would get me, and she struck me yesterday." Then the resolution of her character, which was so much beyond her years, asserted itself; she came out of her romance lore, and added, with quiet determination, "I'm not going back, you know; if you try to make me, Cleopatra and I'll jump into the water and be drowned!"

The German nearly turned a somersault with astonishment, and was more inclined than ever to think he had actually met one of the fairy tribe, in whose existence, old as he was, he had never wholly forgotten his childish faith.

"I should never not no more do it," he began eagerly to explain, piling up all the negative he could think of, to give emphasis to his words. "I'm Hans Vrooman, and I love the small maidens. I would never take you back to the wicked no more."

Valery gave him one of those searching looks children can give, when it seems as if some wiser spirit than they themselves possess shines in their wonderful eyes; and answered, heartily, "I don't believe you would. I like you! Is your name Hans? You didn't write the Wonder Book, did you?"

"Himmel! She means Andersen! What she know not, the small one? No, no; but I can cut the pretty figures—wait a minute—like this."

He pulled a box from under the wagon-seat, opened it, and took carefully out a marvelously carved little figure of the Virgin holding the Child in her arms. Valery uttered a shout of ecstasy, and nearly dropped Cleopatra in her excitement.

"It is schön. How you say—handsome, *hein*?" he asked, his wrinkled old face beaming with pleasure.

"Oh, so pretty, so pretty!" cried Valery.

"Climb up into the wagon, and I let you hold it," he said.

Valery hesitated; after an instant's reflection she stepped back, saying,

"I don't think I can stay any longer; I want to get to Hetty Flint;" but all the while her eyes devoured the graceful image with eager delight.

"You go straight ahead? I go this road too; you ride with me—old Hans loves the small ones. I go far and far, likewise. What they call the place? Corners—*ja*!"

"Why, that's close by where they live," returned Valery.

"Heety Eleent and the aunt? Then you ride in the wagon and save the short legs, and I take you straight to the house, and call out, Ho, Miss Heety and the aunt, see the present what old Hans brings! Then they laugh and was glad."

"I don't know," said Valery, just thinking aloud. "Heety likes me, 'cause she said so; but they don't know I'm coming; and she was very grave—she said she didn't play with children."

"Is that Mees Heety? Then she ought to shame herself!" pronounced Hans, indignantly.

"No, no; but my aunt—Heety said she was my aunt," replied Valery, making the whole case more mysterious by her peculiar style of explanation.

Hans fairly shook the Virgin in his eagerness to have some light thrown on the subject, for a moment absolutely unable to remember any English whatever in the dazed state of his faculties. He spluttered a number of long sentences, which sounded very awful indeed; then becoming conscious that Valery looked uneasy under this torrent of inexplicable syllables, he struggled fiercely to get back into a language which would ring more human in her ears.

"Better you go with me," he said; "see Heety all the shorter."

"You're sure you're going right there?" questioned Valery, still regarding the image he held.

"Ja! ja! Come with me; we ride, jog, jog; after more time, we eat; you see all the pretty things like this, and we get quite safe to Heety—old Hans wouldn't lie. I take you away from the wicked woman faster than your legs; maybe she come before you from behind when you know not; but she couldn't catch Pipes no more. Pipes, he's my old horse mare—we find Heety very soon."

The possibility that she might be followed and taken back to the presence of her tormentor had not presented itself to Valery's mind; but now it filled her with horror, and she was glad to accept the old man's offer.

"If you're sure it's the place," she said.

"Yes—the Corners; and I know some one man by there—John Brent," said Hans.

"Why, that's his name! I know it is! Heety said she lived there," cried Valery, in astonishment.

"So!" exclaimed the German, and looked at her more oddly than ever; for in his visits to the village, some hints had reached him of the tragedy which darkened the old farm-house. "Should you tell me again how you name yourself?" he asked.

"Valery Stuart," replied the child; then added, with the strange, womanly air that would come over her in the midst of her most childish talk, "but I musn't tell any more. Now we are in the great forest, and I'm the princess going out to seek my fortune."

"Ja, ja!" he cried, laughing; "and I'm the ugly dwarf—but good, *hein*?"

"I don't think you're so very ugly," answered Valery, candidly; "when you smile, you look really nice."

"Ah ha, the small one! Now I help you into the wagon! Pipes, he knows all about it, and means to trot like a wind. Say we eat now, though—did you breakfast any?"

"Oh yes, yes; I'm not a bit hungry," returned Valery.

"Then off we go," said Hans; "you may hold the pretty figure to look at, and I show you more."

The last of Valery's fears vanished before that promise. She allowed him to lift her into the wagon; the basket containing Cleopatra was placed on her lap, the image in her hand, and old Hans settled her comfortably, pulling the wooden box forward so that her feet could rest on it.

"Off we sit!" cried Hans, in delight. "Pipes, he out-trot the wicked witch—hurra!"

"Hurra!" repeated Valery, and they both began to laugh, and Pipes, pricking up his ears in surprise, trotted away down the road, carrying Valery farther and farther from the peaceful retreat which had so suddenly been transformed into a place of torment.

Certainly no two people were ever thrown together more thoroughly adapted to enjoying each other's society than Valery and old Hans. Before an hour was over he confided his whole history to his small listener, and she talked so freely about the home she had left, that though he refrained from asking questions, he knew pretty well whence she came and who it was that accompanied him.

Almost dwarfish in size, with shoulders so high that they had fairly the effect of deformity, poor old Hans would have been an unpleasant object to contemplate, but for the beaming good-nature which lighted his whole countenance. The head that crowned this misshapen body was fine enough to have made a study for a portrait of the chief disciple; and the truth was, old Hans possessed the soul of an artist, and in his humble sphere proved a much more faithful servitor of the great mistress than many a man whom the world delights to honor. Had his early associations been different, he would have become a painter or sculptor; as it was, his productions in the matter of wood-carving were marvelous, and the figures and groups he modeled in clay deserve almost equal praise.

Years before, he had strayed over to America, toiled diligently, suffered untold ills from poverty and wretched health, fortunate at least in that he did not consider his fate nearly so hard as it was. But those troubles were over; he earned a decent livelihood now, and having neither wife nor child, was able, with the usual thrift of his race, to lay up something yearly against the days when his hand should lose its cunning and his brain its activity. He loved nature as well as if he could transfer its beau-

ties to canvas or write volumes of poetry in their praise; so he had removed from the narrow city streets where he so long languished like a wild bird in a cage, and taken up his abode in the outskirts of Newburg, among the beautiful scenery of our noble river. All the work he could do he sold easily enough to tradesmen in New York; and having by this acquired a certain reputation, was even employed by men of taste in carving ornaments for their dwellings. Two or three times a year he undertook a journey to the little hamlet near John Brent's farmhouse, to visit some old German friends who had established themselves there, carrying with him numerous specimens of his labor, in the hope of finding purchasers on the road; for Hans, more practical than many of his brethren in the higher walks of art, kept always an eye to the "main chance," and did not disdain to turn his holiday seasons to as much profit as possible.

Hans had a passionate love for children; but Valery was a new revelation to him, and he was half inclined, as he listened to her odd talk, to go back to the youthful superstitions which had always lain dormant in his mind, and believed her an Undine, or forest nymph endowed with a soul; a creature, at all events, of some race very unlike ordinary humanity. Then, in spite of all her wisdom in regard to fairy lore, and her acquaintance with poems and romances she was far too young to have read, she was so full of animal health and spirits, such a perfect child in this side of her character, that the long drive seemed a ramble through an enchanted region to the old wood-carver. In the delight of his society, listening to explanations in regard to his work, his stories of life in Germany, his strange legends which linked a poetical interest to every mountain or laughing brook, Valery half forgot the troubles which oppressed her, and chatted like a whole nest of young thrushes.

Toward noon they stopped in the shadow of a clump of hickory-trees, to let Pipes rest and eat his dinner. Hans pulled a bright tin bucket from under the wagon-seat, and the two shared a sumptuous repast off a variety of heathenish edibles which possessed all the charm of novelty to Valery. By this time their friendship had grown to a tremendous height, and Hans completed Valery's happiness by telling her that if she staid at the farmhouse, perhaps he would settle down for a few months at the corners, and teach her the mysteries of his craft.

"For to begin," said he, "only that! The small one will not be like poor old Hans; she is to be a great artist some day, don't forget that! No matter what comes, always remember the words of the old *vorschnider*."

Valery glanced up at him with her eyes full of wonder and delight; quite able, vaguely as she caught his meaning, to dwell upon it and weave dreams which might have an effect upon her whole future. But she must know what

the German word he had used signified; and after explaining that it was the name of his trade, he went on to repeat a variety of horribly ferocious phrases, so pleased with her quickness in catching them, that he assured her gravely she already spoke his language nearly as well as himself, and almost believed what he said.

But it was necessary to set out on their journey again, and they jogged pleasantly on, no shadow disturbing Valery's content until Hans told her they were approaching the Corners, and were not more than a mile from John Brent's house; then she began to look troubled and to shiver, and he tried to assure her as best he could.

"We shall go there in the wagon," he said; "the Heety Eleent shall be delighted at the gift old Hans brings—you see; and the aunt she smiled at the small one."

"Will she?" asked Valery, earnestly.

"There was no doubt," returned Hans, with his usual weakness for putting a past tense to express the present or future; "there hadn't been none, not never, no!"

There was such force in his profusion of negatives that Valery allowed herself to be somewhat comforted, and with a rare thoughtfulness strove to hide the remaining doubts which beset her, lest the good old man should suffer from her distress.

They drove past the little knot of houses which believed itself a village, down the winding road for half a mile; then Hans pointed toward a low dwelling, its unpainted front so gray with age that it appeared picturesque, peeping out from among the maple-trees which surrounded it and the flowering vines that had twisted themselves over its gables and hung in heavy festoons about the moss-covered roof.

"There it is," he said, cheerfully. "Now we go to surprise Miss Heety and the aunt."

Valery motioned him to stop, but he did not notice the gesture, urged Pipes quickly on, and drew up at the gate before she had time to grow as frightened as leisure to think would have caused her to do.

The sound of wheels brought a womanly-looking young girl out into the porch, and Hans, feeling certain that she must be Valery's friend, called, lustily,

"Ah ha! the Heety Flint; come and see what I brought you."

"Well, if it ain't old Hans Vrooman!" exclaimed the damsel. "What on earth—no, I never did!"

She ran down the path toward the gate, and getting near enough to see Valery's face as she shrank timidly against Hans, stopped short with another exclamation of wonder.

"So you did know my name, Miss Heety," said Hans.

"Dear me, yes; I've seen you a dozen times at the Corners," returned Heety. "But who is—"

"Ah ha, who I brought? Look again, Miss

Heety! The small one is a great friend of yours—tell me her name."

"Isn't little Valery!" cried Hetty, approaching the fence and peering at the child's half-averted countenance. "It can't be—why, I never did!"

"It's me, Hetty; don't you know me?" returned Valery, her lip beginning to quiver and her eyes to fill.

With a shout and a bound which would have excited the admiration of a Sioux Indian, Hetty darted through the gate, sprang up on the wagon-wheel, lifted Valery down, and began kissing her and hugging her and exclaiming over her, so that the child had no opportunity to speak, which was as well, because by this time she was fully occupied in keeping back her sobs.

"Ja, ja!" cried Hans; "make the small one welcome; she's come all the road to see you, Miss Heety!"

"Welcome!" repeated Hetty, kissing her again, stepping back to look at her, then rushing up to embrace her anew. "I should think so! And how you have grown! And Miss Dorothy let old Hans bring you over—must you go back to-night?"

"Oh, Hetty, Hetty!" gasped Valery, "I'm never going back—never! Ask my aunt if I may stay; you said she was my aunt! I haven't got any home, if she won't take me; I'll try to be good—please, Hetty, please!" She hid her face in Hetty's dress, and cried silently, while the girl stared at Hans in amazement and wrath, half as if she thought he must be in some way to blame, and had three minds to pull his beard at once, and demand explanations afterward.

"I don't know what the matter should be," Hans said, ready to cry himself. "Small one, small one, here is the Heety; she loves you; she is glad you have come; don't you sob no more."

"Are you?" questioned Valery, raising her head; "are you glad?"

"Glad? I should think so!" exclaimed Hetty. "But do tell me—mercy's sake, I shall go crazy! You don't mean to say Miss Conway sent you here this way—why she ought to be—"

"No, no, she doesn't know," interrupted Valery, then caught her breath and added, almost in a whisper, "I ran away, Hetty."

"Bless the darling! Did you want to see me so much? But you oughtn't to have done that, Valery," said Hetty, shaking her head reprovingly, though her eyes lighted up with such enjoyment of the child's escapade that it rather injured the dignity of her rebuke.

Old Hans shook his head too, and groaned dolorously.

"What on earth!" repeated Hetty. "Don't sit there nodding like a sleepy turkey, you silly old Dutchman! What is it—has any thing happened? What made you run away, Valery?"

"I couldn't help it," Valery answered, in a

slow, difficult voice. She was not crying now; the crimson died out of her cheeks, and her eyes grew black with the anguish which had dilated them as she looked at her persecutor the day before.

"She struck me—she called me names. Oh, Hetty, don't be angry—don't send me back?"

"Miss Dorothy struck you!" shrieked Hetty, and all the wonder that had been in her tones was meaningless compared with the consternation which sharpened them now.

"No, no," returned Valery, eagerly, "she is always good; that strange lady—she came yesterday, and I was out playing with her little girl. She struck me, and called me names—she said my mamma was naughty too. Hetty, Hetty, don't let her get me—don't!"

Hetty knelt on the ground, and put both arms about the child, pale with wrath and trouble as she began to understand the full meaning of the broken account.

"Was it Mrs. Conway?" she asked.

"Yes—I heard Miss Dorothy call her that—and the little girl said her name was Cecil, and I liked her so! I thought she had come to play with me—I wasn't naughty, Hetty; indeed, indeed, I wasn't."

"And what did Miss Dorothy do?" demanded Hetty, determined to have a full explanation on the instant.

"She told the lady to stop, and she put me to bed herself; she was so good. She said she would feed Troubadour. And Nurse Benson was away, and this morning I got up early, early; and then I met Hans, and he brought me," said Valery, trying her best to render her story lucid and quiet.

"Ja, ja!" added Hans, brushing his hand across his forehead. "There she was, walking out to seek fortune, with her doll in the basket. Oh, Miss Heety, love her, love her well!"

Hetty sprang to her feet, her hands clenched and her face fairly livid with rage.

"I see through it all!" cried she. "Oh, if I had my ten fingers round that Conway woman's throat!"

She was so choked with passion that she could not articulate another syllable, but looking at her, absolutely tragic in face and gesture, old Hans thought it fortunate for the cruel stranger that she was not just then within Hetty Flint's reach.

"Come into the house, Valery," she said, more calmly, after a moment. "You've got a home here—come, and I'll call Mrs. Brent."

"Wait—wait!" gasped Valery, holding her back by the dress. "Will—will she be glad too, Hetty?"

"Lord bless us, she is not a born fiend like that Conway woman!" said Hetty. "Don't you be afraid—come with me! I'm Hetty Flint—you know me—I'd like to see the creature, man or woman, that wouldn't be good to you when I'm around."

"Goot, very goot!" pronounced Hans, striking his palms softly together. "I can her with

leave you, Miss Heety—the small one is safe under your care, *hein?*"

"Safe?" shouted Hetty. "Look here, Hans Dutchman—do you see these two hands—do you?"

She stretched them out, and the sleeves, loosened for convenience while at her work, fell back, revealing arms so beautifully shaped, though brown from exposure, that Hans's artist eye was delighted.

"Ja, ja!" said he.

"You do see them? Very well, I'd have 'em both cut off, if it would do this child a speck of good!" continued Hetty, slowly nodding her head between each word, to give additional emphasis. "I'd use 'em to carry her miles and miles—through fire and water, but what I'd find a place for her to be happy in—and I mean it every bit, Hans Dutchman."

"I know you did," cried Hans, enthusiastically; "I know you did."

Hetty took Valery to her heart again; told her over and over how glad she was to see her; how much she loved her; how long she had hoped for her coming; and the gush of womanly tenderness was so oddly at variance with her late fiery demeanor, that the old man laughed and cried at once from pleasure and sympathy.

"Let's go in now," she said. "Say good-bye to Hans, and thank you too! I know John Brent'll be glad to settle with you for the trouble, Dutchman."

"Ah, no, no!" pleaded Hans. "It makes me so happy to have see the small one—if she shake hands, I like that."

"Lift me up, Hetty," said Valery.

Hetty raised her up on the wagon-seat; Valery flung both arms about the old man's neck, and kissed him on either cheek.

"I love you so much," she said, gratefully; "so much!"

Hans was completely melted, and won Hetty's golden opinions from that minute.

"Come over and visit us while you're staying at the Corners," urged she; "we'll all be glad to see you, take my word for it."

She lifted Valery down, and took her hand to lead her toward the house.

"Good-bye, Hans," Valery said, "good-bye, dear Hans."

The wood-carver drove slowly off, looking back at her with eyes which were misty with tears, and Valery allowed Hetty to draw her on. When they reached the porch, the girl called, in a loud, cheerful tone, "Mrs. Brent! Mrs. Brent!"

The eager summons brought out of the dwelling a tall, middle-aged woman, so grim and stern of aspect that Valery shrunk closer to her companion's side, not even daring to glance a second time at the face which regarded her in such cold surprise, with some deeper emotion stirring under its firmness.

"Here's little Valery come to see us," pursued Hetty, volubly. "She's awfully afraid

we won't be glad to see her, so kiss her right off."

Susan Brent retreated a step, and the ashen gray of her features deepened; she put out her hand for support against one of the rustic posts of the veranda, breathing hard, like a person fatigued by violent exertion.

"It's little Valery," continued Hetty, a sudden anxiety trembling through the forced cheerfulness of her voice. "Hasn't she grown? Come all the way with old Hans Dutchman to see us!"

"Valery come!" returned Susan Brent, in a low, stern tone. "Who sent her to this house?"

"Don't!" was Hetty's answer, pronounced only by the motion of her lips, unperceived by the child. "Kiss your Aunt Susan, Valery—she can't believe it's you, she's so surprised."

Valery released her hold of Hetty's hand and walked up the steps, trying with a restraint beyond her age for composure, while Susan Brent stood silent, that pale, grief-worn countenance shaken out of the apathy grown its habitual expression, into a pang of keen suffering which left her incapable of speech or movement.

"Please let me stay in your house," said Valery, repeating the words she had said over and over to herself during her journey; "I'll be good. I haven't got any home now—may I stay?"

"Hasn't got any home, Hetty Flint!" exclaimed Susan, in chilly wonder, and a voice hoarse with pain. "Isn't the world wide enough for all of them and me?"

"Hush!" interrupted Hetty. "Come here a minute—let me tell you."

She gave an encouraging sign to Valery, and drew Susan into the house, told the story she had gathered from Valery's account, adding, after a renewed utterance of her wish that Mrs. Conway could be placed for a single instant within her reach,

"Miss Dorothy will be sure to send for her as soon as that wretch is gone—don't make the poor little thing suffer any more."

"I won't, Hetty, I won't," groaned Susan. "But it's only the beginning—only the beginning! She's got to bear it—to have it grow worse year by year. Oh, Hetty, why couldn't she have died that black night she came into the world—died, and got rid of it all?"

"I don't know; but God does," sobbed Hetty; "that's all I can say. Come and tell her you're glad to see her, Susan—she's such a sensitive little thing—there she is shaking like a leaf."

"How can I say it? Oh, haven't I suffered enough—haven't I borne enough—am I never to have a grain of mercy shown me?" moaned Susan, flinging up her arms in a sudden burst of anguish which fairly startled Hetty, from its contrast with her usual apathetic composure.

At this instant from the room above floated down the broken notes of a low, sad song—

Lucy singing to herself in the quiet of her chamber, so softly, so sweetly, that it was like the echo of the angelic voices—good men have sometimes been allowed to hear in their dying visions. Susan Brent dropped into a chair, threw her apron over her head, and cried silently for many moments. Hetty wisely left her to weep away the unwonted emotion. She stepped back upon the porch where Valery stood eagerly gazing in at the woman. The child lifted her agitated, apprehensive face, saying in a whisper,

"Is she sorry I have come—don't she like me, Hetty?"

"Yes, yes," returned Hetty, "she loves you, and so do I, but she's thinking about your mother! Don't say a word; pretty soon she will stop crying."

After a while Susan drew the apron from her eyes, wiped the tears from her cheeks, and rose slowly, moving feebly, like an aged person; but she stretched her hand toward the child, saying,

"You did right to come, Valery—you did quite right."

"May I kiss you? Hetty says you are my aunt," returned Valery. Susan struggled perceptibly with herself, then stooped and allowed the little girl's lips to touch her cheek.

"If they weren't his eyes," Hetty heard her mutter; "if they weren't his eyes!"

"Now then," said the girl, eager to bring matters down to a more commonplace footing, "Valery must have something to eat, then she and I will go out to the barn and hunt hen's nests! Come on, Valery, this is the way to the pantry, and I tell you there's some cookies there will make your mouth water."

"Yes, go with Hetty," Susan said.

"You're not sorry I came—are you?" urged Valery.

"No, I'm not sorry," answered Susan. "Oh Hetty, take her away—I mean, she must be hungry—go, Hetty."

Hetty knew the woman could bear nothing further; she caught Valery in her arms and danced on toward the pantry, affecting a lightness of heart which she was far from feeling.

Without warning, that soft, phantom-like melody floated through the house again, faint and tremulous as the notes of an æolian harp.

"Hark!" exclaimed Valery. "Oh, Hetty, what is that?"

"The wind, like enough," returned Hetty, uttering the equivocation with perfect composure. "You never know what the wind may do."

"It's so beautiful," whispered Valery, in a low, awe-stricken voice. "I never heard the wind sound like that, Hetty."

"If you don't look out, I shall get all the cookies," said Hetty, setting the child down and running before her into the pantry. "You'd better be quick—I'm a dreadful one to eat when I once begin."

Presently Susan called from the outer room,

"Hetty, I promised Mrs. Miller to come over and see how her baby got on; I'm going now."

"That's right," returned Hetty, very much accustomed, young as she was, to finding her verdict of importance in the household upon all matters. "It'll do you good to run out a while. If the baby's no better, and they want somebody to sit up to-night, tell Mrs. Miller to send for me."

The fact that it was the busy season of the year with farm people, and she must begin her labor by five o'clock the next morning, made no difference in Hetty's willingness to spend the whole night watching a sick child, if it was in the least necessary.

"I should think you had enough to do," Susan said.

"Oh, good gracious, not half to keep me from getting moth-eaten," replied Hetty, showing her laughing face in the door-way.

Mrs. Brent had put on her sun-bonnet, and stood listlessly in the centre of the room, not looking at Hetty, apparently not hearing what she said. Two or three times she walked about, pushing a chair into its place, brushing imaginary specks of dust from the table, but in an absent, mechanical fashion, which often irritated energetic Hetty. Finally she sat down in a corner, and her hands dropped wearily upon her knees, her whole frame collapsed and shrank together till she seemed an old, old woman. The habit was growing upon her daily; she would sit so for hours unless Hetty roused her, which she was never slow to do, if she could propose any thing which might interest Susan, or take her out of her dreary thoughts.

"I'd go while it's pleasant," said Hetty; "as likely as not we'll have a shower before the afternoon is over."

Susan looked up wonderingly.

"I've actually forgot what I meant to do," returned she. "I get worse and worse every day, Hetty; I declare, I don't remember much better than that poor soul up stairs."

"You have so many things to think of," said Hetty; "you don't let me do half enough. Now go over to Mrs. Miller's—she won't be easy till you've told her what you think about the baby."

"Oh yes, that was it," replied Susan, rising, and walking slowly toward the outer door.

"Where is she going?" she heard Valery ask, from the pantry.

"It's just like his voice," muttered the woman. "Oh, it seems as if it would strike me deaf and blind every time I hear it!"

She quickened her pace, but on the threshold of the porch turned and looked at Hetty, her features working nervously.

"I'm a wicked woman," she said, in a low tone, as the girl went forward to meet her. "Oh, Hetty, Hetty, I try, but I can't help it—I can't! Be good to her—make her feel at home—I won't act so when I get back."

She walked away down the steps, and Het-

ty stood watching her as she passed along the flower-bordered path which led to the gate.

"Well," said the girl to herself, "I don't know! When I look at Susan Brent and mother, I'm ready to be a Universalist, and think people get discipline enough in this world; but when I think about folks like that Philip Conway—and his wife's worse—then, if there's not some place for scorching, I don't see how you're going to make things even!"

"Are you there, Hetty?" called Valery.

"There and here and all over," cried Hetty, cheerfully. "I haven't got the dinner dishes washed yet. Come out into the kitchen, when you've finished your bread-and-milk."

She departed into the regions at the back of the house, and Valery soon followed. While Hetty did her work, as usual, at lightning speed, the two held an animated conversation, and enjoyed themselves immensely.

CHAPTER VI.

MOTHER AND CHILD.

HETTY FLINT was fourteen now, rather tall for her age, with a face which promised to be pretty, though it looked more willful and determined than was exactly pleasant. She would have her own way; no one except Susan Brent could ever influence her in the least; and even in their intercourse, Hetty was decidedly the ruling spirit.

Her father was a worthless, dissipated man, who had fallen from a good position to what would have been absolute want, had not his wife's indomitable energy intervened. There were three children, Hetty the eldest, and she accepted her hard fortune with ready cheerfulness, though she had mapped out a future for herself very different from the dull present, and never lost faith in her ability to overtake it, sorely as it might puzzle her to tell how or when that success was to come about.

She had a great thirst for knowledge, and, hard as she worked, found leisure to read and study. The Corners boasted a good school, kept by a man whose health had held him back from his rightful career, and during such seasons as Hetty's duties prevented her attending the classes, he came each evening to the farmhouse to give her lessons, so much interested in her talents and perseverance that he could not bear to leave her unaided.

It would sound absurd to write of any other than an American girl in that walk of life, but Hetty was not only a more than average English scholar; she had mastered Latin enough to read the first three books of the *Æneid*, and could have asked for something to eat and a place to sleep had she suddenly been landed in France. This is by no means an unusual case, as every person who has lived in a country neighborhood of the Middle States could testify, though the girl's courage, independence,

and boundless ambition certainly were beyond the qualities one often meets in any rank.

The village possessed a circulating library, and Hetty had devoured every attainable volume in the line of romance, from those of Miss Edgeworth's reign to the novels of the present period. She was acquainted with the best biographies, and had reveled in works of travel about the famed countries she meant hereafter to see, until they seemed as familiar as the quiet haunts in which her existence had hitherto passed. It was a miracle that, between work and study, her health remained uninjured, but nothing ever affected it; she scarcely knew fatigue; and often, after a day's unrelenting labor which would have tired a strong man, she spent more than half the night over her books, forgetful of every thing but their charm. With all this she never neglected Lucy, never was too busy to find time to amuse her; her spirits never flagged, her courage never yielded, and her presence afforded the one gleam of light in the desolate homestead. Susan Brent clung to her as helplessly as the poor demented invalid, and with Hetty alone could break a little through the stern reticence in which she shrouded the shame and misery that, so far from lightening as the years went on, only pressed more wearily upon her soul.

The oddest thing about Hetty was the fact that so confirmed a dreamer proved practical and efficient in the daily round of the commonplace existence she led. Of her visions and fancies she seldom spoke, or of her plans for the future, aware that she should be set down as an idiot by every body who knew her; but young as Valery was, she found in her a more congenial companion than often fell in her way. Their talk about the novels they had read set Hetty off into one of her dreams, which were so clear and strong that it was very possible they might to a certain extent prove prophetic from her faith in them, aided by her force of will.

"You don't suppose I mean to spend my life dish-washing and scrubbing floors, do you?" cried she. "Not a bit! It's all very well for now, but it's not going to last much longer."

"Oh, what shall you do, Hetty?" asked Valery, eagerly.

"Well, I don't mind telling you," returned she, rubbing a tumbler with a linen cloth till it shone again; "because, though you're little yet, you can understand things, and you won't tell."

"Indeed I'll not," promised Valery, perfectly able to enjoy the idea of having a secret confided to her. "What is it, Hetty?"

"I shall be either an actress or a duchess—I haven't made up my mind which," replied Hetty, setting the tumbler on the table, and looking at her companion with as much confidence as though the mere assertion of her resolve had already settled the matter. "I expect you know what both these are."

"Oh yes," said Valery. "Like Mrs. Sid-

dons—and—and that French woman—and Miss Cushman—I've read about them all—and I've read Shakespeare too—that's what they play out of."

"Exactly," returned Hetty; "and sometime I'll show you how to do Juliet—only I like Richard the Third best."

"But he was a man," said Valery, doubtfully.

"Well, it's better to be a man and crooked as that, than a woman—but never mind," retorted Hetty. "I don't know—sometimes I think I'd rather be a duchess; it must be so beautiful to have diamonds—did you ever see any, Valery?"

"Yes, Miss Dorothy has some, but she never wears them."

"More foolish she," pronounced Hetty. "But when I'm a duchess, I mean to have as many as Aladdin had."

"There aren't any duchesses in this country," objected Valery.

"Of course I shall go to Europe," replied Hetty; "there are dukes enough there to make me a duchess twenty times over."

"Oh!" gasped Valery, absolutely breathless at the magnificence of her friend's revelations.

"But I've not made up my mind," pursued Hetty; "it's a grand thing to be an actress; I suppose the duchesses have rather a poky time of it, after all. But there, I nearly cracked this saucer—what a fool I am! Just let me set the dishes away, and we'll go out to the barn. Old Lady Black Ruff has a nest somewhere, and I've been hunting it for three days; I'll bet she don't cheat me much longer, going about as important as if she was the goose that laid the golden eggs."

Hunting hens' nests was almost the only recreation the embryo duchess ever allowed herself, and she entered into it with the same zeal she carried through her actual duties. It was a wonder she never broke her neck climbing up into hay-lofts or walking over square beams elevated twenty or thirty feet above the floor; but the worst mischance which befell her in these reckless sports was a torn dress or getting her eyes full of hay-seed. It was impossible, she said, that she should be killed, because she had not yet accomplished her destiny. Look at Josephine in the Reign of Terror, or President Jackson, or David feeding his sheep, for that matter. People had to accomplish their destiny; when this was done, let them look out—she knew.

The kitchen was put to rights at last; even Hetty admitted that every thing was in order, and she was by no means easy to please, inasmuch that when it chanced to be necessary to employ some neighboring woman for extra work, the unfortunate creature passed a hard day of it with Hetty. The girl had been known once to pull down a whole week's washing from the lines, because it was necessary, according to her, that all the sheets should hang together and the pillow-cases by themselves; while, in

the matter of shirts and under-clothing, no garment must stray from the place where the rest of its kind were fastened. Hetty was ready to show her small friend the mysteries of the hay-loft, but had stopped in the kitchen to treat her first to some verses from the opening canto of Marmion, lately fallen in her way, when once more that weird, strange music floated through the house, coming nearer and nearer, so beautiful, so unearthly, that Valery involuntarily drew close to Hetty's side, whispering,

"Do you hear it? There it is again! That's not the wind, Hetty—it can't be the wind!"

Before the girl could answer, Lucy Stuart appeared from the inner room and stood in the door-way; her white dress floating about her like a cloud, her long golden hair, here and there prematurely streaked with gray, streaming over her shoulders—the only sign of age apparent, for the face was free from lines, and the wandering, wistful expression of the soft blue eyes gave a look almost child-like to the whole countenance.

"That's the same lady," whispered Valery; "I saw her here before."

"Don't be frightened," replied Hetty; "she's a nice lady."

"I'm not afraid," Valery answered, retreating a little from her side, and remaining perfectly quiet.

Lucy became conscious of their presence; she glanced at Hetty and smiled; then her eyes sought the spot where Valery waited. She looked back at Hetty, and, pointing her finger toward the little girl, said in a low, hesitating voice,

"Don't you see her this time? She is looking at me. I wonder you never can see them, Mabel. And this is such a lovely angel; I shall call her Sunset."

"This is a little girl that has come to make us a visit," Hetty replied.

Lucy frowned and turned pettishly away, saying,

"I wonder at you, Mabel! I thought you were my friend; but I've nobody—nobody; don't tell me wicked stories, Mabel."

She always called Hetty by that name; the girl's own commonplace appellation was unpleasant to her for some reason, and she had chosen this, never so hopelessly astray in her mind, but that she remembered her companion, though she imagined her first one person, then another, just as she varied her delusions in regard to herself. Sometimes she was Amy Robsart, and Hetty her faithful Janet; Mrs. Brent a spy of Varney's; or it might be Queen Elizabeth, trying to find out the secret of her marriage. She was usually some heroine or dethroned sovereign; but whatever fancy had possession of her, Hetty always played a part as the faithful friend who protected her from the imaginary dangers by which she was surrounded.

"I am glad you have come, Sunset," she continued, in her sweet, plaintive tones. "I

think you are the prettiest angel I have seen! I know you, if your wings are hidden under your blue frock."

"Don't contradict her," whispered Hetty quickly, moving nearer Valery. "Let her say what she likes."

"Don't step between us, Mabel," said Lucy. "You can see this one, can't you, though you never did any of the others?"

"Oh yes, I see her," replied Hetty. "What a pretty name you have given her!"

"Sunset; but it was not I," said Lucy. "I dreamed last night she was coming, and they told me that was her name."

"What ails her?" questioned Valery, creeping up to Hetty, rather awe-stricken than alarmed. "What makes her talk so?"

"Never mind," said Hetty; "but don't contradict her."

"I am so glad you have come, dear Sunset," continued Lucy; "but I was in hopes you would bring the lilies in your hand; then I should know I was to go away with you. I don't remember where I've seen your face; who was it painted such lovely baby angels—what was his name, Mabel?"

"Was it Raphael?" asked the girl, for Lucy had so often gone over the names of the old painters when her insane fancies led her to believe herself again in Italy, that Hetty knew them very well.

"No, no; not Raphael! How you do forget, Mabel! We must go back to Rome, I think—only there's the water—the black water! Oh, don't let me see it—don't!" she cried, becoming suddenly agitated, and putting up her hands in terror.

"No, no, you sha'n't see it," returned Hetty, soothingly. "Look at Sunset."

"Yes, yes, my lovely Sunset," said Lucy, smiling again; then catching sight of the child's face, over which tears were beginning to stream, she added, anxiously, "Oh, she is weeping—don't let her—don't!"

"No, no; she'll not cry," Hetty said.

"I should like her to kiss me," pursued Lucy; "but it's not right—she would fade away and never come back."

"Shall I kiss you?" Valery asked, stepping forward.

"No, no; I'm not fit yet! Up yonder, you know; sometime I shall see you there." Her voice changed to a mournful wail, and she cried, "Oh, Mabel, Mabel, I'm so tired—so tired! I thought this time she would have the lilies in her hand; it's so long to wait—so long!"

"What does she mean?" Valery whispered, getting close to Hetty again.

"Never mind—don't notice," answered the girl, cautiously.

"What are you saying to Sunset, Mabel?" demanded Lucy, irritably. "I don't like whispering—it reminds me of the prison! Where are they all? I'll not have them coming here; if I must be kept shut up in this place, I'll not have them torment me—that was promised."

"No, no; you shall not be tormented," replied Hetty. "Don't think about any body unpleasant—look at Sunset."

"Yes, yes, dear pretty Sunset!" said Lucy, smiling and kissing her hand to the little girl. "I dreamed about you, Sunset. I knew you would come—if only you had brought the lilies."

"Another time," said Hetty; "it will be long."

"Have you been dreaming too?" asked Hetty, wearily. "We have waited so long, Mabel, first to get away from this place, and now—where is it Sunset will take us, did you say?"

"Off into fairy-land," asserted Hetty, in a voice so confident that Valery wondered if it was true she still believed, like the tiny children, in that marvelous realm.

"No, no; not there," shuddered Lucy; "that is like the other life, you know—the dead—dead life he told me about. Oh, Mabel, it's dark and awful just when the light is clearest—not there!"

"No, not there," said Hetty; "but up—up where the light never fades."

"Where Sunset lives," returned Lucy, quieted by Hetty's words and manner. "Who is she like, Mabel? I never saw an angel that looks like her, but she reminds me of some one—away off, I think in that other world—but who was it, Mabel?"

"Shall we go up stairs?" said Hetty, anxious to get away, lest, as occasionally happened, she should recollect the baby she believed dead, and even utter Valery's name. "Come and play on the piano a little."

"No, I want to stay here; I like to look at Sunset," Lucy replied.

"I think she has to go," returned Hetty, entering so completely into the poor creature's vagaries that probably most people would have considered her as hopelessly mad as Lucy herself, though it proved always the most successful method of keeping the dazed senses tranquil. "Sunset has a long way to fly back, you know, and I'm afraid those people will come."

"The gray woman?" inquired Lucy. "Oh, I can't see her—don't let me see her! Come up stairs, Mabel, come."

"I'll be back in a few minutes," Hetty whispered to the child.

"Good-bye, Sunset," added Lucy. "Fly away back to Paradise, Sunset, but be sure you come again—fly away, fly away!"

She retreated slowly, kissing her hand to her daughter, and beginning anew the soft, low chant which she would sing by the hour during her happy periods. Valery kissed her hand in return, able to comprehend that the beautiful lady's mind was astray, and Lucy sang to her quaint melody,

"Sunset, farewell, farewell! Fly away—away."

She glided off through the inner room, lingeringly, followed by Hetty, and still the echo of

her song floated back to the spot where Valery stood.

The mother and child had parted, never to meet any more till both passed beyond the mists which veil this lower world; perhaps to remain alike unconscious of the interview until their freed souls should recognize each other in the clear light of eternity and recall this far-off season. As Lucy reached the door which opened on the staircase, Susan Brent came across the porch and entered the parlor. For several months Lucy's fear of her sister had steadily increased, until Susan hardly dared intrude upon her; and if the demented creature chanced to have a fancy for walking about the house, Mrs. Brent was obliged to hide in her own bedroom. There she would sit and listen to Lucy's wild talk, always hearing herself described as a spy or some wicked queen, till she felt as keen pangs of remorse as though this dread were caused by her own conduct—she, poor soul, who had never in her whole life given the sufferer an unkind word or look.

She would have retreated now, but it was too late; Lucy had caught sight of her and stopped short, holding fast to Hetty's dress with one hand, the other raised in a gesture of repulsion toward Susan.

"Elizabeth has come," she said, in a sharp, strained voice. "She shall not speak! They promised that if I would stay here in the castle she should never trouble me again! I know—she wants to murder me as she did the others—but I'll not give up the parchments—I will not!"

"Come to your room till she is gone," urged Hetty; "we'll lock the door so that she can't get in."

"No," returned Lucy; "I'll not stir!—Woman, give me back my child!"

"Oh, get her up stairs, Hetty—do get her up stairs!" moaned Susan. "I can't bear it—I can't!"

Hetty broke from Lucy, and ran to shut the door that led from the kitchen, saying to Valery as she did so,

"Go into the back-yard and wait for me; go, that's a good girl."

"Mabel, Mabel!" shrieked Lucy. "Have you deserted me—is there nobody left?—all gone—husband—child—all!"

Hetty only waited to see that Valery was safe out of hearing, then she returned to the frightened creature, and put both arms about her, kissing and fondling her as she said,

"Here I am—here I am! I won't leave you—I only wanted to tell them to take the woman away."

"Yes, send her away—send her away," answered Lucy.

"Go out," Hetty said to Susan, humoring the dazed creature's whim with her usual readiness. "This house is ours—go."

"Go!" repeated Lucy; "go! Let me never see your face again!"

With a sharp cry of anguish Susan hurried

into the garden, and sat down to wait until Hetty should come to tell her that she had succeeded in quieting the poor daff one.

But Lucy's violent agitation rose beyond even Hetty's control, and she was at her wits' end for expedients. The doctor had told them several months before that, as the invalid's physical health was so much weakened, any sudden excitement might prostrate her utterly, in which case she would live only a few days, perhaps hours.

She rushed up and down the chamber, crying and screaming that her tormentors were in pursuit, her voice so wild, her face and gestures so passionate, that for the first time in all those years of watchfulness Hetty felt a little alarmed. At last she assured Lucy they would get away from the house when night came, and pretended to busy herself arranging packets of their clothing. The mad-woman seized upon the idea with delight, though even then she was not quieted, but kept running to and fro, listening, thinking her enemies near, and exerting her whole strength to barricade the door with the heaviest articles of furniture she could drag against it.

The sound of her voice, the rolling of the tables, reached Valery's ears as she stood waiting at the back of the house. She grew terrified; crept away through the garden, and came upon Susan, crouched on the ground near the porch, her face hidden in her hands.

"Oh, what is the matter?" demanded Valery. "What ails that poor lady?"

Susan uttered a fresh moan, and buried her face closer in her hands, her whole frame shaking with nervous tremors dreadful to witness.

"Don't, please don't!" sobbed Valery. "Oh, what is the matter? I'm so frightened—I'm so frightened!"

The pleading accents went straight to Susan's heart, and she tried to compose herself.

"Don't be afraid," she said, "Hetty will get her quiet."

Valery, encouraged by the tone, ran to her aunt and knelt on the grass beside her, leaning her head on Susan's shoulder.

"I'm so sorry," she sobbed; "so sorry! Please love me—please love me!"

"Good little girl, good child!" Susan said, softly, and now she could weep a little, and the tears relieved her.

"You're sorry about her," Valery went on. "Who is she? Aunt Susan—'tisn't—'tisn't my mother—she's dead."

"I can't tell you about the lady," Susan answered; "you are too young to understand; but you must always pity her, and love her as I do! Promise, Valery, you will?"

"Always," Valery replied; "always! shall I go up stairs? She was glad to see me—maybe I can help Hetty."

"No, no; don't!" pleaded Susan, holding her fast. "Wait a little—I'll be better in a minute! Don't mind if I speak sharply—I'm not angry—you're a good girl, Valery."

At this moment there was the sound of wheels stopping at the gate, and Valery looked up, exclaiming,

"It's Miss Dorothy—it's Miss Dorothy!"

Susan rose, took her hand, and led her down the path. Miss Conway saw them; she dropped the reins, and uttered an exclamation of thankfulness.

"Here she is, all safe," said Susan, quietly.

"Thank God!" cried Miss Dorothy. "Oh, Valery, Valery, what a fright you gave me—what a fright you gave me!"

She stepped out of the low carriage; in another instant Valery was in her arms, sobbing on her bosom, and Miss Dorothy's heart throbbed with a yearning affection over the poor innocent such as she had never before felt.

"You—you're not angry?" whispered the child.

"Angry, Valery? no, indeed," replied Miss Conway, trying, as was natural to her, to keep aloof from any thing like a dramatic scene.

"That brute of a woman treated you abominably; but you needn't have run away from the old maid for that! Didn't you know you belonged to me—that my home is yours?"

"But—but—she said you couldn't love me—that if you tried you couldn't—that I was a trouble."

"She's a fool, my dear, and that's all about it," interrupted Miss Dorothy. "You're my own precious little girl, so don't ever get any more nonsense in your head! The next time you want to run away tell me, and I'll run with you, remember!"

Valery laughed and cried both at once, but she could not be exactly content till she had asked more questions.

"You're sure I'm no trouble? I love you so—I wouldn't trouble you for any thing—indeed, indeed I wouldn't."

"Then don't run away any more, pigeon; you frightened me half to death! If I didn't love you, I shouldn't have driven the ponies here at a canter to take you home."

"Am I going back?" asked Valery, timidly.

"Of course; don't you want to? Bless me, there's Troubadour mincing his heart out this minute."

"But—but— isn't she there?" broke in Valery.

"No, and never will be again—remember that! Now be satisfied, and let me speak to Mrs. Brent."

"She's my aunt Susan—Hetty said so," returned Valery, but stood quietly holding fast to Miss Dorothy's dress, perfectly content and happy, while that lady stretched out her hand and spoke a few words to Susan.

"Every thing just as usual?" she asked.

"Worse," replied Susan, shaking her head; "I've never seen her so bad. Hark!" Just then a wild shriek rang down from Lucy's chamber, again and again, so sharp and agonized that Miss Dorothy cried out in alarm. As she and Susan, forgetful of the ponies, ran,

actuated by the same impulse, toward the house, Hetty Flint appeared at an upper window and re-assured them by her gestures.

"Was it seeing her?" asked Miss Dorothy, with a motion toward Valery.

"No," Susan said, "it was me; she grows more and more afraid. Don't—I can't tell you."

"There, there, I know," replied Miss Dorothy, laying her hand on the woman's shoulder. "Keep up all the courage you can, Susan. This dreary old world isn't forever—there's a little comfort in that."

Susan moved away in silence; Miss Dorothy began to talk to Valery again about trifling things, to keep the child's attention engaged.

"I saw your old German at the Corners," she said; "he declares you're a fairy in disguise! I'm thinking to have him do some carvings for our church this summer; wouldn't that be a good idea?"

"How nice!" cried Valery. "Then he'll teach me—he said he would."

"I'll go call John," Mrs. Brent said, turning toward them again, both face and voice having recovered their usual stony composure. "The ponies must have a feed."

"No," said Miss Dorothy, in her peremptory fashion; "I must start back at once. Valery, where's your hat?"

She knew that it was better on all accounts they should be gone as soon as possible, and Susan offered no opposition. Valery ran to the house, and took her bonnet, and the precious basket which held Cleopatra, off the kitchen table. But she could not go without saying good-bye to Hetty, so she went into the back-yard and called softly to the girl. Hetty put her head out of the window, saying,

"I'll come in a minute."

"I want to say good-bye," returned Valery; "I'm going home."

"Good-bye; I'm so glad you came! I'll come over to see you before long," said Hetty, hurriedly. "Valery, tell Mrs. Brent to call John, and ask Miss Dorothy—but never mind, I'll step to the front of the house and see her."

"Good-bye, dear Hetty—you love me."

"Yes, indeed; I'd come down and give you a good hug if I could!"

"Mabel, Mabel, what are you doing?" cried Lucy's voice.

Hetty disappeared, and Valery walked through the house out to the gate.

"Hetty's coming to the window, Miss Dorothy," she said; "she wants to speak to you."

"Stand here by the ponies, Susan; you wait, Val," commanded Miss Dorothy, and walked up the garden-path as Hetty appeared again at an upper window.

"What is it?" asked Miss Dorothy.

"Tell the doctor to come right away," ordered Hetty, too earnest to stand upon forms.

"Have Susan call John Brent."

"Is she worse, Hetty?"

"I never saw her so bad as she's been; she

is worn out, and lying on the floor—it's the end, I expect."

"God grant it!" returned Miss Dorothy. "If I can do any thing, let me know; it's best to get the child away at once."

Hetty nodded assent. A low moan, like that of some frightened animal, sounded from the distance, and Miss Dorothy hastened off to escape the tones which were the more agonizing because she was powerless to be of any assistance to the sufferer.

"Kiss Susan, Val, and we'll be off," she said, going back to the gate.

Valery put up her face to her aunt, and after a second's hesitation Mrs. Brent stooped and for the first time pressed her lips upon the child's forehead, then helped her into the carriage in silence.

"Hetty wants John," Miss Dorothy said; "don't be frightened—it's all quiet now. I'll send the doctor as I go through the village. Good-bye, Susan; let me hear, you know."

"Good-bye," repeated Valery; "I shall come again some time, Aunt Susan—mayn't I, Miss Dorothy?"

Miss Dorothy was busy gathering up the reins, and so avoided an answer. In truth, though Valery felt sorry to leave Hetty Flint, it was a relief to get away from the mysterious house and this stony-faced relative, and return to the bright, cheerful home which seemed dearer from the fact that she had thought it lost to her forever. When they reached the village, Miss Dorothy halted at the doctor's house and called lustily till she brought out the whole establishment, with the exception of the particular person she wanted. The head and front of the group was the most remarkable-looking woman Valery had ever set eyes on, and if she had not proved her claims to humanity by a torrent of exclamations, the child would have been much more likely to think her a peripatetic rag-bag owned by the physician's wife, than that lady in person.

"I want to know—if it ain't Miss Conway! Why, I'm all took aback, though I did hear you drove by—been to John Brent's—oh, rlorr—and you're looking so chipper and you."

"I want the doctor to go over there at once," broke in Miss Dorothy.

"Lucy worse? You don't say! Wal, come when it may, a body can't help bein' thankful."

"Where is the doctor?" asked Miss Dorothy a second time, ruthlessly interrupting a flood of talk.

"Land's sake, he's gone to Mumford's—but he said he was agoin' to stop to Brent's on the way hum; I dessay he's there by this time—and Lucy's worse! Why, dear me—do tell!"

Here she was able to remove her admiring gaze from Miss Dorothy's bonnet, and became aware of Valery's presence; the last ejaculation having reference to her surprise at sight of the little girl. Miss Dorothy was about driving on, but the woman got so directly in

front of the ponies that she would have had absolutely to drive over her, so she was compelled to wait.

"Why, that's little Valery, I expect," continued the doctor's spouse. "Hain't heard she drove over with you—dear me! Mighty pretty, ain't she? Poor little dear!"

"Good-bye," said Miss Dorothy; "I'm in great haste," and this time she started the ponies, rather indifferent whether she crushed her tormentor or not. The doctor's wife fluttered back to the steps, and looked after the carriage, muttering,

"Them Conways! Oh, pride'll have a fall some day! She's as bad as her brother—worse, I've no doubt, if the truth was known! Ain't she flesh and blood, that a body musn't pass good-day, I'd like to hear? Nothin', but an old maid, when you come to it! I guess I'm the doctor's wife, if she is Miss Conway."

Unfortunately for the man in question she was, and probably during the ten years of their married state he had never ceased to wonder what insanity induced him to elevate her from the position she had formerly occupied in his dwelling as housekeeper, to the rank of its mistress. But as she asked him, and he was a bashful man where women were concerned, he found no excuse; so she had her will.

"What made her say 'poor little dear?'" demanded Valery, as they drove down the quiet street.

"Simple idioecy—just what inspires all her remarks," replied Miss Dorothy. "But look, Valery, there's old Hans Vrooman."

She checked the ponies, and Hans hobbled up to the carriage, so full of delight at seeing Valery again, that for a little he grew utterly German and incomprehensible, and Miss Dorothy said,

"Now, Vrooman, you'll certainly 'dislocate your jaws! Do stop those dreadful words—it sounds as if you were cursing us, root and branch."

"The brave lady likes her joke," returned Hans, laughing; for she had often purchased carvings of him in New York, and he knew her odd ways very well. "Always likes her joke, the brave lady."

"That sounds more human," returned Miss Dorothy. "I never blame people because English isn't their native tongue! but when they can speak it, I call it wicked to go back to such heathenish dialects."

"Ach, mein Gott! The language that Goethe spoke—that Schiller in writed!" cried Hans, in dismay.

"Well, well, I say I don't blame them," repeated Miss Dorothy; "if they managed to do any thing with those horrible words, I've no doubt they would have been quite remarkable if they could have talked a Christian language."

"Ja, ja! She likes her joke," said Hans, "And how is the small one—glad to go home, heim?"

"Yes, indeed," replied Valery. "And I'm so much obliged to you, dear Hans; and oh, Hans! Miss Dorothy says maybe you will do some things for our church, and then I can see you work, and you'll show me how, won't you?"

"Bless the child!" cried Miss Dorothy. "I never heard such a chatter-box in my life."

"Yes, yes; Hans learn her," said the old man in delight; "he will indeed. A grand head, brave lady, a grand head," he continued, addressing Miss Dorothy, as he pointed his lean fingers at the child.

"Nonsense," replied the spinster, though a smile softened the severity of her words; "just head enough to get respectably through the world. Don't spoil her with flattery, old Hans."

"What is there can't be spoiled—the brave lady knows. Wait five—ten—fifteen years—great artist the small one—old Hans sees; he knows the signs."

"You ridiculous old wretch!" cried Miss Dorothy, in horror. "Let me hear no more such nonsense; an artist, indeed—I don't want any geniuses growing up about me, I can tell you."

"Ah," said Hans, "we want and we want not, but the good God He send what seems best all the same."

"Well, I hope He won't send this child any such fancies," exclaimed Miss Dorothy, glancing uneasily at her companion. "But, Hans, before you go back to Newburg come over and see the church. I've set my heart on a carved altar and railing, and any quantity of decorations."

"Ja, ja! Hans is sure to come! Adieu, the brave lady; adieu, small one; I kiss the hands to both," cried the old man.

"Good-bye, dear Hans," called Valery, as Miss Dorothy started the ponies at the top of their speed, after her usual reckless fashion. "Be sure to come and see me, Hans."

She was rather quiet during the drive; but whenever Miss Dorothy looked down at her, the sensitive, mobile features brightened with a happy smile, and the brown eyes lighted into such beauty that the spinster wondered she had never before noticed how pretty the child was growing.

They were in sight of the picturesque old mansion—the pride and delight of Miss Dorothy's heart—and as they drove up the winding road, and saw Nurse Benson standing on the veranda, with Troubadour elevating his tail like a signal-flag by her side, Valery clapped her hands in ecstasy.

"You're glad to get home again, eh?" said Miss Dorothy.

"So glad—oh, so glad!" cried Valery. "Do you like to have me, do you truly—truly?"

"Of course I do, mousey—recollect that once for all—what I say I mean," replied Miss Dorothy. "This is your home; the people that don't like you and me must stay out of it. Now be a happy little girl—don't think about what has happened—don't ask questions; just

remember you are my good child, and be content."

No other words were exchanged upon the subject, but Valery never forgot Miss Dorothy's assurance, and rested upon it completely. And while she slept quietly in her dainty bed that night, dreaming vaguely of some wonderful figure old Hans had carved, though the face was that of the lady in her aunt Susan's house, John Brent's family were holding a sad vigil. The doctor remained until late, and promised to return the next morning, though he told them honestly there was very little he could do. So two days elapsed; when the third drew to a close, Lucy Stuart lay dying; and those faithful hearts which had guarded her so carefully during the long darkness of the past, stood about her, and could only feel thankful that her final moments were allowed to be so tranquil.

Her reason had sufficiently returned so that she knew them all—realized that years had gone—was full of love and gratitude to Susan, and the poor woman's memories of this parting would in a measure efface the bitterness of the previous trial.

Lucy still spoke of her child as dead, and they did not attempt to undeceive her.

"I'm not afraid," she said, softly; "Jesus pardoned the poor Magdalene—remember that, Susan. Kiss me, dear—and you, Hetty—how kind you have been to me! Is John there?—good John—dear John—always so kind—after all—all—"

Her voice died away, she felt blindly about for John's hand, and when he put it in hers she lay quiet awhile.

"It is over," she said, suddenly; "Philip—God forgive Philip!"

She breathed shorter and more faintly; her eyes closed—opened once more, rested an instant on John—on Hetty; then turned and fixed a gaze of thankful love upon Susan, so sweet, so pure that the peace which filled her departing spirit cast its influence over the dreary prison of her sister's heart.

Once more the lips moved; Susan bent to catch the latest whisper,

"Ph—God forgive Philip!"

The light died suddenly out of the great eyes; the mouth softened into a smile; the freed soul passed away with that last appeal for the man who had wrecked her mortal life, and Lucy's atonement was complete.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PHARISEE'S KINDNESS.

NOT many weeks after poor Lucy was laid in the village burial-ground, Susan Brent and her husband carried into effect that long-cherished determination of forsaking the old home for some distant place, where at least their surroundings need not daily and hourly recall the memory of those dark years.

Susan wished to take Hetty Flint with them; but having given the subject due consideration, the girl decided it would be a willful thwarting of her destiny to go. That wonderful future, which looked so real, must be near at hand now, she thought, though careful no inkling of her wild dreams should reach either her mother or Susan; and she laughed to herself to think what a hopeless lunatic they would regard her could they know the motives by which she was actuated.

After the Brents' departure, Hetty returned to her home in the village near Miss Conway's house, and found matters going so ill that it was necessary to put by her visions and do every thing in her power to assist. Valery was delighted to have her within reach, and for a little Miss Dorothy contemplated the possibility of promoting Nurse Benson to the rank of housekeeper, and giving Hetty a position about her charge. But the plan came to nothing, for somehow Miss Dorothy and Hetty could not cordially sympathize. In certain marked characteristics they were not dissimilar, and those very points of resemblance, resolution and willfulness especially, seemed to each unbearable faults in the other. Hetty called Miss Dorothy haughty and overbearing, and Miss Dorothy considered Hetty headstrong and rather impertinent. Still, for a few weeks the girl was at the house as seamstress—she was wonderfully expert with her needle—and during that season she and Valery held long talks, and Hetty encouraged the child in her visionary propensities in a way of which Miss Dorothy would have strongly disapproved, had she been aware.

Then old Mr. Flint suddenly fell ill, and, to the terror of the whole neighborhood, it was found that he had caught the small-pox in a recent journey to Albany. Fear turned the entire village, as I have twice in my life known to happen, into a flock of mere brutes, capable only of remembering their own danger.

Poor Mrs. Flint sat by her husband's bedside just as the cloudy autumn afternoon was fading into a chill twilight. It was cold enough, so that fires were necessary; the leaves had begun to fall in showers from the trees, and the wind swept down the mountain gorges wintry and damp.

The sound of voices near the gate roused her from her dismal watch by the sick man, who lay moaning and raving in the delirium of fever. She heard her own name pronounced several times, rose, threw a shawl about her shoulders, and opened the door. Outside the gate stood half a dozen of the neighbors—men prominent in the petty positions attainable in a place like that. She moved wonderingly down the walk. As she approached the fence they retreated with one accord into the road, and the oldest of the group, a grim pharisaical deacon, noted for his long prayers and his hard dealings alike with his family and strangers, exclaimed, tremulously,

"That'll do, Miss Flint—you needn't come any nearer; we can hear each other talk, you know."

"What do you want?" asked she, her keen gray eyes wandering sternly over the familiar faces. "I have a sick husband alone in the house; don't keep me waiting."

"Yes, exactly—exactly; that's what we came about," returned the deacon, rather confusedly, looking at his companions for support; but they all stepped a little farther back into the road and remained silent. "Yes—we—exactly"—stammered the deacon, not finding it easy to tell their errand, fond as he was of constituting himself spokesman on every possible occasion.

"Well?" asked Mrs. Flint, impatiently; "do you mean you have come to see if you can help your old neighbor in her trouble? I've watched here alone two days and nights, and not a soul has been near me; did you think it was time to find out if we were alive or dead?"

"Yes, we know—you see the doctor says it's small-pox," faltered the deacon, striving in vain to be calm and dignified.

"You needn't have come to tell me that," retorted she. "The doctor told me, and he said I must do the best I could. He puts medicines down at the gate every day, and I have to guess at giving them, for he says you're such a set of miserable cowards that you have threatened to drive him out of the village if he comes to do his duty by a sick man."

"Now you mustn't take it that way, Miss Flint," urged the deacon. "It ain't right to call names, you know—now is it, gentlemen? I leave it to you, one and all."

There was a feeble chorus of affirmation from the group, but it ceased quickly under Mrs. Flint's rejoinder.

"It's right to tell the truth," said she, "and I have done it. Now what do you want? It's plain you haven't come with any good thought in your minds. I want to know what has brought you."

The deacon turned toward his companions, and a hurried discussion ensued among them. The Pharisee was anxious to retreat from the prominent position he had accepted; but it was too late—the entire company insisted upon his telling the story.

"You called the meeting—you were chairman," said one; "it's for you to speak;" and the others reiterated the words, while the deacon shuffled his feet, and grew more and more uneasy, as Mrs. Flint stood looking full in his eyes with a glance by no means pleasant to encounter.

She was a small, plain-featured woman, grown prematurely old and gray; but as she stood there, one hand resting on the gate, her head raised in stern defiance, there was an absolute grandeur in her face and demeanor which awed the whole party.

"Will nobody speak?" she exclaimed. "Deacon, I hear them say it's your place; you

have words enough usually; it must be a bad errand indeed that has brought you all here when your tongue fails you! What's this about a meeting where you were chairman? Did you have to call a meeting to find out whether it would be right to help old neighbors in sickness and distress? You needn't have taken so much trouble, deacon, if you had remembered your Bible a little better!"

"Yes, exactly; we did have a meetin'," replied the deacon, spurred on to new courage by the whispers of his friends and the angry emotions which Mrs. Flint's upbraiding roused. "And we came to a—to an anonymous decision what ought to be done." Here he looked down again, glanced back at the group for support, found none, and so repeated, in his most pompous voice, "A anonymous decision!"

"I am glad," retorted the little woman, whose tongue on occasion could be sharp as a needle, and who was not slow to take advantage of the deacon's unfortunate habit of twisting certain long words he had a weakness for using. "It's the first time, girl or woman, that I ever knew this neighborhood to discuss any matter without a quarrel; and if the decision was unanimous, I don't wonder you made it anonymous too, for it must be something to be ashamed of if you were all of one mind."

"Oh now, see here, Miss Flint!" cried the deacon; "you ain't greetin' us in a Christian spirit; you ain't, indeed."

"Maybe not," said she; "I always recollect what my Bible says about throwing away pearls."

The position was becoming any thing but agreeable; the deacon's supporters, eager to end the scene and get beyond the reach of the keen-eyed woman's irony, again urged him to speak out and be done.

"The sooner the better," said Mrs. Flint; "I want to go back to my husband—he may wake any minute and need me."

"Jest so, jest so!" assented the deacon.

"And we've made arrangements that you should be with him; of course it's right you should, and there's bread and meat, and every thing made as comfortable as it can be—we tended to that afore we come to you, Miss Flint, for I said from the first, 'Brethren, let us do it all in a prayerful spirit.'"

Mrs. Flint took a step forward; the whole group retreated, and the deacon pressed a handkerchief wet with vinegar to his nose and mouth, calling through it in smothered accents,

"We can hear; stay where you be; Miss Flint—we can hear appropriately."

She leaned both hands on the gate and flashed her angry eyes full upon them.

"Tell it all out, and be quick about it," she said, in a low, stern voice; "quick, or you'll have no chance to say it to me."

At that instant a heavy farm-wagon turned up toward the house from the village road, halted near, and the driver sat watching the scene, apparently at a loss how to act. Mrs.

Flint darted one rapid glance; she saw that a straw-pallet and some blankets lay in the wagon bottom; she fully understood their errand now.

"Do you mean to speak, deacon?" she asked, in the same ominous tone.

"Wal, there 'tis now; there's the wagon; we expected we'd a-got it all fixed afore Foster came; but you kind o' hender matters by not meetin' us in a Christian spirit, Miss Flint."

"Do you know what I'm thinking, Deacon Jackson? The meeting you and I shall have before the judgment-seat and the God you outrage with your prayers," cried the woman, so terrible in voice and aspect that not a man but uttered a little gasp of awe. "Once more, what do you want—what is that wagon for?"

"Why, it'll take you both as comfortable as can be," stammered the deacon; "there's the bed and all. My wife put in the blankets herself, and you needn't never send 'em back. I says to her, says I, Eliza, let Miss Flint keep the hull lot."

"Who is 'it to take?" demanded she, the momentary excitement subsiding into her former unnatural composure.

"Why, both on you, o' course; both—it's according to Scripture—the wife shall cleave to the husband! And it's all been made as comfortable as it could be fixed. Mr. Osborn here sent a kitchen-stove down himself, and plenty of wood; it's all ready for you to set up house-keeping without a speck of trouble! I do assure you, Miss Flint, we've done the hull in a Christian spirit; try and meet us half-way! If you felt it would help you any, I'm ready to pray a little with you afore you start."

"Before I start where?" she asked, cold and motionless, her eyes never releasing him from their searching gaze.

"You ought to git off right away," pursued the deacon; "it ain't good for a sick man to be out in the evening air. It's down by the cross-roads, you know—it's a barn Mr. Fellowes has just built. I don't know as it'll be safe even to use it for hay after; but he don't mind that! We're all willing to lose blankets or any thing, if it'll make you comfortable; we ain't going to set nothing of that sort in the way of our duty."

Mrs. Flint moved slowly round, as a figure cut out of stone might have moved, so that she confronted the rest of the party, who had retreated to one side and left the deacon standing unsupported while he spoke.

"I want to hear you all say it," she said, "every one of you! Each man has got to speak for himself! James Fellowes, when my husband and you were young men, he lent you money to set up in business; and just after I was married I took care of you three weeks, night and day, when you had typhus fever—have you come here to help murder Caleb Flint?"

"Why, now, don't put it in that way—mercy's sake!" groaned the deacon.

"Be silent," she ordered, without glancing

at him; "you have told your story. I want to know if it is true, James Fellowes; will you speak?"

The man hung his head and looked the picture of wretchedness, but the whispered expostulations of his companions forced him to attempt an answer.

"You see the whole village's set on it," he faltered. "They say it ain't safe for Caleb to be lying here right among our wives and children—"

"As it were," put in the deacon.

"It don't seem right, Mrs. Flint," added another, "to expose a whole neighborhood to such danger—you oughtn't to want it yourself."

"That's Morrison's voice," said she; "no wonder he tries to slink out of my sight. That's the man who has sold my husband liquor, and encouraged him to drink—now there's nothing else to get, he want's his life."

There rose a broken chorus of remonstrance and excuse, but she silenced them with a wave of her hand.

"Two more have answered," said she. "Mr. Osborn, do you want to help in the murder?"

"I—I'm sorry you take it so hard, Mrs. Flint," returned the unfortunate little merchant, who was the laughing-stock of the whole neighborhood on account of the abject slavery in which he was held by his strong-minded spouse. "You see, it wouldn't be of any use for one man to set himself in opposition to a general meeting, and we must think of our lives, as Mrs. Osborn says—"

"That will do," she interrupted. "If Mary Osborn wants a murder committed, of course you've got to help—I might as well blame a blind baby as you! But there are more here—three—four—men with wills of their own—men I have played with when we were all children—men whose wives and babies I've helped in sickness and sorrow! Speak out, every one of you—I'll hear each voice before I believe."

An instant's hesitation; hurried reproaches from the deacon and the two who had already given their verdict, then the remainder cried in concert,

"He'll have to go—it isn't safe."

"There, there!" exclaimed the deacon, impatiently. "You hear 'em, Miss Flint—we're all agreed—you hear."

"Yes, and God hears too!" she answered, turned, and walked back into the house without another word.

The group stood staring at each other in discomfited surprise, and the man in the wagon—a laborer of the deacon's, who, having had the small-pox, felt no hesitation about driving the sufferer to the shelter prepared for him—called out to know if they were going to keep him there all night.

"Now don't be precipitate, Foster, don't!" whined the deacon.

"Oh, blast the long-winded words," muttered the man. "It's my opinion that there female's more'n a match for the hull township."

The committee presented a deaf ear to the impertinence, and an animated discussion arose as to what was to be done if Mrs. Flint refused to come out with her husband.

"Wall," the deacon said at last, "if she won't hear reason, she'll have to be made to! Somebody must go and tell her we really shall be obliged to unroof the house or sumphing—I expect there'd be Scriptur' warrant for it—jest remember the children of Israel and the leprosy."

Who was to approach the cottage to give the information, became the next question; but the man in the wagon settled that by jumping to the ground and saying,

"Stand by the horses, somebody! This is a pooty job you've set afoot! I'm a stranger in these parts, but I'm gaul darned if I don't think a congregation of caranquits would have more decency than the hull meetin'-house lot of ye."

There was no reply to his insolent frankness, and he hurried up the path, calling,

"I say, Miss Flint, it's no use—you'd better be in the Samaritan desert with pison snakes and wild alligators than among these here Christians! They say if you don't go, they'll have the roof off the house, and I suppose they'd burn you up arter."

"Come in and help, if you are human," returned the woman's voice. "I've told my husband—he says he will go."

It was not many moments before the group of men in the road, anxiously waiting for Foster's return to report what Mrs. Flint said, saw him and the wife appear in the door-way, supporting between them a tall gaunt form, swathed in blankets, who tottered and groaned at each step, but did his best to bear with fortitude his twofold agony of body and mind.

The deacon was holding the horses by the bridles; at the sight he dropped them, and darted over the nearest fence, followed in eager haste by all his companions. They halted on a hillock some distance back in the field, and stood shivering and trembling, with handkerchiefs pressed to their faces.

The dusk of evening had set in; a few stars shot out in the cloudy sky; the wind swept down from the hills, keen and cold, but it wrung no word of complaint from the sick man. Mrs. Flint and Foster lifted him as well as they could—got him on the straw mattress in the wagon; before they could lay him down, he said,

"Wait! Where are they? I can't see very well."

"Standing over on the hill," his wife replied.

Flint lifted his grand old head, about which the long white hair streamed in heavy masses, his face disfigured by disease and ill courses, but handsome still, and called,

"Good-bye, neighbors; I never shall trouble you any more; speak a kind word of the old man sometimes."

They laid him down upon the straw, made him as comfortable as they could, and he said, faintly,

"It's better than I deserve, Jane; don't fret."

Mrs. Flint stood up in the wagon and looked back at the group on the hill, stretched out her hand and pointed at them, then upward to the sky.

"You called me to meet you this time," said she, in a voice that rang cold and distinct through the stillness; "when the last trumpet sounds, I'll call you, one and all, to meet me at the bar of God and answer for this day's work."

She seated herself in the bottom of the wagon, lifted her husband's head upon her lap, and the cumbrous vehicle jolted slowly down the road toward the half-open shed, away out on the edge of a morass, miles distant from any human habitation—the shelter offered by a whole village to a dying man! And that in the midst of this boasted nineteenth century—in the heart of a country which vaunts its claims to civilization and Christianity. May God have mercy on our impious sins!

The news of the barbarous treatment to which her father had been subjected by the town magnates was not slow in reaching Hetty Flint. The morning after the occurrence, as she sat busy with her needle in a little room off Valery's bed-chamber, one of Miss Dorothy's servants came back from some errand to the village and told Hetty the whole story.

Between grief and wrath the girl was nearly frantic for a while, but her native self-control asserted its supremacy by the time Miss Dorothy learned what had happened, and hastened with her usual kindness to offer not only sympathy, but the promise that every thing which money could purchase should be freely given to alleviate as much as possible the consequences of the inhuman transaction.

"You're very good—you always are," returned Hetty, dry-eyed and pale, mechanically sitting down in her chair again and picking up the work she had thrown on the floor; "I dare say nothing can be done—he'll die, of course! Oh, Miss Dorothy, and they call this a Christian land—if there is any justice anywhere—"

She broke off suddenly, and turned her face toward the window.

"My poor Hetty," answered Miss Dorothy, softly, "don't think of that, if you can help it."

"I'm a fool to waste my time," said Hetty, rising from her seat, and beginning to fold up her sewing. "Miss Dorothy, I must go and see father."

"I think you had better not, Hetty—you can do no good—your mother is an excellent nurse. I have sent over to Rusham for another doctor who isn't afraid of his neighbors. I am sure your mother would not be willing you should run any risk, since you couldn't be of the least assistance."

"I must go and see my father—I will!" re-

turned Hetty, in a slow, repressed voice, which proved much more certainly than any outburst of passionate language could have done, how thoroughly determined she was. "No matter what he has been, he is my father, and I love him! Why, Miss Dorothy, if he should die without my seeing him, I believe it would drive me crazy."

"I think you ought to be very careful, Hetty; if any body knows you have gone, I'm afraid you wouldn't be allowed to come into the village again."

"I'll go in the evening," said Hetty, "but I wouldn't keep away if I knew they would burn me alive when I got back."

Miss Dorothy could not oppose her resolution, for she knew that she should have felt the same in a similar case.

"Where are your little brother and sister?" she asked.

"They've been staying for a few weeks with my aunt Sarah over at Rusham," replied Hetty. "After I've seen father, I'll go home and get ready for them."

"Let them stay where they are," Miss Dorothy said. "And, Hetty, I suppose it would not be right to let you go back and forth from here to the—"

"Cow-shed," broke in Hetty. "That's where these Christians have sent him! No, Miss Dorothy, I wouldn't have Valery or the servants run any risk—you're right enough there. And I don't want to bring the small-pox into the village, though it would be no more than they deserve! I'll not go into the house if mother can manage to let me see him without—but see him I must!"

She put on her bonnet and shawl, and went to find Valery and bid her good-bye. The child was much distressed at losing her, but Hetty promised to return as soon as she could.

"John and Amy will be coming home, and they've got to be taken care of while mother is gone," she said.

And Valery, always reasonable, had no further opposition to offer.

But Miss Dorothy was not willing Hetty and the little ones should stay in the cottage until it had been well fumigated and aired; so it was arranged that they should take possession of a small house she owned in the outskirts of the village, and every thing needed for their comfort was sent over at once. Hetty wrote to her aunt, asking her to let the children remain for a couple of weeks longer, and set off to put in order the new home Miss Conway had placed at her disposal. Going down the village street, she came face to face with Deacon Jackson; and as there were four or five persons standing about, the deacon felt it his duty to improve the occasion by a few words for the girl's benefit.

"Good-mornin', daughter," said he.

Hetty stopped short in front of him, making no answer in words, but the flash of her gray eyes reminded him so forcibly of the way her

mother had looked at him on the previous night that the deacon felt somewhat confused, and inclined to retreat, only, as there were several witnesses, it would never do to be worsted by this saucy girl.

"Which road was you going, Hetty?" he asked, with something at once patronizing and magisterial in his tone.

"Straight ahead, like John Bunyan when the devil met him," retorted Hetty.

"Tut, tut!" said the deacon, sorely discomfited by the sounds of repressed laughter from the people who stood about. "That's more like profane language, Melitable, than I like to hear."

"It's not so much like it as your swearing was the day you couldn't get the red cow out of the garden," replied Hetty, composedly; "besides, it's as true in my case as it was in John Bunyan's, and you're always advising the Sunday-school children to tell the truth."

"Mehitable Flint," returned the deacon, adopting the nasal twang which he seemed to consider the tone proper for religious advice, "take care; the human heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked."

"You have proved that yours is, any way," said Hetty. "But look here, I don't wish to talk to you."

"I want to know where you are going, Melitable," answered the deacon, growing firmer and more pompous as he fancied that his majesty had somewhat subdued her. "We couldn't allow you to go and see your father; it wouldn't be right."

"Deacon Jackson," interrupted Hetty, "if I wished to go, three such villages as this couldn't keep me from it; but I'm going to get a house ready for the children against they come home."

"Yes—exactly—quite right—heard Miss Conway had managed it for ye—always judicial, Miss Conway."

"I don't know about that," replied Hetty, "but she's human, at all events."

"Now, Melitable, you mustn't take it in a wrong spirit," whined the deacon, setting off full swing in his prayer-meeting voice, and beginning to saw the air with his right hand. "We had a Christian duty to do, and we done it. There was our wives and little ones, and a pestilence among the tents of the children of Israel, as it were—we done our duty manfully—and you must wrestle in prayer, Melitable, against the evil spirit that's a-tryin' to blind your eyes, and fire up an unregenerate wrath in your heart."

"The evil spirit hasn't made me a murderer, as it has you and the others who drove my father out to die like a wild beast," said Hetty.

"You'd better pray less, and think of your sins more! The Bible you're so fond of quoting talks about vengeance belonging to Him, and says that He will avenge the cause of the widow and the fatherless! I'd think of it a little, deacon, if I were you, before I let any more

men's deaths lie at my door! You're quite right to compare yourself and your neighbors to the children of Israel, you're very like them indeed! When God grew weary of their sins, He left them to work out their own ruin, just as He has you; and it has led you from hypocrisy up to murder—the same road they traveled, deacon, and it will find the same end."

She walked quickly on, and left the deacon to repair his shattered dignity in the eyes of his companions as well as he could. Hetty was very busy in her new house all day; two or three of the neighboring women came in to see her, but she was in no mood to meet the familiar faces which had now become positively loathsome, so she shut herself in an upper room until they were gone, and then locked the doors so that she might run no risk of further intrusion.

The evening came on, clear and cold, with a full moon to light her tedious walk through the fields. Hetty heeded neither the loneliness nor the difficulties of the way, across plowed fields, over fences, through a dismal wood where the wind sighed and moaned like a troop of wretched phantoms; taking that route because there was less danger of meeting any person who might try to stop her.

She came out on the edge of the morass at last. Before her stood the half-finished barn, backed by a barren hill. At one side a group of pine-trees added to the desolation of the scene, upon which the silver moonlight shone broad and chill, giving a ghostly aspect to the whole spot more dismal than the commonplace dreariness of its appearance at noonday would have been.

Near one end of the building was a space boarded up and converted into a rude apartment; from the window which had been hastily set in shone a light. Hetty knew that it was there her mother held her solitary watch.

She went on round the barn and found the door, knocked softly on it, and called,

"Mother, mother!"

Mrs. Flint knew her voice instantly, hurried to the door, and answered without opening it.

"You mustn't come in, Hetty—you couldn't do any good—remember there's the children, if any thing happened to me."

"I know," said Hetty. "But I will see father—it's of no use to talk—I must see him!"

"He's asleep partly; he wouldn't know you."

"Will he die, mother?" Hetty whispered.

"Yes, it's of no use to deceive you! The doctor Miss Conway sent has been here; he says probably he never could have got well; but now, after that ride, it's only a matter of a few days."

Hetty sat on the threshold and cried quietly for a while; he might be a lost, ruined man in other's eyes; a man who had dragged himself and his family down to wretchedness, but at least he had always been good-natured and pleasant to them, and Hetty loved him.

"Mother," she called presently.

"What is it? Don't sit there any longer; you'll catch cold. Don't let me have to lose you, Hetty; I've no hope in the world but you."

"I sha'n't get cold! Mother, is the bed so that I can see him through the window?"

"Yes, I'll put the curtain up, and hold the light—if you'll go right away afterward."

"I will; I only want to look at him once more."

She heard her mother cross the room, and ran back under the window; the sheet which had been pinned across to serve as a curtain was drawn aside. She gazed into the bare wretched room, and saw her father distinctly as he lay in bed, his eyes closed, but his hands moving restlessly, and his lips muttering delirious fancies. It was a terrible sight, though Hetty was still glad she had come.

"I'm going now," she said. "Mother, if he should get rational; tell him I was here."

"I will," Mrs. Flint answered, stepping near the window. "Take care of the children, Hetty."

"Yes; I've written to Aunt Sarah to keep them till there's no danger. I'm in that little house of Miss Dorothy's."

"I know; the doctor told me; anyhow, Morrison has foreclosed the mortgage on our house—he'll sell us up to the last chair."

"Never mind, mother."

"I don't, Hetty; I don't seem to mind anything—I've borne and borne, till I'm callous like; it's only the children."

"I'll take care of them, mother, and you too—I will; there's a whole life before me yet, and I'll make it worth having—you see."

They said good-bye, and Hetty started homeward, leaving Mrs. Flint somewhat comforted by her visit, and even feeling a sort of rest in Hetty's assurances for the future, wild and vague as they sounded.

It was all over in a few more days; Caleb Flint's life had come to an end. It was a consolation, later, to Hetty to know that he did struggle back out of delirium before his death, and was made happy by the news of her visit.

"You both forgive me," he said; "maybe God will—ask him for me, Jane. I'd like to see you and Hetty again."

He was dead, and it was necessary that he should be buried, though Deacon Jackson did moot the project of burning up the barn in order to get rid of the body. It was decided that Foster and the lame sexton should bury him at night in a grave-yard between the barn and the village, an old burial-place no longer used. They told Hetty; she offered no opposition, wasted no reproaches. She only wished the neighbors to keep away from her, and told them so in few words. It was the evening of the day her father died; Hetty went down to the principal shop to buy a dress for her mother before her return, and make some other purchases out of her small fund of savings.

A knot of men were collected there according to the habit of the idlers of a country village, too much occupied with their gossip to notice Hetty's entrance.

As she was moving toward the counter, a man whom she recognized as a cabinet-maker lately established in the place, called to the shopman, seated behind his desk busy with some accounts:

"I say, Boardman, if I make a coffin for old Flint, who is to see me paid, I want to know?"

The girl stepped quickly forward, and started the whole group by the sudden sound of her voice.

"I will," said she; "my name is Hetty Flint, and you can ask any one of these men if I ever failed to keep my word."

She walked out of the shop, leaving the party somewhat ashamed, and from that moment—as was natural, now that it could do no good—a reaction of public opinion set in, and there were plenty of people to declare that Deacon Jackson was no better than a murderer, and that they had never wanted the sick man removed.

Hetty vouchsafed no attention whatever; she made arrangements with Miss Conway to advance her the money needed for the expenses of the burial, having it distinctly understood that she was to give its value in needlework. She was commencing life by paying for her father's coffin; it was not likely to soften the determination and asperities of her character.

Of course before long Mrs. Flint was allowed to return; the children came back; mother and daughter lived in the house Miss Conway rented them. They had nothing left but such of their furniture as they were able to save from the clutch of hard-hearted creditors.

Mrs. Flint and Hetty worked at whatever fell in their way, never complaining, never faltering. Night after night, when her tedious tasks were over, and her mother and the children asleep, Hetty sat poring over old playbooks, and dreaming the wild dreams which she did not for an instant relinquish; and if they might never prove more real than at present, they at least aided her to bear patiently that cheerless life.

CHAPTER VIII.

HETTY'S FUTURE BEGINS.

THE realization of Hetty Flint's dreams seemed as far off as ever, but she clung to them all the closer the more distant and improbable they appeared; and though she did the work of at least three ordinary girls, was never too busy to find encouragement in the thought of that wonderful destiny which was coming to meet her. She and her mother supported themselves comfortably, and took good care of the children, keeping aloof as much as possible from the neighbors who had so cruelly deserted

them in their hour of need, though they were both too sensible to render the daily burden of their lives harder by cherishing resentment or unkindly feelings. Hetty was indifferent to them all; they had no part whatever in her grand future, and the present seemed merely a transition state, without great importance in her eyes, though, unconsciously, she was learning lessons of self-denial and sacrifice which would be of infinite value whatever changes the years might bring.

She was as reticent as of old; and the only perception her mother ever gained of the visionary world in which her thoughts dwelt, was from some chance exclamation that at times made the hard-headed little woman marvel if Hetty were exactly right in her brain. Occasionally when Mrs. Flint, worn out physically by her labor, yielded to a passing fit of despondency, and fell foul of Fate for having treated her so harshly, or Hetty herself felt unnerved by a week of extra care and annoyance, she would astonish the matron by saying,

"Another day gone—courage, duchess!"

She never gave any better answer than a careless laugh when Mrs. Flint demanded an explanation; but the good soul's ideas in regard to duchesses were exceedingly indistinct; and as the girl showed no other signs of mental aberration, she only came to the conclusion the neighbors had agreed upon, that "Hetty was very queer," seeming to find a satisfaction in the vague accusation which apparently means so much to country people.

Hetty, however occupied she might be, usually stole a little time out of her sleeping hours for her books, and, having free access to Miss Dorothy's library, was able to gratify her taste to any extent.

She was at the Hermitage a great deal during the winter; and when Valery's lessons for the morning were over, it was her great delight to get into the room where Hetty sewed, and either read aloud or hold long confidential chats. Miss Dorothy, had she known how fanciful these conversations were, would have strongly disapproved, or more probably, not being an imaginative woman, considered the pair no better than two idiots.

The winter passed, and toward spring the Earle family came North, after a residence of many years abroad and in New Orleans, and took possession of a mansion which had fallen into their hands along with certain other property. There were two young women and a mother to represent the feminine elements of the household, so of course there was always enough to be done in the way of needle-work. Miss Dorothy recommended Mrs. Flint and Hetty, and after this the girl was a good deal at the house.

The change of which Hetty had so long dreamed overtook her suddenly enough, and was very unlike her expectations. Robert Earle returned home, having left college before his course was complete. He had tried a

little business later, but not possessing fortitude enough to go on with it, he appeared to vex his father by his follies, tyrannize over his sisters, and be absurdly petted and indulged by his weak mother.

He had decided at last upon his future career, and he talked incessantly about it in very beautiful language. He was to be a painter—the finest, of course, the world had ever seen; and he certainly possessed gleams of genius which, as is so often the case with young men, showed for a great deal more than they were really worth. Like all masculines of his type, he was wonderfully susceptible; and having discovered that there was something artistic about Hetty's face, and being astounded by her knowledge of poetry and novels, he proceeded to amuse his idle hours by falling into one of his violent passions.

So poor Hetty's destiny came upon her unawares; but, alas! there was nothing in the pretty idyll into which her life drifted that promised to lead toward the realization of her old dreams; and they, wild and absurd as they were, would have proved safer guides than the voice of her undisciplined heart, which began to assert itself.

Robert spent several weeks under the paternal roof, then he and his mother persuaded old Mr. Earle to let him go down to New York and commence his art-studies under the charge of a noted painter. During the next twelve months he was back and forth frequently, spent the whole autumn at home, and considered himself hard at work because he dawdled about the fields and woods with an easel and color-box, though he wasted most of the time lying flat on the ground under the shade of his white umbrella, imagining the wonderful picture where-with he should speedily astonish his friends, or dating letters in advance from the Eternal City—permission for which pilgrimage he was always trying to wring from the stern parental heart.

Before the year reached its close, the village gossips were busy with Hetty Flint's name, though Valery herself was not more innocent and pure-minded than the dreaming girl. All the females of the Earle family were furious, made a fierce quarrel with Hetty, and injured her in every manner that feminine malice could suggest. At last old Mr. Earle, finding Robert intractable, determined to send him away to Europe, sufficiently acquainted with his son's character to be certain that a very brief season would serve to erase from his fickle fancy every trace of the youthful dream, though if opposed he might, from sheer obstinacy, marry the girl outright.

But Robert was not a man to allow any thing to disturb his selfish ease, so he did a deal of poetry over the hard necessity of giving up his idyll, and began without delay preparations for going abroad, lest his father should change his mind.

It was the end of a lovely summer day, and Hetty, who taught a little school in the village

this season, had gone up to the Hermitage, and taken Valery for a walk. Upon the hill beyond the house was a beautiful maple grove, commanding a fine view of the valley and distant mountains.

This was a favorite resort of the two girls, and there they came unexpectedly upon Robert Earle, strolling idly along, his face lighted up with the pleasure of gratified hope, for he was to depart at once.

"I was going down to see you, Hetty," he began; "I've something to tell you."

Valery had several times been the companion of their meetings, and neither of them ever felt the slightest restraint in her presence. To her the whole thing was a beautiful and sacred secret which she never dreamed of betraying, though Hetty had exacted no promise from her.

"What is it?" Hetty asked, eagerly. "How pleased you look! Val, let's sit down here and rest; I'm tired with that run."

Valery had her mind full of certain wild geraniums she wished to dig up and transplant to her garden, delightfully oblivious of the fact that the season was not favorable, and she had come armed with her trowel and basket for the purpose. So she left the pair to their talk, and set off in her search, which speedily resulted in her getting dress and hands in a state that would inevitably bring her into deep disgrace if Miss Dorothy's eyes chanced to light upon her when she returned home.

"Well?" asked Hetty, seating herself on a mossy log and looking up in the young man's face,—that face which, if Hetty had been older and wiser, would have seemed any thing but a pleasant one, in spite of its regular features and bright coloring. Not the face of a bad man, but more hopeless, so far as the future was concerned, from its weakness and vacillation. If the shape of the head betrayed no strong passions to overcome, it showed neither the force and strength necessary to battle with Fate and conquer it. Robert Earle would be an aimless visionary; and a mere boy, if he lived to the age of Methuselah.

"Oh Hetty, I am going away!" he exclaimed, suddenly, too full of his own thoughts to remember the pain he might cause, for he had told her over and over that he loved her with his whole heart and soul.

She turned pale, but still regarded him with a beautiful smile.

"Your father has consented to let you go to Europe," she said; "I am glad; how happy you must be."

Robert Earle could no more appreciate the effort she made in speaking quietly, the noble self-abnegation she showed, than he could decipher Egyptian hieroglyphics, or paint the doors of the kingdom of heaven. He had just gone through a scene with his whole family for her sake, and now he felt outraged and angry at the idea that she could let him go without hesitation.

"Glad!" he repeated, bitterly. "Then the sooner I'm off the better; if you don't mind it, certainly there's nothing to make me regret the place."

"Oh, Robert, but you don't mean it; you know what made me speak."

"I've had more trouble than I ever had in my life on your account," he went on grumblingly. "They've been abusing me like a pickpocket over home."

"I'm sorry," she answered; and those who knew Hetty Flint best would have been lost in wonder to see how meekly she bore these undeserved reproaches—she, whose haughty temper and impatience of the least reproof were among her chief faults. "I would rather have cut my right hand off, Robert, than brought any trouble on you! But it is better you are going! I don't think your mother or sisters have been quite kind to me either. I've heard lately how they talk."

"Let them say what they like—a set of vipers," cried Robert.

"I can't help myself; at least I've done nothing wrong," Hetty answered, calmly; and any one less occupied with himself than Robert would have seen how keenly the girl suffered under these cowardly attacks. But, in truth, he was eager to get away. Hetty, however undesignedly, had brought annoyance upon him, and he could not forgive it. On his way to meet her, he had been afraid of a scene; and, though, with his usual inconsistency, he was vexed at her composure, found relief in escaping it.

"How long shall you be gone, Robert?" she asked.

