

EBB-TIDE,

AND OTHER STORIES.

BY

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AUTHOR OF

"MORTON HOUSE," "VALERIE AYLMER," "MABEL LEE," ETC., ETC.

"We must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures."

NEW YORK:
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY,
549 & 551 BROADWAY.
1872.

P. 30.

"Then in the starlight he saw her pause, and apparently kneel down against the railing."

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EBB-TIDE.

PART I.

THE TIDE AT ITS FLOOD.

"There will no man do for your sake, I think,
What I would have done for the least word said;
I had wrung my life dry for your lips to drink,
Broken it up for your daily bread."

CHAPTER I.

"'HE COMETH NOT,' SHE SAID."

TEN o'clock on a glorious May day, with the freshly-risen sea-breeze sweeping over the sparkling waters of Charleston harbor; the bright sun gilding all things with a flood of golden glory; the white shipping dazzling the eyes like snow; the wooded shores clothed in a royal garment of soft purple mist; the stately city throned like a queen between her "swiftly-flowing" rivers, while the surf of the great Atlantic beats like music at her feet; a fragrance of roses pervading the air, and an abounding sense of glory and vitality in the buoyant atmosphere! Nature has opened all her choicest stores on this marvellously lovely day, this 15th of May, 185-; there is not a tint known to art which she is not wearing, and many—how many!—for which art has neither name nor power to reproduce. Out on the sea there is an opalescent glory, changing and shifting with every gleam of light that catches the foam-crested waves as they rise and chase each other like merry children in the sunshine! The land seems panting under its wealth of loveliness, of fragrance, and of bloom! Everywhere is spread earth's matchless livery of green and gold; every breath of air is flower-scented; every sound—even the

city's distant hum of pleasure and traffic—is subordinate to the divine anthem which the myriad voices of Nature are chanting—the sweet invitation which they give to the children of men. "Come!" say the waves in their soft tones of ceaseless, rhythmic music. "Come!" echo the happy songs of birds, the merry chirp of the great, invisible insect-world. "Come!" whisper the breezes softer than those of Araby the Blest. "Come!" murmur the trees, gently swaying their emerald leaves and flinging graceful shadows over the velvet turf—"come and be happy!" And how few answer!—how few do not go on their way, be it to funeral or to feast, with blinded eyes and deafened ears! Yet, to those who love her as she should be loved, is not Nature God's ambassador upon earth, speaking, in every quiver of her wondrous light and shade, "glad tidings of great joy?" O rare, sweet *magna mater*! In all this weary, sin-laden, suffering-steeped world, there is nothing like to thee; there is no joy like thy joy, no beauty like thy beauty, no glory like thy glory; thou who art still as fair and young and fresh as when thy first dew-drops glittered in the sunlight of the creation morning, and even thy gracious Maker owned that thou wert "good!" And who would see this noble mistress in her most royal mood, who would worship at her most royal shrine, must seek her where she loves best to dwell—under the deep-

blue Southern sky, by the purple Southern waters, far in the gorgeous depths and dim recesses of the aromatic Southern woods! Nowhere else does she hold out her arms with such a tender embrace, nowhere else does she woo us with such regal charms, nowhere else does she wear such robes of state as clothe her amid the glory and beauty of these enchanted scenes.

Yet a girl, who stands on the pleasant Battery, leaning against the railing, and looking with wistful eyes far adown the bright bay to the broad ocean beyond, seems wholly unconscious of all the witchery round her. She has tilted her hat forward so as to keep the sun out of her eyes, and there she leans, a motionless, absorbed figure, heeding the curious glances of the few loiterers who come and go, as little as the boundless glory of earth and sea and sky. A vessel is just crossing the bar into the harbor; the day is so wonderfully clear that through

"The purple noon's transparent light"

it is possible to catch a glimpse of the spars and rigging outlined against the sky—no horrible, ugly steamer, belching forth black smoke, but a graceful sailing-vessel, with slender masts and snow-white canvas, outspread like an angel's wings. The girl lifts an opera-glass to her eyes, and gazes eagerly—oh, so eagerly!—toward the new-comer, the stranger, perhaps, the friend it may be. Two or three nurses, accompanied by children, pass, and, stopping, gaze also, open-mouthed, at the cloud of canvas far away. They can find nothing remarkable about it, however; so, after a time, they continue their promenade. Other nurses follow, other children scamper past—the Battery is at all hours the paradise of these two classes of the population; then come two ladies (veiled so as to effectually shut out all possibility of enjoying the day!); then an old gentleman, walking leisurely with his hands behind his back; then a young gentleman on horseback, who looks keenly at the graceful, motionless figure with the opera-glass levelled (apparently) at Fort Sumter; then a tall, handsome girl, who, ascending the steps, walks directly up to the figure in question and touches its arm.

"Ermine!" she says, sharply. Then—as the opera-glass falls, and the girl turns round—"How can you stand here making a figure of yourself for the amusement of all the pass-

ers-by? If I were you, I would have more dignity. Aunt Victorine sent me for you; she said she thought you would be here."

"What does she want with me?" asked Ermine, with evident signs of rebellion about the eyes and lips.

The other shrugged her shoulders—a gesture which betrayed her Gallic nationality at once.

"How can I tell? *Ma tante* keeps her own counsel, you may be sure. Perhaps she does not want you to stand here 'like Patience on a monument,' for all Charleston to stare at and talk about. I can't wonder at that, I am sure!"

"What do I care for being stared at or talked about?"

"Nothing, of course; but Aunt Victorine cares a good deal, you see."

"I only came out for a walk" (impatiently). "Why cannot mamma let me alone?"

"Only for a walk!" repeated the other, mockingly. "And how far have you walked? I wager my pearl necklace (which is the most valuable thing I have in the world) that you have not stirred from the spot since you came here."

"Well" (a little defiantly), "what then?"

"Oh, nothing then—except that I don't think your exercise will be likely to benefit you much. Raymond said last night you were looking quite pale."

"Raymond's opinion is not of the least importance to me."

"Of course not; it is not to be supposed that anybody's opinion weighed with the forlorn Marianna, when

'She said, "I am weary,
He cometh not," she said;
She said, "I am weary,
I would that I were dead."

Only you haven't quite reached that point yet—have you, *ma belle*?"

"If you came here to amuse yourself by laughing at me, Madelon, I think you might have stayed at home."

"Do you suppose I came of my own accord, dear? I thought I told you Aunt Victorine sent me."

"Ask her to send a servant next time, then," said Ermine, coldly—after which she turned seaward again, and lifted her glass to her eyes.

A dark-red flush came over the face of the girl called Madelon.

"I presume she thought she was doing something equivalent to that in sending me," she said, bitterly. "It is kind of you, Ermine, to remind me of my position."

"I did not intend to remind you of what you call your position, Madelon," said Ermine, lowering the glass again with a sigh.—Ah! there was no familiar outline about those spars and sails; it was a stranger and no friends after all.—"You are so susceptible" (she gave the word a French meaning and a French accent), "that you always think one intends what has never entered one's head. What is your position, after all? I'm Mr. Erle's step-daughter; you are his wife's niece: neither of us has any claim on him apart from mamma."

"Is that all the difference between us?" asked Madelon, sarcastically. "Thank you, Ermine, for failing to remind me that you are an heiress, and I am a dependant."

"But, Madelon—"

"Only it would have been best to acknowledge the fact at once. Of course, it is absurd to suppose that it could have been out of your mind."

"It has never been very much in my mind," said Ermine, a little wearily.

The other shrugged her shoulders again—this time with a skeptical smile out of unison with so young a face—then she, too, looked out over the bright bay, and nothing more was said for several minutes.

They were first cousins, and considered very much alike, these two girls, yet the resemblance was more in general appearance than in detail. Both were tall, both slender, both had the graceful bearing, the waxen complexion, and dark eyes of French creoles; but there the likeness absolutely ended. Of the two, Madelon Lautrec had the most regular features, the most camellia-like skin, the most magnificent eyes, the most subtle grace of manner; yet few people gave her the palm of beauty over her cousin Ermine St. Amand. What Ermine's special charm was, Heaven only knows, for Heaven alone had given it to her; but a charm she had, undoubtedly worth all the Hellenic noses and Oriental eyes in the world. A slenderly-fashioned, delicately-featured creature, she struck you at first—very fragile, very dainty, but so full of unspoken *coquetterie*, that you knew at once she must have French blood in her veins. A creature with wonderful possibilities of passion and pathos slum-

bering in the depths of those dark eyes—eyes not half so large or bright as Madelon's, but oh, so tenderly, witchingly soft! and quivering about the flexible, sensitive lips. The outline of her face would never have served for marble, but it looked exceedingly well in flesh, and had that exquisite delicacy of modelling which we find only in the Southern races, while her voice had a chord of music in it such as one does not very often hear—a magic sweetness that might have been stolen from the sirens, her admirers said. There was none of this tender charm about Madelon. With all her beauty and all her grace, she was too cold, too proud—often too repulsively haughty—to win popular favor. She curled her scarlet lip over this fact, and thought in her young cynicism that it was natural enough, since she was "no heiress like Ermine." But, although the world is the world, and heiress-ship is always a first-class recommendation to its favor, other things weigh also in the balance of its verdict. Some natures win their own way, let Fortune do her best or worst—and Ermine's was one of these. In a palace or a hovel, she would still have been one of those favored children of partial Nature—

"One handful of whose buoyant chaff
Exceeds our hoard of careful grain."

"Well," said Madelon, after a while, "what am I to tell Aunt Victorine—that you prefer to spend the day 'on a lone rock by the sea,' or that you are coming home? I must return, for I promised Margaret to go out shopping with her, and I know she is waiting for me."

"I will go back also," said Ermine, with unexpected docility. "There is no good in staying here; though I *do* think mamma might have left me alone."

"When you grow a little older, you will find that nobody ever *is* left alone," said Madelon, philosophically. "We are all worried more or less by our affectionate relatives; and—Is that Mr. Saxton yonder? I wonder what *he* is doing here at this hour of the day? Come!—if we stay five minutes longer, we shall have to undergo a catechism about Margaret's health and appearance."

"Perhaps he has come to loiter about until it is late enough for a call," hazarded Ermine. "He looks as if he meant something serious—don't you think so?"

"He looks as if he were loaded to the brim with a proposal, and ready to explode at any moment," said Madelon. "*Grace à Dieu!*"

Poor as I am, would I marry a man who came to offer himself to me in such a coat as that?"

"I fancy Margaret will give him his 'route' as summarily as you could desire," said Ermine, laughing.

"His 'route'!" repeated, the other. "Is that all you know about it? But hush!—here he comes. Don't be stopped, if you can help it."

Here he came indeed—a short, stout man, of florid complexion, large nose (belonging to the class which partial friends call "Napoleonic"), blond mustache, and coat which merited all of Madelon's scorn, inasmuch as, being too short-waisted, it gave him (why, it is impossible to say) the appearance of an overgrown frog. Yet he was not an ugly man, by any means—on the contrary, most people called Mr. Saxton "fine-looking," which is rather an ambiguous term at best. A certain deplorable absence of refinement was his greatest drawback—his personal appearance being strongly suggestive of those Teutonic gentlemen whom we see in any and every beer-garden, drinking fabulous quantities of "lager," and eating fabulous numbers of "pretzels." As far as anybody in America can know any thing about his antecedents, however, Mr. Saxton knew that he had no Dutch blood in his veins; and when he uncovered his head—showing thereby a considerable spot "where the hair wouldn't grow"—he addressed the cousins in good English, instead of the German accent one involuntarily expected.