The question set him off on a new train of thought; he began talking eagerly about his plans, and Hetty listened, glad of any thing which kept their farewell unclouded by harsh words, though feeling, with a bitterness she refused to acknowledge, the utter unconcern he betrayed in the recital of his hopes.

He was going to town the next morning, but he assured Hetty he should be back for a day or two before he sailed. She knew he meant what he said, but something told her this parting was final—he would not be permitted to return! Still she was able to sit there and smile at his joyous fancies, and put by her pain, to keep from casting the slightest shadow over the brightness of his anticipations. Time enough for her grief later, the girl was conscious of thinking; Robert's last recollection of her must not be a gloomy one.

The bright hues of the sunset faded; Hetty knew that she must go home. It was the hardest struggle she had ever made in her life.

"You—you'll not forget me, Robert!" she said, smiling, though her eyes were dim and misty with the tears she would not allow to fall.

He burst into a rhodomontade that was very pretty and eloquent, though it did not mean much, but Hetty accepted the whole as pure

coin. Valery came running up to say she thought they ought to go back.

"Yes," Hetty replied, absently; then, true as we all are to our instincts, through her trouble and eager watching of Robert's face, her fastidious eye perceived the havoc Valery had wrought in her dress. "What an object you've made yourself," she continued; "I hope Miss Dorothy won't see you!"

"Oh, there she comes over the hill now," exclaimed Valery.

The color shot up to Robert Earle's forehead; he held out his hand hastily to Hetty, saying,

"I must be off; I'll see you again before I sail; it isn't good-bye."

"No, no, it isn't good-bye," repeated Hetty, growing white as death, but speaking firmly.

"Good-bye, little Valery," added Robert, and dashed off down the hill in the opposite direction from that by which Miss Dorothy's tall figure was approaching.

"Where is Robert going?" Valery asked.

"Don't, don't," gasped Hetty; "I mustn't cry now! Oh, Val, Val, he's going to Europe."

Before the child could express her sympathy for the distress which, young as she was, she read in Hetty's face as Robert had not been able to do, Miss Dorothy called,

"Hetty—Valery! it is too late for you to be out!"

"I've been digging up plants," quoth Valery, not easily abashed.

Miss Dorothy was near enough by this time to remark the state the child was in; she lifted her hands and her voice in horror and wrath. "What a spectacle! Hetty Flint, I should think at least you were old enough to have common sense! If you're no more to be trusted than this, I'll keep Valery at home."

Miss Dorothy looked excited. Hetty knew her well enough to be certain the irritation was caused by something of greater importance than Valery's soiled frock. She sat and waited in silence; but Valery, never willing that any body should suffer for her errors, said, eagerly,

"It wasn't Hetty's fault; she didn't know what I was doing; and, oh dear me, it's an old dress, and, Miss Dor, I've got such lovely leaves."

"Humph!" pronounced Miss Dorothy; but the keen eyes were fixed full on Hetty, and the girl knew the exclamation in some way applied to Miss Conway's thoughts in regard to her, and not to Valery's words.

"You're not very, very angry, are you, Miss Dor?" questioned the child, too kindly treated always to have much fear.

"I'll make up my mind and tell you later," replied Miss Dorothy. "Run on down the hill before us; I want to talk to Hetty."

"But you're not to be vexed with her—it wasn't her fault—Hetty is good, good!" cried Valery. "Promise to scold me, if any body."

"Oh, Val, Val," returned Miss Dorothy,

shaking her head and sighing, "scolding never did any good; advice never did any good. It seems to me, nothing will keep people out of mischief, big or little. There, run away; of course it's not Hetty's fault if you will go grubbing in the earth like a mole."

So Valery danced onward, perfectly satisfied now that she saw Miss Dorothy was not vexed. The spinster waited till she was out of hearing, then turned upon Hetty, who had not yet found strength to rise, and said, sharply,

"That was Robert Earle left you as I came up; he ran away when he saw me—don't deny it."

The passionate color flamed into Hetty's cheeks; her eyes met Miss Dorothy's, bright with anger.

"It was Robert Earle," she answered. "He did not run away—he was just going before we saw you. As for denying anything, Miss Conway, you've known me all my life, and I don't think you ever knew me enough afraid of any human being to tell a lie."

"I don't like all this, Hetty, I don't like it at all," continued Miss Dorothy, regardless of her indignant rejoinder. "It seems there has been a great deal of gossip about you two. People don't tell me such things, so I never heard it; but no girl has a right to let herself be talked about."

"Who has told you, now? what is it you have heard?" asked Hetty, looking hopelessly obstinate at once.

"Miss Earle and her sister—why they say they are sending Robert off to get him away from you! Hetty, Hetty, to think you should have walked with him and met him time and again!"

"Don't they walk with young men?" asked Hetty, coolly. "When young ladies visit you, don't they too?"

"You know what I mean, Hetty. I don't want to be unkind, but oh, my girl, remember that sad house where you lived so long! Think of poor Lucy, and what comes to girls who allow men above their station to be about them."

Hetty sprang to her feet as if she had received a blow full in her face; she was livid now with anger.

"How dare you!" she exclaimed. "Who are you, to talk to me in this way? I'll not bear it from any human being! Oh, just remember one thing—I'm not a weak fool like poor Lucy, and if I were, the case wouldn't be the same—Robert Earle isn't a Conway!"

She fairly hissed the last words from between her clenched teeth, and the intolerable insolence roused Miss Dorothy's temper to a pitch she seldom allowed it to reach in these days.

"That will do," she said. "Go straight home, Hetty; you mustn't enter my house again until you can come and tell me you are sorry."

"Then I never shall set foot in it," cried Hetty, and I never want to! Oh, you're a hard, wicked woman!"

"Because I advise you for your own good?"

"Because you dare to think ill of me!" retorted Hetty.

"You have done wrong in allowing yourself to be gossiped about—very wrong, Hetty."

"As if I cared for what this miserable little village can say—what are these people to me?" she exclaimed.

"I fear you care for nothing," returned Miss Dorothy, still too much enraged by Hetty's home-thrust to show her usual forbearance and good sense. "Since my advice only meets with insults, I am forced to believe you are thoroughly hardened and bad-hearted."

"It is you who insult me," cried Hetty; "how dare you do it?"

"Where a girl is as imprudent as you have been, she lays herself open to the harshest judgment," replied Miss Conway. "If this is the spirit in which you meet kindly-meant advice—"

"I want none," broke in Hetty; "I'll not have any! You have judged me unheard—I wouldn't try to clear myself now if my life depended on it!"

"Wrong-headed, bad-hearted girl!" exclaimed Miss Dorothy.

"Oh," cried Hetty, beside herself with rage, "you're a proud woman, after all you've gone through, but I could bring your pride lower than it has ever fallen yet—I could! I could tell you something that would make you wish yourself struck blind and deaf! I'll never forgive you—never! I'll never speak to you—I'd starve in the road sooner than take help or work from you. Shame on you, Dorothy Conway—shame!"

She rushed away down the hill before Miss Dorothy could stop her, had she felt so inclined. The spinster walked slowly homeward, angry with Hetty, conscious, however, that she had not spoken so kindly as she ought, though determined the girl, before receiving pardon, should recognize the justice of her displeasure.

She passed through a side gate which led from the meadow into her own grounds, and found Valery busy over her flower-beds.

"Where is Hetty?" asked the child.

"Gone home," returned Miss Dorothy. "It is time you were in the house, Valery."

"Oh, but Hetty wanted a book—she's half finished the first volume of that new novel Mr. Ford sent you."

"Don't talk to me about novels," replied Miss Dorothy; "I wish there wasn't such a thing in the world."

She confused cause and effect in her censures, as people often do, but Valery had her head too full of Hetty's disappointment to argue, and before she went to bed persuaded crooked-legged Nathan to leave the book at Mrs. Flint's cottage as he went down to the village. She accompanied the volume with an extravagantly-worded note, telling Hetty that though Miss Dorothy might have spoken sharply, they must both remember how good and kind she was, and confessing that when she

herself perceived the state of her stockings she could not much wonder at the lady's wrath. Then followed expressions of love and tenderness and stilted quotations which caused Hetty to cry and laugh, and she treasured the letter sacredly among certain little gifts and billets from Robert Earle's hand.

There was a cloud over the quiet pleasure of Valery's life during many months to come, for Hetty Flint held fast to her resolution of never again entering Miss Dorothy's house. Of course Miss Conway, long past the impulsiveness of youth, was too sensible to cherish any feeling of resentment toward the poor girl for her passionate insolence and vague menace that day in the wood. Still, she was unjust in her judgment, and Hetty knew it. Too proud to make the least attempt to set herself right, she gave up the one enjoyment her dull existence held—that of visiting Valery—and went on in her tiresome routine of duties more determined and isolated than ever.

While the dismal season dragged by, there was no end to the slanders which the gossips invented in regard to her, and, to their shame, the women of the Earle family were as fierce and untiring in their efforts to ruin the girl's character as the most unimportant and ignorant member of the village clique. Mrs. Flint, driven almost to the verge of frenzy by the attacks on Hetty, had unwisely declared that her daughter might have married Robert Earle; and this remark reaching the ears of his mother and sisters, added new venom to their malicious determination to blacken poor Hetty in the opinion of all about them.

It was a hard winter, scarcely a day elapsed without some fresh hurt stinging the widow's heart, through her love for her child. A good many people even refused to give them work. When Mrs. Flint went to the Presbyterian meeting-house on Sunday, her old neighbors greeted her with cold words or averted looks; and though, as time passed, the horrible injustice of the suspicion in regard to Hetty was fully proven, the scandal-mongers did not relinquish their prey on this account. Of course Hetty suffered, but she was buoyed up by a hope of which her mother knew nothing—the idea that her probation was drawing to a close. She should pass so far out of every thing connected with her present life that no memory would recur to her other than as she might dimly recall some half-forgotten dream.

"Patience, mother," she said occasionally, when the widow was ready to sink under her burdens; "this isn't the end. The play hasn't fairly begun yet—trust the duchess!"

Mrs. Flint had ceased to regard such talk as a sign of mental aberration; but she considered it a mere jest invented to amuse her, and it always sounded so ludicrous that, mercurial and brave almost as Hetty herself, she would laugh even if she had been in the depths of despondency a moment before.

Few of the scandals reached Miss Conway's

ears, and she had no idea of what Hetty and her mother were enduring. All the needle-work Mrs. Flint wanted the spinster gave her; and Hetty, since it was not alms-giving, had no hesitation in allowing her mother to accept, though, now that her obstinacy was fully roused by the harsh treatment of those about her, she would have starved, physically and mentally, sooner than receive the favor of so much as a kind word from any of her censors, Miss Dorothy included.

Old Hans Vrooman lived in the village, busily engaged on the carved decorations which, to the horror of the Low-church portion of the parish, Miss Conway had commissioned him to execute for the pretty chapel. But she and the clergyman had erected the building at their own expense; he gave his services, and nearly the whole of the monthly expenses were divided between them. So they were able to follow their own wishes, and agreed in a determination to make the little church as pretty and complete as possible.

Hans dwelt in a tumble-down house not far from Mrs. Flint's cottage, and his was the only threshold Hetty's shadow ever darkened during those long dreary months. On certain days Valery came to receive her lessons in wood-carving from the old master; and usually on those afternoons Hetty would take her sewing and go over too, enjoying the strange talks with all the more zest from their contrast to the rest of her life.

Undoubtedly, sage, tiresome, commonplace humanity in general would have considered the three friends fitter inmates for a lunatic asylum than any other place, if their conversations could have been reported, and prosaic Miss Dorothy might have put an end to Valery's visits. As it was, she had no objection to the child's amusing herself with efforts in the old man's art, and was mightily pleased at her success, though what it portended for the future never occurred to her. She was no more conscious that God had intrusted to her charge one of his most favored souls—one upon whom He had bestowed a portion of his own creative power—than the guardians of such natures usually are.

But old Hans—crooked, brain-cracked old Hans, as the village called him—was clearer-sighted than practical Miss Dorothy, with all her education and worldly wisdom. He understood and appreciated the gift of which the child was as yet herself ignorant, and he revered her accordingly, treating her with as much respect as if she had been a grown woman, consulting her in regard to his work, and deferring to her judgment in a way that was at once comical and exceedingly touching. Hetty came in for a share of his admiration; and as he and Valery were both perfectly aware of the mode in which she proposed to serve Art later, the little house became as odd a school as could easily be imagined. In one of his visits to town, Hans had hunted up a

quantity of pamphlet editions of tragedies for Hetty to study. She used to pore over the plays at night when her mother was in bed, and rehearse the heroines' parts, with Hans as audience, and Valery taking the rôle of prompter. The old man had the genuine artist love for the stage, and had seen a good deal of acting, so he was able to assist her somewhat. Whatever effect she might have produced on the scene, it was certain that Hetty often electrified or melted her two friends with her passionate outbursts in Lady Macbeth and her pathos in Juliet.

When the histrionics were over, Valery repeated poems as she labored at her drawing or her carving; then Hans would tell them weird stories of German life, or Valery produce a new book and treat the pair to its pages, while Hans toiled at his brackets, and Hetty's needle flew in and out the endless seams as untiringly as if she had no thought beyond her task. She never forgot it unless to enact some exciting scene, and often, whether she was Bianca or Beatrice, the busy fingers darted back and forth, and the marvels of needle-work grew swiftly under her practiced fingers—the recitations no more interfered with it than her wild dreams did with the ordinary side of her life.

The winter passed; spring brightened the hill-tops, and brought its ever-new wonders of freshness and vigor, to make the old earth beautiful. Valery was growing rapidly out of the last of her childish days; old Hans's labors approached completion; and Hetty Flint had almost attained the age whereat long before she had determined to go out and meet her future; so the first great change in Valery's life drew near. Of this plan Hetty said nothing, even to her confidants, in other than a vague fashion; she feared to meet doubt or remonstrance, and she could not bear to pain them.

During the summer, an artist friend of Miss Dorothy's paid a long visit to the Hermitage, and Valery began her first real studies in the use of her pencil. She filled her teacher with hopes which he was careful never to express to her, though it became clear to Miss Conway what manner of creature had fallen into her hands, and the spinster was rather horrified.

"A genius?" cried she. "I'd as soon have to deal with a phoenix! For mercy's sake, John Ford, don't put any new fancies in the child's head—she has more than enough now, in all conscience."

"Time will decide the matter, Miss Dorothy; it's not in your control or mine," replied the artist, a quiet, grave man, who seemed never to have been young, and whose success in his profession was an established fact in both America and Europe.

The wood-carver left the village. Before his departure Hetty Flint told him her secret, and knew that when it became necessary to inform her mother, the good woman would find

consolation in the idea that at least her wayward daughter was sure of such protection as the old man might be able to give until the time Hetty's destiny should render it possible for her to join the girl.

About a fortnight after Hans went away, Mrs. Flint came to the Hermitage one afternoon, to bring some work; she told Valery that Hetty was going up to the grove for a walk toward evening, and especially wanted to see her. Miss Dorothy's permission was not difficult to obtain, so Valery and her dog—a new favorite which John Ford had presented to her, a miracle of ugliness and sagacity—scampered away to the wood through the brightness of the sunset.

Hetty was waiting for her, sitting on the very mossy trunk where she had sat the day she separated from Robert Earle. If in these hasty details of the girl's early career I have made no mention of the hold his memory kept in her heart, it has been from lack of space, since her share in this history is only of importance as it connected itself with Valery Stuart's life.

She loved the man, and believed in him with all the intensity of her nature. That he had not written, was merely a proof of his unwillingness to add to the gossip which pursued her. She dreamed of no future in which he did not have his part, and her visions of the wealth and grandeur she was to attain were most prized because their fulfillment would leave her worthier, in the world's eyes, of his affection.

Hetty was eighteen now; not exactly a handsome girl, as she sat there waiting for her young friend, her hands idly clasped over her knee, her clear gray eyes wearing the absent, preoccupied expression which becomes habitual to a day-dreamer living the sort of double life she had so long done; but it was a face full of strength and power, that promised to be more pleasing to a critical observer at twenty-five or thirty than now. There was a certain style and elegance about the creature, with her pliant form and supple movements, which made her noticeable however plainly she might be dressed, and had been an additional cause of offense to her neighbors, who were at a loss to understand why she looked so different from themselves, deciding, in consequence, that it must be wrong and unbecoming.

"Here I am, Hetty!" called Valery, as she danced along the path, with Sophocles bringing reproach on his stately name by a series of frantic leaps and barks. "I've run all the way—I'm so glad you sent for me."

Hetty looked up and smiled; but though she spoke cheerfully, Valery knew her well enough to be certain that she was depressed or troubled.

"Is there anything the matter, Hetty?" she asked, anxiously. "Oh me! I wish you and Miss Dor could really know each other, then you'd be friends, and she could help you so much."

"What a dear soul you are!" cried Hetty,

taking both her hands and pulling her down upon the log. "But I sha'n't trouble any of these good people hereafter, Val. I am going away."

"Going away?" repeated Valery, in wonder. "But not for good and all? where to, Hetty?"

"Most folks will probably say for bad, Val; but don't you ever mind that or believe it, no matter what you hear. But, for good or bad, I'm going away, never to come back."

"Oh, Hetty!" exclaimed the little girl; "going to leave me?"

"Now Val—don't—I shall cry! We shall see each other. Bless me! you won't live here always."

"But where are you going? Does your mother know?" questioned Valery.

"Yes, she knows, but I can't tell even you, Val," replied Hetty. "I want you to trust me—to believe in me—no matter what you hear as you grow older, never to doubt me; when we do meet, though it should be years first, never to think I am not just as worthy of your love and just as fond of you as I am now."

"Oh, Hetty, Hetty—going away—I can't bear it!" cried the child. "Of course I shall always love you—always."

"Don't forget what I say," continued Hetty; "you are too young to understand it now, but in a few years you will! When people speak ill of me, don't take the trouble to contradict, but remember my words—trust me, believe in me, love me."

"I will, Hetty; indeed, indeed I will," exclaimed Valery, throwing her arms about her friend with a burst of tears.

They both cried quietly for a little, and it did them good, as it usually does any specimen of feminine nature; then they sat and talked for some time, though Valery with her usual tact never asked a question in regard to this mysterious departure, which Hetty had said must remain a secret even from her.

"You are sure I shall find you?" Valery asked, after Hetty had gone on in her insane fashion about the days when they were to meet in Italy, and sit down in its sunshine to rest from their labor and their triumphs. "Quite sure?" she repeated, receiving Hetty's rhapsody with as much faith as ever mortals of old listened to the prophecies of an inspired sibyl.

"We must meet—it's written in the book of fate," returned Hetty. "Your destiny and mine can never run very far apart—besides there's the promise I made."

"What do you mean?" asked Valery, in amazement.

"Nothing—I forgot—that's just nonsense," said Hetty, trying to laugh; but all the while she was whispering, "I shall not forget, Lucy—I shall never forget! I made a vow by your death-bed to help when the right time came—I will do it."

"What are you saying to yourself?" asked Valery, impatiently. "I can see your lips move—you look so odd!"

"Just a little play-acting," returned Hetty, laughing again. "But come, Val, we must go back. I wonder if we shall ever stand here together again and talk about the old life that will look so far off and so strange!"

"Oh, Hetty, don't go!" pleaded Valery; "don't go!"

"Why, Val, I'm surprised at you; you wouldn't have me turn back on the very threshold of my destiny," said Hetty, saying the grandiloquent words so seriously that they did not sound affected or absurd. "You don't want me to spend my existence sewing long seams and mending old clothes for the village, do you?"

"No, no," Valery said.

"Then let me go. Don't cry—don't feel sad—I tell you we shall find each other again. There, Val, it's like tearing a piece out of my heart to say good-bye, but I must do it!"

She was not in the least a demonstrative person, but she caught Valery in her arms and kissed her, and cried over her, begging her wildly to remember her—to love her—and oh! above all, to trust and believe in her. Then, unable to endure further the sight of Valery's grief, she let her go, said another hasty good-bye, and rushed away down the hill so fast the little girl could not overtake her. Valery followed, weeping silently, while Sophocles marched by her side, conscious that something was amiss, and staring up in her face with mute sympathy. As she reached the gate which led into the Hermitage grounds she stopped and looked along the high-road. Hetty had climbed the fence, and was turning toward the village; she paused, waved her hand, and once more the sound of her clear vibrating voice reached Valery.

"Good-bye, dear Val, good-bye!"

The child responded to the farewell, and stood gazing after her until she disappeared. Before they were to meet again, so many years must elapse that it would have seemed to both, in their youthful impatience, an almost eternal separation, could they have gained any warning of its length, or of the strange paths through which their lives must pass before they joined anew.

It was early in September now, and when the next day came to an end the whole village knew that Hetty Flint had left her home. At first gossip said she had gone to visit her relatives, but Mrs. Flint gave no satisfaction to those who ventured to inquire; and as weeks went by, and still the girl did not return, the old slander came up in a fresh and more abominable shape. Report unhesitatingly declared that Hetty Flint had gone away to join Robert Earle; so out of the petty vileness of their imaginations the village coterie invented tales concerning the absent one, and ended by believing their own miserable falsehoods as completely as if based on a secure foundation.

In a month Mrs. Flint packed up her worldly possessions, took her two younger children,

and went away to live with her sister. Whether she knew where Hetty was gone nobody could tell; whether she suffered or not was equally an enigma. She departed with scant farewells to the people among whom she had lived all her days, and very soon some new topic of interest swept the mother and daughter from their minds.

But Valery never passed the old house without a pang at her heart, and treasured every recollection of Hetty as something sacred, never weary of looking forward to the vague future, when they were to meet beneath foreign skies, in the wonderful clime which is always the haunt of youthful dreams—that true home of every visionary, imaginative soul—the magic realm of Italy.

CHAPTER IX.

A FIRST MEETING.

THE weeks drifted on into Indian summer—that gorgeous heritage of our New World—and Miss Dorothy was seized with a desire to travel, during the soft golden days, so marvelous in their fleeting beauty, so unlike any other season, when every hill and stream gains new loveliness, and the wonderful magic haze wraps and beautifies all objects in nature, as the haze of romance softens and makes beautiful the commonest incident of the commonest life. Valery grew tall so fast that Miss Dorothy's doctor warned her to take the child from her books for a time; and the spinster having conceived the idea of the journey, found a new pleasure in the delight it occasioned her charge. Encumbered with less luggage than another woman would have thought could serve her needs, Miss Dorothy took Valery and Nurse Benson and journeyed away toward Niagara, utterly scorning the companionship of any male, whether as servant or protector.

"No, no," said Miss Dorothy, "one can endure men as one can crocodiles—in their places.—because the Lord made them, though why or wherefore, is beyond my imagination! But to be worried when you can avoid it, I call insanity—worse, downright idiocy—so no men on this voyage, where I mean to be pilot."

She fired this remark at the head of the rector's sister, when that virgin came up to the house, with her three-story neck and her constitutional simper, to bid her friend adieu. The rector's sister went home in high dudgeon, always having in her mind a hope that her brother might win Miss Dorothy for a matrimonial prize, and always receiving similar snubs on account of the hope from her fellow-spinster.

Miss Dorothy enjoyed the journey immensely; and Valery's delight and Nurse Benson's constant fears that they had taken the wrong train, or lost their luggage, or were to be murdered by any masculine object who chanced to give them a glance, added to her interest and

amusement. Indeed, Nurse Benson made the entire tour to Montreal and home by way of Portland, under protest. She lifted her voice in matutinal warnings that before the day closed their doom would overtake them, and the last words Miss Dorothy heard at night were nurse's cheerful assurance that she knew they were to be assassinated in their first sleep by a fiend in human shape whom she had seen prowling about the corridor. She usually roused them at least twice in the small hours with the agreeable information that the house was on fire, and a leap out of the window the only means of escape. But Miss Dorothy bore her old servant's absurdities with sufficient equanimity, and she and Valery were never tired of laughing over them, while nurse groaned dismally.

"You may laugh, Miss Dorothy, but the whole thing is a tempting of Providence, railroads, steamboats and all, not to mention that spluttering old Nigary, that has left me with a buzz in my head worse'n bein' a hole for a mill-wheel to turn round in!"

They settled down to rest for a few days at a quiet hotel near the Falls of Montmorenci. Even Benson, averse as she was to finding anything pleasant away from home, and especially in Canada, could not help admitting that it was a pretty place; and actually left Miss Dorothy and Valery to enjoy the peaceful loveliness of the scene free from her jeremiads and evil forebodings.

The two wandered off to the cataract one afternoon, and after climbing about among the stony paths in its vicinity, sat down to rest, at a sufficient distance to make the sound of the water only a musical accompaniment to their talk. An exclamation from Valery startled Miss Dorothy out of a reverie into which she had fallen; for as she approached middle age, the energetic spinster was allowing herself insensibly to glide into that fascinating, albeit foolish habit, though she would have been filled with wrath and astonishment had any body found sufficient courage to point out the fact.

"What is it?" she asked.

"People coming down the path," said Valery. "A gentleman and a little girl."

"Dear me, I thought a snake had bitten you, at least," returned Miss Dorothy. "Very well, let them come; the path is free! Traveling Canadians, I've no doubt, the most disagreeable sort of English people," added she; for, like most persons who have led a retired life, Miss Dorothy entertained prejudices against all foreign nations, as strong as they were unreasonable.

It was not consistent with her dignity to waste even a glance on the intruders; she sat more erect than usual, looking straight before her, with her lips pursed up as if she were prepared to whistle Yankee Doodle without missing a bar, if the peripatetic children of Great Britain presumed to approach the mossy rock whereon she had enthroned herself.

Valery watched the gentleman and child

strolling lazily onward, and thought she had never in her life seen a man so handsome, notwithstanding he was no longer really young, and wore, besides, an appearance of delicate health. Then the small personage attracted her attention; and though several years nearer childhood than herself, Valery's quick fancy began to contemplate the possibility of their being inmates of the same hotel, and to look forward to having the beautiful little creature for a friend and playmate.

As she had reached this point, the child said something to her companion evidently in regard to them, for the gentleman took his cigar out of his mouth, sent a curl of blue smoke circling through the air, and turned in a slow, indolent fashion that seemed habitual with him to look at the rock whereon Miss Dorothy was perched, stiff and upright as a statue of Liberty intruding upon the domains of her Britannic Majesty. He looked, walked nearer; hesitated and looked again. Just as both Valery and the child were regarding him with astonishment, he stopped short and burst into a musical laugh which sounded as slow and lazy as his movements all appeared.

Miss Dorothy, at the ring of that irreverent merriment, drew herself up in a still more appallingly august attitude. Something in the low soft tones struck her as so familiar that she dropped the statuesque dodge incontinently, and stared in her turn.

"Have you bought the whole of Canada, water-fall, and the rest, Dor?" called the gentleman. "You look like Columbia come to see whether it is worth while to 'annex' the thing outright."

Valery was all eyes in wonder, and the little stranger apparently shared the feeling, though she was less modest about trying to gratify it, for she pulled impatiently at the gentleman's coat, and cried, "Who is it, papa? who is it? Do tell me who it is, papa!"

Miss Dorothy had risen from the rock, and stood with an odd expression of uncertainty and trouble on her face. She saw handsome Philip before her for the first time in years.

"My dear Cecil, don't make a wreck of me," laughed he, taking the child's hand and drawing her forward. "Come and speak to this lady."

"Who is she?" demanded the tiny maid, with an imperiousness which would have been unpleasant had it not been comical. "Tell me, this minute, papa! Who is it?"

"That is your aunt Dorothy; but I'm afraid she has turned into stone," said he. "Bless me, Dor, I hope the sight of us hasn't made a second Niobe of you, I am sure!"

"Oh, Philip, Philip!" exclaimed Miss Dorothy, holding out both her hands, her voice trembling, and the rare tears filling her eyes. The encounter was so sudden and unexpected that she could only remember how dear he had always been to her, forgetful for the moment of the terrible memories which surged between the present and that old love.

"So you're glad to see me?" continued he, taking her hand, even touching his lips to her cheek, though it was all done in a light, half-laughing fashion, as if they had parted only a few hours before.

"I oughtn't to be glad," said she, shaking his hand warmly in return, and recovering her usual manner. "It is good four years since you have been near me or written me a line."

"Oh, my dear, you know letters are not my specialty; I've a sort of horror of even signing my own name," he answered. "As for visits—well, you've never been near us, and Marian made me such a diabolical scene after she came back from your house that I really hadn't the courage to face you."

His words recalled the fact of Valery's presence to Miss Dorothy; she glanced toward the child; the color rose in her cheeks; she looked so painfully disturbed that Philip could not help understanding what troubled her. But he gave no sign; Miss Dorothy could not even be certain that he accorded the girl more than a passing, indifferent glance.

"Cecil," he said, "kiss your aunt Dorothy; provided she'll let you."

"I know she'll let me," replied the child, who for a few seconds had been hiding behind him in a sudden fit of shyness. She ran toward Miss Conway and held up her beautiful face, saying, "I love you ever and ever so much, Aunt Dor—please to kiss me."

There was something inexpressibly bewitching in her manner and her utterance of the simple words, yet as Miss Dorothy stooped and pressed her lips to the low Greek forehead from which a cloud of curls floated back, fleecy and golden, seldom in her whole life—and God knows it had not been an easy one—had a more dolorous pang wrung her heart than now.

Philip was quick at reading countenances, and he felt so confident she was on the point of losing her self-control and making a scene, that his first impulse was to regret the meeting; but he said gayly,

"It's an awful little pickle, Dor; as much like her scape-grace father as possible."

"You're beautiful, papa!" affirmed Cecil, recovering her usual volubility. "I love you, dear, 'cause you brought me out to drive, and you're never cross! I was at your house once, wasn't I, Aunt Dor? Mamma says I dreamed it, and that you wouldn't want to see me; but I know I was, and you love me, don't you, Aunt Dor?"

A quick heavy breath, almost a sob, from Valery, caused Miss Dorothy to turn toward the place where the girl sat. Cecil's words had brought to her mind the occurrence of that never-to-be-forgotten day, and she was looking about in terror, expecting to see the woman appear who had offered her the one indignity her quiet childhood had ever known. Miss Dorothy bent over her and whispered,

"She'll not come, Val; don't mind, that's my good, brave girl!"

To receive this praise from Miss Conway, Valery would at any time have attempted the most difficult Spartan feat; and now she forced herself back to quiet, glancing up with a smile.

"Is that your little girl?" demanded Cecil of her aunt.

"Yes; she's my little girl, and a very good one," replied Miss Dorothy, keeping hold of Valery's hand, while Philip busied himself with lighting a fresh cigar.

"Is she? How funny; she's very pretty anyhow," pronounced Cecil; "I'm not good myself; papa and me are the worst people in the world."

"Speak for yourself, you ungrammatical imp," returned her father; "but what do you say it for?"

"'Cause mamma said so this morning; she said I was the wickedest creature in the world, and you were worse," replied Cecil with emphasis, and an evident enjoyment of the doubtful compliment.

Philip looked at his sister, and lifted his eyebrows with a weary sort of smile.

"Oh, I know what that means," pursued Miss Cecil, nodding her head. "Papa always does that when mamma scolds us, and she scolds us most of the time; doesn't she, papa?"

"There, there, Cis, you shouldn't let out the secrets of the prison-house," said he, laughing and sitting down on a fragment of rock near Miss Dorothy.

Cecil ran to him, threw her arms about his neck, and exclaimed, in a voice at once tender and patronizing,

"But I love you, don't I, dear old boy? And I try to be bad; because if you are, it's the beautifullest thing in the world."

Philip laughed again, half recklessly, with a certain bitterness under, which Miss Dorothy was not slow to catch. If she had lived the whole four years in their house she could not have understood better than from this little scene what a dreadful atmosphere that home was in which to rear a child.

"Ask the small woman to show you the water-fall, Cis," said he, "she looks discreet enough to be trusted. Don't tumble in and make me take a bath to fish you out."

"Will you come; will you?" urged Cecil, running to Valery.

The girl had gone back to her scrutiny of Philip Conway, her embryo artistic taste inexpressibly attracted by that handsome face; her quick fancy noting the listless, weary expression which it could not yet comprehend; a deeper emotion still stirring at her heart. Who shall say—perhaps some vague, undefined yearning of her soul went out toward that father whom for the first time she was unconsciously regarding. These prisoned spirits of ours have mysteries to which we, with all our boasted wisdom, fail ever to find a clue.

And he? But it would be useless to speculate upon his thoughts. Probably he put any serious reflections aside; it was natural to him

so to do, and he had fostered the habit until he possessed the ability to thrust such from him, as he might have locked visible reminders of past wrong-doing in a secret drawer where he need not be troubled, save at rare intervals, by the sight of them.

"Go with Cecil," Miss Dorothy said, for Valery hesitated. She had one of those unfortunate memories which could never forget pain. The most living recollection of her childhood was the wretched day when Marian Conway allowed her demons to urge her beyond all bounds of womanly decency in that cruel outrage. Valery lived over the whole scene in an instant as vividly as if it had happened an hour before, and the sting of that cowardly blow seemed to burn anew upon her cheek. It was not anger she felt; the vague horror occasioned by the words the woman had uttered—words whose import Valery did not yet understand—was still the prominent emotion in her mind. She looked about, afraid to see her tormentor appear again and order her away. It was all the thought of a moment—Cecil was urging her to come in her pretty imperious fashion, and Philip said,

"I'm afraid the small woman doesn't fancy trusting herself with such a feather-head as you are, Cis."

"Oh yes," returned Valery, rising, her morbid fears dissipated by the sound of the slow, musical voice which seemed the sweetest she had ever heard; "I'd like to go if you wish it."

Philip looked oddly at her. Miss Dorothy saw a wistful, almost pained expression cross his face as the child returned his gaze with those eager brown eyes so exactly the counterpart of his own; but conscious that his sister was watching him, his features resumed their usual careless indifference.

"There's an example for you, Cis!" he exclaimed. "What a wonderful small woman it is to wish to do as she is asked!"

"Papa always laughs at every body," Cecil said, confidentially, to Valery; "you mustn't mind."

"A pretty idea you are giving the aunt of papa's government," rejoined Philip, pulling her little pink ear in a Napoleonic caress.

"Oh, she knows!" cried Cecil. "Papa and I are splendid friends, Aunt Dor—I'm awfully, awfully fond of him!"

She had to squeeze his face between her hands once more, standing on tiptoe to reach him as he sat; dance about in one of the impromptu waltzes that made her resemble a weird little Undine, and so often called down her mother's denunciation on her careless head; then she seized Valery, and hurried her off, the laughter of the two ringing back like a peal of silver bells upon the ears of the elders who sat watching.

"Yes, it seems odd enough to see them together," Philip said, answering his sister's thought; and she caught the sound of a repressed sigh, though he met her glance with the careless smile which had so often irritated

her in the old days when trying to make him speak and think seriously.

"You don't look well, Philip," Miss Dorothy said, scanning his features and noticing with a woman's quickness the changes four years had wrought in them. It was not that the face had aged, but it wore the pallor of delicate health, and, sadder still, the expression of a man who possessed no aim in life—no hope to interest him.

"Oh, there's nothing the matter with me," he replied. "I'm in a chronic state of boredom—but I am used to that."

"And you live on just in the old way, I suppose," returned she, rather impatiently.

"Bless me, Dor! I hope you don't mean to lecture the instant we meet," said he.

"No, Philip; my day for that is over," she replied, gravely.

"I hear it all from Marian, you see," he added, shrugging his shoulders. "Idle, dissolute, living on her money—as if that wasn't what her money was for! But I might almost as well have married a poor woman—such a row as there is to get a few thousands just to keep one's creditors from boring."

Miss Dorothy understood the whole miserable, wasted existence; but it was useless to pity him—more useless to utter any words of censure.

"There," said he, laughing, "I've made my moan—let's talk of pleasanter things. I declare, Dor, I wish you and Marian could hit it off better. I miss you wonderfully with your grave old face and your sharp tongue."

Miss Dorothy smiled sadly. She knew perfectly well that he probably had not thought of her three times during all these years of separation; but for the instant he believed what he was saying, and it could do no good to reproach him with his self-deception.

"I miss you too, Philip," was all she said. "My solitary life doesn't bring excitement enough to let me forget my old loves."

"You were always a good soul, Dor," he exclaimed. "I wonder you don't hate me, after the bother you've had with me. Why, there's all the money you paid for me—it must have taken half you owned. I thought I should be able to replace it, but I never have any luck."

Another man forcing himself to utter the confession would have done it with shame or remorse, but not Philip. The idea came in his head, and he gave voice to it; in half an hour he would forget she had ever made a sacrifice in his favor.

"I have enough left," replied Miss Dorothy. "The old place supports itself; I let the farm on shares, and make a fair income out of it, besides my little investments that bring in something too. I've about five thousand a year in all."

"Oh dear, don't be practical!" cried Philip, putting his hands over his ears. "I hate to hear about money—Marian thinks and dreams

of nothing else; she's worse than an old Jew, and she's grown very scrawny and yellow," he added, after his rambling habit of uttering every passing thought in an utterly inconsequent fashion.

"I think enough about it to use it sensibly, I hope," said Miss Dorothy, stoutly.

"No doubt, but don't tempt me by talking of your hoards; I shall be trying to borrow of you before I know it, and I warn you it would be like throwing your shekels in the sea to let them get into my hands."

"If it could do any good, Philip, I'd give you every penny I have in the world," she replied; "yes, and work cheerfully for the rest of my life, to see you stop short in your aimless existence, and begin over again, and—"

"There, there," he interrupted, good-naturedly; "it wouldn't do a bit of good, my dear old Dor! I could make any quantity of promises—I often do to myself—but the first time I got a glass of wine in my hands, or met a pretty woman, or saw a pack of cards, away would go all my fine determinations."

"Oh, Philip, Philip!" she sighed. "Think of growing old—of going out of this world!"

"Now don't be funereal, my nerves won't stand it! Of course I never do think—nothing would induce me to. My thinking-machine never amounted to much, and it has grown perfectly rusty from disuse. Don't fret, Dor, I was born so. I've no doubt in some previous stage of existence I was a butterfly—I can't go against my instincts. You dear old petticoated Solomon, you took all the common sense of the family."

Miss Dorothy sighed again, hopelessly, drearily; and Philip, mortally afraid she would wax lachrymose or fault-finding, jumped up from his seat and said,

"Where are those children? Cis and I must go home, or Marian will treat us to hysterics. We drove over from the city for a lark—Marian wouldn't come, and she'll be furious at our coming without her, though she insisted upon it."

"When are you going home?" Miss Dorothy asked.

"We start to-morrow; Marian wants to stop a day in Buffalo, to visit some old fiend of a relative she has there, then we shall go straight on to town."

They had walked toward the fall while they talked, and came in sight of the two children standing near the verge, Valery's arm thrown protectingly about Cecil's waist, while the latter chattered at the top of her shrill young voice.

"Oh, Dor, Dor!" exclaimed Philip, suddenly. "No wonder you're afraid for me! If it should all come home to my Cecil—what's that dreadful line about children suffering for the sins of the parents? I don't believe it, Dor; I don't believe it!"

He struck his hands passionately together, and his face quivered with a more poignant emotion than she had ever in her whole re-

membrance seen it exhibit. He ran forward to where the children stood, half-knelt upon the ground and threw his arms about them, drawing both to him in a warm embrace. Cecil began to laugh and pull his chestnut curls, soft and luxuriant as a boy's still, in her mischievous way, but Valery leaned her head on his shoulder and looked up with a surprise which changed slowly to an expression of tenderness that moved him as few things had done during the past ten weary years.

"You needn't squeeze the breath out of us, papa!" said Cecil. "Isn't Valery a nice girl? I love her dearly, dearly."

"That's right," he said, in a low voice. "And will you love her, Valery—always—promise me?"

"Always," Valery answered, raising her earnest eyes. Philip stooped, and, for the first time, kissed the lips of his eldest-born. But he saw Miss Dorothy watching, and her countenance showed that she was very near the lachrymose stage, so he pushed the girls away and sprang up with a gay laugh.

"We're as sentimental as an old novel," said he. "Now, little ones, for a race down the hill."

Away darted the three, and Miss Dorothy followed at a soberer pace, trying to get back her shaken composure.

"Cecil and I must be off," Philip said, when she reached the place where they waited for her to overtake them. "Your mamma will have us killed twice over, Cis," he added; "and I tell you what, puss, unless you want me to be wigged venomously, keep your own counsel about whom we have seen."

"Oh, Philip," Miss Dorothy said, reproachfully. "Don't teach the child to be deceitful."

"Bless me!" cried Cecil, in a tone so like her father's that her aunt fairly started, "papa and I have a lot of secrets—we never tell mamma things! Holding one's tongue isn't being deceitful, Aunt Dor."

Philip laughed at the child's precocious distinction, and hurried the adieux as much as he could, for he was so unused to letting himself feel any thing that he was really tired. Cecil half strangled her aunt and Valery with caresses, saying, "Papa and I'll run away and visit you—you'll see—won't we, papa?"

"Oh, of course," Philip answered, "you young Red Republican! Good-bye, Dor—good-bye, small woman!"

He kissed Dorothy, patted Valery's head, but Cecil cried out that he must kiss her, and he obeyed, hastening off immediately afterward, though his sister saw him turn twice and look at the girl. The two stood there and watched until Philip and Cecil disappeared, then Miss Dorothy roused herself and said,

"Come, Val, we must go back to the hotel."

"Isn't he beautiful?" cried Valery. "And she's such a dear little thing—I remember her, Miss Dorothy."

Miss Dorothy had no mind to discuss her recollections, and stalked sternly on down the winding path.

"I hope they will visit us," Valery added. "It's your brother's portrait hangs in the library, isn't it? Oh, dear, I wish he was my father, Miss Dor! When did my papa die?"

It was seldom she asked similar questions, and Miss Dorothy had no idea how often they were in her mind. She stopped short and said, coldly,

"Valery, if there is any thing for you to know, I shall tell you when the right time comes; you are never to ask me or any body else."

"I never will, Miss Dor," returned Valery. "But you're not angry?"

"Angry—no! You're my good, brave girl, always!" said Miss Dorothy, then hurried forward, afraid of betraying the emotion which she was so anxious to conceal.

CHAPTER X.

TELLING THE SECRET.

THE weeks and months went by; grew into years, but Cecil and Philip never fulfilled their promise of appearing at the Hermitage. Valery had passed completely out of the magic realm of childhood; she was entering her teens now, and in that carefully guarded life no echo from her mother's past which could trouble the quiet of those uneventful days ever intruded.

Formerly Miss Dorothy had lived in fear that some reckless or bitter tongue would force the knowledge upon her, and had never felt easy when Valery was out of her sight with any companion besides Hetty Flint or some member of her own household. But she had gradually forgotten the fear, and indeed there had hitherto been little chance of the misfortune happening. Miss Dorothy had been condemned by the gentry of the county for the part she took when Lucy Stuart's child was born; and though long since then coldness had changed back to the old friendliness, Miss Dorothy was too haughty a woman to forget that they had presumed to sit in judgment on her actions. Yet, to do her justice, a more worthy feeling influenced her. The manner in which these proud, insolent people had behaved proved how little capable they were of appreciating conduct that rose from principle in opposition to the received line of action set down by the world, and it was rather a loss of esteem for her neighbors than the remains of anger which caused Miss Dorothy to keep her life very much aloof from theirs.

She seldom, of late years, went to town for the winter months, and of her former friends there she was only on terms of intimacy with a few women growing, like herself, into middle age, who occasionally, during the summer, came up to the Hermitage to pass a week or two. Be-

sides these, John Ford and his relative, when in America, often visited Miss Dorothy. Those seasons were the brightest spots in Valery's memory, for Mr. Ford was never tired of answering her questions about the pictures she had read of, and developing the talent for his art which he recognized in her.

Such quiet years for Valery, that to chronicle them would be wearisome; yet they were full of a peace which gradually calmed her excitable nature, and helped her to cultivate the equable temperament so seldom acquired by persons possessed of the artistic faculty, whatever shape it may assume. Miss Dorothy was a remarkably well-educated woman, and instructed Valery conscientiously, though she wisely forbore to burden and render her miserable with so many of the useless studies which are considered of importance in modern schools. The rector taught her Latin, because he and Miss Dorothy believed the discipline good for the girl's mind. The rector's sister gave her Italian lessons; and as the old maid had passed a good deal of her youth with her grandmother, who had been born in Tuscany, and left her beautiful home for love of a fair-haired American sculptor, the antique virgin proved an admirable preceptress, and Valery was almost as familiar with that dearest and sweetest of languages as if she had lived within the sound of Santa Croce's bells. Very little in the way of mathematics—a terrible ignorance in the matter of ologies, any quantity of research into the odd metaphysical books the rector was fond of, an early acquaintance with poetry and romance, and always her drawing—an affair of affection, not labor—and you have a summary of the manner in which Valery's childhood and early youth got by.

Companions of her own age she had very few, and it was always a rare pleasure if among Miss Dorothy's guests there chanced to be somebody with a daughter young enough to call her friend. Occasionally during the summer months, when the people who owned country houses in the neighborhood arrived and did their best in inventing mild gayeties to enliven the dullness of their sojourn, Valery would receive invitations to join a picnic or children's party. Miss Dorothy at first refused such offers without consulting her, or if they came from persons whom she wished to treat with friendliness, invariably accompanied the girl. She scarcely left her side, from the fear that haunted her of some thoughtless or cruel tongue inflicting a wound to sting and rankle through all the dawning maidenhood which the kind-hearted spinster hoped to render as peaceful and happy as the childish life had been.

But the acquaintances who still visited her were invariably considerate toward Valery, and careful there should be nothing in their conduct to trouble Miss Dorothy or excite her indignation, of which most people stood a little in awe. So the dread faded out of her mind,

and the rector and his sister, the only persons to whom she ever spoke of it, helped to give her confidence by their assurances that the story of the child's birth had so long before lost its interest, that ten to one among the newcomers very few had any clear idea of the painful facts.

You and I have lived to know that putting aside at last the fear of a long-expected blow is usually the signal for its fall, with as much suddenness as if the danger were fresh and unforeseen. Miss Dorothy knew this as well as we do; but applied to herself she forgot it, as you and I would forget it in a similar case.

John Ford and his relative came to spend the pleasant month of June at the Hermitage, and both Miss Dorothy and Valery enjoyed the visit, for the artist was a very agreeable companion in his odd, quaint fashion, whenever he knew people sufficiently to overcome his reticence and shyness. Miss Dorothy liked his cousin for the sake of early associations, though she was a wearing body, so utterly unable to understand a joke that the spinster candidly pronounced her only three removes from an idiot, and Mrs. Sloman, while regarding Miss Dorothy with great reverence and admiration, had an idea that certain crotchets of the old maid's were little better than insanities. Her husband had been the guardian and distant cousin of John Ford, though he usually gave her the title of aunt because it pleased her, and, after her widowhood, offered her a home. She followed him patiently over land and sea, placidly admiring whatever he bade her, always losing her spectacles, and getting sights, books, and men so hopelessly muddled in her chaotic memory, that she was liable to speak of the pyramids as Raphael's greatest work, or mention the Laocoon as the best doctor in Rome.

* She sometimes worried Ford by her care, believing, as most commonplace persons do, that a man of genius could hardly be enough trusted in the ordinary business of life to go down stairs alone.

But he was almost always patient, and of late years she interfered less; would occasionally allow him to state a fact without correction, and kept aloof from his painting-room since a memorable day in Florence when, entering in his absence, the demon of order took possession of her, and she determined that the place should be thoroughly put to rights. She and an old servant between them knocked a hole in his unfinished picture, broke the nose off his pet Clytie, and ended matters by scrubbing with sand a priceless gem he had lately picked up—a veritable Wouvermans, which Mrs. Sloman decided he must have forgotten to wash. But that was her last incursion; for the only time in her life she saw Ford angry, and though he said very little, she never forgot the scene.

One morning, as they all sat at breakfast in Miss Dorothy's library, there came a note from

the Earles, begging that the whole party would drive over and spend the day; there was to be an impromptu *fête champêtre*, dancing on the lawn, croquet for the young ones, and suitable amusements for the elders.

Miss Dorothy had sprained her wrist, and Mrs. Sloman was more peculiar than picturesque with a boil on her nose, consequently their going was out of the question; but Valery, though she said not a word, looked so sorry to miss the pleasure that John Ford woke out of his reverie and offered to accompany her.

"Dear me, yes; why not, to be sure, eh, Dorothy?" exclaimed Mrs. Sloman. "Though how on earth they'll get on by themselves I'm sure I don't know."

"We'll try and come back alive, won't we, Valery?" Mr. Ford said, smiling.

"But you both go about up in the clouds so," persisted his cousin. "I declare I never see you go for a walk that I don't expect you to be gored by troops of mad buffaloes! Oh, you needn't laugh—Dorothy knows. Why, if I didn't watch you as if you were a baby, you'd be standing on your head half the time; you know you would, John. I dare say you've got your drawers on for an undershirt this minute! It's just the way with your painting-people and your writing-people; and there's Valery every bit as bad. And I declare, Dorothy, I wonder at your letting her grow up so; for I've often said you have a master-mind, and might be a builder or something, if you'd only turned your attention to it in time."

The three listeners were of course convulsed with laughter, but she only looked hopelessly bewildered as to the cause of their merriment.

"I think you may trust us for once, Aunt Jemima," Mr. Ford said; "we'll promise to be very discreet."

"You'd better ring for Nurse Benson, Val," added Miss Dorothy, "and see how you are off for white frocks."

"I'll lend her any thing of mine she wants—of course, I like to have her enjoy herself," said Mrs. Sloman; and the idea of Valery arrayed in one of her remarkable costumes, sent the girl and Ford into a new fit of laughter.

"Now I do hope you'll not behave in that way at the party," observed Mrs. Sloman, anxiously; "and John, for mercy's sake, don't get on an absent-minded fit and put the spoons in your pocket."

"Good gracious!" cried he, rather horrified. "You haven't conceived the idea that I'm dishonest, I hope?"

"No, of course not; but you painting-people! I do declare, Dorothy, it's one body's work to watch him! I never shall forget the day we went up to the top of Mount Hæcla to see the Temple of Pastum; and he would walk over the bridge—what was it—Blackfriars?—no, that's a picture-gallery in London—well, no matter; he would do it in spite of every thing I could say—"

Here a twinge of pain made her break off

to put her hands to her nose; by the time it was over she had entirely forgotten what she was talking about, and began a new sentence exactly as if it had been a continuation of the first.

"As I often say, why June should be such a month for a body being bothered with Job's comforters I never could understand; but dear me, the older you grow the less you can account for things, because I remember I once had a Maltese cat—"

"What has that to do with the Temple of Pastum?" interrupted Ford, perceiving that she was more helplessly muddled than usual.

"Now, isn't that just like John?" she cried, triumphantly. "Going off wool-gathering without the least warning. I'm just thinking what our old governess's given name was, Dorothy, and he bursts out about some of those heat-then places that really I often feel it's downright wicked to think of, much less go and see; and as for Naples, never while I live, John Ford, will I be dragged back among those naked creatures, sitting before your face and eyes on what do they call it—the lazzaroni—and a parcel of no more use than a cabbage-leaf, Dorothy, for they dance up and down, and get on all sides of you at once, so that you need a diving-bell to keep from seeing them. But there, John, hush, with Valery right in the room; and it's not fit for the child to know, any more than Potiphar's sister. But ever to teach John discretion, Dorothy, is what I have ceased to hope, though I'll own he's good at heart; and unless it's, sometimes painting Sunday afternoon, nobody could find fault; though what dear old father and mother would have said, born in Massachusetts, it makes my hair stand on end; and that reminds me to ask, Dorothy, if you won't write down that receipt for keeping it from falling out."

She was hopeless this morning, so Miss Dorothy rose unceremoniously from the breakfast-table and departed to look after her favorite roses, for horticulture was an absolute passion with her, and her garden the admiration and envy of the whole country. Valery hunted up Nurse Benson, and had the important matter of her toilet arranged. Then she strayed out on the lawn where Mr. Ford sat with his sketch-book, and he bade her attempt a group of elms, which drove her to the verge of despair with their capriciously beautiful forms and outlines. It was a glorious day, and Valery in her highest spirits. As she came out on the veranda where they were standing, Miss Dorothy and Ford thought they had never seen her look so pretty as in her simple festive attire, or so full of life and animation.

"I mean to have a charming day, Miss Dorothy—I only wish you were going," she said, dancing along toward them with an excitement very unlike her usual rather too staid and quiet demeanor. "Am I looking nice, Mr. Ford? Will I do?"

"I should say very tolerably," he replied,

smiling, always more fond of Valery from her earliest childhood than he had ever been of any other human being.

"Here comes the basket," said Miss Dorothy. "It shows my confidence in you, John, to trust the ponies to your guidance."

"I hope Aunt Jemima won't fill you with evil forebodings during our absence," he answered.

"No," Miss Dorothy said; "her talking fit has gone off; she may not have another for three days. What a mercy it is the spasms only attack her at intervals!"

"But she's such a good old soul," Ford said.

"Bless me, yes; I'm very fond of her. But don't keep the ponies standing. Good-bye, Val—a pleasant day to you. Tell Mrs. Earle why I couldn't come. That woman is the biggest fool of my acquaintance."

"Shall I tell her that too, Miss Dor?" asked Valery, mischievously.

"No, Miss Impudence! I don't believe in fibs; but I do sometimes keep back the truth. Good-bye, John. Let me see how the ponies mean to behave."

So she stood on the veranda, watching them as the little carriage dashed down the avenue; Valery looked back, waving her hand and laughing. Miss Dorothy, glad to think how light-hearted she was, said more vain-gloriously to herself than was right, that she should be able to keep her so, forgetting—as she seldom did—how little even her strong will and earnest purpose could avail.

They drove away, and John Ford had never seen his young companion so full of excitement and anticipation. There was a rather large party assembled at the Bushes when they arrived; and as Ford was a lion in these days, his coming naturally caused something of a sensation. The very fact of accompanying him, and her unusual good looks that afternoon, attracted more than ordinary attention to Valery. She promised already to be one of those women whose faces depend so much on expression for their beauty that they are plain or positively handsome according to the chance mood of the moment. Perhaps for the first time in years a little knot of gossips regaled some strangers with the old, half-forgotten history; and of course it was unanimously decided that Miss Dorothy's conduct had been very odd, to say the least—very odd; still Miss Dorothy had money, and would have her own way! "Just one of those cases, my dear, where one doesn't exactly know what to do, and so forgets the whole thing as much as possible."

This was Mrs. Earle's summary of the matter; and while the group discussed her mother's sorrowful story with utter inability to comprehend its pathos and misery, unconscious Valery joined the youthful crowd in the croquet-ground, and faithful John Ford devoted himself to the game in order to watch over her.

But as I said, he was a lion, full-grown in these days of success, moneyed as well as artist—

ic, and Mrs. Earle felt it her duty to drag him out; and if he would not roar, at least exhibit his mane for the delectation of such guests as had a weakness toward distinguished people. It was a very troublesome predicament for shy John Ford; and when his hostess insisted on his giving her his arm and promenading up and down, receiving introductions right and left, and having to listen to so much nonsense about his pictures that he wished he had been born deaf, there is no doubt he could have seen portly Mrs. Earle fall in a fit with pleasure, but his sinful wishes were of no avail.

Two delightful hours Valery spent; then, unfortunately, the admiration she received from several youths and her skill in the sport excited the envy of a girl about her own age visiting at some house in the neighborhood, who had, without the gossips' knowledge, been an attentive listener to the story of poor Lucy Stuart.

There came a crisis in the game where she declared that Valery's stroke had or had not been properly given—any thing served as a pretext for a quarrel in her present mood. She was rendered absolutely furious by the fact that though a few of the girls to whom she whispered the precious scandal decided with her, those for whose verdict she most cared, and especially a boy of fifteen, who had been her devoted cavalier until Valery distracted him precociously fickle fancy, all voted her in the wrong. Valery would neither argue nor contest; she was surprised at the girl's heat and ill-nature, saying simply,

"But it doesn't matter; I dare say I did miss."

"It matters a great deal," returned her enemy; "I'm not used to being put in the position of having told an untruth. I shall not stand it! I will go this instant to Mrs. Earle and ask her what she means by allowing me to meet people she knows my mamma would not approve of."

"Do be still," urged the other girls; and her recreant admirer, who was a distant cousin, advised her in an audible aside, "Not to make a bigger muff of herself than usual."

It was all Greek to poor Valery; but she saw the girl's tirade was aimed at her, and only thought of appeasing her.

"I hope I've said nothing to annoy you, Miss Evarts," she exclaimed. "Indeed I didn't mean to; I ought not to have insisted on my stroke, but we can count it out."

The pleading voice and deprecating manner the insolent little bully thought proceeded from fear, whereas it was only Valery's natural good-breeding that made her speak. Of course Miss Evarts could not resist striking a fresh blow as soon as she perceived any sign of retreat on the part of her antagonist.

"They must count you out too, if they want me to play," cried she, accustomed already, owing to the fact that she would be one of the greatest heiresses of the day, to making her will paramount.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, Lu Evarts!" exclaimed her cousin, indignantly.

Valery's cheeks grew scarlet; she darted an angry glance at the girl; saw that the others at least tacitly agreed in the insult; then, with as much readiness as a woman could have shown, turned to a young lady who had not been playing, and said,

"Perhaps you will take my place; the game is nearly over."

"I'll not play either," pronounced Miss Evarts's false admirer—a much more boyish personage than the generality of American youths of his age, and really pleasant to meet on that very account. "I say, Miss Valery, let's go down to the lake; when Lu Evarts gets one of her bad tempers, she's not fit to speak to."

"That's the girl who's not fit to speak to," retorted the small vixen, pointing toward Valery. "It's a shame of Mrs. Earle to let her come here to-day; she had no business to insult us all, and I shall write to my mamma about it."

"You'd better write to your mamma to buy you a strait-jacket," cried her cousin, while the other girls, with one or two exceptions, urged the irate Miss Evarts to say no more. Valery stopped in the movement she had made to leave the group, and stood regarding her foe with mingled surprise and indignation.

"Don't you mind her, Valery," added the boy. "Her grandfather earned all his money in a pork-shop. She needn't talk."

"That's better than having no father at all," fairly howled Miss Evarts, "and a mother who was a disgrace to every body connected with her—Valery Stuart, indeed, when she has no name whatever!"

It brought back that horrible day when Marian Conway had outraged her; it brought back all the vague, painful thoughts which had at times since troubled her. Valery turned white as death; but though shaking like a leaf, said firmly,

"If what you say were true—and I know it is not—I'd rather be me than so heartless and wicked as you have shown yourself. I—"

She paused, gasping for breath; her face so altered that they were all frightened, and gathered about her—only Miss Evarts shrank back, alarmed at her own work.

"Let me go, please," said Valery; "let me pass."

"Oh, you horrid, wicked little beast, Lu Evarts!" shouted her cousin. "How I wish you were a boy—I'd punch your head well!"

Up surged Miss Evarts's wrath again, and drowned her passing fear and regret.

"I told the truth," cried she. "I heard Mrs. Earle tell it herself; it's no news to any body, I expect, and I hope it'll teach Valery Stuart, or whatever you please to call her, to keep out of the society of girls whose fathers and mothers are married and respectable."

As Valery, blind and faint, broke through the group to escape, John Ford reached the spot just in time to hear the last words.

"Valery, Valery!" he called.

With one cry, so bitter, so full of anguish, that it used to haunt his dreams long afterward, Valery sprang forward and fell half-fainting in his arms, moaning,

"Take me away, quick—take me away!"

The knot of girls retreated at Mr. Ford's approach, the spiteful young heiress quickly concealing herself among the hindmost, according to the instincts of vicious animals at the appearance of real strength. The artist understood perfectly, from the little he had caught, the reason of Valery's agitation; but all he did was to whisper encouragement as he drew her toward a retired nook in the shrubberies. The boy who had befriended her, darted after, saying, in his straightforward way, "I'll run and tell them to get the pony-trap ready; I know which it is. She wants to go home."

Mr. Ford nodded.

"I'll tell the man to go round with it to the side gate," added the boy as he hurried off.

Valery clung to Mr. Ford, her face hidden on his shoulder, unable to speak, he discovered, though she was not crying. He sensibly left her to recover herself, holding her fast in his arms, and giving more comfort by that mute sympathy than any words could have done.

Of course there followed a grand row instantaneously among the girls; as they were all eager to shift from their shoulders any share of the blame, Miss Evarts had a hard five minutes of it, and took refuge in mild hysterics, which she did very well, considering her age. One of Mrs. Earle's nieces ran to tell her aunt and to get Valery's hat and mantle, and presently Mr. Ford and his trembling companion were disturbed by the voice of their hostess exclaiming,

"I never was so shocked in my life! Miss Evarts deserves to have her ears boxed! Where is Mr. Ford, Jenny?—where is that dear little Valery?"

On she came through the shrubberies, and at sight of the two began a torrent of apologies. She retained a wholesome recollection of the scalping once received at Miss Dorothy's hands, and had no mind that the spinster should fall foul of her again. Mr. Ford received her excuses and regrets in entire silence. He was too indignant to trust his voice, for he knew perfectly well the spiteful little Evarts must have heard the sorrowful history discussed by Mrs. Earle and her gossips, or she could have known nothing about it.

"My dear, dear Valery, we're all so fond of you!" pursued Mrs. Earle, breathlessly, and getting nearly as purple as her gown in her excitement. "My nieces are devoted to you, and I always say you're the prettiest and brightest girl in the county! I'll lecture Miss Evarts well—I do beg you'll overlook it—she's almost a fool—and not let Miss Dorothy think we are to blame—I do beg."

"I—I want to go home," was all Valery answered, not looking up.

"You shall," Mr. Ford said; "come with me."

"So sorry—absolutely heart-broken—do, do explain to Miss Dorothy," cried Mrs. Earle. "Young Meredith ordered the carriage—you can go right down the path—but I wouldn't—Valery, come up to my room, dear, and try a little eau-de-Cologne—I wouldn't have Miss Dorothy think me to blame for the world! Really, Mr. Ford, I am so shocked—do urge the dear child to come into the house."

"The mischief is done, ma'am," returned John Ford, bluntly, not in the least sorry for the lady. He understood clearly that her anxiety was not on account of Valery's suffering, but because she was mortally afraid of Miss Conway. "Valery will be best off at home."

"But you'll explain to my dear friend Miss Dorothy—you'll tell her how grieved I am—such old friends—I wouldn't have her angry for the world! Valery, darling, do make her understand—promise me you will," panted portly Mrs. Earle.

"Yes, ma'am," Valery said, faintly.

"And I'll teach Lu Evarts! I'll write to her father to-night," cried Mrs. Earle, hoping this threat would prove a loop-hole whereby to escape the effects of Miss Dorothy's wrath. "She'll be well punished, I assure you!"

"No, no!" Valery exclaimed; and now she lifted her head and turned her white face on the lady, then looked up at Mr. Ford, adding, "Tell her not to—I don't want any body punished—I'm not angry! Oh, Mr. Ford, I want to go home; I want to go home!"

He was frightened by the whiteness of her face, and the anguish in her dilated eyes. He took from Mrs. Earle the summer mantle and hat, put them on the girl, and, with a scant farewell to their hostess, hurried Valery through the shrubberies to the gate where the carriage waited.

He drove rapidly off, with a great longing in his manly, tender soul, to carry the poor child so far that no echo from her mother's dismal past, no memory of her father's terrible sin, could ever again disturb her dawning youth. It was so difficult to know what to say—it seemed so heartless to remain silent! He had many times warned Miss Dorothy that it would be better to tell Valery the truth, or at least enough of the sad story that no blow such as had now fallen might strike her unprepared. Yet, like Miss Dorothy, he dreaded to have her innocence troubled by a whisper even; so the two had waited, and the result was what it always is when we allow affection to weaken us where a plain duty is concerned.

Valery crouched in a corner of the seat, keeping her head so bent that he could not see her features. He stretched out his hand and took hers—the poor quivering fingers were like ice.

"Are you crying, Valery?" he asked, softly,

not knowing what to say or how to attempt any consolation.

"I can't cry," she moaned, lifting her white face for an instant; "I can't cry! Oh, Mr. Ford, why didn't they tell me—a great while ago—why did they let me go among people? Oh, my mother, my mother! She wasn't wicked—I know she wasn't."

"Valery," he answered, drawing her toward him with his disengaged arm, and pressing the aching head down on his shoulder, "your mother was more to be pitied than any woman I ever knew; I can't tell you now—but remember that."

He felt he had no right to make her acquainted with the sorrowful history until Miss Dorothy's permission had been given, and dreaded Valery's questions; but his words were enough—she asked nothing more.

"I never want to go anywhere again," she shivered after a little. "Oh, Mr. Ford, I wish I could go away when you go to Europe—every body here knows—they think about it always—they—"

She broke off with a sob. The whole misery was vague and indistinct in her mind. The chief feeling where she was personally concerned, that in some way she was an outcast—a pariah—who could have no place among those of her own age. But deeper and sharper was the agony that the memory of the mother whom she had dreamed of, sleeping and waking, since her earliest childhood, could be outraged by such cruel words as she had now twice heard cast upon it.

"We all love you," Mr. Ford answered; "recollect that, Valery. I never cared for any child a thousandth part so much; and my aunt loves you, and Miss Dorothy—every one. My dear little girl, you must learn not to mind the insolence of rude, ignorant people like Louisa Everts—it is not worth thinking about."

It seemed downright idiotic to give the sensitive, mortally wounded creature such counsel. He stopped short, thinking as one does when called upon to offer comfort to a grief for which only time and God's goodness can be of the least avail, that of created men he was the most absurd and useless. He whipped up the ponies, eager to reach the house, for he knew that Valery's unnatural composure must soon give way, and feared the reaction.

Arrived at the gates, they turned up the winding avenue, and as they reached the entrance, Miss Dorothy, who chanced to be standing in the vestibule, came quickly out.

"What brought you back so soon?" she asked. Then Valery's shrinking attitude filled her with alarm, and she ran down the steps calling, "What on earth is the matter, Val? are you ill?"

Mr. Ford made a warning gesture. Something in his face told her that it was no slight cause which had brought them back. She stood still in silent apprehension. Valery sprang out of the carriage, and threw both arms about Miss Dorothy's neck, crying,

"Take me, take me, Miss Dor; don't let any body see me—don't let any body see me."

"Get her to her room. I'll drive round to the stables, and then come up," Mr. Ford said, quickly.

Miss Dorothy clasped the shivering creature close to her heart, with an instinctive consciousness that the dreaded blow had fallen at last.

"John, John!" she exclaimed, in pain and horror.

He understood the question she could not ask, and bowed his head; she saw the great tears blurring his honest blue eyes. Miss Dorothy was answered. Like a sensible woman, she took Valery up stairs without uttering another word, led her into her own chamber, threw off her mantle and hat, and said,

"You are worn out completely; lie down, Val, and don't try to talk."

The poor creature's forced strength was giving way; Miss Dorothy had to help her to the bed; she saw the face hitherto bent till it was hidden among the long waves of her chestnut hair. Miss Dorothy could hardly repress an exclamation of terror. The girl looked as if the blossoming youth had been suddenly swept out of her countenance, under the great shock which seemed fairly to have numbed body and soul alike.

Miss Dorothy covered her with blankets, for she was shaking as if in an ague, and flew noiselessly about to prepare some quieting potion. All the while those dark mysterious words from Holy Writ kept ringing in the spinster's ears, and she rebelled, as each of us has done in turn, against the inexplicable sentence which visits upon the heads of the innocent the sins of the guilty—"even unto the third and fourth generation."

"Now drink this," she said, going to the bed with the draught she had prepared. "You'll be better soon."

Valery took the cup obediently; but it was with difficulty she could swallow, from actual physical contraction of the throat, caused by her nervous agony. Miss Dorothy laid her on the pillow, heard John Ford's step in the passage, and whispered,

"I'll be back in a minute—don't stir."

She went out to her friend, closing the door behind her, and he related in a few words what had happened.

"I ought to have told her before now," sobbed Miss Dorothy, overwhelmed with remorse. "I tried to act for the best—I did, John."

"I know that, Miss Dor; it is useless to blame yourself," he answered. "She has to bear it, poor child! She'll want the whole story now, and she must have it; it would be only cruel to keep any thing back."

"I can't tell her, John. I never can tell her!" moaned Miss Dorothy. "I'm ashamed to be such a coward, but I can't do it! Will you? do help me. I believe it will kill her!"

"Oh, Miss Dor," he said, sadly, "you and I have learned that nothing kills people! What

I dread is its effect on her health and spirits. If we are not very careful, she will grow so morbid that her whole life will be a mere wreck. I never saw any creature of her age feel so acutely! She acts like a woman; it's enough to break one's heart, Dorothy."

"Don't, John. I feel as if I should go wild—I—"

Valery interrupted her by calling, "Miss Dor! oh, Miss Dor!"

She opened the door, and ran back into the room.

"Here I am, dear," she cried, "here I am."

Valery had half risen among the pillows, her long hair floating about her shoulders, dark rings of suffering under her eyes, the whole face so altered that she looked like the ghost of the happy maid whose beauty and cheerfulness only a few hours before had filled Miss Dorothy's heart with such thankful content.

"Who was talking to you?" asked Valery, in an excited, suspicious way.

"Only John Ford; he came up to see if you were better," returned Miss Dorothy, at a loss how to treat the child, so suddenly changed from the patient, obedient creature of the past. "Would you like to see him?" she added, anxious to have companionship, lest the girl should break out with the wild questions which must be in her mind.

"No; I don't want to see any body," returned Valery, in a sharp, impatient voice which scarcely sounded like her own. Then in a second she cried, brokenly, "I don't mean to be bad; oh, Miss Dor, Miss Dor! Tell him to come in, please. I try; but you don't know; you don't know!"

The piteous complaint died in a sob, though she shed no tears; lying down again with one hand pressed hard against her heart. Miss Dorothy had borne too much misery not to understand the real bodily pain the child suffered. She went to the door and beckoned Mr. Ford in. He walked quietly up to the bed, laid his hand on Valery's fingers, which were pulling at the clothes with a nervous restlessness, like that of a person who had been long ill, and said kindly,

"I am glad you have lain down, my little maid."

The familiar pet name touched some subtle chord, and for the first time she burst out crying; weeping passionately, with convulsive sobs at first, but gradually the tears flowed more easily. Miss Dorothy could not speak, and John Ford had no mind to; he knew that to let her weep herself quiet was the only kindness they could show. After a while she turned her face toward the wall and said, in a whisper,

"I want you to tell me—please—please!"

Ford looked at Miss Conway, but for once in her helpful, energetic life, the spinster proved unequal to the exigencies of the moment; she could only hold up her hands in mute sign of her inability to aid any more than the weakest

and least efficient of her sex. So John Ford said, in his low, tender tones,

"I would rather you waited till you have slept, Valery."

"I can't," she moaned; "I can't! Do tell me—you must! I will know—I will!"

Miss Dorothy had risen, and stood hesitating whether it was necessary for her to remain.

"Do you want me to tell her?" Ford whispered.

She answered only by a movement of her hand, and hurried toward the door; but Valery's voice checked her.

"Who is going out?" she called, rising quickly on her pillow. "Don't you mean to tell me?"

"Hush, my child; lie down again," Ford said, gently. "Miss Dorothy can not bear to see you suffer so—she loves you too dearly."

"Oh, Miss Dor, Miss Dor!" gasped the child. "I won't cry—I won't cry—but don't stay, don't."

"That's my brave little maid," returned Ford.

Miss Conway stole softly out and closed the door.

"Don't think I'm bad, don't," pleaded Valery. "It has always been in my mind—I've wanted to ask—I've thought about it night and day; but I promised Miss Dor not to talk about it."

"It seemed best while you were so young, Valery—"

"But now, now! There's something that—Oh, I can't tell—something that makes me different from other girls. Oh, Mr. Ford," she said, "I never had any father—what did it mean? You must tell me—you must."

"I will, Valery; only lie still, and try to listen quietly! Remember how grieved Miss Dorothy is; don't distress her more by making yourself ill."

"I won't—I won't—only tell me, tell me!"

As much of her mother's history as it was possible to relate, and as clearly as it could be explained to a girl of her age, John Ford told her, and she lay there listening in silence.

"But you must recollect," he said, when he had finished the story, "that these things have nothing to do with your future life, except to make you tender and pitiful of your mother's memory. You are not to get morbid, or to think yourself shut out from the happiness granted others, because that would be wicked and ungrateful. No child ever had a pleasanter home, none was ever more carefully cherished and loved. The vulgar insults of a girl like Louisa Everts are not worth thinking of. Each person has to live his own life; what his parents did or left undone is not for him to remember. We are to use our energies, develop our talents, and leave the rest to God."

Valery stretched out her hand, and touched his as it rested on the pillow.

"I'm sure I saw my mother," she whispered. "She lived at the house with Hetty Flint,

I know. Hetty said Mrs. Brent was my aunt—she was mamma's sister."

"Yes, Valery; and all those last years of her life were quiet and peaceful. Her mind was so weakened by great trouble and illness that she had only a vague recollection of her sorrows."

"Was she crazy?" Valery asked, anxiously.

"It was so unlike the ordinary form of insanity that it could hardly be called so," he answered. "She had all sorts of beautiful fancies, and often talked of seeing angels and good spirits about her—perhaps she did, Valery—God's mercy is infinite."

"I am glad I saw her," Valery said, after a little. "I remember just how she looked! She was all in white, with beautiful yellow hair hanging over her shoulders—poor mamma, poor mamma!"

"Happy mamma," he replied; "gone where every thing is brighter and more beautiful than even her dreams were; able to watch her little daughter as she could not have done here! Remember, Valery, in growing up to lead a useful life such as your talents will enable you to do, you can not tell how much you may help toward making perfect the poor, broken existence which weighed so heavily on her here."

"I know what you mean," said Valery; "I can't explain, but I know." Presently she added, hesitatingly, "You didn't tell me—mustn't I ask it?"

"What is it, Valery?"

"About my—my father," she whispered.

"Did I ever see him—is he alive?"

"For your own sake, Valery, I would rather not tell you," Ford replied, after a moment's reflection. "You are not likely to meet—it would be better you should never know."

"Was he very wicked?" she asked.

"Wicked, because he never tried to resist any temptation that fell in his way, Valery; not cold-hearted or cruel, recollect; so let neither you nor I judge him. If he had died when you were a baby, he could not be more separated from your life."

She lay for a while weeping, but very quietly, then she wiped away her tears and looked up with a patient smile.

"I won't be bad," she said. "I see I should be selfish to be unhappy and make you all trouble."

"And you have your whole life before you, Valery. These painful memories are only to be used as aids to employ it aright. The person who gives way to morbid feelings till they darken the whole future becomes a mental deformity, and I can not imagine a greater sin."

"I won't, indeed I won't," Valery said, earnestly. "You are all so good!"

"I am sure you will not; and the very determination to try for others as much as for your own sake, will help you more than any thing."

"What made Miss Dor go away?" Valery asked.

"She could not bear to see you suffer; she

is very fond of you, and the dread of your hearing your poor mother's story has always kept her anxious."

"But now she needn't. I'm sorry I wasn't braver! Please ask her to come back," she pleaded.

Ford went to the door and opened it; Miss Dorothy was marching up and down the corridor, her head-dress awry, her fingers in her ears lest she should hear sobs or shrieks from Valery, yet too miserable and excited to go out of hearing; so comical an object in the midst of her distress, that much as he was himself moved, the artist could with difficulty repress a smile.

"Dorothy!" he said.

"Good Lord!" cried Miss Dorothy, and bounded into the air as if she had been on springs, thrusting her fingers more resolutely into her ears. "Has she fainted? Get the doctor. Oh, John, I'm out of my senses."

"Hush," said he, going up to her and taking her hands. "Valery has behaved like what she is—the most sensible child in the world. She wants to see you, that you may be sure she is not going to be wretched and miserable."

Miss Dorothy twisted her features till it seemed doubtful whether they would ever get straight again, and gurgled and choked, sounding as if she had some sort of steam works inside of her very much out of order. But presently she could grasp Ford by the shoulders and shake him, and utter thanks, and so gradually get back to sanity.

"Miss Dor, Miss Dor!" they heard Valery call.

They went into the chamber. Valery was sitting on the side of the bed stretching out her arms. The spinster sat down by her, holding her fast, and for a while not a word was spoken; then Ford said,

"Now Valery must go to sleep. I shall sit here and read to her, Miss Dor, while you drive out with Aunt Jemima."

"She's having a nap in her room," Miss Dorothy answered.

"Very well; a drive will do you both good."

"Yes, please go," Valery said; "and—and

—Miss Dor, you'll know I'm not fretting. I won't indeed—you're so good to me; I'll try to deserve it; indeed I will."

"That's my brave girl!" said Miss Dorothy. She kissed her once more; and as Valery began to talk excitedly, at a warning sign from Ford, the spinster hurried from the room, thankful, in the midst of her grief, that the long-dreaded disclosure was over.

Turning down the corridor, she met Mrs. Sloman just leaving her apartment. She had awakened from a heavy sleep, and rushed into the passage under the impression that her afternoon doze had lasted through the night, suitably indignant with Ford and Miss Dorothy for not having awakened her; her faculties still so oppressed by slumber that she peered and blinked like a white owl suddenly brought into the light of day.

"What on earth, Dorothy!" she exclaimed, as soon as she saw her hostess. "The idea of letting me sleep like this! I declare to goodness, I believe if the last trumpet had sounded you and John Ford would have gone up and never remembered to wake me, and I not so much as my night-gown on to answer for a white robe if the Revelations need it! Why, I feel just like that man in George Washington's story who slept a hundred years up in the Apennines—if that was the place. I do think you young people get more careless every day; and me old enough to recollect your grandfather, Dorothy, with his hair powdered and done up in a cue that always went flop, flop when he trotted along, and it was owing to that he broke his hip, for persuade him he was getting elderly and ought to walk carefully nobody could."

Miss Dorothy smiled to hear herself accused of youthful indiscretion; but it was utterly useless to remind her old friend that twice a decade had passed since she could screen her faults under that veil, or to set her right in regard to the place where Rip Van Winkle indulged in his lengthened siesta. So she said amicably,

"It is only four o'clock now; I was coming to see if you didn't want to go and drive."

"Only four o'clock, and the sun shining like this—it must have staid up all night!" returned Mrs. Sloman, neither irritably nor in anger, as her words would have implied; just droning on in a sleepy voice which rendered her blunders more ludicrous. "And four o'clock is a pretty time to come and wake me out of a sound sleep to go and drive, and I without a morsel of dinner last evening and no breakfast yet, and really feeling so faint that you might blow me over!"

"Why, good gracious, Aunt Jem!" cried Miss Dorothy, beginning to understand the delusion under which the good soul was laboring, "you have only slept about an hour."

"I know that," retorted Mrs. Sloman, triumphantly; "I couldn't get a wink of sleep all night, and then I dropped off, and here it is so confused; it's to-morrow without my having had any good of yesterday—lost completely; and I meant to have finished that worsted work to-day—no, I mean yesterday—or how is it? I declare, Dorothy, you might better have stood me on my head in the corner, like a cauliflower, than let me get so mixed up!"

"But it's neither last night nor to-morrow; you've only slept an hour."

"Really, Dorothy, I'm not a wooden image nor a sphynx, that you should talk to me as if you were making an almanac," replied the old lady, in an aggrieved tone. "Of course it's to-day, as it always is, but it'll be to-morrow to me because you didn't wake me, and I sleeping all night without so much as unloosening my garters, till it's a wonder my feet aren't swelled like bandboxes with a rush of blood to my head."

"I tell you it's four o'clock in the afternoon," said Miss Dorothy. "You're asleep yet—wake up!"

"Well, Dorothy, I am surprised at your screaming at me as if I was as deaf as the brazen serpent, when I'm up and talking to you, which it stands to reason I shouldn't do in my sleep, unless I was the Wandering Jew; and, dear me, he was better off than I, for the serpent would have awakened him by a bite, and you and John Ford never came near to know whether I'd turned into a marble mausoleum or not; and at least, if I had slept myself into a mummy, I should have thought he might have wanted to put on a scrap of mourning just for decency."

By this time Miss Dorothy could do nothing but laugh for several moments, while the old lady glared and began to grow as nearly angry as she knew how. Fortunately Nurse Benson came along; between them they were able to set the good soul's ideas as straight as they were ever likely to get, and she laughed more heartily than any body at her blunder.

"If it had been John Ford I wouldn't have wondered," said she, "for your painting people are always getting things turned upside down; but anyhow, I'm glad I haven't missed my dinner, though I believe I dreamed of eating it, so it's all the same, and it has quite given me dyspepsia, as it always does to touch things out of the regular time."

Miss Dorothy took her off to drive, and the old lady, finding herself in an amazing flow of spirits after her merriment, talked incessantly, mixed past, present, and future inextricably, and confounded living people with places or pictures or imaginary characters in books, till the spinster half forgot the trouble she had been enduring on Valery's account, and gave up her intention of going without delay to annihilate Penelope Earle for the mischance of the morning.

CHAPTER XI.

PHILIP'S VISIT.

VALERY did not recover so easily as they had hoped from the effect of that day's excitement. She was ill for a fortnight with a sort of nervous fever, which the old doctor declared no child of her age ought to have. He was inclined to be indignant with his patient and the whole household, because the fact was as undeniable as if she had been a grown woman. But this illness was probably the best thing which could have happened. Miss Dorothy and John Ford were so kind and tender that her fancy had no opportunity to grow morbid. When able to get about again, she was very like her former self, only perhaps seeming older and more thoughtful. Ford said to himself, with a sigh for which he would have been puzzled to account, that she was no longer a child in mind or appearance. Some expression of

his thought found vent one day in Jemima's hearing, and the old lady held up her hands in wonder.

"That's John Ford all over!" cried she. "Now wouldn't a body suppose he had a spite against that dear girl, and wanted her to be a dwarf, or the Siamese twins, or something to make a show of, when her head's so full of books already that I often think what a dictionary if you could take and bind her just as she is; though, Dorothy, I shall always say I don't believe it is right to let a growing creature study so much, and it's a miracle she doesn't need spectacles already."

"I can't keep her away from her books, Jemima," replied Miss Dorothy; "you might as well try to keep a duck out of the water."

"Very well, when she has a galloping consumption you'll remember my advice," said the old lady, resignedly. "I know what it is, for there's John been more trouble to me than if I'd had six children growing up like a weed, and so careless that you'd have had to nail a flannel waistcoat on him, as if he'd been a leather trunk with brass tacks, to keep it fast."

"But at all events I lived it through, Aunt Jem," cried Ford.

"Perhaps you did, and perhaps you didn't; you're hoarse this minute; so if I were you I wouldn't shout till I was out of the woods," replied she, looking severely at him over her glasses.

"Well," returned Ford, laughing, "what-over happens, I shall hardly be said to have been cut off in my early bloom; eh, Dorothy?"

"Don't ask me," said the spinster; "I am a good many years older than you, please to remember."

"And I don't think it's right to quote Scripture in that trifling way," added Jemima. "But you can't make John see the serious side of things. I'm often troubled about him; and there was one year I bought tracts enough for a whole family to read themselves blind; and if you'll believe it, Dorothy, he never so much as looked at them except for pipe-lights, and tried to make me think it was rats—you did, John, now you needn't deny it."

Miss Dorothy and Ford, when they were alone, congratulated each other on the fact that the old lady's loquacious moods only seized her periodically. At other times she was a rather taciturn body, and would nod over her everlasting worsted work a whole day without speaking except in monosyllables—so occupied in counting her stitches that, if she chanced to fall asleep, she muttered the number at intervals, as though, John used to say, she slumbered by mathematical rule.

But the remarks about Valery decided Miss Dorothy to give her a change; she took her to New York when Ford and his relative returned, and spent the greater part of the winter there.

Philip Conway had gone with his wife and daughter to New Orleans, so the brother and sister did not meet; but Miss Dorothy heard

more than enough from mutual friends to make her heart ache wearily over handsome Philip's wasted existence. Marian was really not in good health, and had been ordered South on that account. Illness only rendered her more capacious and unendurable; and, whatever his present sins might be, Philip certainly found their avenger in his wife. She gave him no peace night or day, and drew her purse-strings closer and closer, so that between his habits of extravagance and her extreme niggardliness he was subjected to a very severe discipline, and about the only one which could really have touched him acutely.

The months swept on until another year had gone, and in the early autumn John Ford and his aunt came up to the Hermitage to pay a brief visit before sailing for Europe. The artist had not been there for several years, and began to have a great longing to get back to Rome. Mrs. Sloman was placidly indifferent wherever he took her, provided she could find plenty of bright-colored worsteds, and work them into atrocious combinations to afflict her nephew's artistic eyes. He left behind she would not, and he was glad to have her with him in spite of her oddities. He was a solitary man, possessing little faculty for making friends, though the people who really knew him were warmly devoted ones, and the figment of Aunt Jem's fancy that she took care of him as if he were a baby was rather enjoyable to John than otherwise.

"Every body goes away," Valery said, rather dolefully, one afternoon as she and Ford sat alone in the shrubberies, Miss Dorothy and Jemima having gone to spend the day with some old friends; "I wish people wouldn't—else that Miss Dor and I could go too."

John Ford looked at her, and thought how tall and womanly she had grown during their months of separation, and again he sighed, as he used to do when she reflected that she would soon be a child no longer.

"Well, Mr. Ford, you haven't even the grace to say you wish we were going," added Valery, laughing.

"I don't need to," he said, with his grave smile; "but perhaps some time you will be able to persuade Dorothy to cross the big waters."

"She is so afraid of the sea," returned Valery; "but I feel as if I was to go—I have always since I was a little thing."

"If the impression has grown as fast as yourself, it must be a very large one by this time," returned Ford. "Really, Valery, it is outrageous; you are nearly as tall as Miss Dorothy already."

"Already?" repeated Valery, a little indignantly; "I am fifteen, and three months over."

"The immense age!" he said, mockingly. "You are growing quite an antique, Valery! And how old do you think I am?"

"Oh, I remember you and Miss Dor so long; it seems as if you must be very, very old," Valery replied, thoughtlessly.

He took out his knife and sharpened a pencil before he answered; then he said, in an odd, constrained voice,

"Yes, you're right; more than twenty long years older than you, Valery; I am becoming a regular fossil."

"I don't mean that I think you look old," Valery tried to explain, wondering if he could have been touched by her heedless remark. "It is only that I recollect you so far back."

"Exactly," he interrupted, taking up his sketching-block. "Don't try to smooth matters, Valery; the looking-glass doesn't."

"Dear me," laughed she, "you oughtn't to be vain enough to look in it, then you wouldn't know."

"I must brush my hair," he pleaded.

"Well, frankly, I think you ought," returned Valery, with an inquisitive glance at the carelessly-arranged locks, where a few streaks of silver began already to appear. Then he laughed too, and got back his usual placid demeanor. "And you mean to stay away two years?" continued Valery, after a little.

"Yes; and you are not to give up your work while I am gone," he said, "only don't be tempted into dabbling with color yet; remember that! Draw from life as much as you can; make every body, from Miss Dor down to nurse, serve as models."

"I wonder what it is all for," pursued Valery, in a dreamy way. "I work as if I thought I was to be an artist some day; but Miss Dor doesn't like the idea, and says it's just a fancy I have taken from knowing you."

"Miss Dor isn't Solomon," muttered the painter; then added, "let the future take care of itself, Valery; it's not in her hands or yours, that either of you should decide."

"And I wouldn't like to think nothing was to come of my life," said Valery; "it's not with me as it is with other girls. I should like—"

She stopped, and a spot of red burned her cheek. Ford knew what she meant; but it was a subject of which neither had ever spoken since that day when the knowledge of all which must in certain ways leave her youth an isolated example had been so cruelly forced on Valery.

"I am not a fatalist," said he, "but I do believe our lives are under guidance; and if you are to be an artist, events will unite to make you one in spite of you. In the mean time, let the future take care of itself; and if you throw me my tobacco-pouch I will indulge in a small pipe."

Ford had always tried to teach Valery to occupy herself so thoroughly with each hour's duty or pleasure that her vagrant fancy would have slight leisure to roam off into the shadowy hereafter, and, thanks to his counsels, she was less of a day-dreamer than most imaginative girls. Though she did not yet comprehend, with every succeeding year she would understand better the wisdom of his teachings, and

be grateful for the discipline he helped her to exercise over mind and imagination. Thanks, likewise, to his advice, Miss Dorothy had paid careful attention that the girl devoted a proper amount of time to physical exertion. She was a capital horsewoman, a good pedestrian, and so thoroughly well that she was growing up mentally healthy—a blessing so great that one needs to have experienced the evils and tortures resulting from a different mode of education really to appreciate it.

While they sat there talking, a hackney-coach from the railway station drove along the avenue to the house. They saw a gentleman get out and make some inquiries of the servant who appeared at the door in answer to his summons.

"Somebody to see Miss Dor, I suppose," said Valery. "Who can it be?"

"He's too far off for my short sight to distinguish any thing but a black spot," returned Ford.

"I don't recollect him, yet some way the face looks familiar," pursued Valery. "Who is it?"

"I suppose I had better go and tell him Miss Dor is away from home. Jane is always making blunders," Ford said.