"Good-morning, young ladies—I am glad to see you looking so blooming after our dissipation last night" (heavy gallantry was Mr. Saxton's style when he attempted gallantry at all). "I hope you don't feel very much used up by it?"

"Dissipation!" repeated Madelon, with an arch of her scornful brows. "Do you call that festive occasion last night 'dissipation,' Mr. Saxton? I should as soon think of calling strawberry-ice an intoxicating beverage! I don't feel at all used up, thank you—nothing short of a three o'clock German ever does use me up! Perhaps you do not feel so, however."

"On the contrary, I feel very well indeed," said Mr. Saxton, coloring a little on top of his head. "I—ah—thought we had a very charming evening. Mrs. Fontaine's entertainments are always in excellent style."

"I believe she always has an excellent

supper," said Madelon, "and that is what gentlemen mostly care about. I did not think the evening charming at all—I thought it horridly stupid.—Didn't you, Ermine? The music was execrable, and scarcely a man worth looking at!"

"I thought it tolerably pleasant," said Ermine, feeling her cousin's rudeness, and striving to atone, yet in reality damning poor Mrs. Fontaine's entertainment still more effectually by her faint praise. Then—making a headlong plunge into commonplaces—"I see the lovely day has tempted you as well as ourselves to come out and enjoy it, Mr. Saxton."

"Ah—yes—it is very pretty," said Mr. Saxton, looking round and benignly patronizing the day. "I intended to take a stroll until the hour for morning calls," he went on. "Then I hoped for the pleasure of inquiring how you ladies were. That I see is unnecessary; but Mrs. Erle and Miss Erle—"

"Are both quite well, thanks," interrupted Madelon, tapping her foot with ill-restrained impatience to be gone. "Ermine, we had better not detain Mr. Saxton any longer."

"Detain me!" said Mr. Saxton, gallantly. "So far from that, if you are going home and will allow me—"

"No, thanks," cried Madelon, hastily; "we are not going home—that is, not immediately. But no doubt you will find Aunt Victorine and Margaret in, if you care to inquire whether or not they are 'used up.'—Ermine, we shall be late, I am afraid.—Good-morning, Mr. Saxton."

Hasty bows on both sides. Mr. Saxton continues his stroll with a faint sensation of having been snubbed, and a decided impression that "that Miss Lautrec" is a very disagreeable young person. Ermine is hurried off down the first flight of steps, and then says, indignantly:

"Madelon, I am ashamed of you! Why did you treat the poor man so rudely? It is not his fault that—that—"

"That he is hateful and tiresome and conceited?" said Madelon. "No, I suppose not; but it is Margaret's business to bear him, not mine—and I certainly don't mean to do volunteer work. *Juste Ciel!* how heavy on hand she will find him for the rest of her natural life!"

"She will never marry him," said Ermine. "I would risk any thing on that."

"Indeed!" returned Madelon, sneeringly.

"Then I don't mind laying a wager with you. Precious as my necklace is to me, I will put it up against any thing you please, that Margaret is engaged to Mr. Saxton within—well, I will give myself a wide margin, and say three days. She may hold out a little while against the powers that be, but her contumacy won't be of long duration."

"I don't believe it!" said Ermine, determinedly. "You forget—Raymond!"

"Raymond!" repeated the other, in astonishment. She turned, looked at her companion, and then burst into a laugh. "I beg your pardon, my dear, but indeed you ought to be put under a glass case and labelled '*Ingenue*.' If it were not yourself, I should think you were a most consummate hypocrite, but as it is—why, have you no eyes, no ears, no quickness of perception? Don't you see that Raymond is sick and tired of Margaret, and that he is straining every nerve to get her married and out of his way?"

"Out of his way! How is she in his way?"

"Ermine, don't try my credulity too far," said Madelon, with her cynical smile—the smile which had come from overmuch study of Balzac and George Sand, coupled with a natural ability to catch the undercurrent of life—"you are a woman, not a child. You must see and know that Raymond means to marry you."

Surge went a tide of carnation over Ermine's clear, white skin—flash came a gleam of something like fire into her soft, dark eyes.

"I am a woman," she said; "not a child to be bartered away, or given away, Madelon. Raymond is not such a fool as to 'mean' to marry a woman who would never be induced to marry him."

"I am not much of a phrenologist," said Madelon, carelessly, "but it seems to me that I have only to look at Raymond's head or face, or whatever it is that kind of people profess to judge by, to see that he never made a plan yet—and gave it up."

"Then he had better not make any plan with regard to me," said Ermine, with decisive *haut-leur*.

Mademoiselle Lautrec shrugged her shapely shoulders once more.

"I sometimes think Raymond has taken for his own the motto of Philip of Spain—'Time and I against any two,' she said.

"He will be a great man some of these days—if he doesn't overreach himself or die beforehand. Those are the two lions in the paths of most clever men. If I were in your place, Ermine, I think I should take him. There are possibilities of something more than ordinary in him; and that is more than can be said of the majority of men."

"Then why don't you take him yourself?" said Ermine, magnanimously.

"I!"—lifting the white eyelids from her magnificent eyes. "What are you thinking of? It is very ill-bred to make personal application of one's remarks. I am Madelon Lautrec, with my face for my fortune; and unfortunately that species of capital is not recognized on 'Change. You are Mademoiselle St. Amand, the West-Indian heiress, with—"

"A very fine fortune—when told in centimes!"—

interrupted Ermine, smiling. "Never mind, Madelon—little or great, in a few months I shall be the legal possessor of it. I can go and live with my dear guardian, in my dear Martinique!"

"An entrancing prospect, truly!" said Madelon, dryly. "I wonder how long your enthusiasm for your dear Martinique will last after you get there? Here we are, however—and now I must tell Aunt Victorine about Mr. Saxton, so that she can keep Margaret at home."

"Tell Margaret," suggested Ermine, "and see what she will do."

"Margaret has more sense than you give her credit for," said Madelon, coolly. "If I did tell her, I think she would—stay."

They had by this time reached one of the prettiest and most attractive of those charming Battery villas—for villas they certainly are in appearance, whether defined thus or not—which are the admiration of every stranger visiting Charleston. The lives of those who inhabit them must certainly have fallen in pleasant places, we think, as we sit and gaze at them from the flickering shade that falls athwart some tempting bench. But, after all, is it not rather deceptive work, this judging the lives of people by the outside of their habitations? Few dwellings could have looked more airy, more elegant, more redolent of all things essential to happiness, than the stately house of many galleries, balconies, and bay-windows, before which the cousins paused; and yet—but it is scarcely worth while to tell a story by

insinuation or anticipation. Let us in, and see for ourselves.

CHAPTER II.

A CHARMING CHÂTELAINE.

Madelon walked directly into the house, but Ermine paused a minute before entering, and gazed back wistfully at the shining waters from the side of which she had come. The windows of the house did not overlook the harbor, but fronted instead on that lovely Battery square which was now wearing its brightest livery of emerald-green, the shell road gleaming white through intervening verdure, the blue waters of the Ashley beyond, and the wooded shores of James Island robed in tender, mist-like haze. It was a day of serene and heavenly calm—a day of golden splendor, “astray from paradise”—a day on which it seemed as if happiness *must* descend from that distant sapphire sky, like God's own angel, sent to bless all eager, yearning human hearts.

“If he would only come, it would all be so perfect!” the girl said half aloud.

And by “all” she did not mean any human influences, but only this fair, bright Nature, who wore her royal beauty like a smiling bride—Nature, whose joyous bidding *she* felt in every fibre, but whom she could not heed, with whom she could not rejoice, while her perverse, longing heart flew like a bird far away over the waters. Something—a shade, as it were—came to her face, as she turned and followed Madelon across a frescoed, marble-paved hall into a sitting-room which was simply a model of what a sitting-room should be—not very sumptuous, but luxurious and charming in the extreme. At one end a bay-window overlooked the street; just opposite the door two large French windows opened on a gallery, which, in turn, “gave” on a flower-garden. The fragrance of roses and jasmine came in through the open window and filled the bowery room.

“Like sweet thoughts in a dream,”

while the garden itself seemed a wilderness of bloom, a paradise of roses, clustering, hanging, twining everywhere, of graceful arches and trellises draped with vines, of trees with deep-green, glossy leaves, and white flowering shrubs. In furniture the apartment was some-

what nondescript. There was a piano in one corner, a carved bookcase in another, a broad, low, easy couch in a third, lounging-chairs innumerable, pictures, brackets, vases full of cut flowers, and a centre-table covered with books, work, periodicals, and newspapers. Across the hall was a suite of apartments said to be the most perfect in Charleston—rooms full of white statues, rare pictures, and gleaming mirrors; but all *habitués* of the house preferred this pretty boudoir with its charming mixture of comfort and refinement, and regarded it as a special compliment to be admitted here. One thing about the room struck the most inattentive observer in marked degree: it was impossible to enter it without perceiving at a glance that it was accustomed to enshrine the presence of some woman more than ordinarily gifted with the refinement and grace which, above all else, make a woman lovely in the sight of man.

And such a woman was standing in one of the French windows, giving some directions to the gardener about the training of a vine, when Madelon entered. A very fine and gracious lady. That was your first impression of Mrs. Erle, and, if you saw her twenty times a day, you were never tempted to alter that opinion. Whether or not she were beautiful, you did not pause to inquire; who ever does, when that nameless charm of manner, that unconscious magnetism of glance, which only a few rare women possess, is brought to bear on the startled yet acquiescent senses? But, if once forced to cold-blooded scrutiny, you found that Mrs. Erle stood the test of criticism as well as she stood the test of every thing else. Not strictly beautiful, perhaps—how few are!—but handsome, distinguished, and most unexceptionably thorough-bred in appearance—a woman who looked as if only the bluest of “blue blood” could possibly flow in her delicate azure veins. To describe her in detail would be impossible—for she was preëminently a woman who lost by being “picked to pieces”—but, taken as a whole, she was thoroughly harmonious, thoroughly graceful, and thoroughly fascinating to women as well as men.

She finished her directions before she looked round—giving them in a clear, pure voice, full of that indescribable modulation of refinement which is the despair of those who do not catch it in early childhood—then turned and advanced into the room as Madelon was saying—

“I wish I was as sure of a great many things I should like to know as that he will ring the door-bell the moment the clock strikes the last stroke of twelve.”

“He will not find me at home, then,” responded a petulant voice from the cushions of the couch, where an amber-haired, white-robed divinity reclined, in an attitude that might have served for the “Persian girl” whom Mr. Tennyson saw in his excursion up the Tigris, to “Bagdad's shrines of fretted gold.”