"He's coming here," pursued Valery, watching the visitor as he strolled toward them down the winding-path, occasionally stopping to bend over Miss Dor's late roses, and twisting off the flowers in a reckless fashion which would have filled her with wrath and pain had she been there to see.

Valery had risen from her seat, and was standing near Ford, regarding the new-comer in a vain effort to recall where or when she had seen him. Ford was hunting for his glasses, which of course he could not find, having dropped them in the grass while filling his pipe.

"Halloo, Ford, how are you?" called a peculiarly musical, pleasant voice.

John Ford fairly started to his feet, and glanced at Valery with a horrified look that she did not understand.

"I know who it is now," she whispered; "Miss Dor's brother."

She moved from the artist's side and walked down the path toward the visitor. Ford chancing to remember a pair of extra spectacles in his pocket, put them on, and watched with a strange pang at his heart the meeting between the two.

"It is Mr. Conway, I am sure," Valery said. "Miss Dorothy is not at home, but she will be back this evening."

"Dorothy not at home, eh? And you—dear me, I have seen that wood-nymph face before," returned Philip, in his boyish way. "Now let me think—"

"I am Valery Stuart," she added, quickly. There was a garden bench close by. Philip sat down upon it, removing his hat and passing his hand slowly across his forehead.

"Surely," he said, in a low tone, "you are Valery."

"I saw you and your little daughter once in Canada," pursued the girl; "perhaps you don't remember me."

"My dear," said handsome Philip, lifting his head and looking at her, "I remember you well—very well."

He seemed tired and worn; a sudden pallor, too, had crept over his face. Valery was beginning to look earnestly at him; Ford came forward, saying,

"How are you, Conway?"

"I thought it was you," returned the other; "glad to see you once more! Somehow our lines don't often cross in these days; I hope yours, like those of the poetry-writing patriarch, have fallen in pleasant places."

It was a poor attempt at the old extravagant talk, always inconsequent, often irreverent; but with a certain dash and glitter which carried the listener along, making light persiflage or specious sophistry sound worth so much more than it really was. Ford wondered within himself if it could be possible the man had feeling or conscience enough to stir dumbly away down in his burdened soul at sight of this girl. A great bitterness, too, rose in Ford's heart as he watched, thinking of the shadow, perhaps a heavier weight still, which this man's sin had cast over Valery's life. Then he glanced back at her, and her face startled him with its earnest, inquiring look, growing more intense and strange, as if she were frightened by some wild question that had sprung up in her mind. Ford hastened to speak and attract her attention from the train of thought toward which he felt convinced some mysterious intuition had directed her.

"Seeing you is a very pleasant surprise, Philip," he said. "Your sister will be delighted to have you in the old house once more."

"I don't want to go into it. I don't want to set my foot there," returned Conway, shivering as if the warm September air had been the chill of winter. But again he made a great effort to restrain himself, and get back his usual voice and manner. "So you're pleased to see me, John; it is a surprise, I suppose. I had been up the river, was going down on the boat, and when she stopped at the landing, it came into my head to step off and drive over here. You know I'm a deuce of a fellow for doing whatever I happen to think of at the moment."

"You look very tired," Valery said.

"Eh—what? Yes, I am tired," he said, slowly. "Perhaps I'd better have kept on the boat and gone to the Highlands."

"But Miss Dorothy will be so glad to see you," urged Valery.

"Then she must be quick, for I've to be off very soon," exclaimed he, jumping up. "There's a train at six o'clock. I want to get across the river in time to catch it."

"Oh, she'll not be home till evening," re-

turned Valery, in a disappointed tone. "She has driven over to Bramley."

"Just my luck," cried Philip, yet Ford thought he detected a relief in his voice. He knew the man so well that he understood perfectly that finding himself unnerved by the sight of Valery, he was glad to escape any chance of a fresh shock from a meeting with Miss Dorothy. "Just my luck, Ford. I'd have liked to see the dear old girl. We're off for South America next week."

"South America! What takes you there?"

"Well, Mrs. Conway is deucedly pulled down—has been for a good while; and her old doctor, upon whom she pins her faith, insists on her going out to Brazil. Of course Cis and I are off too."

"Is that your—your daughter?" Valery inquired; and again something in her voice made Ford turn and look at her. She had her eyes fastened full on Conway's face; the same eager, half-frightened expression was in them still.

"Yes—so you remember her?" asked Philip, moving farther along on the rustic bench and motioning her to sit by him. "And you know me too, eh? What made you recollect me?"

"I can't tell," answered Valery; "but I did—I should have known you anywhere."

Conway tried to laugh, rose quickly from his seat, and paced up and down the garden walk for a few instants. He came back as abruptly as he had risen and stood before Valery. "I recollect you too, Miss Woodnymph," he said, pleasantly, "and I wanted to have another look at you. Well, well, you've grown—not a child any longer! My dear, I hope you may be a happy woman."

"I will try to deserve to be," she answered, in a low voice.

His mobile features flushed suddenly, then grew pale; he turned to Ford with a dismal ghost of his ringing laugh, and said,

"Isn't that just like Dor? But she doesn't look like her—she—"

"Nothing could be better for her or any of us than to adopt Dorothy's sentiments and rules of action," interrupted Ford hastily, afraid to let him finish.

"Yes; no doubt—at least I dare say—you know I never had the knack of goodness." He turned back to Valery, adding, "I'm a dog with a bad name, Valery, my dear; but when people talk to you against me, do you keep a kindly thought for me in your mind all the same."

"Nobody ever speaks ill of you," she said.

"Miss Dorothy loves you dearly; I'm sure of that. Once when I was a little thing I found her crying by your picture. She sees you so very, very seldom."

"Ay, ay—it's better—no good for any body to see me. Good! Why, I bring a curse on all people and places, eh, Ford? But there, I needn't get tragic—it would be late in the day

for that." He looked again at Valery. "So she cried, did she? my dear, good Dor—heigh—ho! I ought to be off, I think—it must be late."

He consulted his watch—seemed on the point of going—but a new idea struck him as he glanced down the winding paths of the garden. "How natural the old place looks! I'd like to go over it once more; come on, both of you!"

They rose to accompany him; but as Valery turned into a walk which would have led them past the dwelling, he said quickly,

"Not that way—not that way; I don't want to go near the house."

Again conscious of the violence and oddness with which he had spoken, once more his mocking laugh ran out, and he continued, in his usual lazy tones,

"When you are as old as I am, Miss Valery, you'll know what it means to be afraid of ghosts."

"I think I know now," she answered almost in a whisper, as Ford dropped behind them.

"What?" he asked, "is the old house haunted to you also?"

"No," she said; "I meant I understood what you said."

"How should you—a child—a baby! Look up at me, Valery—stand still!"

She obeyed. After an instant he gave a heavy sigh, and pushed her gently on before him.

"I shall remember how you look now," he said. "Here, turn down this path."

"Mr. Ford will lose us," Valery said. "Shall we wait for him?"

"No—no—we don't want Ford—come!"

She followed him without remark; but now her face had grown very pale, and a tremulous, eager expectancy settled like a cloud upon it. He did not look at her; he was thrashing the bushes with his stick, and talking in a broken, fragmentary way which had grown habitual with him.

"We ran a race that day, you and Cis and I—do you recollect? Ah, well, we're getting too old for that, eh? And we can't any of us outrun Fate—remember it, Valery—she's bound to have a settlement with us somewhere."

He hurried her through the shrubberies, up and down the winding paths. Many times he stopped for an instant in his irregular pace, turned toward her, seemed on the point of speaking, but always checked himself and hastened on. She walked beside him, growing whiter and whiter, the shadows gathering slowly about her eyes as they always did in moments of strong agitation. He perceived the change in her countenance, and said,

"I've tired you out; how pale you are! what a brute I am!"

"It isn't that," she faltered.

"What is it? Is there any thing the matter? Could I help you? But no, I couldn't do any good—I never helped any human being! There's Dor—she is of some use—go to Dor."

"There's nothing the matter," Valery replied, with a great effort at calmness. "I—I thought you had something you wanted to tell me, perhaps."

"I—what? How should I? There, child, never mind—I think I had—I really do—but it was just one of my mad moments—it is all over now."

He took out his watch again.

"This time I must be off—I shall barely catch my train," he said. "Say good-bye to Ford. I'll take a short cut to the gates—my trap is there."

"Are you going?" she asked.

"Yes—I can't imagine why I came; but I'm glad I did—and you were pleased to see me?"

"Yes—yes!"

"That's my dear girl—I'll recollect it! Good-bye, now, Valery! Lift your head—I want to kiss you once."

She raised her face; he pressed his lips on her forehead; she grew so weak and faint under the rush of emotions which swept across her that she felt dizzy and blind, and was obliged to sit down on a bench.

"Say good-bye," he continued. "No matter what people tell you; think the best of me you can; not that I deserve it, but I'd like to believe you would."

"I will," she answered; "indeed I will?"

"That's right—kiss me—good-bye!"

He turned a corner of the shrubberies, and was gone. John Ford missing them, thought some freak of Philip's had led him toward the house. He hurried thither, afraid to leave them alone. There was no telling what whim might have brought Philip to his old home: perhaps one of the spasms of remorse, as violent as they were brief, which he used to have in his boyish days; and he might reveal to Valery the part of her mother's story she had never heard, just to receive the child's pardon and forget it in an hour.

But they were not in the house. As Ford emerged again into the principal avenue, he saw Conway step into the carriage by the gates. He ran back through the thickets, calling, "Valery! Valery!"

There was no answer, and he fled on faster, with a sharp premonition of evil at his heart. He reached the bench; Valery had slipped partially off it; her head was resting on her arms; she did not move, though Ford uttered her name again and again. He lifted her; she had fainted completely away. There was a little fountain near; he brought water in a cup that lay by it, bathed her forehead, and presently, with labored and difficult breath, she came slowly back to consciousness, opened her eyes after a brief instant of uncertainty, remembered every thing, and whispered,

"Has he gone?"

"Conway? Yes, Valery! What did he say to you?—what—"

"Nothing," she interrupted, in the same

sharp whisper. "But I know he is—my father."

Ford did not attempt to contradict her; he could not be certain what to say; well as he knew her, he was puzzled by her calmness.

"Don't tell Miss Dor I know," she said, after a little; "be sure you don't, it would only trouble her."

He promised briefly.

"You're so good! Will you help me into the house? I—I think I'm tired."

He gave her his arm and led her away. She went up to her room: when the dinner-hour arrived she appeared again, looking weary and pale, though, as she saw him watch her anxiously, she smiled the beautiful smile which made her face fairly lovely. Once more he sighed to remember that she had gone out of her childhood forever, and in force of will and power of self-restraint was a matured woman already. They spent the evening in cheerful conversation; but try as he would, that idea of Valery changed so completely from the child he had loved and petted, remained inexpressibly painful to John Ford, yet he could have offered himself no reason for the feeling.

When Miss Dorothy heard of her brother's visit and his proposed journey, she could not rest until she had seen him; so the next day but one took the train to town, that she might have an opportunity of bidding him good-bye.

Ford watched Valery in surprise and admiration of the fortitude with which she preserved her usual demeanor lest Miss Dorothy should have fresh trouble and uneasiness on her account. Even to the artist she did not again speak of the discovery which had for a long time been growing in her mind, and became, she could not tell how, a certainty during that last interview with her father.

After Miss Dorothy departed, Valery went away by herself for a while; but when she came back there were no traces of tears, scarcely more than an added gravity, to mark the effect of that solitary self-communion. Yet he knew this final clearing up of the mystery surrounding her birth had forced the creature on to a depth of mental development which she ought not to have reached for years. Her whole girlhood must be rendered something so solemn that she would never know the buoyancy and lack of reflection which renders that season a fairy-dream.

Valery would have been as much puzzled as the kind friend who watched, to explain the varying emotions which disturbed her mind. There was no bitterness in her heart toward the father who had cast her out on the world, nameless and homeless. At any moment, if the sacrifice of her entire future could be of avail to him, she would offer it freely. Had he been alone, in sorrow or illness, she would have cared for him, toiled for him; yet the idea of encountering him again filled her with a cold dread; and when Miss Dorothy announced her intention of visiting town she was terrified lest

she should be asked to go. To meet him, to run the risk of seeing him accompanied by the daughter he loved and acknowledged; by the wife—that woman who held the place, which ought to have been her mother's, and was so still in God's sight—the woman who, not content with helping forward a great sin, had outraged and insulted her, a helpless child, and, worse still, her mother's memory through her—Valery felt would be a torture keener than a thousand deaths.

Still, with a strange, though I think natural, inconsistency, she yearned to look in his face again, to catch that troubled smile and the light of those dreamy eyes whose counterpart fairly startled her with the resemblance each time she gazed in her mirror. She understood—the sentiment was vague as all her intuitions in regard to him—that some newly-awakened feeling, born perhaps as much out of bitterness and loneliness as remorse, had moved his heart with a tenderness which he had never felt even for that other daughter, petted and cherished as she was. Ah, that other! Valery wondered she did not hate the very thought of the girl, but it was not so. To have a sister had always seemed the most desirable thing in the world, and her lonely fancy went out toward Cecil, treasured every recollection of their interviews, cherished her, longed for her, and reached away into the future to some imaginary resting-place where their two lives should meet, and she be able to prove, by some great act of devotion—her favorite dream in regard to those she loved—the depth and strength of the affection garnered in her heart against that season.

The morning after Miss Dorothy's departure, Ford strayed into the library in search of Valery to take a walk. He found her bending over her drawing, hard at work; but the instant she heard his steps she thrust the sketch under some papers, coloring in her sensitive way.

"Secrets from the old master already?" asked he, laughingly, yet feeling the while the pang he ever did when any thing occurred to warn him that she was fast growing beyond the possibility of the frank confidence with which she had hitherto regarded him.

"No, no; not a secret," Valery answered; "I was only trying to do something that I knew I couldn't; but I wish, I wish—"

"Let me see what you have been at; perhaps I can help you to the wish you are so mysterious about," he said, sitting down by her. She took out the sketch unhesitatingly, and replied,

"I was trying to remember my mother; if I only had a picture of her! I am sure this is not like, though I recollect her so well; but when I try to fix the features on paper, they go away from me like a dream!"

Ford looked at her portrait; there was the long, waving hair, the worn, delicate contour, but the expression was that of Philip Conway's face, not Lucy's.

"It isn't she," Valery said, mournfully. He shook his head.

"It is a little like what she may have been when you saw her," he replied, "but never with that expression."

"You only knew her when she was quite young," returned Valery; "was she very, very pretty?"

"I think the loveliest face I ever saw, in certain ways," he said; then a sudden thought struck him. "Valery, there's an old box of mine somewhere about the house; I left it here years ago, full of rubbish that I couldn't cart about from Dan to Beersheba."

"Yes," Valery said, "it is up in the lumber-room, or it used to be when I was a child and played there. I know Nurse Benson said it was yours; and I had a great curiosity about it, because it was an odd, foreign-looking thing, and had the stamps of some Italian towns on it."

"Exactly, Miss Inquisitive! I've an idea that I left the key with Nurse Benson too, so if I ever wanted to open it I should have no trouble. Where is the old body?"

"Do you think there is a portrait of my mother in it?" she asked, eagerly.

"I made one, I know—a little sketch in oils; but don't get up a disappointment for yourself, it may not be there."

They went in search of Nurse Benson, who remembered distinctly that the key had been given her, and knew just where she put it. Of course it was not to be found in the proper place; and then, according to the instincts of humanity, she recollected, first, that Mr. Ford had asked her for it a great while ago, and secondly, that she never had it, and finally produced a great box of keys and said it must be among them. After this, she naturally delayed them by expostulating against their going into the dusty lumber-room. The box could be brought down; indeed, she felt certain it had been sent to New York! Miss Valery's dress would be a sight, and anyhow she was sure Miss Dorothy had told her the box was empty. She thought it was among the things Patty Austin stole that time she was sent away for misconduct. Valery must recollect, for nobody could forget the circumstance, or Patty Austin either, who, of all unprincipled, impudent creatures, was undoubtedly the worst ever allowed to go unpunished by such misplaced kindness as Miss Dorothy would in her goodness display, no matter how much nurse might argue. But by this time Ford got possession of the keys, and he and Valery hurried off, leaving Benson to finish her monologue at her leisure.

They toiled up among the attics to the lumber-room, and the first thing Ford did was to fall over the old box, which had apparently come forth to meet him. Of course the keys flew out of his hand and hid in the most impossible place, and the whole business assumed a ludicrous aspect, so that Valery, prepared to be

sad if not tearful, found herself laughing heartily, as we usually do when we think to encounter a bit of pathos or melodrama. Having captured the keys, and tried at least a score, they discovered the right one, and plunged into the recesses of the trunk, which contained only books and a collection of sketches.

Presently Ford came upon the picture he wanted—the portrait of ill-fated Lucy Stuart—painted one summer when he came up with Philip to the old house—alas! the very summer which was the beginning of Lucy's woes, for Philip found her, after his long absence, blossomed into such delicate beauty that his fickle fancy was set on fire at once.

"Here it is," Ford said, putting the picture into Valery's hand; "and very, very like."

She took it in silence, and moved away to a window; he occupied himself with examining the contents of the box, that she might study it and get over her emotion undisturbed.

Oh, the beautiful girl's face, with a wistful, half-melancholy look under all its brightness, like a premonition of the dark fate which overtook her! Valery studied it, pored over it, pressed it to her bosom, wept softly, talked to it, all the while John Ford held aloof, watching her furtively, his great manly heart moved to its very depths by the exhibition that so many would, out of the complacent shallowness of their petty minds, have regarded as childish and puerile.

At length Valery rose and came back to his side.

"I may keep it?" she asked.

"Of course—it belongs to you."

"Thank you, oh so much, so much! Poor mother—poor sweet, pretty Lucy!" she murmured, patting the picture gently with her hand, as if it had been something sentient that could feel her caress.

Ford closed the box, and they went away down stairs talking of indifferent matters, as it was wiser and safer to do. Valery paid a visit to her chamber, to put the sketch away among her treasures, then Ford insisted on her going out for a long ramble. After luncheon they took Aunt Jemima to drive in the pony-carriage, though what enjoyment she found in such expeditions no mortal could ever imagine. She was in a constant state of alarm, confident that her life was in deadly peril, and indeed would often have made the dread a certainty by jumping out if she had not been carefully watched.

"If I live to get home, never, never, will I put my foot in a wagon again," was the invariable announcement she offered on each occasion; yet the next day she was eager to go, and just as miserable the whole time.

The following afternoon Miss Dorothy returned, looking tired and worn. She had staid to see the steamer sail, and of course had been treated to one of Marian's insane fits of temper, though she went to visit her at the creature's urgent solicitation. But Miss Dorothy passed all that over with brief mention; Ma-

rian's freaks had long ceased to give her any concern. Cecil, she said, was a beautiful child, but terribly spoiled. As for Philip, to her eyes he seemed in much more delicate health than his wife—she had never seen him show so much feeling as he did at their parting—poor Philip!

Valery listened to these details which Miss Dorothy gave John Ford in her presence, but said not a word. She was busy with her pencil, and did not appear to pay any attention to the conversation, though she drank in every syllable, and, when bed-time came, lay awake for hours, thinking, wondering, trying not to be impatient and rebellious under the burden which darkened her youth. But the Conway blood in her veins was hard to subdue, and her naturally haughty spirit revolted against the disgraceful memories which must cast so heavy a shadow about her path through all time to come.

The visit of Ford and his aunt drew to a conclusion; they were to sail almost immediately for Europe, and Miss Dorothy was rather inclined to bewail herself over this general desertion.

"I wish you would go too," Ford said.

"Oh bless me, and the farm, and the sea to cross!" cried Miss Dorothy, in horror. "No, indeed; Val and I will keep at home, and not go tempting Providence—eh, tall girl?"

"All the same," said Valery. "I am afraid, if crossing the ocean is tempting Providence, that I should do it if the opportunity offered."

"Pooh, pooh! Well, when you're a few years older, we'll talk about it," replied Miss Dorothy. "I've no doubt you and John Ford will get your own way between you; but you will have to wait till I'm older, and grayer, and sillier than I am now, before you lead me into that particular folly."

It was a favorite self-delusion of Miss Dorothy's, as it is of most people who are inclined to be despotic, that she always yielded her will to others; whereas, in small things or great, she bent every body to suit her desires, beautifully unconscious of the fact that nothing rendered her so obstinate and overbearing as opposition.

"As long as they haven't steamers drawn by horses, I don't mind going," observed Jemima; "but there's no knowing what they may get up! Look at those men in New York with their fast trotters; if that isn't a tempting of Providence, I don't know."

"They should use Neptune's ocean steeds, I suppose," said Ford, smiling at Valery.

"I do wish, John, you wouldn't talk about those improper people, especially before the child," observed his aunt. "They're had enough in pictures and I've enough to endure when I think of going back to Rome where you see them as large as life and a great deal more undressed, sitting in shells and Cupids drawing them without a stitch on their backs unless it might be a quiver. Your Neptunes and your Apollos, indeed! And I suppose even in those

days there must have been a few decent men and women with their clothes on, and if they had to paint why not them, I should like to be told, instead of Fornarinas with no jacket but a lace veil and their hands held up—pretty sort of baker-girls they must have been. And I've always wondered, John Ford, if that was the kind we bought our bread of in Rome and if I find out this time it is, not a morsel comes in at our door—heavy sour stuff unless you take the French and you might as well call yourself an atheist at once as have to do with them—bakers or not, made half of hartshorn I'm told anyway, and the most ridiculous-looking loaves, Valery, great long sticks or half-moons just like the idolatrous papistical pictures of the Virgin! I declare, I wonder at you, Dorothy, with your painted window and candles—even a leaning that way is bad enough; but if ever I saw a Jesuit in disguise—and years and years of watching them in Rome slinking about always like three black cats, never two or one, is enough for me, and the blackest and cattiest three I ever saw weren't worse than your rector and his sister, with a mouth like a slit in a post-office box and those wisps of curls hanging down behind." She stopped suddenly, took off her spectacles, rubbed the glasses, adjusted them on her nose, and went on with her work in complacent quiet, perfectly unaware that the different ideas she wished to express had tumbled out in a medley so hopeless that any stranger would have set her down as fit to be chief maniac in Bedlam.

Two days later she went away with her nephew, and Miss Dorothy and Valery were left to an unbroken quiet of many months in their picturesque old home.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BROKEN IDOL.

DURING all these years Hetty Flint remained lost among the shadows of the cold world into which she had gone boldly forth, obedient to the voice of her ambitious dreams, still more powerfully supported by her faith in that love which was to be the reward of the visionary future, as it had been the chief incentive to pursue that future unflinchingly.

True to his inconsistency, Robert Earle wearied of the foreign lands in which he had meant to reap a speedy harvest of fame and fortune. He returned to America, and established himself for a winter in New Orleans. He decided his health required a warmer climate than that of the North, and his mother was always anxious about his imaginary delicacy, though he had never known a week's illness in his whole life. The fact was, he wanted to escape his father's censure of his expensive habits and culpable idleness. He could always more easily manage to wheedle money out of the old gentleman by pathetic letters from a distance

—he wrote remarkably good ones—than by personal appeals while Mr. Earle was daily irritated by his follies and caprices.

He was sitting alone one night in his comfortable, even luxurious, apartments, which, though they possessed one room owning easels and any number of unfinished pictures, had very little the air of belonging to a professional artist. It was an unusual thing for him to sit there in solitude; he detested his own society. But to-night he had given a dinner, the guests departed early, and he was smoking a cigar and resting before the fatigues of a masked ball—one of the favorite amusements of the gay city during the Carnival season.

There came a light tap at the door: supposing it his servant who knocked, he called out a careless permission to enter. He heard the door open and close gently, but did not turn his head. The silence which followed at length attracted his attention, and he said, indolently,

"What do you want, Jervis? You always disturb me at the wrong moment; at least say something!"

Still no response; he removed his cigar from his lips and glanced round. The intruder stood hidden; at the same instant the rustle of feminine garments caught his ear. He rose suddenly, uttering some surprised question—the words died unfinished—the cigar dropped from his fingers and rolled away over the hearth. A woman stood opposite him, in an attitude at once expectant and shrinking; her face hidden in the hood of a dark cloak which covered her whole form.

"What the deuce—"

He could not finish; the visitor threw off her mantle; it was Hetty Flint who stood before him, but so changed that for an instant he scarcely recognized her. She was handsomely and richly dressed; jewels gleamed on her neck and in her hair; it was Hetty; but as unlike her old self as a gorgeous butterfly is unlike its dull chrysalis.

"Robert!" she said, softly; "don't you know me, Robert?"

It was Hetty's voice too, though it had caught a deeper, richer tone, in keeping with the alteration in her appearance.

"Good heavens!—can it be you, Hetty Flint?" he asked.

She moved forward, extending her hands with a gesture half eager, half deprecating, saying,

"You do know me—you have not forgotten me?"

"Forgotten you! I should think not."

"I was sure of it! that gave me courage to come. Oh, Robert, Robert!"

"But where on earth do you spring from? where have you been to?" he asked, eying her curiously.

"It's a long story, Robert," she answered, with one of her old joyous laughs, though she still trembled from nervous excitement. "It's

a long story, but I'll tell it if you have patience to listen."

"Of course I have," he said, still regarding her, and taking in every detail of her handsome costume, while an odd smile crept over his lips. "Haden't I always patience, and more than that, when you talked, Hetty?"

"Always! And you are glad to see me—say you are glad."

"Glad? of course I am! I never was so charmed in my life; and what a pretty little dramatic point you have made of your arrival," cried he, gayly. "But don't stand there in that way—come to the fire. Let me look at you—is it really you?"

He approached her, speaking quickly; but there was a certain careless freedom in his manner, and the same strange smile on his mouth, from which the Hetty of other days would certainly have shrunk, though now she did not seem to observe it.

"Why, Hetty, what a fairy princess you have turned into!" he exclaimed, wonderingly.

"But you've not said you are glad to see me. Come here, and let me be sure of that."

He extended his arms and made a movement to draw her into them; but she retreated a little, saying,

"Wait; I must tell you my story first, Robert."

"Oh, there's no need—I'm good at guessing riddles," he replied, with a quick laugh, and another glance at her costume.

"You are glad?" she said, joyfully. "I thought you would be, though at the last I hesitated, and was half afraid. Was I not silly?"

"Silly indeed, Hetty," he answered, pleasantly; but his gaze grew more earnest, and a sudden tinge of color stole over his cheeks and lighted his eyes.

He looked very handsome; yet the Hetty of former times would have been frightened at the expression on his face, though, in her girlish ignorance, she might not have comprehended its meaning.

But this Hetty did not appear to notice; indeed she was busy laying her mantle on a table.

"I can't believe yet it is you," he added.

She slid past him as he tried again to put his arms about her, sat down near the fire, and pointed to the easy-chair opposite.

"Sit down there," she said; "I want to look at you."

"But you never used to send me half a mile off in order to do that," exclaimed he.

"I must tell you every thing quietly, else I shall break down," she said, her lip beginning to tremble. "I'm nervous and shaken, though I don't show it much, and you must let me have my own way."

"What a tyrannical Hetty!" laughed he, still hesitating. As she again motioned him somewhat imperatively to be seated, he dropped into the arm-chair, giving a little shrug to his shoulders, which said plainly enough that

they were only play-acting; but since it gratified her to do it in this manner, well and good.

Hetty was looking about the prettily-appointed room with a woman's quickness, noting its elegance and comfort.

"Are you rich, Robert?" she asked, abruptly.

"*Ay de mi!*" replied he, with a comical groan. "Richer in debts than any thing else, I am afraid, my little Hetty."

She laughed out again, and clapped her hands with the glee of a child. She was so small, so quick and supple in her movements, that she still looked very young indeed.

"That seems to amuse you," said he, joining in her laugh.

"Poor old Robert!" she answered; then added, in a lower tone, "I am so glad, so glad!"

"What are you saying, Hetty?" he asked.

"I'll tell you after a while—I was just whispering to my familiar," returned she, gayly.

"Oh, this is my den; I'll not have even a spirit claim the least bit of your attention," said he.

"You are just the same Robert—as exiguous as ever!" she cried.

"Bless me, now she's speaking French," said he, half amused, half in wonder. "Have you been in France, Hetty?"

"*Non; cependant je parle assez bien le français; du moins, je l'espère,*" she replied, with an irreproachable accent, and rising for an instant to sweep him the most bewitching courtesy.

He made another attempt to approach her; she held up her white hand, glittering with rings, and her face grew serious again.

"Sit down," she ordered, "else I shall vanish like the water-sprite you used to say I resembled."

"Do you still remember my foolish sayings?" he asked, standing irresolute, vexed at his own hesitation, yet to a certain extent held in check by that imperious hand.

"I have forgotten nothing, Robert—nothing," she answered, and her voice grew tremulous and soft. "How could I? What else in all these years"—she broke off, and tapped her lips impatiently with her pretty fingers. "Never mind that," she added, in a lighter tone, "that doesn't come yet—I am spoiling the drama!"

"I think you do it very neatly," said he.

"I have thought about it so much; but at the last moment I grew so afraid that you might be changed—that my coming would annoy you. But it does not?"

"Hetty!"

"There, it doesn't need another word. I understand. Oh, Robert, it is so pleasant to look at you—to hear your voice! It seems as if this long separation had only been a bad dream! Did you ever think of seeing me again?"

"Do you find it necessary to ask that question? Are you the sort of woman one forgets?" he asked; but though he tried to control his voice, there was a tinge of mockery in it.

"At least you are not the sort of man who does forget," she replied, gravely; "I knew that, else I should not be here. Oh, these years—these years, Robert, how long they have been! I thought they would never come to an end."

"They have seemed longer to me," he answered; and, before she could stir, he was on one knee before her and kissing her hand.

"No, no!" she said, hastily withdrawing it. "Not till I have told you—"

"As if you could tell me any thing half so interesting as the mere fact of having you here!" he said, eagerly.

"But I must do it my own way. I will," she replied, with a graceful, child-like petulance. "Am I altered, Robert?"

"Yes and no—"

"But a little different from the poor plain girl who—"

"Why don't you finish, Hetty?"

"After I've told my story: I'll make no other confession until then!"

"Who loved me?" he whispered, snatching her hands. "Let me believe that was what you meant to say."

"You are spoiling my drama," cried she, smiling, though her eyes were full of tears. She started up and moved across the room to a piano-forte that stood there. "I want to show you first every change I have made in the old Hetty, before—before"—she paused and glanced back at him over her shoulder, half coquettishly, half tenderly—"before I tell you it is always the same Hetty for you."

She sat down at the instrument, played a brilliant little prelude, and sang a couple of verses of a gay French romance in a sweet, true voice, with a certain artistic correctness which Earle was musician enough to appreciate.

"Admirable!" he said, as she finished. "Why, Hetty, what a phoenix you have turned out!"

"Cinderella after she found the prince," laughed Hetty, going back to the fire.

"Evidently the prince has been found," muttered he, with an evil smile; but she did not catch either words or sneer.

She remained standing before him in an attitude which was the perfection of grace, although a little studied. Any body with a trace of heart or noble feeling would have perceived that the motive which prompted this desire to show the change wrought in her was the great love that had nerved and strengthened her during the work.

"And you are pleased?" she asked, at once playful and earnest. "You are not ashamed of me?"

"You are perfect!" he cried. "My beautiful, beautiful Hetty!" But he sat still; she should play the comedy out in her own way; he was sure of the prize which had been wrested from him. If the girl had become in all other respects the most abandoned and lost of her sex, she would have been an object of pity still,

because her heart yet held to its old dream and its passionate love—forced to stand opposite this man who was capable of complacently regarding what he believed her degradation—rejoicing at it, since it placed her loveliness within his reach.

"If only you would not look and act as if the next instant you might vanish like a snow-spirit," he continued.

"Even the snow-spirit found an enchanter powerful enough to bind her to the spot," she murmured; then, with a quick change to gaiety, adding, as she seated herself again, "Now for the story! So I am not absolutely hideous, and *gauche*, and unpresentable, Robert?"

"What a rapacious Hetty where compliments are concerned!"

"Ah, I tried so hard, and always for you," she sighed. "I don't look as if I had known much suffering, do I, Robert?"

"I should say rather you must have passed the years in an enchanted palace, with fairies for servants, and queens for teachers."

"I am so glad, so glad! And yet I've known what hunger was, Robert, and cold and want—" She broke off with a shudder.

"It is all over; don't think about it!" he exclaimed, going toward her again and kneeling by her side.

"I don't think I minded it so very much even at the time," she added, absently, letting him hold her hands and press his feverish lips upon them. "I had always one hope to support me, one thing to which I could look forward! At the worst, I told myself it would pass—I should not fail, I should not die. I knew, Robert, I knew that I should find you at last!"

"Have you hunted for me, Hetty?" he asked.

"Silly boy! As if I ever lost sight of you! I knew when you returned from Europe; I saw you once when you passed through St. Louis."

"And did not make yourself known?"

"I could not then; the time had not come—I was in wretchedness and—never mind! I always felt the day would come; and just when the night was blackest the day broke—I was free; nothing stood between us! I knew you had not forgotten; I knew you would be glad—and I am here; I am here!"

She uttered the words with an energy and passion strangely different from her former demeanor; carried so completely out of herself that she could not check the revelation. He caught her in his arms, whispering loving words, and for an instant she lay sobbing gently upon his breast.

"My Hetty—mine, mine!" he exclaimed. She freed herself from his embrace, laid one hand on his head, and drew it back so that she could gaze full in his face with her tender eyes.

"At last," she said, while a smile of loving triumph parted her lips. "Oh, Robert, I

think even your mother and sisters will not be ashamed of me now."

"What are they to us?" he retorted, with an ugly frown.

"Ah, Robert! I could not separate you from them," she answered, quickly; "much as I love you, I would rather give you up than do that! A mother is always a mother, and she is so fond and proud of you."

"We don't care about them just now," he said, though an expression of utter amazement stole over his features.

"Yes, yes, we will always care," returned Hetty. "Oh, I will try so hard to make them like me; I will be so patient and dutiful, that they must in time."

"Good gracious, Hetty, what are you talking about?" burst from his lips before he was aware. He rose to his feet at the same instant.

Hetty that sank back in her chair; but her eyes were fixed full on his face, were studying it as she had not before. Some perception of the meaning written on it startled her for the first time. "She put the fear resolutely aside—the struggle was apparent—saying,

"I forgot to tell you my story."

"As if I cared for stories, Hetty. I have found you, that is enough," he answered, close beside her again, eyes and voice eager once more.

"But you must hear," she said; "how could you trust me else? It is all so odd and strange. But oh, Robert, they can't call me awkward and plain, and—"

"Why do you keep harping about the opinions of those ridiculous people, as if you were ever likely to see them?" he interrupted, irritably.

"I tell you nothing would induce me to separate you from your mother," she said, firmly.

"What a little goose it is!" he exclaimed trying again to draw her head upon his shoulder. "They'll not know; they can't disturb our happiness. We care as little about them as we do about the nonsensical laws and creeds that dull, respectable folk make such account of."

She gave one quick start, then turned her face away. It had grown ghastly white; but not a muscle of her frame quivered. The old indomitable resolution enabled her to sit perfectly still and listen.

"It would not be for me to reproach you with the past," he went on; "I care nothing about it; you love me better than any body else. If you should ever go away—women will be capricious, Hetty—I should be sure you would never care as much for another as you have for me."

She was on her feet now. He saw her face; it was like that of a dead woman; even the dilated eyes looked glazed and sightless.

"If I had only been struck deaf and blind an hour ago!" she said, slowly. "If God had let me die long since in the darkness!"

She staggered, but when he tried to support her, pushed his hand away—not roughly, still in the same unseeing manner. She crossed the room, took up her cloak, and threw it about her.

"What now?" he asked, half believing all this a part of her comedy. "Come back to the fire, Hetty! You don't think I mean to let you go? You don't suppose—"

"What is it you do think of me?" she broke in, a sudden light coming to her eyes. "Put it in words."

"That you are the darlingest girl who ever turned a man's head, Hetty."

"What do you think brought me here?"

"Because you knew I loved you."

"Enough to make me your wife?" whispered she.

He burst out laughing; he had misunderstood her; she had really come there expecting to dupe him. The sound of his merriment brought the cold, death-like expression to her face again.

"Is that your answer?" he heard her whisper anew.

"You absurd Hetty—you beautiful little goose. Let me tell you how I love you—how happy we will be."

She was at the door before he could finish. He darted forward with some wild idea of barring her progress. The glance she turned upon him caused him to pause. He might as well have tried to stop a fire, a sea, an earthquake, as the woman with that face.

"Hetty, Hetty!" he called.

"She is dead!" came a voice in response, so hollow and far off that it did not seem Hetty who spoke. "Murdered, and by your hand. You can't stop a ghost!"

She was gone. The door closed before he could recover his presence of mind; he heard the outer door of the house close likewise, and in another moment the sound of carriage-wheels rolling rapidly away.

As Hetty Flint reached the street, a man started up from the place where he was crouched like some faithful dumb animal, only just in time, for she tottered, and would have fallen had he not caught her. She gave one moaning cry:

"Hans, Hans!"

"Hush the Hetty, hush. Old Hans is here; you was quite safe—quite," he said, for the glare of the street-lamps struck her face, and its death-like agony told him the whole story as plainly as words could have done.

"Take me away—quick—take me away!" she groaned. "Oh Hans, Hans!"

He helped her into the carriage, gave an order to the coachman, and they drove rapidly off. Hetty crouched in the corner of the seat where he had placed her, shivering, moaning at intervals like some wounded thing; and always the old man answered,

"Hans is here—Hans is here! The poor Hetty—see, you was not alone."

"You—you followed me," she said, after a while.

"Yes; Hans was certain where you had gone, Hetty. Ah, if I was daring to tell you long ago!"

"I understand why you would not let me talk about him—why you wanted me to write instead of coming here—"

"The veilain!" muttered Hans. "I could drink his blood like an ogre—like two ogres!"

"Hush, Hans. Oh, let us get away!"

"We are off, Miss Hetty. He can't come near you—old Hans is here—don't be afraid," returned the wood-carver, with a significant clenching of his fists.

"But further—I can't stay in this horrible place. It is not too late—there's a train—oh Hans, let us go!"

"Yes—to-nights—when you would; but where you want to go, the poor Hetty?"

"Anywhere—North—let me go and find my mother. Oh Hans, Hans!"

They reached the hotel at which they had stopped on their arrival that day in New Orleans, and Hans assisted the girl up stairs to her rooms. He placed her in a chair and threw off the cloak; the warm light fell full upon her trembling form and pallid face, which looked like the ghost of the eager, hopeful countenance Hans had regarded with such pride only a few hours previous. She was dry-eyed and quiet; her hands twisted themselves spasmodically together, and her breath came irregularly. There was no violent outburst of despair; she was too stunned and lifeless for that.

"We are wasting time," she cried, suddenly. "I must go—I will go!"

"Yes, Hetty, yes; but wait till the morning—we go then. Try to get some sleeps till now."

"I shall never sleep again," moaned Hetty. "Dear Hans, let us start—I shall go mad if we wait—I tell you I shall go mad!"

She sprang up; her wild look and gesture alarmed him:

"We go," he said, "we did go to once. I settle the bed, then we don't wait no more. Try to rest some lectles."

"I can't—I want something to do! I'll get my things ready—I can't travel like this!" She glanced down at her dress, caught the glitter of the jewels upon her bosom and wrists, tugged at the necklace as if it suffocated her, and flung it across the room. "I was so happy! Oh Hans, Hans! The world has come to an end! Why can't I die? why can't I die?"

"He knows," whispered the old man; "try to remember that!"

"I can't remember—I can't believe! Oh, it was cruel to make me live for this! I was so patient—I never complained—I bore it all, you know I did, Hans—I worked—I was cheerful—and all for this—to have a curse fall on me just when—when—"

She broke off, threw herself on the floor, and

buried her face in the cushions of the chair. Old Hans leaned over her, saying very little, touching her hair gently, calling her name. Presently she rose—the horrible feeling of haste came back.

"What a fool I am!" she cried. "Get ready, Hans—I must go—I will! I shall be a raving lunatic if to-morrow finds us here."

She ran about the room, collecting the trifles she had thrown out of her boxes. As soon as he saw her fully occupied, Hans went away to make arrangements for their departure. In all her blind haste, it would have been odd enough to any observer to see how Hetty moved orderly about in her task, arranging every thing as carefully as if no more important thought disturbed her mind, her face never losing its death-like whiteness and rigidity.

When Hans returned she stood by the table in the centre of the room, dressed for the journey.

"They carry the boxes down," he said; "we was starting now."

He saw that she held a packet of letters—trifles of ornaments—a miniature-case. She ran to the hearth and cast the whole into the fire; as the blaze caught them, she pressed her hands to her heart with another low cry.

"They're gone," she said. "Take me away! Hetty Flint is dead—there's no trace left."

For days and nights they traveled ceaselessly toward their goal in the far North; but before the journey's end was reached, Hans had to halt in a Western city and watch over the girl, rendered for a season mercifully insensible of her misery by the terrible fever which seized upon mind and body alike.

Long weeks afterward, the first conscious words old Hans heard her utter were, "Help me up; I've buried that poor, silly Hetty. I dare say we'll get on very well now, Hans."

So he knew that the full recollection of the past had come back to her with the first return of her mental faculties; but it was the only mention she made of the horrible blow which had sent her so close down to the gates of death that, often as he sat by her side, old Hans thought they were opening to let her through.

"You haven't let my mother know?" she asked.

"Not certainly; as you will beg me always. I did wrote that you was very busy. Now we go to see her."

"Such a blessed old Hans! Yes, now we'll go to see her."

"But somebody else was coming many oftens to inquire," Hans said.

"Indeed? Who could care except you, foolish old Dutchman!"

"It was Mr. Vinton—you don't forget him?"

"Oh no; how good of him! But how did he happen to be here?"

"He was on the same train with us, and so he made stop too," Hans replied. "He shall want to see you very much."

"I'll be able to travel in a few days," Hetty

said, looking doubtfully at her wasted white hands. "How absurd it was to try so hard to die, and then not do it."

She recovered very rapidly; but the journey was not continued so soon as she had decreed. Old Hans caught a severe cold; and his strength, never great, was so much undermined by anxiety, and long days and nights of sleeplessness, that he sank rapidly under the acute attack. Until just at the last Hetty could not believe there was any danger; but his language proved that he had foreseen what the end must be.

"I know at first the old man's work was done," he said. "Don't cry, Hetty; you could get on very well now; and I'm going away where I see such bright things as sometimes I dreamed about when I carved the blessed Virgin and the Babe."

"Oh, Hans, you'll not die—I can't let you die!"

"The good Hetty! But she wouldn't wish to keep the poor old crooked fellow from his rest! And there's Gretchen up there too—maybe she see now how Hans loved her when they would both be young. Hans always made the Virgin's face like hers. Oh, it is very good to go, Hetty, my child—it is very good to go!"

That night Hetty Flint sat mournfully regarding the still white features which might never again reply to her glance with the old smile of tenderness; weeping as she had not been able to do over the wreck of her own life, kissing the withered hands clasped in their last peaceful sleep, and sobbing.

"I've nobody left now. Oh, Hans, Hans!" Footsteps approached her softly, and a kind voice said,

"You are not quite alone, Miss Hetty—if you will let me do what I can for you. At least I can go with you on your journey to your mother."

She looked up, met the kind, elderly face of Mr. Vinton, and held out her hand in penitent gratitude, conscious that she did not altogether deserve the patient devotion he had shown.

CHAPTER XXI.

REPENTANCE.

VALERY STUART was eighteen. Almost four years had elapsed since Miss Dorothy bade her brother farewell before his South American journey, yet his expatriation still continued.

Occasionally there arrived letters from Cecil; at long and uncertain intervals, one of Philip's rambling, amusing epistles. They were always given Valery to read; but Miss Dorothy did not know how she wept over the pages in the solitude of her chamber, and yearned to come nearer to that father and sister whom she might never claim. Still, hers had been a happy youth in spite of those lonely musings which she never betrayed even to her

kind protectress. She was an odd girl, the spinster thought. There was a great deal about Valery she could not understand; good, patient, obedient, but odd! The old maid got in the habit of shaking her head doubtfully and rather dolefully, as she repeated that verdict to the rector and his sister, and they would shake theirs in return and groan a little, though neither of the three could have told why, since they all had a great admiration for the dreamy-eyed damsel, and a profound faith in her talents.

She had been carefully educated; music was a passion with her; but the artistic talent exhibited as a child remained her most marked mental gift. Long ago John Ford had persuaded Miss Dorothy to allow her masters, and during his visits to America he always watched over her progress himself. Valery worked as diligently at drawing from casts or life as if she expected to set up a studio, and Miss Dorothy forbore to chide, though both she and the rector's sister raised their hands in horror when the girl persisted in studying anatomy; and the latter virgin declared that at Valery's age she should have been ashamed to know how a single bone in her body was situated. But Valery toiled always, and they finally decided that it was better not to appear conscious of her eccentricities. In her own mind, the object to be attained by this industry was vague indeed. Owing to her perfect physical health, and the atmosphere of affection which surrounded her, she lived in the present as few imaginative people do at her age, seldom dwelling upon the shadowy future further than to fancy herself dating letters from Rome or copying antiques in the Louvre, and was the happier in consequence.

During the bright midsummer days there came news to Miss Dorothy. Marian Conway had died in South America, and Philip and Cecil were on their way home. Although the woman's health had been wretched for years, her death was sudden, and Miss Dorothy gladly buried the memory of her faults. She could not help recollecting that at least Philip need no longer be forced daily to hear that he was living on his wife's bounty or wasting her substance. It never occurred to the generous old maid that Marian's disposition of her fortune might prove the crowning wrong of her poor, selfish, misshapen life.

Tidings followed that Philip and his daughter had reached New York. They would be detained there a few days on business. Marian four years previous had made her will, and deposited it with her old lawyer uncle, between whom and Philip there existed a bitter feud—bitter, that is, on Mr. Denham's side, for Philip never got beyond a provoking indifference—dating back to the first days of their acquaintance.

One afternoon as Miss Dorothy stood on the veranda looking out over her old home and wondering what would ever tempt her to leave

it and go prowling about the world, she saw a carriage drive up the winding avenue. An elderly servant of her brother's, who had been in the family since Miss Dorothy was a young girl, descended, and at sight of her hurried forward with a face so lugubrious that she knew at once he had evil tidings to impart.

"Davis!" she said, quickly. "What is the matter? My brother—has any thing happened to Philip?"

"Oh, Miss Dorothy," returned he, "so long since I've seen you—and to bring such bad news—"

"What is it?" she interrupted, in her impatient way. "Speak out! Not dead—Philip's not dead?"

Valery Stuart was passing through the hall; the sound of voices attracted her attention; she came forward just in time to catch Miss Dorothy's frightened cry. A chair stood near; she sank into it more from the sudden weakness which seized her than any act of volition, and sat unnoticed by either of the speakers.

"No, Miss Dorothy, but nigh it," came the man's answer. "They were on the train—Master Philip and Miss Cecil—I'd come up before—and there was an accident, and—and—we've got him home. The doctors say there's no chance—and oh, ma'am, he begs so to see you! Please to start right away."

Miss Dorothy covered her face with her hands for an instant; but life had held too many horrible shocks for any thing utterly to unnerve her now.

"Was Miss Cecil hurt?" she asked, in a slow, hard voice.

"No, ma'am, no; but she's a most crazy! And you're to come right off, please. We'll catch the down train; and above all, Master Philip says for the young lady to come, you know."

"Valery," demanded Miss Dorothy. "He wants to see Valery?"

"Yes, ma'am, he couldn't write. But, oh, miss, when he caught hold of my hand and begged me not to forget! If you'll please to start right away!"

Davis turned aside his head; he was growing old, and had served handsome Philip many years, loving him with a devotion Philip's dependants always exhibited.

Crouched in her corner, Valery caught Miss Dorothy's voice again, eager and sharp with pain.

"Is there no hope—are the doctors certain?"

Then the servant's response, falling like a blow on the girl's naked heart,

"Oh, ma'am, it's only a question of a few hours, they say; he—he can't last longer than to-morrow morning."

Valery heard Miss Dorothy cry out in irrepressible agony—heard her step on the stone floor. She sprang from her hiding-place and fled up the stairs; she would be sought for, and must have at least a few instants to herself.

The tenderness daily increasing in her soul for that almost unknown father since their parting four years ago, welled into passionate lament at the news of this disaster. Down on her knees in her room she prayed wildly for the misguided spirit which must so shortly go out to be judged by its works here, prayed to God that the love of her early lost mother, her willingness to forgive and sacrifice herself for him, might count in his behalf at the solemn hour of judgment.

Then a horrible feeling of haste distracted her—they must be gone—she was losing time—she should never be ready! She hurried about the chamber preparing for the departure; presently Miss Dorothy's voice called,

"Valery—Valery! I want you—quick!"

The girl opened the door, and the two white faces looked at each other. Instinctively Miss Dorothy felt that there was no need of explanation. Valery knew the whole.

"Did you hear Davis?" she asked.

"Yes," Valery replied, in a dull, absent way. "I came up to get ready—we must go at once."

Miss Dorothy seized her dress as she was moving away.

"Valery," she whispered, "do you know?"

"Every thing—ever since the last time he came here. Hurry, oh hurry, Miss Dor!"

There were no further words exchanged. Miss Dorothy passed into her own rooms; when she came out dressed for the brief journey, Valery was waiting in the corridor.

"We have time enough for the train, Miss Dor," she said, quietly.

Looking at her white, fixed countenance, there came upon Miss Dorothy the thought of what importance this child's free pardon might be to the dying man; not only as a solace to his last moments, but who should say of how much avail in the dread examination that awaited beyond! She threw up her hands with a gesture of wild entreaty, crying,

"Valery, Valery—you are not angry—you forgive—"

She could not finish, but Valery understood.

"I couldn't go if I did not!" she answered. "Hurry, hurry! I love him! He'll be glad to hear poor Lucy's daughter say that now."

She hastened down stairs, motioning Miss Dorothy to follow. Nurse Benson had heard the dismal news from Davis, so there were no explanations to give. Davis helped the ladies into the carriage, mounted by the coachman, and away they drove down to the river, which it was necessary to cross in order to reach the railway.

They spoke very little during the drive, each sitting erect and quiet in her corner; when words did pass between them there was no show of tragedy or pathos. Valery hoped that Miss Dorothy had put on thick shoes, for the ground was damp from a morning shower. Miss Dorothy said that Farmer Osborne's potatoes promised well. Then both cried out at

once that the horses went so slowly—so slowly! settled back in their seats, and were silent again.

They arrived at the ferry, found the boat just leaving, and in a few moments were landed by the station on the other side. While awaiting the train, both walked up and down the platform, not talking, sufficiently occupied in controlling the horrible impatience which made motion of some sort an absolute necessity. Then a rush and roar—on came the express, fortunately obliged to stop at the station for water. A brief delay, and they were whirling through the brightness of the afternoon, whose beauty only seemed an added pain.

It was not more than three o'clock when they reached their destination. One of the Conway carriages was there in expectation of their arrival.

"Ask how he is," Miss Dorothy said to Davis, unable to frame the question to the strange servant.

Davis addressed the man in a low tone; he only shook his head in reply. No one uttered another word. They drove through the bustling village—odious from its airs of believing itself a town—out among the glorious hills dotted with hamlets and country seats, and presently entered the noble domain which was one of the gifts Marian had brought her husband. Verily the dreariest room in the county workhouse would have proved a more acceptable resting-place than that stately mansion where he had dwelt, exposed to the ceaseless lash of her unmerciful tongue!

The broad front of gray stone, surmounted by lofty towers, appeared in view, and was lost in a sudden turn of the road. Beautiful glades opened amidst the winding arches of the wood glorified by the afternoon sun, soft green meadows, bits of park scenery, then the dwelling became visible again. As the carriage drew up before the grand entrance the housekeeper crossed the portico, followed by two or three of her chief satellites, all old servants of the Conway family.

"He's been easier, ma'am," the woman said, answering the eager inquiry in Miss Dorothy's face; "the doctors say he'll not suffer much more. Oh, miss, miss, try to think that's a little comfort, anyhow!"

Even in her genuine grief her glance wandered toward Valery; of course the whole group knew perfectly well who she was; and one look at those marvelous eyes, so like Philip's, sufficed to soften all hearts in her favor.

"Where is Miss Cecil?" the spinster asked; as she hurried impatiently past the housekeeper, taking Valery's arm, with a sudden recollection of what this arrival must be to her.

"She's been sitting with her pa, miss; but she'll come the minute she knows you've got here," returned the woman, following.

At this instant a young girl appeared on the upper landing, and Valery whispered to her companion,

"There she is; there!"

Cecil did not attempt to descend: young as she was, she knew she could bear nothing further, and the stern Conway pride would not permit her to indulge in a scene before the domestics.

"Come up, Aunt Dorothy," she called, and retreated at once into a room near the head of the staircase.

Miss Dorothy walked on, drawing Valery with her. Cecil met them at the door, kissed her aunt, took Valery's hands, kissed her too; then her self-control broke down, and for a few seconds she sobbed and moaned wildly, and Miss Dorothy joined her; but Valery remained very quiet. After a little, Cecil said,

"It was good of you both to come; papa has been so anxious! I'm glad, Valery, though I did feel jealous at first that he should want any body but me. Oh, my father, my father!"

The words startled her listeners, they sounded so much as if she had learned the secret which either of them would have given life itself to preserve from her. But one glance at her face showed that she had meant only what her language literally expressed. She remembered Valery pleasantly, and was for a moment filled with a vague jealousy at the idea of her father's desiring any body's presence, though too much absorbed to reflect that there was any thing odd in the request where Valery was concerned. Besides, her aunt Dorothy and this girl were inseparably connected in her mind; and once when she asked Philip who Valery was, he simply answered that she was the daughter of a very dear friend; but Cecil was never to mention her name—above all, to mamma. It was wonderful that, in her paroxysms of temper, Marian had never revealed the truth to her child. Indeed she had exposed Philip to Cecil less than could have been expected. It was the one trait of decent thought or action the weak, half-developed soul had shown during her selfish pilgrimage.

Cecil wept quietly for a while in Miss Dorothy's arms, holding fast to Valery's hand, and Valery envied her the ability to shed tears. Those were strange thoughts which filled the girl's mind as she stood thus, for the first time, under her father's roof, and among the quick flashes of memory came the recollection of her mother's death-bed. This softened her again; remembering how soon that father and mother must meet, she could not let his soul go out troubled by one shadow of reproach from Lucy's child.

"Is Philip conscious?" Miss Dorothy asked at length, feeling that any thing was a kindness which might attract Cecil's attention.

The poor young creature lifted her beautiful head and dried her eyes.

"I'm so selfish!" she half sobbed. "He has been waiting so anxiously for you to come. Stop here just a moment till I go and tell him."

She went away; Miss Dorothy and Valery

sat down and waited silently among the shadows. Presently Cecil came back.

"Come, aunt," she said, "he wants to see you first."

Valery kept her seat while Cecil conducted Miss Dorothy to the dying man's chamber, returning immediately after, and the two remained together. Cecil could not sit still; she wandered up and down the room, trying occasionally to speak, breaking off with bitter sobs, then, in her impulsive fashion, apologizing for her selfishness, and begging Valery not to think her unkind.

"It was so sudden," she shivered. "Oh, papa, papa!"

Valery's great heart swelled with sympathetic grief; she flung her arms about Cecil's neck, trying to whisper words of comfort. Cecil clung helplessly to her, and there they crouched in the oppressive stillness until they heard Miss Dorothy call.

"Valery, Valery!"

They both ran out to meet the unhappy sister, whose face looked ashen, the muscles working convulsively in spite of her efforts to appear calm.

"Does papa want me?" demanded Cecil.

"Not just yet; try and be patient for a little," returned her aunt; "he has something to say to Valery first."

"Oh, I—" But Cecil checked the passionate complaint which naturally enough rose to her lips. "I'll wait," she added, more quietly. "Go, Valery—go at once."

Valery stole softly along the lofty passage to the door which Miss Dorothy had left ajar, opened it, passed through a dressing-room, and found herself in the bed-chamber. There, stretched on the couch from which he would never rise, his countenance already changed by the approach of death, lay handsome Philip. Her step roused him; he turned his head wearily as she paused in the door-way. A spasm of pain disturbed his features; he extended his hands, exclaiming,

"Valery, Valery!"

She moved forward and fell on her knees by the bed. Philip half raised himself among the pillows and wound his arm about her neck; her cheek rested on his breast. Thus father and child met.

"You know," he said, slowly, "there's nothing to tell you. Dorothy says you know."

She pressed her hand on his in answer.

"And you don't hate me—you—"

"Hush!" she interrupted. "I love you—always—father, father!"

He did not reply. She glanced at his face; his eyes were closed, but a few tears stole softly from between the lids. Valery understood that the more quiet she could keep the interview, the better it would be for him. She rose, seated herself in a chair by the bedside, holding fast one of his hands, kissing it gently, but not attempting to speak.

"It was like Lucy's voice," he murmured.

"Say you forgive me—say it for her—maybe God will then."

She spoke the desired words, fully, freely, adding tender epithets which sprang naturally to her lips, and they seemed to bring him a certain peace for the moment.

"I needn't think of myself all the while," he said, with the old smile and something of the boyish, bewitching manner which had ever been his most dangerous charm. "I can't get things very straight—I'm sort of deadened here," and he touched his forehead.

"Don't try to talk; just let me sit by you for a while," returned she. "Perhaps to-morrow—"

She stopped short; there was no hope to hold out with that death-stricken face confronting her.

"Oh, to-morrow!" he repeated, with a sudden anxious expression in his eyes, though he still smiled faintly. "Valery, Valery, I've said that all my life, and this is my last opportunity. There'll be no more to-morrows for me in this world; where the next will find me, God knows!"

"And you may rest, because God does know," she said, softly.

The dark eyes cleared; the half smile grew peaceful.

"I think Lucy will do her best for me," he whispered; "and they'd not like her to suffer any more. Maybe, for her sake, I'll get off easier than I deserve. If I may just have one look at her, so that I can remember always how happy she is, I don't much mind. I never was very brave, I think, but I can bear it."

"But you are sorry, father—you do repent!" cried Valery, agonized between her fear of rousing him to keen pain and her horror at what seemed only a sort of heathenish fortitude. "There's nothing else necessary—He is so pitiful! You are sorry—you are?"

"I think so," he replied, in the same dreamy way; "I try, but I've so often believed I tried, until a new temptation came! 'Unstable as water'—what are the words, Valery?"

"You don't need to think of that—the failures are nothing. Oh, He knows—only you are sorry!"

"Yes, I understand—I try, dear; I try. But I never thought much—I always got away from it—and now it's not easy. I feel so confused here," and again he touched his head. "But I try! 'Our Father'—you know—and He was so merciful—even the thief on the cross—and Lucy must be asking and praying for me all the while—I can't think they'd grieve Lucy! Maybe after what seems an eternity I'll be helped up out of the darkness and the pain—and oh, the sin; I'm so tired of it! But I'll not complain—I deserve—whatever He does will be right! If only they'll give me one look at Lucy in her white robes, as I dreamed of her last night! It would be happiness, compared to these last years."

It was a long speech but uttered at intervals,

as he lay with his eyes closed—thinking aloud, it seemed. The confession brought comfort to Valery; the very fact that it was not a careless or unbelieving desperation which nerved him was much; but that he was resigned even to discipline and suffering if God willed it, offered a sure hope upon which her soul could rest.

She knelt beside the bed, and began to repeat the supplications of that most blessed of all psalms, which has helped so many a burdened soul to put its confession into words, and presently she heard him utter, brokenly, the touching measures, "*For I acknowledge my transgressions; and my sin is ever before me. Hide Thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.*"

Then there was a brief silence. At length his hand pressed hers more closely. She bent her head, and he whispered,

"I think He lets me repent—I think He helps me."

After that he dozed for a few moments, holding her hand still, a deeper smile of peace upon the parted lips, which twice murmured Lucy's name. He roused up as suddenly as he had sunk to sleep, glanced eagerly about, and said, in a voice full of loving awe,

"I thought she was here."

"I am sure of it," sobbed Valery; "close to us, father; she will never leave you again!"

He awakened fully, and began to talk with composure.

"I forget every thing," he said. "Valery, John Ford knows. The last time I saw him in England he persuaded me not to put it off. I hadn't much I could give you, but I did attend to it before I went to South America. He will tell you."

"Yes," she answered, more to soothe him, than because she attached any special meaning to his words.

"It will be enough to make you independent," he went on; "at least, I did remember that."

She understood that he spoke of some provision he had been able to make for her, but she could not talk of it.

"John Ford knows," she said.

"Yes; but there's something else," he replied, anxiously. "I can't tell whether it would be right—I thought I must ask you—it was partly to do it I wanted you at once. But there'd be no use—it couldn't change any thing—and such a blow to Cecil, you know—poor Cis!"

"Don't bring any more pain on Cecil," returned Valery, firmly. "Don't tell me or her a single word—it could do no good. I am quite satisfied—remember Cecil!"

"Do you love her—will you?" he asked, eagerly.

"If she will let me," Valery replied; "dearly, dearly!"

"That's right," he said. "Oh, now I can go content! Watch over her, Valery; she doesn't know, but you can tell her if you think

best—only she has seen my decent side always. But you'll be good to her? She's so like me in many ways—my poor Cecil! Will you help her, Valery, will you?"

"In every way I can—always," Valery answered. "If I can stand between her and suffering, I will do it. If I can purchase her happiness by any sacrifice, I will not hesitate. Are you content, father?"

He stretched out his arms once more; she crept into them, and for a few seconds lay there praying, and again heard him repeat, brokenly, the words of the heavenly psalm. A sound from the outer room reached them—Cecil's voice impatiently demanding admittance.

"There she is," Valery said. "She must not be kept away any longer; only tell her nothing—nothing!"

"Just as you bid," he replied; "you must judge. Ask her to come in. Oh, my poor Cecil, my poor Cecil!"

Valery went to the dressing-room door and opened it. Cecil exclaimed, in tones sharp with pain,

"I'll not be kept out. Papa—I want to see papa!"

"Come, dear," Valery replied, and drew her into the chamber.

Philip raised his eyes as they approached, and the beautiful smile which lighted his face on seeing them side by side—Valery half supporting her young sister—checked Cecil's tears.

"That is right," he said. "Love her always, Cis; don't let any body ever come between you—remember! Do you promise—do you both promise?" he added, his voice becoming louder as a fresh pang of mental suffering roused him out of the numbness and lethargy gradually dulling his physical senses.

They spoke the words he desired; he grew quiet at once, and turned his head on the pillow with a long sigh of relief.

"You'll never forget, Cecil; no matter if some one should try to make trouble between you? You'll believe always that she's your best friend—that she loves you almost like me?"

"Always, papa, always!" sobbed the girl.

"Let me look at you both once more—yes, that's the way I like to see you—side by side—keep close to her, Cis! I think I can sleep now—I'm tired; but don't go away, Cecil."

"No, papa, no!" She turned to Valery and whispered, "I want to stay with him, I want him all to myself."

She spoke from an impulse of jealous affection, natural enough under the circumstances, but it was very hard for Valery to endure—this thrusting her from the spot where she of all the world had most right. Her hesitation only lasted for an instant; she recollected her vow; no sacrifice could ever be more difficult than this Cecil now called upon her to make—she would not fail.

"Kiss me," she said.

Cecil complied, whispering,

"I love you, Valery; I do love you."

The girl crept out of the chamber in silence, and Cecil went back to the bed. Philip had dropped into a doze—no good sign—it was only the beginning of the end—but in her ignorance Cecil half believed that it augured a hopeful change, and sat down to watch, more composed and self-contained than she had been since the horrible accident occurred.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE END.

VALERY descended the stairs, meeting no one but the housekeeper, who told her Miss Dorothy was engaged with a visitor, adding, hesitatingly, that it was Mr. Denham who had arrived. Valery knew the name. Mr. Denham was the uncle of Philip's dead wife, and Philip's nameless child had neither the right nor wish to force her presence upon any of that family. She wandered away through the long suites of shadowy apartments, dismal with an oppressive stillness all the more burdensome from their gorgeous decorations. She reached a boudoir off the great drawing-room, the windows of which were open on the flower-gardens, so that the place looked less gloomy and desolate than the other rooms. While she sat there, the sound of conversation reached her from the salon—her own name pronounced in an angry tone by a strange voice.

"Valery—that girl—here in this house?"

"Yes," Miss Dorothy answered; "Philip sent me word to bring her."

"I wonder Marian's ghost did not rise to drive her out," returned the other. "How dared any body outrage this roof by bringing that girl under it?"

"Come, that's much more melodramatic than sensible, Mr. Denham!" exclaimed Miss Dorothy, in her blunt way. "A woman might indulge in this sort of bombast, but I am surprised at it from you."

"Miss Dorothy Conway, you are very kind to lecture me—very," said he, his voice trembling with anger. "I am quite aware that you pride yourself on speaking your mind, and so do I, ma'am—so do I!"

"That's nonsense again. I've no intention of lecturing you," retorted Miss Dorothy, with some irritation. "As for speaking your mind, I should say you did. Excuse me for adding (indeed, I don't care whether you excuse me or not) that I should think decent feeling and taste would have kept you from talking of my brother as you have done, and he dying."

"I never shrink from the truth, ma'am—never?" replied the fat, pompous voice. "I should do my duty by Philip if I were to see him—"

"Which I'll take good care you don't," interrupted Miss Dorothy.

"As for dying," he continued, "I doubt it, from the description I have had. I think it very possible he may recover; but if not, I

should say bringing the results of his profligacy and sin into this house at such a moment was a poor preparation for—"

"I don't choose to hear any more, sir; I have twice said so! Stop! You are a coward, sir, to use such language to a woman at a time like this!"

"Miss Conway—ma'am—why—"

"I mean just what I say—stop! You had something of importance to tell me, so you said; but as yet you have done nothing but abuse my brother. Whatever his faults may have been, he is fast passing beyond your judgment. Let him alone, sir—let him alone, lest, in condemning his sin, you commit one that God has declared greater than all others!"

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, I beg your pardon; I don't need to be taught my duty," said the fat voice, the pomposity again getting the better of the passion which had shaken it. "I know my duty, and I've done it always, I am proud to say. When a man at my age can look back over a whole life of conscious rectitude, he doesn't need to be set straight, Miss Conway, ma'am."

"I have no inclination for the task, provided you keep your opinions concerning my family to yourself," replied Miss Dorothy. "Now, sir, don't let us waste any more time—I want to get back to my brother: tell me what is necessary, and let me go."

"I was so astounded—I may say—yes, I really think I may say horrified and shocked—by your telling me the girl was in this house, that I forget where I was."

"Something about your niece's will," returned Miss Dorothy, ignoring the first part of his speech.

"Ah, Marian's will!" and a tremor of malicious satisfaction sharpened the fat voice a little. "Yes, indeed, Marian's will! Poor girl, poor, outraged, deceived, ill-treated girl!—died of a broken heart, of a—"

"You are wandering from the point again," broke in Miss Dorothy. "She took eighteen years to die, at all events; and if she had been a little more careful of her stomach, I suppose she might be alive to-day."

"I don't expect any trace of feeling from a Conway, ma'am, none;" and now passion mastered the pomposity. "But the memory of my niece is dear to me, and my duty to morality, aid to—in general—will not permit me to listen to such remarks."

"For mercy's sake, Mr. Denham, go on with what you want to tell me, and leave our relations alone, dead or alive," cried Miss Dorothy. "What about Marian's will?"

"I see its wisdom now—clearly," pursued Mr. Denham. "There are depths of perversity in the human heart, I find, which I had not sounded; but Marian's experience had been more painful. She foresaw this hour—she acted upon it—ah, how fortunate that she did! From what contamination may she not have spared her child—from what—"

"Do you mean—?" Miss Dorothy began with a sudden excitement of manner which she repressed quickly as she paused in her question, looking sternly at her antagonist, who nodded his head with an energy that left him redder than ever.

"Aha!" cried he, triumphantly. "The justice of it strikes even you, prejudiced as you are! You don't need to ask what I was about to say—you know instinctively what it would be."

"Haven't the slightest idea," returned Miss Dorothy, stillly, and sat bolt upright in her chair, never releasing him from the tyranny of her keen eyes, while Mr. Denham bounced and chuckled and nodded like a malevolent old parrot. Then Miss Dorothy, with a change from rigidity to contempt, said, "Perhaps, when you get through that little exercise, sir, you'll commence your explanation—if you have any to give."

"Oh, I have one, Miss Dorothy—don't you fear but that I have one—and I'll give it, ma'am; I'll give it with clearness and precision and—and enthusiasm, ma'am."

"Try and give it in plain English—that will satisfy me," retorted Miss Dorothy, evidently determined now to make the man angry, though, in spite of her composure, the startled look which had come into her face did not leave it.

"English will serve my turn," said he, spitefully; "I leave foreign languages and—and foreign manners to Philip, Miss Dorothy."

Miss Dorothy rose from her seat and turned resolutely toward the door.

"You evidently don't intend to tell me any thing," said she; "and after all, I can have no concern whatever in the terms of your niece's will. I shall say good-morning, Mr. Denham."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Conway—I beg your pardon; but now and then you can be mistaken as well as other people—"

"I never was mistaken in you, at all events," she muttered, unable to keep the words back, though she was vexed at herself for allowing the pompous old creature to irritate her.

"Would you say that again!" he asked, breathing hard, and trying to speak with elaborate courtesy. "Would you have the great kindness just to say that again, Miss Dorothy Conway, ma'am?"

Miss Dorothy Conway never so much as deigned him a glance.

"Because it is my opinion," breathing harder, and pulling out his chest to a preposterous extent, "that it was something actionable, and I only wish I had a witness."

"For your own sake, I am glad you have not," said she. "Once more—and for the last time—how does Mrs. Conway's will concern me?"

"In a vital—yes, a vital point," returned Mr. Denham, seeming to roll the words over in his mouth with extreme relish. Then he shook himself again, and let his chest relapse to its ordinary size, for the pleasure apparently

of puffing it out anew while he repeated, "A vital—vital point," as if so delighted with the phrase that he could not find it in his heart to let it go.

Miss Dorothy gave a second glance toward the door, which warned him that if not careful he would lose the satisfaction of overwhelming her with the promised disclosure.

"I am coming to it, ma'am—I am working up to it! I'm a moderate man always; and I wanted to prepare you for a shock—a great shock," said he, rattling out his r's like a volley of small shot.

"It is an unnecessary precaution, Mr. Denham," she replied; "I don't think I shall find it difficult to bear with composure any thing you may have to tell."

"We'll see about that, ma'am," said he, with a defiant sniff, which he unexpectedly turned into a sort of prayer-meeting whine. "Far be it from me to exult—I am only thankful, deeply thankful."

Miss Dorothy's hand was on the door-knob; the movement caused him to add hastily,

"Your brother Philip wishes that his daughter Cecil should live with you in case she were left an orphan."

"My brother has asked me to promise that, and I have," she answered coldly, though the muscles of her stern mouth worked tremulously, and the startled expression returned to her eyes.

"Whether that can be must depend on circumstances," said Mr. Denham; "it will depend a good deal upon me, and you will have to make me a promise also."

Miss Dorothy went back to her chair; she did not sit down, but stood leaning her hand on the arm, eyeing the man keenly.

"What promise am I to make, sir?"

"It's in the will, Miss Conway; it's in the will! I'm proceeding legally—I'm straightforward—it's Joel Denham's way."

"We have got so far," said she, quietly; "I have promised my brother that Cecil shall live with me. What follows?"

"That will depend upon circumstances—entirely! Marian's last command was that if after her death Philip should be so lost to all proper sense of decency as to attempt to hold any communication with the girl called Valery Stuart—you follow me, ma'am—you follow me?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Denham—go on."

"Then the allowance which I am to pay him out of his deceased wife's property ceases at once."

"I should doubt whether that clause would hold, sir; but it is too late for it to matter now."

"It would, ma'am," he cried, venomously, "else there would be a lawsuit, and the reasons be made public—his character exposed—the whole shameful truth come out—"

"Have I not told you that Philip is dying?" she interrupted, in a voice of keen anguish.

"Let Philip alone—at least the will can not concern him now. Go on to my part."

"In case of his decease," pursued the pompous man, not a whit softened by her distress; feeling, on the contrary, that he gained a sort of triumph thereby, "you are, to a certain extent, Cecil's guardian; only nominally—the power is in my hands—my hands," and he spread them out before her to give emphasis to his words.

"Well, sir, and what are you to do with this power?"

"I am to use it prayerfully, but inexorably, ma'am, and—I don't doubt that grace will be given me to do it—"

"Perhaps you will tell me first, and pray over it afterward," she broke in again, while the chair shook under the nervous trembling which seized her, though her voice was cold and disdainful as ever.

"In case Miss Dorothy Conway persists in harboring, housing, or otherwise countenancing, or in any way, by word of mouth or written letter, holding communication with the girl called Valery Stuart," pursued Mr. Denham, moving his right hand slowly through the air, as if reading aloud some invisible document, "in that case—you follow me, ma'am?"

"I am trying to, sir!"

"Then the said Dorothy Conway is to be forbidden any intercourse with my grandniece, Cecil, while she is a minor; and Cecil is to reside entirely with my family until she comes of age," he concluded, making a motion of folding up the invisible document and presenting it to her.

"And that was Marian's will?" Miss Conway asked, slowly.

"I have a copy of her last instructions left in her lawyer's hand; the will itself states that certain instructions are to be made known by me at the fitting moment! If you doubt my word, Miss Conway—"

"I do not; I am quite prepared to believe it," she sat down, looking straight over his head in a way which severely hurt his sense of dignity.

"I shall give you time to reflect," he went on; "finding, as I did on my arrival, that girl here, to the great disgrace of all concerned—my grandniece exposed to the contamination of her society—here, under the roof that was Marian's—I felt it my duty to speak at once."

"You have done your duty, sir—you shall have my answer."

"Not in haste, Miss Conway; I beg you to take time to reflect and weigh—"

"I don't need time! Valery is as much my niece as Cecil. I love her as dearly—she shall never leave my roof—never lose my care—there is nothing more to be said."

"But it remains for me to act," replied Mr. Denham, trying to speak with sad firmness, though the evident enjoyment of his power was fairly ludicrous.

"That Cecil will pay any attention to such

commands, I don't believe," cried Miss Dorothy. "You may prevent her living with me, but you can't hinder our seeing each other and loving each other."

"Not if I tell Cecil the whole truth?" he asked, with a crafty laugh.

"I can hardly believe that even you would be brute enough to do that," she exclaimed, impetuously.

"I shall do it, to obey Marian's command—I shall do it from a sense of justice—prayerfully always," he answered, in the nasal voice which seems indispensable to a hypocritical pretense of religious motives. "But there's another injunction—one I think serious enough to weigh even with you."

"No consideration under heaven could have an instant's weight, Mr. Denham! I will never give up my brother's child!"

"Then if Cecil—which I do not believe—but if she should, after knowing the truth, ever exchange so much as a word with you, the fortune left by her mother, or the bulk of it, passes away from her! Will you help to ruin your lawful niece, Miss Dorothy?"

"That so iniquitous a will could hold for an instant, I don't believe," Miss Dorothy answered.

"It would hold—there's enough left Cecil, so that she could not break the will! And would you like to see her try! Would you like the catalogue of your brother's crimes to come out in a court of justice? Would you counsel Cecil to bring such infamy and disgrace upon—upon the blossom of her life?" and though he spoke earnestly enough now, he could not resist rolling his words and searching for eloquent phrases.

"I shall counsel nothing—do nothing in the matter," replied Miss Dorothy. "I shall take Valery and go away; she will be all I have left, but you can not deprive me of her. Marian chose a fit instrument to carry out the most unworthy plan of revenge that ever a woman imagined—and you counseled, you aided; it was, in a great part, your own idea, I believe!"

"I am proud to acknowledge it, Miss Conway. I saw my duty, and I did not shrink from it. I never shall shrink, grace sufficient being given."

"You needn't blaspheme; I can credit your assertion without that!"

"When I saw Marian after she left your house, insulted, outraged, by learning whom you kept there, she came to me for advice," he went on, "and she acted upon the advice I gave."

"The best thing you can do now, Mr. Denham, is to go home," said Miss Dorothy, rising. "Give my brother a chance to die in peace—to be buried; then do your worst."

"And I am to consider your answer as decisive, ma'am?"

"You are! I will never give up Valery—never! Cecil can do without me. She has fortune, station, though it is horrible to think

of her subject to the influence of you and yours! But my duty is plain enough—I shall keep Valery. If I were you, Mr. Denham, I would have the decency to leave this house."

"You turn me out!" he exclaimed, growing white with anger. "Ma'am, it's not in your power. I have a right here, and here I shall stay as long as I think proper."

"Then you will stay alone, for my patience can bear no more," she answered, and hurried from the room.

Left victor, the pompous man was exceedingly at a loss what to do with his triumph. While meditating the propriety of an attempt to force himself into Philip's bed-chamber, the door opened and the housekeeper appeared demanding Miss Conway, in a state of great excitement.

"Yes, Mr. Philip was worse," she said, in reply to Mr. Denham's inquiries; "the doctors had come—it was thought each bad turn must be the last."

Left alone again, Mr. Denham found himself so uncomfortable—having, in common with many less pious people, an extreme horror of death—that he decided to take his departure. But he kept up the force of duty to the end for the benefit of the servants; he was forced to go—he was to be telegraphed for should any change take place—and so escaped from the house.

Valery Stuart sat crouched where she had been while the conversation in the next room went on. She never once remembered that she was listening to words not meant for her ears; the situation was so strange that no common rules of action could have any weight. Long before the disclosure came, she presaged it; something whispered it to her as distinctly as a human voice could have done. She must wait—she must hear. That Miss Conway would consent to give her up she knew was impossible—she understood her character too well to suppose it; but the plan of action forced upon herself was plain to her mind, even in the moments of cold, apathetic suffering and confusion which followed the first horrible shock.

To get away—out of sight—beyond any possibility of discovery, was her strongest impulse. She was actually on her feet, struggling in a blind fashion to find the door, only thinking of escape, when she recollected that to go now would make worse bewilderment and trouble for those she left behind. If her father should ask for her—if Miss Dorothy should need her! And she must see his face once more—hear his voice speak kindly words! Her youth, her whole life had come to an end with this new and terrible blow, but she could not go yet! Only to see him again! they could not refuse her that; then she would creep away, and her presence should never again trouble any human being connected with his past.

The long hours dragged by; the night came on, dreary and solemn. Cecil watched alone in her father's chamber, except when some sud-

den attack of pain roused him from his stupor, and help for the moment was needed. Miss Dorothy and the nurse remained in the room without—silent, waiting. Occasionally the doctor stole in for an instant; there would be a few whispered words, then all grew still again. Valery crept into the apartment, and stood near the door; Miss Dorothy beckoned her to approach, drew her down upon the sofa, and there they sat in silence—waiting—waiting!

It came at last; in the narrowing watches of the night—a little longer, and the vigil would be done. The short, fierce spasm of mortal agony subsided; but this time Philip did not sink into drowsiness as before. He half raised himself on his pillows and strained his eyes eagerly about.

"Cecil!" he called; "Cecil!"

Her arm was about his shoulders, supporting him; her voice answered through its sobs,

"Close by you, papa; don't you see me—don't you hear me?"

"Every thing goes so far off—so far!" he gasped. "Is that you, Dorothy?"

She came forward from the foot of the bed. Valery, roused by his voice, opened the door, and lingered trembling on the threshold. She could approach no nearer; Cecil stood between her and that possibility; it seemed a crime to the sister, toward whom her heart had gone out so fondly, to intrude at this moment.

"I'm so tired," Philip murmured; "it seems so dark! Don't cry, Cecil, don't cry!"

His head sank upon her bosom; he appeared to sleep for a few seconds. Suddenly he started—extended his arms—his eyes were lifted toward the ceiling, and a smile so bright, so strange that even in this awful moment it seemed to bring youth back to his face, settled upon his lips.

"I see you," he whispered, "I see you! Am I asleep? have you come to—to forgive?" Then, after a pause, "Lay me down, Cecil—I'm not afraid—if she can pardon, maybe God will too."

The head sank lower—the smile became fixed upon the features—there was one faint cry from Cecil, then the silence remained unbroken. Philip's soul had gone forth into the unseen; but always when she reflected, Valery, understanding as Cecil might never do these latest words, could be sure that, in spite of error, in spite of wasted talents and a mis-spent life, an angel had been permitted by the Holy One, "who judges not as man judges," to show him a gleam of light adown the portals of eternity through which his soul was passing.

The next morning early, before Cecil wakened from the troubled sleep which exhaustion had forced upon her, Valery knocked at the door of Miss Dorothy's room. The spinster was up and dressed, looking so stiff and unapproachable that a careless observer might have thought she did not suffer; but Valery

knew what lay beneath the cold exterior, and how hard the woman struggled to preserve that composure, lest, if she gave way in the least, her grief should leave her helpless.

"Have you slept, Valery?" she asked.

"Not much—I was thinking."

"Oh, child," Miss Dorothy answered, drearily, "there's always time for that; life is long enough, in all conscience; let's get away from thought for a little while."

"I can't—I want to say something," Valery answered. "You've been too busy to remember; but—but I must go away."

"Never!" cried Miss Dorothy, thinking only of Mr. Denham's words on the previous evening. "You shall never leave me, Valery."

"You don't understand," continued Valery, as quietly as ever. "I mustn't be here—the funeral, you know! If Cecil's relatives were to see me—you forget! I don't want them to tell Cecil. Oh, I couldn't have Cecil learn to hate me!"

Her voice rose to a shrill cry, but she checked it, and went on slowly, dry-eyed always,

"I may go home, mayn't I, Miss Dorothy? I am ready. There's an early train I can take; it's more for Cecil's sake than any thing else—don't you see?"

Miss Dorothy, for one of the few occasions in her life, rushed out of her stern self-control into a passion of hysterical sobs. Perhaps never since the hour she stood by Lucy Stuart's bed, and saw for the first time her helpless babe, had she been so completely unmoved as now. She flung her arms about Valery's neck and wept aloud. But Valery could not shed a tear; she felt cold and apathetic and dead, and had only a vague wonder in her mind to see Miss Dorothy so overcome.

"You're right, child," Miss Conway said at last, wiping her eyes. "You shall go home; perhaps it will be better to go this morning; those harpies will be in the house before noon."

"And—and—you'll tell Cecil, won't you, that I thank her for letting me come—that I wish I could help her?" Then once more the sharp cry of pain troubled her voice, "Oh, don't let her be told—don't let her be told!"

"There'll be nobody quite brute enough for that," Miss Dorothy replied; "they're as bad as they can be, but there must be limits, Valery. Have you ordered the carriage? is it time to go?"

"Yes, quite time—I'm all ready—don't come down," Valery said, for she meant to walk; it would have been easier to march over a road paved with iron spikes than be indebted to any means Marian had left. Yet there was no bitterness in her mind—she felt too crushed for that; she had no right in the world at all, least of all there.

"Good-bye, Miss Dorothy. Oh, if I could tell you, if I could thank you!" she cried. And now her unnatural composure broke down; she clung to her friend with painful sobs which brought no tears to relieve her.

CHAPTER XV.

MISS DOROTHY'S DECISION.

THE funeral was over; two days had passed since they laid Philip Conway to rest in the old family burying-ground, and Miss Dorothy began to think of going away.

Mr. Denham was at the house: he had insisted upon her taking this time for reflection; not so much for her sake in reality as his own, because his wife had no mind to trouble herself with the care of Marian's child. She had expressed her opinion upon the subject with a clearness which made the pompous man very uneasy at the possibility of having to return and present Cecil to the ruler of his domestic peace. Miss Dorothy had held no conversation with the child in regard to the subject. Cecil was too much absorbed by grief to think about her future, though her helpless clinging to her aunt was a warrant of the despair with which she would resist any attempt at separation. Yet the spinster did not waver; it was a cruel necessity, hard to bear as martyrdom; but the right course was plain—she could not forsake Valery.

To darken Cecil's girlhood by a revelation of the truth was impossible. The creature was so excitable, so impressionable, that this disgraceful history in regard to the father she had worshiped might positively be the means of unhinging her mind. It was not likely that she could go through life without gaining some perception of it, but the facts must affect her differently when a woman. Miss Dorothy knew that Mr. Denham and his wife would guard the girl as carefully from the danger of such knowledge as she could do herself; they were all united in this one interest. Marian, weak, cowardly, cruel as she had been, held fast always to that resolution; Cecil should not know. Little as she was capable of appreciating her child's character, she had presaged the peril of any disclosure.

So there was no loop-hole for Miss Dorothy; she must resign either one charge or the other. She dared not tell Cecil, and give her the chance of decision now, and she trembled lest the separation should be for life. Cecil's nature held capabilities of terribly strong feelings and resentments; she was a thorough Conway. These qualities might be fostered, by the bad influence of her mother's relatives, to an extent which would absolutely blight and root out the goodness and gentleness prominent in spite of her haughtiness and violent temper.

They must part: if Cecil had been older, and the truth possible to tell, Miss Dorothy knew that she could not bring herself to struggle over the will. Better any thing than that the story of Philip's past should make paragraphs for gossiping newspapers, and its stain bequeath a lasting trouble to Cecil, and irreparable ruin to his elder child.

The evening of the second day she was seated in Cecil's room; the poor creature had gone

"Love me," said Miss Dorothy, "that's enough for me! But it's not 'good-bye'; I shall be back directly after—after it's all over," she continued, shrinking from the utterance of the word she had tried to speak. "Take good care of yourself, and don't fret."

Valery kissed her many times, though she had never been demonstrative in her affection—more from a fear of annoying Miss Dorothy than because it was her nature—and Miss Dorothy gave her numerous directions and requests, just to keep the parting from overpowering both.

"I will go down stairs with you," she said.

But Valery begged her not; and Miss Dorothy understanding that the girl wished to pay one last visit to the chamber where their dead lay, and to enter it alone, said no more. So the farewells were spoken quietly enough, and Valery went her way—pausing at the door to look back once again at the face which had always been kind and loving for her—the face that, in all time to come, she should never behold again. Miss Dorothy waved her hand and tried to smile. Valery closed the door, feeling that she had shut herself out from her girlish life forever; there remained no more possibility of going back to it than if crossing the threshold had been the first step into another world.

She passed along the corridor, traversed the chamber where a woman sat watching, entered the shadowy room beyond, and stood alone with her dead. She could not spare many moments; besides, she had a nervous fear that the housekeeper or some stranger might intrude. She went up to the bed, drew the sheet down, and gazed at the quiet face—smiling and peaceful as perhaps it had never looked since the innocent days of early boyhood. She could weep now, and the tears did her good; she could pray, and find relief in those fervent petitions. Some premonition of the future seemed to come over as she knelt, leaning her forehead against the cold hand stretched out upon the counterpane; and the vague hopes so mercifully granted her gave new strength. She made herself a promise as she knelt there, and during the years which followed it was never forgotten. Whatever came, she would be cheerful and patient, lest her conduct might bring a shadow over the peace of him whose early recklessness had forced this trouble upon her. She recalled those wandering words that had fallen from the dying man's lips, and they were an inexpressible comfort to her. The mother, whom she recollected like some beautiful childish dream, would pray for him in the clear light of eternity, and she, his child, would guard and treasure his memory here, and both be to him tokens of God's forgiveness and love.

The sound of steps and voices in the outer room roused her; she rose, kissed once again the still, pale face, and departed. The new life had begun.

to bed exhausted by the emotions of the terrible week, and dropped asleep, holding fast to her aunt's hand.

The maid stole in and whispered to Miss Dorothy that Mr. Denham wished to speak with her. She knew what the message meant; the time had come when her decision must be announced. She looked at the face of the sleeping girl, and the thought of leaving her to grow to womanhood under the care of those worldly, mercenary relations was an almost insupportable pang. Then Valery's image rose before her; the promise she had given Lucy Stuart rang in her ears; she could not hesitate.

"Tell Mr. Denham I will come down," she said, gently disengaging her hand from Cecil's. The girl murmured her name, and stirred uneasily. A knife seemed to cut deep across Miss Dorothy's heart, but she did not falter.

"Here's a letter for you, ma'am," the maid added.

Miss Dorothy took it, and motioned the woman to go. She looked at the superscription—it was in Valery's hand. She would read the epistle before seeing Mr. Denham; the loving expressions, the desire for her return, the utter helplessness of the nameless girl all brought so vividly to mind, might nerve her for the interview.

She moved to the other end of the room and sat down, opened the envelope, glanced over the closely-written pages, starting at some words which met her eye, smoothed the sheet carefully, and began at the commencement, shaking her head as if to tell herself that she had mistaken the sense of the passage.

This was Valery's letter:

"When this reaches you, dearest, and best of friends, I shall be so far away that no efforts your kind heart might lead you to make could ever avail to find me. It is to spare you this useless task, which I know your goodness would impel you to undertake, that I write this letter. Oh, believe me, dear Miss Dorothy, it is better so—I am right in the step I have taken! Think of Cecil left to the care of those cruel people; think of her growing up to hate our father's memory, perhaps troubling his peace in the existence to which he has gone forward, by her angry thoughts! All the sin would be on my soul—the ruin of her life would be my work—dear, dear Miss Dorothy, I could not bear that—

"I am writing incoherently, and I meant to tell you the whole plainly and clearly. But don't think I am not brave; don't think I am not determined! My dearest, I would die sooner than let your loving tenderness—and you do know how I prize it—find me out in the way I have chosen.

"I was in the next room when Mr. Denham told you those cruel commands—I don't mean to blame the dead—I meant only that he was cruel to tell them to you so harshly, and at that time. There is but one course open to save and protect Cecil—you must stay with

her. Oh, Miss Dorothy, if I clung to you, and they told her the truth, and she came to hate me and upbraid me as Marian once did, I should go mad. And it is for our father—our father—he could not rest in the next world if strife and dissension were to come between his children.

"You are not to be afraid for me, dear—it is all arranged. I have means to make me very comfortable—indeed, I feel quite rich! He did not forget me—only think of his generous heart—he had settled upon me every thing he had to give, and it is more than enough to leave me free and independent. He told me himself, when we were alone that night. I shall have no trouble whatever in getting possession at once of my little fortune. It was so good—so good! And to think that Cecil might be taught to hate his memory—she is so young—you wouldn't have that—you would make any sacrifice rather than that should come. Oh, my kind heart, oh, my best of women, let it rest here; feel that it is right—that it is God's will! I charge you as I would if I were dying—cling to Cecil—don't try to find me—nothing else could drive me to desperation, but that would! Oh, Miss Dorothy, I should go mad like my poor mother; I should take my own life, sooner than stand between Cecil and her peace. Only let matters rest, and every thing will be well; I shall be in good hands; I shall have work to do, and no shadow from my childhood will come up to disturb me. I don't complain—you guarded me so carefully; but, dear, though it breaks my heart to think I shall never see your face again, never hear that voice which had only kindness and love for me, there will be a rest in going away from every reminder of my poor mother's shame. Dearest, you never knew how I suffered—how I shrunk from every body, because each person knew my secret—it was always in their eyes—I could read it. And the pain would have increased—I never could have grown used to it—never! It would have warped my womanhood, blighted my life, and all your loving care could not have prevented it.

"I only tell you this for an additional reason why you should not try to follow me—I mean why you should be content—because you could no more find me than if I were dead. It is for my sake as well as Cecil's—for my peace as well as hers—remember that always, my darling heart, and be satisfied.

"I can tell you nothing more; if I were to write myself blind, I could never express a tithe of the love and reverence I feel for you! You who gave up your youth, your life, to my father while he dwelt here among men, must let me have the ineffable happiness of feeling that I help, by God's mercy, to add to his peace in the next. These are my last words; they hold the whole.

"And now, good-bye. I send my entire heart out in the blessings that I mingle with your name. Oh, my noblest and best of wom-

en, good-bye. Love Cecil with the love you would have given us both, had it pleased the Heavenly Father that our lives should pass together! Think of me, and teach her to think of me, as you might if I were dead and gone. The recollection always that you do so think of me, that in her mind there is no harsh recollection connected with my name, no shadow to fall through it upon our father's memory, will bring me a deeper peace than your love could show in any other way.

"Once more, take my heart's love and my heart's thanks! I kiss this paper that your hands will touch. I pray to God to give you strength, and He will give it as a recompense for all you have suffered; and in the life beyond we shall have a reunion only the sweeter from the trials and separation which He orders here."

Miss Dorothy read the letter, and Cecil slumbered while the stern woman wept wildly, thinking not so much—great as was the grief—of Valery's loss, as of the silent suffering she had borne from her early childhood, borne so patiently and with so rare a fortitude that no human being about her ever suspected it.

Many times before she finished the letter Miss Dorothy sprang from her seat with some vague, insane idea of rushing out in search of the girl; but as she read those solemn admonitions the feeling passed, and she could as easily have defied an injunction from the unseen world as these warnings. The matter must rest here; her charge had been taken out of her hands, and she could do no more. Recalling Valery's character, she felt that the girl had only spoken the truth when she said that to be found would drive her to desperation. Life held a plain duty for the spinster now, and she must accept it. It was hard and painful; but life had been hard so long that she had grown accustomed to it. At least she need not be anxious about the lost one's future; she was provided for. Miss Dorothy knew her perfect truth so well that she could take the avowal as meaning exactly what it professed.

A knock at the door; Mr. Denham's pompous arrogance was wounded because she had presumed to keep him waiting. She dried her eyes and turned to go, bidding the woman who brought a softened paraphrase of Mr. Denham's impatient message remain in the room lest Cecil should wake.

She held the letter in her hand as she entered the library where that epitome of all the cardinal virtues was walking up and down, watch in hand, as irate, if not so dignified, as the French king when he uttered his famous exclamation.

"I suppose you did not receive my first message, Miss Conway?" said he, breathing hard, and puffing out his chest prodigiously.

"Yes, I received it," she answered, wearily.

"I could have wished you had been good enough to recollect that my time is valuable," he continued, severely. "My numerous duties

follow me even here; and this delay will make me so late over my letters that I must deprive myself of natural rest, and I need rest, ma'am; I am human. I am always equal to my duty, but I am human."

He gave the confession condescendingly, as though he felt that it was an avowal too astounding for her really to credit.

"Now that I have come," said she, with the same weary manner, so unlike her usual firmness that he absolutely believed her awed by his grandeur, "I need not detain you long."

"Sit down, Miss Dorothy, sit down," returned he, quite affably.

She sat down, but her eyes were fixed upon the letter in her hand, instead of paying attention to the noble attitude he struck for her admiration.

"I hope," said he, "that we may be able to understand one another comfortably; you know we are connections, to a certain degree, Miss Dorothy—to a certain degree," he repeated with emphasis, to show her that, though he was condescending enough to admit the tie, she must not presume upon it.

"At least," she replied, "we have one common interest."

"Ah, ah, I comprehend! You refer to my grandniece—to Cecil! I am very quick to arrive at people's meanings and motives, Miss Dorothy," said he, with a look of profound wisdom, as if examining a witness legally and getting at some truth the questioned one desired to conceal.

"Exactly—Cecil," said she, too tired and preoccupied to be either amused or irritated by his stupendous absurdity.

"And you have come to a resolution in regard to her," he proceeded, with the same attempt at legal profundity; "I can see that! Now we shall get on very well, I dare say; but don't be hasty, Miss Dorothy: moderation is my motto."

She really was not equal to growing angry with his impertinent arrogance; she only wanted to finish, and be rid of him.

"I have made up my mind," she said, "or rather, it has been made up for me."

"Bad," interrupted Mr. Denham, "bad; shows a trace of feminine weakness, ma'am."

"I want you to read this letter," she continued, without noticing his parenthesis.

"You have put your answer upon paper; very well, very well," said he, gratified at this style of procedure so much in keeping with his idea of what was due to him.

"No; it is a letter I have just received. If it had not been for this, my answer to you would be the same as it was the other day; but this leaves me no alternative. I shall remain with my niece Cecil."

He was divided between offense at her words and extreme pleasure at finding that she meant to help him out of his difficulty where his grandniece was concerned.

"You—you put your response abruptly, and

—and in a singular fashion, ma'am," said he, breathing hard again. "I could have wished to hear you say that your decision had been reached from mature reflection, from a sense of what was right."

"I can't help that; you must be satisfied with it just as it is," replied she, speaking more like herself. "I want you to read that letter. I choose you to know exactly how the case stands."

"Slowly, slowly, Miss Conway," returned he, beginning to get a new relish for the scene as she grew impatient. "There's a Latin proverb which says—well, I don't exactly recall at the moment what it does say."

"But I say read the letter," retorted she.

He waved it back as she offered it to him.

"One question first," he said, relapsing into his court-of-justice manner. "You relinquish that young person whose name ought not to be uttered within these walls? You devote yourself to Cecil, and you give me your pledge that no communication shall ever intrude to sully the pure atmosphere which must surround my grandniece like—like a halo, may I say—from that quarter which—"

Fortunately, he became so hopelessly involved that he had to stop.

Miss Dorothy had got back her subdued, preoccupied air and voice.

"The necessity for the promise has been taken from me," said she, "so far as Cecil is concerned; but I make it freely for Valery Stuart's sake—we are parted forever."

"Most extraordinary!" he burst out. "For—for—I can't bring myself to repeat your words, ma'am; but I doubt if I ought to accept your promise on any other terms than given for Cecil's sake."

"Better let well enough alone," said she. "I shall stay with Cecil—the conditions of Marian's will are fulfilled."

"You—you have come at last to a proper sense of what is right—you have given up that girl."

"I have done nothing of the sort," said she, doggedly; "no power on earth could have made me do that."

"Why then, ma'am, what do you mean when you say the conditions of my niece's last testament are fulfilled?" cried he, with a kind of war-horse snort. "Am I a man to be trifled with, ma'am? am I likely to falter in my duty?"

"Oh, do read that letter and be done," said she; "it will save any further words, and I'm tired."

"Is this a time for reading letters?" he demanded; and repeated the inquiry as if he had some insane idea that the question was an overwhelming denunciation. Miss Dorothy simply held the epistle out by way of response; he waved it off anew, and this time with horror and disgust. "I can read no letters—none—I must have your answer, Miss Dorothy Conway, ma'am."

"To have it, reasons and all, since you in-

sist on the reasons, you must read that letter," said she.

Nothing but the recollection of his wife, and dread of the scene which would await him if he returned home accompanied by Cecil, could have made the pompous man yield. But he was afraid of his wife. Inexorable as he was with the rest of the world, he shook in his shoes at the power of that sickly, feeble woman, who rarely left her room, but who held the reins of government very tightly nevertheless, and was capable, even at her husband's age and notwithstanding Cecil's relationship, of a jealous scene which would disgrace them all.

So he took the letter and pranced up to the chandelier, and tried to read it without his glass; but discovering that he held it upside down, decided to have recourse to his spectacles.

Miss Dorothy watched him absently while he read; she was thinking of Valery—of Cecil—of her own life desolated by the errors of one human being, wondering, his most of us have often done, over the inscrutable law which makes so widespread the effect of a single sin. She was not given to any kind of metaphysical reverie as a rule, and had tried for years and years to keep her thoughts in the narrow, prosaic round where it was safest they should dwell; but to-night she was weak and tired, and they were past her control. She was thinking of all sorts of things while her old enemy pulled and panted over Valery's letter. It seemed a sacrilege to let his hand touch it, his eyes rest upon those revelations springing from the inmost depths of her true, resolute heart. Still she had a sense of gratification in forcing him to understand, as far as his shallow nature could, the character of the girl whom he affected to despise. Away back into the past drifted her fancies, recalling memories of Philip when a boy—of her own girlhood, with its beautiful dream, which died so suddenly under Philip's reckless hand. It was not a profitable reverie, with its sweetness and pain; she realized that when Mr. Denham's voice called her back to the present.

"Ahem!" he began, clearing his throat to warn her that he was about to say something more than commonly impressive. "This epistle—and I am glad to admit it—does credit to the feelings of its writer; I trust they are heartfelt."

"And I trust you will not presume to doubt it," cried Miss Dorothy, with such sudden energy that he stood open-mouthed. "Give me my letter, if you please, Mr. Denham," and she had risen and taken it unceremoniously out of his hand before he could close his lips. "Now, sir, the matter is settled; there's no necessity for any further discussion."

"No, not at present," he replied, struggling to recover his dignity, which her abruptness had a good deal overset.

"Nor at any other time," she continued.

"I think it will be well for Cecil to go home

with me. This house would be a sad place for her to live in; it can be shut up or leased, just as you please, until her majority."

"Always prompt—always business-like," he said, with a smile which carved hideous creases in his face. "I trust hereafter we shall understand one another better, ma'am, now that we have a mutual subject of interest."

"Well," said Miss Dorothy, unable to repress the avowal, ungracious as it was, "I don't imagine either of us is likely to change much at the age we have reached. I suppose you want to get back to town to-morrow?"

"It is imperative," he replied, with great majesty, and meant to add a long list of reasons that should reflect upon his importance, but she did not wait.

"And I want to go home," said she, "and I think Cecil will be glad to accompany me."

Mr. Denham was sufficiently mollified, by the turn affairs had taken, to express his belief that Cecil would be charmed to have her aunt's society. He actually held out his hand, and Miss Dorothy had to take it; and she looked as if it was a crab or a turtle, or something else damp and unpleasant. Luckily, he was interrupted in a long-winded speech by the entrance of Cecil's maid—the poor girl had awakened, and was calling piteously for her aunt; so Miss Dorothy uttered a hasty good-night and fled.

The next morning Mr. Denham took his departure, arrangements having been made for the discharge of most of the servants, as the house was to be shut up for the present and left in the care of the housekeeper. He inflicted upon Cecil a rather lengthy address, which she endured with more patience than Miss Conway gave her credit for possessing, only once breaking in irreverently when he spoke of her going with her aunt—

"Why, of course I shall," said she; "where in the name of goodness would I live, except with Aunt Dor? I shouldn't leave her if I had as many guardians as there are trees on the lawn."

Mr. Denham looked somewhat indignant at the outburst, but Cecil kissed him, and advised him "not to be a dear old prose," and was so charming in her impertinence that he could not help forgiving her.

Slight as his faith was in human nature, he knew Miss Conway's word was implicitly to be trusted; if she ever decided to take Valery back, he would immediately receive information. The pompous man had always hated Philip, and had been treated by him with a consistent, cool contempt which he meant never to pardon in this world or the next. All he could do now was to transfer the dislike to Valery, and he felt aggrieved that she had put it out of his power to persecute her. But it was a comfort to think Miss Conway had been forced to yield to his will—this was the self-complacent fashion in which he viewed her decision—and it was an immense relief to be able to in-

form his household dragon that she need not anticipate any trouble in regard to his ward. So Mr. Denham went his way, and the same afternoon Miss Dorothy and Cecil took the boat up the river, and were safely established at the Hermitage that evening.

Cecil had caught a severe cold during her father's illness, and between it and her overwhelming sorrow, was ill for several weeks; not dangerously so, but requiring constant attention. That season brought herself and her aunt closer together than before, and by the time Cecil could get about again they were on the most comfortable terms. Dearly as she loved the girl, Miss Dorothy could not forget Valery. She was forced to admit that things were arranged for the best; but there was a sore spot in the generous heart which beat under that cold exterior, and even her overweening fondness for her present companion could not heal it.

To her old servants and the neighbors she vouchsafed only a few indefinite explanations. It seemed too natural that she should consider it impossible to let the girls live under the same roof for Valery's departure to be a subject of much question. Miss Conway wrote to John Ford at Rome; her idea was that Valery had gone to him. She received a reply, not from Ford himself, he was absent. The answer to her epistle was from Mrs. Sloman, and, rather more incoherent and rambling than her conversation. They knew nothing whatever about Valery, and there was so much wonder, and so many offers to do all sorts of impossible things, that Miss Dorothy was only anxious to keep her quiet, and wrote to her never to mention the lost one's name to any body if she could help it.

Long before these matters occurred, of course there had been an explanation with Cecil. All the way up on the boat she talked about Valery, and at last Miss Dorothy was obliged to tell her that she would not find the girl at the Hermitage.

"Why, I thought she lived with you?" Cecil said, in surprise.

"She did for a time," Miss Dorothy answered.

"I liked her so much, and so did papa; he told me to be fond of her," continued the child. "Why have you sent her away? Are you angry with her, Aunt Dor?"

"Angry? No, indeed! My dear, you do right to love her. I did not send her away, she wanted to go; she has relations somewhere out West," returned Miss Dorothy, hating the dissimulation with which she was forced to speak.

"But why should she go?" persisted Cecil. "She wasn't vexed! She hadn't done any thing wrong, I am sure."

"She's the best and noblest girl that ever lived," cried her aunt. "Always believe that, Cecil—always! Now, my dear, listen; I can't tell you about Valery; there are painful things

in her life of which I have no right to talk, even to you—"

"But not her fault," broke in Cecil.

"Not her fault, certainly; never think that," replied the spinster. "She has the truest, grandest heart, but circumstances over which neither of us had any control have separated us, Cecil. You can do her one great kindness, and I know you will; never to talk about her to any human being, never to let people speak of her in your hearing if you can avoid it."

"I can't understand it, aunt," she said, impatiently.

"I know, but I have no explanation to give! Just remember, it is a kindness to Valery; you are so generous, that will be enough for you. Valery will do very well; her life and ours lead a long way apart—that is all; so now, my dear, there's an end of the matter."

Miss Dorothy spoke calmly, but she looked so pale and distressed that Cecil had not the heart to trouble her by further questions.

"My best of old Dors, I'll do just as you tell me," she said. "You are sure there is nothing we can do for her?"

"Nothing but be silent," Miss Dorothy answered, sadly.

Cecil kissed her, and said no more. She was taken ill so soon after her arrival at her aunt's house, and was ill so long, that by the time she recovered she had ceased to think often about Valery, as was natural, considering how little she had seen of her; but when she did recollect, there came the memory of her father's dying injunction, "Love her, always, Cis; let nothing ever come between you." She would not; and it was sometimes a favorite dream of hers that when she grew up she should find Valery, and they were to be very happy together. Until then she could only obey her aunt's request, and, willful and capricious as she was, she loved the spinster too well to trouble her by any reference to the forbidden subject.

CHAPTER XVI.

ACROSS SEAS.

THE years went rapidly and pleasantly by with Cecil Conway; she had attained the dignity of womanhood, and it would not have been easy to imagine a life which promised more brilliantly than hers.

A season in society had not succeeded in spoiling her, though, on account of her beauty and fortune, she received adulation enough to turn the heads of three ordinary girls. She enjoyed her triumph hugely; there was no doubt of that; she enjoyed every day and hour of existence; perhaps more thoughtlessly than was right, but it would have required a very inexorable mentor to remind her of this. It was not Miss Dorothy who could do it, assuredly. Let the child be happy, she said to herself—the years would bring care and disap-

pointment enough—no need to anticipate them by filling her mind with dark warnings or cynical wisdom.

Soon after Cecil's nineteenth birthday her granduncle died; and as if destiny was never tired of showering abundance upon her, she inherited the bulk of his great fortune. He had grown fonder of her than he had ever been of any human being, and during his long, tedious illness acquired a good many lessons which the past had failed to teach. He and Miss Dorothy even learned to meet without quarreling; and Cecil vowed that in his paralytic, half-childish state, he showed more good sense than he ever possessed in his prime, because he never tired of asserting—still with a struggle after the old pompous form of speech—that Miss Conway was the most wonderful woman of his acquaintance.

Before his death he sent for Miss Dorothy to see him alone, and told her divers things which softened her judgment in a way that even his sufferings had failed to do.

"This world's affairs look very different to me where I am lying now," he said, "and I am glad to tell you what I never thought I should be willing to do."

She began to think his poor head must have gone utterly astray, but he went on collectedly enough,

"It was a good deal my fault that Marian clogged her will by that letter of instructions."

"Well," said Miss Dorothy, "we can't help that now! Perhaps it was all for the best—I would not think about it."

"I must—at least I must tell you. That letter, and the one which was to be given to Cecil when she grew up, are both destroyed. I did not do it; but I am very glad of the accident that did."

There was an expression of relief on Miss Dorothy's face which it had never worn during all these years. She had lived in constant dread of the day when Cecil's beautiful youth must be clouded by the story of her father's sin, made more terrible from the fact that the disclosure was dictated by her own mother's command.

"Both destroyed!" she repeated, in amazement.

"Yes; you remember the fire two years ago, when my office was burned?"

She nodded assent.

"I had taken those papers from my safe, meaning to carry them to my house. I forgot them in my desk. The fire broke out that very night, and they were burned."

"Then there's an end of them," exclaimed Miss Dorothy, with a sigh of relief. "If ever there was a special Providence shown, it was in that fire, Mr. Denham."

"I think so myself now," he answered. "Yes, there's an end of them. I believe Marian, too, must be glad. There is no reason why Cecil should ever know a word of that sad history."

"No reason in the world; she's not likely to from me," quoth Miss Dorothy. "It's dead and gone, like the actors in the tragedy—let them all rest together."

"Yes, yes; you are right! But I thought you would be glad to hear this, Miss Conway."

"I am glad, I have no words to tell you how glad! I've lived in a constant shiver of dread, and I feel as if I had got out into the day once more," said she, looking at least ten years younger than when she entered the room.

"I am glad, too," he replied; "more glad than I have words to express. There can be no question whatever now; the will only says there are certain conditions attached to be made known by me to the heir—"

"Yes, I know," Miss Dorothy interrupted, too eager to recollect what an offense an interruption always was to the testy gentleman. But he smiled now, and said,

"I didn't mean to make a long explanation, Miss Conway—just to have you understand that Cecil will take her fortune unlogged by any stipulations whatever. During the time before her majority you will act as her guardian—she could not have a wiser, I am sensible of that, Miss Conway," he concluded, with one of the old patronizing waves of his hand; but in her softened mood she could only think of the kindly intention prompting his words.

"I thank you very much, Mr. Denham," she answered, "and, believe me, I will do my best."

"If Miss Conway had a worst, it would be superior to other people's highest efforts," said he, grandiloquently, and Miss Dorothy was shocked to find herself thinking,

"Bless the man, he'll die struggling with a long sentence."

They talked a little more, then Mr. Denham said, "Now send Cecil to me; I have not much time to be with her, and I can't bear her out of my sight."

They buried him not many weeks after this interview, and Miss Dorothy was able to forget that he had ever been different from the light in which he showed during the closing scenes of his life. She and Cecil traveled for a while, then returned to town, and early in the spring the young lady started her aunt with a proposal not in the least new to her own mind, much as it took the spinster by surprise.

"You blessed old woman," she said, abruptly, one morning as they sat together over the breakfast-table, "this existence we lead is not to be endured another month; and she nearly upset her cup in her improper energy.

"Don't scold, yourself, anyway," returned Miss Dorothy, unmoved.

"I feel inclined to, just for the sake of a sensation," vowed Cecil.

"Oh, if you've reached that word, I'm off," said Miss Dorothy, making a feint to rise, though she laughed; "but you've something in that silly little head of yours, so out with it! What do you mean by talking like some absurd creature in a novel?"

"That's just what I want; not to be absurd—don't ask the question!"—cried Cecil, gayly, "but to be like a heroine! I want excitement and adventure, and change, and ten thousand things besides; so let's be off to Europe, Aunt Dor."

"Bless the child!" exclaimed the spinster, aghast.

"I've been meaning to propose it ever so long," continued Cecil; "I'm tired of New York, and Washington, and Newport, and all the rest; so take me away before I grow cross and abominable."

"Good gracious! what shall we do there?" demanded Miss Dorothy.

"Why, take the whole country by storm," laughed Cecil. "I want to see kings and queens, and be adored by princes and dukes; that's every pretty American girl's destiny, and I must fulfill it! Now don't stand between me and my destiny, Aunt Dor, because that would be sinful."

"Dukes, indeed!" quoth Miss Dorothy, with a deal of fine republican scorn; "a nice lot they are; I'd rather be a nun than marry any of them! Look at that idiot of a baron who prowled about you last year."

"Mercy forbid!" broke in Cecil; "he nearly drove me out of my senses. But it's no question of marriage, my dear! I've no heart whatever; it is pitiable, but true; I never could succeed in getting up a single palpitation. But I must go to Europe; you went when you were a girl, and I must go—that's a darling."

Miss Dorothy was silent; Cecil's words sent her thoughts back to her youthful days; to the twelve months spent in the storied lands of the Old World; to the beautiful Italian haunts where she had dreamed and been happy. She remembered, as if it had happened yesterday, that Sorrento trip! It was while they stood on the rocky shore looking out toward Ischia, moored like a fairy bark in the purple distance, that the words were uttered which lifted her into a realm more beautiful even than the scene about. Oh, the golden days which followed! Oh, the beautiful, idle, visionary season! It lay a whole world off, lost in the irrevocable; lost so utterly that for years she had scarcely thought of that time, but it all came back now, fresh and vivid! She could fairly catch the light of the Southern skies, hear the murmur of the flower-scented wind, see again the eager, happy face which might never more meet hers, until she passed "to where beyond these voices there is peace." Back came also the dark night; the terrible letters which called her and her father home; Philip's boyish follies and crimes; the stern necessity that devolved upon her to give up her happiness in the hope of saving him, and leaving the old man to end his days untroubled and content.

Cecil's voice roused her from the painful reverie; she shook herself mentally, and returned to the present, calm, decided, and practical as a Monday morning.

"Why, aunty, where have you been?" cried her niece; "I've spoken six times, and you sat there like a mute! What on earth were you thinking about? Upon my word, you look as handsome as possible, and you've actually got pink in your cheeks."

"Fuss and feathers!" retorted Miss Dorothy, elegantly, and sat up rigid and disdainful. "So you want to go to Europe, Cis? Then we had better go, or I shall have no peace."

"You're the darlinest old aunty in the world," pronounced Cecil.

"Oh yes, when I give in to all your whims! I'm an old idiot, and you're a young one; but let's turn ourselves into Wandering Jews, if you've a fancy that way."

"But you don't dislike the idea, Aunt Dor? Indeed, I don't mean to be tiresome and selfish."

"You're a poppet; you're a popinjay," returned Miss Dorothy, with great energy, though she smiled too pleasantly for her denunciations to be very terrible. "You'll be horribly seasick, that's one comfort."

"I shall be nothing of the sort," declared Cecil, indignantly. "I've been yachting scores of times, and enjoyed it every minute."

"I don't think that's grammar," said Miss Dorothy; "but no matter whether you talk it or not, if you're going among dukes—they'll never find out. I shall be shockingly ill, and you'll have to take care of me, and that will be worse."

"I'll be as good as gold, and take such care of you!" promised Cecil.

"Unless there's a handsome man on board for you to flirt with!"

"Now, Aunt Dor, when you know I never flirt!"

"I hope not; I do hope not! Oh, Cis, you may get in earnest some day, and then you would be sorry you had brushed the bloom off your fruit by playing at nonsense and sentiment."

"I think there's not much danger of my getting in earnest, so don't suggest such awful possibilities; I mean always to stay with you."

Miss Dorothy did not pursue the conversation; she rather dreaded the time when Cecil should discover that she possessed a heart. The girl had such capabilities of feeling and suffering in her nature, that the spinster feared for her the wakening which, nine times out of ten, holds less of happiness than pain.

But the matter of the foreign journey was decided, and, having once admitted this, Miss Dorothy was anxious to start. Whatever other form of patience life had taught her, that of submitting to delays was certainly not among them, and she gave nobody any peace day or night till they were fairly off.

The London season was still young enough to be at the height of its brilliancy when they descended upon Mayfair. Cecil's success became an established thing from the moment in

which she made her first courtesy at Court, after, fortunately, getting alive out of a high-born mob so utterly without mercy that the confusion would have called for a policeman's exertions in less lofty quarters.

Cecil enjoyed her triumph, as was right and natural, and Miss Dorothy suffered herself to be led from breakfast to concert, and concert to dinner, and dinner to a round of balls, night after night, with the fortitude of an early Christian martyr. Occasionally, when she had time to think, Cecil would say,

"It's a shame, Aunt Dor, to drag you about so—but what can one do?"

"Oh, when one is to play the fool, I believe in doing it to the full extent," replied the spinster. "Enjoy yourself, Cis, I shall live it through! I may be obliged to have a pair of cork feet when it's all over, but no matter."

"You poor old dear! Next winter we'll go down to Rome and be quiet, to nuke up for this. Oh, Aunt Dor, it's all like a gorgeous dream; but I don't think I should like it year after year."

"Nobody but a lunatic would," pronounced Miss Dorothy; "I'd rather be sent to the treadmill at once! But it's time to dress. Isn't there a luncheon or something, only with a ridiculous name instead of the right one? I declare I do nothing but change my clothes. I feel as if I was one of those kid women in a dress-maker's shop."

"It's just a little breakfast at our minister's; we must go," Cecil urged.

"I'm ready; don't I say I'm ready? I'd rather be a Comanche chief and hunt buffaloes; I shouldn't work half so hard."

But though she grumbled, she was careful never to disturb Cecil's enjoyment by showing real annoyance; and indeed, while she pooh-poohed the whole business, was as much pleased to see her favorite admired as the weakest of her sex could have been.

"Now that breakfast nonsense is only the beginning; what comes after?" she asked, as she rang the bell.

"I've promised to go and see the pictures. You know we've had no time to get to the Academy yet; it's a shame, for there's poor Mr. Merriford's 'Triumph of Alexander,' and I want to coax that rich Californian to buy it."

"Triumph of a fiddlestick!" cried Miss Dorothy; "the name's enough. Merriford's an idiot, and I'll tell him so."

"Then there are some things by your old friend John Ford; you would like to see them."

"Upon my word, I've not heard from him for years," said Miss Dorothy; "ever since you grew up you've kept me in such a whirl that I've had no time to think about any thing."

"You shall have a good long hour at the gallery," laughed Cecil; "I'll see that nobody speaks to you, and you shall think as much as you please."

"Just so that ridiculous Lothbury does not pounce on me, I can bear any thing," said Miss

Dorothy; "but he really is more than my nerves can stand, with his sister the princess, and his attempt to copy that silly English drawl. Now he's the style of American that turns my stomach. I told him so last night at Lady Mannerly's; I had borne enough."

"I thought he was looking very odd when I came up," replied Cecil, laughing again—it was so easy for her to laugh, happy unconscious creature! "Really, Aunt Dor, you are too cruel sometimes."

"Not a bit," said the spinster. "It does people good to step on them occasionally. I don't suppose he has heard so many wholesome truths for years as I told him last night."

There could be no doubt that Miss Dorothy was a rather formidable personage to encounter, if not in a conciliatory mood; but she was a well-bred woman nevertheless, and her manners, when she saw fit, were thoroughly charming. She was a great favorite among people who pleased her; those whom she did not like were given to regarding her with sentiments of deadly animosity, which suited her exactly.

"I detest half-way things," was one of her favorite observations; "I want either to be liked very much or hated outright; and I prefer to be hated by the generality of people."

They made ready and went off to the breakfast, where Miss Dorothy's soul found fresh cause of vexation—so strong that not all the delicate viands prepared for their delectation could soften her one jot. There was an American woman present who had married an Austrian count; and, as the culmination of her follies this day, actually told Miss Dorothy that she found herself often speaking English with a foreign accent. Miss Dorothy had been watching her with an acrimony which quite deprived her breakfast of relish, but this was the crowning stroke; and the spinster acquired a virulent enemy in pretty Madame de Hatzfeldt by administering a verbal castigation much in the style of that she had bestowed upon luckless Jem Lothbury the night before. Madame glided out of the thing very neatly, and took occasion to tell Cecil what a fancy she had for her, and how much she admired her aunt. While uttering an infinity of pretty speeches in her most foreign accent, she was thinking that if ever she found an opportunity of stinging that stately beauty and her atrocious old relative, nothing under heaven should keep her from doing it. But Cecil could not know what Madame was thinking, and Miss Dorothy would have laughed in scorn had any perception reached her; and Madame was so excessively pretty, so witty and charming; in spite of her nonsense, that Cecil felt ashamed of her first feelings of aversion, and determined to like her very much.

They got away at last, and drove to the Academy. "There's so much done anyway," said Miss Dorothy, as she entered the carriage; and she said it in a tone of such devout relief, that an elderly gentleman who had offered to

accompany them looked discomposed and puzzled. Fortunately he had known her too many years to be long astonished at her vagaries, and soon they were gossiping over old days, while Cecil leaned back in her seat with a happy smile on her lips, and an absent, dreamy look in her eyes, which Miss Dorothy had more than once observed of late, though she wisely forbore any remark.

Rather to the spinster's disappointment, the rooms were not so crowded but that they could move about with tolerable comfort; and because this was the case, the usual inconsistency of human nature caused Miss Dorothy to sit down at once.

"Mr. Knowles can show you the pictures, Cis," she said, "and I'll wait here comfortably until you fall over John Ford's things; people who work as hard as we do ought to save their strength whenever they can."

But Cecil was in no haste, and refused to leave her aunt alone. However, the matter was speedily settled, for there loomed down upon them the most appallingly stately woman in England—so awful in her grandeur that she made the tall son upon whose arm she leaned look like a school-boy led out for exercise, in spite of his height and big blonde whiskers.

Lady Aldershott was always overwhelming, but perhaps never so much so as when she wished to be exceedingly cordial; then her condescension, added to her state, was really enough to take one's breath away. She saw fit to be fiendishly courteous on this occasion; indeed, Miss Dorothy had noticed that she grew more and more so of late; and while the countess was enunciating elegant phrases, and Lord George pulling his whiskers, according to habit, she began to wonder if it were possible that he had any thing to do with Cecil's newly-acquired absent air. The very idea chilled the spinster's blood; that the girl could care for him, seemed impossible; that she had the slightest idea of buying a coronet with her millions, Miss Dorothy was loth to believe. And yet Lord George was always hanging about her nowadays, and the countess waxed more civil each time they met; and Miss Dorothy, who always learned every thing, knew that between the turf and play, and a variety of other aristocratic foibles, the earl was often so embarrassed that he did not know which way to turn. If Lord George had conceived the plan of avoiding the annoyances his father's extravagance would entail upon him by swooping up Cecil and her money!—or rather, if his mother had, because the spinster did not give him credit for ability to originate a plan of any sort. The bare fancy filled her with such dismay that she was glad to escape from it and lose herself in the frigid torrent of the countess's talk.

"Just come in—not seen the pictures yet!" she was saying to Cecil, with a manner that would have befitted Lady Macbeth at the royal banquet. "And Miss Conway looks tired; so am I. George, my dear, give Miss Cecil your

arm and prove yourself a good cicerone while we two rest here comfortably."

There was no appeal from her decision; the most obstinate people always felt that it would have been as easy to rebel against the laws of the Medes and Persians. Lord George offered his arm, and Cecil took it; the countess nodded at her son as she might have expressed approval when he was about three feet high, and patted Cecil's hand as if to say, "Don't be overcome by the honor—I permit it; I know how condescending it is, but I permit it!" She included Miss Dorothy in her bland smile of superiority, so broad that it gave her a second double-chin without warning; and though Miss Dorothy secretly chafed under the magnificent patronage, there was nothing for it but to endure in silence.

"I'll come back for you, aunt, when I find John Ford's pictures," Cecil said, in no way affected either by her ladyship's state or her condescension; but fortunately the countess did not dream even republican assurance could reach that extent, or she would have turned into stone at once and been perfectly adapted to sitting upon a pedestal as a statue of Britannia.

"Have you the catalogue, George?" she asked; and of course he did not know.

"Of course he doesn't," was Miss Dorothy's mental parenthesis; "he never dares know any thing unless she tells him he may."

The catalogue was found on the seat where the countess had put it; she shook her head pensively at her son, as if it were his fault, and sighed, "Careless boy! Oh, youth, youth!"

"That is a fault for which people can't be blamed long," Mr. Knowles ventured to observe, as the young couple moved away; trying so hard to speak and act naturally, under the blighting influence of her ladyship's grandeur, that his face shone as if it had been newly varnished.

The countess looked at him, and there was no sign of approval in her countenance now. She touched her glass as if thinking that in an instant she should be compelled to regard his assurance by its aid. The elderly bachelor, never very courageous among females, and more afraid of the stately dame than if she had been a sphinx endowed with speech and petticoats, mumbled an excuse and rose as suddenly as if he had seated himself on something sharp. Miss Dorothy intercepted the countess's glare, and grew savage; she would not have permitted him to retreat, only he appeared so thoroughly wretched that she felt to detain him might come under the head of cruelty to defenseless animals.

"You must come back for me presently," she said; and her manner was so defiant that the countess did not attempt a second glare.

Poor Knowles ambled off, looking so ridiculously happy at his escape that Miss Dorothy wanted to laugh, in spite of remembering she was completely at her ladyship's mercy.

"And now," said that awful personage, "we can talk comfortably; and I assure you, Miss Conway—I assure *you*, it is really refreshing occasionally to converse with a person so sensible as yourself;" and Miss Dorothy wondered afterward how she ever kept from pinching her.

Fortunately she was enabled to retain a firm grasp of her patience and good manners; and the countess talked about herself, about Lord George's virtues, about divers matters which went to prove that the greatest favor a benign Providence ever bestowed on unworthy humanity was the gift of the Aldershot family, and the crowning glory of that race the hour in which she stepped from a dual nest and perched—always looking like Britannia, though she did not say so—upon the genealogical tree of the ancient earldom.

Miss Dorothy followed her wandering monologue—if any thing so heavy and massive could be said to wander—as well as she was able, though annoyance at poor old Knowles's discomfiture and dismayed wonderment as to whether Cecil could show herself weak and vain as ordinary girls, left the spinster a less attentive listener than the countess imagined it possible for her high mightiness to find.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE GALLERY.

The young people got on much more comfortably than the pair they had left unprotected in Lady Aldershot's hands. Once beyond the oppression of his mother's presence, Lord George was an unusually agreeable person, free from the slightest pretense, and so overflowing with health and spirits that many a man possessing intellectual gifts far beyond his would have proved a less acceptable companion.

They studied several of the large pictures from a sheer sense of duty, and Lord George tried to express the ecstatic admiration befitting, until Cecil said, pleadingly,

"Please don't—you make me ashamed! I dare say they are vastly fine, but I can't see any thing in them for all that."

"Just my case, only I did not like to acknowledge it," he confessed.

They both laughed, and impertinently agreed that it would be an awful thing to attain to sufficient critical acumen for a due appreciation of such countless square feet of canvas, whereon figured in impossible attitudes scores of heroes and heroines, gods and goddesses, who ought to have been allowed to die out of all decent memories centuries ago.

"But come," Cecil said at length, "the roof will certainly fall on us if you give utterance to any more heretical opinions! We will go in search of something better suited to our limited comprehensions."

They finally discovered John Ford's pictures, and Cecil persuaded Lord George to ad-

mit that they were among the gems of the collection. Close by them hung a small painting which soon distracted Cecil's attention from the works of her aunt's friend. There was nothing strikingly original in the subject—an old room, such as one might see in an Italian palace; a terrace at the back, with a sweep of sunset-tinted sea beyond. The light reflected into the chamber, and fell on the head of a beautiful girl, by whose side stood a man evidently youthful, though his face was bowed so that it showed very indistinctly. Another figure—a young girl also—stood nearer the terrace, and looked back at the pair with an expression of patient resignation. The whole story was so plainly told, that one perceived she was making some great sacrifice for the two she had left—that the man recognized her struggle, though he accepted it; while the beautiful girl in the foreground saw nothing, knew only that a great happiness had come suddenly within her reach.

The force and life-likeness of the figures were really wonderful, and all the accessories were admirably managed. Cecil stood looking at it in silence, attracted by some vague fancy which the picture roused even more than by its merit as a work of art.

"This must be the thing they were talking about at the club last night," cried Lord George, bringing her out of her reverie. "How she left them," he added, reading from his catalogue. "Upon my word, that's very nice, you know—it is, indeed."

"What is the artist's name?" Cecil asked.

"Let me see—'Bingham,' no; 'Timothy Tuckett,'" read Lord George, with a comical face.

"Never; it is impossible!" cried Cecil. "No man with such a name ever painted that." She took the catalogue from his hand and studied it for an instant. "You were reading from the other page—I knew it couldn't be! Timothy painted the horrible bottle-green woman with a blue head-dress."

"And who painted this?"

"There's no name—just a star; how provoking!" said Cecil.

"Well, he's a deuced clever fellow, whoever he may be," returned his lordship.

"How do you know it was a man?" demanded Cecil. "I am sure a woman did it—I am perfectly sure a woman did it."

"With that drawing, and that bit of light? Oh, Miss Conway!"

Then she abused him for insinuating that it was too good to be a feminine effort, till he gladly promised to believe any thing she chose. Turning to the picture again, he said, suddenly, "Why, the figure in the foreground looks like you; the face is more girlish, but it's like you. I am certain at sixteen you were the living image of it!"

It was like her; an undefined consciousness of the resemblance had given her that odd feeling when she first looked at the painting. Ce-

cil ridiculed her companion's fancy; all the while she secretly acknowledged its truth, and would have given any thing to find out the name of the artist. But it was nearly time to think of going, so she sent Lord George to convey her aunt to the place, partly that she might show Ford's pictures, partly because she felt a sudden remorse at having left her so long to Lady Aldershot's society.

"It's a long way down; it would be ever so much nicer if you came with me," he pleaded. "I'm sure they will both scold me for leaving you here alone; they will be certain to think it's not proper."

"Then I shall stay," replied Cecil. "Aunt never scolds, and your mother won't dare to—me, at least."

"She wouldn't have the heart," he answered; not so much for the sake of the compliment as that he remembered there was no creature his mother would hesitate to "row"—I use the word he did mentally—if it suited her regal pleasure.

"Besides, I want to see if I can discover the resemblance you talk about—only don't tell them; I shall be sure to hate the picture then, and I like it so much I don't want to do that."

He had to obey her caprice, of course, and Cecil stood alone, attentively regarding the picture. She heard her name suddenly pronounced, turned, found herself face to face with Fairfax Carteret; and the painting, the room, the crowd, faded from her sight, and all thought of Lord George followed them.

"I knew an inspiration brought me here today," he said, holding out his hand. "I was going by in a great hurry, but could not resist a peep. I am so glad! Please say you are not sorry to see me, Miss Conway."

Though Cecil's heart was fluttering, and her breath came hurriedly, she looked composed enough as she gave him the tips of her daintily-gloved fingers. He could not know there had been no such color in her cheeks, no such light in her eyes all day long as brightened her face into fresh beauty beneath his gaze.

"I am very glad indeed," she answered, frankly. "When did you get back from Belgium?"

"Only this morning. I ran off the moment my cousin was better."

"A fine way to perform the part of the Good Samaritan!" said she.

"Oh, he was quite well; and I really had to come," Carteret averred.

"Your life is so full of business and care," laughed she.

But he would not be teased. He was asking after Miss Dorothy, and eager to know if London equaled Cecil's expectations. He reminded her of the pleasant voyage, of this conversation, of that stroll up and down the deck, of the moonlight on a certain evening; not doing sentiment, but showing an earnestness under his gayety and cheerful talk.

Cecil had no need to be reminded of a single

incident of their ocean-journey. There was not a thing so slight that she had forgotten it, from the moment when he assisted Aunt Dorothy up the cabin stairs the first time she left her state-room, claiming acquaintance with her and receiving a joyful recognition for the sake of his mother, who had been one of her girlish friends; for his own too, because she had known him as a boy, and a spoiled, unmanageable wretch he was, she informed him with her customary candor.

Thus introduced to Cecil, who was told to consider him in the light of an old acquaintance, the pair had ample leisure, during the long days and evenings, to glide into a familiarity of intercourse that would not have come about in months under ordinary circumstances. It was always his arm which supported Cecil in her promenades for exercise—always he who read to her and talked when they grew tired of books—and the beautiful days stole by like a cloudless dream until the moment of parting.

Carteret found letters at Liverpool which compelled him to hurry to Brussels on account of his cousin's illness; and as Miss Dorothy needed a night's rest, or thought she did, he could not even have the pleasure of accompanying them up to London.

So they parted, and no human being fancied what the memory of that voyage was to Cecil, or how often she looked forward to his return to England. Many times at ball or opera, surrounded by her hosts of adorers, they all disappeared from view because she thought she perceived him in the distance. Frequently, when disturbed suddenly, she would be haunted by the idea that he had arrived; and she needed life as full of excitement and enjoyment as it was, to bear patiently the disappointment.

Not that there had been the slightest approach to love-making during the voyage, which was like sailing over enchanted seas and under Elysian skies to them both. Whatever Fairfax Carteret, in his masculine hardihood, might have acknowledged to his heart from the commencement, no perception of her own feelings had startled Cecil's maiden innocence. It was only when they separated that she began vaguely to catch the significance of these days; but even during the weeks which followed she did not really reflect. If a doubt had crossed her mind—if she had been less accustomed to happiness—the frequency with which his image haunted her might have brought a realization of the truth. But she did not think—he was coming back, she knew—she only told herself that she was glad, without trying to find a reason for her joy. He would come, and existence grow still brighter and more priceless—each pleasure keener, because he shared it—but no question to her soul as to why his arrival would work such change.

And here he was—appearing before her as suddenly as he had done when they first met. The dusty old gallery, across which the London sun streamed dimly, turned into a fairy palace

at once, and the common world sank out of sight in the glory of her dream.

Fairfax Carteret was nearly thirty, and, like most young men, accustomed to think himself very ancient; a Virginian by birth, educated partially abroad, and connected so closely with the titled English branch of his family that his position, socially considered, was a thing worth having. Added to this, he was handsome, clever, and rich. Naturally, he had gained varied experiences, knew the world thoroughly from London to St. Petersburg—as novels and idle people employ the term—and had been petted and adored till the only wonder was that he remained uninjured. But he had, and, still more wonderful, possessed a certain freshness and capability of enjoyment, ancient as he considered himself, which young men of this generation usually exhaust before five-and-twenty.

There they stood and talked, those two, utterly oblivious of every thing and every body, though their conversation was idle and gay enough, and would have given a listener no idea of the tumultuous feelings which left both a little excited and nervous.

"I can't sufficiently admire myself for the unerring wisdom which brought me into the gallery," he said, laughing; but he gave rather more credit to his own intuitions than they deserved. If he had not chanced to see and recollect Miss Dorothy's black man (too busy quarreling with the coachman to notice or remember any thing except the wrath kindled in his sable breast by a slighting remark the Britisher had ventured in regard to his color), it is very probable Carteret would have gone his way without any more idea that Cecil was near than he had of meeting Queen Elizabeth. But when he said the words he quite forgot they were not literally correct, and would have sworn that he could never fail to receive a warning of her proximity.

"Aunt Dor said she saw something in a newspaper the other day about your having accepted a position here in the Embassy," Cecil observed, not thinking it necessary to add that instead of resting satisfied with her aunt's recital of the news, she had read it over and over, and thought how fit he was for any honors which could be conferred upon him.

"They offered me the secretaryship before I left Washington," he replied; "Morton, who holds it, wants to be exchanged to Greece on account of his health. I may take it."

"I should think you would," she said; "if I were a man I should like nothing so much as a diplomatic career."

"All very well under monarchies," returned he; "but in our blessed country of change, such a career is too uncertain. Just as you have mastered the details of your position, a new administration comes into power; out you go, and perhaps are never heard of again."

"But a really capable man is sure to make his mark," Cecil said, with a youthful faith in

politics regulated by righteous laws which was too pretty for him to think of disturbing.

"Whether I accept or not, I mean to spend the season in London—if you promise to be nice to me," he said.

"That will depend on your conduct," replied she, gayly; "you always do quarrel with me—or would, only I'm so sweet-tempered that it is all on your side."

"I promise to astonish you by my submission and obedience," he said, with a glance so eager that Cecil's breath began to get troublesome again, and she was glad to change the conversation and talk about the pictures.

But he would not look at the pictures; he would only look at her, growing more earnest each moment. The color rose in Cecil's cheeks, and her eyes sunk under his, in a way that might have given him new hope, had he not been too anxious to observe it. Had he spoken then, had he bared his heart and established confidence between them, the months which followed might have borne a very different record for both; but it did not please destiny to spare them clouds and trouble. There came an interruption—trivial enough in seeming, but, like a host of other apparently unimportant incidents in these odd lives of ours, it was to have more effect than many a startling event, slight as it appeared.

Pretty Madame de Hatzfeldt was strolling down the room with a party of Austrian friends, more elegant and foreign than ever, because a good deal bored by her companions. She had come for a purpose, and been disappointed; fate had removed some victim from her clutches for the time. As it was a new-enough flirtation to be interesting, madame felt aggrieved with the world in general, and, when in this state of mind, was more bent upon mischief than on ordinary occasions—a thing by no means necessary.

Long before she reached the spot where Cecil and Carteret stood, madame's dark eyes—very keen eyes, though they did look so soft and so beautifully shy, and, according to her, needed the aid of the pretty *lorgnon* which hung at her chatelaine—perceived the pair, and took in the situation at once. She had never seen Cecil's face wear the expression it did now, and on the instant she remembered the promise she had given herself while smarting under Miss Dorothy's lecture. It required only a glance at Cecil's companion to strengthen her resolution; for though it was a long while since they parted, madame had by no means forgotten Fairfax Carteret and his rash condemnation of her truthlessness. It made her grind her white teeth at this moment to remember, not only the failure of her plans and the pain to such heart as she possessed, but the humiliation, the bitterly courteous language in which he told her that she was discovered. Still madame walked on, smiling and gay; and when the flatter of women's dresses and the hum of conversation caused the couple she had

watched instinctively to turn their heads, madame rushed up to Cecil and caught her hands, and cooed her delight at meeting again in that *mélange* of French and English many people thought very pretty, though it had so roused Miss Dorothy's wrath.

"My beautiful American Lily—*quel bonheur!*" Then a relapse into connected French for the benefit of the fat Austrian ambassadress, who was one of her group. "My dear friend, is she not more lovely than ever? This horrid room, that makes the rest of us like peonies or faint as death, gives her the most charming color."

And the ambassadress smiled, and the foreigners chattered, and Cecil proved as able to hold her own in what the books on etiquette are pleased to call "the court language of Europe," as Madame de Hatzfeldt herself. Fairfax Carteret was looking rather black at the interruption, when madame turned toward him with a pretty affectation of surprise, saying in English—and the softened tone struck Cecil's ear, occupied as she was—

"Has Mr. Carteret entirely forgotten me? It is ages ago, but I did not think we should have to be introduced again."

"I should have thought it only yesterday," he answered readily enough. Though he spoke quietly, and pointed the implied compliment by a bow, Cecil saw a change in his face—a change so sudden that it set her talking faster than ever to get rid of the odd sensation it roused. Still, however much she talked or laughed, she did not lose one word of the little dialogue between the two.

She was right in fancying that she saw annoyance in his countenance, but it was nothing more. From the moment he knew Adela Livingston thoroughly, he had despised her with an intensity which increased as her foreign airs and graces reminded him of the treachery whereby she had purchased her present position and title. It vexed him to think of Cecil on terms of intimacy with the woman. It required a great effort to stand there and be civil, but there was nothing else for it. Madame's art turned even the coldness—which she understood, raging inwardly at the knowledge—to suit her own purpose, well aware that Cecil would not forget a glance or a syllable.

In the midst of the talk, up came Lord George with his lady-mother and Miss Dorothy and poor Knowles, who had still to endure the countess's state because Miss Dorothy would not let him off. The countess knew the whole party, and immediately took the brunt of the conversation upon herself; and if any thing could be more appalling than her stilted English, it was her performance in the French tongue. Miss Dorothy was tired and cross, and neither countess nor ambassadress could keep her from showing it. Luckily she saw Carteret delighted to meet her, and gave him a greeting very different from the careless salutations which she had bestowed upon the rest.

"Such a bore," Lord George whispered in Cecil's ear when he could get close to her. "What on earth did all these people come for, I wonder?"

Carteret saw him whisper, and caught Cecil's smile; Madame de Hatzfeldt, watching, gave him a little significant nod which did not tend to soothe his feelings. By this time the countess was ready to descend upon him, and said, still after the manner of Lady Macbeth at the banquet,

"I am pleased to welcome you back to England, Mr. Carteret; I saw your cousin Lord Balmore just before we came up to town; he was looking vastly well."

"When did you come?" asked Lord George, between whom and Carteret there had already passed greetings.

"Only this morning," he answered.

"But, now that he has come, we mean to keep him prisoner," cried Madame de Hatzfeldt, with an affectation of intimacy which caused its recipient to shiver, while Miss Dorothy looked a grim disapproval that filled madame's soul with delight.

"Don't let these French-talking people get at me," Lord George pleaded, in a low voice to Cecil. "I'm not over-ready in my own tongue, but when it comes to that sort of thing I'm done for completely."

And Cecil seemed more interested in his conversation than ever before, and let him keep her on the outskirts of the group; the countess saw it, and smiled benignly. Carteret saw it too, but he did not share her ladyship's approval.

"I hope we shall see you at Aldershot House very often," she said to him; "the earl will be gratified—I shall likewise."

Carteret mentally called her a score of names which would not have looked well written after her titles on the family tree; but he had to talk as well as he could, and the stream of chatter went on: Madame de Hatzfeldt not hesitating to whisper in his ear several times, Cecil and Lord George animated, poor old Knowles growing more and more uncomfortable, Miss Dorothy crosser and grimmer, the foreigners dying to get off and be witty at the expense of the English people—in short, every thing under the surface as much *à tort et à travers* as most incidents are in this world. There was one exception to the general discontent, and that was the countess. She was satisfied with Cecil and Lord George, and the sight of Carteret brought to her mind a vague plan about a certain Lady Alicia, a penniless connection of the Aldershots, between whom and the heir there had been love-passages of which her ladyship did not approve. Carteret had the misfortune to be an American, but he was related to a good old English family, his position excellent, and he was very rich. Lady Alicia might do worse—she would be out of the way, at all events. The thing was worth thinking over, and Carteret worth petting a lit-

tle, and her ladyship's efforts in that line were something to make a stout heart quail. Poor old Knowles, always watching her as if he had been a fascinated bird, and receiving a glare which nearly paralyzed him when detected by the countess, thought he had never seen any thing so overwhelming, and wondered how Carteret could support it with composure. Lady Macbeth at the banquet was nothing compared to her now; only the Queen of Sheba doing amiability to a son of Solomon could have appeared in the least like her. Poor Knowles, between discomfort and a pair of new boots and Miss Dorothy's nips—she must nip somebody—fairly got wrong in his head, and fell to thinking what an awful object the countess would be in a night-cap—say one with broad frills, such as he remembered his grandmother possessing. His brain was going so fast that whatever he tried to say, this fearful suggestion came uppermost, and required to be choked back. He must have been undone utterly had the misery continued, but, fortunately, Miss Dorothy reached a pitch of exasperation between them all—Madame de Hatzfeldt's manner to Carteret, and Cecil's conduct the chief causes of displeasure—when she could and would bear no more. She marched up to her niece and said,

"We can't live here, you know, so I think we had better go home."

"By Jove, I wish we could!" cried Lord George.

"And I wish you wouldn't swear," quoth Miss Dorothy.

But Cecil and Lord George only laughed; he rather liked her downright sincerity, and indeed had been a favorite with her until she conceived this dread of Cecil's turning worldly and wicked.

"Aunt Dor, you have not even looked at Mr. Ford's pictures," said Cecil.

"I've seen enough," retorted she; "I don't want to see any thing more for a week! That woman makes me ill."

"She is going it rather strong with Carteret," said Lord George, following the direction of Miss Dorothy's eyes, which rested with grim contempt on Madame de Hatzfeldt. "She's a very pretty woman, though."

"She's a painted doll," retorted Miss Dorothy; but Cecil would neither see nor hear, and was greatly occupied in buttoning her glove.

"I'm ready to go, aunt," she said, after a little. "Where is Mr. Knowles?"

Knowles was as delighted to get away from the countess's neighborhood as a brown thrush would be to escape from a rattlesnake. But first there were numberless farewells to endure, and Madame de Hatzfeldt would kiss Cecil, and the foreign men would hop about her, and Carteret received no farewell beyond a cold bow. No chance even to accompany her out; Madame de Hatzfeldt held him fast, and the countess signified her intention of going too.

"Keep in advance with Miss Cecil, and

make a way for us, George," was her command; and Carteret had the pleasure of seeing the young lady led off by his lordship.

It might have been a relief to his feelings could he have known what sudden pang disturbed at that instant the man he considered so supremely blessed. The crowd parted, and in the distance Lord George caught sight of the Lady Alicia. He had not known she was in town; he could not get near her. He was obliged to go on and turn his back, giving his arm to Cecil, remembering, as he did so, that he must thus let Alicia pass out of his life forever. He liked ease and money, and Cecil was a beauty; still, he felt existence rather hard upon him, and had to bear his burden like the rest. Then, too, the countess glared sterner than fate; so he gave one sigh, pulled his whiskers, and stood up to his duty like a Briton. But after leaving the group Cecil's high spirits flagged, and they walked on in a rather dull fashion, while poor Knowles and the elder ladies followed.

"You look tired," Lord George said, kindly, thinking how beautiful she was, and wondering why he could not care.

"Yes, I think I am; very stupid, at all events," Cecil answered.

"Ah, that—"

"Don't finish," she broke in; "if you attempt a complimentary speech, I shall hate you forever."

"I was only about to state a self-evident fact," laughed he.

"I'll not have that even, unless it was something uncivil; I really can bear nothing more after those foreigners."

"I don't think I'm good at compliments," he replied; "I am too English—but upon my word, I'm rather a nice fellow, after all."

"I do think you are," she said; "and you remember the bargain we made about pretty speeches!"

"Oh, you're a little hard on me," returned he, and they began to laugh and jest again; but all the while Lord George was thinking that it might be just possible Cecil Conway would not buy a coronet so gladly and thankfully as his sapient mother believed. Life was a muddle, he told himself, and recalled Alicia's glance of recognition as the crowd shut her from his view. Life was a muddle; but he came into it with his hands tied, and must accept what it pleased to offer. He wished heartily for an instant that he had been born a shepherd in Australia, and Alicia a dairy-maid on an adjoining farm, without so much as an ancestor between them.

Cecil's thoughts were not more entertaining; and could the countess, watching them as they walked on before her, have known the reflections in which each indulged, she would not have been safe for either to encounter during the next twenty-four hours. Happy in her ignorance, she bade Cecil an affectionate adieu in an involved sentence which made old Knowles

shudder, and took instant possession of her son lest he should be guilty of the weakness of straying back into the gallery for a second look at the Lady Alicia.

"Well," cried Miss Dorothy, as the carriage rolled along Piccadilly, "I've known a great many idiots in the course of my life, but never—never did I meet a collection of such hopeless ones as this morning!"

Cecil was too busy with her own fancies to answer; and poor old Knowles, still dazed by an irreverent vision of the countess in a broad-frilled night-cap, could only smile feebly. Miss Dorothy shut her lips hard together, and did not open them again until the carriage stopped at her house; then she exclaimed, with increased energy,

"I wish I was a caterpillar under a green gooseberry-bush, or something horny and tough, without a leg to my name!"

"Bless me, Aunt Dor, what an outburst!" laughed Cecil, while poor Knowles stared aghast.

Miss Dorothy vouchsafed no response, descended from the vehicle, and swept into her mansion with a grandeur somewhat after the countess's manner; became conscious of the resemblance, and turned to console the unhappy old bachelor with a few last pleasant words.

Cecil jested and laughed too, but sighed under, and could almost have echoed her aunt's wish. This morning, which began so brightly, had drifted into the dreariest commonplace her experience could recall.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MADAME'S FRIENDSHIP.

THE next day Cecil was rather unsettled and capricious, though apparently in extravagantly high spirits, and at last brought upon herself a demand from Miss Dorothy as to whether "she had a bee in her bonnet?"

"I rather think I have," she answered; "anyway, I'm in one of my nonsensical moods, and you're awfully solemn, Aunt Dor. I mean to be compassionate, and leave you to your book. I promised Mrs. Hungerford to go shopping with her, so I'm off! But don't forget to be ready for Lady Mosby's kettle-drum when I come back; I wouldn't miss it for any thing."

"You may well call it a kettle-drum," returned Miss Dorothy, contemptuously. "I should think you would be glad to sit still for a couple of hours at least."

"But I promised poor Mrs. Hungerford," pleaded Cecil. "Besides, I couldn't possibly keep quiet, and should worry you into a fever."

She took herself off, and was bored intensely all the morning; but that was not her sole punishment for neglecting Miss Dorothy's advice. Several persons called during her absence—Fairfax Carteret among them.

"He seemed to expect to find you at home,"

said Miss Dorothy. "Had he told you he was coming?"

"I am sure I don't remember," replied Cecil, indifferently.

But while they were driving to Lady Mosby's she managed to get the conversation back to him, and Miss Dorothy said,

"I was vexed with him yesterday, but it wasn't his fault."

"What did he do to vex you?" asked Cecil.

"I thought he was flirting with that detestable woman—"

"And he assured you he was not!" interrupted Cecil, laughing.

"Nothing of the sort," replied Miss Dorothy, testily. "Mr. Carteret is a gentleman. He said very little, but he doesn't like her; that was plain enough. He and I are old friends, and I've a right to scold him; but he was not to blame."

"Madame de Hatzfeldt is a very pretty creature; one couldn't accuse his taste if he did admire her," returned Cecil, rather flipantly.

"I wish you would not express such sentiments," said Miss Dorothy. "I've no doubt it's my old-fashioned stupidity, but I think they are simply awful! Fairfax didn't say much, but he let me know that if he had a sister he shouldn't like to see her intimate with your foreign-aided madame, pretty as she is."

"When Mr. Carteret has a sister, he can do his best to guard her against the lady's fascinations," said Cecil, with a pretense of a yawn, and began to talk of other things.

Miss Dorothy opened her lips, shut them resolutely without having uttered a word; and gave her left ear a vicious pull. It was a habit of hers to give that ear warning tweaks; and though she wanted to say a variety of things about Carteret, wisely held fast to her silence. In spite of Cecil's intimation of profound indifference to the gentleman's tastes or opinions, she was in a different state of mind from that moment, and Miss Dorothy saw it.

"You'll have a chance to tell him what to do with the sister that he hasn't, for he said he should look in on us at the opera to-night," was the only further mention she attempted concerning him. But the artful spinster perceived that Cecil changed still more—"grew as sweet as honey" was her thought—and Miss Dorothy felt easier than she had done since the day she conceived the suspicion that Cecil might turn worldly enough to be dazzled by a coronet.

Carteret did come into the box that evening; and though Cecil was cool and self-possessed, greeting him exactly as she did those who followed, there was a sudden light in her eyes, which he caught, and once more told himself that he was not quite a madman to indulge the dream which had brightened the dreary days of his continental sojourn. Every thing went as nicely as possible for a space; but Madame de Hatzfeldt was watching the *lôge* from her seat on the opposite side of the glittering horse-

shoe, and was too quick-witted and unscrupulous to be long at a loss to change the aspect of affairs. Lord George had lounged into the box; several other men, whom Miss Dorothy would have liked to strangle with her pocket-handkerchief, appeared. Carteret fully resolved to outsit the whole lot, and have the pleasure of conveying Cecil through the crush-room. But presently poor old Knowles appeared—unconsciously turned into a bird of ill-omen by the errand upon which he had been sent.

"Oh, Carteret," said he, "Madame de Hatzfeldt says you are not to forget her supper, and that if you mean to keep your promise of taking her down to her carriage you must come now, for she is tired, and wants to go home."

It was utterly impossible for the victim to say he had accepted no invitation to supper, and had never dreamed of claiming the bliss of giving her his arm down stairs. But Miss Dorothy knew by his face that such was the truth, and felt dreadfully angry with Cecil because the young lady before Knowles finished his message was so deep in a low-toned conversation with Lord George that she could apparently neither hear nor see any thing where Carteret was concerned.

The unfortunate man rose to go; Miss Dorothy held out her hand and gave his fingers a significant squeeze, to show that she understood the business; but Cecil's head was bent over her bouquet, Lord George whispering in her ear, and wrath swelled in the spinster's soul.

"Mind your manners, young people," said she. "Lord George, I heard your mother say it was very American to whisper! Cecil, Mr. Carteret has bidden you good-night twice, if you could only listen."

"I do it because it is American, and therefore delightful—"

"And I am saying good-night as fast and as respectfully as I know how—" cried Lord George and Cecil in the same breath.

Every body laughed, and had some bit of nonsense to add, except Miss Dorothy and Carteret. The spinster could have cried with a pang between anger and distress, and Carteret took his departure, casting one reproachful glance at Cecil, which she met with a smile of cool indifference. She had gone back to her conversation with Lord George before the wretched Carteret closed the door, and Miss Dorothy was powerless except to snub poor old Knowles, which she did very ungratefully, and he had no idea how how he could have offended her.

But Miss Dorothy did not mean that either fate or Madame de Hatzfeldt—whom she considered the wickedest of the two—should spoil the pretty romance she had fancied begun during the sea-voyage; at least, not without a strong effort on her part to prevent it. The next time she met Carteret she said, in the most point-blank fashion,

"You weren't engaged to that woman's supper—I saw it by your face."

"And I assure you my face was perfectly truthful," he replied; but it was out of the question to say more.

Miss Dorothy repeated the conversation to Cecil, but Cecil was so busy telling her Lord George had proposed to drive them down to Richmond the next day that she paid very little attention.

"She's a provoking creature!" thought Miss Dorothy, sadly maltreating her left ear again. "She's prouder than Lucifer too! Oh, my poor Cecil, if I live to see your life ruined and wrecked like all the others, how can I bear it—how can I?"

But there came a respite; Madame de Hatzfeldt caught a severe cold, which—Miss Dorothy wickedly said by the special grace of Providence—settled in her face, and it was so swollen that for a time she had to make a recluse of herself. The spinster could not resist a bit of feminine vengeance. She had never set foot inside Madame de Hatzfeldt's doors, and had vowed that no earthly power should ever take her there; but when, through the indiscretion of the doctor, she chanced to learn what kept madame shut in her chamber, she forced her way thither, and had the pleasure of looking at madame's nose and pitying her misfortune. Madame bore it—she clenched her pretty hands under the long sleeves of her dressing-gown—but she bore it, and was so civil, and so much obliged for Miss Dorothy's kindness!

"You've got a whole week of it yet," said the spinster, putting her head on one side, and regarding the swollen organ with a beautiful mingling of sympathy and wonder. "At least a week! Dear me, dear me! I wouldn't have bothered you, but I promised to attend to our friend's commission. How you must suffer with it—I shouldn't have known you. The doctor isn't afraid it will leave a scar, is he?"

"Ciel, no!" cried madame, in horror. "Why, it's nothing; I mean it will not last; it is painful enough."

"Well, I hope it won't," returned Miss Dorothy, in a tone that implied great doubt. "I shall tell people they must not worry you with visits; you ought to keep quiet; any excitement will make it worse."

"I should think I was quiet enough; I'm dying with *ennui*," moaned poor madame; and the confession was balm to the spinster, who enjoyed her own malice the more because it was the first time in her life she had ever indulged in such weakness.

"You'll soon be able to see people; you're married, so you'll not mind," was all the consolation she had to offer. "But you must be very careful. I hope there's nothing serious, though I remember your great-uncle Carford Livingston used to have the erysipelas dreadfully."

"The doctor says it's only a cold," returned madame, feeling dreadfully helpless, and longing to fly at Miss Dorothy and pull her bonnet off.

"Don't you let any one find out," said the guest, warningly; "that dreadful *Punch* is caricaturing every body just now; it would be quite capable of putting you in with a nose like a lemon."

Madame kept her temper to the last—was foreign and elegant in spite of every thing—though the rage in which she indulged after her tormentor's departure made her unfortunate proboscis throb and ache till it needed poulticing for hours.

"Only wait till I'm out again," thought madame; "only wait! Oh, you dreadful old cockatoo, I'll pay you for this! She's fond of him, and you know it, and you'd give your two ears for the match. Only wait!"

But the obstinate nose would not be hurried about getting well; indeed, it acquired and retained for days a puffy, self-satisfied look, as if pleased with its mushroom shape, and determined to preserve it. Madame broke two looking-glasses in disgust, and kept her maid in fear of her life; but that was all the satisfaction she had, for her husband was busy with his diplomatic duties, and, besides this, his Austrian phlegm held her in awe at her most insane moments.

During this brief season every thing went to Miss Dorothy's satisfaction, and she hoped Cecil and her admirer might float so far along in their beautiful dream that madame would be powerless to cause further misunderstanding. Even Lord George was not much in the way; in fact, he behaved rather ill at this time, though, fortunately, his mother remained in ignorance of his conduct. He followed Lady Alicia about a great deal more than was wise, making Cecil's society the pretext for seeing his cousin so often, because the two girls had got up quite an intimacy, and were together frequently. The countess, still adhering to her plan for the benefit of Alicia and Carteret, continued blind as a mole, and was perfectly contented to see the four on such terms; so accustomed to success and obedience that it never entered her mind anyone of them could go contrary to her will. It was shocking, no doubt, to think of grafting these republican shoots upon the ancestral tree of the Aldershotts, but money must be had. The earl was going from bad to worse, and somehow, in spite of her grand connections, the Lady Alicia achieved no conquests; always liked certainly—always popular even among women—the most fatal sign her ladyship knew, that she was not considered dangerous.

Bright, golden days they were; unprofitable maybe, but pleasant for all that. The rush and whirl went on; and though, like the rest of the crowd, Cecil worked harder than a galley-slave, she never felt conscious of fatigue—never a ball was a failure—no hour that did not bring its meed of happiness.

It was deep in June now, and Carteret's secret had not been told. Madame de Hatzfeldt appeared again, gayer, fairer, and more danger-

ous than ever. Scandal busied itself with her name, but her husband's position held her up, and she was too cold-blooded to get sufficiently in earnest for the stories to pass beyond vague gossip. She had adopted a new manner with Carteret. He did not like the woman, still he could not help thinking perhaps he had judged her harshly, or that she might have grown out of some of her faults as the years went on. She wanted his friendship! She was solitary and unhappy; she knew she deserved it, but this did not make her burden the easier to bear. She told him these things frankly; she would talk about Cecil too. He had not the slightest intention of reposing confidence in her, yet he could not be an unwilling listener when she chose that theme. If he could not have Cecil to himself, and her engrossed life rendered this difficult, at least it was something to find an unwearied admirer of her grace and beauty always ready to vaunt them. She worked so artfully, he did not realize it was from her he caught a fear that Cecil, dazzled by the adulation which she received, and the idea of one day wearing the Aldershot diamonds—which had long been paste—might sometimes allow worldly aims to come between her and the honest impulses of heart. He was not able to tell how he got into this habit of confidential talk with madame—that is, confidential on her side. It had come about rapidly, for all these occurrences were the affair of a few weeks. But the fact remained, and, before he really thought about it, became perceptible to others, as he saw with deep annoyance. But it was difficult to draw back now; besides, madame informed him that she and Cecil were fond of each other, though, owing to an insane dislike Miss Dorothy had conceived toward the fair Anglo-American, they could not be on the terms both would have wished.

"You may not believe it, Mr. Carteret," said madame, "but, with all her pretense of candor, that is a very artful old woman! She is not a bit your friend, and, like most of our countrywomen, she's crazy over nobility, much as she abuses it."

Carteret knew that a portion of the account was not true, and he doubted the rest; but, in the uncertain state of his mind—for Cecil's manner toward him was very changeable and capricious—the words produced an effect. Miss Dorothy grew disgusted with the whole world, and took refuge in a grim silence. She was vexed with Cecil, angry with Carteret, and venomous toward Lord George. Her feelings in regard to the countess were not safe to dwell upon, even in the secrecy of her thoughts. She saw that noble lady's plans as distinctly as if they had been elaborately explained; and when any slight incident made her fear that, through ambition or pique, Cecil and Carteret were likely to further them, she got in such a state of mind that she dreaded to meet this daughter of a dual line, lest her patience, worn threadbare, should snap suddenly, and

she be guilty of conduct which would cause beholders to fancy her a Comanche or Sioux Indian disguised in crinoline.

Old Colonel Grimshaw gave a grand *fête* one day at his Twickenham villa, and all the world was there. The countess had condescended to cool the company by the icy grandeur of her presence, and with her eye upon him, Lord George did not venture to indulge in any reprehensible conduct. Lady Alicia was left to make what she could of life among heavy dowagers and elderly incapables of the opposite sex, while his lordship showed prominent amidst the satellites which crowded about the brilliant American beauty.

Cecil was looking handsomer than ever, and received so much admiration that even the countess could not feel that Lord George's sacrifice would be very terrible. But it was a long day to Cecil, in spite of her high spirits, which never once flagged. Only the night before she had heard for the first time something of the reports in regard to Carteret and Madame de Hatzfeldt, and she had risen this morning from a sleepless bed dreading the *fête*, and determined that no trace of the thoughts which troubled her should be visible to the keenest eye.

So the two played a bitter game of cross purposes, and madame watched it, and vowed before the festivity ended to find some means of darkening the cloud between them. The time had been when she would gladly have married Carteret—would have taken him in preference to the title she had purchased—when such heart as she owned went out toward him with the earnestness which for a little while she could put into her emotions. The old wound rankled still. She was mean enough to believe in revenge; besides, she had a feverish craving for excitement; and since she could not find it in a flirtation with Carteret, it was pleasant to think of punishing him for his former and present insensibility, and at the same moment to pay the grudge she owed Cecil.

She came upon him down by the fountain, where he stood absently watching a disconsolate swan: he had just broken away from every body for an instant's quiet. Cecil had treated him to so many changes of manner within the last three hours that he was bewildered and discouraged, almost ready to believe her heartless, and not worth a thought, though this misgiving did not help his pain a whit, or give him the slightest mastery over the burning passion in his soul. Madame de Hatzfeldt stole softly behind him and touched his arm. He turned quickly, wishing her at Jericho, but forced to smile and try for a few civil words.

"Don't treat me as you would a common acquaintance," she said, reproachfully; "I thought, at least, you had got beyond that."

"Surely," he answered, not with any clear idea of what she meant by her words, or he by his monosyllabic reply.

"You are suffering, and you want to hide it," she continued.

"Yes, the heat has given me a blinding headache," he said, truthfully enough as regarded the pain at all events.

"And something else has given you a worse heart-ache," returned madame; "and I know what it is."

She stood gazing into his face with a smile so sad, an expression of such entire sympathy in her eyes, that anger would not have been in masculine nature. He made no reply; he did not mean even now to be confidential, but he could not feel vexed with any thing so pretty, and coaxing, and altogether charming.

"You'll not speak—you'll not trust me," she went on. "I think I'm a goose to care about you, but I do."

"That is very good of you—"

"Now don't say that, unless you are bent on putting me in a passion. If there's any thing I hate it is to be told I am good, for I'm not, and wouldn't be for the world;" and there could be no doubt both propositions had a merit madame's confessions rarely possessed, that of perfect truth.

"Then I'll not say it," returned he, conscious that his words sounded inane, and that he looked imbecile, but not able to find spirits for high comedy.

"You need not stand there and say nothing," said madame, evidently up in her part. "You don't think I followed you down here to the fountain to have you watch that decrepit swan, do you?"

"I didn't think you followed me at all," he replied.

"Eh bien! I did, and I own it unblushingly," cried madame, half in French, half in English, according to her wont, though, from fear of my critics, I mean to translate her conversation into the vernacular. "Now what have you to say?"

He tried to say several things, but was conscious that each effort became a more ludicrous failure, and so stopped short.

"No wonder you stammer; it's because you know you don't deserve my friendship—you repay it with coldness and reserve; and indeed, indeed, though I don't pretend to be in the least a truthful woman, I am so when I call myself your friend."

"I like to believe it," he managed to reply, "and I appreciate your kindness."

"Ah, that is a little better, but not quite honest! If you did appreciate it as you ought, you would not be so icy and reticent."

"I don't think I am."

"Take care, we are in the palace of truth, and there's the swan putting up her neck in astonishment. You are not a bit frank—you don't trust me."

"But I have nothing to tell."

"You will make me guilty of the rudeness of interrupting you. There is something you could tell; you have been utterly wretched all

day. Ah, Mr. Carteret, I have suffered enough to know the signs! But never mind; I need not be stupid, and talk about my own life; I have made it what it is, and I bear it."

Carteret was suffering so acutely that when her voice rang out suddenly, sharp and broken, and her face settled into lines of pain, he pitied her, and for the moment was ready to believe her in earnest.

"I bear it," she repeated, softly; then, after an instant's silence, during which she seemed striving to get the mastery of a host of bitter reflections, added, "but I did not come here to speak of myself—my fate is decided, and there's an end! Yours is all before you. Oh, Mr. Carteret, don't play with it, don't dally, or it may be too late to claim your happiness."

"What would you have me do?" he asked.

"Don't be vexed—I know where your heart is—you are doing wrong! I can judge better than you where another woman is concerned. You are leaving Cecil too much to herself. In your determination that she shall make her choice between ambition and peace, you don't give any hope or help. You act indifferently so well that you deceive every body but me; and she is sorely tried—you don't know how sorely."

He was listening now eagerly enough; he had forgotten his suspicions; he could only let himself be fooled, as every man has in his turn been duped since the days of Merlin and the false Vivian in some guise or other, and as often under that of friendship as of love.

"You have not finished," he said; "tell me the rest of your thought."

"I have not; I will tell you."

He looked across the waters sparkling in the rays of the afternoon sun—away over the shrubberies toward the distant horizon. He did not see a little group, of which Cecil and Lord George were at the head, approach along a path that gave a view of the space about the fountain. But madame saw them, and she saw Cecil turn resolutely in another direction, leading her companions with her.

"What were you going to tell me?" he asked.

"That you are trying Cecil too far! Mr. Carteret, you don't know what she bears up against—Lord George's devotion, her aunt's influence—and you leave her in doubt of your real feelings. She will accept a coronet to hide her pain—out of that wounded pride which drives a woman to more complete desperation than any thing else in the world."

He started; the warning had struck home.

"You do see at last—you do take in all the danger!" she cried, clasping her hands in entreaty. "Then act at once—don't let an hour go by."

"In the name of Heaven, what do you expect?" he answered, impatiently. "How can I speak—what chance do I ever get? She is always as you see her to-day, with a crowd about."

"So like a man! You must not wait for an opportunity, you must make one. Mr. Carteret, my own opinion is, that if you wait till tomorrow—for I feel sure there is some misunderstanding between you—if you wait, I believe she will accept Lord George before she leaves this place."

"There is something you are keeping from me."

"No, no! Not a syllable of confidence has passed between us; she is too proud, too much like you for that! But as I have read your secret without help, so I have read hers. Trust my intuitions, trust them, or you will rue the delay till the hour of your death."

"I can do nothing now," he said, moodily; "she has avoided me all day."

"Go into the house and write a few lines; tell her you must speak with her—say what you like! I'll give them to her—I'll manage that you see her. Go—there's the bugle sounding for breakfast. Never mind, I'll keep a place for you at table. You can give me the note when you sit down by me."

"Thank you! How good you are!"

"Don't waste time—do as I tell you! Your happiness and that of my beautiful Cecil will be the best thanks I could have. But take care what you write—it's not likely—still, if she were to lose it—you men are always careless; a woman would manage such a letter."

CHAPTER XIX.

READING THE LETTER.

THE bugle recalled the various groups, and people hurried toward the tent stretched in the space beyond the croquet-ground. As Cecil and Lord George entered with a gay party, they encountered Madame de Hatzfeldt standing quite alone, regardless of numerous invitations offered her.

"I am waiting for Mr. Carteret," she said, in answer to some remark of Lord George's.

She had remained there for the express pleasure of greeting Cecil with those words. Carteret had gone on to the house, according to her directions, to pen his note, and she meant to spare the girl no sting petty or great that her malice could suggest.

"How very good of you," laughed Lord George.

"Is it not?" returned she. "I don't think any body has ever heard of such an instance of devotion since the Crusaders! But I promised to wait, and I must, though goodness knows where he has hidden himself. However, waiting is a new sensation, and I like new sensations, don't you?"

"Most certainly, when I can find them," he said.

"Especially when the old ones are forbidden by the higher powers," she half whispered, but making her voice audible to Cecil. "How

well your cousin Alicia looks to-day—almost pretty, dear girl!"

"Confound the woman!" muttered Lord George, under his breath. Cecil did not appear to notice little madame's ill-natured efforts.

"We shall get no places at all," he added, aloud, "if we don't hurry. Success to your patient endurance, madame!"

"Oh I always succeed," she replied, gayly, "always! You may keep seats for us near you. Dear Miss Conway, you look tired!" she added, turning to Cecil.

"How my looks slander me! I never enjoyed a day so much in my life," she replied; then fearing that the words sounded abrupt and sharp, added something complimentary and kind before allowing Lord George to lead her on.

But, neatly as she did her part, Madame de Hatzfeldt was too keen-sighted in her malice to be deceived.

"You are carrying a sore heart under it all, my beauty," she thought, looking after the group as Cecil's laugh floated musically out in answer to some witticism of her companion. It was not that madame meant to be fiendish in her wickedness, or would have worked out a deliberate plan of revenge. But she was bitter and sore, hated Cecil and Carteret with as much energy as she could put into any emotion nowadays, and the chance to punish them both was too tempting to resist. Besides, like most persons who live on excitement, she was fond of incidents that looked dramatic and made her feel like a woman in a play, for her gilded existence was rather tame and monotonous in spite of the resources within her reach. The whole plan about the note rushed into her head as she saw Carteret standing by the fountain. If she had been obliged to reflect and plot, probably she would have relinquished her scheme of vengeance from sheer indolence; but here it was ready to her hand; she meant to do all the harm she could, and the lack of premeditation kept her from becoming alarmed by any thought that untold misery might grow out of her conduct.

Carteret entered the tent; she beckoned him to follow, and moved on toward the tables, choosing a place below the party she had promised to join, though within easy reach of Cecil's eye each time she looked up.

"Have you written the note?" she whispered, as Carteret seated himself by her side.

He nodded; he was gazing at Cecil, and she remained beautifully oblivious of his neighborhood, as only a woman could, though not a glance or whisper escaped her notice. Madame de Hatzfeldt knew this; and when Carteret handed her the billet he had scribbled, passing it under the table as she bade, she managed to show it; and though Cecil never deigned a look, madame perceived that her own pretended awkwardness was a success. Cecil thought she must have sat there a thou-

sand years. The whole scene was a hopeless confusion before her eyes; the voices that talked to her sounded far off and indistinct; her own replies and laughter did not seem to come from her. It was as if her soul stood a little way apart, and had suddenly grown too stunned and helpless to aid her. She was so unused to suffering that her very self seemed strange; but she bore it all, and made no sign.

When she glanced down the table again, madame and Carteret had departed. Other people were rising. Lord George was offering his arm; she accepted it, still in the same unrealizing way, and walked on, answering, laughing, conscious the while of trying to think if it was two days or ages since Carteret bent over her in her opera-box, and the whole world had looked so beautiful.

She wished she could get home, but there was no chance of that; she could not even catch a glimpse of Miss Dorothy; in any case, she could not have forced herself to go. There was something more to come—what, she did not know; but some dreadful crisis was near, and she must wait for its unfolding. She became aware that Madame de Hatzfeldt had joined the group, and was looking oddly at her, making some sign of intelligence which she did not comprehend; but every thing was so vague and unreal that this might only be a fancy like the rest.

"I want to speak to you—I want you to help me," she heard madame whisper close to her.

The shiver of dislike which she felt as the woman's perfumed breath stole over her face was real enough, at all events, but she did not hesitate to bow her head compliantly.

"Miss Conway and I are going to run away; we want you to know how painful it will be to miss us!" madame said to Lord George, as she took Cecil's arm.

Cecil allowed herself to be drawn down one of the garden paths, away beyond a thicket of laurestina that shut them out from view. Madame broke into voluble but incoherent exclamations, half laughing, half crying, in a hysterical fashion which seemed much more natural to Cecil, in her dazed, bewildered state, than any ordinary conduct could have done.

"I'm frightened out of my wits!" cried madame. "I wouldn't dare tell a human creature but you; but I know I am safe—you are too honest and true to be treacherous."

Cecil did not ask what was the matter, never remembered to do it, only gazed straight into madame's face without seeing her, aware that the crisis of which something had warned her was at hand.

"Don't look at me so, else I sha'n't have the courage to tell you!" pursued her companion, laughing again, but wiping her eyes with her lace handkerchief. "It is too ridiculous! still my husband would be furious—he's awfully strict, and I never mean to flirt—only men will be such idiots!"

"What do you want me to do?" Cecil asked, abruptly, though she was as absent as ever. "You wanted something, you said."

"No, no—just to tell you—to get away for a little! The man must be mad—and I'm not to blame—do say you think I am not!"

"Not to blame," Cecil echoed, dreamily, while her head swam till the laurestina began to dance an insane jig about the lawn.

"I never did flirt with him—at least not since we met this time—since I was married," continued madame, looking the prettiest picture of distress that could be imagined. "Years ago in America—I was a girl then—he was silly enough to think he cared about me, but I never dreamed he remembered that old nonsense! I thought we were just friends—and I was glad to be. Oh dear, I don't know what to do!"

Cecil could not have asked a question if her life had depended on it, she could only stand still and listen, comprehending with the first word what madame meant, though the scene was none the more real for that.

"I know people have gossiped," madame went on, in her pretty, frightened way; "I was told of it only yesterday, and I felt that we mustn't even be friends any more. I couldn't be talked about—I should die!"

She caught Cecil's hands and squeezed them till her diamond rings left cruel red marks on the girl's fingers, but Cecil did not flinch.

"What am I telling?" madame cried. "I can't keep it to myself; I'm such a goose. And you'll not betray me?—promise—swear!"

"I will not betray you," returned Cecil.

"I knew it—I'm not afraid! You'll not even let him suspect that you have heard a syllable?" asked madame, eagerly.

"Who? Monsieur de Hatzfeldt?" Cecil inquired.

"No, no!" returned madame, impatiently; "Carteret! I know it is a bit of crazy folly; it means nothing—at least it won't last—it's just memory, and that sort of romantic sentiment. I wouldn't have him suffer for it, though I'm angry, of course. Oh dear, how odd you look! One would think you did not hear a word."

"I hear, and I understand," Cecil answered, and the shrubberies ceased to dance, the earth to reel; she stood cold and still, regarding her companion, the confusion gone, perfectly able now to comprehend every thing.

"You are the best darling!" cried madame, enthusiastically. "Where was I?—my poor wits have quite deserted me!—oh, the note!"

"You had not said any thing about a note," interrupted Cecil.

"But you saw it, my dear, you saw him give it to me at the table! I was so taken by astonishment that I nearly dropped it, and I knew you saw! That was what made me determine to tell you. I couldn't bear that you should think ill of me, and—and—"

"You had no need to offer this explanation,"

rejoined Cecil, as the other hesitated, and began to sob and gasp anew. "I should not have presumed to judge your conduct."

"That's because you're the noblest girl in existence!" said madame, stopping her tragic play to catch Cecil's hands again, but this time they were drawn out of her reach. "You would have thought in spite of yourself, and I want you to love me, and I couldn't bear to have you believe me like so many married women. Indeed, indeed, I may flirt, but I'd cut my fingers off sooner than let a man make love to me! I feel so degraded, so shocked!"

More quivers, more broken exclamations; Cecil remained quiet till the other ceased.

"You're not blaming me?" demanded madame.

"I think not. I believe I don't fully know what has happened—I am very stupid, I fear," said Cecil, still unnaturally composed.

"You shall see it—I'll show it to you," returned madame, pulling a paper out of her bosom, but she checked herself as she was handing it to Cecil, to add, "You'll never, by word or look, let him imagine you know any thing about it?" We are such old, old friends, and I wouldn't like him to be angry or humiliated! It's just a bit of temporary insanity. I oughtn't to tell, but it took me so by surprise—you promise?"

"I have promised already," Cecil replied, "and I shall keep my word." She stepped back as madame drew out the note. She had no desire to read it.

"I know you will; you are one of those rare women whom one feels intuitively can be trusted! This is what he says—you must see. The very first words show that I am not to blame."

Cecil put up her hand, but madame did not heed the gesture; she passed her arm about the girl's waist and held the paper before her eyes, reading aloud the hastily written words:

"I must speak to you, I can not wait! By the memory of the days that were so pleasant, I implore you to grant me a hearing. You have avoided me—put off the possibility of explanation: if to prevent giving me pain, it is only a cruel kindness. The report which has reached me since I came here has nearly driven me wild. Give me a chance for just one word—let me at least show you my whole heart, even if your verdict must crush it."

Madame read out the incoherent billet slowly, and Cecil stared at the page as if some horrible fascination riveted her eyes upon it. She had several times seen Carteret's writing; there was no mistaking the marked chirography.

"The report—he means a story that we were going to leave London," explained madame. "Bless me, I shall have to if he perseveres in this nonsense!"

Cecil shrank away from her embrace, and madame did a little more tragedy, then wiped her eyes and laughed again.

"Did you ever know any thing so absurd?"

demanding she, hiding the paper. "My dear, you're such a comfort to me; telling you has quite restored my courage! My poor old Fairfax, I'm very sorry for him! Don't be shocked, but really I can not get up the amount of virtuous indignation I ought. I shall have no scene; I shall give him to understand that if any thing of this sort occurs again my doors are closed against him forever."

Cecil was struggling hard for words; she could not endure the idea that the least perception of her feelings should become apparent to the woman. She heard herself laugh, make some idle response all the while her heart sank down, down, and her whole youth seemed to lie behind her, ruined and blighted by this cruel blow.

"I do blame myself for the past," madame was saying when she could listen again.

"He was very, very fond of me! Ah, my dear, as Adela Livingston I was a little hard-hearted—young girls so often are! Perhaps I did encourage him—I tried to like him. Well, upon my word I don't know why I didn't, only along came my stately Austrian, and I forgot every body else."

Cecil made a tolerable pretense of attending to these words, but her thoughts were drifting back to the golden spring days, when they sailed over enchanted seas under Elysian skies, and not a smile from those proud lips, not a meaning syllable that false tongue had uttered, escaped her memory. It was not alone the bitter agony to her heart which she endured; her entire faith in truth and honesty appeared gone. Who could be trusted since this man was capable of such treachery?