This was “the beautiful Miss Erle”—a radiant bird-of-paradise, over whom men raved, and of whom women steered clear, conscious that her brilliant fairness simply “killed” all lesser charms. Even stately, handsome Madelon looked almost plain beside her, perfect as she was in every outline of feature, and dazzling in all the bewildering tints that make blond beauty so captivating to the eye. People had likened Margaret Erle to every goddess of antiquity and every poetical saint in the calendar, until Margaret, well aware of this fact, esteemed it a point of conscience to pose accordingly. It was incumbent upon her never to be out of drawing, as artists say, to be always ready as an inspiration for a poet, or a study for a painter; so, from sheer force of habit, she sank into a graceful attitude if nobody more important than a canary was by; and even arranged herself with due regard to picturesque effect when she retired to her chamber to sleep. If Miss Erle's undeniable beauty was, in consequence, a little spoiled by self-consciousness, it was scarcely wonderful. A young lady cannot conveniently be “Italian Aphrodite,” Calypso, Hebe, St. Cecilia, all the Graces, the whole family of the Muses, and herself, into the bargain. Somebody must necessarily suffer in the matter; and that somebody is generally herself. At present Miss Erle was enthroned like an odalisque, amid cushions, the soft-blue tint of which enhanced the transparent fairness of her complexion, showed to advantage the pure, paly-gold of her hair, and made an effective background for her clear Greek profile—a fair, languid enchantress, whose manifest delight it was to ensnare men's souls in the meshes of her glittering tresses, and drown them in the depths of her violet eyes—but an enchantress most potent when she was silent, least likely to charm when she spoke. After all, Nature is less capricious in the distribution of her gifts than we are sometimes tempted to ima-

gine. The most fascinating women are not generally the most beautiful, and rarely indeed are the most beautiful the most fascinating. It is not so much a heart as a *mind* that dolls generally lack, not so much the power to attract as the power to retain; for regular features and “sun-kissed” hair are pretty enough in the abstract, but not always charming in the concrete.

“Who will not find you at home?” asked Mrs. Erle, turning round. Then, as Margaret kept silence, “Of whom are you speaking, Madelon?”

“Of Mr. Saxton,” answered Madelon. “We met him on the Battery, and I was just telling Margaret that he means to call, and ‘hopes to find Miss Erle at home.’”

“He will be disappointed, then,” said Miss Erle. “I must go out to do some shopping. I thought you were *never* coming, Madelon.”

“Your admirer detained me, my dear,” said Madelon. “Perhaps you had better think twice about going out, for he has plainly screwed his courage to the sticking-point, and means to take advantage of it before it oozes out at his fingers, like that of Bob Acres. I would not for the world hurt your feelings, but his appearance strongly reminded me of that charming old ballad about

‘A frog he would a wooing go,
Heigh-ho, says Rowley!
Whether his mother would let him or no,
Heigh-ho, says Rowley!’

“What was the fate of the frog, by-the-by? I don't remember.”

“Pretty much what will be the fate of Mr. Saxton, if he chooses to make a fool of himself, I presume,” retorted Margaret, irefully; “for it is provoking to have one's admirers depreciated, even if one does not mean to marry them.”

“Madelon, flippancy is a very undesirable accomplishment for a young lady,” said Mrs. Erle's clear voice, a little coldly. “Mr. Saxton is a very pleasant gentleman, and if he has said that he means to call, I hope, my dear” (this to Margaret), “that you will defer your shopping, and be at home to receive him.”

A dark cloud of sullen obstinacy came over the lovely blond face, as we may see it come over many faces of just that “angelic” type. Perhaps it is this fact which makes one secretly incredulous concerning the prevailing fairness of the celestial hosts. At all events, let us hope that, when we get to heaven, we shall

see some faces as dark, and bright, and frank, as we have seen on earth, and we can ask no more, either for them or for ourselves.

"I believe I should prefer to do my shopping, thank you, mamma," said Miss Erle, ungratefully. "If you think Mr. Saxton so pleasant, you know you can receive him yourself."

"I shall certainly receive him myself," answered Mrs. Erle, quietly. "You know me well enough to be sure that I am never guilty of any thing so improper, or in such atrocious style, as to allow you to receive alone a man who has never declared himself. Indeed, I shall make it a point that Madelon and Ermine see him also."

"I think, *ma tante*, you can afford to let me off duty," said Madelon, with her mocking smile. "Mr. Saxton and I have already exchanged compliments, and I told him—a shocking story, by-the-way—that I was not coming home. He will not expect to be gladdened by my presence, I assure you."

"Ermine, then. But where is she? Did you not request her to come home?"

"Here I am, mamma," said Ermine, entering at the moment. Do you want me?"

"Yes, I want you—or, rather, I don't want you to stand on the Battery and tan your complexion, or take a sunstroke," said Mrs. Erle. "Your face is quite flushed now—you, who never have a color! Ermine, this must really stop."

"What must really stop, mamma?" asked Ermine, sitting down with a sigh. "It is delightful out on the Battery; such a fresh breeze blowing that it is much cooler than in here; and as my for taking a sunstroke, I am about as likely to take the plague. I was only looking for—for Alan's ship."

"So I supposed, and therefore I sent for you. You know my wishes on that subject, Ermine; and yet you openly and perversely disregard them. What am I to think of such conduct?"

"Indeed, I don't know, mamma," said Ermine; and the words, which might have been impertinent, were in truth only weary. Evidently much had been said on the subject—so much that, to one at least, it had become entirely exhausted and entirely distasteful.

The stately, gracious lady flushed, and gave her daughter a glance in which it might have proved hard to tell whether impatience or contempt was most strikingly apparent.

"Perhaps you are not aware that your habits are already the subject of much remark," she said. "You forget that you are well known, and that it is impossible to stand on the Battery with an opera-glass at your eyes for several hours every day without attracting attention. Only last night Mrs. Lawson had the impertinence to ask me if you were not engaged to that disreputable—unfortunate young man who is the captain of a trading-vessel."

"Somebody asked me the same thing," cried Margaret. "I—I never was more angry in my life! I think Ermine might remember that she compromises all the rest of the family by her conduct."