"We must go back," madame said; "we shall be missed. I must get into the house and bathe my eyes. I've cried until I am a perfect fright."

Cecil walked slowly forward, her companion conversing volubly, and she trying for answers which were not too incoherent or strained. Madame watched her, and knew that the blow had struck home, fairly admiring the courage with which it was borne.

"It will do them both good," she thought. "They may come together, but it will be a long while first! A little suffering is wholesome; and they can't hurt me, even if they got at an explanation—bah! he'd have trouble to arrive at that—she's prouder than Lucifer! No doubt she'll end by marrying Lord George. Well, she ought to be obliged to me for helping her to a coronet!"

She broke off in her mental summary, to pour out a new torrent of protestations and thanks upon Cecil.

"I never can repay you," said she; "I declare I should have done something idiotic if I had not had you to tell—gone to my husband, and who knows what might have happened then?"

The creature was vain and silly enough to like a duel fought for her sake, Cecil thought;

and bitter as she felt toward Carteret, such consummation of his folly was too horrible to contemplate for an instant.

"You'll not do that," she said: "think of the trouble—the misery—worse for you than any body. Avoid the man—shut your doors against him—but try nothing so insane as that."

"I'll not, dear; indeed I'll not. I will do just as you tell me; you are the sweetest, the most clear-headed darling!" cried madame, enthusiastically, and laughed to herself at the idea of confiding any secret to her Austrian, of whom she stood in wholesome awe. "The matter shall rest between us, and we'll both forget it, won't we?"

"At least we will never speak of it again," Cecil answered.

"That's right and best. I feel so safe with you. I know even your aunt will never hear of it—I am awfully afraid of her!"

"No human being will ever hear a syllable from my lips," was Cecil's reply.

Madame knew she would keep her word; the girl's excessive pride would withhold her, if no other consideration did. The dread that any one should suspect her secret would keep her from mention of the man, or his affairs, so madame triumphed with unalloyed content.

They neared the crowded lawn; it was twilight now, and people were beginning to depart. Madame wanted something of another person, and was eager to get away from her companion. She lived in a round of little plots and plans, and exhausted as much art and diplomacy over the commonest affairs of life as if she had been a Machiavelli in petticoats.

"I am going into the house," she said; "I'll see you to-morrow. Good-bye, dearest; we're sworn friends, remember! I am so fond of you—I've no words to tell. If ever I can serve you, I'd do it at any cost; always be sure of that—always."

"I thank you," Cecil answered, wearily, anxious to escape further expressions of gratitude.

Madame did the dramatic a little longer, then hurried off; she wanted to discover the old colonel and wheedle him out of flowers enough to decorate her rooms for a coming soirée, and so be able to pocket the money which her husband would give her to pay the supposititious bill from the florist. She was an adept in such artifices, and took a real pleasure in them as proofs of her ingenuity and skill.

Cecil was wondering, in a tired, dazed way, where she should find Miss Dorothy, fearing to be surrounded again and forced to talk. She longed to reach home, and be alone with her misery, even while she dreaded it as the young do dread to face a first suffering. She turned to go, but as she did so a step smote the green-sward, and, looking up, she saw Fairfax Carteret close by her side.

"At last!" he exclaimed, eagerly. "I have been searching everywhere for you."

She gave him one angry glance, and averted her eyes.

"I am sorry you took so much trouble," said she, coldly.

The look, the voice, both told him his doom. He stood confounded. It was all true; he had deceived himself! His hurried, insane note had only roused her anger and contempt; she was not kind-hearted enough to appreciate his honesty or pity his pain.

"Have I offended you by coming?" he asked, uttering the first words he could find wherewith to choke back the groan of anguish which surged up from his very soul.

"Offended me!" she repeated, with an icy smile. "What an opinion you must have of the importance people attach to your actions when you ask a question like that."

"How can you misunderstand me so cruelly!" he cried. "Oh, Miss Conway, you must know me better; you—"

He stopped; she had advanced a step, and was regarding him with a face of such scorn, such intolerable and overwhelming contempt, that the sentence died unfinished on his lips. She thought, in the worthless vanity and fickleness of his nature, he was about to speak words of tender gallantry; and with the lines of that letter still swimming in characters of fire before her eyes, it was more than she could bear. For the instant her wrath mastered the sharp pain at her heart; a marble woman could not have looked more pitiless and cruel.

"I believe I am not in the mood for high comedy or histrionics of any sort," said she, and smiled again. "Do you happen to have seen my aunt, Mr. Carteret?"

He put his hand to his forehead; it throbbed and burned as if he had received an actual physical insult; but he was suffering too keenly to feel angry.

"I left her by the breakfast tent," he managed to answer; "she asked me to find you."

"Allow me to thank you for—"

"Please don't say such things!" he interrupted. "I have been a hopeless maniac—but I don't mean to worry you further."

What he proposed to himself by this ridiculous talk she could not imagine; did he think to dupe her into some betrayal of feeling? It might easily be; she was prepared to believe any thing of him now. He might have laid a wager similar to one she had heard of lately, that he would make love to a certain number of women in a given number of hours, and receive favorable answers from each. She felt for an instant that if there had been any man at hand on whom she had a right to call, she would have bidden him murder the creature before her eyes. The thought flashed like lightning through her mind, long as it takes to write—she was answering before he had hardly finished.

"One meets so many maniacs," she said, "but I never do allow myself to be worried! How pretty the colored lamps look among the trees, don't they, Mr. Carteret?"

She was not content with wounding him, she

wished to be insolent and harsh, now that he had plainly revealed his affection in that letter! How could he have so utterly deceived himself in regard to this woman? It was horrible to think of any girl, young and beautiful, utterly hardened, completely given up to worldly ambition! He believed—he said it mentally for the first time—that, during those bright days of the voyage, she had been softened and touched by a glimpse of the dream which he had guarded as so priceless. But she wanted station—title; she had decided to accept them; and in her anger to think they could never bring her peace, she found a savage delight in trampling ruthlessly upon his heart.

"I shall leave you to make pretty speeches to the next woman you meet," said she; "I am going to find my aunt."

"One moment, Miss Conway, just one," he returned in an odd, repressed voice. "I know of course what this means; but I should like to hear you put it in words; it is not much to ask, and would make my part easier."

"I am not good at impromptu charades," said she, with a laugh; "I am so fearfully stupid that I do not understand you in the least—but is it worth explanation?"

"There is no need," he said; "I am answered. You might have done it in a kinder fashion, still I will not complain."

"That's very nice of you, I am sure," she replied, sickened by this effort to be sentimental, after her showing so clearly that she understood and despised his game. "I will leave you while you are in this amiable mood; it is pleasant to part decorously with people."

"And the parting is forever," he murmured, half unconsciously.

"I hope so with all my heart," retorted she, lifting her head proudly as again that letter flamed before her eyes.

"And I echo the hope," he said; but even now he could not speak angrily—he uttered the words from a dreary consciousness that the one favor destiny could grant him was never to look in her face again.

"Really, this would all be very pretty on the stage," observed Cecil; "but I am at a loss to know why two ordinary acquaintances—acquaintances for a brief space—need be heroic about saying good-night."

"We have not been ordinary acquaintances, Miss Conway," he said, sternly. "You know that. From the first I showed too plainly what my feelings were for us to be placed on that footing."

"Are you going to talk about your feelings?" demanded she. "After all, you ought to do it well; people frequently talk best of what they know the least."

There was no good in exposing himself to these insults; it was grief enough to know he had lost his hope of earthly happiness; he need not add the misery of seeing this creature, who had seemed to him little less than an angel of purity, show in these revolting colors.

"Believe me, I have no such intention," he answered. "Shall we go and find your aunt?"

"Thanks—I need not trouble you. I see Lord George Wharton coming this way," she said, with a graceful bow.

"I may not have another opportunity—let me congratulate you now," cried he, determined to be decently courageous under his pain.

"Mr. Carteret," said she, sharply, "there are limits even to *persiflage*—I beg you not to pass them! You may at least congratulate me on the fact that in Lord George's society I shall be exposed neither to a mawkish attempt at sentiment, or an impertinent affectation of intimacy."

She turned and left him without another word. He saw Lord George hurry forward to meet her, saw her take his arm, look up smilingly in his face, and rushed away with such bitter anguish and wrath in his heart that he thought he must go mad.

"Miss Dorothy is determined to take you home," said his lordship.

"A very sensible determination," exclaimed Cecil. "This certainly has been the longest day I ever spent in my life!"

"Now that's not complimentary! However, I shall think you mean it to apply to this *tête-à-tête* with Carteret."

"A good deal of it may," she replied, energetically. "There is a person I never wish to speak to again as long as I live, if I can avoid it."

It seemed a fitting opportunity to utter the words his lady-mother decreed, but he did not feel equal to the task. He was thinking of Alicia—of the distant Australian lands he had taken insanely to dreaming about of late—and he lacked energy to woo the heiress with proper warmth.

Cecil was sorry for the words as soon as they were spoken; she had not meant to say so much about the man to any body. She began talking of other things, to laugh and jest; Lord George was glad to follow her lead and get away from the dangerous ground which he knew must be attempted one day or another. The countess saw them approach, and felt perfectly satisfied with the appearance of affairs, actually growing so tender of Cecil that she arranged a stray curl for the young lady with her own aristocratic fingers. But Miss Dorothy, farther than ever from sharing the countess's content, said,

"The carriage is waiting, Cecil; we must have all caught severe enough colds by this time."

"Always practical—always judicious, dear Miss Conway!" sighed her ladyship. "And you are very right to take care of your treasure. My dear," turning to Cecil with her most overpowering manner, "this day adds to your triumphs—even his highness had no words to express his admiration."

His highness was an offshoot of Austrian

royalty who had graced the fête with his presence for a short half hour. In the midst of her trouble and heart-ache, Cecil could not help thinking what a humiliation it was to be admired by a man with such a nose and under-jaw as the prince possessed.

They got away at last, the countess to the end so persevering in her manifestations of affection that Lord George grew uneasy lest she should render herself and him ridiculous; but Cecil was too much preoccupied to notice, and Miss Dorothy determined not to mention any subject to her niece connected with mother or son so long as she could possibly restrain her indignation.

The very next day old Knowles brought the spinster news which startled her afresh. Carteret had thrown up his diplomatic appointment and left England. Cecil, writing notes at a little distance, did not appear to heed what was said.

"Left England!" exclaimed Miss Dorothy. "Why, what on earth—he never said a word about it yesterday!"

"He has gone, at any rate," insisted Knowles. "I met him this morning; he seemed in a great hurry, and I could not make head or tail of what it was called him off so suddenly."

Miss Dorothy glanced at her niece with suspicion.

"Cecil," she cried, "do you hear? Mr. Carteret has gone away."

"Very well, aunt; London must try to support his absence," she replied, carelessly.

"Humph!" said Miss Dorothy, and gave her ear a sharp tweak. "Did you know he was going?"

"I am sure I don't remember—so many people are always going, or coming, which is worse."

"I think it very odd he did not at least say good-bye," persevered Miss Dorothy, eyeing her niece severely, and pulling the unfortunate left ear. "Very odd indeed!"

Cecil shrugged her shoulders with easy contempt; the gesture gave Miss Dorothy an excuse to find fault, and at this moment, suspecting her niece as she did of being in some way the cause of Carteret's departure, that was a slight comfort.

"I wish you would leave those foreign graces to Madame de Hatzfeldt," said she. "I don't know what you mean by lifting your shoulders—I'm too old to learn signs and grimaces."

"My dear Aunt Dor, I only meant that Mr. Carteret's disappearance did not seem worth wondering about," replied Cecil, good-humoredly.

"He's worth a score of these foreigners, with their ridiculous drawl and their titles!" cried the spinster.

"He is a very fine fellow," added Knowles, anxious to appease Miss Dorothy's inexplicable irritation. "He is about the best possible specimen of a clever, cultivated American."

"Oh, if you both mean to get violently patriotic I shall run away," laughed Cecil. "I know you are wishing to flutter the star-spangled banner, Mr. Knowles—please don't!"

"I hope I never shall be ashamed of my patriotism," observed Miss Dorothy.

"But it's too precious to waste on ordinary occasions," said Cecil, teasingly; "it ought to be kept for the Fourth of July and public meetings, and other unavoidable monstrosities."

"You may overpower me with your wit, but you can't change my opinion," returned the spinster, still pulling her ear.

She looked more distressed than angry, and Cecil, knowing very well what was the matter, had no wish to worry her.

"You dear old Aunt Dor," said she, "I'll not be wicked another minute; I'll go out and buy an enameled eagle, and wear it always, to prove my patriotism!"

She rose from the table, went to Miss Dorothy, and stood smoothing her gray hair with a tenderness the spinster could not resist.

"I'm not cross," said she, shaking her head, "but you're a bad girl."

"Well, she's a very handsome one, at all events!" cried old Knowles, with a candor which made both ladies laugh.

"That deserves my prettiest courtesy," said Cecil.

"But all this doesn't tell me why Fairfax Carteret flew off in that crazy fashion," added Miss Dorothy.

"Perhaps he has been sent on some secret mission," hazarded Mr. Knowles; "indeed, I shouldn't wonder."

"I should," said Miss Dorothy, and gave Cecil another keen glance; but Cecil had returned to her seat, and did not catch it. "Private mission!—private insanity, more like!"

"Some one says all people are insane more or less," said Cecil from the table, where she was busy sealing and directing her letters. "Perhaps your friend Mr. Carteret has suddenly developed an undue share of madness."

"Why, I always fancied the young gentleman was a great admirer of yours, Miss Cecil!" said Knowles.

"Do you offer the fancy as a proof of his insanity?" laughed she.

"No, no; but then—"

"My dear Mr. Knowles, be easy on that score; I am innocent of blame."

"I didn't mean to blame you; I suppose you can't help turning all their heads."

"Good gracious, you are so gallant this morning I don't recognize you!" cried Cecil.

"I wish the countess might appear—her presence would soon reduce you to order."

"What an awful woman!" shivered Knowles.

"She is a little overpowering, but so is Mont Blanc; and so very grand—like Mont Blanc again," returned Cecil, still keeping up her pretense of nonsensical gayety with undiminished spirit.

"I wish with all my heart she were the thing

itself; I'd never take a journey to look at her, I promise you," pronounced Miss Dorothy, glad of a subject which gave her an opportunity to explode.

"Now, Aunt Dor, that's dreadfully unkind when the countess is so good! She thinks us very American, but she overlooks that; and just consider what a favor her society is! Why twenty lessons in deportment from the best masters would not be so improving as one half-hour with her ladyship!"

"She is the most outrageously impertinent woman I ever met in my life," cried Miss Dorothy. "Don't talk about her, or I shall turn into a vinegar-pot at once!"

"It gives me a cold chill just to think of her," groaned Knowles. "Now there's the son—he seems a nice enough fellow, eh, Miss Cecil?"

"I like him very much," replied Cecil.

Miss Dorothy sniffed, but offered no remark. She was greatly troubled by Carteret's departure; she had hoped, after his return from the Continent, that she could lay by her fears in regard to Lord George; that the little romance which, spinster-like, she had woven during the sea-voyage for Cecil and her old friend's son might be realized. Now, without warning, without so much as the ceremony of an adieu, he was gone, and there Cecil sat jesting, smiling, provokingly indifferent to every thing which concerned him; not enough energy in speaking to solace Miss Dorothy with the idea that her conduct might arise from pique. The old maid felt bitterly disappointed, but there remained nothing to be said or done. In regard to her future, Cecil was a girl to act for herself; she might receive her aunt's advice, giving due weight to the affection that dictated it; but all the same, Miss Dorothy knew she would act and choose for herself.

The day dragged on, and Cecil had never a moment for solitude or reflection. Mrs. Hungerford came for her before old Knowles left, to go to somebody's concert. Miss Dorothy pronounced herself too utterly worn out after yesterday, to be fit for any thing this morning except to doze in her easy-chair, though the poor soul did not doze much. Once alone, she could not help thinking and trembling for Cecil's future. She wished almost that they had not come abroad, because then the girl might never have been tempted into selling herself; Miss Dorothy would put it in this light. No power could have made her believe that Cecil really liked the earl's son. Then her dreary fancies drifted away back into the past, to her own desolate youth, to Philip and his wasted life. Then up came thoughts of Valery, and, the yearning once more to see the girl which had been in the spinster's heart day and night through all these years, though she so seldom uttered her name.

Poor Miss Dorothy! Like most of her class, there was nothing left her now but a sort of vicarious existence; she had no more to hope or anticipate where her own fate was concerned,

and this rendered doubly hard the fact that she could do so little to secure the happiness of the young people she loved so fondly.

Madame de Hatzfeldt was at the concert, and the instant she could get near Cecil, whispered,

"He has gone—left this morning."

"Let us be thankful he showed a gleam of decency, honor, and right feeling," returned Cecil, more severely than madame had ever heard her speak.

"How stern you are!" cried she, with a volley of French ejaculations; "absolutely Spartan in your severity! Well, dear, I'm glad, too, he has gone; I never could have breathed easily while he remained; I told him he must go."

"Yes," Cecil assented, thinking that straightway, after trying to enact sentiment for her benefit, he had gone back to do dramatics with madame.

"He followed me home," pursued madame, inventing her lie as she went on with perfect ease. "We had a sad quarrel; that is, I made one. I told him he had no right to insult and compromise me by such conduct. Poor fellow! he was white as a ghost; I could see he suffered dreadfully; but he was very submissive—never said a word that was wrong."

"Let us hope he may recover," answered Cecil, contemptuously, no more believing he had been earnest in his protestations to madame, than she believed he felt the scene he attempted to play with her. Really, he was too contemptible to think about; she wondered that she felt any pang—could be weak enough to give his memory the slightest place in her mind.

Still it was not possible to obliterate the recollection of her dream; she might know her imagination had bowed before an ideal, that the real man was totally unlike the creation of her fancy, yet this knowledge did not quiet her heart. She told herself that it was worse than folly; but the pain would not be banished; it would keep with her, and take the bloom off every enjoyment, casting a shadow of suspicion between her and all faith in humanity; harder to bear than the suffering itself.

CHAPTER XX.

IN ROME.

The gorgeous light of late afternoon—it was late in May too—streamed over Rome, brightened the gloomiest nook and glorified the distant hills, till it was like catching a glimpse of the Delectable Mountains, to watch their changing hues.

John Ford stood on the summit of the Janiculum, surveyed the panorama spread out beneath, and gave himself up to the inexplicable charm of the scene. Close at his feet lay the huddled, narrow streets of the Trastevere, the yellow Tiber creeping sluggishly on; and be-

yond, the full sweep of modern Rome, with the green beauty of the Pincio for its limit, the Alban hills shutting in the view miles and miles away. To the north, the long line of the Vatican and the mighty dome of St. Peter's blended into one vast mass; farther to the left appeared glimpses of the ruins; and yet farther, the white stretch of the Appian Way—Metella's tomb, the last object distinguishable in the golden haze, towering up like some giant vessel becalmed in a purple sea.

The Eternal City had been home to him for many years. No matter whither he wandered, his feet always strayed back; and not a spot from distant Soracte, shining now like a broad door which might give entrance to a heavenly Eden, to the most distant pile of broken fragments that had been a stately town when Rome was young, was unfamiliar to him. Yet the scene never grew hackneyed; there was always something new and unaccustomed in its beauty; past and present mingled in such inseparable charm that he could never feel he stood in the common light of to-day, and lived wholly in the prosaic round of modern times.

A young lady came out of the church—erected, Papist legends would have us believe, on the spot where Peter met the death by which "he glorified the Lord." Lost as he was in his reverie, Ford could hear that step, and turned his dreamy face, rendered fairly handsome by its slow, grave smile, as she approached.

"I am afraid we ought to go home, Mr. Ford; your cousin will begin to think we are lost."

"Then I suppose we must get back and relieve her mind," he answered, "else she will be ordering poor old Giovanni to have the Tiber dragged. The last time we went wandering, she conceived the idea that we had buried ourselves in the house of Nero, and wanted the consul summoned, and excavations commenced at once."

They both laughed a little, then for a few moments forgot his relative and her fears in watching the dazzling line of yellow light which gave token of the coming sunset. Luckily, they were brought back to a sense of their duty by the appearance of the blind beggar and his mate, who have haunted the hill since the memory of man.

"I've no soldi left, Valery," said Mr. Ford, after a vain search in his pockets, from whence he produced pencils, tubes of color, scraps of paper, and numerous other trifles which had no business to cumber the intricacies of any sane man's attire.

"Of course not," she replied, smiling; "we have been out several hours; and if you had brought a copper mountain, with you, there'd not be a vestige by this time."

Mr. Ford's shameful weakness in the matter of beggars was a fact so thoroughly established that he had not a word to say in his own defense. But he looked so wretched at the indignant cry the blind man set up when his

spouse informed him what poor success their pleadings were likely to meet, that Valery was glad to console both friend and mendicant by producing some coins from her purse.

"And now, we really must go," she said, taking Mr. Ford's arm and leading him resolutely on. "If we look back we are lost—that light is too bewitching!"

"Ah, Valery," said he, shaking his head, "it is enough to make one forswear palette and brushes forever."

"I don't know that," she replied; "it leaves me very hopeless, but at the same time I feel that it is better to have tried and failed, than live content never to make the effort."

"You are a brave girl," he said, with another of his rare smiles. "Well, you are right to be courageous. Did you read the London papers I sent into your room this morning?"

"Yes; how odd it seemed that it could be my work they were talking about! But I can see it so plainly, and see so many faults which I did not while it was on the easel, that I rather wonder how I dared send it."

"As long as you work as conscientiously as now, you need not be afraid to exhibit your efforts; they may not satisfy entirely, but you will have done your best."

"That is not very encouraging or very clear, but I know what you mean," she answered.

"Are you capable of walking home?" he asked, after a pause. "If not, we may as well take this little carriage."

"I'm not in the least tired; I would much rather walk," she replied.

So they descended the hill, took the street which winds past the Corsini Palace, and threaded the narrow alleys of the Trastevere. They soon crossed the bridge, and were deep in the heart of modern Rome, passing under the frowning fronts of the Spada and Farnese palaces, that looked as if they had grown grim and sullen from keeping for so many centuries the secrets of the two ancient families now vanished from their shelter forever.

John Ford was no talker, but he and Valery were never at a loss for conversation; and the girl unconsciously retained her childish habit of telling him every thought in her mind as freely as if he were a favorite elder brother.

The five years gone by since she left Miss Dorothy's protection had altered her somewhat; but it was the same face still, matured into womanhood, with a strength and power, and an expression of sweet patience better than any ordinary beauty. These years, so full of change and earnest labor, had carried her out of the morbid sadness which threatened at one time to enfeeble and warp her whole character. She owed much of this alteration to Ford's influence, and was glad to know it; for any feeling which formed a new bond of affection between them was pleasant to her.

When she forsook Miss Dorothy's house, determined to lose herself so completely that no trace of her whereabouts could distract her old

friend from the line of conduct which Valery felt to be the only right one, she hurried down to New York, meaning to follow John Ford over to Europe. But he had not sailed, owing to a fortunate business delay, and she enjoyed his companionship on the voyage. He approved thoroughly of her resolution, offered every assistance in his power, and made the whole plan of her future simple and easy.

"You will live with my cousin and me," he said. "I must stay in England for a while; and long before we reach Rome Dorothy will have written to Mrs. Sloman, and have had her answer that nothing is known about you, which will end all inquiries."

The competency which Philip had settled upon his child—the one thoughtful act of his whole life—was deposited in English funds, and Valery entered into possession of an income more than sufficient for her wants—large enough to seem an absolute fortune to her moderate tastes.

They did not reach Rome until the winter. Valery lived so secluded a life that there was no danger any mention of her should get back to America. She worked faithfully and diligently, and gradually there came the belief that she was fulfilling her destiny in this servitude to Art; and the thought helped her on toward content and happiness. After a few months, the three went away; and though Ford's paintings were regularly forwarded to London and New York, his most intimate friends knew very little of his whereabouts. A whole year was spent in Greece, another in the East, a twelvemonth in wandering about Spain; and it was not until the previous autumn, which completed the five years of absence, that the artist once more found himself definitely established in his beloved city.

Valery had been a hard student, and was beginning now to reap the fruits of her patient industry in the favor accorded the pictures she dispatched nameless to foreign exhibitions. Naturally enough, no notice of her had crept into the gossiping records of those sworn destroyers of peace and privacy—newspaper correspondents, so that during the whole time no clue reached Miss Dorothy whereby to trace her.

Since the pictures were sent, Ford had learned of Mr. Denham's death; Cecil was nearly of age now, and no great harm could grow out of Valery's discovery, if it must come. They were talking of the matter as they walked home through the sunset, and Valery said, in answer to some remark of his,

"Miss Dorothy will have become so attached to Cecil that she could not leave her. Only I hope we may not meet; to have Cecil know—to see her shrink from me—hate me! I have not grown brave or strong enough to bear that!"

"The chances are ten to one she will never hear; there are things the most wicked or stupid people don't tell," he said. "But if she did—"

"No, no; I can not contemplate the possibility!"

"I mean that if she could have a harsh thought in her mind she would not be worth caring for," he said.

"I hope I should never blame her—I am sure I should not! But if every thing may only remain as it is—I can recollect that she was fond of me—that she kissed me, and said I should always be dear."

"You are not unhappy, Valery?"

"I, my friend? Look at me!"

She raised her face toward his, and smiled; his grave mouth stirred a little; his dreamy eyes caught a sudden shadow from some secret emotion. He knew the feeling well, but he was accustomed to guard against it. He drew her arm through his again, and they walked on. No matter what moments of weakness he might have, no sign of them would ever be allowed to startle Valery out of her unconsciousness, and bring the slightest change into their daily habits. It was a life of constant repression and trial to Ford, but he was used to that. Since this girl became his care, existence looked fuller of interest and pleasure than it had done for years; he would not yield to any insanity, however strong, which might result in depriving him of the partial content this close companionship afforded. He was like a brother to her, and he could never be any thing more. He knew that, and kept silence—shutting his heart close over his love, lest he should bring some disturbing element into the quiet of their days.

I hold self-abnegation and sacrifice, in whatever form they may be shown, the noblest heroism weak humanity can display; so, in spite of his grizzled hair and his forty-four years, old John Ford, as irreverent friends had called him almost since boyhood, was a hero to me from the hour I learned the secret of his cheerful, laborious life. The secret was always there; it haunted his waking hours, followed him into his dreams, never once ceased to be a bitter pain, but was borne so patiently, so nobly, so beautified and glorified his every thought and act, that, plain and simple as he walked among men, the angels knew no warrior's triumph ever excelled his in this steadfast mastery of himself.

Close to one of the tranquil piazzas which lie between the Corso and the Quirinal Hill, a spot the birds and the sun and the black-robed priests and Ford's favorite beggars all sought and loved, stood a mediæval palace, with blackened walls, and scores of dark galleries and numberless stately rooms, where long since Ford had selected his abode. He chose a suite of lofty chambers rather high up, artist-like, and filled them with quaint Old-World furniture and decorations, which were the constant worry and delight of his cousin. The deep-set casements gave a view of the piazza with its towered church, and the long stretch of a palace which fronted on the Corso, and turned its

back contemptuously upon the little square. It often made Ford—fond of odd fancies—smile to think how like humanity the house was, in seeming to despise the stillness, and thrusting its ugly face out toward the rush and noise of the street beyond.

Valery had her own private haunt on the same floor, painting-room and all; and, though she lived with her friends, was enabled at will to enjoy the privacy which is dear to any man or woman who serves Art truly.

Between them both, and what Mrs. Sloman was pleased to call their "vaggeries," the good soul lived in a continual state of bustle and care; and as they knew she liked it, they would no more have interfered with her sense of responsibility, than have dreamed of correcting her when she chose to adopt and persist in some strikingly original pronunciation of the commonest word, though she was as well acquainted with the rules of grammar and custom as most people.

It was growing dusk as the pair returned. Old Giovanni, Ford's factotum and tyrant, had already announced that dinner would be utterly spoiled; and he and Mrs. Sloman had groaned over the unreasonableness of the absent ones, and been quite happy in their grumbling and discontent.

"I knew you wouldn't be back in time," she said, looking up from her never-ended knitting as they entered; perfectly cheerful and good-natured, as she proceeded to pour out a string of complaints. "I told Giovanni you wouldn't be back, and I ordered dinner at exactly six o'clock, and it's half-past now."

"Did you order dinner because you knew we wouldn't be here?" asked Ford, laughing, while Valery laid a bunch of violets in the old lady's lap.

"Now, John, you know that wasn't what I meant! Dear me, Valery, I'm sure there's all sort of creeping things in these woods; every thing is full of them in Rome! John Ford, you've been among the beggars! I'll wager any thing you haven't a penny left in your pocket, and I can smell them; I always can when you've been out; and Mr. Staunton has been here to see you, and would go into the studio, and I never was so ashamed! I might dust till I was blacker than a chimney-sweep, and it would only be thicker than ever; and I said that if I had to live my life over I'd never be an artist, no matter what was offered."

She was more beautifully vague than usual; so Ford pitied her, and said he would just go to his room and get rid of all trace of the beggars, and be ready for dinner at once.

"Now don't hurry, else you'll have no appetite! There's fish to-day; I went away over to the Forum nearly myself, and it must be burned up by this time."

"I didn't notice any sign of a conflagration in that quarter," observed Ford, with a sly smile.

"Now you are wool-gathering as usual,"

replied Mrs. Sloman. "Valery, he's mixed things up till he thinks I mean it's the Forum that was burned; you always do, John! And such a heap of rubbish as it is! I hope when Victor Emanuel gets here he'll pull it all to pieces, and put up some decent houses instead; if he's got any nose he will, that's certain—I mean, if he has any smell in it; for it's quite a deformity in his pictures, I'm sure, though you never can believe in them of course."

"That is not hopeful for John and me," said Valery, laughing.

"Oh mercy, I didn't mean you! I'm sure you do beautifully, Valery, and you'd never think of painting the Forum with such a nose—I mean Victor; but there, my work is all in a snarl, and don't speak to me, for I'm counting."

Ford went away to his room; but while getting ready for dinner his thoughts were busy with the subject which his cousin's mention of the king had roused. There was something he had intended to speak about for several days past; and when they were fairly seated at table he tried to bring the matter up gently enough not to startle Mrs. Sloman out of her senses.

"Valery, you have never seen Tuscany," he said, rousing himself from his reverie, and unconsciously interrupting a monologue of his relatives that had been going on for the last ten minutes.

"I'm talking about custard, not Tuscany," said she. "John, you get worse and worse every day!"

"I beg your pardon, Aunt Jem; I did not notice you were speaking. But about Tuscany—we'll take the custard later on, if Giovanni doesn't spill it before he gets to the table."

"No, I've not seen it yet," Valery said. "I mean Tuscany."

"It isn't time; we haven't finished the chicken," murmured Mrs. Sloman; but Ford knew if he stopped to set her straight he should never arrive at what he wished to say.

"It would be a lovely place to spend the summer," he continued. "Later, one could run up to Venice, perhaps even go on and have a peep at those wonderful Dolomites you were reading to me about the other day, Valery."

"Yes, that would be very pleasant," she said.

"How would you like it, Aunt Jem?" he asked.

"Oh dear me, I've lived topsy-turvy so long that it doesn't make any difference," she sighed. "There are fleas here, and there'll be fleas there—I'm sure Giovanni has dropped something!—and, unless we want to die of malaria, we must go somewhere; and I'd rather end like a Christian if there's a decent disease to be found in Italy, which one couldn't expect, for just to see the amount of sour bread they eat is enough to turn one pea-green."

"Then Tuscany it shall be," said Ford; "you two shall go quietly off there next month, and I'll join you later. My own opinion is, that Rome will be besieged before a great while."

"Then we have got to starve!" broke in Mrs. Sloman, glancing down the table as hopelessly as if this were the last meal they were likely to share for an indefinite time; "and nothing on earth in the house but a ham, only the dinner! Mercy on us, there's a cannon—Victor Emanuel has come! Get an American flag, John, they'll never dare fire on that! What on earth we're here for nobody knows; and not so much as a poker in the house that's worth calling by the name!"

But her companions' irrepressible burst of laughter brought her back to her senses. Ford had known that whenever the communication was made she would be quite beside herself, and it might as well come now as later.

"Now, Aunt Jem, there's nothing the matter! Before autumn the Italian army will come in here—probably quietly enough, but I'd rather have you away for the time."

"Away? I should think so! I'd like to start to-night."

Valery repressed a feeling of disappointment at having to go. Like most enthusiastic people, regeneration and union was her pet dream for her beloved Italy. She would have been glad to stay and see the national flag planted on the Capitol; but remembering what a cruelty it would be to keep Mrs. Sloman, or send her off alone, she relinquished the thought. She and John drank to united Italy in a flask of extra Monte Fiascone produced for the express purpose; and Mrs. Sloman, having satisfied herself that the cannonading had not actually begun, grew quite jubilant over the idea of meeting sundry old Florentine friends again.

"You must tell every body to go, John," she said, rushing, with her customary abruptness, to another view of the case. "I never did like Antonelli, but I feel as if I'd be glad to send him an anonymous letter or something, and tell him to hide in the cellar or under St. Peter's; and it's my opinion he'd be more out of mischief there than anywhere else, for all he's so polite."

"You must tell nothing to any one, Aunt Jem; we might get into very serious difficulty," said Mr. Ford, firmly; and when he spoke in that tone the good soul was always sufficiently impressed not to forget his caution, however confused she might become.

"I sha'n't open my mouth," returned she, dropping her voice to an awful whisper. "Hush, John, there's Giovanni! Talk about something else; we might all be arrested in a minute! Yes, Valery, yes, Victor Emanuel—no, no, I didn't mean that! Gracious mercy, can't either of you help talk about something, so that Giovanni won't suspect? you're ready enough when there's no occasion, the dear knows!"

As soon as they could stop laughing they reminded her that Giovanni did not understand a word of English, though he had several phrases which he was accustomed to fling at his mistress's head during their frequent argu-

ments, about as unlike any human language as most of Mrs. Sloman's efforts in his native tongue.

"I never did trust him; you can't tell what he knows," she said, regarding suspiciously the old servant as he busied himself in changing the plates. "He's as like a Jesuit as a Jesuit is like a black cat, for all he wears a brown coat—Giovanni!"

"Sì, signora."

"Amata molto il Pope, io!—There, I'll put him off the scent if he did suspect; I'm not going to be spied and put about at my own table!—Molto amo Popy, Giovanni!" she continued, bursting again into what she believed Italian.

Giovanni made a wry face; he was a desperate old Liberal, as Valery and Ford knew, but it was useless to explain to Mrs. Sloman; the shortest way was to let her exhaust the subject, then it would speedily pass out of her mind.

"Io Americano, Giovanni! How do you say Yankee Doodle, John?—Doodle-do, Giovanni!—Oh dear, he's spilling the gravy! the stupidest old thing! Do speak to him, one of you; tell him to hasto, or whatever it means; that he's done enough, and to go."

Giovanni pursued his business composedly, so much accustomed to the old lady's peculiarities and brief seasons of appearing a little astray in her head that he paid no attention whatever. Her small stock of Italian had deserted her when she first began, as it always did if she got in the least excited; presently mastery of her own language followed suit, and she could only gasp and roll her eyes in a manner suggestive of suffocation. Valery and Ford went on talking quietly about Florence, regardless of her nods and winks and broken ejaculations to Giovanni, and at last, having finished his duties, he departed. By-and-by she came up to the surface once more, and broke in upon a discussion about Fra Angelico, to exclaim,

"Yes; that apartment of old Fiorelli's in the Via della Scala will be the very thing!" She seemed so confident that she was assenting to some remark of Ford's, and nodded her head so amiably that he had the fortitude not to look provoked, though she had broken in upon a discussion in regard to one of his pet theories.

"I should think it would do nicely," he answered; and, slight as the thing was, Valery could not help admiring the man's patience. "You can't have the dinners sent in, and be quite comfortable."

"What do you mean by talking as if you were not to go with us?" she asked. "Now if you mean to stay here and be bombarded and starved and shot at, and goodness knows what, just say so, John Ford—I'd always rather know what is coming, and nobody can say I'm not always prepared, and so I well may be, after all these years here in Italy.—There's

no currant-jelly for the mutton! If I've ever tried to make Giovanni remember any thing, it's that jelly when we have mutton, but he never will! Now just say what you mean to do, John! If you intend to get bombarded, then I shall be bombarded too, and we'll send Valery off with some one; it's not likely any body but us will stay to be shelled out of our senses."

"My dear Jem, I've no intention of remaining," Ford said; "you know I never do spend the summers in Rome."

"There might be worse places," she replied, briskly; "I can see its imperfections as well as the rest; but I'm not one to be always grumbling, though the minute the mosquitoes come, my arms and neck will be such a sight! I know perfectly well, if they'd build something over the Forum things wouldn't be so bad."

"I mean to make a little excursion into Germany," continued Ford, calmly. "I shall join you late in the summer, wherever you may be. By-the-way, Valery, you might go to the Baths of Lucca; it's as pretty a place as one could easily find."

"The name makes me think of poor Shelley," said Valery. "What is that little poem about the Serchio?"

"My dear," cried Mrs. Sloman, pleadingly, "I wouldn't try to remember! Those poets were all a sad lot, but he was rather worse than most of them—having himself burned alive after running away with the coffee-maker's daughter! And whatever's taking you off into Germany, John Ford, I really can not imagine."

"I think you might stay with us," added Valery. "But after all, that is shabby and selfish, when you are always so thoughtful and kind."

"So he is, Valery, so he is!" cried Mrs. Sloman, and knocked his glass of wine up his sleeve in reaching forward to put his hand. "There, John, that stain won't come out—put some salt on it at once—dear me, you artist-people are so heedless!"

Ford righted the glass and wiped his arm, saying, "I'll not run away for long, but I have promised to join Starvelt and a party on a little jaunt."

He did not add what was the truth, that sometimes his task of repression and self-control grew too hard to bear, and he was obliged to absent himself for a season, lest he should disturb Valery's peace by a perception of the secret he had guarded so long.

"I think we must let him go, Jemima," Valery said, smiling.

It was unreasonable, he knew, but it hurt him to see that she could allow him to depart without a single complaint.

"We shall be very, very glad to have you back, though, when you are tired of pleasuring—shall we not, Mrs. Sloman?"

Oh yes—glad in a quiet, unemotional way! He was ashamed of himself for thinking the words rather bitterly, and hastened to get back to a better state of feeling.

"Of course we shall," Mrs. Sloman was saying, somewhat indignantly. "I hope, after all these years, nobody means to accuse me of wishing to have John go away! I've lived in Italy a good while, but I'm human yet—if I have been bitten and—and swelled out of my seven senses!"

"You are just what you always were, Jem, the dearest old soul in the world!" exclaimed Ford, warmly, as he pushed his chair back from the table. "Now I mean to smoke; so I would advise you both to take flight."

But the idea of his departure made them more inclined even than usual to pet him. They insisted that he should go and smoke in the salon, and be comfortable.

"The curtains will get an improper and immoral odor, Jemima," he urged; "and to-morrow, if some old tabby comes to see you, she'll be dreadfully shocked."

"I don't care for any old tabby that ever lived, not if she were the Grand Mogul's daughter," Jemima declared belligerently, and he was forced to give way.

So the evening passed pleasantly; and after a while Ford could regain his ordinary quiet, thankful, as he watched Valery sitting by his hearth, that at least Fate had granted him so much pleasure; it was better than not to have her at all. But that time must come too. He often thought of it of late, and shuddered and turned cold at the idea of life deprived of Valery's presence, though it was only another form of the old pain, and he was used to pain.

Presently several fellow-artists strayed in, and they had tea, and were very bright and cheery. When the guests were gone, Mrs. Sloman dropped into one of her seasons of silence, for her inconsequent chatter was liable to such, and sometimes they lasted days together. So, while she knitted, or dozed, or wove her own homely fancies, the other two talked of many things in a frank, open way, talked as the best friends can seldom do, and, when bed-time came, Ford had recovered his cheerfulness.

He kept Valery's hand in his own for a little as she was bidding him good-night, and said, abruptly,

"Are you sure you are happy, my child?"

"Quite sure, John," she answered, earnestly.

"I may thank you for it too; if you had not taught me, I should never have learned to overcome my wicked, morbid disposition! I never can even tell you the half I owe you."

"If you are happy, that is enough! Good-night, Valery. God bless and keep you always!"

She stole away, touched and softened by the unaccustomed show of emotion, and was soon fast asleep, dreaming of the wonderful future. But John Ford kept his lonely watch in the old parlor for hours, trying to be thankful that it had been in his power to make her girlish life bright and pleasant. It was something to have done! For himself, what mattered a little suffering more or less—he was used to pain.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE RACE FOR LIFE.

WHEN June was at its full, Valery and Mrs. Sloman went away to Florence, leaving Ford still at work in his studio, though he promised in a few weeks to visit them on his journey northward. He had a picture to finish before entering upon his interval of summer leisure, if one could give that name to a season which would be spent in filling his portfolios with studies and hints for future paintings. At least he would have the freedom of change and work in the open air, and, artist-like, he called this leisure, whatever idle people might have done.

He had a fortnight's hard toil, however, before he could get off; and for a day or two the picture grew so slowly that he began to have a nightmare sort of feeling in regard to it. Brain and hand, fancy and body, seemed dulled alike, and he suffered from a horrible oppression which painters and writers know so well—the idea that the old creative power had deserted him, that he should have to stop short in his career and let the whole future rest a cold blank. He knew perfectly well how absurd the feeling was; nothing ailed him but overwork, and the bitter pain which had mastered his energy for a while, though it was no easier to bear on that account.

Day and night he was so restless; he could do little save wander about the rooms Valery had lately brightened by her presence, dreaming of the happiness which came so freely to other men, and which fate denied him with cruel pertinacity. But he struggled through the darkness without complaint, forced himself back to his easel, and gradually the self-control of long years asserted its strength over this sudden rebellion against its supremacy.

While the days passed thus drearily with him in his Roman haunt, Valery was sunning herself in the beauty of Florence the fair, sometimes wishing that Ford could partake of her enjoyment, but too full of pleasant hopes and fancies to feel any sense of loneliness as she wandered among the priceless treasures of the picture-galleries, or dreamed, pencil in hand, in some green nook by the Arno. Mrs. Sloman was greatly occupied with a couple of old friends who lived in the house with them—two oddities of sisters as inconsequent and crack-brained as herself—and Valery was left to a most enjoyable freedom. The manners and peculiarities of strangers have so long ceased to be a marvel to Italians that Valery could roam about at will unnoticed; the sketch-book under her arm and the pale foreign face were warrant enough for any vagary she might feel tempted to indulge.

In one of her visits to Fiesolè she encountered a child whose beauty so struck her that she began a sketch, then determined to go back the following day and undertake it in colors, as the girl had sheep to watch—and willing as she was to be painted—no time to spend in going down to the city.

The next morning it rained, the next Mrs. Sloman managed to slip on the stairs and hurt herself; not until the third afternoon was Valery able to return to the dark-eyed guardian of the sheep. She left the little cabriolet near the old monastery, with orders to the driver not to wait, but come for her at sunset, and walked on over the hill in search of her model. With the usual contrariety of human nature, the girl had chosen this opportunity to get her face so badly swollen by a cold that she scarcely looked a desirable subject for a picture. So Valery had to content herself with trying a study of some sheep, and found, after several hours' labor, her efforts in the line of animal painting any thing but a success, though she was in a mood so cheerful and happy that she could afford to laugh at the failure. She put up her brushes, talked with the sheep-watcher, whose remarkable dialect was rendered more peculiar than usual by her mishap, strayed into the hut where the girl lived with an old witch of a grandmother, two goats, several rabbits, a cock and his family, and numerous other pets which hardly seemed desirable inmates, and managed to pass the time pleasantly enough.

Sunset was approaching; she left her new friends, and strayed farther up the hill to watch the brightness culminate and fade over the distant mountains. The western sky was all aflame; masses of crimson and gold floated like gigantic ships toward the zenith; lines of dazzling light swept across the horizon; the hills shone like cliffs of molten jewels; the river curved along like a silver belt; and Florence lay basking on the plain, so beautified by the gorgeous radiance that it might almost have served as a model for the pearl-gated city which the prophet saw in his vision.

Then the glory faded—a soft purple spread about the hills—a faint white mist gathered over the distant palaces and towers—a few stars shot up into the sky, and the trembling rim of the young moon touched a group of cypress-trees near with her uncertain light. Suddenly a nightingale hid in the thicket burst into a flood of passionate song, and Valery gazed and listened till the sense of enjoyment became such ecstatic pain that she could have wept from very happiness.

But the nightingale ceased to sing, the purple shadows gathered more darkly down, and Valery came back to reality to recollect that it was growing very late; if she did not turn homeward Mrs. Sloman and the brace of antique maidens would get frightened, and rouse all Florence in their distress.

The path was not too easy in the gloom; a ditch must be crossed, and a stone wall climbed; it occurred to Valery that she deserved a scolding for her carelessness. She fancied that by traversing the adjoining field she should gain a better route to the highway. She discovered a huge gate, which she managed to open after much difficulty, then it swung to viciously, and nearly squeezed her in pieces. When the gate

had fairly shut, and all her strength was powerless to re-open it, she perceived that the meadow was full of cattle and horses; and though by no means timid, wished she had been content to cross the ditch and scramble over the stone wall, especially as she saw no signs of the cart-road she expected to find.

While she was looking about for some other mode of egress, the fierce barking of two dogs who had broken into the field higher up frightened the animals just composing themselves to sleep under the trees. They commenced a frantic race down the hill—the dogs, delighted with the disturbance they had caused, rushed after. The cattle bellowed, the horses neighed—some stray sheep added their plaintive voices to the deafening concert—and on the train dashed, rousing the herd nearer Valery into a panic as mad as their own. It was a regular stampede; she turned to fly, conscious that death menaced her—death in its most horrible form.

The flock of terrified brutes was close upon her; she could see their eyes shine; see the steam of their breath as they pawed the ground and careered onward in that frantic race. There seemed no escape; she ran first in one direction, then another. The frenzied herd surrounded her on two sides; at the back was the lofty wall overgrown with thorny bushes—no outlet but the firmly-closed gate. Away she darted, keeping as near the wall as possible; her foot caught against a mossy stone, she fell; recovered herself and sped on, though her limbs were so paralyzed with fright that she seemed scarcely to move.

The sight of any object running sent the herd in the same direction; there was a fierce chorus of bovine voices, a fresh pawing of the ground; she knew they were all pursuing her as mercilessly as if animated by a desire to trample her under their iron hoofs. On, on—the mad race only lasted a few seconds, but it was like a lifetime to her. No use to shriek—no human help to be had! On, on—only to prolong a little the useless struggle, put off for a few more instants the horrible death. They were gaining upon her; the hot breath of the foremost seemed fairly to burn her cheek. Again she stumbled; this time falling with such force that she was fairly stunned. She had unconsciously dropped close to another gate reached in her blind course; as one despairing cry broke from her lips, it was burst open; in her partial insensibility, she felt herself raised in some person's arms, and borne away.

When she came to her senses, she was half lying on a stone bench, a rustic well near by, a gnarled orange-tree shivering in the evening air. She tried to raise herself; a voice said in Italian, with a foreign accent,

"Are you better? Don't be frightened; you are perfectly safe."

She sat up on the bench and looked about; the distant lowing of the cattle made her tremble still, but her presence of mind began to return.

"I will bring you some water," the same voice said; then her swimming sight permitted her to see the speaker; she knew that her hat was off, and her forehead wet with water he had already brought from the well.

She sat, faint and dizzy yet, watching the man as he filled a traveling-cup from the bucket—a young man, evidently English or American—and as he came back saying, "Drink this, and you will be better; you are not hurt, I trust?" she managed to get her wits enough in order to answer.

"I am not hurt," she said; "I would thank you if I could."

"There is not the slightest reason," he replied; "I am very glad I happened to be near enough to see you in danger. You are English, I think."

She laughed in spite of her chattering teeth; there was a sensation of safety in looking up at the brave, frank face, which restored her courage.

"An American," said she; "near enough the same family to account for my imprudence."

"Then you are a countrywoman of my own," he answered. "No, don't try to move, yet; you are not fit to walk; rest a little, then I will help you down to your companions."

"I came quite alone," she said, forced into the admission; "I suppose the carriage is waiting for me by the monastery."

"Then we shall do nicely," he said. "Try not to be frightened; there is no possible danger now; we have the wall and gates between us and the cattle."

She could not feel afraid; there was something in the tone of that deep, rich voice, which would have given her courage when her terror was at its height. She had traveled so constantly during the last five years, that it did not occur to her as necessary to be startled or embarrassed at finding herself in this out-of-the-way place with a stranger whose appearance offered so strong a warrant for confidence which this man's certainly did.

"I am quite able to go on now," she said, rising; "I have lost my sketch-book, but no matter."

"Indeed, you've not," he replied, laughing, "you held it fast even when you fell. There it is on the bench beside you. Are you sure you are able to walk?"

"Oh yes; I am a little dizzy, but there is no harm done."

He offered her his arm with grave courtesy, and helped her slowly along the rugged path, talking so easily and respectfully, that even a fine lady, given to a dread of frogs and unknown men, could hardly have found an opportunity to grow nervous.

"You go back to Florence, I suppose?" he said; "I'd not seen the dear old city for several years until yesterday; it used to be almost home to me."

"This is my first visit," Valery replied; "I

like the town, but I shall never be so fond of it as I am of Rome."

"I can understand that, if you are an artist," he said.

"I hope to be one day," she replied, quickly, meaning the confession to serve as an excuse for her escapade, of which she felt somewhat ashamed.

"Formerly I knew a great many of the artists there," he continued; "it is quite probable we have mutual acquaintances. Do you know Mr. Ford?"

"I live with his cousin and himself," she replied; and though she knew it was not the proper sentiment for a young lady to acknowledge if she meant to obey ordinary rules, she felt that between having saved her life and being an acquaintance of John Ford's, he was almost a friend already.

He uttered some fitting commonplace, and they walked on slowly, for Valery was still unsteady in her steps, and he would not let her hurry.

"We are almost down," he said; "there is the monastery," pointing toward the long line of massive masonry to the right, whose darkness was here and there illuminated by the pale gleams of the new moon. "I remember once visiting the place; it seemed so quiet and peaceful, I felt almost tempted to ask a refuge."

"I can fancy an old man having that feeling," she said, "but we who are young would have no right to the rest, I think."

"It is certain that few of us find much," he returned, with a rather bitter intonation.

Valery stole another glance at him under the shadow of her veil; it was a handsome face, full of force and energy, but restless and stern, as if some great trouble to which he had not yet had time to grow accustomed were upon him. The moon was near its setting; the stars flamed in the cloudless sky; the city spread faintly out in the distance like some enchanted world; a nightingale commenced to sing, was answered from an adjoining thicket, and the strain taken up still further on, till the whole air seemed alive and vibrating with the delicious melody.

The stranger moved along in a silence which Valery did not attempt to break. Woman-like, she was pitying him for the bitterness and pain she read in his countenance, and letting her fancy stray into vague wonderment as to the cause, after a fashion she had—an unprofitable fashion, wise people might say, but God knows I would reflect ere I took from the young that ability to weave dreams, unprofitable as it may be.

They reached the narrow village street, and came out by the convent square. Valery's coachman had proved faithful; the little carriage was waiting in the appointed spot.

"There is Pietro," she said; "he must have thought me lost."

"Is he a coachman you are accustomed to having?"

"Yes; some friends of mine recommended him; he is the faithfullest old creature in the world."

"So much the better, if you often take such long rambles," he said, gravely, though in a way which took from the words any thought of intrusive counsel.

"I do beg you will not think it my habit," she said, feeling her cheeks burn in the gloom; "I don't know how I came to forget myself so; I was looking at the sunset; then I had a fancy there was a better road through that dreadful field."

"I had been back on the hills, and happened to pass just as the animals took fright," he explained.

They were near the carriage now. She stopped, and held out her hand with a frankness which she had no mind afterward to regret.

"I have to thank you for my life," she said, softly, "and I do."

He did not notice the words, scarcely saw the hand he touched for a second; her tones struck a sudden thrill to his heart, not for their own music, sweet and plaintive, but because so like a voice softer than the songs of angels to his ears—a voice which, dear as it had been, and must ever be, he prayed fervently that God in His mercy would keep him from hearing again.

She wondered anew what his thoughts were during that instant of deep absorption; again felt intuitively that he suffered, and was very sorry for him.

"I wouldn't have liked to die—and such a terrible death!" she continued, more to rouse him from these sombre reflections, whatever they might be, than from any other motive.

"I beg your pardon! To die—no, it is not easy; somebody or something always will save one," he said.

"Do you stay at Fiesolè to-night?" she asked.

"Oh no; my horse is here; I will ride back near the carriage, so that when I see Ford I may be able to tell him I saw his relative home in safety."

"You are very good; and when I write, who shall I tell him saved me from my great danger?"

She wanted to know his name; it would be pleasant to utter it in her prayers; he was sad, and in trouble, and Valery believed, like any good church-woman, in the efficacy of intercessory supplications.

"Tell Mr. Ford it was Fairfax Carteret; I dare say he has not entirely forgotten me."

"No, I am sure not! Again I thank you; I mean, I would, if I could; good-night," she said, turning hastily toward the carriage, for her voice broke, and she began to feel the feminine need of a hearty cry after her excitement.

Once more the tones reminded him of Cecil, and sent a pang to his very soul; but he got back to ordinary perceptions in time to help her

into the vehicle and utter his adieux in a sober matter-of-fact manner.

Valery could hear the tramp of his horse's hoofs all the way down the winding descent to the city, and had her quiet cry out with a delightful sense of security. When they reached the gates, he rode past the carriage, bowed another farewell, and was gone.

Valery arrived at Casa Rindi, and mounted the stairs in fear and trembling of the scene that awaited her, but nothing ever falls out in this world as one expects. The three old ladies had driven off to visit an acquaintance who owned a villa a few miles beyond the Porta Romana, and were not yet returned. So Valery had ample leisure to dine and rest before they got back, and wisely went to bed without informing Mrs. Sloman of her adventure, lest the good soul should take fright after all, and have her night's sleep spoiled.

She had promised to go the next day with a party of artist acquaintances up to San Miniatto; on coming home, she found Mrs. Sloman in a state of great agitation, which the old maids shared, Miss Clorinda smelling hartshorn, and Miss Priscilla munching caraway-seeds with all her might, according to their habit when nervous or upset. They burst into frantic speech, and at first she could make nothing of the chorus of broken ejaculations which would have led a stranger to believe himself in the presence of three hopeless lunatics.

"Oh Valery! How could you? To go out to-day! I'm sure she can't use her right arm. What will John say? Oh, my poor nerves!"

Valery sat down in a chair and laughed heartily as the trio poured out these cries at once. The inclination was irresistible, even if they should take mortal offense at her want of decorum.

"Don't laugh!" groaned Mrs. Sloman. "To go chasing mad bulls!"

"When he came in, it gave me such a turn!" cried Miss Priscilla, with her mouth full of caraway.

"Oh, my nerves!" moaned Miss Clorinda, with another sniff at the hartshorn.

Valery comprehended that it was not one of the bulls Mrs. Sloman accused her of chasing which had invaded their retreat, as might have been supposed from Miss Priscilla's interruption, but Mr. Carteret, who had called to inquire after her welfare, and she wished that the friends who persuaded her out had—well, staid in Rome, at least.

"Has Mr. Carteret been here?" she asked; but the trio only fluttered their head-dresses more furiously, and began a new series of strangled squeaks like three mice in a trap.

"I shall dream about it for a week," cried Mrs. Sloman.

"Yes—ye-e-es, he was here," from Miss Priscilla to Valery.

"With such awful horns!" quavered Miss Clorinda, meaning her moan as an answer to Mrs. Sloman.

Then the three together—

"I can fairly hear him bellow! It all comes of girls taking to sketching; in my day— Yes, indeed, unless it was on velvet! I shall tell John it was his fault. Oh, my nerves!"

Valery succeeded in partially quieting them at last by the assurance that they could see she had suffered no injury, though they would still all talk at once; and Mrs. Sloman said,

"You never can tell; you might have broken something inside, and not know it yet."

"To be sure," added Miss Priscilla, "there was my cousin when she had typhoid fever, the doctors called it measles ever so long."

"You'd better try a good strong dose of hartshorn," urged Miss Clorinda.

The other two had also remedies to propose; and Miss Priscilla choked herself with the caraway seeds, and required to be thumped on the back—thereby creating a diversion for which Valery was thankful.

"So you had a visit from Mr. Carteret?" she said again, as soon as comparative peace was restored. "I am sorry I was out."

"He is going to Genoa," said Mrs. Sloman. "I wanted him to stay, but he seems a very unsettled sort of man."

"But so like Hamlet," sighed Miss Clorinda, who was of a romantic turn.

"I don't remember him," said Mrs. Sloman, after vainly searching her memory to recall an acquaintance of that name.

"Shakspeare, you know," said Miss Clorinda.

"Oh dear me! don't go talking out of plays to Valery. I'm sure she and John are queer enough now; if you only knew the trouble I have with their vaggeries."

"There's only one 'g' in it, Jemima," expostulated Miss Priscilla, still black in the face from her recent suffocation.

"All the 'g's' in the alphabet, and all the other letters added, couldn't begin to express the way they go on!" cried Mrs. Sloman.

"And pronunciation is merely arbitrary," added Miss Clorinda, who sometimes waxed argumentative when nervous.

"I sha'n't have another minute's peace till we get home," sighed Mrs. Sloman.

"Peace is not for this world," retorted Miss Priscilla, taking gloomy views of life after her attempt at strangulation.

"I never loved a dear gazelle," quoted Miss Clorinda, leaving assertion in favor of romance. "What a handsome man he is, Valery! How beautiful it must have been when the cattle were rushing down on you—"

"You call that beautiful!" broke in Mrs. Sloman.

"To see him appear like—like Mars or Apollo," pursued Miss Clorinda, with a reproachful glance at the interruption.

"Well," said Mrs. Sloman, not energetically, she was always too maundering and slow for that word to apply, "I think he's much too nice a gentleman to be compared to those indecent

old wretches who never wore any clothes but a quiver."

"Do remember that Valery is here," cried Miss Priscilla, bridling.

"Oh, bless me, living among 'em as we artists do, models and all, it's no use to be modest!" sighed Mrs. Sloman. "I declare, the way they all go on sometimes about their Venuses and Cupids made my hair stand on end till I got sort of used to it."

"There are things to which I could never grow accustomed," replied Miss Priscilla, with dignity.

"Oh, the artistic soul can not be trammelled by ordinary laws!" cried Miss Clorinda, enthusiastically, who, in virtue of sundry extraordinary paintings executed on velvet when a school-girl, often gave herself little airs and graces. "I once did a Cupid in floss silk, with a grass-green mantle and pink shoes. I wish I had it to show you, Valery."

"You always had such talent, Clorinda!" said Mrs. Sloman, admiringly.

"Always," added Miss Priscilla. "She used to walk in her sleep, and frighten me half to death."

The elder pair recovered their customary amiability in this united praise, and Miss Clorinda beamed, listening to the encomiums with a modest consciousness they were deserved, which was a sight to behold; and it seemed to Valery she regarded the sleep-walking as the most meritorious and remarkable among her varied accomplishments.

"There is no limit to what industry and patience will accomplish, Valery," she said, waving her skinny little hands about, as if to insinuate there was an example of both before her, if she had the energy to imitate it.

Miss Clorinda had once been supposed to possess pretty hands and a graceful figure, somewhere away back in the annals of the past, and the sisters clung to the fiction that she possessed them still; and both were frequently put into attitudes for Miss Priscilla to point out to the general admiration. Nowhere in the past was there any memento to be discovered which showed that the elder sister ever had any such claims; but she was considered severely practical, and kept a book of expenses, while Clorinda gloried in an album. One could not help laughing at the pair, but they were the best old women in the world, and long ago had nearly ruined themselves to save a scape-grace brother from the punishment he richly merited.

For days after, the three ancient birds were fond of referring to Valery's accident—going into spasms of alarm if she proposed venturing out alone. Fortunately Miss Clorinda saw fit to undertake her spring-cold; and though by no means seriously ill, she required a great deal of attention, and the other two birds did nothing but hop about her chamber, stir tisanes in small tin pots, and keep up a delightful confusion, which the invalid enjoyed as much as they. The marvelous dressing-gowns wherein

the watchers arrayed themselves for their amateur sister-of-charity performances were only to be surpassed by the night-cap Miss Clorinda mounted—a pointed structure, with innumerable frills, which gave her the air of an amiable cockatoo, and once in the while she pecked slightly at her companions, thereby increasing the resemblance.

They were so fully occupied that Valery was left a good deal to her own devices—and rather a dreamy, visionary season she made of it—but working so faithfully that she was not aware how persistently her thoughts wandered away to elf-land, and recalled the pale, troubled face of the man who had saved her from such deadly peril.

CHAPTER XXII.

KEEPING TRYST.

THE summer drifted on. John Ford had paid his brief visit, and gone his way north. He saw the change in Valery which no one else remarked, and took with him into his wanderings a new sense of loneliness and discouragement that not all the brightness and freedom of his pleasure-trip could remove.

When July rendered Florence hot and tiresome, Valery and her companion went with the old maids to Spezia for a time; but Valery grew impatient of the sea-side monotony, and joined a party of acquaintances who were to spend several weeks at the Baths of Lucca. They staid a day in the quaint old town, hunting up pictures and straying about the cathedral, then drove down to the Baths one bright afternoon, along the chestnut-tree shaded road, whose every turn offered a new picture of quiet loveliness, and a subtle charm that many a bolder and more picturesque scene would fail to equal.

The ancient reputation of the Baths as a fashionable resort in some measure passed away when Tuscany ceased to be a dukedom; still, this season, many Florentines had gathered there, and a host of English and Americans, deterred from going north by the war newly broken out between France and Prussia. Balls and concerts were frequent; and to Valery, unaccustomed to the habits of idle people, it appeared an unceasing round of gayety. Her friends had secured rooms a little out of the lower of the three villages. Valery's chamber overlooked the Serchio, which seemed to her always repeating Shelley's pretty measures in its rippling song; and as her companions were good-natured, and did not tease her, she was content and happy.

John Ford wrote long, cheerful letters in answer to her own, but never a line from one end to the other which could disturb her peace by the slightest conception of the troubled heart that went with him through his wanderings. Valery was a great deal occupied with

a study she was making for a large picture—her first commission—and between this engrossing interest and her vague dreams, not a moment of the lovely season hung heavy on her hands.

Sometimes her friends would urge her to leave her work and join them in a day's pleasure; and though she rather grudged the interruption, it was enough to remember that she had promised Mr. Ford to keep fresh and strong for the winter's real labor, to make her yield to their persuasions; and as she possessed nothing of the recluse in her nature, dreamer though she was, the hours of idleness and relaxation formed very enjoyable episodes.

There was a ball one night at the *cercle*, and Valery was coaxed into going, though she did not dance, and felt shy and out of place in the brilliant scene. Still it was pleasant to sit in a quiet nook with Mrs. Granger while the girls amused themselves, and watch the dancers and listen to the music. Before long, to her surprise, she had a group of men about her, and the old lady enjoyed her success immensely.

There were many more beautiful women present, but there was something peculiar in the pale, dreamy face, lit up by those lambent eyes, which could not fail to attract notice. When she talked, her countenance so changed and brightened with excitement that it was pretty indeed to watch her. After a while a gentleman came up to speak with her chaperone; the sight of him carried Valery away back to her childish days—it was Robert Earle. They had met once since the old time, off in the heart of Syria. Like all people who have led a nomadic life, he was too much accustomed to falling over acquaintances in improbable places to be astonished at seeing her here; indeed he seemed too thoroughly listless and *blasé* to have any capabilities for the sensation left.

"How do you do, Miss Stuart?" he said, languidly, as he might have spoken if they had been in the habit of meeting daily, and as if any thing beyond the languidest salutation were an exertion to which he was not equal.

"So you got back safe from the mountains?"

"As you see," she answered, smiling; "I am rather surprised that you found energy enough for the long journey westward."

"It was no end of a bore," he said, dropping into a seat by her side; "but it had to be done. Ought I to ask you to dance? I've given it up long ago, it's so tiresome; still I'll ask you if I ought."

"And I'll refuse," she replied; "not out of good-nature, but because I have never learned the art."

"What a mercy!" he sighed; "you are a positive boon, Miss Stuart! Do let me sit here, and please keep the people at a distance; there's a host of dreadful American girls in search of partners."

His languor, his fatuity, and his drawling speech appeared less absurd than they would

in another, for he had a certain grace which redeemed them. He was very handsome still, though the years had given his face a worn, discontented expression; and even the long, drooping mustache could not entirely hide the feeble lines about the mouth, which had always been his unfortunate feature, revealing the indecision, the lack of purpose and will, that made his life a failure. Valery did not really like the man; she never forgot any thing; so the recollection of the trouble he brought on Hetty Flint was just as distinct as in the days when she gave her friend the uncomprehending sympathy of childhood. But she pitied him too thoroughly for severe censure; his career had failed; and though she could not help feeling contempt for the qualities which caused the defeat, she was sorry for him all the same: one of those men who keep always so much of the child in their characters that it is difficult to be as harsh upon their shortcomings as on those of ordinary humanity. Old Mr. Earle, at his death, left the family far from wealthy, and for years Robert had been obliged to work at art as his profession; but he would never be a painter. There was the same want in his pictures that weakened his character—an uncertainty as to the drawing, a feebleness of touch, which not all their merit in point of color could redeem.

"Have you been here long, Mr. Earle?" asked Mrs. Granger, thinking it proper that conversation should go on; for Valery, not considering it her duty to amuse the gentleman, had subsided into a reverie about the old life, and he looked too listless to originate any efforts in the talking line.

"No; I only came a couple of days ago," he said, barely escaping the rudeness of a yawn by a pull at his mustache. "It's a stupid place; dreadfully overrated; don't you think so, Miss Stuart?"

"I like it very much, on the contrary," she replied. "I should think you landscape-painters could find all sorts of nice studies and bits to fill your portfolios."

"It's such a bore to make studies! I did go out this morning, but I'd forgotten my tobacco-pouch, and that upset me," he acknowledged.

Valery thought she would like to shake a little energy into him, then remembered he was not worth the trouble.

"I am sure that was excuse enough for idleness," she said.

"Oh, of course," quite seriously. "Where is Ford these days? I think somebody told me he'd gone into the Tyrol; people are always telling one things till one gets the headache. I suppose he drudges away as usual."

"He works very hard, and is glad to do it," said Valery.

"Yes; dare say! You see, he was brought up to it; that makes all the difference in the world," returned Earle, rather brightening, as if he fancied he had uttered a profound remark.

Valery was too weary of his folly to answer. Just then there ensued a slight bustle of excitement; the music stopped for a few moments, and gave every body leisure to watch a party making so late an entrance that reasonable people were thinking of home.

"That's the old Princess Potaski," said Mrs. Granger. "That tall man is the Duke d'Asti; I heard they had all come to the Baths to-day."

"What a pretty woman that is with the duke!" said Valery, glancing toward the group.

"Yes; I don't know who she is; these notables seem very devoted to her; she doesn't look like an Italian."

Robert Earle managed to get his glass to his eye and regard the party slowly approaching.

"How that old princess wears!" he said; "I suppose the war has driven her back to Florence. If she were a nobody she'd have been sent to the tread-mill years ago."

"Why, they say she has more influence than any woman in Europe—in a social way," said Mrs. Granger. "Her approval is enough to make any girl a beauty, or any man a lion."

"Oh yes; it's a world of humbug," drawled Robert. "That don't hinder the fact that she has had more adventures—"

"But who is the lady with her?" interrupted Valery, having no mind that Mr. Earle should indulge in the style of scandalous talk to which, like most weak, envious people, he was rather given.

"Haven't an idea," he said; "my short sight keeps me from seeing clearly, and I've just broken my glass."

Valery sat silently watching the strangers as they moved toward the upper end of the room. The lady of whom she had spoken remained the chief object of interest to her, as she was to all those surrounding her. Certainly long past girlhood, though a young woman still; not exactly beautiful, but with a mischievous, piquant face that possessed a great charm, and a high-bred air which not one of the titled women near could equal. She was talking and laughing gayly; and the duke, an elegant man, somewhat beyond forty, listened to every word as deferentially as if the smiling lips dropped pearls of wisdom with each syllable.

They were quite close now; even Earle could see her plainly, and he exclaimed, with more animation than Valery had ever seen him betray,

"It's the oddest thing—I seem to know that woman's face very well, but I can't think for the life of me where I have seen her."

He had uttered the exact thought in Valery's mind, but she was too absent to reply. The party was now nearly opposite the place where Mrs. Granger and her companions sat. A fresh crowd of foreign notables rushed up to greet the princess and her friends, causing a momentary halt, which gave Valery and Earle an opportunity to study more narrowly the countenance that had attracted both by a vague sense

of its familiarity. The princess was presenting people to her; she was the centre of the group, and so perfectly at ease in the midst of the general admiration, that it was evident such triumphs were no novelty.

"I can't make out who she is," Earle said to Valery. "She must be some Englishwoman of rank, from the row they make—probably one has seen her picture somewhere."

But the explanation did not content Valery, though she remained silent. It was no pictured semblance of that brilliant creature which was familiar to her. She had seen the face itself scores of times, but not as she saw it now—the hair gleaming with jewels, the features calm from assured success; yet she knew it perfectly—only when or where? She grew fairly dizzy under the host of perplexing impossibilities that presented themselves to her mind; but argue as she would, they kept their stand, and she smiled at her own romantic folly. The group moved on; as she neared the bench, the lady's eyes wandered by chance toward the three—rested for an instant upon them, then turned away; but it seemed to Valery that, brief as was the glance which met her own, the clear gray eyes gave a sudden, eager look, as if something of the puzzled feeling which troubled herself found a response in the stranger's mind.

But she had passed; the music swelled out again in an entrancing waltz, and Valery saw the lady whirling down the room encircled by the duke's arm, and was ready to think her confused fancies a bit of nonsense so excessive that it was a warning not to grow visionary as she had been doing of late.

"Really, I must find out who she is," said Earle, rising lazily; "it's an awful bore to ask questions, but I quite want to know."

He sauntered away, and presently one of Mrs. Granger's daughters came back for an instant to the maternal side and gave the information that the lady attracting so much attention was Mrs. Vinton—an Englishwoman, she believed—anyway a great friend of the princess's, who had brought her down to Italy that she might add to the triumphs won in Paris during the last winter of the ill-fated Empire.

The Duke d'Asti was said to be devoted to her, and the princess had set her heart on a match between the fascinating widow and her old friend, who had hitherto resisted the toils spread incessantly to catch his famous name. Valery listened, and put her fancies down as more foolish than ever, and not long after that the girls declared themselves willing to go home; so they all departed.

The next morning Valery went out for a solitary walk; she crossed the bridge and passed up the steep hill from whence there is a view of the narrow valley, with the Serchio stealing slowly through its midst, as if loath to leave the mountain coolness for the heat of the plains beyond. Not far from the ugly old casino which crowned the summit stood a house that Valery

had often remarked, wondering it should stand empty, as the situation was far preferable to the more crowded dwellings lower down. But, as she neared the gates, she saw from various signs that it had received occupants, and walked on, rather envying them a *gîte* so favorable for studying cloud-bits, and the varying effect of lights and shadows. Beyond the villa was a group of chestnut-trees where she meant to rest, but, as she turned out of the path to approach them, perceived that their shade had already been invaded. A lady was seated on the stone bench, making so pretty a picture, in her soft draperies and graceful attitude, that Valery had leisure for a quaint conceit about a wood-nymph before the sound of steps caused the other to turn her head to see who had disturbed her retreat. Valery met the face which had perplexed her so sorely on the previous night; this time, after one quick glance, the features softened into a smile of mischievous recognition that puzzled her more than ever.

"Good-morning," the lady said, quietly; "I was thinking about hunting you up, and here you come bodily into my dream."

Valery stood still and stared; she concluded either the stranger or herself must be slightly demented, and could not decide which.

"Dear me!" cried the unknown, with a gay laugh, "how you do stare. Bless me, I hope foreign travel has done more for me than it has for you! What, you don't know me yet? Very well, I am dying to kiss you; but I'll not stir till you can bring me close enough to your heart to remember who I am."

"I seem to know you so well, but I can't think—it can't be—oh, please tell me your name!" stammered Valery, beginning to tremble with excitement, but not yet able to believe her wild fancy real.

"My name is Mrs. Vinton," the other answered, smiling mischievously still, and keeping her seat, though her own voice shook somewhat, and Valery was more at a loss than ever.

"I don't know it," Valery said, nervously; "we must both be mistaken; I can't tell what—"

The lady interrupted her by rising quickly; she laughed again, though Valery could see the gray eyes looking so lovingly at her soften into tears. Suddenly she called, in the country dialect which the girl had heard so often in her early days,

"Hitty, Hitty, the old brindle cow's in the garden—run like a lamp-lighter—run!"

"It isn't—it can't be—"

"It is Hetty Flint. Oh Valery, Valery!"

They were in each other's arms, and sobbing so heartily for a few instants that they could only hold each other fast, and utter broken ejaculations of love and wonder.

"I told you we should meet; the last words I ever said to you were that we should meet," cried Hetty, straining her to her breast again, then retreating a step to look at her more closely. "It's the same face—the same sweet, pure

face! Oh Valery, if life had been harder for me than it has, this meeting would repay me!"

"I can't believe my eyes; I can't realize it," sobbed Valery. "Hetty, Hetty!"

"Always Hetty for you, my precious, though I've softened the name into Mabel since I grew into a fine lady," returned she, with another embrace. "There, that's the way I used to hug and pet you when you were a child; you ought to be sure you are not dreaming now."

"I can't believe it; I am so glad, so glad!"

"Glad! and I? Why, Valery, I never really loved any body but you—never! I knew you last night; I felt sure it was you, and asked your name. You had disappeared, else I should have startled you by speaking; but it was just as well not to make a scene there."

"After all these years—and to meet here—here in Italy!" cried Valery.

"That we dreamed about and talked about, while I wiped the dishes and dusted the floors with these two hands; very pretty hands all the same, aren't they, Val? and look as innocent of usefulness as any princess's of them all."

"Do you remember the old house, and Aunt Susan? Poor Aunt Susan, she is dead!"

"I remember every thing and every body as if it had been yesterday; I have forgotten nothing, nothing," replied Mrs. Vinton, and her mobile face darkened as she spoke. "Child, child! best of all has been to remember you, your love, your faith! They have staid with me in the darkest hours; kept me from yielding when temptation came; given me courage to persevere when the way was dreariest; left me still some faith in humanity and God. Oh, Valery, Valery!"

She covered her eyes with her hands, and wept silently for a moment, then looked bravely up, and smiled again.

"I needn't cry, now it is all over," said she, "and I have found you; nothing so bright has come to me as this."

"But I want to know every thing; where you have been, what you have done, so many years, so long."

Mrs. Vinton looked searchingly at her. One could see that the countenance was capable of a certain hardness and stern resolution, under all its mischievous playfulness.

"You trust me, Valery; you have always trusted me; never for an instant have you forgotten your parting promise!"

The voice was half a proud demand, half an eager assurance.

"Always, Hetty, always!"

"I knew it, I could not doubt that! Child, there have been seasons in my life when I had no other faith left, here or hereafter, but I believed that!"

"Poor Hetty! Was it so hard? Have you suffered so cruelly?"

"I have had my share," she answered, laughing out again with the reckless gaiety which had always been one of her chief characteristics; "but I don't complain—I never

did! My dear, I'm a wretch ever to think of it all except as a cause for thankfulness. Life has borne me as far away from the old days as if I had passed into another world, or been changed in my sleep from Cinderella into a grand princess."

"I want to hear; begin at the beginning," said Valery.

"Oh, it's a musty-fusty old story now. It will keep, but you shall hear it after a while. Don't think there's a day or an hour in the whole record I would not let you see."

"Don't I know it, Hetty?"

"Of course you do—I'm a fool! I'm a little upset this morning, because I lay awake all night thinking of you. I believe I promised the duke to think of him; but no matter."

"Oh Hetty, they said at the ball you were to marry him."

"Did they? Well, I told you my destiny years ago; either to be an actress or a duchess. I've been the first, and failed dismally enough," with another laugh; "it remains to be seen how I succeed in the latter capacity, always supposing I undertake it."

"Do you care for him, Hetty?" Valery asked.

"Do I love him, you mean?" returned she, not hesitating over the word which Valery was shy to speak.

"Yes, dear Hetty; else, if he could make you ten times a duchess, it would be worse than any thing that has gone before."

"The pretty little preacher! Oh, the sweet sermonizing mouth!" cried Mrs. Vinton, kissing her. "I foresee that you will lecture me as severely as you used!"

"But you don't answer, Hetty."

"My dear, I mean to tell you every thing always, but what I don't know I can't tell. Never mind the duke or any of his kind, just now. By-the-way, Robert Earle is here."

"Yes; did he find out who you were?"

"He went away down to the verge of imbecility, my child, and I doubt if he will ever get back," she answered, with another peal of laughter. "He knows, but he doesn't believe; it was the drollest sight! Heigh-ho, poor Robert, how fond that absurd Hetty was of him—what a mercy she died!"

"And—"

"Not another question till I've heard about your precious self! My child, I've been dead and buried, and gone into a new existence, and that's all there is to say. Sit down here, and let's be rational; kiss me first—that's right! Now hold my hand fast, so each may be sure the other is here."

They sat there in the soft light of the Italian morning, and Valery narrated what had befallen her in these years. Mrs. Vinton seldom interrupted her with questions, only motioning her to go on when she tried to shorten any portion of the history. While Valery was telling the reasons which had forced her to leave Miss Dorothy, Hetty drew her closer, but offered no other sign of sympathy or approval.

"Well, my dear," she said, as Valery finished, "you have your whole life before you; it will be a pleasant one, mark my words. Oh, child, how patient you have been! what faith and resignation! It makes me feel so wicked to think how I rebelled and raged!"

"But you were always brave and strong," Valery urged.

"Yes, in a way, but it was a bad sort; the stoical desperation of some ancient heathen! Never mind, Valery, you shall teach me to be better. I'm growing old to learn, but I'll try."

"Old!" laughed Valery. "You look as young as I do."

"That don't alter dates. I shall be thirty-one my next birthday; but nobody knows this except the duke, and he doesn't believe it."

"Not much wonder, Hetty! Do tell me: is he nice? Is—"

"I can't tell you any thing about him yet; he has not been put to the proof."

"How do you mean?"

"That he knows me as a rich widow, with great friends and troops of admirers. When I tell him to what I was born, that I have been since that away down into the depths of misery, he may think as ill of me as ever the people in Alstead did."

"But you lived it through, with God's help."

"Ay, with God's help; shame on me that, when the darkness was at its deepest, I refused to believe therein!"

She began abruptly the story of her life from the moment she disappeared out of the little neighborhood in which so many evil tongues were ready to repeat and believe the worst that malice could invent. Her mother had known she meant to go, had always been kept in cognizance of her whereabouts until the day came that Hetty could send for her and the two children.

She went to New York to fulfill her girlish dream of becoming an actress. She had the firmest determination to appear as Lady Macbeth; after months of waiting and effort, during which she lived from hand to mouth as best she might—even selling matches in the streets one winter month—she made her *début* upon the stage of a second-rate theatre, though not in precisely the character she had decreed, or with the overwhelming success she had so often pictured greeting her first effort. She appeared as a supernumerary to carry a letter to the heroine of the piece, having exactly two lines to speak, which she proceeded diligently to forget; and not content with that, trod on the leading lady's red-satin train and tore it straight across, to her highness's unbounded wrath.

Poor Hetty was informed, as soon as the brief scene ended, that her services were no longer required, so she wrapped her shawl about her and stepped out into the night, not knowing even which way to seek shelter. The woman in the wretched house where she lodged had told her that she need not return unless

she brought money in her hand to pay the debt she owed. She wandered about for hours, and in the gray of the morning sank down in a solitary corner, raving in the brain-fever which had been threatening her for days. Long after she recovered consciousness in the ward of the hospital to which she had been carried, and the first sane words that she uttered, on getting an idea of her whereabouts and what had befallen her, caused the nurse who watched to think her more hopelessly mad than ever.

"Come," said she, "you're not to be Lady Macbeth; so get well and let your hair grow, my future duchess."

She did get well, and for a time chance threw her into a branch of the theatrical profession, only she stitched the velvet robes and fashioned the tinselled ornaments of tragedy queens, instead of wearing them. She pursued this drudgery two whole years; then deciding that she had not given her histrionic abilities a fair trial, succeeded in obtaining an engagement as "general utility woman" at a theatre in Memphis. She worked like a dragon, received poor pay, and suffered daily indignities and hardships such as only an unsuccessful actress ever knows in their full horror. But she toiled patiently on. During the last weeks of that dreadful season, a broken-down ballet-dancer stopped at Memphis to die, and Hetty, in the midst of her labors, found leisure to nurse her, and stripped herself of every thing except one decent suit to help the woman to food and shelter, going many a time fasting to bed after a whole day's work to accomplish it.

Before this poor dancer died, there came news that she had inherited a fortune from her family in France, who discarded her when—a mere child—she ran off with a handsome-eyed Thespian. The money was of no use to her now except to pay her funeral expenses; but she lived long enough to settle it upon Hetty, then went away to the rest which she had earned, if suffering and trouble here can give any of us a claim to peace beyond.

Hetty's first act was to make her mother comfortable, and provide for the education of her brother and sister. Then she went to New Orleans; she knew that Robert Earle was there. She believed still that he loved her, and she went, no more doubting her reception than she doubted her own truth and honor. She found him! She passed slightly enough over the details of the meeting, though—in spite of the years that had passed, of the entire change which had taken place in her mind and heart since then—her voice shook for the only time during the whole recital, and her face turned to an ashen pallor, like the hue of death. He saw her far handsomer than of old; well-dressed, prosperous, and—he never waited to hear the story of her wealth, which she meant to reveal after obtaining the assurance that he still loved her. He judged her by the vileness of his own heart; and Hetty heard from the lips of the man for whose sake always she had lived, struggled,

toiled, words of insult which swept out of her soul the last trace of youth and hope as suddenly and surely as a tornado could blight a smiling landscape.

"I buried Hetty Flint that night," she went on, after a brief pause, forcing her voice back to its usual careless tone; "I buried her in the dark and the tempest, and there could be no resurrection; though it was hard work. Dead as she was, she fought still, the idiot; but I buried her!"

She continued the narrative of her journey, her illness, old Hans's devotion and subsequent death, and the kindness she received from Mr. Vinton, an elderly, shy, studious man, who had loved her since the earliest days of her struggles.

"I married him at length, my dear; I was not half worthy even to be his slave, but I tried to prove a good wife. I found how I had learned to appreciate him when he died two years after, but it was too late for any thing besides regret that I had not done so more fully in the beginning."

There was little else to tell; her mother had lived with them in Washington; her sister formed a good match, and her brother had a fancy for entering the Naval School, from which he finally graduated with many honors. At length Hetty roused herself out of the gloom and discouragement which followed Mr. Vinton's loss, perceiving that even yet life had not come to an end. The old longing to travel came back. She must see foreign lands, visit Europe, find work to occupy her faculties. She established her mother with the younger sister, and sailed for France, Mr. Vinton's former position in Washington enabling her to procure numerous favorable letters to people whom she could wish to know.

"Fate is a little like humanity," she continued; "when the old dame has a spite against you, she can't abuse you enough; when she sees fit to pet you, there is no limit to her goodness; and whatever you do is admirably done, and successful."

"I don't think I would put it just in that way," said Valery.

"No; I take it back. A relic of my old heathenish darkness, my dear! Well, as I had a goodly fortune, of course I added to it. I must have excitement; so I speculated in stocks, and whatever I bought went up like a balloon. Positively, I should be ashamed to tell you how much I gained, or how rich I am. Where was I? Oh, at last I came to Europe; I traveled for a while; I studied languages. Well, I made myself what I am. You needn't speak; I understand what you want to say! But I'm not too *gauche*, eh?"

"You are like a queen, and you know it," said Valery.

"I did try for a compliment after all! No; I'm brusque and uncertain and capricious, but people like that, or pretend to—as good a rôle as any, perhaps! I settled down in Paris un-

der excellent chaperonage, and nobody had a gayer life than I during the last years of the dear old Empire. I couldn't tell you how many times I might have been a countess or a marchioness, or some dreadful German thing with a long title."

"Did you never feel inclined?"

"Oh, I tried often to do it, but somehow I could not bring myself to the point. It wasn't my destiny, I suppose."

"More of the old heathenism, Hetty!"

"I can't help it; I am like the Bonapartes, and can't avoid believing in my star. Well, this spring, when there were rumors of war, the old princess—the most delightful and wickedest of women—offered to bring me to Italy and give me a success. My dear, it was a fair bargain—my money against her influence—and we got on as well as possible together."

"And where do you spend the winter? I hope in Rome."

"You may be certain of it, since I have found you," she replied.

"Now you are sure, after my telling every thing, that you love me?"

"Indeed I do! You're a brave, brave woman, Hetty!"

"I? The biggest coward that ever lived, in spite of my pretense! I'm only just to-day cured of one fright."

"And that?"

"I was always in mortal terror of meeting Robert Earle; I could not tell but there would be a resurrection of that idiot of a Hetty at sight of him."

"You are satisfied now?"

"Heigh-ho! I wonder if there is any man worth thinking about?" she said, rather absently.

"Have you already found subject for a new fear?"

"Upon my word, I don't know! The duke is very charming; a better man than most of his sort."

"And he loves you?"

"He has been looking it for some time; but it is so easy to look it and say it too. He begins to do that. I am to have leisure to think; I want to give myself a little rest before I answer; if I say yes, he must hear the whole story."

"Of course; you will be so much happier if there is no secret kept back to hang over your head."

"My dear, I shall neither tell lies nor act them! There he is, coming up the hill now! No, don't run away; stay and see what he is like, and help me to decide whether it is worth while to fulfill my destiny as duchess."

She stopped short, and a certain sad, pensive smile settled over her features. Valery knew that she was touched and softened by this recital of her past sufferings and struggles, and left her to herself to recover the high spirits which so seldom failed, and which had borne her gallantly through such bitter trials.

CHAPTER XXIII.

QUITS.

VALERY and her old friend enjoyed exceedingly the next few weeks, and were together as much as possible. The princess and her set, taking their cue from Mrs. Vinton, were ready to pet the young artist to any extent; but Valery was somewhat shy, and had not much time to waste. However, Hetty used to get away from her companions and accompany Valery in long walks and sketching-excursions, declaring them pleasanter than any thing that had ever happened in her whole life.

The duke was absent a good deal. He was an advanced Liberal, and went down to Rome, at Hetty's command, to make himself active in the struggle which lasted during the whole summer, but he returned for brief visits whenever he could; and it was apparent enough that *la belle sorcière*, as the old princess called her, had taken a hold of his fancy which he could not easily shake off.

Robert Earle remained at the baths, and endured a purgatory of suspense and doubt which ought to have been an expiation for many of his follies and shortcomings. Such heart as he owned, such power of loving as his shallow nature possessed, went out toward Mrs. Vinton with more strength and impetuosity than he had ever shown in his whole life. He would have liked to find a confidante in Valery, but she steadily ignored his advances, and he was obliged to fight his battle without help. It was the prettiest bit of genteel comedy imaginable to watch Hetty's treatment of him. She was frank and open as the day, untroubled by any great degree of dignity; but she kept him in such good order that he never once found courage to speak clearly of the past, and she received every allusion to it with such delightful unconsciousness that he often asked himself if there was not some impossible mistake after all. Could this easy, self-possessed personage, so thoroughly at home in the midst of her wealth and position, be the creature who had once thought his smile the highest approval she could receive, had believed in his mental endowments and his moral worth as she believed in heaven?

It was so perplexing that his brain never got steady, though there was one thing real enough—the careless, slighting treatment he received from Hetty's foreign friends. They tolerated him because it was the widow's caprice they should, but he knew that he was not of half so much consequence in their eyes as her pet dog. The duke was an exception; from him he obtained always a bland, grave courtesy harder to bear than any rebuff; it put him so far off, made him feel so young and of such slight importance, that it drove him nearly wild. If he could only have quarreled with the man—but he might as well have tried to quarrel with a marble statue of the duke's grandest ancestor. He had lived to be patronized by Hetty Flint;

that was the most confusing of all. She persuaded the duke to buy a picture of him; and sore need as he had of the money, it required a great struggle for Earle to keep from tearing up the check sent by the duke's man of business and flinging it in the Italian's face. Hetty appeared perfectly unconscious of his sufferings. She treated him with such persistent kindness that his overweening vanity had seasons of believing she cared for him still; but if by a lucky chance he found her alone, which seldom happened, he got no more opportunity to declare his passion and remorse than if he had been dumb, and she blind and deaf.

This state of affairs continued during several weeks; and the excitable man was on the verge of frenzy, unable to eat or sleep, to do any thing but bewilder himself more and more with the widow's fascinations, and chafe under the careless disregard of the gay people who surrounded her. At length, one day, he appeared at the house so nearly mad that neither her artifices, nor his fear of her displeasure, could keep him silent. By some odd chance she had been left to an hour's solitude; even the princess was not there to watch with those sharp old eyes whose malevolent glare discomforted Earle more than any human eyes had ever before done, expressing a knowledge of his secret, and a cold surprise at his insolent presumption which fretted him beyond endurance.

Mrs. Vinton was seated on a vine-draped terrace overlooking the valley, dressed in white, so dainty and *piquante* that a wiser man than poor Robert might easily have lost his head.

"I was just thinking of you, Mr. Earle," she said, smiling, in nowise affected by his sudden appearance.

"I did not know you ever had time," he answered, trying to seem at ease, and conscious the attempt was a sad failure, and his remark a worse platitude.

"Masculine injustice," returned she; "no, I'm afraid it is a little mock humility on your part. I doubt your considering yourself of so slight importance as to believe that your friends forget you easily."

"Sometimes I am not quite certain whether we are friends," he hazarded, and knew this speech was as unsuccessful as the first.

"I should be sorry if you said it in earnest," she replied, gravely. "I flatter myself I always show people very plainly when I rank them in that catalogue."

"I so seldom have an opportunity to see you," he grumbled.

"Oh what a wretched memory you must own!" laughed she. "Why, only this morning the princess declared you were the most prominent bit of furniture in my salon."

"I am well aware she doesn't like me," said he.

"Not like you? Dear me! she is too indolent to make any effort either way."

"She hates me, and so do the rest of the foreign troop about you," he asserted, suffi-

ciently encouraged by her good-nature to give way to the irritation that always soured his mind as he remembered the distance at which these fine people kept him.

"I hope none of them have been unkind to you," said Mrs. Vinton: "perhaps you are a little oversensitive."

There was something in her voice, gently as she spoke, which reminded him it would not be safe to show his ill-humor, so he hastened to add,

"But you have not told me what happy chance brought me into your thoughts."

"This lovely view, of course. You ought to make a sketch from here for a large picture; I am sure the duke would be delighted to purchase it."

"Thanks," said he, trying to be dignified and lofty; "I don't care to turn my holiday into a season of drudgery."

"Ah, of course—how stupid of me! But I am so accustomed to seeing artists always at what you call drudgery I forgot picture-painting is only a kind of play with you."

Her words showed him that his attempt at stateliness had been childish and silly. Between the varying emotions which filled his mind, the spell of her presence, the irritation, the wild passion that surged up in his heart, he was in a pitiable case, and lost the last trace of wisdom or self-control.

Before he really knew what he was saying, he had poured forth his confession, and, as a crowning *maladresse*, began by asking pardon for his past heartlessness and sin. Once or twice she tried to interrupt him; finding the attempt useless, she leaned back in her chair, her eyes cast down, and her face so calm and still that it would have puzzled the keenest physiognomist to gain the least clue to her thoughts.

"Oh, Hetty, Hetty!" he cried, for the first time uttering the familiar appellation. "Speak to me—say that I have not deceived myself—that you do forgive me—Hetty!"

She looked at him now; a faint surprise in her countenance, but no other emotion visible.

"You are not angry because I called you by the old name—the dear, sweet name?" he continued. "Only forgive me—only say that I may hope! I will be patient—I will prove to you that I have atoned for my mad folly! Oh, Hetty, Hetty Flint, no woman was ever worshipped as you shall be!"

She put up her hand with a gesture so decided that he stopped speaking, and stood staring at her.

"You are making a mistake," said she, in her quietest voice, "a most incomprehensible mistake; please don't say another word. I have no acquaintance whatever with the young person you apostrophize so poetically, and it is always a pity to waste blank verse."

"Oh, that is cruel, cruel!" he exclaimed.

She regarded him with the same expression of indolent astonishment. "I did not laugh

at your poetry," said she; "I only reminded you that you were repeating it to the wrong person."

"Sometimes I am ready to believe you can't be the same," he went on; "so changed, but after all the same Hetty still! And my heart goes out to you as eagerly as it did when we first met in the old days; you have not forgotten them—I know you have not."

"My memory is tolerably good," she replied, lightly, "yet it fails me here; even if I were disposed to have the utmost faith in the doctrine of metempsychosis, I'm afraid it would not help me to understand."

"Ah, stop, stop! I have suffered enough—been punished enough; Hetty, Hetty, have a little mercy!"

"Still harping on that mysterious name!" returned she, with a commiserating shake of her graceful head. "Really, Mr. Earle, these summer heats must have affected your brain! Try and get your senses back, or I shall be obliged to send you away."

"How can you torture me like this? How can you be so heartless?" he groaned; and there was no acting in his excitement—it was all a horrible earnest.

"I have no wish to give you pain," she said kindly enough. "I only want to set you right, and keep you from confiding matters to me that you will regret afterward. Be sensible, and don't tell me any more of your pretty secrets; recollect, they can be no possible concern of mine."

"You don't forgive me! You will be hard and merciless?"

"I have nothing to forgive," she replied, somewhat impatiently, though with an apparent effort to be considerate, as one might try to soothe a hopeless but harmless lunatic; "nothing whatever to forgive; do come out of your fancies. We have been good friends, I hope; I have endeavored to do the little that lay in my power to make your stay here pleasant; don't be tragic this warm day."

He fairly clenched his hands in rage and suffering. Until now he had hoped; his ridiculously overweening vanity—and under high heaven there is nothing so immense, so incurable as this failing in a weak man's nature—had deluded him into the belief that he should at last succeed. Even yet he was unable to credit her looks and words. She only wished to punish him a little more; she had not forgotten the old days, changed as she was.

"You want to overwhelm me completely," he said. "I deserve it, but be merciful! Believe me, Hetty, there is no need—I have had my retribution already."

"Again I tell you there is no Hetty Flint here," she answered, and her voice, which had been so careless and playful, rang out hard and stern. "She died one black, stormy night, and I stood alone by her grave! She hasn't left so much as a ghost, believe me."

"Ah, stop, stop! I could tear my heart out

when I think of my insolent madness. If I were to live a thousand years, I should never cease to hate myself," he cried.

"This remorse might be touching and interesting to the young person you call Hetty Flint, if she were only alive to hear it; but it really has no meaning whatever to my ears," she answered, relapsing into her former indolent composure.

"God forgive you!" he exclaimed, passionately, so completely carried away by his misery that he could only regard himself as the most wronged and ill-treated of men. "God forgive you!"

"Thanks for the pious and compassionate wish," said she; "I accept it, though without the slightest idea of any special reason you can have to ask mercy for me."

"Oh, you will live to regret one day the heart you are breaking so ruthlessly!" he cried. "That will be your retribution."

"Do you mean to treat me to a touch of prophecy, as a closing burst to your incomprehensible tirade?" she asked, in the same easy, contemptuous tone of kindness.

"I come to you with a plea of pardon on my lips—"

"But when I am not the person you have offended!"

"I come with what no woman has a right to despise—what she is always honored in receiving—the offer of a true heart," he said, exciting himself into an added state of injury.

"Oh, if the offer was to me, let me return my thanks for the honor," she replied, with a pitying smile. "But, unfortunately, I don't care about hearts, unless such as these;" and she touched her chatelaine, from which hung sundry charms of quaint device.

"You are harder than this stone!" he exclaimed, smiting the balustrade with his hand. "If you had any feeling, any softness, you would be touched by my pain—you would look back at least kindly on our common past!"

"We will not talk any more if you please," she answered, rather wearily. "Try to understand that I have no connection whatever with the days to which you so persistently refer."

"And these are your last words?"

"On this subject, I trust. Go away now, Mr. Earle, and get your senses back! It will only need a little sober reflection, I am sure, to convince you that the conversation has been a mistake on your part which had better be forgotten."

He grew furiously angry, and poured out a torrent of mingled invective and tenderness; absolutely uttering threats that he might tell her fine friends what he knew of her past.

She laughed in his face.

"You are hopelessly mad," said she. "Shall I send for the princess, that you may begin with her? Tell Hetty Flint's story first; tell the whole truth—don't spare her! She was a sil-

ly little thing, who absolutely worshiped an ideal she believed Robert Earle."

"I will be worthy of it; only trust me—I will be worthy," he broke in.

"This poor girl endured slander, loss of friends, every thing, for your sake," she continued, as if he had not spoken. "She left her home desperate, kept alive only by the thought of you; lying only to make herself worthy of your love; toiled day and night; drudged, starved, always upheld by that hope! However hard she worked, she found time to study, to try and become an elegant, accomplished woman—still for you—"

"Hetty, Hetty!" His adjuration moved her no more than the iron door of a tomb would have stirred under the frantic beat of his clenched hands.

"It pleased God to raise her out of want—to put it in a kind heart to leave her a fortune. Do you know what her first act was?"

His head sank; he stood mute under the cold fire which blazed in her eyes and trembled in her voice.

"She went in search of you! never for an instant had she doubted your love and honor; she went to tell you that now she was rich, able and willing to aid you; that to share your fate was the highest destiny life could offer! She found you—"

"Hetty, Hetty!"

"She found you, and you judged her out of the villainess of your own heart! You murdered her—your first words killed her more quickly than the sharpest dagger could have done! So Hetty Flint's story came to an end—she has not even a grave to weep over, if you had tears to shed."

He began to understand; dimly he felt that neither anger nor bitterness actuated the words. Hetty Flint was dead; this woman, to whom he had ventured to raise his eyes, insanely confounding her with that girl, was so far beyond his reach that his frenzy equaled that of the old-time poet, who went mad for love of a daughter of the D'Estes. But he did suffer; that was real enough; and her next remark added to his pain a keener feeling of shame than had ever touched his blunted sense of right in all these years.

"Not content with your work, not content with standing a murderer in God's eyes, you talk of punishing me because I don't share poor Hetty's weakness! You sink from wickedness to absurdity at once! Am I a woman to be frightened? You know—poor and weak as you are—you know there is not a detail of my whole life I should fear to utter in the world's ears."

"You don't think I would tell a word to distress you—to—"

"What is there to tell? Mr. Earle, your mother and sisters could injure, Hetty Flint by their evil tongues, aided by your acts; and none of you spared her, certainly. But for you to gossip where I am concerned, would be about

as possible as for the Empress of Austria's lowest groom to attempt such insolence in regard to his sovereign."

He stammered some words of contrition; much as he suffered, he could feel the sting of her reproof; it was a horrible humiliation to his narrow soul to appreciate the distance which separated him from her. He was almost ready to cry out that it could not be real—this woman had indeed nothing in common with the girl who had loved him—he was a presumptuous idiot, taking advantage of his patroness's condescension.

"I must bid you good-bye now," she said; "come and see me when you like. I assure you I shall not even recollect this conversation by to-morrow."

"Oh, I can easily believe that," returned he, longing to be ironical, and failing signally.

"That you can believe it proves there is some hope of your outgrowing your vanity and pettiness," she said, gravely. "You may make something of life yet, Mr. Earle, if you will only be courageous and willing to work. Try it, and so redeem the past. Hetty Flint would forgive you freely if she were alive—she does it through me; and God will forgive you too, if you essay to earn pardon."

"I've no life left—nothing to look forward to now."

She rose from her seat with a gesture of impatience.

"That is a style of conversation to which I never listen," said she. "I'll talk with you, if you like, when you find there is something to live for and work for too."

She passed slowly into the house; he made no effort to detain her, snatched his hat, and rushed away down the road to the gates. He suddenly found himself face to face with the duke, and the duke greeted him with a bland, far-off courtesy which sent him on more insane and miserable than ever. He tried that night the frequent resource of men who insist upon laying the blame and sin of their conduct anywhere except in the right quarter. The world was against him, Fate had a pleasure in tormenting him; he was unappreciated, neglected—the most pitiable instance of a man of genius buffeted by fortune that the earth had ever produced. So he took refuge in a long carousal, and in his drunkenness gambled away every penny he had, and was obliged to leave his luggage as a gage for his hotel bill.

Two days later he came enough to his senses to start for Florence, forced to undertake the journey to Lucca on foot; there he had some artist friends who would assist him for the moment.

He stopped on the summit of the hill and looked back upon the village; an open carriage dashed so rapidly round a sharp corner that he had to retreat into a ditch to escape danger. He glanced toward it with an angry frown, beheld Hetty seated in the equipage, the

princess by her side, and the duke opposite. The three saw him, and gave gracious salutes, which he was too blind with passion to return. Then the carriage whirled on, and left him half smothered in dust—dust raised by Hetty Flint's chariot-wheels!

Valery was going back to Spezia to join Mrs. Sloman, and Hetty cried as heartily at parting as ever she had cried in her homeliest days.

"But it is only for a little while," she said. "I'm a goose to behave like this! I shall see you in Rome next winter."

"You'll be sure to come?" urged Valery.

Hetty, with her usual inconsistency, began to laugh, while her cheeks were still wet with tears.

"I am afraid I shall have to," she said. "Val, I have made up my mind to fulfill my destiny. I shall be a duchess when I get there."

"And are you certain you will be happy, Hetty; it's not just ambition? Oh, don't throw away your present freedom and content for that!"

"Upon my word, my dear, I actually believe I am in love—it seems so odd! I gave in to it last night, after telling that silly man every thing."

"And he loved you the better for knowing the truth?"

"Bless me! what he said was enough to make his ancestors turn over in their graves. I'm sure they'll haunt me when I take the liberty of living in that old palace. But I told him nothing should induce me to be idle or let him be, so he's to plunge into politics, and I shall be quite in my element. I mean to rule ministers, king, and all," said she, laughing again.

"I think he is a good man," Valery replied; "I do think he is."

"My dear, he has a heart of gold; it's about all the gold he possesses, by-the-way. No, you needn't look, that man would marry me if I hadn't a centime. I'm a new revelation to him, that's all! I'm glad I have money—he deserves it. Oh, Val, what would the deacon say? Talk about novels; why the most sensational of them would never dare put in the incidents which actually happen every day! But I needn't moralize."

"And when are you to be married?"

"In October, at the old princess's country-seat. I wish you could be with me."

Valery shook her head. "There was her picture; she must go to work at that as early as she could return to Rome, and Mrs. Vinton had not the heart to urge her."

"I have some things to give you when I get to Rome," Hetty said, suddenly; "I haven't them here; old books and trifles that belonged—"

"To my mother?" asked Valery, when the other hesitated.

"Yes; you were too young when we parted.

Miss Dorothy would have been displeased at any thing which could make you think there was any connection between you and Lucy."

"Yes, I know. How good of you to keep them, Hetty! I haven't the least thing that was hers."

"Only books and a few little ornaments," returned Hetty, after an instant's silence in which she looked irresolute, as if there was something she had it in her mind to say. "The past is dead and buried," she added, abruptly; "we have nothing to do with it in any way."

"Nothing," Valery said. "I would not know its secrets if I could."

Hetty gave her a keen glance, but Valery's eyes were averted, and did not notice it.

"You feel that?" Mrs. Vinton asked. "There is nothing to be told; it could do no good to disturb those old memories of the dead; they are sacred, at least to me. But she never talked, not even to you—of—of—"

"She was usually happy and forgetful as a child," rejoined Hetty; and the doubt and indecision which had been in her face left it wholly. "My dear Valery, just think of her as an angel in heaven; poor Lucy! poor, beautiful Lucy!"

"She loved you always, and always knew you, Aunt Susan said."

"Always, Valery, and I was such a visionary thing that her fancies never seemed so odd to me as they would have done to another." She stopped; then, with the same appearance of longing to give Valery an opportunity to question her if she felt disposed, added, "No one besides knew how often she had gleams of reason, days in which her memory was perfectly clear."

"Poor Lucy!" murmured Valery. "She could talk to me; indeed, she generally thought I had been with her while she was in Europe," Hetty continued, "and knew every thing about her past."

But Valery only said, "You were so good to her. Oh, Hetty, it is so pleasant to remember that she had you always to humor her fancies as nobody else could have done; it was a great mercy, for she would have been very wretched without."

Hetty drew a breath of relief, yet there was a certain expression of disappointment in her countenance at finding that Valery had no mind to inquire what Lucy had told of her history.

"There, there," she said, suddenly, "we needn't get doleful."

"It doesn't make me sad to think of her," Valery answered.

But Hetty got away from the subject, and, as the surest means of engaging Valery's attention, began to speak of herself. While they sat talking in their favorite retreat under the chestnut-trees, the duke sauntered out of the house, having found only his old friend the princess, whom, with the usual ingratitude of humanity, he deserted mercilessly, though she

was in a mood for society, and begged him to await Mrs. Vinton's return.

He felt tolerably certain where to find her, as the princess admitted that she had gone to walk with her American friend. So he came upon the two; and Valery could not help smiling and feeling pleased to see how, in spite of his dignity, he showed his happiness as plainly as if he had been a boy of eighteen.

"Have you told our dear Miss Valery?" he asked Hetty, as soon as the first greetings were over.

"I'm not in such haste to confess my follies," returned she; "and, mild as she looks, Valery can scold on occasions."

"But she will not scold for this," he said, struggling a little longer with his English, which was not over-ready; then bursting into voluble Italian, "she will wish us every happiness, and congratulate me on having won the dearest prize ever any man gained."

"Indeed I will congratulate you both," Valery answered, warmly. "You have won a great prize, and I am sure you are worthy of it."

"There, I hope you are satisfied now," said Hetty, teasingly.

"Not entirely; I want to beg a favor of the signorina. This obdurate little woman talks of the autumn but vaguely; now I want a day set so that I may feel sure my bliss is real."

Hetty flew off at a tangent immediately, and was horribly provoking; but between them they forced her to fix the day for the marriage.

The afternoon wore on in pleasant talk, and the next morning Valery left the Baths.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MISS DOROTHY'S SERMON.

THE London season drew to its close; and as eagerly as any school-boy ever counted the days which must elapse before vacation did Miss Dorothy count those last weeks. A great change had come over Cecil—a change that caused the spinster deep and incessant pain. She feared her niece had sent Carteret off from the poorest of worldly motives, stifling the cry of her heart in ambitious dreams. She cared for the man, Miss Dorothy believed, and was still more confident that Carteret had been earnest and sincere. Nothing could have separated them except Cecil's own act; and the old maid's wrath was only mastered by her genuine grief, and dread of the retribution the girl would bring upon herself.

The two were seldom alone at this time; Cecil was either in the midst of a crowd or shut up in her room, thereby avoiding the possibility of inquiries or explanations. She tried to preserve her usual manner, was affectionate and kind, but Miss Dorothy's keen sight perceived the cloud which had risen between them. Still Cecil shrouded herself impenetrably in her pride and went resolutely on her way, deter-

mined (her aunt believed) to keep silence concerning her plans up to the latest moment, through fear of loving reproaches or advice.

The countess had positively adopted the beautiful American into her heart, and a very chilly resting-place that aristocratic domain would have proved had Cecil chosen to dwell therein; but she showed no disposition to appropriate these august quarters; for though invariably courteous and deferential to her ladyship, she submitted to, rather than returned, her affectionate demonstrations. Fortunately, it never occurred to the mighty dame there could be any cause for such conduct beyond the proper awe which her dignity inspired in the young lady's breast. Indeed the descendant of dukes considered it a very correct state of feeling, and admired Cecil's delicate perceptions and ability to appreciate the patronizing fondness of which she was the recipient.

It is true that her ladyship was not altogether so well satisfied with her son; that gentleman shilly-shallied and deferred in a fashion which roused her indignation, though she bore it more patiently than she would have borne an appearance of opposition from any other human being. She must give him time; Cecil was safe enough; let him have time. Lady Alicia had accompanied her gouty stepmother to some German baths, so she was out of the way. Indeed, the countess dismissed that disappointing offshoot of the Aldershotts from her mind. This was her second season, and she had failed; the final hope the countess saw for her—Fairfax Carteret—had abruptly departed, and hereafter Alicia was of no importance except to act as sister of charity to any of the aristocratic connections who chanced to need such care.

Lord George had been very sulky and rebellious for some days after her loss, but the countess wisely forbore to draw the reins too tightly, certain that in the end she should win. So she on one side, and Miss Dorothy on the other, watched the weeks go by with very different emotions, as they ruminated upon what was to come after. The spinster bore up under her burdens until she felt that limit reached, to pass which, in the matter of forbearance, has been declared no virtue. She found herself doomed to go from London to some stately seat in Devonshire, and from thence they were to journey on to the Towers, the country residence of the Aldershotts. Miss Dorothy's last thread of patience snapped, and she tossed the countess's letter of invitation over to Cecil with undisguised scorn.

"You and I have been playing at cross-purposes long enough," said she, giving her ear a merciless tweak; "now I want an understanding, that I may know what to expect."

"Good gracious, Aunt Dor, how mysterious!" returned Cecil, with an assumption of the factitious gayety which had of late taken the place of her girlish high spirits.

"You know perfectly well what I mean," re-

torted Miss Dorothy; "now don't beat round the bush, because I mean to find out exactly where we stand."

"Just where we always did, I hope," said Cecil, coaxingly; but the spinster was not to be wheedled out of her stern resolve.

"Do you wish to go to the Towers?" she asked.

"I'd as soon go there as anywhere," replied Cecil, wearily.

"That's no answer at all!" exclaimed Miss Dorothy, giving herself a vigorous shake.

"It's the best one I can give, at all events. Oh, please don't scold, Aunt Dor, that's a darling!"

"I'm not going to scold—I mean, I don't know whether I shall or not! The idea of not caring, at your age—it's unnatural."

"Well, I must be unnatural, then! I suppose I am tired and listless; try and be patient, aunt dear."

"I should like to hear what has been the matter with you for the last month and more," said Miss Dorothy, sitting up rigid and determined.

"Just what I say," replied Cecil; "I am tired; I suppose I have worked too hard at enjoying myself."

"Then, in the name of mercy, why do you want to go rushing after more excitement?"

"One must do something, you know," said Cecil.

"Now don't imitate that jargon; my nerves really will not stand it this morning. We shall quarrel as sure as fate, and we never have quarreled—I don't want to begin now."

"I should think not!" cried Cecil, rising and throwing her arms about her relative with a return of the old demonstrativeness. "No, no; you and I will never quarrel, Aunt Dor."

Miss Dorothy would have liked to draw the beautiful head down on her bosom and beg the girl to confide in her, but it is only in novels that it becomes easy for human beings to demand each other's confidence; and Miss Dorothy, warm-hearted as she was, had slight faculty of expression where her tenderest feelings were concerned. Cecil gave her a hearty hug, laughed at her own burst of sentiment, and went back to her seat, leaving the spinster a good deal discomposed both as to her head-dress and her emotions.

"You're more like yourself this minute than you have been in weeks," said she, looking so preternaturally severe that Cecil knew she was on the point of crying, and Cecil was in a mood to have a horror of a scene. So she tried to lead the conversation to less dangerous topics, but Miss Dorothy imitated the advice that the Thane of Cawdor received from his wife, and screwed her courage to the sticking-point—she had begun, and must go on.

"About this invitation," said she; "why should we rush off to Devonshire, and then to that awful countess? I am sure we have had enough of her during these months."

"A little of any thing so grand does go a great way, certainly," laughed Cecil, though there was no merriment in the sound; "but I'm afraid I have more than half promised her and the Percivals too."

"You want quiet and rest, not fresh excitement," pursued Miss Dorothy; "we might go over to the Continent and find some place where one wouldn't be din'd and danced out of one's senses."

"Oh, the war upsets every place there," Cecil said, dreading the idea of solitude in her present state of mind even more than the weariness of a crowd; talking and being talked to, however hard work it might be, was easier than the companionship of her own thoughts. "No, we can't go to the Continent yet; we must just fulfill our destiny, Aunt Dor," and she laughed again in the same mirthless tone.

The spinster looked at her with misty vision; the beautiful face had grown thinner, the great eyes darker and brighter; people said she was handsomer than ever. This season of aristocratic life had been what she needed to perfect her charms! But Aunt Dorothy would have given a great deal to see the happy, girlish peace that brightened her features when this season began.

"That's exactly what I want to know about," said she, with an effort.

"What?" Cecil asked, absently.

"You talk of fulfilling our destinies," said Miss Dorothy, with a fierce tug at her ear; "what's yours to be—what do you mean to do—what's been in your mind these past weeks?"

"I'm afraid I don't know," replied Cecil, sinking back in her chair.

"Then it's time you did!" retorted Miss Dorothy; "high time you did; and I want to know that I may regulate my destiny, for I don't mean to be driven, I can tell you."

"What a dreadful old aunt! What a solemn old aunt! You don't threaten to go away from me, I hope?"

"When you marry, you won't need me," said Miss Dorothy.

"But there's no question of marriage, aunt!"

"Don't be insincere, Cecil; I can't bear that."

"I don't mean to be; I am as honest and open with you as I am with myself."

"Then you are treating yourself very ill, that's all I can say!" rejoined the spinster, hotly.

"But I don't mean to treat you ill, aunt; do believe that."

"Oh me! Do you suppose I'm thinking about myself? I'm growing an old woman; nothing matters much where I am concerned! But you, Cecil, you are young; you have your whole life before you. Do you intend to throw it away, and spend the rest of your days in useless regret?"

"I don't think I should be weak enough to do that," sighed Cecil. "No; whatever life I

made up my mind to accept, I wouldn't moan and wail about it after."

"Child, child!" cried Aunt Dorothy, stretching out her hands with a gesture that was half entreaty, half warning; "there could be no future so terrible as an ill-assorted marriage, a marriage which had no love on either side, not even respect, since each would know the other actuated by unworthy motives."

Cecil did not go through the pretense of affecting to misunderstand; she neither tried question nor evasion, just sat silent, looking straight before her with a dreary gaze.

"I wish you'd say something, if it is only to bid me mind my own business," exclaimed Miss Dorothy, suddenly descending, as people do in real life, from tragedy to downright crossness.

"Don't sit there as if you were dumb, staring away off into the middle of next week like a woman in a picture, whatever you do!"

"I was thinking of what you said, Aunt Dor," replied Cecil; "I believe I have not thought much lately."

"I wonder when you would have found time!" quoth Miss Dorothy, in rapid parenthesis.

"I have allowed myself to drift on and on, without remembering where the current might lead me," pursued Cecil.

"More shame to you," returned Miss Dorothy, though her unsteady voice took away from the severity of her words; "more shame to you! If you were an ordinary chit of a girl, one might expect such conduct; but you have a mind and reasoning powers, and why don't you use them, instead of throwing them by like bits of old-fashioned jewelry?"

"I fancy I put it off; I'm rather a coward, I believe; it was easier not to reflect," continued Cecil.

Miss Dorothy bounced in her chair and kicked her footstool. Both actions certainly were inelegances one would not have expected from a woman who had during so many weeks been allowed the privilege of studying the manners of the British aristocracy; but for the instant she was incapable of expressing her emotions in words, and it was a slight relief to bounce, and bounce she must, had the countess herself been present.

"Don't be vexed with me, Aunt Dor," pleaded Cecil.

"I will!" cried Miss Dorothy.

"Then no more than you can help, please," rejoined Cecil, with unusual humility.

"I'll set no limits," Miss Dorothy declared.

"After all, you can't regard my conduct in a harsher light than I do," returned Cecil.

"I don't wish to hear any body I love abused," observed Miss Dorothy, shortly, but her voice showed that her throat had grown suspiciously dry and choked.

"What would you have me say?" asked Cecil.

"Something to the point," replied Miss Dorothy, rapping the chair with her knuckles;

"something to show you mean to wake up and decide upon things, knowing why you do it."

"That's just what I have tried to avoid," she murmured.

"Then begin now; open your eyes and look about. I tell you it is time, Cecil Conway! If you loved this man, I'd be silent; life is always endurable where there is love; even the idle, rapid, do-nothing, never-sit-still, mauding, pottering existence of these fine people we've staid among too long."

Cecil had not so much as a smile for the string of vituperative epithets, delivered with an energy which fairly shook the spinster's head-dress loose; but the old lady caught it as it fell, replaced it upside down on her apex, and went on with her sermon, in no wise discomposed.

"To choose such a life without motive, without heart, I can think of no wickedness equal to it—none that would bring so frightful a punishment; and the woman doesn't live, Cecil Conway, who would feel it more keenly than you."

"I wonder if there's any thing better?" muttered Cecil, and for a second looked a little sulky.

"No matter what you choose, it would be better than that," retorted Miss Dorothy. "Found a hospital—have the small-pox—turn chimney-sweep—any one would be wiser than to accept such a shallow tea-cup kind of life with a—with a tea-pot of a husband!" fairly shouted Miss Dorothy, rising to her feet as suddenly as if something had touched a secret spring somewhere about her.

They both laughed this time, and Miss Dorothy sat down a good deal mollified by her own eloquence; but determined to clinch the nail she had driven in, added, more emphatically,

"And an old stone image for a mother-in-law, as proud as Pharaoh, as grasping as a Jew, as bad-tempered as the Witch of Endor, and a heart that would last to all eternity for a nether millstone without showing the least sign of wear."

As the spinster stopped to rest after this crowning burst, Cecil rose and walked up and down the room in silence. Miss Dorothy did not interrupt her meditation; she seized the heap of worsted-work beside her chair, wiped a couple of stray tears from her eyes, and stitched diligently, regardless of the eccentric deviations she perpetrated in her pattern. After a while Cecil returned, laid a hand on her aunt's shoulder, and said,

"You are right, Aunt Dor; nothing could be so bad as a marriage without love on either side, but it must be nice to be loved! I think if I could be sure some good man had given me his heart, I would become his wife if he was willing to take me."

"Then you'd do the wickedest thing of all by yourself and him," pronounced Miss Dorothy, shaking off the white hand, but dropping

her work immediately after to catch the cold fingers and chafe them softly between her palms. "Oh, Cecil, try as you might, you would hate him in a month; there can never be any half-way work with you!"

"Heigh-ho!" sighed Cecil.

"It's no good to sigh like a Laura Matilda," observed Miss Dorothy, with a return of petulance; "sighs and tears never helped to do any thing but bring on dyspepsia;" and all the while she patted and fondled the pretty hand, and laid it lovingly against her tear-stained cheek.

"Well, aunty," questioned Cecil, "what can I do to show I am obliged for your lecture, and mean to profit by it?"

"Stop trifling with your own peace, stop trying to ruin your own future," replied Miss Dorothy; "that will satisfy me."

Cecil turned abruptly away, and walked twice more up and down the room.

"And you don't want to go to the Towers?" she asked presently, coming back to Miss Dorothy's side and speaking with such composure that the spinster could not decide whether it was a simple question, or half an answer to her advice.

"No, I don't," the old maid said, shortly: "I'd rather go into an ice-bath in the middle of January."

"The poor countess!" said Cecil, smiling.

"Oh, poor!" repeated Miss Dorothy, waxing belligerent. "She's as crafty as a crocodile, and I can see through her as plainly as I see through that window; don't tell me!"

"Good old aunty!" laughed Cecil, giving her another kiss. "There, there, she sha'n't be teased any more! We'll go off somewhere, and be quiet for a while; you'd like that?"

"Like it!" echoed Miss Dorothy; and the emphasis she laid on the two words rendered any further expression of her views superfluous.

"When winter comes," pursued Cecil, "we'll contrive to slip down into Italy if poor Paris should be shut up, as they threaten. Does that satisfy you, Aunt Dorothy?"

"You're a good girl; I always knew how you would act if you took time to think," returned the spinster.

Cecil left the room without another word, and Miss Dorothy pursued her embroidery more tranquil than she had been in weeks. She saw that Cecil was not happy, and pitied her out of the inmost depths of her loving heart; but she had done every thing now that lay in her power, and must wait. She could not bring herself to believe that the shadows were to settle into a lasting night; they would pass if only Cecil could learn to be patient.

"The child was born for happiness," she thought; "I've always felt that, and I'll not change my opinion yet. There never has been a happy Conway, but she's to be an exception! I don't know how I know, but I do—I do!" she continued, stabbing the air with

her needle, as if threatening some invisible adversary who had contradicted her proposition.

These long weeks of separation had done more to soften Cecil's indignation toward Fairfax Carteret than any arguments which his most devoted friends could have brought. The one act of duplicity which had filled her with such fiery wrath was so completely at variance with scores of examples of his conduct and manner of thought which came unsought to her knowledge after his departure, that gradually, in spite of her contempt for her own weakness, she often found herself trying to explain or palliate it. An extended acquaintance with Madame de Hatzfeldt had proved that lady so utterly false, so incapable of the truth even where it would have served her purpose better than a lie, that Cecil could not help suspecting her of some treachery in the affair of the note, clear as it looked. She had discovered too, that notwithstanding her protestations of friendship, madame was the bitterest enemy she had ever made, and had on several occasions attempted to put upon her the onus of certain indiscretions in the way of coquetries where she had in reality forced Cecil unconsciously into giving her the protection of her companionship.

Then she tried to rouse a difficulty between Cecil and Lord George; and the young man, courteously enough but very palpably, proved that she had lied outrageously; and though neither he nor Cecil would have stooped to betray her, she saw that they understood her perfectly, and soon dropped even the pretense of friendliness.

Naturally these things insensibly softened Cecil's judgment of Carteret, though the fact of the note remained. Cecil's sense of rectitude could not pardon the sinful weakness which delayed him near a married woman whom he had loved in former days; but as she reflected that he at length showed conscience enough to flee, she was able to justify him somewhat where she herself was concerned. Perhaps he had not meant to trifle; he might have been honest in his interest, only weak enough to be disturbed by again meeting the woman who had touched his heart long before. Perhaps, had she been less open in her scorn during their last interview, he would have told her the truth—told her that he was trying to overcome his mad folly. Of course this could have changed nothing; she must have sent him from her all the same, but at least she might have given him kindly words, and in a measure preserved her esteem for him; and she felt now that it would be much even to think gently of him, and acknowledge that he was worthy of her friendship.

Close to the house there was a square, to which Miss Dorothy, like certain other residents of the neighborhood, possessed a key; and this morning, on leaving her aunt, Cecil went there for a solitary walk. Of course, be-

cause she wished particularly to be alone, some perverse imp inspired old Knowles with the idea of likewise airing himself in the quiet retreat, which was a very pleasant one for London, as the sparrows well knew.

He came upon Cecil idly throwing crumbs which she had brought for the birds' benefit; and though wishing poor Knowles in Africa at the nearest, she was too considerate to show her irritation to a man of his age, and so attached a friend of Miss Dorothy's. They talked of the trifles which ordinarily make up conversation, but Knowles mentioned Madame de Hatzfeldt, and Cecil could not help laughing at the acrimony with which he described certain devices whereby that lady had deluded him into serving her purpose.

"Why, only yesterday," said he, "she managed to make her husband believe I had played sheep-dog to her all the morning, and she had been goodness knows where, and just captured me as she was driving home. Of course I couldn't contradict, but I don't like it. I'm too old to be dragged into fibs, and I told her so."

"I am sure you ought to be grateful at having an opportunity to oblige such a pretty, graceful creature as madame," replied Cecil.

"She always reminds me of some sort of feline animal," cried he. "I knew her when she was Adela Livingston; I've not forgotten, and I don't believe Fairfax Carteret has either."

Cecil lost all interest in the subject immediately, and did not attempt to disguise a yawn.

"I suppose I bore you," said old Knowles, bluntly.

"Now that is politely telling me I have been rude," returned she. "Indeed I am always glad to talk with you, Uncle Jack," she added, giving him the appellation familiar to her in childish days; "but I must confess that the flirtations of Madame de Hatzfeldt and your friend do not in the least amuse me."

"He'd as soon have flirted with a hooded snake!" exclaimed Knowles, striking his stick on the ground with such energy that he frightened the sparrows, who flew off scolding at this interruption of their breakfast. "I know Fairfax Carteret thoroughly; no disgusting French ideas for him—he'd cut his hand off sooner than flirt with any married woman."

"Don't be energetic," said Cecil, lazily.

"And of all women, with Adela Livingston! Why, that winter in Washington—oh, it's ages ago, when she was engaged to Charley Ray—he found her out then. She tried her best to bewitch him, to fool Charley, and Carteret let her see that she was appreciated as she deserved. She said then—yes, and vowed—she'd have her revenge sometime; bah! the little cat!"

Cecil had listened eagerly enough to this disclosure; she offered no remark, turning her face away so that it was hidden.

"So Miss Adela, hooked the Austrian," continued Knowles; "it's no secret I am telling,

every body knew it at the time, and her reputation suffered a good deal. Of course Carteret never said a word; but when Charley Ray went to the bad his old aunt did, and Adela was glad to take the Austrian before he heard all the stories, for others came out. She's never been back to America; one could tell, just from her bitterness about her country, that she had some personal reason at the bottom."

Cecil began to talk of other things; voice and face were composed, but a whirl of conflicting thoughts dizzied her. At length old Knowles took himself off, and left her in solitude.

Every thing was inextricably entangled, and there could be no hope that the matter would ever find explanation. Still one truth was forced upon her mind, and refused to be effaced—she had wronged Fairfax Carteret. It was too late now for that to affect her other than in her feelings. It was not probable that they should meet again; and if they ever did, no reason for her own conduct, no demand to have the facts stated, would be possible. She had given her promise to madame, and, however false and vile the woman might be, she could not break it.

Fairfax Carteret was nothing to her. She informed herself of this truth over and over; but it was much that she might get back the faith in humanity which his apparent treachery had so sorely shaken.

Nothing to her! The repetition of the words reminded her that she had accepted a future for herself—at least conditionally; that she had not dreamed of shrinking from it until Aunt Dorothy's eloquent tirade opened her eyes to the awful importance of the step she had meant to take blindly and without thought.

"Only it was so nice to be loved!" she had said to her relative; the idea returned, in this sad meditation. But was the desire fulfilled in her case? Of that fact at least she must be convinced before her decision became irrevocable.

CHAPTER XXV.

IN THE GARDEN.

SOMEbody's garden-party came off that very day; one of the last festivities of the worn-out season. Miss Dorothy was so sadly shaken by their conversation of the morning that she looked more fit for bed than excitement of any sort.

"You are completely tired out," Cecil said. "I'll not hear of your going."

"Nonsense!" replied Miss Dorothy; "there's nothing the matter. I don't wish to spoil your day's pleasure for my whims."

"Oh, pleasure!" cried Cecil; then added in a voice less expressive of a high and mighty contempt for the world's pomps and vanities, "I really do want to go; I have a special reason."

"Very well, we are going," returned Miss

Dorothy, shutting her eyes resignedly, half asleep in advance.

"You are not, that is very certain," said Cecil. "You're a bad, rebellious old darling, and must learn to obey! I shall send a line to Mrs. Trevelyan; she will only be too happy to take me."

Miss Dorothy was too weary to argue, and indeed consented to remain at home willingly enough; so Cecil departed under the charge of the ancient dame, whose society was always a rest, as she had neither son nor nephew to fling at the beauty's head.

Lord George was at the fête; the countess had that morning received a royal summons to Windsor, so Cecil was left entirely free from watchful eyes. People in general were too busy with their own concerns to trouble her, especially of late, as the affair with Lord George had come to be regarded as a settled thing. So it came about that in the brightness of the sunset Cecil found herself wandering through the gardens on Lord George's arm. They reached a secluded spot, and Cecil signified her intention of sitting down to rest, no matter how much such indiscretion might be opposed to all rules of correct behavior which ought to govern young ladies.

They had been laughing and talking merrily, but Cecil grew suddenly grave, and sat looking out toward the sky regardless of her companion's remarks.

"I should like to know where you have gone," said he. "I have been talking for the last five minutes without your hearing a word I said; it's a shame to have my best jokes wasted like this!"

"I'll take you where I have been, if you like to go," said she, gravely.

"I hope you don't mean to scold me! I've done nothing wrong, have I?" he asked, laughing, though he regarded her with a certain degree of curiosity.

"I think we have both done something wrong," she answered; "but it is not too late to get right if we try."

He bowed, and waited for her to continue, though his fingers played uneasily in the breast-pocket of his coat.

"You are dying to smoke," said she; "so you shall, only don't let any body see you; I'll break over my rules to-day."

"Upon my word, I was not thinking about it, but, now you remind me, I'd like to immensely. Your beginning has quite startled me."

She watched him while he lighted his cigar, smiling with a little good-natured contempt to see what a relief he found in puffing out the white clouds.

"You are comfortable now?" she said.

"Oh yes; ready for any thing! But seriously, you are not vexed?"

"Not with you," she replied; "I think you one of the best boys in the world, spoiled as you are; but I am a little vexed, nevertheless."

"I suppose *la madre* has been at some of

her tricks; but indeed they're not worth minding."

"Oh no; she grows sweeter daily; it is astonishing how much honey there is in her ladyship's composition."

"But she does like you; actually, putting every thing aside, I believe she is genuinely fond of you," said he.

"Now that brings me round to what I was thinking about," she replied. "Her son asked me the other day to marry him, but I don't remember his saying that he shared his mother's amiable weakness."

Lord George nearly dropped his cigar in knocking the ashes from it, but said, composedly enough,

"You told me to skip the tender part—that it sounded well in old plays, but did not belong to our generation."

"That may be very witty and cynical and modern; but do you think it right to say such things—do you think it true?" she asked.

He looked a little embarrassed, a little diverted, but under both feelings there was trouble, which Cecil saw plainly.

"Where is Alicia now?" she inquired, suddenly.

Lord George was in the act of putting his cigar to his lips as she spoke; he proceeded calmly to puff out a fresh cloud of smoke, apparently solicitous to keep the weed alight, then he said,

"Still at that German place with the unpronounceable name, I fancy. The mother will know her address if you want it."

"You really do it very well," returned she, smiling more brightly than he had seen her do for weeks; "very well, indeed; but you ought to be ashamed of yourself, all the same."

"Somebody has been telling you some ridiculous nonsense," said he, in an annoyed tone; "I thought you were too unlike other women to listen to such stuff."

"No one has told me a syllable except yourself and Alicia," she replied.

"I—why—Alicia! What in the name of mystery do you mean?"

"And neither of you any thing in words. Lord George—dear friend—didn't I say we had both been doing wrong?"

He comprehended that his hope of retrieving his embarrassments by means of her millions was in great danger; but though sorely tempted, he could not for the life of him look in her frank, kind face and tell a lie—swear, protest, utter vows. At the moment he would have given his right arm to feel that he loved her; not on account of her money, not so much because her beauty moved him, and it did that, as because he recognized in her something better and higher and truer than he had ever seen in any human being, even in the girl to whom his heart had gone out in his boyish days, and would not be recalled by any dictates which the countess styled reason and common sense.

"You were wrong, but I have been the chief

offender," she went on, before he had sufficiently recovered his wits for any rejoinder.

"I don't believe you ever did any thing wrong in your life!" cried he, bluntly. "I never did right even by accident—but you!"

"That's the only real compliment I ever received," said she. "Now I want you to listen to me."

"Just a minute first!" He knew that he must make some effort: he would not lie, but he could not let ease, comfort, fortune, slip from his grasp without a struggle, though he hated himself for the necessity. "You are not speaking because you are angry—because you think I have deceived you—because—"

"No; not because I am jealous," she finished.

"I was not going to say that; don't think me a downright puppy, I beg!"

"I think you a much better man than your life would have left most of your sex," she said, earnestly. "Another would find it easy to speak a score of falsehoods in a breath; you can't bring yourself to utter one."

"No, by Jove! I'm bad enough, but whatever comes, I shan't tell you any lies!"

"Nor must I you; nor must either of us act them, dear friend. But listen—you shall have a chance after—I want to talk about myself first."

He turned rather pale; his lips trembled somewhat under his mustache, but he bowed assent and waited.

"You asked me the other day to marry you," she continued firmly enough, though the scarlet flamed into her cheeks, and in her confusion she looked so beautiful that he was ready to beat his brains out against the garden wall from sheer rage to think he could not love her.

"You asked me the question seriously, though we both jested and laughed, and I received it as seriously, since I begged you to give me a week to decide. Did you think I loved you?"

"I—upon my word, Cecil, these are questions no man could be expected to answer!"

"Did you think I loved you?" she repeated.

"Do you want to make me look like an ass?" he exclaimed, angrily. "Do you want to see how consummate an idiot a man can be?"

"Take care; that is not quite honest! You had watched me for weeks—closely too; did you really think that?"

He could not utter this lie either; not if the whole Aldershot race perished with the present generation.

"I did think you liked me," he said; "I'll tell the truth! When I first knew you—I didn't know you a bit, of course—I thought you were like nine girls out of ten, not capable of loving any body. Then there was a time I fancied you cared for some one else; but lately—I don't know just what I want to say, or how to get at it?"

"Tell it precisely as it comes into your thoughts."

"Well, I had an idea you were not happy, but that passed, and—yes, I thought you liked me."

"Could you ever forgive me if after I married you it came to your knowledge that I loved another man—loved him so dearly that if I believed in his truth, neither faith, honor, any thing, could keep me from going to him if he called?"

"Good God!" he cried, springing to his feet; "do you know what you are saying?"

"It is not pretty, not lady-like; I know that; but I am no better than other women, and other women have done it! Other women have married, thinking they could be safe, and gone down—down to where there was no return."

"You are proposing impossibilities," he said, coldly, and once more the millions loomed very huge before his eyes.

"I am not," she answered; "I have loved another man; I begin to think that I may have misjudged him; I believe that if I found I had, and it was too late—"

She stopped and turned away her head; he did not speak. After an instant she looked back, and continued,

"One thing might keep me safe; my husband's love. I think—yes, I know that would! I could die, but I could not deceive the heart that trusted me!"

Now was the time to speak; the precious opportunity was slipping away—just a word—an oath; if he could only induce her to believe, the millions were his! He could not do it! Not all his worldly teachings; not all his rather reckless life; not all his needs could help him to forfeit his manhood by a falsehood uttered in the light of those eyes.

"Do you love me well enough to run that risk?" she asked.

"I would try to make a good husband," he answered.

"I do think you would, you good old George," said she, coming down out of her exalted mood and stretching forth her hand impulsively. He took it, pressed his first kiss upon it—the dainty, delicate American girl-hand—and hated to reflect, and here again the money had no part in his regret, that it might never be his to hold and keep, and still could not mourn over the impossibility.

"I do think you would," she repeated; "but I must have something more than a good husband! I'm not sure but I'd bear a beating, if I thought you loved me, with greater patience than the most untiring show of devotion, knowing your heart was not under."

He was more himself now; he meant to risk a clear avowal; would ever another woman be so well worth the winning? Yet, as he asked the mental question, Alicia's pale face rose before his sight, and he knew that he loved her—argue as he might, try as he would—he loved her! She was shy and silent and plain; but from the childish days in which she had obeyed

his whims, screened him by accepting his faults and their penalty as her own, her whole life showed one unbroken course of patient devotion—and he loved her. Forty reasons to one why he should prefer this brilliant creature, this favorite of nature and fortune, but he did not.

"Cecil," he said, "every woman and every man have dreamed their dream, and had it come to nothing, and been very comfortable and happy after."

"I don't believe it!" she cried; "it's the old sophistical creed, but it's false for all that."

"I have dreamed mine too," he went on steadily; "but I know it can't come to any thing—I mean I knew it long before I met you—I can't tell it prettily as you do, but I wish to be honest."

"Of course you do; go on!"

"I shan't say I was not attracted by your money when I first showed that I intended some day to propose to you, but I tried to think it wasn't a fortune-hunter's spirit which led me. I suppose it's nonsense in this age to talk about family and name, but I wanted to keep mine up—maybe that's no excuse. I feel as if I could make it one, though, if I could tell it as I ought."

She touched his hand again with the tips of her perfect fingers; he looked at them covetously, conscious of thinking what a long, lean, bony hand Alicia had—but he loved her; never so much as now, when he was trying very hard to persuade himself that he cared for this transatlantic beauty!

"When I got to know you, I felt there never was any fellow half worthy of you; I knew that at least I would try to be! I said to myself I would work—go into Parliament—show that I had some stuff in me after all—and, oh, Cecil, I can not lose you! I'd have tried to make you happy. I'm sorry you can't like me a little, Cecil!"

The sudden change from the manly composure with which he began to speak to that boyish impetuosity, softened Cecil's heart more than he could dream. She was so lonely, her bright life had so unexpectedly turned gray and dim, that she found a strange attraction in this nature which possessed such capabilities for good. At this instant she could have held out her hands and bidden him take her, promising that they would try to deserve happiness, but his next words sent the insane fancy flying far away forever.

"About Alicia—I ought to tell you about her; for I'm—I'm trying to persuade you to marry me, Cecil, you know. It's an odd way to woo a woman, but I'll be true if I can."

"Yes, tell me about Alicia," she said, softly; "good, patient, sweet Alicia! she deserves that we should both remember her."

"The nicest girl in the world!" cried Lord George; "not handsome and brilliant like you bewildering American women, but for truth, and—downright steadiness, and strength, I'd back Alicia against the whole race!"

"A heart of gold," returned Cecil, and smiled to see how for a second the young man forgot to whom he was speaking, forgot prudence and reason, while all the best feelings of his nature burst out in that confession. "You were almost brought up together; you could hardly tell when you first began to care for her."

"By Jove! I believe I was born caring for her, though she's two years younger," said Lord George, in his blundering way. "I was a beast of a boy; no wonder, spoiled as I was! If my mother had been that Eastern queen—what's her name?—in the opera, you know, she'd have massacred a whole nation if they hadn't brought me the moon when I cried for it! I was an awful tyrant, but Alicia never minded."

"She knew your heart was right all the time!"

"Well, I don't think I am all bad, you see; I'm bad enough, but there are things a fellow can't do."

"That you couldn't, at least, I am sure. So you grew up together, and were very happy; why couldn't they let you alone?"

"Oh, people never let you alone," returned Lord George, impatiently. Then he remembered that, instead of putting the childish fancy in the light proper for the occasion, he was only showing how completely his heart lived in the old dream, and made another effort to set matters straight. "I'm making a muddle of the whole thing; but you know what I mean."

"I understand very well; you couldn't tell it better," Cecil answered, thinking that she did indeed comprehend him much more thoroughly than he understood himself.

"Of course that's all over," pursued Lord George, passing his hand across his forehead. "We're the best friends in the world. I am sure we ought both to be wise by this time; my mother has harped enough on her favorite theme."

"*Noblesse oblige*," quoted Cecil, scornfully; then added, in a grave voice, "The countess is right—*noblesse oblige*; but there is a rendering of the proverb I think her ladyship has failed to catch."

The color came into her cheeks again, the light to her eyes; she looked like some youthful Sibyl pointing out the true destiny which, by courage and fortitude, he might attain. Lord George, with all his sterling qualities, was not quick of perception; but he understood her meaning, and had no answer ready. He was not doing the best for himself; there was a way of regarding the old dream as he had lately tried to do in his thoughts, which would place the matter in a different aspect before Cecil. But his specious arguments had flown; and though he essayed to think that this beautiful creature had cast a new spell about him which would make her well worth winning, under all his efforts back came the recollection of Alicia's pale face and checked his eloquence.

"And so that's all about it," he said, precipitately, beginning as if about to utter a long

speech. "Now, Cecil, it's about you and me! Where's the good for either of us to strive after the impossible—why not take what is within our reach, and be satisfied?"

"We might take it," she replied; "but to be satisfied would not lie within your power or mine."

"Oh, I don't know that; there's a deal to be made out of life—you've got such a head on your shoulders that you'd keep us both straight! By Jove, Cecil, it's no bad thing to be Countess of Aldershot—that sounds perfectly asinine; but you know what I mean!"

"It is only that there is one thing better than title and position—that's to be honest and true. Dear old fellow, the diamonds in my coronet would burn my forehead; and however much they dazzled the world, I should feel the shame under."

"You put it so strongly—in so odd a fashion!" he expostulated.

"I think the downright truth always sounds odd," she answered. "Maybe I was a little heroic; but I am frightened, now that my senses have come back, to think what I have been near doing during these last weeks."

"I do believe you would have married me a fortnight ago," he said, with another covetous glance at the perfect face—not springing from any unworthy motive—born out of a consciousness that something well worth possession had slipped from his reach.

"Let us be thankful that I did not," she replied. "You might be noble enough to bear patiently, but I am not; I should have done you a cruel wrong."

"And you, the handsomest and richest girl in England! Not that I'm thinking now about the money;—of course, I do think of it, but not in that way. I couldn't afford to care for you if you were poor—perhaps that's meaner than anything I have said; but indeed mine is not just a common case, Cecil."

"You have great temptations, there is no doubt of that; all the more reason for overcoming them."

"Why, Cecil, if you leave me I am all alone; life is just a blank! My mother will sell me to somebody as sure as fate. I never knew any one who could struggle against her, and I love her. No matter how she seems to you, she's my mother."

There was a real strength even in his weakness that Cecil could appreciate; if he were led into error, it would not be so much lack of manly purpose as the honest affection for that icicle of a parent which would be the cause.

"You are right to love her; she commits great blunders, but she means to be a good mother—if you could only help her to see a little more clearly!"

"Teach her!" cried Lord George, with a comical look of dread. "You might as well rouse up all the dead Bourbons and try that dodge on them."

"Then you must remember her favorite motto—*noblesse oblige*! So it does, friend; never so much as with you nobles of this generation. Put every thing aside but a steadfast determination to do right; and the way will be made clear enough."

This was very fine language; but when Lord George recalled the earl's last losses at the Derby, and remembered that another such day would go far toward leaving him a bare title as his sole inheritance, it was not easy to be suitably impressed.

"I don't see why we shouldn't do right together," he said, discontentedly.

"Indeed, I'm sorry," Cecil replied, so penitently that, in spite of their earnestness, they both laughed.

"Come," cried Lord George, hopefully, "you don't like me any the worse for this talk; that's something."

"I never liked you half so much," she replied, frankly.

"Then you'll say let the past go—you'll try what we can do with life?"

"You force me back to the bold question I have already asked you," she said, too serious to think of shame. "You don't love me, George!"

"By Jove, when you say that and—and look so—it seems to me that I do!" he exclaimed.

"How would you like to stand at the altar with me and see Alicia stand there as my brides-maid, George? I tell you in that awful moment—solemn as death, George—the dear old dream would look so bright and beautiful that nothing could compensate for its loss. It is not we alone who would suffer—think of Alicia! In spite of title and position and grand relations, life hasn't been very kind to her, George. Don't you think she deserves a little mercy at our hands?"

"She's had a hard lot of it," he muttered, letting his head sink on his breast. "Poor Alicia!"

"Rich Alicia, because there is one heart that prizes her as she deserves! Oh, my friend, put the idea of buying ease and comfort out of your mind; build up your own future! There is enough to be done without in any way making your mother feel that you have degraded your family name. Try, at least; let Alicia wait, but own always to yourself that you love her; live with the object of winning her always in view, and leave the rest to time and God."

He had lost her, lost her and the millions; but though he could see plainly how dismal the immediate present looked, he was neither so despondent nor disappointed as he would have believed he must be under the blow. Something of her enthusiasm fired his soul; her words sounded like the echo of a voice which had long tried to rouse him out of the sloth and uselessness of his life.

"So it ends here," he said; "I think it ought to have been different."

"Yet you feel that it is right," she interrupted. "Only remember, you have done with plots or plans, no matter who forms them. Tell Alicia you love her, and then wait; don't let her be worried to death by any body knowing the truth, only leave neither shadow nor doubt between your two hearts any longer. She will wait patiently enough. Oh, George, it's beautiful to have something to wait for!"

Her voice died in a sob; she had become so softened by her appeal to him that these last words took her strength away as existence stretched out before her, desolated by the tornado which had swept so utterly without warning over its course.

"You are not happy, Cecil," he said, kindly. "I wish I could help you, but I'm such a stupid fellow I could never say just the right words as you do."

"I'm only a girl, and a goose," she answered, looking up with a smile. "I'll bear your sympathy; I couldn't give you a greater proof of confidence than that; I'd sooner die than be pitied. And now we have been improper long enough; we must go back to respectable society and decorous small-talk."

He had lost her; it was in keeping with the inconsistency of human nature that he should be filled with regret, although an instant previous he had been enthusiastic over the purpose she pointed out.

"I hate to let you go," he said, with a return of the boyish manner which he often displayed in spite of his six-and-twenty years.

"We shall be nearer to each other all our lives than if we could have committed our crowning folly," she replied. "Go and walk up and down for a little; I'll call you when I want you to come."

He obeyed her, passing out of sight, but remaining within reach of her voice. Once alone, Cecil sobbed passionately for a few moments. A sudden bitterness and rebellion came over her; why should she be an idiot, and refuse splendor and rank? A strong impulse seized her to call him back and say that every thing should remain as before. She had nothing left now, nothing! All the triumphs of the past two years had failed to bring any other heart so near her as this man's, even though in his case it was a mere fancy struggling to overpower an honest affection. But he might learn to love her; she could teach him to forget; perhaps in his companionship accomplish the still harder task of teaching herself. To summon him and lay her hand in his—it was the one chance of interest or occupation that the future offered. He was not an ordinary man; there were the elements of greatness in his composition; she could aid him, push him on, and gratify her ambitious nature by his career. Why not do it? Short of a crown, the world had nothing much more brilliant to bestow than the position within her grasp. Why could she not care for it? But though this temptation with which she tried to dazzle her

vanity failed, she was tempted. Existence spread out so bare and desolate; her proud heart chafed so angrily under the consciousness of its own weakness, that she was moved to snatch at any means of escape from its complaints, if only to drown them under other troubles. And he was so good and kind; he would pet and spoil her, and beneath her haughty exterior she had a childish fondness for such treatment. He would learn to love her. The very repetition of the phrase restored her to a better mood by its sting to her pride. She remembered Alicia, and the last unworthy feeling died out of her breast; whatever harm she might be capable of doing herself, she could not ruin the happiness of another.

"Lord George!" she called, afraid to remain longer alone.

He had been walking up and down the garden paths, distracted by a score of varying emotions, wondering most that in spite of a sentimental regret as he thought of Cecil's beauty, he could not be so miserable as he ought over this ruin of his hopes. The long-repressed love would assert itself; life would look full of brilliant possibilities, however persistently he regarded the annoyances and perplexities of the present.

He hurried back at Cecil's summons; she laid her hand on his arm, and they walked silently through the shrubberies until they neared the groups scattered about the lawn.

"You'll never forget," she said, quickly.

"Remember, I trust you; I believe in you!"

"And I'll be worthy of the faith," he answered, in a low voice.

"For me, but still more for the sake of right and for Alicia," she whispered.

They parted without another word.

The next morning's journals announced the death of the earl. He had been found dead in his bed; the cause heart disease, long neglected, though only his old family physician heard the verdict without surprise.

But he was dead, and Lord George the Earl of Aldershot.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FORD'S JOURNEY.

AUTUMN arrived, and John Ford took his relative and Valery back to Rome. The brief struggle was over, and the Eternal City stood up, with all eyes fixed upon her, as the future capital of united Italy; and never, even in her proudest days, when the imperial eagles took their broadest flight, had she reached so high a destiny as in this promise of her regeneration.

Valery toiled diligently at her picture, and the weeks glided so rapidly away that winter came before she was aware. She had been so often obliged to pause in the task which interested her, to do other work, drawings and little sketches demanded by an English house, that the painting had not yet reached completion.

Even Mr. Ford had not seen it; it was to be finished without either counsel or criticism, according to his wish, though he promised her to be very severe when she had done all that she could.

In December he received news which made it necessary for him to go down to Naples. He had amassed a competency during these long years of patient labor, and a portion of his savings was invested in some Neapolitan funds, and just then required attention. He did not look well this winter, though insisting that he was never in better health, and his cousin and Valery were glad that he should be forced to accept another week of idleness. But Mrs. Sloman could not allow him to go alone; he had come back from his summer trip minus several of his shirts, and with the greater portion of his wardrobe so thoroughly out of repair, that Jemima had vowed never to trust him again on a journey without her guardianship.

"I am going with you, John," she said, as soon as he spoke of his departure. "I'm going to pack up this minute."

"There is no need of leaving your breakfast. I shan't start for several days," he answered, for she had risen from the table as she spoke.

"I believe in being ready," she replied; "better be ready and not go, than go and not be ready;" and she put her head on one side with an air of wisdom which made her look so much like an old blackbird she kept in a cage, that Valery could not help smiling.

It was a mania of hers to begin packing the instant a journey was proposed; sometimes her boxes stood ready for weeks in advance, and at the oddest times—say in the middle of the night, or while engaged with guests—she would be seized with the idea that some indispensable article had been left out, and undo her work to find the thing she wanted at the bottom of the biggest trunk.

"You must get ready too, Valery," she said; "now I do hope you'll try to be in time—I don't want any missing of trains."

But Valery had no mind to leave her picture, and looked so blank at the prospect, that Mr. Ford, who always noticed every change in her face, said,

"You don't care to go, Valery?"

"I can't very well," she replied: "I have those drawings to finish, and I have been so hindered already about my painting, that I begin to have a desperate feeling in regard to it."

"Oh, my goodness, with you to think about here, maybe setting yourself on fire, and the Jesuits in the state; they are, and no knowing what Antonelli is up to, for all he doesn't wink, or make any more sign than a mouse in a wall, and then's when I trust them least, and John to watch down there under Vesuvius; for he'd walk straight into it, you know you would, John, and never know there was an eruption if I wasn't near to hold you back by your coat-tails, and so I shall go distracted between the

pair of you!" cried Mrs. Sloman, excitement making her more incoherent than usual.

"I promise neither to set the house on fire nor let myself be stolen," returned Valery. "But I really can't go, so you must be nice and not urge me, because I hate to refuse you."

"You're always the best girl in the world," pronounced Mrs. Sloman, menacing Valery with a fork in the most deadly manner, while her face beamed with kindness; "you always were, and will be, and if I've told John so once I have a million times, and whatever he'd say he don't dare deny it."

"Aunt Jemima has apparently had difficulty in bringing me round to her good opinion of you, Valery," he said, pleasantly, though thinking any rather than pleasant things. It was a fresh prick of the thorny cross he wore so patiently, to feel that she did not care to go—hard to endure as the trifles which hurt us always are.

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that, John," cried his relative, in an injured tone; "as if I would say or think that you are not as fond of Valery as I am, and didn't appreciate her as she deserves—it's making me out worse than a black-backed Jesuit or a— or a simoom, whatever that is, and I'm sure I don't remember, and I really wonder at you, John, so I do."

"Don't mind him, Jemima," Valery said, laughing; "he's a gloomy old bachelor, and doesn't half appreciate the bliss of being bothered with two such paragons as we are."

"Oh, I don't set up for that. I've had enough of it ever since that swindler-woman who never brought back the handkerchiefs she took to mark—paragon, indeed!"

"Paragon was her name," said Ford.

"Green, indeed, not she; it was us for being taken in, and she pretending to be a distressed widow and an Englishwoman, and telling all the particulars, even to her husband's cork leg, and no doubt wiping her nose on every one of those handkerchiefs this minute and laughing in her sleeve. I'd paragon or green her if I could find out where she was, I promise you."

"Those six handkerchiefs are a sore subject with Jemima," said Ford.

"And well they might be, when I went out in the rain just to give her something to do, and walked away over to the Via Prefettura; and I know Borgia overcharged me, and the hens weren't matches, as I might have expected from his name, and I told him outright he ought to have had Lucretia for his grandmother, and he knew no more who I meant than I know who Job's wife was."

"I think we will start on Thursday, Aunt Jemima," observed Ford, to turn the current of her thoughts.

"I'm going to see about the things," said she, "and I ought to lock up every closet, else there won't be a thing left."

"Giovanni and I will take good care," said Valery.

But Jemima shook her head dolorously.

"I'm always prepared for the worst, that's one comfort," said she, with resignation; "John never goes out that I don't expect to see him brought in with a broken leg, and whatever happens, Valery, there's always a lot of old linen in that table-drawer that won't open in my room, and that's just the way all the furniture behaves, such a lot of rotten traps as John has picked up!"

Luckily Giovanni brought a message that somebody was waiting to see her, so she trotted off, managing to tear her dress on the door-knob in her hurry.

"So your friend that you met last summer, Mrs. Vinton, is married," Ford said, plunging into the first subject of conversation which offered, lest Valery should observe that he was not quite himself to-day.

"Oh yes; several weeks since; I have had two letters from her, and she seems a very happy duchess indeed."

"I thought they were coming here—he is a Roman."

"Yes; but he is detained in Florence—he is very active in politics, I believe. They will come early in January, Hetty writes."

"I don't quite like leaving you alone," he said.

"Please don't put that fancy in Jenima's head! Why, what should happen to me? There are half a dozen women artists here who always live alone. I shall do very well, and keep so busy that I shan't know where the time goes."

"Too busy to miss us," he said, with a rather sad smile.

"Now that is downright wicked—I refuse to answer! You don't look well," she continued, regarding him closely.

"Ah, that would be a still more dangerous fancy with which to infect poor Jenima," he replied.

"But are you sure it is not true?" she asked.

"I am very well—there's nothing ever ails me," he answered cheerfully enough; "I grow grayer and older, but that's not much wonder; I'm getting elderly, you know."

"Nonsense!" cried Valery, with more candor than politeness. "One would think you Methuselah, by the way you talk sometimes."

"I think I feel rather like him," he said.

"Say what you will, I don't believe you are well," returned she.

He shook his head, and tried to put her off with a laugh.

"Then something troubles you," she went on; "you have not been like yourself since we came home."

"What a fanciful little Valery," said he, playfully.

"Indeed it is true; I have been so occupied, that I have not thought about it as much as I ought."

"More than enough, little Valery; I assure you there is no occasion for any such ideas."

"Nothing has happened, no worry about

your investments, nothing to make you anxious for the future?" she persisted.

"Nothing," he replied; "I am quite a rich man nowadays in my small way. Dismiss your fears, Valery."

"You wouldn't deceive me? You would tell me—you wouldn't shut yourself up in your thoughts, and be too proud to have my sympathy?" she pleaded, looking at him with those earnest eyes which were the one real beauty of her face.

"If there were any thing in which sympathy could help me, I would come to you, Valery; be sure of that."

"I hope so; I should be very unhappy if I were not sure of it."

"Always such a good, dear Valery!" he said, tenderly, meeting her gaze with courteous cheerfulness, while his heart ached wearily under it, to think that, with all her affection and sympathy, she must live worlds away from any perception of his real self. Perhaps, some time after he was dead and gone, she would gain a vague idea of what she had been to him—he should be glad to think it would be so—not to understand clearly enough for any sadness at the thought that he had suffered for her sake, but enough to render his memory precious in the midst of the love and happiness which he was certain she would one day find. These rapid reflections brought a fresh idea into his mind, though by no means new. He had long meant to make his will; it must be put off no longer; before he started on this journey it should be done, and then, somewhere in the future, Valery would learn the truth in a measure. He thought that when at rest in the strangers' burial-ground under the blue sweep of the Roman sky—in the quiet spot where Shelley's ashes lay, where violets blossomed above poor Keats's tomb—it would be pleasant to know that Valery sometimes snatched a few brief instants out of her treasured happy life, to steal away and sit by his grave, and wonder dreamily over the secret which she had never suspected while he walked by her side.

Never to know until then; he had no right to trouble her youth with any knowledge of his burden. Had he spoken while her heart remained undisturbed, she might have come to him out of mistaken gratitude, and he should have done her a horrible wrong. During these weeks since they met, he was more glad and thankful than ever that he had been mute; for he saw a change in her—a new zest in her life—a new strength and energy—and he understood from whence it dated. They had told him of her danger, of her preserver; and Ford knew what Valery was still ignorant of, that since that season there had risen an unrecognized dream in her soul which helped to brighten existence into added beauty. So this autumn the old burden grew harder to bear; the girl-heart had stirred; it might be only a warning, but it served to keep constantly before his

mind the idea that sooner or later he must see her pass out of his life into the guardianship of a claim so precious and close, that there would be no place left even for the free intercourse of the present days.

Her voice roused him from his reverie; he looked up, not with a start as people do in novels—he had too long kept guard over every word and gesture for such weakness—but smiling an apology for his preoccupation.

"I shall try and have my picture ready to show you when you get back," she was saying.

She had been so long with her dreams, that she had not even noticed his silence; it was well, it was what he wished; but it was another pang, all the same.

"You are not to work too hard," he said; "remember that."

"A fine example of moderation you give me," she replied; "why, you would never leave off if Jenima did not drag you away."

"I must work while I may—I've less time left than you."

"You are forty-four years old; one would think you a hundred by the way you talk," she said, indignantly.

"Yes, forty-four; almost double your age," he said.

So much the better; not that he was weak enough to wish the end at hand—he was glad to stay while there was work to be done; but it was a sort of rest to see the snows of age approach—they might bring a quiet which the maturity of manhood had failed to give.

"It seems a long way off—a long way," Valery said, absently.

"I beg your pardon!"

She remembered that though he had no feeling where his age was concerned, her outspoken thought showed a want of tact; so, instead of repeating it, began to speak of his journey, and, woman-like, gave him sundry small commissions to fulfill for her.

"I shall have to make a list," said he; "why, what an unexpected weakness for ornaments you have developed."

"Oh, it is only that I want to make two or three little presents; though I do confess to intending the shell for myself; so be careful about the pattern and color, for I have coveted a set ever so long."

"Now, that is too bad," said he; "you have spoiled my Christmas present; Jenima had told me about your longing."

"I'll not have shell for my Christmas," said she, with one of the occasional willful looks, which made her like Cecil. "I have set my heart on a sketch, done just for me—never to be used for the subject of a large picture—to be all mine."

"The queen has spoken," he replied, rising from his chair. "I must go; I have a little business on hand."

So he went his way, determined this very morning to carry out the idea that had been in his mind so often. He drew up a draft of

a will, and, simple as it was, took a good while over it; he wanted it to say so many things, yet only for Valery's understanding when the time arrived that she should read it. He carried the paper to a lawyer of his acquaintance, to be certain that it was done in legal form, arranging to have it brought to his studio the next day for his signature.

Somehow testamentary proceedings are never an exhilarating task, and Ford regarded his journey in a more gloomy light than before. But the next day the will was signed and witnessed; he had settled every thing now, and could be at rest. But though he told himself this over and over, he was far from quiet during the two days which followed. He was sorry now that he had permitted Mrs. Sloman to leave Valery, or that he had not insisted on the girl's accompanying them. As they all three sat together that last evening, he watched Valery with an inexplicable dread at his heart which he could not shake off. It was not the idea that he should never return which troubled him; he asked himself this question, but it was not that. Close as she sat, her face lifted to his with its slow, beautiful smile while she talked cheerfully, he seemed to see her through the mist of a great distance, as if some premonition which could not take tangible shape strove to warn him that they might never sit thus again; that some great change or some deadly peril hovered over the girl, and must fall before he could get back to her rescue.

It was all as fanciful and silly as possible, and he was vexed with his own folly, but could not drive the feeling away.

"I'm sorry I made up my mind to go," he said, abruptly, during one of Mrs. Sloman's frequent absences. The poor woman's mind was so fretted about her trunks, that she could not spend half an hour without running to peep into them to see if every thing was there; one might almost have thought she had put her immortal soul into the boxes, and was afraid it might not be safe.

"Why?" Valery asked.

"I don't know; I hate change, I believe," he returned, evasively, getting away from the strong impulse to tell her at least a portion of his dreary fancies.

"You will only be gone a week," she said.

Only a week; it seemed nothing to her! Only a week; but it was like a year to contemplate in his eyes, since he must be deprived of her companionship through its weary length. And in his life he had known so much to happen during that brief cycle of days! More than ample time to rob him of the one joy existence had left—her society in his house. Decidedly he was growing imbecile in advance of age! Heartily ashamed of his weakness, he began to talk of her picture, her friend who was coming the next month, any thing to rouse his thoughts out of the gloom into which they sank like so many tired birds.

But the uneasy feelings went with him to his

chamber, haunted his restless pillow for hours, and when he did fall into a disturbed slumber, there followed a terrible nightmare, in which he saw Valery exposed to some nameless peril—what, he could not tell; but he could see her beckoning frantically toward him, imploring him to save her, while that awful roar from the invisible danger almost drowned her voice, and he could not move hand or foot to aid.

The dream had so utterly unnerved him that he was glad to get up, light the lamp, and read and smoke until the day broke. He lay down again after that and slept a while; then it was time for the early breakfast their departure rendered necessary. He went out to find Valery occupying herself with various little matters for his comfort, and in her cheerful talk somewhat forgot his tiresome forebodings. But they returned at the moment of departure, though Jemima talked so fast and loud in her excitement that it was difficult to listen to any thing else.

"Whatever you do, Valery, be careful of fire; and I've laid all my keys in your room: they're under the sofa-pillow, and you'd better keep them in your shoes, for if any of these thieves about, and I know the piazza is full of them, should break into the house, they'd likely not look there."

"I'll take every possible care, Jemima. Enjoy yourself, and don't be disturbed by fears that any thing goes wrong here," Valery replied.

"Oh, enjoyment; I don't expect that, my dear, with John just as likely as not getting up a new eruption of Pompeii; and I don't like leaving you either, Valery; and whatever you do, don't let any Jesuit make friends, he'd have you a Romanist and shut up in a convent before you knew where you were. Oh dear me, I wonder if Giovanni has taken down the boxes."

As the carriage that was to take the travelers to the station dashed out of the court-yard, and Jemima was fretting over the probable loss of their luggage, Ford glanced up at one of the windows, and saw Valery waving a last farewell. Again the awful warning shook his soul. He would have gone back, but for the utter absurdity of the thing. He gazed as long as he could catch a glimpse of her figure, then threw himself into his seat, drew his hat over his eyes, not even hearing poor Jemima's complaints.

"One—two—oh, where's the other carpet-sack! And my satchel and the gray shawl—oh, here they are! But my glasses—John, John, I've left my glasses—drive back—no, they're in my pocket. Dear, dear, I know we've left something, I'm sure of it. Mercy on us, how the man drives! we'll be upset. I do declare, John, you're fast asleep! Did one ever know the like!"

Here, fortunately, she became speechless for a space, and left Ford in quiet.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FLOOD.

THE week of solitude passed uneventfully enough with Valery; she worked hard, forced herself to take long walks, and, when evening came, was ready to enjoy her arm-chair and cheerful fire. Several times old friends of Ford's came to inquire how she was getting on, and once or twice took her to the opera—that indispensable adjunct of Roman life, though unfortunately not always the performance of unalloyed perfection which imaginative strangers expect to find in the birthplace of song.

Just as she began to look for the return of her wanderers, she received a letter from Mr. Ford, announcing that he should be delayed several days beyond the period set for his absence; and Valery wondered a little that he showed such evident impatience at his detention in the beautiful city, since he had no pressing work on hand. There was a rambling epistle, too, from Mrs. Sloman, with so many commissions and incoherent directions for Giovanni's guidance, such a jumble of unfinished sentences and parentheses, that Valery was really at a loss to know what she wanted done, and decided that it would better be not to confuse or irritate old Giovanni by attempting to explain.

So she lived her quiet life, saw her picture grow rapidly under her now practiced hand, and dreamed her dreams as of old, for there was an odd mingling of the visionary and practical in her character; and certainly the former weakness never interfered with the much-vaunted quality, which in her case was redeemed from its usual tiresomeness by this same imaginative indulgence.

It was natural enough that the recollection of her summer's adventure should be frequently in her thoughts, and that the image of the man who had saved her from a cruel death should many a time haunt her fancies as she toiled at her easel, or during the long evenings walked up and down the vast old Roman drawing-room, which in spite of its dimensions had been made to look quaint and habitable by Ford's artistic taste, though Jemima did groan over the untidiness of the tapestries that hung from ceiling to wainscot, and the impossibility of keeping the dust out of the curiously-carved cabinets and the oddly-twisted chair and table legs.

I do not in the least mean to say that Valery had followed the example of some heroine in an old romance, and fallen in love with a man she had never seen but once, because he had preserved her from peril; nor did she imitate certain transcendental creeds too common in our day, and decide that since he had saved her life, that life necessarily belonged to him. There was no idea of love in her mind; indeed, if conscious how frequently her thoughts dwelt upon this stranger, she would have been troubled and annoyed, and would have laughed more derisively at her own silliness than the sternest

censor. But she only knew there was a charm in the face such as no man's face had ever possessed for her, a subtle sweetness in the slow, melancholy tones, whose echoes still rang in her ear and wakened some eager voice away down in her soul, which had been silent till that hour. There was nothing distinct enough in her fancies to rouse a suspicion; she liked to think that one day they should meet again, and she believed that it would come to pass—how or when she knew not—but they were to meet, and the pleasantest idea which presented itself in connection with this meeting was, that in her turn she might be permitted to serve him, do something to lighten the darkness which she felt had gloomed about his way, a darkness in which he fretted and struggled instead of waiting with steadfast patience until it should please God to send the new dawn.

It was the second afternoon after John Ford's letter reached her; she was still at her easel, though the waning light warned her that it was time to lay by her brush, when old Giovanni entered in his shambling way, and began a mingled string of apologies for his intrusion and lamentations over some misfortune.

"What is it? What has happened?" Valery asked, so suddenly brought back to reality that she had not heard a syllable of his monologue.

"O Signorina, Signorina mia! It is as I say," returned Giovanni, flinging his hands about like an old wire-hung image.

But Valery was too much accustomed to small excitements on his part and that of Mrs. Sloman to be agitated; she had seen him wring his hands when a fire would not burn, and shriek that he was deserted by his saints if he chanced to drop a tea-cup, so she wiped her brushes and waited for him to pour out another string of piteous ejaculations, which threw no light whatever upon the cause of his distress; then she said,

"Now tell me what is the matter, Giovanni, and I'll see if between us we can't remedy the mishap."

"We can do nothing," cried Giovanni, with a new twist of his whole frame; "good and kind as the Signorina is, she can't help here—only the blessed saints can do that—and they seem to act pretty much as they usually do, and not care what happens," he added, with a sudden burst of irreligion which was ludicrously out of keeping with the passionate appeals he had just addressed to every haloed name in the calendar.

"Don't slander the saints," said Valery, unable to repress a smile. "What is it they won't do? Come, Giovanni, you've not explained yet what has happened."

"Marta mia, and the Signorina who understands Italian as if born here, and I have told over and over," moaned Giovanni, spreading out his arms with a despairing gesture, then as suddenly bringing the palms of his hands together with the report like a small pistol. "The river, Signorina, the river!"

"Is the Tiber rising?" Valery demanded, serious enough now.

"It began last night; but it's coming up—up—nobody knows where it will stop now."

"But it never rises beyond a certain height—hasn't for years and years," Valery expostulated.

"Who knows?" cried he. "Every thing is changed—the Pope shut in the Vatican, and who can tell how far off the saints may have gone in a passion—a bad-tempered set always."

"What has come over you?" she asked. "Only yesterday you were exulting at the people's triumph; are you wishing the Pontifical rule back already?"

"What you have does well enough when the sun shines—it's what you haven't that you need when trouble comes," retorted Giovanni, pitifully. "The saints and the Pope may go where they please on week days, but for *festas* and times of danger one would rather know that they are somewhere about."

Valery had put her brushes in water and covered her easel, and was ready to leave the chamber.

"Is the Signorina going out?" he asked.

"Yes; I want to see for myself if there is likely to be danger."

"What I was thinking was that if the Signorina would not mind dinner being late—now would she, for once in a way?"

"Mercy, no! so tell me what you want, there's a good soul."

"For my old sister will be so frightened—she's a stupid old woman—but sisters are horn, not bought! The Signorina knows Elisabetta?"

"Of course—she is *portiera* in the house where Miss Lane's studio is. That reminds me—I must go and see about her things: she is in England, and the house is so near the river that if it rises her pictures might be ruined."

"Why, then, the Signorina will see Elisabetta!"

"I'll bring her back here for the night, so don't be troubled. You oughtn't to go out, for your rheumatism has been very bad these two days past."

"I'm worse off than if my legs were made of wood," grumbled Giovanni; "and only last year I gave two candles and a pot of flowers and a new apron to Santa Monica, and that's all the thanks I got; I tried San Giovanni till I was tired, and the other's worse—so then I just joined the Liberals," he continued, in a burst of confidence.

"The best you can do now is to stay in the house and keep warm," Valery said, not thinking it worth while to offer any advice as to the possibility of uniting liberal sentiments and a suitable reverence for the saints. "Elisabetta shall be taken care of; make your mind easy."

"There never was any body so good as the Signorina," Giovanni averred; but she escaped at this beginning of what she knew would be a

long tirade, hurried to her chamber, and made ready to go out.

It was not dark yet; there seemed no excitement in regard to the rise of the river; and when she questioned the coachman of the cabriolet she had taken in the piazza, he only shrugged his shoulders and replied,

"*Chi sa!* They say the water is already high in the Ghetto, but they're only Jews, and used to it once a year."

She drove along the Corso to the Via della Fontanella, down which the carriage turned—a long winding street which under various names keeps on its course to the Tiber. Her destination was off this thoroughfare—a narrow street and a desolate old house, where Miss Lane kept her studio with true British obstinacy, because every body urged her to seek more habitable quarters.

By the time Valery reached it there were evident signs that the overflow of the Tiber was much more considerable than usual; the houses between her and the river had the water close at their doors. But nobody seemed alarmed; it had done its worst, no great harm at that, and the people waited with their customary stoicism until the next day should bring a diminution of the flood.

Old Elisabetta could not be found; the lower floor was deserted; but Valery at last succeeded in capturing an urchin on the stairs, who told her that Elisabetta was ill. She had her bed in the anteroom of Miss Lane's studio during that lady's absence, and there Valery found her, groaning and moaning with all her might. Valery comforted her as well as she could, and promised to come back in a few moments, but the first thing was to get the keys of one of the ground-floor rooms in which she knew Miss Lane had several boxes stored containing books, pictures, and other valuables. She could not content herself with the indifference of the Romans, and meant to have the boxes moved up stairs, so that they would be safe in case the inundation increased.

The house was almost without inmates, and these were not to be found, so Valery had to go out into the street in search of assistance. It was very difficult to find any body; the men preferred lounging about the doors and watching the river, and willing away the time in gossip, to earning money. But she succeeded at last in hiring two; then they made as great an ado about getting the cases up stairs as if she had asked them to move a mountain, and several times appeared inclined to leave them half-way and depart. However, she induced them to persevere, and the boxes were finally placed in safety. The next thing to be thought of was to get Elisabetta out; it was dark now, and Valery found that the hackman had driven off and left her to her own devices.

But Elisabetta was really too ill to go into the night air; she was suffering from a feverish cold, and considered herself at death's door. She lay on her pallet, huddled up in rugs, her

bright eyes and beak-like nose appearing above the wraps, and giving her the look of some monster bird of prey. She could only groan, and lament, and call on Valery to listen to her dying words.

"Tell Giovanni I forgive him," said she; "he kept my mother's necklace and gave it to that hussy of a Carolina, and she jilted him after all, but I forgive him! Holy saints, I want a priest—I burn—I freeze. Ah, *Signorina mia*, it is death, it is death."

It was of no use to argue, Valery knew that; she bade her lie still, and went out to the nearest chemist's and returned with some simple medicines which she had tried often enough in similar cases to be certain of their efficacy.

"I thought you had left me to die alone," moaned Elisabetta. "There's that wretched Marietta promised to come and sit with me when her work was done, and she's not here yet!"

"I am going to cure you," Valery said; "now be quiet, it is bad for your head to talk so much."

But Elisabetta had never been quiet in her life, and had no mind to begin so late. She kept up a steady tirade of complaints in her shrill old voice, while Valery did what she could to get her comfortable. There was a fire-place in the anteroom, and wood in the studio, so she managed to make a great deal of smoke, and flame enough to heat water for the preparation of a tisane. She persuaded Elisabetta to drink it with a harmless anodyne added, did all that was possible, but the poor creature suffered so much that she could not bear to leave her until Marietta should appear.

The old woman grew so feverish and excited that for a couple of hours Valery was too busy to think of any thing else, though she did occasionally remark that there was an unusual bustle below. At length Elisabetta sank into a doze; Valery looked at her watch; it was nearly nine o'clock. A great stillness had settled over the narrow street; suddenly Valery became conscious of a distant roar, like a heavy wind surging up with a muffled sound. She went to the window and looked out; the sky was cloudy and overcast—it was not that she noticed—the street was turned into a rapid running brook—the neighboring houses were all dark—not a human being in sight. There was no possibility of her getting home until daylight; by that time the flood would probably have abated so that she could walk, at least there would be somebody visible whom she could send for a carriage. She went back to the bed; Elisabetta still slept; but while Valery bent over her she woke with a cry from some troubled dream, and began to shriek and pray so that it was difficult to soothe her. "There's a roaring in my ears," she said; "it is death! Holy Virgin, it is death!"

"It is only the river—there's a flood. I hear it too," Valery said.

"Don't leave me—don't let me die like a dog!" pleaded the old woman.

"I don't mean to leave you; I shall stay with you till morning," Valery replied; and this assurance gave Elisabetta a little courage.

Valery recollected she had eaten no dinner, but fortunately knew that Miss Lane always kept a store of tea, biscuits, sweetmeats, and similar edibles in a closet of her studio, that she might make her luncheons without trouble. Elisabetta had the keys safe in her pocket, for she was an honest old soul, and could be trusted perfectly, except where her temper was concerned. So Valery was able to have a cup of tea, which she drank without milk, and ate some biscuits, smiling over her Barmecide feast, and thinking how astonished John Ford would be if he could have a vision of her in the desolate place. She talked cheerfully with Elisabetta, and at last the ancient crone admitted that she felt easier, and thought she might possibly live until morning.

"You are better than a score of doctors, Signorina," she said; "but I can't keep you here any longer."

"I am going to stay, however," Valery answered, and Elisabetta could only reiterate praises and thanks, breaking off to lavish bad words on her patron saint as a new twinge of pain seized her.

Valery wheeled an arm-chair out of the studio, found some books, trimmed the lamp, and sat down to read, after administering another potion to Elisabetta, strong enough this time to send her off into a tranquil sleep that lasted for hours.

Valery waded through the dismal old French novel, then watched the dancing flames, and listened to the old woman's heavy breathing until she grew drowsy herself. She arranged the fire so that it would keep in, wrapped a shawl about her, and did not attempt to resist the "exposition of sleep" which had come upon her.

It was long past midnight when she was awakened from some vaguely pleasant dream by an awful tumult without. She started to her feet and listened. The distant roar that had helped to lull her to slumber sounded near and painfully distinct—like the dash of a mighty torrent pouring directly down upon the house. Elisabetta slept quietly; she would not waken her. She ran into the studio, unbarred the shutters, and opened the casement. Whichever way she turned her eyes, there was the sweep of waves, pouring resistlessly on—rising always higher, higher. The moon seemed to be up, though she was not visible, but a troubled, ghostly light streaked the clouded heavens, and gave a more frightful aspect to the awful waste of waters, which was like a sea as she gazed through a gap in the dwellings toward the open space where the river had its natural bed.

At first it did not occur to her to be alarmed for her own safety; she only thought of the hundreds of helpless beings in the distant Ghetto, in the houses close upon the banks of the Tiber. But as she gazed, the torrent swelled

up and up—she bent over the window-sill and looked down—the casements of the ground-floor were half hidden in the murky stream!

The house was built with the first story of very inconsiderable height, much lower than customary with Roman dwellings—another hour, if the inundation increased as it had done within the last, and the flood would attain the spot where she stood. Even yet she was not absolutely terrified; there was something dreary and weird about remaining there with only that helpless old woman; she felt as if she were alone in some great ship on a gloomy sea, or watching the tempest from some light-house built out in the swelling surf. But there was no danger; if the water continued to rise, they should be obliged to take refuge on one of the upper floors, but she need not waken Elisabetta unless the change became a necessity, for the crone would inevitably go straight out of what poor senses illness had left her if roused by any such command.

At all events, she must do what she could to save Miss Lane's property in case the worst arrived. A line of lofty shelves ran along one side of the studio; Valery mounted a step-ladder and piled all the articles that were movable upon them. It took some time, and as she toiled she could hear the sweep of the waters growing always louder and more terrible. She went to the window again and peered into the dismal night; the stream had risen a good deal since she last looked, but it still lacked several feet of attaining their floor; it must stop here—within the memory of man no inundation had attained a greater height.

She returned to the anteroom—Elisabetta had not stirred—she put fresh wood on the fire, and sat down, determined not to let nervous forebodings trouble her, since there could be no real peril. She consulted her watch; it was three o'clock. She would not look out again for an hour, took up her book and forced herself to read—read on, though the roar of the waters sounded so close that often she turned instinctively to see if they had actually invaded the room. It was a very long sixty minutes to spend, but she sat resolutely still, and Elisabetta never woke. The time she had set was up; Valery went back again to discover if there was any change. There was indeed, but none that promised hope! The flood had gained a number of inches—it swept on in absolute waves, and she could see fragments of furniture and other objects borne past, but no human victim as yet. She could delay no longer; it was not safe to remain in the rooms another half-hour. She would not rouse Elisabetta till the last moment; she would go up stairs and prepare as well as she could for the old creature's comfort before wakening her. Now it occurred to her as strange that she had heard no sound from above; that nobody had come down to learn how the old woman fared. There were people on the next floor, she knew—beyond that, the house was used for storage-rooms.