"She compromises herself much more seriously than any one else," said Mrs. Erle's quiet, incisive voice. "Such a damaging report once circulated is never forgotten; and there is no telling how much it may affect a girl's establishment in life."

Ermine is mute—suddenly and strangely mute. A flush, deeper than that which her mother had remarked a moment before, dyes her clear, white skin, while the downcast lids veil effectually the averted eyes. As she sits by the table, tracing with one dainty foot an arabesque pattern on a Persian rug under her feet, she is a picture of obstinate defiance, they all think.

"There is Alice Stapleton," said Margaret, who often spoke when it would have been wiser to keep silence, and whose illustrations were not always strikingly in point, "who ever forgets that she was about to elope with a dancing-master when she was at school? Of course she is very nice now, but I don't believe anybody worth speaking of will ever marry her."

"And do you call Alice Stapleton's disgraceful affair a parallel to my affection for Alan—Alan, whom I love better than anybody in the world except my dear guardian?" asked Ermine, lifting her eyes all ablaze with indignation, and fixing them on the speaker.

"For that matter, I call a dancing-master infinitely superior to a sea-captain any time," retorted Margaret, whose *forte* was any thing in the world but amiability. "Gentlemen are dancing-masters sometimes—at least one reads of such things."

"And are gentlemen never sea-captains?" demanded Ermine, with ominous calm. "I

shall be very much obliged to you for a definite answer to that question."

Before Margaret could comply with this moderate request, Mrs. Erle interposed.

"I am ashamed of you both," she said. "Is this a mode for two well-bred people to discuss any subject? Ermine, it is useless to attempt reasonable argument with you, I perceive; but *I am* your mother, even if I am not your guardian, and I request" (a strong accent here) "that you will refrain from looking for Alan's ship, where all Charleston can see and comment on your folly."

"It is folly, no doubt, mamma, for it does not bring him any sooner—I can stay at home," Ermine answered, quietly.

This unusual submission took her audience quite by surprise. Even Madelon looked at her for a moment somewhat astonished, and a little suspicious. What did it mean? Usually she fought *à l'outrance* over any point where "Alan" was even distantly concerned; and now to give up this indulgence was singularly without precedent, to say the least.

For a fortnight past, her feverish anxiety concerning his coming had grown day by day, and at all hours she and her opera-glass had haunted the Battery, until almost any mother in Charleston would have esteemed Mrs. Erle amply justified in decidedly "putting a stop to it," as Mrs. Erle at last resolved to do. She had resolved it, however, with sundry misgivings concerning the probable consequences of rebellion; and this unconditional surrender was therefore most unexpectedly gratifying.

"Now, that is sensible—a very rare thing with you," she said, approvingly. "I cannot understand this sentimental fancy about Alan. That seems to be the weakest point of your character, Ermine. I wonder it never strikes you what he may think of it."

"What may he think of it?" asked Ermine, with level, half-defiant eyes.

Mrs. Erle returned the gaze quietly, but, when she spoke, every word dropped with mercilessly cool decision on the three pairs of listening ears:

"He may think he has made a conquest of a foolish girl, who has not sufficient self-respect to conceal her folly."

"Mamma!" It was a choking cry of indignation—a cry that absolutely made Margaret start among her downy blue cushions—

"mamma, how dare you speak so to me?"

"Ermine, have you lost your senses, that

you dare to speak so to me?" asked her mother, sternly.

Ermine gave a great gasp, shivered from head to foot, then, locking her hands tightly together, grew suddenly and rigidly calm.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "When one is insulted, one does not stop to think who offered the insult. Perhaps that may excuse me. But"—her eyes lightened here—"if you think to estrange me from Alan by such taunts as this, you are mistaken. I love him too dearly, I trust him too entirely, to believe that he would ever do me such injustice as to think any—any thing like that! He knows how I love him—he and God—for any one else, it does not matter. I am used to misconception—especially from you—for I have never had any thing else as long as I can remember."

"And I am used to that charge," said Mrs. Erle, with dignity. "Fortunately, my own conscience acquits me of it; and any one, who has ever known any thing of your rash and headstrong nature, will acquit me also."

"Then let me go to my guardian—my dear guardian," said Ermine, quivering. "He has some love for me, some patience with me."

"If I allowed you to go to that foolish old man, I don't know what point your indiscretion would reach," said Mrs. Erle, coldly. "As it is, your recklessness and insubordination make the principal trouble of my life."

"I am sorry for it," said Ermine; "but perhaps—who knows?—it may not be for long. I am sure, for your sake, I hope it may end very soon."

She spoke the last words half dreamily; then took her hat from the table where she had laid it, and walked out of the room, across the hall, and up the broad, easy staircase.

There was silence in the bowery-room until the last echo of her footsteps died away. Then Mrs. Erle said:

"Nobody who has not suffered in the same manner could credit the anxiety which Ermine has been to me from her childhood. She certainly has the most unfortunately tenacious nature I have ever known. To think that, after all these years, she should still cling to that disagreeable guardian of hers, and this disreputable nephew of my husband's, who was once kind to her in a careless, boyish fashion!"

"She would undergo torture and death for either of them," said Madelon. "Isn't it

remarkable? One would think that dresses, and admirers, and all that sort of thing, would not leave her any spare time or spare thought to waste on such subjects. Do you know," pursued the young lady, "I don't think Ermine is exactly like other people, Aunt Victorine? She is so very queer—queerer, by far, than you know—that she always seems to me like one of the people who are said to be marked out for uncommon uses—tragedy, passion, despair, and all that sort of thing."

"I beg you won't put any such romantic nonsense into her head," said Mrs. Erle, coldly. "She sadly lacks common-sense now."

"I put romantic nonsense into anybody's head?" said Madelon. "That would be a Saul among the prophets indeed! But I think you will find an abundance of it in Ermine's brain without any assistance from me."

"She told me yesterday that as soon as she is of age she means to go to Germany and study art," said Margaret, in exactly the same tone she might have employed to announce an intention to go to the penitentiary and break stones.

"She is hopelessly absurd," said Mrs. Erle, with a sigh, "and I really think her guardian is accountable for a great deal of it."

"As for her painting," said Madelon, who seemed rather inclined to take the part of devil's advocate, "I don't see that it does much harm to any thing except her dresses. I suppose you know that she has ruined her pretty blue organdie with paint-stains, by-the-way?"

"Her affection for her guardian is the most incomprehensible thing to me," said Mrs. Erle, whose mind naturally ran on the grievance which was most a grievance to her. "He is really the most disagreeable old man I ever knew. I often wonder what induced my husband to choose such a person—but the ways of husbands are incomprehensible. If he meant to leave me a posthumous annoyance, he could not have done so more completely; for the trouble Colonel Vivieux has caused me about Ermine's fortune and Ermine's self is almost beyond belief."

"What a charming thing it is, to be sure, when one has no fortune to necessitate a guardian, and prove a source of trouble to one's friends!" said Madelon. "For these and all other mercies, let us thank Providence!—Come, Margaret—if you mean to lie there all day, I must go down-street."

"Margaret is going to stay at home," said Mrs. Erle. "I specially request it."

"Indeed, mamma, I am not," said Margaret. "I—I don't care a straw about seeing Mr. Saxton."

"But you do care about showing your pretty face on King Street, don't you?" said Madelon, laughing. "One admirer at home is certainly not to be compared to fifty abroad."

"Madelon, I wish you would let me alone!" cried Margaret, wrathfully. "I have to go and see the dress-maker about my green silk; you know I can't trust you to do it."

"Quite right, too, my dear, for I might order a flounce additional, or a ruffle less, which would break your heart," said Madelon.

"I shall order the carriage, and drive with you to see about the dress, after Mr. Saxton's call," said Mrs. Erle, who knew that, if it came to the point of the green silk, concession was absolutely necessary. "That will be better than walking in the hot sun. We will see, too, about the point-lace cape you have set your heart on, but"—as Margaret's turquoise eyes began to gleam with pleasure—"I must really insist on your changing that wrapper for a dress in which you can properly receive Mr. Saxton."

After a few remonstrances, Margaret yielded with a very bad grace, and retired to effect the desired change of toilet. Then Mrs. Erle leaned back and sighed wearily.

"What a happy day it will be to me when that girl is safely married!" she said. "Nothing short of the point-lace bribe would have induced her to see this man; and yet—" She broke off abruptly here. "Madelon, if you are going down-street, I wish you would take Louise with you, and get her that pair of blue-kid gaiters which she is determined to have. I am tired of hearing her fret for them."

"I saw Nathalie with Louise and Regy on the Battery," said Madelon. "If I meet them, I will take *la petite* with me. *Pauvre tante*," added the girl, half compassionately, half mockingly; "even Louise, at the mature age of nine, begins to worry you. I really believe I am the only consolation you have!"

"You certainly give me the least trouble of any," said Mrs. Erle, kissing the ripe, scarlet lips that bent over her.

Yet, after Madelon left the room, and the hall-door closed on her, the speaker shook her head.

"The time for it has not come quite yet,"

she said, addressing a royal lily placed in a tall, slender vase before her; but I should not be surprised if the trouble she gave in the end was the worst trouble of all."

Just then a peal of the door-bell echoed through the house, and the lady made haste to smooth her face in readiness for the visitor whom it heralded. "Show Mr. Saxton in, John," she said, as a servant entered with a card, "and 'not at home' to any one else while he is here."

After all, is it worth while to envy the charming *châtelaine* her beautiful house—

"With its porcelain and pictures and flowers,"

or would not "a dinner of herbs," where love abounded, and scheming was unknown, be rather preferable?

CHAPTER III.

MADELON GIVES ADVICE.

THE soft, fragrant May dusk has fallen over the blooming land and the shining waters, the divine glory of the western sky has faded away, and only a faint glow lingers over the broad rivers, the calm harbor, the glittering spires of the city, and the great, distant, placid ocean. The afternoon throng, which makes the Battery for eight months in the year one of the most charming pleasure-resorts in the country, has gradually dispersed and gone its way, to gather round countless tea-tables, and discuss all the choice bits of news, social and political, which "fly about in the sunshine like gay little motes," at any such popular and universal lounging-place—a place where one can see the whole *beau-monde* on dress-parade, for the mere trouble of sauntering to and fro in the bright sunshine, with the water sending soft tones of music into one's ear, the fresh sea-breeze bringing fresh color into one's face, the lovely panorama of sea and shore spread before one's eyes—the purple islands, the distant forts, the broad expanse of sparkling water, the whole perfect picture, in front of which,

"—as though sprung from the waves she has cleft,
Grim Sumter frowns out o'er the sea."

It was at just that witching hour of the twenty-four when a mantle of twilight, edged with the silvery lustre of a new moon and

countless glittering stars, falls over the fair scene, that Madelon Lautrec, parting with one or two gay companions at the door of her aunt's house, entered and ran through the brilliantly-lighted hall straight up-stairs. She did not pause at the door of her own chamber, but passed on and knocked at that of Ermine, which adjoined it.

"Come in," said a clear voice; and, when the door opened, a rush of light came out on the dark corridor, disclosing a room like a sea-cave, all green and white, with long, swinging mirrors, and a dainty, spotless, canopied bed. Before one of these mirrors Ermine stood, putting the finishing touch to her toilet, in the shape of a lovely, half-blown rose, which nestled among its rich green leaves against the glossy plaits of her dark hair.