She stirred the fire into a brighter flame, so that in case Elisabetta woke in her absence she might not find herself in the dark, took the lamp and went out into the stone passage whose flags echoed dimly under her feet in the solitude. She passed along it—reached the turn of the staircase, came in front of a great black door that looked grim and cruel enough to be the entrance to some horrible dungeon. She put out her hand to push it open, supposing that it was only swung to—it resisted her attempt. She set the lamp on the floor and exerted her full strength; she might as well have pushed against the stone wall—it never moved! At the same instant a new rush of the torrent, a fresh gust of wind, moaning like a human voice through the corridor, struck her ear. For the first time a sensation of genuine terror shook her courage, and seemed to paralyze her whole frame with its awful chill.

She threw off the horrible dread, and again pushed against the oaken door with all her force, bruising her hands in the frantic effort only to find it idle as the previous one. She caught up the lamp and ran to the stairs—descended a few steps—heard a low rush and murmur, and held the lamp so that she could look down. The water reached the platform where she stood, the rays of light fell over a deep dark pool which foamed and gurgled as if impatient to engulf her.

Back she rushed to the door, pushed, struggled, beat upon it with her clenched hands. If buried alive and beating on the doors of the vault that shut her in, the attempt could not have been more vain. Even yet, though her head swam and her blood turned to ice, she did not wholly lose her presence of mind. She must make the people above hear, that was all; they would surely be awakened by the noise of the water, and she could rouse them into a recollection that there was some one needing help on the floor below. She darted into the ante-room, treading softly, even in her fright turning to make sure that Elisabetta slept, seized a heavy billet of wood, and flew out, careful to close the double doors, that no sound should penetrate to the chamber.

She beat and pounded on the door, hammered and beat till her arms were swollen and strained, but not a sound from above warned her that she was heard—not even a dint showed in the oaken panels the least sign of her frenzied efforts. She shrieked aloud in a mad hope that her voice might pass the heavily-beamed ceilings; only the echo of her own voice replied, wild, unnatural, and the roar of the wind and the rush of the waters answered in still more fearful echoes.

Back to the staircase; the flood had mounted up—up. The broad step where she had stood a few moments since was hidden under a ridge of white foam. One more trial: she could not yield yet! Her last strength went out in the frantic dash she made anew against the oaken door, in the sharp scream with which

she echoed it; she staggered back under the recoil of her own blow, and half fell upon the ground.

A few instants of partial insensibility, then she was on her feet—the instinct of self-preservation too strong for her to be utterly helpless yet. She tried to steady her limbs, to get back a little force; dropped on her knees and uttered a prayer. A strange sort of composure came over her momentarily. If it was God's will that her earthly life should end here, she must be resigned! She had believed in Him always; trusted that, whatever came, her faith would never yield. She must hold fast to it now.

One more glance down the black pool, and she fled into the chamber beyond, half unconsciously barring the door behind her, as if there was a sort of safety in that. She was at the window again, straining her eyes across the dark waste which seemed to sweep uninterrupted to the very base of the Janiculum, rising always, up, up, in its relentless swell.

She must waken Elisabetta; she went back to the room, looked at her watch—it was five o'clock—after five. Day could not be very far off; but death was nearer—she knew this; it might hold aloof long enough for the first ray of dawn to light them to their cold grave, but that was all!

Every incident of her life seemed to revive as she stood there; scenes, voices, words, dating away back to her earliest remembrance, startled her even in her terror with their vividness. The old woman stirred in her sleep; muttered some broken words; she was dreaming of her husband who had been dead and gone many a year; dreaming of the country-house where they dwelt together, when her wrinkled face was young and fair; babbling of some festival day which had come; bidding him get up and make ready for the morning's mass.

A rush, a sweep, an ominous creaking, a shaking of the old house, firm as it was! Valery looked toward the windows that were on a level with the floor, giving upon an iron balcony. The water dripped in; at first a little stream, growing stronger, wider as she gazed, floating on, on, silently, noiselessly, spreading over the floor, reaching the hearth where she stood.

The noise had been caused by the breaking of the balcony supports under the sweep of the flood; the sound roused old Elisabetta, who started up with a cry.

"Santa Maria, what is it—where am I—who's here?"

"Hush, Elisabetta! I am with you," Valery said.

"What was the noise? what was it?"

"Something outside; lie down again," Valery continued, going to the bed. She need not tell her yet—no good to prolong the agony—let her have till the latest possible moment free therefrom. "Are there any people above stairs, Elisabetta?"

"No—no; they didn't pay their rent, and the *padrone* turned them out last week. What do you want, Signorina? I'm not worse, am I? what is it?"

"No; you are better, it will be all well now," Valery said, answering her own thoughts more than the old woman's words. They were saved—the keys must have been left in Elisabetta's keeping. "Where are they?" she asked quickly.

"Do I know?" was the fretful reply. "Poor things; but they were a sad, idle lot, any way."

"No, no; the keys—the keys to the upper floor," cried Valery.

"Oh, the *padrone* took them; he said he wouldn't let the rooms yet—he carried off the keys," replied Elisabetta, turning her head sleepily on her pillow.

The last hope gone; it was God's will that they should die! Life stretched out before her so full of interest, so bright with promise! Oh, it was hard to be resigned! Not so much the absolute dread of dying, that was only physical; but to die, to leave so much undone—it was cruel to bring her into the world only for this!

She was down on her knees, struggling against such rebellion; some eager accents roused Elisabetta, and she called again, "What is it? I will know what is the matter!"

Valery stepped off the hearth, her feet were almost ankle-deep in the water! At the same instant the old woman raised herself in the bed, saw the black current rolling stealthily away over the floor, and made the room re-echo with her frenzied shrieks.

"The river—the river! We are drowning—we are drowning!"

The first gleams of the sullen dawn broke through the crevices of the shutters; it had come to light them to death.

Elisabetta was clinging to her wildly, shrieking, praying; the water rushed more furiously in, not noiseless now, seething, bubbling, deep enough so that small articles resting on the floor were already beginning to float. The darkness was intolerable to Valery: she broke away from the old woman, ran to the windows, and swung back the heavy shutters, letting the dim, uncertain rays into the chamber. Elisabetta shrieked anew, calling on the saints in a last mad appeal, then fell on the bed, muffling herself in the clothes, unable to do any thing but sob and gasp in her extremity of terror.

To look out of the casements was like looking into a narrow strait, as the walls of the opposite edifices shut them in.

From the studio only a broad waste of waters met her eye, with here and there houses standing up like great ships that had lost masts and sails in the night's tempest. A fresh cry from Elisabetta brought Valery back; a new sweep of the water across the floor, upsetting a table, had frenzied her into louder shrieks. Valery made her way through the shallow pond which the room had become.

If the old woman would only be quiet! she was conscious of thinking that as she sat down on the bed. She spoke some soothing words; bade Elisabetta remember who would care for them alike in the awful death and in the world to which it must open; but Elisabetta could only shriek and sob, too much occupied with the physical horrors of the moment to think of any thing else.

More wind, fiercer beat of the waves from without, a sudden dark object looming up near the windows.

"It will break in!" Elisabetta screamed. "It is coming—holy Virgin, it is coming."

Valery looked—her exclamation of dread changed to a cry of joy! She sprang to the window, beat frantically on the panes, shrieking with all her might.

"Here, here! Elisabetta, we are saved—a boat—a boat!"

It was close to the windows, she was seen! She saw in her turn the faces of two men; that of the nearest, bent eagerly toward her, was the countenance of the man who had already saved her life—sent by the mercy of God to her rescue again. She had borne up under the fear, the danger; but the revulsion of feeling was too much. She managed to get the window open; as the fresh sweep of water made her stagger back, Fairfax Carteret sprang into the room and clasped her in his arms.

"Saved, thank God, saved!" he cried.

She knew that she echoed his words, knew that she bade him take Elisabetta first; then she felt herself lifted into the boat, and for a few moments knew nothing more.

When she came to herself, they were paddling cautiously up the species of canal. Other boats were in sight bringing relief or food to the people in the neighboring houses. While he was aiding the boatmen to pilot their bark along the dangerous strait, she heard Carteret say,

"We were just in time, Miss Stuart; we had been hunting for the place a long while."

Carteret had arrived in Rome a few days before, and about nine o'clock on the previous evening had gone to call on Ford. He found Giovanni mad with alarm, because his young mistress had not returned, and started at once to her assistance. But it was hours before he could find either a man or boat at any price; after that, they had been till dawn reaching the spot, but he could not let the girl who had Cecil's smile perish while there was any means of saving her to be employed.

So once more Valery had to thank him for her life, and now she knew that it was all the sweeter because she received it at his hands.

Even up in the Corso there was the same odd appearance of Rome's having been in a single night transformed into a second Venice; and it was not until close to the little square near which the Fords lived that it was possible to leave the boat. Carteret hailed a stray carriage which had brought some early sight-seer

as far as he could go without a bark, helped Valery and the old woman in, and they drove swiftly away.

Just as they reached the palace, desecrated nowadays by the habitation of barbarians from Great Britain and America, another carriage drove down an upper street and followed them into the court-yard.

John Ford looked eagerly through the window, and the first sight that met his eyes was Valery, wet and pale, and Fairfax Carteret assisting her to alight. Without waiting to remember that Jemima might need his aid, he hurried forward; Valery saw him, stretched out both her hands, and cried,

"Thank him, try to thank him; he has saved my life a second time."

Her worn-out nerves would bear nothing more; the joy of seeing her old friend's face, added to the long hours of excitement and peril, exhausted her last strength. He caught her as she staggered back, hurried on up the stairs, while Giovanni rushed down to embrace Elisabetta, and the two howled and danced till they drove Jemima out of her senses, and she fairly shook Carteret in her frenzied haste to learn what was the matter.

When they all got up stairs—for Jemima dragged Carteret along, and kept shaking him the more frantically the more he tried to explain—they found Valery lying on the sofa, and Ford bathing her forehead, going composedly enough about his work, though he was white as a ghost.

"Valery's been drowned!" shrieked Jemima. "She's been drowned, and Elisabetta too, and Mr. Carteret saved their lives! Oh dear, is she dead? Get some feathers, John, burn 'em under her nose. Oh she's drowned! What is it they do—roll people on a barrel, or something, and we haven't a barrel. Oh dear, oh dear!"

Ford requested her so sternly to be silent, that she got her senses back enough to sit still in the chair where he placed her, sobbing wildly, and muttering something about a barrel—a barrel, while her bonnet, perched over one eye, and her hair streaming down, as it always did on the slightest provocation, gave her an intoxicated expression that was droll to see.

Valery soon recovered consciousness, and could sit up and relate to Ford what had happened, breaking off to turn her pale face toward Carteret and cry,

"Please tell him, Mr. Ford, what I feel; I can't, I can't!"

The first thing, Ford said, quietly, was for her to go to bed a while, and he requested Jemima to accompany her.

"A barrel—a barrel!" still moaned Jemima; then made a dart at Valery, and cried over her till she got herself into a more frightful disorder than ever, and Valery, instead of receiving assistance, had to take her away and comfort her back to something approaching sanity.

So the two men remained there alone. In the whirl of trouble that shook Ford's brain, one

thought stood out prominent—he was to be utterly alone for the rest of his life! If he had returned to find Valery drowned and cold, he could not have been left more utterly desolate!

"God bless you, Carteret!" he said, slowly; "you have brought me back my child. I wish I could thank you."

He would leave no possibility of trouble for the two from any connection between Valery and himself, and this was what he must learn to consider her now—his child; and learn also a parent's hardest lesson—to give her up.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WAKENED AT LAST.

THE soft, gray light of a January day shone into a small room of the old D'Asti palace, where the Duchess and Valery sat. The suffering caused by the inundation hastened the return of many of the Liberal party, eager to follow the example of the king, who had won golden opinions during the few days he spent in Rome, hurrying thither as soon as possible after the news of the tragic event reached him.

D'Asti had accepted some city office, and Hetty accompanied him, as busy and eager and full of life as ever; occasionally a little unlike her titled sisters from her originality, but so witty, bright, and altogether charming, that nobody, unless it might be some fossil of a "Papaline," ever dreamed of hinting the duke could have made a better choice, in spite of the grandeur of his name.

"So you think I do it very well?" Hetty said to her friend, not in the least hesitating to have her vanity gratified by compliments, though in a rather childish spirit which was pretty enough.

"Oh yes," laughed Valery; "I don't imagine the D'Asti ghosts will venture to come back and reproach you! I don't believe there was ever one of the ancient dames looked so charming."

"I fancy none of them were ever half so comfortable," said Hetty; "I think the grates and *caloriferes* must horrify them as much as my presence. Well, I'm glad I do it nicely; it's a pity I'm not taller, I can't half show off a train."

"The one drop of bitter in your cup!" returned Valery. "Really, duchess, I offer you my profoundest sympathy."

"And so you must needs try and get drowned," said Hetty, letting her thoughts fly off at a tangent, as she often did. "Did one ever hear the like! When I read your letter I couldn't rest till we were ready to start."

Nearly two weeks had passed since then, and life in John Ford's quiet household went on apparently in its usual calm routine. But it had been any thing rather than tranquil to the silent man who bore his burden with such unwavering fortitude, and full of a pleasant excitement to Valery, though she never dreamed

of analyzing the feelings which lent a beauty to the days such as no previous ones, even under the broad arch of her beloved Roman sky, had ever equaled. Her picture was finished and sent off to England, so that she had more leisure than usual, and Fairfax Carteret had been a frequent visitor at the house, always made heartily welcome by Ford, and received with enthusiasm by Jemima, who had never quite got her mind into its customary state of placid confusion. Of the three, Valery was the most undemonstrative; but John Ford, watching her always, not so much from selfish thoughts as because his great, generous heart was full of care and anxiety for her happiness, knew that these weeks were willing her on in a dream from which she could never return to the repose of her girlish years; whether to go out in a darkness which must leave its shadow over all coming time, or brighten into a lasting day, was beyond his power to tell.

He knew at least that Carteret was a man of strict honor, incapable of indulging in that prettiest and meanest of amusements called flirtation; but on the other hand, Ford knew his pride so well, the deep-rooted old Virginian prejudices in regard to birth and family, that he dreaded for Valery the time when revelations in regard to her parentage must be given, as they certainly must, if his premonitions proved correct.

But Valery thought of none of these things as yet; there had been no struggle in her mind to call them up, sternly as they had often haunted her in the past, when more than one suitor had come to her with the offering of his heart. She had believed, since their affection found no response in her soul, that she was to be kept always from the possibility of caring for any man, by this ban which separated her from other women of her age. And now she did not think; now that she was in danger of suffering and trouble, not one kindly spirit-voice hinted to her the necessity of guarding herself against the new content and brightness that had stolen into her days.

To Carteret himself it was a more peaceful season than he had known in these months of wanderings which began when he hurried, wounded and outraged, from Cecil's presence. Naturally the double tie which linked Valery's destiny with his had its effect upon his mind. He often asked if it was meant that he should here find peace from his troubled pilgrimage. He would have been glad to love her, and forget all that lay behind, if possible; sometimes he almost believed that such repose would come, then some tone in her voice, some chance word or smile, would make her so like Cecil, that while this odd resemblance formed the chief spell her presence possessed for him, the sight of her would grow a bitter pain. He was careful in his language and conduct; he determined conscientiously that there should be nothing beyond friendship in his manner, and it was this very frank kindness which kept Valery from taking alarm at the pleasure his society afforded her.

He was not a happy man; they had gone far enough in their intimacy for him to admit that, though in no weak or misanthropical spirit; and her pity and sympathy she was glad to give, not so much in words as acts—it seemed a sort of return for the debt she owed him.

While she and Hetty were sitting in the pretty boudoir, a servant came up with his card; the duchess bade the man show him in, and turned to Valery, saying,

"Mr. Carteret—our hero—I used to know him in Paris."

In another moment he was in the room, and while making proper speeches to the new duchess, and she replying with her usual ease and fluency, Valery had an opportunity to get back the composure which his unexpected appearance had disturbed. She was often fluttered at the mention of his name or his sudden entrance, but she accounted for that easily enough; with the memory of her awful peril still so recent, it was not strange the sight of the man who had rescued her should bring a certain emotion.

"I need not present you to this young lady," said the duchess, leading him up to Valery, "only I hope you haven't ordered the house to be set on fire for the pleasure of saving her life the third time! Indeed, indeed, I look upon you as little less than an angel, for her dear life is more valuable than a whole troop of the rest of us useless women."

"Of all which she doesn't mean a word," said Valery, holding out her hand; and as he bent over it, Hetty's quick fancy wove a very pretty romance for the two, though she went on talking all the while.

"I don't know whether she means to say I don't think myself valueless, or that you are no hero! Perhaps I had better admit that it was only mock modesty which made me claim rank in the catalogue of useless females."

"And I should decline being a hero, even if I had the stuff in me," said Carteret; "I think the race must be awfully tiresome except in books and pictures."

"People's ideas about what constitutes a hero vary so much," observed Valery.

"Now I do believe she is turning metaphysical," cried the duchess; "still I should like to hear your private definition of the word."

But Valery had no mind to attempt an exposition of her theories, which were in many ways heretical, so only gave some evasive answer, and for a little the conversation changed. They talked of the weather as people always do, and as it had rained almost incessantly for weeks and weeks, there was enough to be said; of the changes in Rome, of the fascinating princess who was coming soon with her husband, the heir now to a stately title indeed—king of united Italy. The duchess was loud in her praise, as any sane creature would have been; then the cheerful talk wandered on, Valery somewhat silent, according to her wont,

and Hetty a perfect *feu de joie* of epigrams and witticisms, though she did it so well that one could not accuse her of appearing studied or unnatural. At last, the mention of some new book brought the conversation back to a subject similar to that with which it began, and reminded the duchess to say,

"But you did not give us your definition of a hero, after all, Valery."

"I am not sure that I have exactly decided what makes one," she answered.

"Evidently, then, you don't accept the generally received idea," observed Carteret; "and Alexander or Napoleon are not your ideals."

"It seems to me there is at least a higher form of heroism," she replied, coloring, while Hetty played with a white kitten—her chief pet—watching her two friends closely, that she might be certain whether to go on with her romance.

"A higher form?" Carteret repeated, questioningly.

"Yes; I think a man who makes a patient and consistent sacrifice of his life to a real duty, though the life may be a narrow one, is a truer hero than the greatest general that ever lived."

"It would be so difficult to decide what was a real duty, where a whole life was concerned," returned Carteret.

"Oh, of course there could be only one," cried Hetty, in too high spirits for any effort at serious conversation; "only one for any man—a sacrifice made for some woman."

"Unfortunately, the sacrifices men usually make for women are just those into which duty doesn't enter," said Carteret, rather misanthropically.

"That sounds like a sentence out of a bad French novel," laughed the duchess.

"Besides, no good man could love a woman who would be capable of demanding an unworthy sacrifice," said Valery.

"Oh, I'm not so sure of that," retorted she; "it is a melancholy fact that love is by no means proportionate to the worthiness of its object. But there, I for one am getting beyond my depth; what I said sounds awfully wise, but I must have stolen it out of a book! I persist in my assertion, though; a man's plain duty is to give up the whole world for the woman he loves."

"I am afraid, then, his heroism would suffer," laughed Carteret, "since he would frequently go in opposition to his duty."

"But I'm not proposing improper things," said she, gayly; "once put those out of the question, and there are no limits to his duty."

"Yes; for even then there might be a struggle between love and honor—the claims of family and similar reasons which ought to be paramount."

"That depends on how one regards them," said Hetty, leaning lazily back in her chair. "Mayn't a man love a poor woman, or a woman whose birth is beneath his own?"

"As long as it is stainless," he answered, gravely.

Hetty felt that she had brought down an unexpected blow with a vengeance; she dared not look at Valery! Fortunately Kitty gave her an ungrateful scratch at the instant, and an opportunity to shriek, which she turned to so good an account that for a few seconds Carteret was too busy extricating her hand from the kitten's claws to notice Valery.

"It is raining again," were the first words they heard her speak. She had risen and was gazing out of the window; Hetty gave her a rapid glance while Carteret was depositing Velvet on the floor; she had turned somewhat pale, but there was no other sign that his chance words had hurt her.

"Of course it rains," cried Hetty; "talk about Roman skies indeed—I've not seen a gleam of sun in a week."

She chattered and laughed till the conversation was leagues away from the painful subject, and presently a servant came up to say that Mrs. Sloman was waiting in the carriage for Miss Stuart.

"I thought you meant to stay," Hetty said.

"Oh no; Jemima told me she would call on her way home; she has been shopping and must be tired, so I'll not keep her," said Valery, glad to get away.

"She can send the carriage back for you later," urged Hetty.

"No indeed, *Duchessa mia*," laughed Valery; "we pay for carriages by the hour, and they're not to be extravagantly wasted."

Carteret rose to see Valery down stairs; Hetty knew the girl dreaded his companionship just then, and fortunately the duke entered at the moment. She bade Carteret sit still, saying,

"D'Asti will never forgive you if you deprive him of the pleasure—I am growing awfully jealous of Valery."

"She looks very unhappy, doesn't she, Miss Stuart?" asked the duke, in his broken English.

So there was more laughter and nonsense, and under cover of it Valery got safely out; but while the duke talked as they descended the grand staircase, while the carriage was driving homeward, and Jemima recounted her adventures, and boasted of her bargains, those words Carteret had spoken rang persistently in Valery's ear, and left her deaf to all other tones.

"As long as it is stainless!" And hers? The sudden hardness in his haughty face, the pitiless ring of his voice as he uttered the sentence, had opened her eyes clearly to the great pride which marred so much that was noble in his nature. Like most of the descendants of the Cavaliers, he had been nurtured and bred to regard his family claims as arrogantly as ever any cion of the house of Bourbon could have done, however little his good taste might allow it to show in the ordinary intercourse with his fellows. He would sacrifice any thing, every thing to them—centred his chief idea of duty

in their behalf. Valery saw this now; she seemed to study his character in a new light. Again, as she heard in fancy that stern answer, up came anew the bitter question—and hers? And straightway a fresh thought, which roused her suddenly out of the calm unconsciousness of the past weeks, and gave a new force to the cruel blow that had struck her. Then she discovered that Mrs. Sloman was speaking, and tried to concentrate her faculties on the matter of the moment.

"The whole dress pattern for a hundred and twenty francs, Valery, and I never wear green; but if it made me look like Mohammed, I wasn't going to throw away such a chance, and both sides the same, for I do like a thing you can turn, though I don't know about ruffles of the same, I'm sure, or would you have black—do you think black would look well, Valery?"

"Admirably, I should say," Valery answered, though she had slight idea what it was she pronounced upon.

"Or bias folds and fringe—I like fringe."

"Oh yes, decidedly," returned Valery, still somewhat mistily. "I would have them too."

"How can I have both?" demanded Jemima, with mild fretfulness. "I don't believe you know what I've been saying, just like John, I might talk and talk— Oh, I bought him some more handkerchiefs, for how he loses them I can't tell, and unless I pinned them in his pocket, and then he'd manage to go about with his nose scratched; and if you're sure you'd have ruffles, I wish you'd say, or folds either, if you like them best, though green never was my color even when I was young, for all Clorinda was so fond of stripes, and she prides herself on her bargains, but la! they're always failures, and that cloak she bought for winter just because it was summer and half-price, it was spotted right in the middle of the back, though she would not see it—"

Luckily she was interrupted by the carriage driving into the court of their house. Ford chanced to enter at the same time, and opened the door to help them descend.

"You look pale, Valery," he said, always noticing the slightest change in her appearance.

"I believe my head aches a little," she answered, and passed on up stairs, while Mrs. Sloman held fast to his arm, and poured out a long account of her bargains, insisting on his admiration, and giving him no opportunity to overtake Valery.

She had gone on to her own apartments by the time they reached the salon, and into these Ford never intruded without invitation. When she first came to live with them he had thoughtfully arranged that, while having their protection, she should possess full liberty for privacy, and even isolation, if she desired it. He fitted up a suit of rooms for her, on the same floor, out of the collection of furniture which he had amassed to Jemima's disgust, making for the girl a charming retreat whose expenses were

quite within her small means, it having been part of their arrangement that, so far as money matters went, she was to be placed under no obligation. There was a bright, cheerful salon giving upon a terrace that could be glassed in and heated at will, so that Valery could indulge in flowers and birds—this led into her studio; and on the other side were her bed-chamber and dressing-room, which this very winter she had had rich enough to brighten with new and various decorations as pleasant to her feminine tastes as if the idea of her sex.

A very cheerful, happy retreat it had been to her; never in all these years had she entered it with so heavy a heart as she brought thither to-day. She locked herself in, threw off her bonnet and shawl, opened all the doors of communication between the rooms, and commenced a slow march up and down their length. On the easel in her studio stood the work she had left a few hours before; it looked unfamiliar, as if some other hand than hers had sketched in the vigorous outlines—it looked paltry and weak too! For the first time in her life she suffered from the depressing feeling that she should never be able to accomplish any thing worth the labor she gave. She threw a cloth over the easel with a sudden impatience, and walked more quickly to and fro. There was a great trouble and excitement in her mind, and over and over Carteret's words rang in her ears, and always there followed the bitter question—and her birth—hers? During these dreamy weeks she had forgotten the bar which separated her fate from that of other women, but the bitter truth came back with a force such as it had never possessed! Formerly, her reflections had been too vague and aimless to bring more than a certain sadness in their wake, but now the sting was hot and sharp, and up flashed the natural reflection, it was cruel that she should be forced to live, to suffer this, to bear a burden brought by no act of her own.

Her heart had strayed far into a new world during these visionary days—whether it had received a vital hurt, she could not tell—at least the wound ached sorely, and existence loomed dreary enough among the shadows which gathered over the dream-world lying in ruins at her feet.

Each bitter memory of her childhood and early youth awoke; the horrible insults by which Marian cruelly forced a portion of the truth upon her childish sense; every slighting word or look from others; the revelations that drove her away from Miss Dorothy's care—back they all came—nothing was spared her! For a season a passionate rebellion hardened her, and she had never rebelled till now; there was no mercy for her on earth or in heaven, and yet she was innocent! She had the same right to hope and happiness that other women were so freely allowed, yet both were swept out of her reach by this unmerited ban. What justice was there in the decree that she should suffer for the sins of others? What possibility

of faith in a Providence which could ruthlessly condemn her to a misery like this?

A black, black hour—a sad strait for any human soul to reach—but the very passion which caused it faded under a quick perception of the terrible crisis in which she stood. Her father's face seemed suddenly to float, phantom-like, before her aching sight; she had forgotten her promise—allowed her soul to utter the reproaches which might close between his soul and peace. She flung herself on her knees with a despairing cry, and strove to utter words of prayer that should drown the insidious whispers which beset her like the tempting of fiends. Her overstrained nerves found relief in tears; she groveled there in the gloom, and wept and sobbed, and prayed—not to be released, not to have her burden lifted—but for strength to bear it, for a return of the faith that had hitherto unswervingly supported her.

She rose at length; the fierce spasm of agony was over; life could never recover the brightness of her desolated dream. No after-peace could ever obliterate the horrible suffering of this hour; but at least she could be patient, and endure. She could again seize and hold fast to the thought that thus she might aid in the expiation of that spirit which had gone beyond mortal judgments; and however fanciful the belief, however much she carried it out of its rightful limits, it must be a sterner censor than I who would have striven to lessen its scope or blamed her for its indulgence.

The room was dark with the shadows of twilight when she rose from her knees, startled into a recollection of the present by some sound from without. Those kind friends would be waiting for her—afraid that she was ill—and in her selfishness she must not bring trouble upon them. She bathed her eyes, arranged her dress, and prepared to go forth.

The struggle and the misery had only begun—she knew that—she must not let herself be overwhelmed in this first rush of the tempest, since strength would be needed so long. Life must go on; there must be no outward change; no human being must ever gain a perception of the darkness which closed between her soul and those who loved her best. Oh, it was so hard, so hard! To live—to live—and death had lately been close to her side and would not take her! If she could only have looked up and met that face for a last glance as the cold waters shut over her; gone down with its pale beauty the latest mortal sight in her eyes; if his voice had only sounded in her ears to utter some wild farewell as the black flood hid her! Death had been so near—if it had only taken her before she reached this hour!

But this was part of the old rebellion; she must get away from it; never allow it to approach her again; shut it out; shun it as she would have shunned some tangible temptation toward sin! She hurried from her own companionship—difficult as it was to meet any one in this hour, she must go; better to begin the

struggle at once—force herself to think of others—crowd her heart down under the small social necessities of the moment—do any thing to keep those dreadful reflections aloof, until she should be strong enough, regain faith enough, to abhor their wickedness.

A friend of Ford's had been invited to dine; they were all gathered in the library as she entered—pallid, but sufficiently like her usual self to rouse no suspicion save in one mind. Ford knew that some sudden shock had smitten her soul, yet he must make no sign; he was helpless to aid; all he could do was to appear unconscious of the change, and watch always if the time should come when comfort might be in his power.

Jemima was the most unobservant of women; besides, her mind was distracted by the dread that the dinner was not so good as usual, and the sculptor-friend too full of himself and his talk to remark any young lady's appearance. In the middle of his encomiums upon one of his own recently finished works, Jemima unexpectedly threw her new green gown into the conversation, as if to make a covering for his naked woman. During the next few moments the misunderstanding between the two (the artist supposing she talked of his nymph, and Jemima believing him interested in her bargain) was so very droll that Valery could find a smile with which to answer Ford's comical look.

"The hair bothered me a good deal," the sculptor said; "the ancients never got beyond ropes—the moderns haven't—but I flatter myself that my nymph is an improvement in that line."

"Yes, yes," returned Jemima, impatiently, not observing that he had his head turned toward Ford. "I say green—it's not my color and never was, but green for once, said I, at that price, and I'm not going to repent now—green forever, and I don't care what Clarinda says when she comes—green it shall be."

"Why, madam, I don't color my works!" cried the sculptor, testily, roused into listening by her persistence. "You forget that I'm not a painter—besides, it's a nymph, not a mermaid."

"I don't care if I look like both," retorted Jemima, full of her own subject; "and I'll have a long train, Valery, if it makes me more like a mermaid than Mr. Graves says it will."

"Good gracious, I never said any thing of the sort!" said he, aghast.

"Oh yes you did," returned Jemima, mildly, with the usual obstinacy of persons a little hard of hearing. "I told Valery it wasn't my color and never had been, and she can't deny it, but green it is, and a bargain you'll not fall over every day—as thick as a board and both sides alike—and I don't mind what you say a bit, Mr. Graves, green it is and green it shall be, whether I look a mermaid or Mohammed—there!"

Graves seemed so hopelessly astray and bewildered that Ford began to laugh, and said

with extra distinctness, hoping to set Jemima straight before she got one of her deaf fits on and grew, as she did sometimes, a little belligerent.

"Mr. Graves was not speaking of your dress; he meant—"

"And John," she interrupted, "don't tell me I can't hear! I make no pretense of being young—I'm sixty-one, and would tell it from the top of St. Peter's, if the Pope and all the cardinals were there to listen, but I can hear and do, and often wake you and Valery to get up and listen to noises when you'd both let the house burn down over your heads before you'd know it, if I hadn't luckily my ears as sharp as they are."

But they succeeded after a while in presenting Mr. Graves's nymph to her mind, and then she got back her amiability, and allowed him to continue his own praises. But Valery saw that her soul was still full of her dress, for while helping the pudding she said it was ruffled, and once asked Mr. Graves if he liked fringe; and the old sculptor, having no idea what it was even, answered absently—just to get rid of her—that he thought it apt to be tough! She looked at Valery and shook her head, evidently seized with the idea that Graves was not exactly steady in his senses, and regarded him for the rest of the evening with an expression of sympathy on her countenance which would have filled him with wrath could he have dreamed what her thoughts were.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE DUCHESS SPEAKS.

The days went on; January came to an end, and the new month brought a change in the weather. The almost incessant rains, which had made Rome gloomy and dull beyond remembrance, suddenly concluded to cease, probably thinking they could do no harm to surpass that of the famous inundation which had startled all Christendom a few weeks before.

Glimpses of the beautiful Roman spring began to appear; that slow, lingering season so unlike the rapid growth of vegetation in our New World. The grass was green on the Pincio; the trees put forth their buds, the stately palm stood up more mysterious than ever in the soft sunny atmosphere, and the dear old promenade became once again thronged with carriages and troops of pedestrians. It was Mrs. Sloman's favorite amusement to go there and sit of an afternoon, and Valery often accompanied her, even sometimes leaving her work to oblige the old soul, who was of a social turn and disliked solitude.

Valery was rather glad just now of any thing which called her out of the silence of her studio, and gave her an excuse to let her brushes lie idle. Work was not easy in these days; her fancy appeared dulled, and her hand slow

to exercise its accustomed skill. It would pass—she told herself this over and over—it would pass; so would the restlessness which made quiet difficult, and kept her wakeful during the long nights; the bitter yearning and pain—they would all go, if she could only be patient. Life might never be just the same as before; she seemed forced out of the last hold on her girlish days into the dreary maturity of womanhood, where the sky was bleak and gray, and the sharp rocks hurt her feet; but she could bear it. No return of the sinful rebellion which had so horrified her rendered the task more hard. No matter how thick the clouds lay about, she could have faith to believe it right; never in this world, perhaps, to understand why so bitter a trial overtook her—but there would be all eternity wherein to learn the reason. Oh, thank God, there is such faith to be gained by the human soul—there is such patience within your reach and mine, if we could only cease to struggle; could only admit that our own pride and fortitude are vain reeds, and seek the higher help which never fails to come, if only it be asked!

Fairfax Carteret had been a frequent visitor during these weeks, and though she doubted if it were wise, Valery could not bring herself to forego the pleasure of his society. At least while in his presence, she could partially put by the stern decree passed upon her life; drink in the sweetness of his smile, rest upon the music of his voice, force aside reality, and forget that the sunny hour was a mere dream unconnected with her real existence. True, as solitude and night arrived, there was a bitter reaction; but resolve as she might, she could not resist the charm when next it enticed her. She told herself always it would only be for a while; she should have time enough to endure after his departure, and though acknowledging her weakness, could not relinquish the little meed of pleasure offered.

He was likewise in a strange state of mind; guarded and careful as he tried to be, there were often moments during that season when he had it in his thoughts to ask Valery if she could care for him—could be happy as his wife. But so surely as he formed the resolution did some look or smile bring up Cecil's image with such vividness that the resemblance repelled him and he would go hastily away, feeling even that chance likeness, as he deemed it, a pain which kept his heart aloof from her, however much of a rest and pleasure her society might be.

Valery had always been a rather clear, pitiless analyzer of herself and others, except during these few weeks that her dream left her deaf and blind to all besides its beauty. She could not help observing the inconsistencies of his manner, and sometimes dwelling upon them, because she told herself it was hopeless to find strength by trying to put him out of her thoughts. She must recognize his full importance in her life, acknowledge that his love would have of-

ferred such happiness as nothing else could give, and yet learn to accept existence deprived of its bliss. In studying him she could not fail to perceive that he was interested in her far beyond the ordinary interest a man gives a young woman; and though it was always a new pain to see how often either some fancy or some memory connected with his past hurried him from her presence, she told herself it was best, since he would not suffer at her hands. If his whole heart had gone out toward her, the moment which rendered her confession necessary would have given not only her own pain to bear, but the sight of his misery. If he were to love her, and shrink or hesitate as she told him the truth, she knew herself well enough to be confident that no after-change in his sentiments could ever induce her to marry him. The determination would not be the result of anger, nor from scorn of his narrow-mindedness—she understood too well the influence early associations and teachings have over every character, to blame him; but she would have held firm at any cost. No matter if he threw over his pride, his creed, if he begged her to put her hand in his and go with him, she could not do it! If some event in life were to bring up a renewal of the struggle in his mind, and she were to see it when it was too late to free him from the stain—oh, it would be worse than a thousand deaths! But he did care for her; she liked to feel that, certain it would not grow a sentiment strong enough to cause him suffering. Something kept his heart always a little aloof—some recollection—some suspicion of her birth—perhaps only a merciful warning—that he might be preserved from pain.

To-day she allowed Mrs. Sloman to persuade her out again, and as usual the old lady decided in favor of the Pincio. It chanced to be an afternoon when there was music, and in the matter of music in the open air it would be difficult to find any thing more admirable than the band that plays on the Pincian Hill. Mrs. Sloman selected seats near the circle where the musicians have their stand, but sufficiently close to the curve to see the carriages which whirled back and forth or drew up occasionally for the occupants to listen.

It was a lovely day, the air balmy and soft, and the winter wrappings that one could not venture to throw off rather burdensome in the full sunlight. As they sat there, Jemima in one of her silent moods, which left Valery free to pursue her own thoughts, Fairfax Carteret strolled along from the opposite walk and saw them. He came forward at once, and Valery had no leisure to be disturbed by his sudden approach; for though she had seen him nearly every day of her life during the past month, Jemima emerged from the chaotic medley which she dignified by the name of reflections, to express unbounded surprise at his appearance.

"But Mr. Carteret was at the house a few days ago," Valery said.

"I can't help it," returned Jemima; "somebody went off, and I made up my mind it was he—somebody said so! Else it was Mr. Mumford, and I never can tell one from the other."

As she said Mumford with whom she identified him had red hair, a squint, and was at least fifty years of age, neither Valery nor Carteret could repress a little astonishment at her assertion.

"I can't help it," repeated Jemima, growing utterly bewildered. "Mr. Mumford, I always take you for him. I mean Mr. Carteret, I always think you are the other, though"—turning to Valery—"I like him a great deal better than I do *him*, but somehow I got it into my head he was gone, and I am sure you said so"—addressing Carteret now—"and it's very confusing to have people come and go so constantly, and that's the worst of living at Rome, you never know who's here and who's not, and you might as well be Jack in a box—I mean them, they change so often."

"I assure you," said Carteret, "I have no intention of going away for some months to come, Mrs. Sloman."

"But I'm sure you have gone—I mean Mr. Mumford has—and one of you is so fond of tea, I always distinguish you by that, though I can't remember just which it is."

Valery, convicted of a thrill of pleasure at his announcement, had leisure, while Jemima talked, to reproach herself for the weakness, yet could not feel so angry at her folly as she ought. Presently Carteret asked her to walk about for a little, and Jemima said,

"Yes; go, Valery. I like my exercise best sitting still, but it does young people good to take it walking," and she nodded at Carteret as gravely as if she had enunciated some grand axiom.

"You'll not mind sitting alone?" Valery inquired.

"Not a bit; I can watch the carriages; and do see that nurse-girl with the red petticoat and ribbons, and she'll drop the baby, staring to see if people notice her—how any body can let her make such a show of herself, and it's a cross-eyed baby and small, no wonder, is more than I can conceive."

She was so fully occupied observing the careless domestic in her rather theatrical array, that she paid no attention to her companions: they left her and walked through the winding paths toward the broad road which overlooks the Borghese grounds. Carteret was talking and Valery listening; and from one of the carriages that dashed past them unnoticed, Hetty's face looked out, and her kindly glance watched them as long as they were in sight.

"I wish I knew," she thought; "I do wish I knew! Just as I believed I saw the way, they come and tell me that he was in love with Cecil Conway, and that she threw him over! And if he doesn't care—heigh-ho, poor Valery! I mean to find out if I can—I might do something! I'm sure I've never failed yet in what I set my heart upon, and to see Valery happy—"

Then her meditations were interrupted by a couple of equestrians who rode close to the carriage, and talked to the new duchess about numerous matters which interested her, for she had already made her salons a sort of headquarters for all the nobles on the Liberal side. But while they discussed the probabilities in regard to a ministership which she had set her heart upon for her duke, she did not forget the subject that entered her mind as she regarded her two friends, having, long before she bloomed into a great lady, acquired the enviable faculty of thinking about several things and conversing on half a dozen others at the same time.

"I think this first approach of spring makes one dreamy and idle and worthless," Carteret was saying, in return to some apology Valery had offered when he asked about her new picture.

"It seems so to me," she replied; then suddenly remembering what was the reason that drove her forth from her labors, stopped short. "I mean to be industrious again," she added; "my lazy fit has lasted long enough."

"Please don't grow furiously active," he said; "take pity on all my idle hours! This is just the weather for pilgrimages. May I come for you to-morrow, to go to the palace of the Caesars? You know you promised to stray about the ruins with me. I've not visited them for several years."

"You don't think of returning to America at present?" she asked.

"Not yet; I must go back, though; I've no right to waste my time in these purposeless wanderings."

"I think Mr. Ford said you were connected with the Embassy in England," she added.

"Yes; I resigned," he answered, shortly, and a shadow crossed his face.

She was quick always to notice the least change in his looks or manner, and the passing gloom that saddened his countenance did not escape her.

"I am sure any body is happier with work to do," she said, softly.

"Yes—much—you are right! I must go back to America."

There was some meaning under his words which she could not understand, but at least she could try to rouse him out of his dreary train of thought.

"We will go rain-hunting to-morrow, if it is pleasant," she said; "I believe they would never grow quite familiar, if one visited them every day."

"It is very good of you to let me persuade you into wasting your time," he said.

She smiled—more brightly than usual—looking so much like Cecil, that with his mind full of the bitter thoughts her question had awakened, it was unendurable.

"After all," said he, abruptly, turning away his head, "I suppose most lives are made up of nothing else except regrets."

"I don't mean that mine shall be," Valery said, firmly.

She wished so much that she could know of what he was thinking; if only certain that some great love or sorrow filled his heart, it might help to overcome her own weakness.

"I don't believe you intend that yours shall," she continued.

"No; I hope I am not a coward or a fool," he replied, rather bitterly. "A man finds himself the latter occasionally, but he needn't add cowardice to it."

"I can scarcely fancy your doing so," she said.

"Though you would not vouch for my proving an exception to the first proposition," returned he, laughing cynically.

"You have a habit of always turning the conversation off with a jest, if you have been led into speaking of yourself," she said, gravely; "I don't think it well with one's friends."

"And I have learned to regard you as one of my best," he answered, with equal seriousness. "Indeed, Miss Stuart, I have to thank you for a great many useful lessons."

"To thank me!" she repeated, in wonder. "Now, honestly, I haven't the slightest idea what you mean."

"It was because they were unconsciously given that they did me good," he said. "Your perseverance, your quiet courage, and, above all, your simple, child-like faith—strong, thinking woman as you are—have not been wasted on me."

And only so lately her faith had wavered till it seemed shaken to its very foundations; she had cried out that her life was utterly barren, yet if in any way it bore a good effect for others, it could not be useless!

"I thank you so much for saying that," she exclaimed, impulsively, looking at him with her great brown eyes a little misty; "so much! But don't think better of me than I deserve—you can't know how often I rebel and am impatient; but, indeed, it is a great help to have the faith."

"If it were only within every one's reach!"

"It must be, if one tries aright; now that sounds like a sermon, but I don't know how else to say it."

"Perhaps you will teach me that in time, among other good things," he said, without thinking of all his words might imply.

The color deepened for an instant in her cheeks, then faded as suddenly, but she said, quietly enough,

"I suppose we all teach others in some fashion. I think we must go back now; Mrs. Sloman will want to go home."

They walked slowly along the winding paths again, where the shrubs were beginning to put forth their tender green, the happy voices of children, the fountain's song, and the softened notes of the music, blending together in pleasant harmony.

"I don't wonder you love this place," he said.

"I have been very happy in Rome," she answered; "whatever were to happen to me, I could always remember that."

"If only the recollection did not grow an added pain," returned he; and again she saw in his face, as she had so often done, the stir of some sorrowful memory. It hurt her, but she was glad too, since it reminded her that the impulsive words which thrilled her heart were carelessly spoken, and must not be dwelt upon.

"I shall come for you to-morrow, then?" he said, as they approached the spot where Jemima sat.

"Yes; I shall be ready."

Mrs. Sloman was anxious to go home, for she had been sitting until she felt chilly.

"I'm beginning to creep," she said, as soon as they approached; "it commences in my back and goes down to my ankles; and it's always the way in this climate, where you can't tell whether you're warm or not; do you creep, Mr. Carteret?"

"I suppose I did in my time," he said, laughing.

"Only in the summer-time?" she repeated, misunderstanding, as usual. "That's odd, but I remember my great-uncle used to have his worst colds then, and he died of apoplexy."

"I don't think Mr. Carteret looks a very likely subject for the disease just at present," said Valery.

"Oh, you never can tell what people will have," she replied, sagely. "There was Matilda Mayhew got thrown out of a carriage and broke her neck, when the doctors all said she must die of consumption; and that makes me think, Valery, I wish we had driven up here, for I'd like to go round by the Corso and stop at Carolina's a minute, because she hasn't sent home those things—a—corset, you know," in an awful whisper, more distinct than her ordinary voice, though she was happy in the belief that the gentleman had not caught a syllable of the secret.

"I dare say Mr. Carteret will be good enough to find us a carriage," replied Valery.

He went in search of one, soon returned, and conducted them to it.

"I'm sure it's very kind of you, Mr.—Mr. Munteret," cried Jemima, triumphantly, confident she had the name straight this time.

"Perhaps he'll go with us, Valery, and stay for dinner—though I don't believe that chicken is bigger than a partridge," she continued, perfectly unconscious that she was thinking aloud.

"Pray don't bring starvation on us by an acceptance, Mr. Carteret," said Valery, seeing him make a great effort not to laugh.

"Why what on earth, Valery!" exclaimed Mrs. Sloman, of course hearing quickly enough when she was not meant to. "I didn't say any thing—we always have three good meals, for I'll never give in to the foreign habit of nothing but coffee in the morning, and John always

takes tea, and the eggs in Rome are never certain, and as for ham—oh, if you come to that, you'll not stop short of Baltimore before you get it."

Carteret put them in the carriage, and stood looking after it as they drove away. Roused by the stopping of wheels close by, he turned, saw the duchess's *calèche* drawn up at the side of the road, and stepped forward to greet her.

"I couldn't exactly drive over you," said she, giving him her hand, "though you choose an odd spot to fall cloud-gazing. Please get in—I want to go down for one turn about the Borghese grounds."

Hetty looked very pretty and *piquant* in her tasteful toilet, among her bright-colored wraps, and was as talkative and genial as ever. But as the carriage, after descending the hill and passing through the Flaminian gate, turned into the villa road, she became silent for a few moments, then said, quickly,

"I have made up my mind to be impatient, so I may as well begin."

"The sooner the better," laughed he; "variety, et cetera—I spare you the old proverb."

"But I don't intend to spare you," cried she; "something worse than proverbs too—even Solomon's! I did not mean that, though. I promised Valery not to say things that sound irreverent for the sake of being witty."

"Valery, as you call her, is the most charming preacher one could imagine," said he.

"Has she been sermonizing you?"

"No; only as her daily life is a constant evangel."

"At all events, it brings me to what I want to say—I hate beating about to get at things."

"That's because you have no patience," said he, coolly.

"But you are not to lecture. I brought you here for the express purpose of doing that myself."

"Don't hope to infect me with Liberal ideas," returned he, teasingly; "I am full of sympathy for the poor pope, and even entertain a tenderness for Antonelli."

"Now don't make me think about all those foolish old creatures, else I shall lose my temper! I grew so rabid this morning that my husband told me I would do more harm than good. But where was I—you put things out of my head."

"Threatening me with a lecture."

"No, no; I only said I meant impertinence; but you promise not to be vexed?" she added, growing serious again.

"I think I can safely promise that, duchess."

"Yes, for I mean well—oh, the odious phrase—no, I don't—I hate well-meaning people! I shall get utterly unintelligible if I try to make excuses! Any way, I like you very much, and—"

"That is intelligible, at all events, and nice to hear."

"Don't be silly! Yes, I like you, but there's somebody I like better."

"Oh, as you are still in your honey-moon!"

"Do be quiet—as if I was thinking of my husband—bless him! No, Mr. Carteret, I like Valery better—it is of her I think, and that is what makes me speak! There, now we're in the midst of things at once, but we'll not quarrel."

"Not on that subject, assuredly," he answered, grave enough now, and looking at her inquiringly.

"What I want to say is so impossible—so unusual, but I do think I ought, Mr. Carteret; she is the dearest friend I ever had or ever can have—remember that, and forgive me."

"What do you wish to say about her?" he asked.

"Not so much about her as you."

"Say it freely; I admire and respect her as much as you can."

"Admiration and respect are all very well," exclaimed Hetty, impatiently; "but—see here, you have saved her life twice; Valery is not silly, not given to romance, but I can't help fearing that she may grow interested in you after such a beginning. I don't know any thing about it, but I'm always planning, and I liked to think it might end—oh, as a novel ought; and now I have heard that your heart is elsewhere, and I must think of her—you are not vexed?"

"Go on, please!"

"I know you are constantly at the house; I am sure you would do nothing wrong—you're not that meanest of creatures, a male flirt! But, who can tell, she might learn to care, and oh, think of her unhappiness—I can't bear it, I can't bear it!"

He was silent as she stopped in her passionate speech, but presently said,

"I thoroughly appreciate your motives—you were right to speak. I can only say you do me justice; I—"

"Of course I knew that in advance; I could have told Valery what I heard if I had not been sure of you."

"I may probably tell her myself," he said, gravely.

Hetty sighed: it was true then, this report which had come to her ears—come too late, however; she felt that Valery cared for him already.

"Life is an awful muddle!" she cried, irritably.

"I can not dispute that," he said, smiling, though he echoed her sigh. "Rest satisfied, duchess, I shall do no wrong; I would cut my two hands off sooner than bring a moment's unhappiness to your friend."

"At least I've done no harm," said she; "that's a comfort; one usually makes dreadful blunders trying to set things straight for other people."

"Not so great as in setting things straight for one's self," he answered, gloomily.

"I am not sure; we overrate ourselves and our feelings—life doesn't hang on one senti-

ment; if I hadn't learned that, Mr. Carteret, I should never be the happy woman I am."

She felt bitter and angry toward Cecil; what right had this girl, who had the whole world at her feet, to come between Valery and her one chance of happiness? However beautiful and gifted, she could not compare with Valery! Hetty could have raved at Carteret for letting any thought of this creature stand between his heart and her friend.

"I can't say any more," said she; "I don't expect your confidence. Tell the man to drive home, please—where shall I set you down?"

Carteret gave the requisite orders, then said, "One would think you were vexed with me, after all, duchess."

"No—yes; I suppose I am, or with fate! But talk of something else! You must follow your destiny like other people; I only hope you'll not find out too late that you have been mistaken."

He understood perfectly what she meant; that she was sore at the idea of his ranking any woman in his mind above her favorite. But there was no need to explain; to Valery alone should he ever tell the history of the past—to her only, if he became convinced that she cared for him. His dream had died in darkness; surely life had nothing better to offer than the love of this woman, if it were true that her heart had gone out toward him. Hetty was too busy for a while with her own reflections to notice his silence. Suddenly she roused herself to say,

"You know that Miss Conway was to have married the Earl of Aldershot months ago, only the mourning for his father prevented it."

"He is a fine fellow," Carteret replied, quietly.

Just then the carriage halted before the house where he lodged; he made his adieux and descended, and Hetty drove off, half angry with herself for the parting thrust she had given him, yet feeling too much vexed at what she mentally termed his folly to be very remorseful.

Carteret mounted the stairs to his rooms, and spent long hours in silent reflection. To one thing his mind was made up when he rose from that season of self-communing. To-morrow Valery should have an opportunity to decide what was to be done with their two lives; he would not put it off; she should be given the chance at once. So far as he was concerned, nothing could be so bad as this torturing solitude, without even a plain duty to occupy his heart and keep it from feeding on itself.

CHAPTER XXX.

WHERE THEY MET.

THE next day was as bright and beautiful as its predecessor; the sun seemed to have regained its old love for the Roman landscape, and to be eager by the warmth of its caresses

to make up for its late caprice. Carteret thought this as he walked along the quaint piazzas, where the gayly-dressed peasants basked in the warmth, where black-robed priests glided past, and mendicant monks shuffled morosely along, and the doves wheeled and circled about, and the bells rang out dreamily through the quiet—thought it, and smiled at his own fancifulness, as we all do when we find ourselves indulging in imaginative sentiments, as if there was a weakness in getting somewhat beyond the narrow round of every-day reflections.

They had forgotten when making their engagement that this day was a *festa*, and a visit to the ruin an impossibility in consequence. But Carteret went on to the house all the same, and found Valery alone. Mrs. Sloman had gone out, and Ford was shut up in his studio.

"But I don't see why I am to be cheated of my walk; you can't work on a *fête-day*," he said; "at least so bright a one as this."

"Then we will go up over the hill to Santa Maria Maggiore," Valery replied. "Giovanni told me there was to be a procession from one of the neighboring convents, and I have a weakness for processions."

They set out, passing on up the hilly streets till they reached the Via Sistina, from whence in the distance the vast Basilica loomed against the horizon, like some mighty ark of rest, offering a refuge from the storms and perils of the lower world.

Carteret had not forgotten his resolution of the previous night; however pleasantly they talked, it was in his mind the whole time. They descended the street of the Four Fountains, a continuation of the broad thoroughfare which commences at the piazza of Trinità de' Monti, only changing its name at every corner, after a fashion Roman streets have; and Carteret made her sit down to rest before mounting the tree-lined avenue which leads up to Maria Maggiore.

While they sat there, the procession came out of the church and filed down the hill, passing them slowly. A long troop of black-and-white veiled women, marshaled by a number of elderly sisters; and though droning a prayer in concert, they were not too busy to watch whatever went on about them—these dull-lived women, only now and then, on occasions like the present, coming into the broad light of day from the shadow of their cloisters. They looked pale, like all persons who live unnaturally restrained; some of them blinked a little, like night-birds mused to the sunshine; still the general effect of the long row of nuns in their funereal costume was quaint and pretty.

"I wonder if they are content?" Carteret said, giving utterance to the first thought that comes into the spectator's mind while watching a similar scene; "if this glimpse of the ordinary world makes them long to stay in it?"

"I should think the lack of occupation must be the chief want," Valery said; "in any of

the orders that really work, I can understand the possibility of contentment."

"One hardly begins life meaning to be satisfied with that."

"Yet wise people say we must all come to it," she answered.

"But don't you think it natural to rebel when we find ourselves deprived of happiness, which seems our right?"

"Very natural, unfortunately."

"Then I don't see why so strong an instinct was given if we are not to use it," he said, smiling.

"I suppose one ought always to try for the happiness, only patiently instead of in a rebellious spirit. But it is too lazy a day to split theories; shall we go? I am not in the least tired."

They walked on again, both silent for a while, then Valery began speaking of the color of the clouds, the effect of the light on the tree-tops—nothing escaped her observation. He could not help thinking how much beauty she always pointed out that he would have passed unheeded, though he really loved the beautiful, and, like most young people of our generation, could talk any quantity of Raskinesque sentiment about it. But Valery did not work herself up to the subject, it showed naturally; one could see her thoughts were always busy, her eyes always quick to notice; so much a matter of hourly habit that it did not occur to her to do stately periods.

The conversation never once neared the point he meant to approach, and now they had reached the church. They did not enter, but walked on round it into the quaint square, looking away over the distant hills whereon shone broad streaks of silver snow-drifts left from the winter's storms, but so radiant that one might have fancied them pathways leading up into the eternal glory. In the nearer scene stood a ruined temple of Minerva; between that and the hills, a stretch of smooth, grassy plain. They gazed in silence—studied the majestic front of the church, and suddenly the bells in the tower chimed out soft and glad, and added to the dreamy beauty of the surroundings.

Carteret saw that Valery had no wish to talk, and respected her mood, though the peaceful scene brought neither quiet nor pleasure to his troubled thoughts.

Still the bells rang, and from a distance some deep, iron-tongued bell boomed out a response, and continued at intervals joining the joyous refrain, with such an appealing pathos in its tone that Valery shivered under an odd fancy which started up in her mind. It seemed to her that the bells were the voices of happy spirits singing softly in measured cadence, "We pray, we pray;" and that the responding voice, the deep, grating wail, was the agonized call of some lost soul in purgatory straining toward the golden gates of Paradise, and meaning in answer, "For me, for me!"

"Come into the church," she said, suddenly; "I don't like it."

Carteret looked at her inquiringly and would know what was amiss—her face had changed so quickly. In order to relieve his fears that she was ill she had to tell him her foolish conceit, blushing, confused under his smile.

"You are laughing at me," she said; "I don't wonder."

"No, indeed! I must tell you my thought in return, that you may not accuse me of it. I was thinking that your society always shows me what a commonplace animal I am—I have to reach upward all the while to follow your artistic fancies."

It was a pretty compliment enough, but it jarred upon her ear; she did not like to be reminded just then that there was little real sympathy between their souls; few points upon which their thoughts could find a common meeting-ground.

She led the way into the church—to my mind one of the most interesting and beautiful in Rome. The vast sweep of the broad nave, with the double rows of Ionic columns separating it from the isles, which give admittance to a succession of lovely chapels; upon the broad entablature supported by the pillars, a succession of quaint mosaics that date back beyond the mediæval ages; and above, the light spring of Corinthian pilasters rising to the gorgeous roof, which still glitters with the first gold ever brought from the New World. The noble curve of the tribune beyond, bright with colored marbles and Oriental alabaster—the peculiar soft light which fills the whole immense space; every thing combines—religious sights, associations with the past, the sweet old legend linked with the building of the temple—to form a spell which must have its influence upon the most careless beholder, however little as a rule he may be touched by devotional feeling or artistic appointments.

The two walked slowly up the nave, Valery pointing out to her companion a thousand beauties that had before escaped his eyes; then the sudden melancholy swell of the organ checked their talk, and they stood listening, and Valery's face kindled under the emotions which thrilled her soul till Carteret wondered at its beauty.

Two begging Franciscan monks, who had been making a picture of themselves as they knelt in front of one of the chapels, sprang up and beset him for alms, and Valery wandered on to study an Annunciation which she loved, for the countenance of the Virgin raised toward the lily-bearing angel was so full of startled awe and joy that many a more renowned picture of the same subject had often moved her less.

Carteret left her to herself for a while, and Valery bent to say a prayer, not sufficiently rigid to refuse that support, because she could not yield to the errors which separated the Romish temple from the pure doctrines of the old Catholic faith. As she rose from her knees, she heard a youthful voice exclaim, in a half-whisper,

"Aunt Dor, do look! who is she so like? Aunt Dor, do move this way—see!"

And a voice that Valery remembered well, which made her heart thrill after all these long years, answered aloud,

"Do be quiet, Cecil! You have been half crazy ever since we got to Rome; now, don't go mad just here! There are two horrible brown creatures yonder, listening, I'm sure; spies of the inquisition, I've not the least doubt. I don't wish them to put you in a dungeon, and I have to go to Florence for Victor Emanuel to get you out."

"I don't believe there are any dungeons convenient, Aunt Dor; but you haven't looked."

"Don't tell me, they're everywhere!" interrupted the other.

"But do look! you can't see her face; why, it certainly is she."

"Who—what?" cried her companion, impatiently.

"Valery; I do believe it is Valery!"

"Valery! in a Franciscan's gown? Oh, you must be daft."

But Valery moved a few steps forward. Miss Dorothy saw her face for the first time, as she stood with her hands involuntarily extended, a smile of recognition on her lips. Cecil Conway uttered a cry of joy, forgetful where they were, and rushed forward, repeating,

"It is Valery! oh, Aunt Dor, I was sure of it! Valery, Valery, where have you been so long? How glad I am. Oh, Valery, Valery!"

She broke off to embrace her former friend rapturously; Miss Dorothy for an instant regarded the pair, comatose nearly with astonishment, then rushed at Valery in her turn, and there was much incoherent exclaiming from all their attempts at questions and explanations, broken by half-sobs of delight; and in the midst of it up came Fairfax Carteret in search of Valery, and stopped like a man petrified at sight of her companions.

Cecil saw him first of any body, and gave him a stately welcome, to which he could find no answer in the least intelligible.

"Who—what?" cried Miss Dorothy at the sound of his name, releasing Valery. "Mr. Carteret? Well, I've no power of surprise left; show me whom you please or what you please, after this I'm past astonishment."

"But not past saying you are glad to see me, I hope?" returned Carteret, recovering his wits enough to go up to her and hold out his hand.

"No indeed," said Miss Dorothy, shaking it warmly. "So you are in Rome too! I hope you are as well as any body can be in this Pagan atmosphere."

"Quite well, and very glad to meet you again, Miss Dorothy."

Cecil had taken possession of Valery, whispering her joy at their encounter; and Valery, while she listened, was remembering what she had seen in her face and Carteret's when they met so unexpectedly.

"We've just found the best girl in the world," said Miss Dorothy.

"Where are you, Valery?"

"Here, Miss Dor!"

"I was afraid you might have disappeared through the floor; one never knows what may happen in Rome."

"You have met old friends, Miss Stuart," said Carteret, not yet sufficiently composed to address Cecil.

"Old friends! I should think so!" cried Miss Dorothy, before the other could speak; then a new thought troubled her mind, and she must have her doubts settled at once in spite of joy, the small courtesies of life, or any other consideration. "Valery, you were on your knees before that thing," pointing to the picture; "you don't mean to say that you have turned Papist?"

Valery laughed, and shook her head.

"I hope I may say a prayer in any church without harm?" she answered.

"I hope you may, Valery," replied Miss Dorothy, rather severely; "I hope you may."

"I am sure she may," added Carteret, trying again to speak naturally, and unable to decide which was hardest, to talk or be silent.

"Humph!" quoth Miss Dorothy, and there was a world of doubt and question in the monosyllable.

"Her ideas are of the clearest," he continued; "I assure you, Miss Dorothy, she has made me thoroughly ashamed of my ignorance as to the exact difference between Catholic and Roman Catholic; unlike most of us, she understands her own faith."

Miss Dorothy's face cleared into a beaming smile.

"She ought," cried she, with a certain saintly majesty and a mingling of self-congratulatory pride, at which one could not help smiling; "she ought; I taught her."

Valery held her hand fast, trying to say how glad she was they had met, longing to ask a thousand questions; Miss Dorothy, equally eager, yet both a little silent, as people are apt to be after a long separation: so many emotions rise at once, that words are hard to find, and for a time one can scarcely tell whether the meeting is more a pleasure or a pain.

Carteret moved toward Cecil, and Cecil stood a statue of elegant indifference. It is an odd study to get exactly at people's thoughts in some moment of strong feeling. Cecil was wishing at the instant that she were either engaged or married to Lord George; for a good while she had believed that she had wronged Carteret, but this had no effect on her now. She could only wish there had been any claim or vow upon her to make his appearance a matter of no consequence. Woman-like, she was the first to recover her presence of mind: she began to talk as easily as if they had parted only the day before, as if they had parted and met again the merest society acquaintance imaginable. His heart swelled with wrath and

pain, but he would not be outdone; so they stood there and said such a host of nonsensical things, that any acute listener would have gained an inkling of the truth in spite of their attempts at keeping a proper surface. But there was no one to listen or watch for a few moments: Valery had taken Miss Dorothy's arm, and drawn her down the aisle, into an open chapel some distance below. As soon as her first confusion of delight had passed, she remembered questions that must be put at once.

"I don't need to say how glad I am, how happy the sight of you makes me," she said, slowly; "but we have forgotten—I must not stay here."

"I'll not lose you again!" cried Miss Dorothy, putting both hands on her shoulders, as if she expected her to run away on the instant.

"But Cecil, oh, Miss Dorothy, does she know?"

"Hush, child; no—nothing—she never will now."

"But if her friends discovered that you had met me?"

"It's all arranged; there's nobody now to tell her. Valery, I'll not lose you again! Mr. Denham is dead."

"Yes; we heard that."

"Well, he changed a good deal before he died; I'll explain later; there's no reason for trouble now; Marian's letter was destroyed long ago. Don't let's even think yet of any thing dreary; I tell you we need not part—Oh Val, Val, I am so glad to find you!"

"And I! if I could only tell you, if I only could!"

But words failed them both; they could only cling to each other and cry silently for a while. Then Miss Dorothy shook herself, and blew her nose till the chapel rang as if a trumpet had suddenly pealed out.

"We needn't go sobbing like geese," cried she; "tell me every thing in a minute; do you live here, where have you been, who is with you, all about it?"

"I live with John Ford and Jemima. I met him in New York, and he brought me home, but Jemima had answered your letter before that." There were a few rapid explanations, soon interrupted by Cecil and Carteret; the young lady found it not easy to preserve her elegant manners, and signified her intention of joining her aunt.

"You will catch more cold if you stay here, Aunt Dor," she said; "Valery, you'll drive back with us; come here to me this instant. Aunt Dor shall leave me a little bit of you to kiss in my turn."

So now Carteret tried to play the agreeable to the spinster, while the girls walked on down the aisle before them; but it was difficult to get his thoughts sufficiently in order to reply coherently to Miss Dorothy's remarks and inquiries. When they reached the porch, she said,

"We can offer you a seat, Mr. Carteret."

But he declined, he would rather walk; he would leave Miss Stuart in their care; he was charmed that she had met two such old friends, but he would leave them now.

"Oh, she came up with you?" asked Miss Dorothy. "Well, you can't have her any more to-day. But come and see us at once; we are in the Piazza di Spagna—just got here yesterday—I don't know the number, but it's the darkest entrance in the whole square."

"Perhaps this will make it a little easier to find, Mr. Carteret—if you are good enough to hunt us up," Cecil said, still with her grand air, handing him a card that had the address written on it.

"Of course he'll come," cried Miss Dorothy; "and he'll tell why he flew off like a whirlwind from London—you young people nowadays are past my comprehension! But I'm very glad to see you, Fairfax Carteret, and you look more like your mother than ever."

"Thank you, Miss Dorothy; I'll come to see you and be glad to," he answered, laying a slight emphasis on the pronoun.

"We are having quite a series of stage effects in our surprises," added Cecil, in her most delightful drawl, and going to the very limit of lady-like insolence.

Carteret did not seem to hear; Miss Dorothy looked cross and annoyed; Valery watched Carteret's face from under her veil. There was a second's uncomfortable silence while the carriage drove up.

"So you'll not come with us?" Miss Dorothy said.

He refused again, very calm and fearfully courteous now.

"I am afraid I am not civil," Valery said, and stopped, for she knew he did not hear a word.

"Oh, we can't lose you a moment," cried Cecil, and Valery perceived that he could hear her voice plainly enough.

"Then, if you absolutely won't come, we must say good-bye," continued Miss Dorothy, holding out her hand.

He bowed over it; lifted his hat to Cecil, saw Valery, and his first impulse was to make his farewell so marked that it could not fail to strike the other two. But he resisted the unworthy desire; he remembered the words he had meant to speak to her that morning; the sight of Cecil proved to him what a horrible wickedness they would have been! This cruel girl had the same power over him as of old; he could not insult Valery by any feigned words or looks of tenderness. Yet if she cared? If unconsciously during these past weeks his manner had led her to expect such words? All these thoughts flashed through his mind during the instant he held Miss Dorothy's hand. "Good-morning—I'm so glad to have met you, though I meant to scold," said the spinster; then a careless bow from Cecil, a shy glance from Valery's troubled eyes, and the carriage dashed off over the un-

even pavement and left Carteret standing alone.

After a while he roused himself from his gloomy reverie and hurried away. It was impossible to return home and spend the day in inaction. He hastened down the pleasant road, past the peaceful-looking convent, past the vine-covered ruin, and through the Porta Maggiore, never halting in his rapid march until he was miles distant, off on the broad campagna where the sun lay bright and warm, the heavens spread above blue and joyous, the skylarks soared and sung, the breeze rippled by with soft murmurs, and every thing was redolent with beauty and content, which made the tempest of his thoughts still harder to bear from the contrast.

Such a whirl of contradictory emotions, with the horrible pain at his heart predominant through all, till at last, wearied out, not so much from physical fatigue as the force of mental excitement, he lay down on the scented turf, drew his hat over his eyes, and tried to put a little order into his reflections, and reproved himself for his boyish weakness.

A new fancy started up and for an instant looked like a vague hope! Cecil had overdone her elegant indifference; if indifferent to this meeting she would have appeared more natural! Had she cared? Was there some secret connected with the sudden change in her manner which drove him desperate and half-mad from England? Then close upon it came another reflection which turned the vague hope into an added pain. Valery—if the idea the duchess had half implied were true—if she had learned to regard him as something more than a friend?

He sprang to his feet and resumed his eager march; his brain reeled and whirled till he could find no relief except in that hurried motion, but he could not outrun his fancies, he could not get beyond the voice which so clearly indicated the course that he must adopt. Cecil's own act had parted them; he must rest content with her decision; he could not even ask if some feeling of pique, some enemy's work were at the bottom of her conduct; he could not bring about any explanation. If it was true he had unwittingly given Valery reason to believe that one day he should come with a question from his soul to hers, then he must fulfill that tacit pledge. He had never yet broken a promise: whatever his youthful errors might have been, he had kept faith unswervingly, especially where women were concerned; it was his creed—there was nothing he could not more easily have forgiven himself than any shortcoming here; he must not give the lie to his rule of action now.

So he walked on and fought his battle with such strength as he could find; and never once, however much he suffered, however bright gleamed the hope which he tried to tell himself was only a vain fancy, did he sully his soul by contemplating the possibility of swerving a

hair-breadth from justice and honor. Whatever happened, he could bear his agony if these were left him unstained; but nothing under Heaven, no, not Cecil's love, if that could come within his reach, would ever atone for their loss, or leave him a moment's peace, though the future of which he had dreamed the previous summer under the ocean's skies could have been that instant realized by forsaking them, by so much as an effort to warp them to his will.

The carriage drove down the hill, and the three feminine tongues chattered volubly, and Valery told where she had been and what she had done during those years of separation.

"Then the picture was yours," cried Cecil, "and you are growing famous—only think of that, Aunt Dor!"

But she asked no question as to why Valery left them; she remembered the warning her aunt had long ago uttered, and, besides, she was too glad to see Valery again to think much of the past. But she was rather odd and capricious in her manner all day; this meeting with Carteret had shaken her too rudely for her to recover self-control. Miss Dorothy sent off a note to Ford and Jemima, ordering them without fail to come to dinner, and the hours before their arrival flew so rapidly, and there was so much to ask and to tell, that Carteret's name was scarcely mentioned.

Jemima arrived, and Cecil thought that in her whole life she had never seen any thing so wonderful as the cap she had mounted to do honor to the occasion—such a fluttering, inconstant cap too, which, heavily as it was weighted with ribbons and flowers, seemed to believe itself able to fly, and was every few moments trying to escape from Jemima's head, as if it fancied itself some sort of hybrid between a bird and a vegetable production; and Cecil, rather inclined to-day to headache and nervousness, could not keep from watching it till she got a feeling that it was alive—some species of bat or vampire with an intention to do Jemima a mischief, if she did not allow it to escape.

Most women, as flighty and inconsequent as the good old soul, would have troubled the three by a dread lest some suspicious word might reach Cecil; but she was as odd in such matters as in her fits of silence; once a need of secrecy impressed upon her mind and it remained; she could be trusted implicitly—she might have her days of mild lunacy, but her tongue would never approach the forbidden subject, however much she wandered.

Cecil was delighted with John Ford, and before the evening was over had made up her mind to something which his best friends did not suspect—the true state of his feelings toward Valery. That set her wondering upon another subject. Mrs. Sloman told the story of Valery's double rescue from danger by Carteret, and Cecil looked with sudden inquiry at the girl's face. But Valery's eyes met hers

unwaveringly—she spoke freely of the man—calmly too, and Cecil put by her half-suspicion before it was fully formed.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MISS DOROTHY BEWILDERED.

THE very next day Miss Dorothy and Cecil appeared at Ford's apartment, unable as they said to believe that seeing Valery was a reality until they held her fast again. They were never tired of wondering at and admiring her pictures and sketches; and Miss Dorothy, fully satisfied that the girl was the greatest artist who lived or ever had lived, would have snapped her fingers in scorn at any body venturing to remind her of Domenichino or Raphael.

Not that she said much, it was not her way; but to those who knew her, the very attempt to tell Valery that with patience and industry she might do a good deal; the manner in which she drew Ford on to criticize, and then nipped him for his assurance; the grim majesty with which she descended upon Cecil and told her not to turn Valery's head by nonsense—were convincing proofs of her state of unbounded pride and delight.

Cecil had gone with Ford into his studio, Jemima had rushed out to indulge in a skirmish with Giovanni—she always had to have at least six in a day to be happy, and Giovanni knew it and did his part as a simple affair of duty—so Miss Dorothy and Valery were alone in the girl's pretty salon.

Suddenly the door opened and in came a dainty little figure, gorgeous in costly velvets and furs, and the duchess, before noticing that Valery had a guest, was greeting her as if they had not met for ages, and crying,

"You bad child, I expected you last night! I ran up stairs hoping I should disturb you, as a punishment for your wickedness;" then she perceived that a visitor was present, and added, in Italian, "Ten thousand pardons for my rudeness, I thought you were alone when I rushed in so unceremoniously."

"Look at that lady," whispered Valery, in the same language.

The duchess looked and recognized her instantly; made a rapid sign to her friend not to betray her, and turned toward Miss Dorothy with her sweetest smile and most arch, mischievous manner.

"My dear Miss Conway," she said, in English, "I am charmed to meet you again! I'd not the least idea you were in Rome! I hope you are quite well?"

"I thank you, ma'am, and I'm as well as I ever expect to be in this damp place," replied Miss Dorothy, who had grown rigid at the sound of a foreign language and sat eying the speaker, trying to make out where on earth she had met her.

"The Duchess D'Asti, Miss Dorothy," Valery said.

Miss Dorothy bowed, and tried to look as if she recollected her, and was so dazed that the two could hardly preserve their gravity.

"Miss Conway has been meeting such hosts of people during the last year," continued Hetty, "that it is not surprising she doesn't just remember me."

"Well, I'm sorry to seem rude," admitted the old maid; "but that's the truth, and as my foreign languages are very rusty, the titles of your foreign ladies are dreadfully confusing."

"And I thought you would be pleased to see me," cried the duchess.

"Oh, I am pleased—don't mind my old-fashioned ways! I am sure Cecil will be glad—Cecil will know," returned Miss Dorothy, more confused than any mortal had ever seen her, from her remorse at not recognizing the elegant small woman who seemed so charmed to meet her.

"I am afraid your niece could not help us," said Hetty, with a merry laugh. "But I shall be delighted to make her acquaintance."

Miss Dorothy leaned her hands on the arms of the chair and looked helplessly at Valery.

"Cecil was always with me in England," she said.

"The duke will be delighted to meet you," pursued Hetty.

"The duke?" repeated Miss Dorothy.

"Yes—my husband, you know."

"Do I?" muttered the spinster, and looked more helplessly at Valery than ever, beset by a horrible fear that age had suddenly overtaken her and done away with her memory completely.

"Have you the blue-room unaltered?" asked the duchess, overwhelming her with another inexplicable question, in the most natural tone.

Miss Dorothy stared, pulled her own ear, and finally said slowly, like a person who knew she was asleep and talking in her dream, but must needs follow out its vagaries,

"That's in the Hermitage—I've no other blue-room."

"Certainly, in the Hermitage! Do you remember what a lecture you read me once?" pursued the duchess.

"Well," gasped Miss Dorothy, still in her sleep-walking voice, "I've lectured a good many people in my day, no doubt, but I don't think I ever took that liberty with you."

"Oh yes you did, and many a time since I've been grateful," and both she and Valery burst out laughing.

"Come," said Miss Dorothy, "that's something! I must be asleep. I know I am, I'm here alone and fast asleep; but I will say, though I know there's nobody present, I'm glad you weren't angry."

"I believe I was at the time," returned Hetty.

"I don't remember—I didn't dream that,"

murmured poor Miss Dorothy, looking as dazed as Jemima could have done. "We aren't speaking Italian, are we? I might talk any thing in my sleep."

"Oh, Miss Dor, can't you think; look close, don't you remember her?" cried Valery, while Hetty played with her vinaigrette and did the languid fine lady very neatly.

"I wish I could turn over," they heard Miss Dorothy mutter, "that might wake me up! I can't have dreamed seeing Valery too!" Then aloud, making another effort, "Your name is Italian, madam?"

"Naturally," said the duchess, and poor Miss Dorothy leaned back in her chair more convinced than ever that she had nightmare.

"But you know my blue room," she said.

"And the library, and Valery's room, and the bill back of the house. I can see them when I shut my eyes, as plainly as if it was yesterday I stood there," cried Hetty.

"I wish I could open mine," sighed Miss Dorothy, hopelessly.

There was a light tap at the door; in answer to Valery's summons, it opened, and Carteret entered, saying,

"I met Mrs. Sloman, and she said I might come up, Miss Stuart."

"She was quite right to say it," replied Valery.

"Ah, Miss Dorothy, good-morning; I didn't know I was to have the pleasure of meeting you."

"I'm asleep," moaned the old maid, then recovered herself enough to add, "Oh yes, good-morning."

"How do you do, idlest and most perfidious of men?" said Hetty.

"My compliments, duchess. I decline to answer your abusive epithets," returned he.

Then the two began to laugh and chatter nonsense, and Valery to do her part as well as she might, while Miss Dorothy sat stupefied until she could bear it no longer, and hurried out of the room in search of Jemima.

"Pinch me!" were her first words, nearly upsetting the old lady in the corridor.

"Have you got the hiccoughs?" asked Jemima, innocently. "I'll jump at you when you're not thinking, that's the best way to stop them."

"I thought I was asleep," continued Miss Dorothy. "Who's that lady in Valery's room?"

"The Duchess D'Asti," replied Jemima.

"People are all mad," cried Miss Dorothy, rushing into a rage; "as mad as hatters, Jemima Slowman."

"I wish you wouldn't say such things," answered Jemima, tearfully. "I'm often troubled, John and Valery are so queer, and there's Giovanni has broken the best soup tureen, and I'm sure I heard cannon this morning! Antonelli'll blow us all up before we know where we are, and I'm so glad you've come, Dorothy, though I'd never have known Cecil, grown out of all remembrance; and you don't dye your

hair either, though there's not a gray streak in it, and if you saw the state mine's in under the cap I'm sure you'd think I was my own grandmother, though you mayn't recollect her, for she died ever so long before I was born."

At least here was proof positive to Miss Dorothy that she was awake; in her wildest nightmare she could not have pictured Jemima so utterly vague and inconsequent.

"Don't let me keep you if you've any thing to do," she said; "I'm going into your room to rest a while; I'm tired."

While Jemima followed, keeping up an unbroken torrent of talk in which she joined the most irrelevant matters in the same sentence, the three seated in Valery's salon conversed pleasantly, and after a time the door opened again, and Cecil entered.

The duchess sat astounded by her beauty, which was in its fullest perfection this morning; but though she talked, and when Cecil was presented, said pretty things, and kept the conversation unflagging, she was not too much engrossed to notice the rigid way in which Carteret had risen to his feet as the young lady appeared, or the effort with which he flung himself into the first subject that offered. She glanced at Valery, half afraid to read some sign of suffering in her face; but though Valery looked pale, she was enough like her ordinary self to deceive any eyes unless it might be Hetty's, made so clear-sighted by her great love.

She felt an unreasoning and unreasonable dislike rise in her mind toward this beautiful creature, who had suddenly thrust herself between Valery and content. She was all the more annoyed because she could not help appreciating Cecil's loveliness and the charm of her manner, and she resented the girl's evident affection for Valery.

"Oh those Conways!" she thought, "haven't they done harm enough? It sha'n't be, I say; it sha'n't be! I believe he could love Valery yet, and—"

She recollected that she was being theatrical, and this was no time for it, even mentally.

"I can't imagine what has become of Miss Dorothy," Valery said, at last. "I must go and see that the good Jemima has not talked her quite to death in her delight."

Partly the truth and partly that she wanted a few moments to recover herself; for this was not an easy morning to Valery; not an easy night that she had spent, in which sleep refused to come, memory insisted on going over every incident of her acquaintance with Carteret from the terrible moment when his arms had borne her out of the reach of danger, up to yesterday; painting so vividly the scene of restraint and deep meaning she had witnessed between him and Cecil.

Only a little space in the shadowy ante-room, then she went on into the salon where Miss Dorothy sat waiting for Jemima, who had just left her on a suddenly remembered errand about

some trifling thing which must needs be attended to at once.

"Ah, here you are, Miss Dor," she said. "Why didn't you come back?"

"If you don't want me to go out of my senses, tell me who that lady is—duchess indeed, and talking about America, as if I knew any duchesses in my blue-room," cried Miss Dorothy.

"And you can't remember her?"

"I've bothered over it till I'm dazed," replied Miss Dorothy; "there's something familiar in her face, but who she is, or where I ever saw her, I know no more than if she were Adam or Eve."

"But you did know Hetty Flint," said Valery.

"Good Lord!" cried Miss Dorothy, and sprang completely out of her chair. "Hetty Flint—"

"Is the Duchess D'Asti."

"Good Lord!" she repeated, with more emphasis; then relapsed into her troubled, somnolent-feeling state. "Tell me what you like now, I can believe any thing! I never had any brains to boast of, but now they're only a pulp, nothing but a pulp!"

"I'll tell you all about it sometime, it wouldn't be right that even Cecil should know; she's the bravest, best woman," said Valery, rapidly. "Hark, I hear her voice, she is calling me."

"Don't bring her in," shuddered Miss Dorothy. "I really can't bear any more to-day. I shall act like a fool! I know I'm asleep and dreaming, and if you talked till you were black in the face you'd not convince me! Do go away to her; let me alone."

Hetty had no mind to sit and be amiable to Cecil and Carteret long, so she had risen and said,

"I must run away, I have an engagement! Good-morning, Miss Conway. No, Mr. Carteret, you are not to see me down stairs—I have to find Valery first."

So now she met her friend in the corridor; she had nothing in particular to say, but must needs draw Valery into an empty chamber, and pet her and talk eagerly, though not a word of what was in her heart escaped her lips.

There was silence in the room she had left for an instant, then Cecil began praising her, and Carteret tried to do his share. But it was difficult for them to converse; each was thinking of their last interview long months before. During the night, when she had not slept too much either, Cecil had made up her mind to a course of conduct. Supposing even that Madame de Hatzfeldt's story were true, at least the man had tried to redeem his error by going away. She had long been sorry for her insolent language, and had determined on the first occasion to tell him so.

"Mr. Carteret," she began firmly enough, though she had to speak rather fast lest her courage should fail or some chance tremor of her voice show that more was hidden under the confession than she meant to betray. He look-

ed up when she pronounced his name, and she hurried on. "Mr. Carteret, I believe I was rude to you the last time we met; I was very angry that day; I have had reason since to think I did you injustice—are you generous enough to forget it? We shall only be in Rome together for a short time; we need not annoy our mutual friends by our private misunderstandings."

He had risen from his seat before she had half finished; he forgot every thing except her presence and the great love which welled up like a torrent over all the barriers wherewith he had barred it out of sight during these months. Some wild, passionate words were on his lips; before he could utter them she added,

"As my aunt's friend, as the friend of my dear Valery Stuart, I am more anxious than ever to say this."

Valery—the name brought back the consciousness of all that separated them now. He sat down again; the pang in his heart was keener than the bitterness of death, but he made no sign.

"I thank you," he said, quietly; "if you judged me harshly, I don't think I deserved it."

"I can not explain," she continued; "the subject must end here." He bowed coldly.

"I have no right," he said; "but may I ask you one question?"

"I can not promise to answer, but ask."

"Did you receive my letter?"

"I never had a letter from you in my life," she said; "some notes of invitation, but those were to my aunt."

He could not speak; unless he told the whole truth no explanation was possible, and if he attempted that, the mad cry in his heart would utter itself, and whatever hope there might be, it came too late. He heard Valery's voice outside; she was returning; she stood between him and this woman now, perhaps forever.

"I must not keep you," Hetty had said. "Do you remember my saying I had something for you?"

"Yes, the books that were my mother's," Valery replied.

"Exactly; I forgot them in Florence, we came off in so great a hurry; but I have sent for the box; I shall soon place them in your hands very soon."

She kissed Valery and ran away, and the girl walked slowly through the corridor toward the chamber where Cecil and Carteret sat. Ford met her and asked some question as she neared the door, so the sound of her voice startled Carteret back to a realization of the impossibility of further explanation with Cecil.

"I thank you," he said, quickly; "as you say, we need not speak of this again. I am glad you do not dislike me; I shall try to be worthy of your friendship."

She bowed, a little hurt by his coldness, having no mind to add a single word, even if there had been time, but the door opened and Valery and Ford entered, and the two elderly ladies followed an instant after. There was a

brief idle, pleasant conversation, though it was mostly between Cecil and Ford; the rest were rather silent, and before long, Carteret took his leave. Miss Dorothy and Cecil wanted Valery to go and drive, but she pleaded to be let off as there were still several hours of light and she had wasted nearly her whole day. They consented on condition that she would go to them that evening. "Otherwise, we'll stay and bother you," Cecil declared.

Valery promised to go; she was tired, and though she felt it ungrateful, could not help wishing to be left alone.

"I tell you what it is, Cis," said Miss Dorothy, "we mustn't come here at improper hours and interrupt these busy people."

"Then Valery must find me something to do, for come I will," returned Cecil, with a childish willfulness which she often showed, all the more bewitching from its contrast with her queenly beauty.

"Valery must paint your portrait," Ford said; "that will be an excuse."

"Will you?" asked Cecil, delighted with the idea.

"Of course," she replied; "but, Mr. Ford, where am I to find colors for a complexion like that? and the face never keeps the same expression for two minutes."

"You wicked creature, to abuse my poor face!" returned Cecil. "But I'll not promise to sit still."

She went on to relate the despair of some person who had tried to paint her portrait, because she was always seized with an irresistible desire to get up at a critical moment; and she looked so beautiful as she talked, that Valery and Ford could only feast their artistic senses and marvel. A certain pang wrung Valery's heart as she gazed; it seemed hard that this happy creature should have all—beauty, station, love! The unworthy feeling startled her, and she checked it, remorseful at her own wickedness.

Cecil had risen, and was standing by her, smoothing the glossy braids of Valery's hair. The contrast and yet the subtle likeness between the two was very remarkable, though Cecil was much the fairer and her coloring more brilliant. Valery in her most animated moments was pale, and her smile had a certain sadness, while Cecil's perfect mouth swarmed with joyous dimples at each movement of the scarlet lips. What was an air of pride and willfulness in Cecil, became a reserved, quiet dignity in Valery; and Cecil's glad power of wit and repartee a quaint vein of humor in the other. But I might fill pages and give no clear idea of the distinctions I wish to trace; if their actions and characters do not make plain all that I want understood, then I must leave the two only shadows, clear and living as they are to my mind. Miss Dorothy took her niece away; Ford hurried off, for of late he rather avoided being alone with Valery, and she sat down to her easel again, though her work made slight progress.

Some friends that evening insisted on taking Cecil to the opera, and Valery spent it quietly with Miss Dorothy, trying to rest and be thankful in the spinster's kindness and affection.

From her box, where she sat glittering with jewels, artistic in dress, where troops of men came and went, and her husband enjoyed her triumphs in a way that made his Italian friends scoff among themselves, our American duchess could watch Cecil, and when some chance gesture or movement of the head reminded her of Valery, she felt the unreasoning bitterness of the morning rise again in her soul as she contrasted the destinies of the two girls. After a time she saw Carteret enter the *loge*, and however gayly she talked, however much she was occupied with her admirers, she had leisure to remark every word and look that passed between them, and thought, "I wouldn't do her any harm, but oh, if she had only gone anywhere else instead of coming to Rome! Well, it's no use to struggle against Fate, but I'll at least do my best that Fate makes no blunders."

Late that night, after the gay supper at her house was over, she sat alone in her room, her maid gone and she brooding over the fire with a serious aspect which one who had only seen her in her ordinary mood would scarcely have believed the *mignonne* face could wear.

Finally she rose and went to a large box which had only that day arrived from Florence. She opened it, selected from among matters of her own, several books and a quaint bronze casket which she placed upon the table. She turned over the leaves of the volumes thoughtfully, some old Latin and French works, sighing now and then as she came upon Lucy Stuart's name written here and there, or a few attempts at an English versification of the poets in the same careless, girlish hand. Then she looked long at the casket, not so much as if studying its workmanship, though it was rare enough to repay the trouble, as watching a series of pictures rise out of the past as the lamp-light played and flashed over the carved box. It had its history, that casket, and of all people now living, Hetty, Duchess D'Asti, was the only person who knew it. Long ago, during their sojourn in Southern France, Philip Conway had given that casket to Lucy Stuart, and among the few gifts from his hand which she had carried with her across the sea in her homeward flight, that had gone too.

At last Hetty searched among the shining treasures of her toilet-table for a chatelaine, from which among other baubles hung a little bronze key molded in the shape of a cross. She went back to her seat, saying, half aloud,

"Here it is. I have always worn it, just as I promised Lucy I would."

The key turned in the lock of the casket with a little grating sound. Hetty raised the lid and began to examine the contents, touching them softly as if they had been sacred relics, and to her, with whom friendship was a religion, they were so. Only a few old-fash-

ioned trinkets, some blackened twigs that had once been the stems and leaves of fragrant flowers, a few letters in a man's handwriting—nothing more, but they were the only traces left by which one was to picture poor Lucy Stuart's shattered life.

The inside of the lid presented a smooth surface of ivory, stained by age; a painting had been traced upon it, but the colors now were dimmed and faded. There was a secret spring, on touching which the ivory slid back. Hetty had once been shown how it worked; she had not forgotten. She pressed her finger upon the spot. The *plaque* yielded, revealing a little package of yellowed papers. Hetty knew what they were—fragments of a journal Lucy had kept. She raised these—under them lay another thin fold of paper or parchment. She did not look at it except to make sure that it was there; replaced the articles she had taken out, shut and locked the casket, and put it away.

"I will do exactly as I promised," was her thought; "the rest is in Fate's hands—in God's hands, I mean, wicked heathen that I am! My poor Lucy, if you can see me now, you know that I mean for the best in redeeming my pledge. I can do nothing more."

CHAPTER XXXII.

A DUEL À LA MORT.

THE Carnival was rapidly approaching, and though, owing to the scarcity of strangers, Rome was less gay than usual, numerous fêtes and balls took place among the Liberal party; to do honor to the season; and the stately apartments of the Quirinal were often thrown open for receptions, which the tact of the young princess who reigned there rendered always charming. It must have astonished the old corridors that had been for centuries accustomed to the stealthy tread of priests, to the sombre grandeur of prelates and cardinals, to find themselves echoing to the laughter of young voices and the sound of gay music; and the pretty little theatre which rose magically in one of the great anterooms was a desecration which undoubtedly made scores of Papal ghosts, haunting the scene of their former power, start back in horror, believing that they had lost their way. The dull salons too, where monkish counsels had been held, where an oppressive stillness seemed formerly always to reign, blossomed into gorgeous beauty, and appeared delighted with the change from their prison-like gloom.

Cecil's appearance in society was a signal for fresh triumphs, and as Miss Dorothy demanded her long-promised peace, the duchess offered to take the young lady out whenever she pleased. During the next fortnight the two were a great deal together, and Hetty could not resist the charm of Cecil's manner,

though she often resented her own weakness as an unfaithfulness to Valery. But Valery was pleased that they liked each other, and went on in her daily work, making no sign of disquiet or trouble. Cecil managed to visit her frequently, but she was so much occupied, that the sittings for her portrait were postponed from day to day. Carteret came too; seldom, however, during the day, for he avoided Cecil as much as possible, though of course they met night after night at dinners and balls. But before the toil of the evening commenced he frequently sought Valery's society, though he saw her no more alone; at that hour Jemima and Ford were always present, so as yet there had been no possibility of putting an end to the doubts and indecision in which he lived.

The nearing carnival days brought a certain influx of gay Continental people, barred out from unhappy Paris; and among them came Madame de Hatzfeldt, with a party of Austrian friends, free for the moment from her husband's guardianship. He was detained in England, but could not prohibit her journey, as she was not strong, and the physicians had ordered a couple of months' residence in a warmer climate.

Madame had known the American duchess in France during the days of the latter's widowhood, and hated her as she hated any successful woman, though hastening, on her arrival in Rome, to overwhelm her with protestations of friendship, which shrewd Hetty received at their precise value. From Carteret's half-confessions she comprehended that madame was at the bottom of the difficulty between himself and Cecil; and, in order to know exactly what was best to be done for Valery's sake, meant, before the lady's departure, to get the whole secret in her possession. It would not be easy; the duchess felt that, giving full credit to her antagonist's craft; but she had never failed in any effort, and animated by her present purpose, vowed to prove more than a match for madame's acuteness.

And madame played straight into her hands; she had met the duke in England before he made Hetty's acquaintance, and had done her best to wheedle the grave, handsome man into a flirtation. She must always be in mischief, so now the devil prompted her to tease Hetty; the fact that the duke was still a husband new enough not to have wearied of his chains (I put the matter as madame would have done), finding no weight in her view of the case. Of course he had married the widow for her fortune; of course, like most foreign spouses, would be ready to enter into any amusement which offered; and madame felt that she would gladly give one of her pretty ears to worry this impertinent creature, who had mounted so much higher than herself on the social ladder, and make her either pitied or laughed at.

Hetty understood the little game and managed in a thousand artful ways to help ma-

dame, and forced the duke to aid unconsciously. Of all things, madame prided herself on her conversational abilities; she did tell a story remarkably well, and for the sake of enchaining a circle of auditors would have told almost any history, even at a personal risk.

It came about one night at a supper at the duchess's house—from which Cecil was detained by a slight illness, and Carteret went away early—that, à propos to some subject, madame convulsed the whole table by relating an incident of a former English *bel esprit*, whose name she could not give, and the manner in which she punished a young lady who had offended her. She related the whole story of the note that Carteret had placed in her hands for Cecil, gave the interviews with great dramatic effect, and kept every body's attention fixed for a full quarter of an hour; telling the thing in so droll a fashion, that most people were too much absorbed in the theatrical bit to reflect upon the doubtful morality of the *conte*.

Hetty never was so sweet in her manner to madame as when she bade her adieu that night; she absolutely kissed her on both cheeks, thanked her for having been so charming, and said to herself,

"You miserable little Judas, it's as clear as daylight now. I hold you in these two hands."

And madame thought,

"The duke must be getting in earnest, and she sees it and is jealous. She'd never be so affectionate if she were not furious."

Then they embraced each other again and parted, both vowing that, of all the friends they had in the world, there were none for whom they entertained so lively a regard as for each other.

During the next few days madame pursued a more merciless attack upon the duke than ever, and at last committed the folly of writing him a note, a silly little note, saying that she had a matter of importance to disclose—asking him, by the memory of the pleasant days in England, to come to her that evening.

She knew the hours at which the duke was in his study, and sent a servant with the billet, ordering him to wait for an answer. Now that morning the duke had been sent for by the prince to go to the Quirinal; he was expecting a letter concerning one of the numberless petty political intrigues which went on in Rome that winter, and as Hetty was his prime minister and confidante, he had bidden her open the note if it came in his absence, and answer it herself. Indeed, the matter was more her affair than his, having for its object the subjugation of a noted "Papaline" noble, whom she had vowed to win over to the king's cause, and the duke's part had been performed at the instigation of her woman's wit. This letter they expected would contain details they wanted to place at once in the nobleman's hands, hoping to work a great change in his views from an appeal to his personal vanity. But the business has nothing to do with my story; I only enlarge so much upon it to explain Hetty's conduct.

She was sitting in her husband's study, busy with some writing for him, awaiting anxiously the letter, when the groom of the chambers entered, and placed Madame de Hatzfeldt's note on the table, saying:

"*Sua Eccellenza* ordered me to bring the letter to the *duchessa* as soon as it came—the messenger is waiting, if the *duchessa* pleases."

Hetty took the letter, motioned him to remain, wondering somewhat that a reply was needed, and tore open the envelope. The first words she read betrayed the mistake, but she did not mind her disappointment, for there came the quick thought that she had succeeded—she held Madame de Hatzfeldt fast in the toils. She considered a little, and then said,

"You need say only that the duke will answer the letter in person. Just those words—not a syllable more, Bianchi."

The man was devoted to their interests; he would repeat his message with precision, and add nothing to rouse a suspicion in madame's mind when it reached her, that her note had passed into any other than the rightful hands. Later, the expected letter arrived, but though she did her duty, Hetty was too much occupied with her plan of punishment and retribution to have any great zest in the business, for all it had interested her so much of late.

There was a ball at the Ruspoli palace that night, and Madame de Hatzfeldt dressed in good season and descended to her boudoir to await her guest. She contemplated herself in the mirror, and was fully satisfied with the effect; she looked more like some water-sprite in a German legend than ever, and smiled like the most malevolent of the race as she reflected upon her coming triumph. As sure as if it had already come to pass, was she that she should fool the duke to the top of his bent, and be able to make him ridiculous, have another story to relate in the very presence of the D'Asti's, and know that every body understood and enjoyed the duchess's rage and the husband's confusion.

She went on to think just what she should say, just how far she should go in this interview, and finally seated herself—very difficult she was to please in her attitude, but at last the pose was perfect, as she could see in the mirror opposite—and waited.

The velvet carpets gave back no sound under the tread; the heavy curtains parted noiselessly, and madame only knew that she was not alone when the rustle of a silken robe startled her. She turned so quickly that the graceful attitude was a failure—remained rigid, half risen from the couch, for there, in front of her, dressed also for the ball, the D'Asti diamonds blazing on her neck and arms, her face wearing the sweetest and most dangerous smile, stood the duchess herself.

"Don't stir—don't disarrange that graceful pose, *ma belle*," said she. "What a lovely dress! Sit down and let me—there, we are quite comfortable now."

She dropped into an easy-chair, and madame involuntarily sank back on the couch with a horrible fear at her heart, her eyes fixed upon her visitor like some fascinated bird, and the duchess regarded her with that sweetly menacing smile still upon her lips.

"You really frightened me," cried madame, trying to recover her wits. "I did not hear you come in."

"No; I would not let them announce me; so intimate as we are, I knew you would not mind."

Madame attempted some response—tried to laugh, but words and laughter were both a failure, and she pulled nervously at her pearl necklace as if it girded her slender throat too tightly.

"You look like a fairy in her grot—no, that's not half a comparison! You look as bewitching as Circe in her bower," pursued the duchess, apparently unconscious of any thing extraordinary in the other's manner.

It was just possible that the visit might be an odd coincidence; that some affair of her own had brought the creature, in utter ignorance of the fact that she would encounter her husband. If the meeting could only be prevented—there was nothing else to do! Madame tried to rise, meaning to pull the bell and give the servant a whispered order to admit no one, but the duchess laid her hand on her arm.

"Sit still; I like to look at you," she said, and again the dangerous smile flashed over her face.

"Just a moment—I have forgotten something! So good of you to come, dear duchess—we'll go to the ball together," madame answered, still trying to rise, still detained, not so much by the white hand which held her, as by that smile warning her anew that peril was near.

"Yes, we'll go to the ball together," returned the duchess; "but it is early yet—we have oceans of time."

"*Un instant et je serai tout à vous*," said madame, roused to the necessity of action—the duke might be announced at any moment—and relapsing into French in a vain hope of appearing like her usual self. "Just a word for my maid."

"Oh, there's no need; I told them not to let any body in," replied the other; "I wanted to see you alone, and I must."

Madame sat down again; she was conquered, and she knew it, though still in doubt what was to come, and determined to hide her trouble. "How mysterious—you quite pique my curiosity," she cried.

"As you have mine—so we'll explain mutually and be quits," said the duchess, with a pleasant laugh.

"Oh, the idea of my piquing any body's curiosity—I who am always as transparent as the day," returned madame, fluttering her fan, not wholly as a pretense; she felt hot and choked, as if the air of the room had been stilling; "transparent as the day," she repeated.

"Always—to me at least," said the duchess, as carelessly as ever.

"What magnificent diamonds!" cried madame, goaded, frightened as she was, into some effort at planting a sting. "How lucky you were to be so rich—not only able to buy a ducal coronet, but supply the gems to sparkle in it."

"I bought something else, though you may find it hard to believe," said the duchess, quietly.

"Oh what?" cried madame, in her childish way, though she was more angry than ever that the other would not even notice her thrust.

"A great deal of love and happiness—doesn't it seem odd?"

"Like a poetic idyl," answered madame, with a sneer; "but it sounds very pretty, all the same."

"And trust and confidence added," pursued the duchess; "still more like a fanciful idyl, isn't it, *ma belle*? But you may believe me, impossible as it sounds."

"I am sure of it," gasped madame, unable to sneer, for the duchess was smiling again; and fright once more mastered the woman's courage, or the craft that stood her in its stead.

"I am going to prove it to you," continued the duchess; "I came here on purpose to do so."

"I don't understand," faltered madame.

"But you will! I can be transparent as the day too, when I wish," said the duchess, arranging the lace on her bosom as she spoke, and looking as calm as if no more important thought crossed her mind.

"I confess I am utterly at a loss about what you want to arrive at," returned madame, with an attempt at languor which was sorely disturbed by the quiver in her voice.

"Then I'll tell you," said the duchess, still unmoved; "the letter that Mr. Carteret gave you for Cecil Conway—once on a time."

Madame was on her feet before she knew; so utterly taken by surprise that she could not remember what confession there was in the words that broke involuntarily from her lips.

"What did he tell you?"

"Pray don't be agitated, between such friends as we are there's no reason," pleaded the duchess, softly. "Yes, here we are at the bottom of our little mystery! The letter he wrote Cecil, begging for an interview—the letter that you let her believe was written to you!—I think the best jest I ever heard; you fairly surpassed yourself, *ma chère*!"

"I don't know what you mean," stammered madame, once more seating herself, or not so much making a voluntary movement as dropping back on the couch because her limbs refused to support her. "I don't know what you mean; I—"

"It is now ten o'clock," said the duchess, glancing up at the pretty Psyche clock on the mantel; "I have not much time to give you, because I promised to go to a reception before the ball."

"What do you mean by speaking in that way?" cried madame, growing desperate enough for an attempt at bravado. "One would think you were a police-officer in petticoats come to arrest a criminal."

"No, no, my dear; there are crimes outside the pale of the law, for which it has no means of punishment; you are safe so far," returned her conqueror, calm as ever.

"Did you come here to insult me?" demanded madame, her passionate temper rising now in reality, and overpowering her sense of danger.

"Oh no, don't misunderstand, I only came for the letter Fairfax Carteret wrote to Miss Conway."

The momentary strength that anger had given the woman died out as suddenly as it had come, but she crouched back in her seat prepared at least to be sullen and defiant.

"He never wrote her any letter; he wrote me a silly one to which I never paid any attention."

"How you made us all laugh the other night by your witty recital of the affair," interrupted the duchess, and laughed again, as if the recollection amused her still.

Madame remained silent for an instant; she was found out certainly; but after all, if she held firm no harm could come to her, and if it were necessary she would persist in her falsehood to Carteret's face, in Cecil's presence—then let him convince the girl if he could!

"What I said to her I would say again," she cried, sharply; "say it to them both—I'm not to be frightened, duchess!"

"I wouldn't frighten you for the world—how you do persist in misunderstanding me!" said the other, in a plaintive voice, but, as she spoke, drew a letter from her pocket and began twisting it about in her jeweled fingers, apparently unconscious of what she was doing, but managing to leave the crest and address visible, and madame recognized her own note to the duke.

She half stretched out her arm, with some mad intention of snatching the paper—the duchess's eyes met her own with such a placid, smiling determination that madame knew she might as well have tried with her puny strength to wrench something from the claws of a tigress.

"Twenty minutes past ten," said the duchess in her softest voice; "I can give you till the half-hour strikes to make up your mind."

"What do you want—what do you expect?" moaned madame, feeling herself on the verge of hysterics.

"The letter that Mr. Carteret gave you for Cecil Conway," repeated the duchess, as monotonously as though she were saying a lesson.

"As if I would have kept such trash!"

"As if you would have destroyed it! Do remember I am a woman too," said the duchess, sweetly.

"You're—you're—oh *diablesse, que vous êtes!*" exclaimed madame, turning French from force of habit, and the duchess bowed as if she had

received a compliment. "What did I ever do to you that you should torment me like this?"

"You—do to me—as if the supposition were a possibility!" returned the duchess, and her voice was too indifferent to make her words even contemptuous; but once more the D'Asi diamonds caught the light as her slender fingers toyed with the note.

"A billet that the idiot wrote me!" added madame, with difficulty repressing a shriek.

The duchess only glanced at the clock, still playing with the letter.

"I haven't it with me, even if it is not destroyed," she began.

The duchess held up a warning finger—the clock chimed the half-hour—madame's voice died in a sob.

"Oh, I could kill you with pleasure! I could stamp your life out under my feet, and be glad to do it!" she cried, flinging up her arms with an insane fury.

The duchess rose slowly—her eyes yet fastened on the clock; madame put out one hand and grasped her dress, a new spasm of fright mastering her rage.

"Wait—what are you going to do? Wait."

The duchess regarded her with a preoccupied, forgetful air, as she said, "I was only trying to remember just the time a letter takes to reach England—you can tell, as you write often to your husband."

"You'll drive me out of my senses!" gasped madame. "You sha'n't send it to him—you sha'n't! I'll murder you here in this room before I'll let you! If I could lay hands on a knife I'd kill you—I would—I would!"

"The post goes out at nine," pursued the duchess; "to-morrow will be Thursday—on Sunday morning it would reach London—did you say on Sunday morning?"

"I don't know—I'll not tell you! Oh, let me alone—what have I done? Just a bit of nonsense—you're the cruellest woman that ever breathed—a stone would have more feeling than you!" returned madame, wringing her white hands.

"Fine ladies don't have feelings," replied the duchess, with a cold surprise in her face and voice, "and you and I are fine ladies. Good-bye—I must go now."

She moved slowly down the room; after an instant of bewilderment—after a vain effort to cry out and being unable to utter a sound—madame expended her strength in a wild rush forward. She got between her enemy and the door—grasped her dress again—and as the duchess quietly retreated a step, fell on her knees.

"You did not hurt yourself?—let me help you up."

"He would kill me," moaned madame; "oh, worse than that—he would leave me—he swore to me once—I shouldn't have a friend—not a place to turn—Oh, for mercy's sake, don't betray me."

"Let me help you up," repeated the duchess, simply.

"No—I'll die here—you sha'n't go! Haven't you any mercy?—at least we're both women! Oh my God, don't leave me."

"Hush!" said the duchess, sternly, "not that name, until you go to Him on your knees for pardon."

The wretched woman buried her face in her hands and sat huddled on the floor, moaning and shivering in horrible dread. If this letter reached her husband she was utterly ruined; only once, early in their married life, there had been a scene between them in regard to a somewhat similar affair, and she had never forgotten it. The man understood her better than most people did; comprehended that she was too cold-blooded and calculating for her sins to pass a certain limit. But he had a deal of pride in his dull German way, and determined that his name should not suffer by her follies growing sufficiently pronounced to attract anything beyond general gossip. So the miserable creature knew she could hope nothing from his mercy, and was well aware that the duchess knew it too. Her only chance of safety lay in the possibility of softening this sister woman, so calmly courteous in her pitilessness. She struggled slowly to her feet and cast an appealing glance toward her victor—read in the composed face that only one loop-hole was left—one way out of the meshes in which she had entangled herself.

"I didn't mean to make you angry—I didn't know what I was saying," she pleaded, and her frightened contrition was more revolting to Hetty's courage than her attempts at bravado had been.

"I am not in the least angry," she said.

"Then don't go—don't leave me!"

"I will remain if you have any thing to say," she replied, coldly; "but come and sit down—we must not make a theatrical scene! Suppose any one were to come in—you might have a visit!" she was a thorough woman and could not resist that last thrust.

"Nobody—nobody," sobbed madame, catching her hands and drawing her toward a sofa. "You're not vexed—I didn't mean a bit of harm—indeed, indeed I did not—don't be angry."

"My dear lady, these apologies—if you insist on making them—are due to Miss Conway or the gentleman—I have no cause to be angry."

"Oh, I don't care about them—they may think what they like, they can't hurt me—but you—Oh don't be hard and unforgiving!"

The woman's frank confession that she cared for what nobody thought, so long as no harm could come to her, was fairly amusing, but it made the duchess unmerciful enough to say,

"I tell you that I have no reason to be angry."

Madame drew a long helpless sigh—no escape possible—she could only do exactly as she was bidden.

"You'll tell me what you want," she cried.

"The letter that Fairfax Carteret wrote to Cecil Conway," repeated the duchess, in precisely the same measured tones as before, when she seemed to be reading a lesson.

"Heavens and earth! Come to my bedroom," exclaimed madame, springing up with a fresh stamp of her foot, and through all the terror in her face a murderous frown visible that set Hetty wondering in her odd way how much her life would be worth if this pretty creature only dared act upon her instincts.

She followed her in silence to the bedroom; the lamp was turned down, the maid gone. The duchess seated herself near the toilet-table glittering with ornaments, rouge-pots, and powder-balls scattered about, but madame was too nearly out of her senses to care what was seen. She hunted nervously for her keys, took a writing-desk out of one of the commodes, unlocked it, upset the contents in her haste, and finally tossed a letter to her companion, saying,

"There it is!"

Hetty glanced at it, and put it in her pocket.

"Since you can't have any other relief, suppose you fear this," said she, giving into madame's hand the letter to the duke.

Madame seized it with a little cry, and fairly tore it with teeth and nails, uttering ejaculations that made her appear for the instant, in spite of fair face and rich dress, like some savage animal—as if the duchess had been enchantress enough to force her real self to appear under its disguise of beauty.

"It is almost eleven," Hetty said; "I shall see you at the ball."

"What are you going to do with that note?" asked madame.

"I've not the least idea; nothing, probably."

"Just tell me which of them told you?" she panted. "You owe me so much—tell me."

"Why neither of them—do you think I need to be told things?" demanded the duchess, with a look of innocent surprise. "I put this and that together till the whole story was perfectly clear to me."

Madame stared at her; she seldom believed people, but she felt that the duchess was telling the truth.

"What an outrageous fool I have been!" she exclaimed. "I needn't have let you know, after all."

Hetty only looked at her own hands, twisting and untwisting an imaginary note, and smiled.

"I forgot that. Don't, you frighten me!" shivered madame. "How did you get it—what did he say?"

"The duke?"

Madame nodded.

"Bless the child!" said Hetty, laughing. "He has no idea you ever wrote to him; he was expecting a letter, and told me to open and answer it while he was gone; so I did."

Madame threw herself down on three

and for the first time during the whole interview burst into a fit of passionate weeping. The danger over, all she could think of was the completeness with which she had been outwitted, and the prominent emotions in her mind became rage and shame at her defeat.

The duchess gathered her long opera-cloak about her, and left the chamber in silence. She drove off to her reception, and did not reach the Ruspoli palace until very late. She was too well acquainted with her own sex to be surprised when she saw Madame de Hatzfeldt whirling through a gallop on some military man's arm, looking as bright and gay as if no serious thought had ever crossed her mind.

The duke met his wife at the reception, and accompanied her to the ball; they were still standing side by side when the music stopped, and madame and her partner halted a few paces off; their course toward a seat brought them all face to face.

"You dear, dazzling duchess!" cried madame, joining her hands with a pretty enthusiasm. "Duke, you are the most enviable man in the world."

"I am glad to have Madame de Hatzfeldt's seal set upon my own verdict," he answered, with one of his grand bows: Hetty added a few merry words, and they parted; but the duchess knew that, of all people in the world, madame would hereafter scrupulously avoid herself and her grave, silent husband.

Two days later, the restless lady departed for Naples, and during the rest of her life the place she hated most, never able to mention its name without acrimony, was the Eternal City.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE CASKET OPENED.

It was only the Saturday after that the mad performance of the Carnival began. I remember a slight shower fell that afternoon, and the Corso seemed suddenly thick with a growth of monster mushrooms, so many umbrellas of every shape and hue filled the street. But that was the last sign of storm for nearly three months. Day after day, each more gorgeous than its predecessor, followed, as if the weather had become so ashamed of its evil conduct during the early winter that it wanted to make amends. Cecil and her aunt had secured a balcony, but that first day they joined the duchess at the window of her great salons which overlooked the Corso. Carteret made his way hither also; and Hetty, watching the two as she always did, construed the slight restraint between them to suit her own views—at least tried to do so—and determined that the time had come to place in Valery's hands the legacy Lucy had left for her child. But Valery was not with them; she could not waste so many afternoon, she told the duchess, and would re-

serve herself for the closing days when the excitement reached its height.

Sunday followed; twice the duchess was on the point of sending her package; each time deferred it; not able to offer herself a reason, though at the bottom it was more a dread to fling some new cause of disquiet into Valery's life than any other motive which occasioned her delay.

It was Monday morning; Valery felt too restless, after her troubled night, to settle down to work, so she went out for an early walk. The day before, she and Ford had gone for a long ramble, and during her absence Carteret called. Jemima said that he seemed odd and silent, and appeared disturbed at not finding her. John Ford, listening to the broken story—it was Jemima's weakness to make a long history out of the simplest detail—glanced at Valery, and something in her face sent him abruptly away to his own room to atone for the pleasure of the last few hours by one of his dismal vigils.

So this beautiful morning Valery set off for a solitary ramble, and almost unconsciously turned her steps toward the Pincio, which is never so lovely as at the hour when so few even of its daily visitors see its peculiar charm. She passed down through the little square near the house, followed the streets toward the Piazza di Spagna, and mounting the famous hundred steps, only tenanted so early by a few newsboys folding their journals and an occasional vender of flowers arranging her stock to make the best effect, and reached the open space at the top, with the old obelisk in the centre, the stretch of church and convent wall, where the French nuns pass their monotonous lives, rising up beyond, as if trying to catch glimpses of the world below. Her walk led directly along the brow of the hill, past the stately Medici gardens overlooking the city, mounting gradually, until at length she attained the heart of the beautiful promenade.

The Pincio was almost deserted; here and there might be seen a group of Romans from the country, beginning their day's excursion early; now a knot of pretty English girls, with their governess, chattering like a flock of blackbirds; again, a line of sable-cloaked youths from some Papal seminary, prayer-books in hand; an occasional horseman galloping past; a few elderly gentlemen come hither to read their newspapers in quiet; but nothing visible to disturb the repose of the place. She walked out on the great stone terrace that hangs above the Piazza del Popolo, and looked down upon the beautiful scene. A soft white mist spread over the city, not thick enough to obscure the view, turning to a golden haze where the sunlight struck it, and out of it rose the numberless church towers, each with its legend, the countless palace-roofs, and not one without its eventful history; the open dome of the Pantheon—the long line of the Corso—the sweep of St. Peter's and the Vatican—still on to the left,

Trajan's column—the Coliseum—the world of wondrous ruins—the broad stretch of the Campagna closing in the whole, and in the morning light still more than ever, like a vast, waveless sea, with here and there turret or tower rising like some great ship becalmed on its breast.

She gazed until the sense of beauty grew an absolute pain—that inexplicable feeling which Rome gives oftener than any other haunt in the world—then walked back through the space where the old palm-tree stands, into the winding paths of the gardens. A few people were sunning themselves on the stone benches; an elderly woman standing by a huge black-and-white cat that she had placed on one of the seats, watching it eat the breakfast she had brought in her pocket. It was droll to observe her interest in the old animal—a dissipated, ill-regulated looking grimaldin, with an air of having been out all night, grumbling over his breakfast, snapping at his mistress, and conducting himself so much like a human being under similar circumstances, that it gave one a passing faith in the doctrine of metempsychosis to watch his performance.

Suddenly, as Valery sat there, she caught the sound of horses' hoofs, and a ring of girlish laughter borne on the scented breeze. She glanced out from her covert—two equestrians dashed past, Cecil and Carteret. They swept by, and did not see her! Straightway there came into Valery's mind the thought that thus she must stand and watch them pass out of her reach, and know that she had no part in their future.

During the preceding days and nights she had thought herself schooled into resignation, but learned now how little her utmost efforts had accomplished. It was not at first simply mental pain; a sharp physical agony quivered at her heart as if the naked nerves had been struck by a knife. The old rebellion surged up, the passionate outcry against fate, the wild yearning for happiness, the bitter comparisons between her life and that of others. The radiant sunlight was hateful; the murmur of the wind, the echo of happy, childish voices, the song of the fountain; every sight and sound of beauty became an insupportable torture. She hurried back along the road to the entrance of the Medici villa; it was too early for visitors to obtain admittance to the gardens, but the stately concierge, an old acquaintance of hers, allowed her to pass without demur.

She paced up and down the formal avenues, chilly and dark at that hour, while the ilex-trees shivered in the breeze, and uttered querulous complaints, and the gloom and the melancholy whispers were at least better than the clear light of day. Up and down she rushed, and fought her battle over again, struggled, prayed, rebelled; felt the mad desire which has come to each one of us in our time to end the existence destiny rendered so terrible a curse. It seemed to her she could never rest again; she must go on, on, in a pilgrimage like that

of the fabled wanderer, alone with her suffering and her murdered dream—yet not alone; the angels, with whom it is right to leave her (not daring to intrude upon the awful hour), watched and protected her still.

It was almost noon when the conflict ended, and, worn and faint, like a person spent with long illness, she remembered that she must go back to the duties of her life.

No one disturbed her that day; even Jemima had gone off to watch the Carnival show, and left Valery to herself. That night, as she sat in her room, a package was brought, and with it a letter from Hetty. Among other mysterious passages, the epistle contained these lines, which Valery read over and over, staring at the little bronze casket, and holding the key in her hands so tightly that a faint red impression of the cross was left on her palm, hesitating still to open the lid.

"I promised Lucy if ever a crisis in her child's life arose where her happiness could be vitally affected by knowing her mother's story, that I would give up this casket. I can help you no further; I can not say whether the full secret will be made plain to you—that you must search for: if it escapes your eye, then I must believe, as Lucy bade me, that it is because a higher power wills that you should not know."

Valery studied the words, and looked at the casket with a vague feeling of dread, till at last her hand began to pain and burn from the force with which she grasped the key. She smiled drearily when she saw the print of the cross upon her palm. In her excited state, it seemed a seal set upon her whole life; and in this hour, with her suffering unsubdued, she could not remember that in time—at least in eternity—immortal roses might twine about the symbol, if only she could bear it aright. She opened the casket at length, and there lay the mementos of her mother's past—the trinkets—the blackened flowers—Philip's portrait—the fragments of her journal. Every thought connected with her mother was so sacred in Valery's mind, that involuntarily, as she began to read, she sank upon her knees, and the tears which she had not been able to shed over her own sufferings, streamed from her eyes, and dissolved the icy band that locked her heart.

But there was nothing, after all, to make Hetty's warning plain; strange allusions here and there, chance words which startled her, but nothing to show that any mystery was hidden in the details of the pitiful story whose outlines Valery had known so long.

She examined the casket again; the smooth plaque of painted ivory showed no sign of being movable—she tried it, with the idea that something might be hidden under, but it did not yield to her efforts. She put the relics back, and rose from her knees; some unguarded movement sent her shoulder with such force against the table that it nearly upset, and while she was trying to steady it the casket fell, with a dull crash, upon the floor. Valery uttered a

faint cry; it hurt her that even an involuntary act of hers should have brought the least injury to any object belonging to her dead mother. She stopped to pick the casket up; the shock had dislodged the ivory lining of the lid; on the floor lay a roll of papers which she had not before seen.

When day broke Valery Stuart rose from her night-long vigil, swept the curtains back from the deep-set casements, and looked out upon the dawn. The last struggle was over; strength had come—a higher strength than had nerved her before, which would never fail, never falter, for it was born out of a spirit of self-sacrifice. She could thoroughly now fulfill the vow made by her father's death-bed.

She was white as a ghost; her eyes dilated, and unnaturally dark with pain, but a smile of ineffable sweetness brightened her face into such beauty that, had any one entered suddenly, he might have started back in awe, almost believing that he saw not the earthly Valery, but the likeness her glorified spirit should wear in the light of the hereafter.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

VALERY'S PLEDGE REDEEMED.

THERE was to be a ball at the D'Asti palace that night: as the duchess sat in her room, occupied with the important duties of her toilet, some one came and said that Valery wished to see her for a few moments.

"Show the signora in," she told her woman, "and don't come back till I call you; I have plenty of time to dress."

Valery entered; the woman went out and closed the door; the two friends stood there alone. Hetty hurried forward to meet her guest; her extended hand dropped to her side at the first glance she caught of Valery's face; she stood still, saying, in a sort of awe-stricken voice,

"You found it: you know the whole secret now."

Valery kissed her quietly, led her to a seat by the fire, and sat down opposite.

"It was to be," she answered; "the casket fell on the floor, and the ivory lid dropped out."

Hetty watched her for a moment in silence.

"Well?" she cried, impatiently, as Valery did not speak.

"Yes, it is well; every thing is well now," she replied, and the beautiful smile settled upon her lips once more.

"I don't understand!" exclaimed Hetty. "Oh, what is this I see in your face, Valery! You don't mean to give up your happiness! Oh, you shall not, you shall not! You have borne enough—sacrificed enough; you have a right to your happiness."

"And I am going to claim it," she replied; "the best, the dearest that this world could offer."

"What do you mean?" cried Hetty, passionately. "What do you come here for with a face that frightens me, and then say you intend to claim your happiness?"

"My foolish Hetty! Is it such a terrible face?" asked Valery, leaning forward and taking her two hands, while the strange unearthly light glorified her eyes still more.

"You look as if you had come out of another world," exclaimed Hetty; "oh, I don't know how—as some girl saint might have looked when they were leading her to martyrdom."

"And could the girl have had a higher blessing offered?" demanded Valery, in her firm, clear voice. "The death whereby she should glorify the Lord?"

"You'll make me wicked—I'll not hear it!" moaned Hetty, snatching her hands away and smiting them hard together. "Oh, Valery, Valery, what are you going to do?"

"Nothing, Hetty; don't be frightened."

"I am—I don't believe you! I'll not let you make yourself miserable; I say, I will not! I love you so. Oh, my Valery, my poor child!" Then her voice broke, and she began to sob bitterly.

"Listen to me," Valery said, kneeling beside her, and putting her arm about Hetty's waist. "Such a fond, loving heart, such a bad, one-sided head, that will only see what it wishes!"

"I have seen plainly enough, Valery; you can't deceive me, I love you too well for that to be possible."

"And it is because you do love me that you must let me be happy in my own way," returned Valery.

"By sacrificing yourself to Cecil, by letting your whole future go to wreck, by— Oh, you shall not do it; I say you shall not!"

"And if I were ready to follow your plan, what would it be, Hetty?"

"Tell the truth—the whole truth!"

"To what purpose, Hetty?"

"Because—because— Oh, Valery, I know that Carteret did care for Cecil before he saw you; but as if any body could love her after—as if any old memory could put you out of his heart!"

"I want first to talk to you about Cecil and Mr. Carteret," Valery said, never hesitating over the name. "I saw by your letter that you had found some clue to the shadow which lies between them."

"I only mentioned it to show you that there had been no engagement, no love-making," Hetty interrupted.

"But you must tell me clearly, you must give me those proofs."

"To carry to him, to help him make a fool of himself, to help you in your effort to be a martyr! Then I won't!" cried Hetty, obstinately.

"So, for my sake, you would do what nothing could induce you to do for your own—commit a wicked action!"

"Wicked, if you like. I tell you I'll not have it! Oh, I thought you were to be happy at last! He did care, I know he did, and you—"

"Hetty, Hetty!" interrupted Valery.

"I'm a brute; I'll not speak about you; I'll be as silent as you have been. I don't pretend to read your heart! But he did care, and back comes that Cecil, after making him miserable once; after daring to doubt his truth; after believing the first falsehood a crafty woman chose to tell her! Oh, she deserves to suffer; she has had her chance of happiness, and recklessly thrown it away; what right has she with another?"

"Let us put Cecil aside for a little," Valery said, smoothing her friend's long hair, which fell down her back in a shower of dusky ripples.

"Put her aside altogether! That's just what I want. I declare, I fairly hate her!" cried Hetty, venomously.

"You love her very much; you can't help it!"

"I know that, and it makes me hate her all the more," said she, laughing and crying at her own inconsistency.

"About me first—let her go. Hetty, I would not marry Fairfax Carteret if he were to ask me."

"He will ask you."

"I hope not; I think not."

"He will ask you; he'd have done it before now, only there has been no chance these last days."

"Would you like to see me humiliated, Hetty?"

"I don't know what you mean again!"

"Am I the sort of woman who could fail to be humbled when a man came to her with such words from a sense of duty, only because he feared that his kindness and friendship had been misinterpreted by her miserable vanity to mean something more?"

"He wouldn't! I tell you the other was a dream—a fancy!"

"My foolish Hetty, so determined only to see what she wishes! You don't understand either him or me, Hetty."

"You needn't tell me stories."

"I shall not, Hetty! Now call the old romance a dream if you will; tell me what dispelled it."

Hetty shut her lips sullenly, and turned her head toward the fire.

"Do you believe me capable of a falsehood?" Valery asked, after waiting a little, in the vain hope that she would speak. "I am a proud woman; do you think that, even to spare my pride a humbling, I would come to you with a lie on my lips?"

"No, Valery, no!"

"Then trust me when I say that I want my happiness, that I know what will give it."

"What will?" she asked, her voice growing hard and suspicious again.

"To clear up the cloud which separates these two. Wait, Hetty," she added, as the other made an impatient gesture. "Remember that every instant you hesitate is a bitter humiliation to me; don't do any thing which will bring restraint between us; don't make me feel that there is a thought in your mind which I shrink to encounter."

"Oh, stop, stop!" broke in Hetty, straining her to her bosom.

Then she rose quickly and hurried to the table, unlocked a writing-desk, and took out the crumpled letter Madame de Hatzfeldt had given her. She ran back to the hearth, and threw it into Valery's lap, saying,

"There it is; Carteret wrote it to Cecil; that Austrian woman, instead of delivering it, made Cecil believe it was written to herself—there's the whole story."

She returned to her dressing-table and sat down before the glass, apparently occupied in brushing her hair; preserving a silence that would have looked like ill-humor, only her friend could see the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I must go home now," Valery said, "unless you will let me help you dress—will you?"

"I've three minds to bid them put out the lights and shut the doors," cried Hetty. "A pretty state I am in to give a ball!"

Valery went up to the table and raised the downcast face so that their eyes met.

"Look at me," she said; "do I seem unhappy?"

"I hate saints and martyrs!" ejaculated Hetty, beginning to brush her hair more furiously than ever.

"Then don't make a victim of yourself with that merciless brush," said Valery, pleasantly, taking it out of her hand. "I suppose your coiffure is waiting to arrange all this."

"No; I can't bear a man fussing about my head; Pauline always does it," Hetty said, still pouting.

"Let me try; it's only to do these braids and arrange these pretty little curls over the forehead; now just see how bewitching I shall make you!"

Hetty submitted, smiling in spite of herself, though she said,

"I wish you could turn me into a Gorgon for the night; I know one person I'd leave a stone image! I wish every Conway that emigrated to America had been drowned sixteen times over."

Valery went on weaving the masses of hair, and at last Hetty exclaimed that she had improved on the old model.

"I declare, you've actually managed to make all this heap look artistic," she said. "What shall I wear in it?"

"Just one diamond star; why, you look like a little fairy."

"You dreadful girl, you never come to my balls; I have to hunt you up if I want you," grumbled Hetty.

"My dear child, I shall have to remind you

of your favorite maxim—we must all fulfill our destinies. I like to come when you are quiet, but really, the mere thought of what is called society life is tiresome to me! I like my work and my little amusements, but I'm shy and awkward and solemn in your great world."

"You're too good for this old planet, that's certain!" pronounced Hetty, giving her a vigorous hug. "Oh, Val, Val, it might all be so different!"

"I think every thing is very well as it is, dear."

"Just one word would do it—one word from me; he would find where his heart really was then—with all that horrible old Virginian pride cast into the balance where it belongs."

"I think you wrong Mr. Carteret, Hetty; he would be a very weak, unworthy man, if that could be true."

"Oh, human nature is frail," said Hetty, with an exasperated shrug of her shoulders. "He's been so nurtured in these narrow creeds, that, clever and good as he is, they are not to be shaken."

"Put to the proof, I believe they would be cast off unhesitatingly. I could not respect and admire him as I do, if I doubted that."

"Oh you—you're the proudest creature that ever lived, only in such an out-of-the-way sort!" retorted Hetty, giving herself another shake of exasperation.

"Proud enough, I hope, to reverence the right," she answered; "and so is he, and so are you, my wicked-tongued little woman."

"I do believe I am wicked," cried Hetty, despairingly. "Oh, if you could only have seen madame and me do theatre the other night;" and with one of her quick changes of manner, she began to laugh heartily. "I sha'n't betray her, even to my husband, but I must just tell you enough to make you appreciate the scene."

Valery was glad to have her talk herself back into her accustomed spirits, but had to remind her that it was time the maid should be summoned to complete her toilet.

"I suppose it would be useless to urge you to stay?" Hetty said.

"In this dress?"

"Oh, we could send for your things."

"Some other evening, but not to-night, Hetty dear!"

She was furling away to ring the bell; the duchess stopped her. "Kneel there, so that I can look at you," she said.

Valery obeyed without demur; Hetty gazed long in her face, and the tears gemmed her eyes again.

"One of the grandest women God ever sent down to earth," she murmured. "Oh, Valery, Valery, what a life they will give you hereafter! Do you know how much good you do? do you know that no human being ever comes near you without feeling better and purer?"

Valery leaned her head on Hetty's knees and looked up, tearful too, but smiling still.

"If it be true in the faintest degree, this lov-

ing exaggeration of yours," she said, "have I not more reason to be content and happy than any one you know?"

"And are you—surely, surely, are you?" Hetty questioned, eagerly.

"Do you believe the dead see us?" returned Valery, instead of answering her earnest inquiry.

"Yes; I don't know; but what has that to do with it?" asked Hetty, wonderingly.

"If I can give Cecil her happiness, don't you think it will seem a sort of expiation?"

"An expiation from you," broke in Hetty, "from Lucy's child!"

"Because Lucy and I both loved Philip," she answered only; and a sufficient perception of her meaning struck her friend, to keep her from further expostulations.

"The noblest woman, the grandest heart!" Hetty murmured, kissing her again, and brushing her hand over her own moist eyes.

Valery rose, and prepared to go.

"Good-night, dear," she said; "you promise to amuse yourself?"

"Yes—no—I dare say; because I'm such an absurd creature that I rush from one extreme to another without warning. I wish you wouldn't go home to mope."

"Indeed, I have not the slightest idea of doing that, nor any reason," returned Valery.

"I shall read a new book to Mr. Ford and sing to him, and we shall be as cheerful as possible."

"Why—do you know—I think—"

Hetty paused abruptly; a sudden light flashed upon her; for the first time she understood John Ford's secret as well as if it had been put in language.

"What do you think?" asked Valery.

"That I shall never be dressed if I don't let you go; but I wish you would stay, all the same."

Valery kissed her, and would have run away, but the duchess still detained her.

"I want to ask one more question—only one."

"And that?"

"Have I done my part? Am I to interfere any further, now that you have taken the letter?"

"You never did a better work," Valery said.

"I doubt if I meant it."

"You wicked Hetty!"

"I can't help it, I only wanted it in my hands; I believe if I could, I'd have used it to suit my own purpose as unscrupulously as pretty madame did."

"You do yourself a great injustice. I know you better than that."

"Human nature is frail," quoted Hetty again.

Valery kissed her once more and departed; the duchess summoned her women, and returned to the important duties of the hour. But Hetty was unusually indifferent to her appearance, though she sat gazing in the mirror as earnestly as if absorbed in the contemplation of her own image. Yet she never saw it once; a whole world of vague fancies took shape, and seemed to float before her in the polished glass which reflected so brightly the wax-tapers,

and the glittering baubles scattered over the table.

Hours after, as she stood in her crowded salons, the gayest and most charming hostess that could have been imagined, she was watching Cecil and Fairfax Carteret as they circled round and round to the tones of the bewildering music. Their ride of the previous morning, like every chance which threw them together in these days, had been unaided by any efforts of their own. Cecil, seized with a fancy for an early gallop, had set out, followed by her groom, but just by the Flaminian Gate met Carteret; and it was no more possible for him to neglect asking permission to accompany her, than for her to refuse the request. So they turned up the Pincian Hill, laughing and talking all the while, each afraid to relapse into the briefest silence lest some sign of the constant struggle in which this season passed should be visible. Carteret never visited the house except at hours when he was certain there would be other guests present; and when they met at balls or during the carnival show, he reproached himself for yielding to the spell of her presence, and grew angry at his own weakness. They never quarreled now. If left to themselves, their talk was of the commonest subjects, and usually supported with a certain frigid dignity on both sides, somewhat amusing to witness, only that it was sorrowful to one understanding its cause.

Cecil complained of fatigue, so he led her back to her seat by Miss Dorothy. The spinster looked very grim in her sable velvets, and her attitude was suggestive of a spine without joints. In truth, she was by no means satisfied with her niece or the young man, but interference on her part could only do harm, so she kept a tight rein on her tongue. She scolded them both frequently, to be sure, though always about trifles, and in a whimsical fashion, which left it impossible for them to take offense. Good as she was, she could not help her human weaknesses, and found a slight consolation, as humanity does, in giving them occasional metaphorical raps over the knuckles when her anxiety for their future became unendurable.

As they reached her side, Carteret saw the duchess make him a little sign, and with a bow, and some indifferent remark, turned to go.

"You can't either of you keep still a second—you might as well be teetotums!" exclaimed the spinster. "My head spins just to watch you till I feel as if I was half a top, half a woman!"

Cecil, already engrossed with a new aspirant for the unfinished dance, had no leisure to listen; but Carteret said, laughingly,

"I don't believe you like balls, Miss Dorothy."

"What a discovery," retorted she. "I wonder you don't turn astronomer or something."

"A good idea," he said, teasingly.

"If you wanted to study meteors, almost any modern young lady would answer for a specimen," she continued.

Cecil deigned no reply, and fortunately her new partner was too ignorant of English to understand the old lady's grumbling.

"At all events, meteors are very pretty," Carteret answered.

"Oh, it's by just such nonsensical speeches girls are spoiled," averred Miss Dorothy.

"Do you hear, Miss Cecil?" he asked.

"I beg your pardon?" questioned she, with her most indifferent fine-lady air, that always irritated her aunt.

"I wish you'd both go and dance," exclaimed that relative; "maybe I'll be in a better humor when you get back."

Cecil allowed her partner to lead her off, vouchsafing Carteret one of the careless speeches wherewith she frequently disturbed his calm in these days. He made a more respectful adieu to the old lady, and she felt a wish to atone in some way for Cecil's want of friendliness.

"I scold you," said she; "but I like you very much, all the same."

"Then you may scold me as often as you please," he replied.

"I think you're a good boy, a very good boy," she continued, and longed to say a variety of other things; but only savages on a South Sea island can afford to speak frankly, so she sighed and added, "That pretty duchess wants you—be off with yourself."

Carteret approached Hetty; she took his arm, saying,

"Tell me that my ball is a success—I've only a minute in which to hear you."

"Indeed it is; but whatever you undertake must be—you never commit blunders."

"Are you sure that you do not?" she asked.

"Very often, no doubt—I'm only a man."

"I've not the least doubt you do," she answered. "Well, I can't help you if I would."

"And would you?"

"Oh, you'll do the wrong thing—men always do—especially if you have been warned. But you must take the consequences."

"Of what, duchess?"

"Of your blunders, of course! Besides, you're worth nothing better than you will get."

"Thanks for the implied compliment, enigmatical as you are."

"Oh, I felt that it would do me good to be downright rude," cried Hetty; "I feel ever so much better for it."

"I am glad; now, perhaps, as a return, you will tell me the meaning of this attack?"

"Not I; find it out for yourself," laughed she; "I've nipped you, and that was all I wanted."

"And you leave me to blunder unaided?"

"Yes; there's the old princess looking daggers because she's not had her whist—I must make up a table for her. Good-bye! How delightfully dazed you seem! Really, it puts me in spirits for the rest of the night."

She went laughing away; he stood watching Cecil as she danced, absently wondering over

the duchess's little onslaught. At least it reminded him that he had wasted too much time—to-morrow he would go back to Valery.

CHAPTER XXXV.

CECIL'S PORTRAIT.

THE carefully subdued light stole into Valery's studio, concentrated upon the spot where she sat before her easel, brush in hand; and as she tried to fasten her thoughts upon her task, repeating to herself the axiom of an old painter, "Art is a jealous mistress, and will permit no rival." It was not easy to work, but she had idled enough during these past weeks; work was the best solace she could find, and the wandering mind, the flagging hand, must be subdued by the force of her will. It is difficult to paint pictures or write books in a mood like hers, but there is very little impossible if we only try in the right way, and Valery had found that.

Suddenly there was a step in the antechamber which made her half start to her feet, but she sat resolutely down again. There came a light tap on the door: she tried for voice to answer; the summons was repeated before she could gain strength. She did not turn her head as the footfalls she knew so well crossed the carpet. She was diligently putting certain touches to her picture, and any one familiar with studios knows that if he intrudes at such a moment he must stand still and wait till the artist has passed that critical point. Presently she laid her palette on the table by her side, wheeled round in her chair so that her face was left in shadow, and looked up at Fairfax Carteret with a quiet smile of welcome.

"I could not speak before," she said, and her voice gave no sign of the real meaning there was in the simple words. "Now I can say good-morning, and a lovely one it is."

"I have interrupted you," returned he, a little nervously, "but I hope you'll not send me away."

"No; I have always told you that if I might work during your visits they would never disturb me," she answered.

"Ah! but this morning I think I don't want you to work," he said.

"That is rather exacting, but I will be idle for a while, not long enough, though, for my colors to dry," she replied, calm as ever, though inwardly she trembled and grew cold, as a perception of his errand struck her.

"You are always good and kind," he said, sitting down at a little distance from her. "I believe this old room is the prettiest nook in all Rome. I know at least that the quietest, most peaceful moments I have spent in months have passed here."

"My old room is much obliged, and so is its owner," returned she, pleasantly. "See how nicely my hyacinths have grown—that

white one especially. It always reminds me of a fair princess surrounded by a trusty guard in Lincoln green."

"I wonder if you could look at the commonest object without brightening it by a pretty fancy," he said, not with the air of meaning a compliment, just speaking his thought out.

"It's only a vagrant, foolish habit we artists get," she said.

His eyes wandered toward the easel, but she knew that he did not see the picture resting there. She was certain what had brought him, and found it difficult to be quiet and natural. But one resolve formed itself; he must not speak. When he went back to Cecil there must be no confession necessary, though the motive which actuated him this morning was one that made her honor him the more, much as it hurt her pride, and that hurt did intrude itself even through the tumultuous aching pang at her heart.

"This will be the gayest carnival day yet," she said.

"You have seen nothing of the sport," he replied, forcing himself to attempt another effort at commonplaces.

"Not yet; it is an old story to me, so I am waiting for the last days; they will be crazier than any carnival we have had for years—the first one of free Rome."

"How completely your sympathies go with the Liberal movement; I can't have your faith in this people."

"Then we shall not talk about them till you learn to know and appreciate them better," she said, laughing. "But you must be careful not to say so much even to the duchess."

"Oh, she is rabid, but she has the faculty of rendering her manias charming; besides, she is fast growing a positive power—really, a wonderful woman."

Preoccupied as she was, Valery could not help smiling as there rose before her a vision of the old time; Hetty, slim, shapely, her sleeves rolled up, moving swiftly about Aunt Susan's kitchen, sweeping, washing dishes, repeating her French verbs, and dreaming of her future.

"She is indeed a wonderful woman," she repeated.

Then another pause; it was hard to wait; she wanted to bring the interview to a crisis and be done, free to go back and face her life, and see exactly what it was to look like when he had passed out of it forever. The tumult in her heart had died; it was the last struggle; there was a great stillness in her soul, a chill silence like that of a spent snow-storm, under which all vitality seemed slowly freezing out.

"This will be your best picture," he said, suddenly.

"I have worked hard to make it so," she answered, thinking of the picture of her future life which spread before her dreary as an arctic landscape; "I shall try still harder."

Then a second pause. She rose from her

chair, searched among a pile of portfolios for a few moments, and came back with two or three chalk-and-crayon sketches in her hand.

"These are studies for the head I mean to paint next," she said, and spread the sketches on the table by which he sat, portraits of Cecil Conway. "Do you think I have caught the expression? She has not sat to me yet. I have worked at these by way of getting familiar with her face, for she is a difficult subject."

He gave one involuntary movement when he saw what the sketches were, but controlled himself—regarded them for an instant, pushed his chair back from the table, and said,

"They are very like; you will succeed admirably."

"It is a beautiful face."

"Very beautiful."

"And there's a true, noble, womanly soul under—my glorious Cecil!" Valery exclaimed, gathering the sketches together and resting her hand upon them. It gave her a new strength; it was as if Cecil were present, and the eager eyes pleading for her happiness. He turned away; to him also it seemed as if Cecil were gazing at him, standing between him and the possibility of doing what he felt to be right. He rose from his seat, walked two or three times up and down the room, and returned to his place.

"I am a very wandering Jew of a visitor to-day," he said; "I beg your pardon for my restlessness."

"There is no need."

"The truth is, I came on purpose to say something to you, and now I find myself as awkward as a school-boy."

"And I had something to say to you," she answered, "and you must let me speak first."

He supposed that he knew what she meant; some time before she had appealed to him in behalf of a family in whom she was greatly interested; they wanted to emigrate to America, and he had promised when they were ready to pay their passage.

"Oh yes, your Morensi," he said, and hurried on before she could interrupt him. "I was a very sad, solitary man when we first met. I have to thank you for a great deal of kind sympathy, and, better still, for the example your patient, active life has given me."

"It is very pleasant to hear you say that."

"And there is more I want to say to you; perhaps I shall make a long story of it, but I want you to understand me thoroughly."

"I do that already, Mr. Carteret, believe me, and I honor and trust you among my dearest friends; so there is no need to tell me the story," she replied.

He looked at her in a sudden surprise; surely no woman whose heart was touched could have spoken in that frank, calm way! Had he been a fatuous ass after all, fallen into the common masculine weakness he so heartily despised of thinking that because a brace of romantic incidents had connected

themselves with their first acquaintance, this woman had let her heart go out unconsciously in a girlish dream? He must speak, and he must be truthful; but how to do it and run no risk of appearing a contemptible idiot in her eyes, losing even her esteem which he prized so highly! Before he could find any fitting words she was speaking again.

"I mean that where your character, my friendship for you—our friendship, I hope—are concerned, there is no story to tell, yet I think I want you to tell me one after all."

He could not understand her in the least. If she had comprehended the meaning of his speech, she certainly could not make this answer.

"I fear I am very stupid," he said, with a confused smile.

"I think you have not been a happy man, Mr. Carteret, these past months," she resumed.

"I tell you, the peace I have found I owe to you," he answered, glad that he could utter these words eagerly.

"I thank you for that; I could never tell you how precious the confession is to me, my friend," she said, turning her pale still face toward him, the beautiful brown eyes misty and soft with emotion.

"And I mean it," he continued, rapidly; "if you can believe that, in what else I have to say, I speak with the same sincerity—if you can let me—"

She interrupted him; another instant, and the words which must never escape his lips would be uttered.

"It is because I think I can show you the way to a real and lasting peace, that I am so glad," she went on. "Will you answer me a question freely?"

"Yes; any thing you can ask."

"Are you and my Cecil on the pleasant terms that you were when you first met in England?"

His throat felt husky and dry; he replied, in a rather hard, measured voice,

"If you had let me tell my story, you would have heard."

She lifted one of the sketches of the beautiful face and held it toward him; she saw him shrink, but his agitation caused her no pain now.

"Did you for one instant believe that mouth could utter or imply a falsehood?" she asked. "Worse still, believe that this girl could be heartless, cold, ambitious, pitiless for herself and you, in her determination to mold her future according to worldly dictates!"

"What has she told you?" demanded he.

"Not a word; no syllable of confidence has passed between us."

"Do you know that she is said to be engaged to the Earl of Aldershot—that they only wait for his mourning to be over to acknowledge it?"

"The earl will marry his cousin, and they owe their happiness to Cecil. I know that from Miss Dorothy," she replied.

It was difficult to sit still and make no sign; he clasped his hands tightly over the arms of the chair, and waited.

"You had some reason to think Cecil coquetted with you?"

"I have no complaint to make against her," he said, stiffly, thinking only how he was to get the conversation back to the channel from which it had wandered so dangerously.

"Don't be hard and proud, else I shall not believe you deserve the new hope I have it in my power to give you," she said.

"A new hope!" he repeated, so bewildered that he could remember only the bound his heart gave, as if suddenly waking to fresh life.

"It never occurred to you that Cecil might have better grounds than you for doubt and suspicion? Look at this."

She took from the table-drawer the note Hetty had terrified Madame de Hatzfeldt into giving up, and placed it in his hands. He stared at it like a man in a painful dream.

"This was shown Cecil as addressed to the person who allowed her to read it—now can you understand?"

He was on his feet; a flood of questions rising to his lips—checked by the recollection that the knowledge had come too late—he must go on with the errand which had brought him thither.

"How the woman who abused your confidence so vilely was induced to relinquish this letter, does not matter—you have to thank the duchess for that—at least it is in your hands now."

He stood dumb and stupefied.

"You can imagine what Cecil felt—but it is all over—wasn't it worth suffering a little for, oh my friend? Go away to her now—go to Cecil, and remember, that of all people who rejoice in your happiness, there is no one so glad as I—no one so content—no one who prizes you both so dearly."

She rose and held out her hand; she wanted him gone; the brief enthusiasm which had nerved her was dying out; she felt faint and cold and dead—she must be left to herself.

"Oh, Miss Stuart—oh, Valery."

"Yes, always that name! Think of me always as you would both do of a sister—it will make me very happy. Good-bye now, dear friend! go—go to Cecil."

She laid her hand on his arm and led him to the door; he grasped the slender fingers, tried to pour out broken thanks, but she only smiled—pushed him gently across the threshold—watched him for an instant as he turned away with the slow, uncertain tread of a man walking in his sleep, so bewildered still that it seemed each instant he must wake and find it all a dream—then she closed the door and stood alone in the silence face to face with her own soul.

The sound of the key turning in the lock brought him back to a consciousness that it was all real—no vision such as had often mocked him during these dreary months: the night

had passed; the new morning transformed life into an Eden.

He hurried away through the streets, already filled with grotesque maskers moving toward the Corso, carriages decorated with bright colors waiting for their occupants, the shrill cries of flower and confetti dealers filling the air, on toward the house where Cecil and her aunt resided. Neither of the ladies were in; Cecil, an indefatigable sight-seer, had dragged Miss Dorothy off to visit some church ceremony before it was time to go to their balcony on the Corso.

Would they return to the house before going there? Carteret asked. The maid was sure they would—he had mounted at once to their apartment regardless of the concierge's assurance that the signore were absent.

They had not lunched yet, and Miss Dorothy had said she should return. Carteret could not wait; he had an important engagement, it was near the hour, and as it was a matter of rendering a service to a countryman, he could not be behind time. He sat down and wrote a brief letter, not a love-letter; he could not deprive himself of the pleasure of telling his story face to face with Cecil, but inclosing the note Madame de Hatzfeldt had employed to suit her own purposes, the note where still, by careful examination, one could trace the name "Cecil," erased by madame's pen before displaying it. Not a love-letter—not an avowal—but every word breathed the passionate language of his heart, and in a cooler moment he might have smiled at his own folly in believing he had left himself any thing to say hereafter.

He gave his letter to the woman, charging her to place it in Cecil's hands the moment she entered; and the maid meant to do it, but Miss Dorothy had consented to her joining a party of the servants of the house who were going out in a carriage, and they were anxious to start, early as it was. So the best she could do was to give the note to the black footman, and he never had the slightest claim to possessing a memory.

The consequence was that Cecil came home, and, as it was late, she and Miss Dorothy lunched in great haste and departed without her having heard of the billet. As soon as Carteret could free himself, he rushed off to the house where the ladies had their balcony, but was informed that they had not arrived, though it was now so late the Corso presented the craziest aspect that the wildest lunatic could imagine. Back to the Piazza di Spagna he hurried; no trace of Cecil to be found; even the footman had disappeared; for he had remembered the forgotten letter, and hastened to repair his breach of trust. Carteret started for the D'Asti palace, keeping in the side-streets as long as possible, but there was a whole block of the Corso to traverse before he reached the mansion, and his way led just where the crowd was thickest.

A double line of vehicles of all sorts and sizes obstructed the street; throngs of motley masks

danced and yelled and tore at him; showers of confetti blinded him from countless windows and balconies; men in women's attire held him fast; women in men's dress threatened his life; the more he tried to hasten, the more impatience he showed, the greater their delight, the wilder their gestures, the louder their laughter, till he became a mark for every passer-by, and each carriage in turn tried to smother him under bouquets and confetti. He was beneath the balcony of the palace at last—received the worst greeting yet from Hetty and her party—stopped on his way up stairs to be brushed and restored to decency, and finally reached the salon. He was met by the duchess, forced to talk nonsense, got out on the balcony at length, and discovered that Cecil was not there.

She and her aunt had joined a party of friends for the day, and the only servant who knew of their whereabouts was the perfidious black man, who, at that precise moment was fighting as hard a battle as Carteret had done to reach his destination, so daubed and pelted and stained, that whether he was a white man stained with black as a masquerading freak, or a black man powdered into partial whiteness, would have been difficult to tell. Carteret could neither escape nor gain any information in regard to Cecil. The duchess was in one of her wildest, most fantastic moods; and seeing that he looked anxious and miserable, would do nothing but tease and torment him, till he found it very hard work to preserve an appearance of good-humor.

"You do look so delightfully cross," she said, as he made an effort to retreat from the party whose childish sport only wearied him.

"But you're not going? Well, if you must, you must—I thought you would have waited to see your beautiful countrywoman."

"Is Miss Conway coming?" he asked, eagerly.

"How do you know I mean her?—Am I not your countrywoman, you monster?" she asked.

She would give him no precise answer, but each time he grew so impatient that he was ready to rush away, said something to make him believe she expected Cecil every instant, and he remained trying his best to behave like other people, and amusing wicked Hetty immensely by his vain attempts.

"Is she out in a carriage?" he inquired in English.

The duchess immediately translated his question into Italian for the benefit of her friends, and they teased him worse than ever, each pointing out some preposterous figure in the different vehicles halting for the moment under the balcony, and assuring him there was this mysterious "she."

"It's a common lunacy with him," Hetty averred, speaking her Italian most volubly, and with a pretty little foreign accent that was charming; "not confined to the carnival."

"I want to thank you," he said in English, as soon as he could get an opportunity to address her again.

"He is making me a declaration," cried Hetty; "Princess, I'll translate as he goes on."

"You are really incorrigible," returned he, unable to keep from laughing, vexed as he was.

"I think the duke had better be sent for," said Hetty, covering her face in pretended confusion. "I don't dare tell you what he says."

"He must say it in Italian," they all declared; "he speaks it so well."

"I think he ought to go on his knees," said Hetty.

Down they pushed him, crowned him with a fool's cap, dropped confetti in his neck, went through the utterly insane performances only Romans can, while the people in the adjacent balconies shrieked their enjoyment. But anxious as he was, Carteret had no mind to be absurd, so he made a very successful pretense of entering into the spirit of the scene.

"I'm glad to annoy you," said Hetty in English; "you have disappointed me."

"But I do thank you for that great favor—however, did you get the note?"

"No matter; you'd not have it, if it had depended on me," said she. "Oh, I think you're a precious goose, so easily tricked! I have been doing it myself for some time past."

The rest of the party were busy pelting several unfortunates below, so the two had a moment to themselves.

"I don't know what you mean. I suppose I am a goose, since you say so."

"You were half inclined to think that Valery must have woven a romance about you, just because you had the good fortune to save her life."

"Oh, duchess!" he cried, deprecatingly.

"Yes, you did; you're like all men—worse, in fact!" retorted Hetty, determined that at least neither he nor Cecil should ever know at what cost Valery had given them their happiness—she could do so much for her brave girl.

"I hope not," he said; "I hope you don't speak seriously."

"Well, I'll admit that I don't think so ill of you as I pretend; and I am glad Valery has an opportunity to do something nice for you and Cecil, because she values you both much more highly than you deserve."

"I admit that readily enough, so far as I am concerned."

"And don't dare to compare Valery even with your Cecil!" she interrupted.

"No; Valery stands quite alone. Indeed, I do her full justice, and admire her enough, even to satisfy your jealous friendship."

"Then I forgive you every thing," said she.

"You are very good, but—"

"You are wondering what I have to forgive!"

"A little, perhaps."

"Just nothing—which makes my forgiveness so much the greater amiability," laughed she. "But I'll not keep you any longer; I know where you are dying to rush to."

"I thought you expected—I fancied that Miss Conway was coming."

"That's because, in your insanity, you expect to meet her everywhere," cried Hetty. "She'll not be here to-day, my amiable Bedlamite. Go off and find her."

"But I really can not get any trace of her," he answered, with a look so rueful that the duchess began to laugh again.

"She has been carried off by the Jesuits," she said, in a mysterious whisper; "Miss Dorothy was always in dread of it; her vast fortune was so very tempting to the old wretches just at this time of trouble and defeat."

"You are incorrigible, duchess!" he exclaimed, laughing, vexed as he was at her ill-timed jests, though, after all, if he could only have reflected, he might have had the grace to admit that it was his seriousness and anxiety which were out of place in that season of mad revelry.

"I assure you it is true! I've no doubt that at this moment Antonelli is offering to make her the next Pope if she will only retire into a convent, and let the dear black lambs possess her shekels."

"Then I'd better go and see him," returned Carteret, trying to enter into her humor, and failing so dismally that she was in ecstasy.

He uttered hurried adieux and fled, followed by Hetty's teasing words and the general laughter. But he might as well have remained where he was; he had scarcely reached the street before he was surrounded by a motley group who danced and yelled like so many fiends; and one demon, in a party-colored dress of black and scarlet, stood on his head directly in front and waved his legs gracefully in the air as if he had been some marvelous link between the animal and vegetable kingdoms, while the duchess and her friends looked down from the balcony and encouraged the lunacies by their laughter.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AT LAST.

WHILE Carteret was struggling with the crowd, the unfortunate Julius Caesar fought his way through the city that his namesake helped to render immortal, and succeeded at last in reaching the house where his young mistress was passing the day. A miserable-looking wretch he was when he arrived, and nothing but a chivalrous devotion to the whole Conway family prevented his cursing them root and branch, when he regarded the havoc worked in his holiday attire, and, worse than all, the state of his fluffy head. Julius's chief pride lay in the masses of wool that crowned his summit, and when he caught sight of himself in a mirror on the staircase-landing, he groaned aloud in bitterness of spirit. That he should ever be able to cleanse those crisped tresses

from the lime-dust, weeds, and similar desecrations, appeared doubtful, and Julius felt that, like Lady Macbeth, "he had lived a day too long," though he did not put the feeling exactly in the words which the greatthane employed in speaking of his wife.

He really had not the heart to exhibit himself on the balcony, so he persuaded a servant to ask Miss Cecil if he could speak with her, and, while waiting, rubbed and brushed himself as well as he could, groaning every now and then as the white dust blinded him at every shake he gave his cauliflower of a cranium.

"What is it, Julius?" his young mistress asked, appearing at the door of the anteroom, and taking off the wire mask with which all persons standing on balconies must be guarded. "Why, you have suffered severely! Is there any thing serious the matter?"

Julius began a confused narration, but so mixed up explanations and laments that Cecil would have had no idea what he wanted, had she not seen the note in his hand. She took it, recognized Carteret's writing on the envelope, and hastily turned back into the empty salon.

Her friends were busy in the balcony; even Miss Dorothy had mounted a wire visor and a pair of hideous blue spectacles, and was flinging confetti with the enthusiasm of a genuine Roman, only attempting to excuse herself now and then by saying,

"I hate half-way work; if I'm to turn mountebank, I want to do it to the full extent! There's a man without a mask; pepper him, pepper him!"

Cecil moved away to the farthest end of the room, and sat down in a recess to read her letter. The note Madame de Hatzfeldt had shown her fell out as she opened the envelope; she glanced at it in wonder, then began to peruse the eager pages that Carteret had written. Twice, three times, she devoured every line and word, then suddenly thrust the billet into her bosom, covered her face with her hands, and sat motionless, afraid to stir, lest she should wake and find it a dream.

Footsteps and voices roused her at length, her friends were calling, coming in search of her: she rose and faced them with such pretense of composure as she could find, and did her part as well as she might until the whirl and tumult ceased. The long line of soldiery cleared the street as if by magic, and every body waited in breathless suspense for the race which closes each day's amusement during the week.

It was growing dusk as the unriden horses shot past, and soon the boom of the cannon announced the arrival of the foremost at the Piazza Venezia. The crowd began to disperse, and before long Julius Caesar returned to say that the carriage waited. But Miss Dorothy had promised to remain and dine; Cecil must and would go home, she had a ball that night—she was tired—any and every reason except

the real one, that she wished to be alone with her happiness.

She got away and drove off, but as the carriage reached the Piazza di Spagna some sudden necessity to see Valery came over her. It was useless to go home; Carteret would not be there yet; she must go to Valery—Valery, who had managed, in some inexplicable fashion, to make every thing clear, and bring this new radiance into her life. She reflected remorsefully that during these last days she had rather avoided her friend—that there had been vaguely jealous feelings in her mind. She wanted to offer amends, to assure herself likewise that her fancies had been groundless, that Valery was to have no suffering from this kind work.

She gave the order to drive to Ford's house; but there was no one at home except old Giovanni, who was crosser than ever during this carnival-time. But Cecil chose to enter Valery's apartments and wait; Giovanni would have been delighted to forbid her, but that was an extent to which he did not venture to carry his ill-humor, and he could only solace himself by informing the signorina that Valery had gone to see old Elisabetta, who was ill again—always a troublesome body, Giovanni grumbled—and that he could not tell when she would be back.

Cecil passed on up stairs and entered the pretty salon which Valery's taste had rendered such a charming retreat. She sat down and read her letter again; kissed it, committed numerous follies at which she blushed even in her solitude, half frightened yet to listen to the tumultuous whispers of her heart. At length inaction grew wearisome; she could not rest tranquil anywhere; she would go home; but she might leave a note for Valery, asking her to come to her as soon as she returned.

When that was done she turned to go; stopped to read her note over; it sounded cold, and she longed to give some evidence of her great love. She remembered a locket which hung at her chateleine—a pretty little bauble, containing her own miniature and that of her father. The very last time she had seen Valery—she remembered with contrition that it was several days since—Valery begged this trinket, and Cecil refused it, curly almost, for her evil spirits had possession of her. She would leave the locket now, put it somewhere that Valery might find it, and so understand the gift as an appeal for pardon.

She went into the bedroom; there was an antique cabinet there in which Valery kept her small stock of jewelry and other matters that she prized. Cecil knew where the key was; once complaining that she was always losing her keys, Valery had recommended her to try her plan, and showed a tiny drawer at the back of her dressing-table into which she always dropped them under hair-pins and other minutiae of the toilet which nobody would think of disturbing. Cecil found them there now, and unhesitatingly took them and fitted the right one into the cabinet, smiling, as she disengaged

the locket from her chain, to think how pleased Valery would be.

She opened the cabinet; the first sight that met her eyes was a bronze casket, which looked so familiar that she uttered a cry of astonishment. She possessed one that she had found among her father's things and had always regarded as something perfectly unique, and here was its counterpart, else some witchcraft had transferred her own treasure hither. She lifted it to make a closer examination; the lid, which had been broken from the hinges the night it fell on the floor, came off in her hands; she saw her father's portrait, her father's writing on the package of letters. She dropped the casket as suddenly as if the curiously-twisted serpents that coiled about its top had wakened into life and stung her, started back to a distance, and stood staring, her hands pressed to her head in a mad rush of bewildered thought. A thousand fancies which had often perplexed her took shape; the mystery connected with Valery's birth and childhood, concerning which her aunt had bidden her, as a kindness to Valery, never to speak; her mother's hatred; her father's sending for the girl on his death-bed; her uncle's inexplicable denunciations; Valery's disappearance; all rose in her mind with such power, that her brain reeled under the suspicions which agonized her.

She would go straight to Miss Dorothy, take her home—no matter how it looked—no matter what any body thought; she would not rest an instant until she had heard the whole truth. She ran back to the cabinet to lock it, and pushed the casket again. The ivory lining fell from the lid; more papers, in a woman's writing; her father's name repeated on the pages that met her eye. She was of course incapable of examining the scrolls; she huddled them back into the casket, put the lid on, was locking the cabinet, when she saw a folded paper which had fallen on the floor. She picked it up; out dropped a newspaper notice that Hetty Flint years before had cut from a journal and placed there, the record of Lucy Stuart's decease, with her age and the date of her death. Cecil unfolded the sheet to put the scrap back; saw then that it was not paper, but a parchment. Her eyes caught words half written, half printed; she was past reflection now; she read them, uttered one despairing cry, and staggered back against the wall.

Her cry was echoed in a wilder voice; she looked up; blind, half mad as she was, she saw Valery in the door-way, regarding her. She put out her hands wildly to keep her off, gasping, moaning, fairly struggling like some desperate animal, as Valery rushed forward and tried to throw her arms about her, exclaiming,

"Cecil, Cecil! what have you seen? what have you found?—Cecil, Cecil!"

"Don't speak to me—don't look at me!" she shrieked. "Let me die—let me die—here at your feet—only say that you forgive!"

She threw herself on the floor, embracing

Valery's knees, shuddering with self-aborrence—mad, from the dismal secret which had stricken her life in its fullness of beauty.

"My Cecil—my darling—my sister!" sobbed Valery, sitting down, raising the beautiful head, pressing it to her bosom, covering it with passionate kisses. "My darling, my own, don't mind, don't think! Only remember that we are sisters, that I love you, that I would give my soul for you; my Cecil, my Cecil!"

"Sisters!" she moaned. "Oh, and I—what am I! How can you love me? You must hate me, you must! Don't be afraid; it shall all be set right; you shall be justified! Don't think I will hesitate; the whole world shall know! I am not utterly base and vile, if I am a Conway! Oh, Valery, Valery, kill me! it is the only kindness you can show—kill me here, and let me be done!"

Valery strained her closer to her heart, trying to check the insane words with her kisses, while Cecil moaned and struggled in her horrible shame and anguish.

"I have never suffered, Cecil, till now!" she cried; "it is only you who make me; you will murder me, if you take it like this! Only remember how I love you; how, even in this dreadful moment, even while watching your agony, I can only think of my great happiness in holding you in my arms and calling you by the dear name at last—sister, sister! Look at me, listen to me; sister, sister!"

Her pleading voice smote the fiery passion of Cecil's despair and dissolved it to tears. She clung to Valery, weeping convulsively, and Valery held her fast, murmuring tender words, raining down warm kisses on her cheeks and lips, till at last the spasm passed; and though Cecil wept still, the sort of insanity had left her senses free once more.

"And you love me; you can call me sister?" she said. "Oh, Valery, Valery!"

"My darling, if I have ever suffered, it is happiness enough, more than to repay me! Oh, Cecil, I thought I must live and die without it! Sister, my sister! See, I was not wretched; my life has been very tranquil and pleasant; this hour gives me all that I could ask! Nobody need know; let the past rest. We have no right to drag secrets out of the graves of the dead and blazon them to the world! Let it rest between you and me, my Cecil, my own sister."

Cecil freed herself from her embrace and rose to her feet. She was white as death; her features set in the rigid, indomitable Conway obstinacy.

"I'll not do it!" she cried; "you have borne enough; it shall all be set right! Do you think I am utterly base and vile? do you believe I will wait a minute?"

"Stop, Cecil!" exclaimed Valery, confronting her, and there was that in countenance and voice which checked the mad tirade. "If you do this, I will never see your face! I'll not say I shall cease to love you; I must always

do that; but if you bring one shadow on our father's memory, we never meet again in this world! Look at me; I mean it, I swear it, and I am a Conway too. I shall keep my oath."

"And I! what am I?" cried Cecil, throwing herself on the floor again. "Oh, can't I die? Is there no mercy in earth or heaven? Can't I die?"

"Be still; not another word! You are mad yet; you must let me think for you; I have the right."

But even while the cruel-sounding words were on her lips, she sat down by Cecil, and once more raised her head and pillowed it on her bosom, whispering tender epithets, and soothing her back to quiet.

After a time Cecil could listen, could sit up, and control herself enough to speak intelligibly.

"Let me tell you how I found it; don't think me capable of such meanness as I seem. I only wanted to put this locket where you would find it—"

"And the casket fell open; I know, it is the counterpart of your own," Valery interrupted. "My child, it had to be; you were to know. But it makes no difference in our lives, try to understand that; only we can love each other more dearly now."

"I'm not fit, I'm not worthy."

"I only knew the whole a short time since; my burden for years was a real one, yet I bore it; yours exists only in your excited imagination. Can't you find courage to face that, my sister?"

"And you have done every thing for me, and now it is too late!" Cecil cried, remembering her happiness of only an hour back.

"What do you mean?" inquired Valery, wonderingly.

At that instant there was a sound in the next room which made them both start to their feet; a voice they both knew so well calling.

"Miss Stuart, it is too dark to know if you are here. Giovanni said I might come up."

Valery forced Cecil into a chair and walked out into the salon, went straight to the fireplace and stirred the embers into a flame.

"Now you can see me, Mr. Carteret," she said, composedly enough. "But I can't let you stay even a moment."

"Giovanni said Cecil was here!" he exclaimed.

"You may go and find Cecil to-morrow," she replied; "she can not see you to-night."

"Is she ill—what—"

"There is nothing the matter, but I want you to obey me—don't go to her house to-night."

Before he could answer Cecil entered noiselessly, saying, in a strained, unnatural voice,

"I am here—don't go—I have something to say to you."

He started forward with a cry of joy. The fire-light fell full on her face. He stopped, appalled by the sight.

"Oh, my God, Cecil!" he faltered. "What is the matter?"

"Nothing," she answered, with the dreariest spectre of a laugh; "nothing! Sit down. I want to speak; I have a story to tell you, Mr. Carteret."

"Be quiet, Cecil!" said Valery. "Mr. Carteret, she is very ill; you must go away."

"What is it? If you have any pity, tell me!" he cried, almost beside himself with dread.

"It is nothing; she has had a nervous attack; if you knew us women better, you would not be alarmed," returned Valery, still trying to keep the scene from any climax.

Cecil laughed out again; it was horrible to hear her.

"He shall not go!" she exclaimed. "I say he shall not go!"

"Cecil, remember!" whispered Valery.

"I will not go," he said, "till this is explained."

"That is easily done," replied Cecil, in the same monotonous, unnatural voice. "I told you I had a story to tell."

"Oh, Mr. Carteret, if you care for her, for yourself—"

"And yet she vowed there was nothing the matter," broke in Cecil; "oh, we Conways!"

"I mean only that Mr. Carteret had better spare himself watching a nervous spasm," Valery said, still struggling. "Oh, do go away; she will be well to-morrow."

"I think I shall be driven mad between you!" exclaimed Carteret. "Cecil, are you angry with me? did you get my note?"

"Oh yes, I got it! Angry? No."

She moved closer toward him, and motioned him to sit down; he obeyed mechanically, regardless of Valery's imperative reiteration of her command for his departure.

"Fate is stronger than you or me, Valery," said Cecil; and still the voice was so unlike her own, the face so changed, that both regarded her with a sort of terror, as if some despairing spirit from the depths of purgatory had usurped a phantom resemblance to the girl they loved, and come to torture them.

"You are a very proud man, Fairfax Carteret," she went on; "proud of your stainless name. You have told me that you love me; when you read this paper I think you will be glad you have not yet asked me to be your wife."

"Cecil, Cecil!" he cried.

Valery stood speechless, still watching an opportunity to stem the full tide of confession before it was too late.

"I do love you, Cecil; the dearest hope I have in life is to win you," he hurried on.

"I should have been a prize," she answered. "Wait. I believe if I had not come in the way, you two would have cared for each other; there is time yet, the secret which kept Valery from letting herself care for you is none now, and you have only confused our identity; I am going, that I need not stand between you."

"Cecil is merely laboring under a delusion, you see," returned Valery, before he could speak.

"Let him read this, then, and decide," she cried, stretching out her hand, while the fold of parchment fluttered in it like dried leaves.

"Decide that he has confused our identity? How ill you tell your story. I shall do it myself," Valery said, forcing the parchment from her. "Two loving hearts have once been near ruin," she went on, moving close to the fire; "God was good enough to give them another chance of happiness, and now the girl is guilty of doubting a second time the man who loves her, believes that this old scrap of soiled paper, which concerns neither him nor her, could be a bar between them; see how easily it is done away."

She stooped quickly and thrust the parchment into the fire, holding it there till it was thoroughly blackened and scorched. Cecil uttered a cry of wrathful misery, then stood mute, till Valery rose to her feet again.

"You have burned it," she exclaimed; "but he shall not be duped, he shall not! I'll tell, I'll tell!"

"Go away, Mr. Carteret."

"He shall not! Listen: I have neither name, nor family, nor any thing real in the paltry trickery of my life," she burst out. "That parchment was the certificate of marriage between Lucy Stuart, her mother, and Philip Conway, her father and mine. Her mother lived years and years after that, but long before—"

She could not finish, Fairfax Carteret had darted forward and caught her in his arms.

"My Cecil, my darling, my wife!" he exclaimed. "There is only one honor the world can give worth having—your love! Don't shrink, don't tremble, Cecil, my Cecil!"

With one long, shuddering sigh, Cecil's head sank upon his shoulder in an insensibility so cold and terrible, that his first thought was that she had died there in his arms.

When she came to her senses a whole hour after, she lay on the sofa, a lump was burning brightly, Carteret knelt beside her, his arms about her, and before she could realize any thing further Valery glided softly out of the room and left them together.

The elder sister's sacrifice was complete, and its reward had already begun.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

WHEN THE MORNING BROKE.

So the gayest carnival that Rome had enjoyed for a quarter of a century came to an end, and the Lenten gloom settled over the city, more sombre than usual that year, as the poor old Pope remained obstinately shut up in the Vatican, and there were few or none of the customary church services to attract strangers.

Cecil and Miss Dorothy went at once to

Naples, and Carteret followed; it was settled that they were to come back in Easter-week, and the wedding would take place immediately after. The whole affair had been so speedily and quietly arranged, that no one but Miss Dorothy was made acquainted with the secret for the time.

The night before they started for Naples, Cecil and Carteret were sitting together, and she showed him a letter that had just reached her from Lord George—he was to be married to the Lady Alicia.

"What will the countess say?" exclaimed Carteret.

"I thought you would be more disappointed than any body, you were so determined I should marry him," laughed Cecil.

She had fully recovered her customary spirits; no further word of explanation concerning the miserable history which Cecil revealed in her passionate despair had passed—it would literally have no place in their future lives.

They departed, and it was Valery who startled John Ford with the news of the engagement.

"Oh, my child!" he cried, suffering too much at the thought of her pain to remember that he might humiliate her by betraying some perception of her secret. "Are you content? I mean—"

"I am very, very glad—I have no words to tell you," she answered, quietly.

"Thank God!" she heard him murmur. Something in his voice startled her; she stole one glance at his face; the change there, the devout gratitude, the world of varying emotions, gave her, for the first time, an intimation of the secret which he expected to guard to his grave.

The Lenten season glided by; spring burst over Rome in the fullness of beauty, and amidst its brightness Cecil and Carteret were married. But, beautiful as the bride was, no one could look at Valery Stuart in her white robes, without marveling at the expression of peace which brightened her face into a loveliness even higher and nobler than Cecil's own.

The newly-wedded pair were going at once to America, but Miss Dorothy remained behind.

"We travel in circles, Val," she said; "I have got back to my right place, and I mean to stay. At least pretend you need me, for I shall grow perfectly unendurable if I can't persuade myself I've something to do."

"Never so much as now, dear Miss Dor," Valery replied; "not even when I was a helpless little child—remember that."

So the two set up their household gods together, though during the ensuing summer they dragged the gods about a good deal; for Valery had a fancy to go into the Tyrol, and Miss Dorothy could refuse her nothing.

But when winter came again, they were back in Rome, established pleasantly in an old palace near Ford's residence. Jemima de-

clared that, much as she missed Valery, it was delightful to have a place to visit every day; and as she had the two old birds down from Florence, she was as happy as possible. Valery fancied that John Ford found the three oddities rather too much for one house, but he was invariably kind, although Miss Clorinda would expound her theories in regard to high art at great length, and Mrs. Sloman insisted on his listening.

"Clorinda's opinion is always worth having, John," she said, "and she'll be a great help to you; but mercy knows if she was to talk to the Day of Judgment, however much she might set you right about Raphael and Neptune and the rest of them, she'd never teach you to be careful of your health; and if you were undressed this minute, I'm morally certain you haven't your thick flannel on, though I laid it on a chair myself; and nobody unless it's statuary can stand this climate without it, and so I've told you over and over."

"If he'd only try that tisane of caraway!" sighed Miss Priscilla, menacing him with a bunch of the odious weed; "if he only would!"

But he was patient, and allowed them to worry him, and was invariably considerate, even when Miss Clorinda expressed her opinion that Art would never reach its highest stage of development until velvet was substituted for canvases.

"Like your Cupid!" cried Mrs. Sloman, admiringly.

"Charissa was always so gifted," Miss Priscilla would add; "she walked in her sleep at ten years old, and played the 'Battle of Prague' at eleven."

Then Clorinda would strike an attitude and look at him pensively, at which stage of proceedings Ford usually made his escape, for Clorinda's pensive moods were more than he could bear.

Hetty always found time to be as fond of Valery as ever, though her life was a very busy one. Her butterfly society existence, much as she enjoyed it, occupied a comparatively small portion of her time. She went hand in hand with her husband in his schemes for the regeneration of Italy; and, besides that, did more good in a quiet fashion than a score of professed philanthropists would ever have accomplished. The great changes in the Roman schools and hospitals were aided by her advice and almost unlimited means, and, better than that, she gave her personal supervision and assistance in a way which will leave her a higher place in right-thinking minds than all the honors crowding so thickly about her as time goes on.

To rescue young girls from temptation, assist talent struggling against discouragement and poverty, guard helpless children, bring comfort to the sorrowful, and light to those in darkness, these things formed a portion of her daily existence, for Hetty had learned not only to read aright the long misinterpreted proverb,

Noblesse oblige, but was actuated by the higher motive of obeying the last injunction of our Saviour addressed so plainly to every steward throughout all generations, "Feed my Lambs."

One night, at a monster ball given for some charity, Hetty, holding her court, and gayer even than usual, because she had deluded Valery into accompanying her, saw in the press and crowd beyond a sight which made her smile. A large woman, clothed in rainbows apparently, with divers new colors added, a face from which no art could banish the peevish lines which it had taken at least fifty years to wear, and a nose that said "nag" plainer than ever a nose did before, was dragging a slight, weary-eyed man along in stern custody, and berating him in a perfectly audible voice with an accent to which only a daughter of Massachusetts could aspire.

Robert Earle and his connubial tyrant! It would have been more romantic to picture him sinking to the depths of despair, and ending a misspent life by a pistol-shot; more in accordance with the rules of modern romance to land him at last in a hospital, and describe Hetty playing the ministering angel for his benefit, but it is better to relate things as they actually happen in our prosaic century.

Presently, as Hetty and her party moved through the room, she came face to face with the tired, washed-out incapable. Earle would gladly for once have effaced himself behind his jailer, but the duchess was blandly condescending, only allowing herself one glance of the nose which said nag, and one look of superior pity at her old lover; but it was enough—poor Robert, in his morbid vanity, could better have borne transportation than that regard.

Another spring came on, and at the close of one of its brightest days Valery invited John Ford to enter her studio and pronounce his verdict upon a newly-finished picture.

There had been a slight restraint upon their intercourse during these long months, undefinable, but apparent enough to Valery, though she had not attempted to overcome it. He visited the house frequently, but Miss Dorothy was always present while he staid, and the old brother-and-sister-like freedom between Valery and himself was quite done away. Indeed at times she seemed rather to avoid him, but he bore that, as he had done other crosses, uncomplainingly.

However, this day she sent for him to look at her picture; and though there was something a little shy and odd in her manner, she talked pleasantly, and teased him a good deal, after a habit she had acquired of late.

He stood for a while in silence before the painting, which represented a woman, young and beautiful, gazing out over a stormy sea; the gloom of dawn hung about her, and showed a sweep of bleak rocks crowned with dismal pine-trees; but in the distance a radiance from the rising sun brightened the waters, that slept in a tranquillity which offered a strong contrast

to the angry surf beating at the foot of the cliffs.

She grew impatient of his silence, and said, abruptly,

"Well?"

"What do you call it?" he asked, without turning toward her.

"When the Morning broke," she answered. "But you don't say a word! Is it a great failure, after all?"

"A failure? You have gone beyond your master, Valery; I shall have to come to you and learn."

Still he did not glance at her; he was intently examining the picture, but she knew that he had ceased to see it. A vivid flush stole over her cheeks, faded as suddenly, leaving her rather pale, though a smile softened her mouth.

"What will you come to learn?" she asked, almost in a whisper.

He was silent yet; the trouble deepened in his face. Valery laid her hand gently on his arm.

"Don't you mean to answer my question?" demanded she.

He turned and looked down at her; she colored again, but returned his glance courageously. The weary lines of restraint in his features changed to an expression of wonder and surprise; he gave a quick movement, checked himself, and said, with an effort at his usual voice,

"It is a noble picture, Valery!"

"I don't care any thing about the picture," returned she, half laughing, though her color came and went, and he could see her tremble.

There was something so new in look and manner that he could only stare, believing himself gone suddenly mad.

"You're a foolish old John!" she whispered.

"Valery, Valery!" The name broke from his lips in a startled cry.

She laid both white hands upon his arm; they quivered and shook, and her head was half averted, but she kept them there courageously.

"Must I take them away?" she faltered after an instant, in which she could fairly hear his heart beat. "Do you want me to take them away, John?"

He thought certainly that he must have lost his senses; but when his brain steadied a little, he found it was only that life had rounded suddenly into glorious perfection.

"And I think I had to ask you after all," Valery said, a whole hour later, when they had talked till there was no shadow left between their souls. "After all, I had to ask you!"

He made no answer, only clasped her two hands in his, and gazed into her face with such a yearning, thankful love, that her smiling eyes dimmed with tears.

So it ended.

THE END.

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