"You have come for Lena, haven't you?" she said, turning round with a smile, as her cousin entered. "You ought to have been five minutes earlier—Margaret has just sent to ask for her, and, as I had finished dressing, I let her go."

"Margaret is unconscionably selfish," said Madelon, in a pet. "Why cannot she be content with her own maid? If I had a maid, I am sure I should teach her to do her work, and not have to beg the loan of somebody else's all the time. *Au diable!* Don't look so shocked, my dear; it isn't half as bad as to say, 'Go to the devil!' in English—and quite as gratifying to the feelings. I hope Lena will do her hair execrably—that would be only poetical justice! But, meanwhile, who is to do mine?"

"For the concert, do you mean?"

"Yes, of course for the concert. Do you know, by-the-way, that Aunt Victorine has so far departed from her usual rule, that I am to be allowed to go with Major Hastings?"

"Madelon! Impossible!"

"*Ma foi*, but it is possible! You can't be more surprised than I was—for five minutes. Major Hastings being a new acquaintance, of course did not know Aunt Victorine's inflexible chaperon rule, so he asked me this afternoon if I would not allow him the honor of escorting me; and, more for amusement than any thing else, I referred the matter to Madame *ma tante*, and she said—yes. For five minutes, as I remarked before, you could have knocked me down with a feather."

"And then?"

"Hum! Well, then I remembered one or

two things, and my surprise abated—very quickly and very decidedly."

"But what were the little things?" cried Ermine, impatiently. "Mamma, who is always so very particular, so very *French* in her ideas, who never lets us go with anybody but Raymond!—what is the meaning of it, Madelon?"

"Set your wits to work and guess, my dear."

"Is Major Hastings rich, and does she mean you to make a *mariage de convenance*, after the model of—well, no matter who?"

"I have not the faintest idea whether he is next door to a beggar, or a millionaire; but *ma tante* is no vulgar match-maker. If he were a Rothschild, she would not break her rules without better reason for it than that. Guess again, Ermine."

"I—I can't. Tell me."

"Will you do my hair for me, if I tell you?"

"Yes," cried Ermine, with reckless impatience. "Of course I will—only you must sit down at once, for it is getting late, and you know Raymond is always dreadfully impatient."

"Let him learn to wait, then—somebody says that is Nature's noblest effort, and it is certainly the one that would do Raymond most good. Here I am, however—all ready."

She took off her hat, shook out her hair—of which she had a magnificent suit, barring that it was not remarkably silky in texture—and sat down in a low chair before the toilet-table and the large mirror which reflected the room with its hangings of pale sea-green, and made a picture of the two girls in all the winning grace of their youth and beauty.

"Now," said Ermine, as she gathered up the heavy locks in both hands, and began with deft fingers to do the work of the maid who was just then arranging Miss Erle's golden tresses, while another maid stood by and looked admiringly on—"now you're in my power—tell me at once, or I shall have no mercy on you."

"You are horribly stupid to need to be told," said Madelon, with complimentary candor. "Don't you see that, as usual, the Alpha and Omega of the whole thing is Raymond?"

"I *am* stupid, I suppose," said Ermine, humbly; "but I don't see it at all. What has Raymond to do with Major Hastings?"

"Bah!" It was the most significant interjection in the world. "Ermine, I am ashamed of you! Listen, then—and be enlightened. Don't you know that Margaret is to be sent to the concert with Mr. Saxton as a convenient mode of informing the world in general that the engagement is an accomplished fact, and of bringing Margaret to terms through the medium of public opinion?"

"Yes, I know."

"Then, don't you see—Take care! you are braiding my hair unevenly. Perhaps I had better defer this interesting conversation until you have finished."

"No, no—pray go on. I will be more careful."

"Well, then, as I was remarking, don't you see that it is of course highly desirable that such a good opportunity should not be lost for throwing you and Raymond together?—Good Heavens! Ermine, don't pull my hair so dreadfully! My head is not made of India-rubber or wood, and I really can't stand it."

"I beg your pardon—I did not mean—Madelon, if I thought you were right, I would not go to the concert for any consideration."

"Nonsense!" said Madelon, who, seeing her cousin's excitement, began to be apprehensive about the effect on her *coiffure*. "Nonsense, Ermine—don't we always go with Raymond? Nobody is likely to think of you what they will be certain to think of Margaret and Mr. Saxton. It is simply that Aunt Victorine likes to give him an opportunity to glide into the lover, which would be rather difficult if I played the agreeable part of Mademoiselle De Trop."

"He would not dare," said Ermine, indignantly. "He knows that I know how long he has been in love with Margaret."

"In love with Margaret!" repeated Madelon, scornfully. "My dear, Raymond is in love with nobody but himself and his own interest. Aunt Victorine would not thank me for saying so, but it is a fact. Of course, we all know that Margaret is in love with him; but I don't believe he has been any thing but tired of her this long while."

"Madelon, you see so much you frighten me! How do you find all this out?"

"Simply by using the few wits which Nature gave me to atone for her shabby conduct in other respects. Ermine"—the girl's light tone suddenly changed into so much of grave

earnestness, that Ermine stopped short and stood in a tragic-muse attitude, armed and equipped with an ivory-backed brush—"why don't you make up your mind to marry Raymond? You will have to do it sooner or later, and why not at once?"

"Madelon, what do you mean?"

"I think it is very evident what I mean," said Madelon, pushing back the masses of hair which overhung her face, and looking up at her cousin in the mirror, with eyes like those of a sibyl. "Aunt Victorine and Mr. Erle have made up their minds that you are to marry Raymond—Raymond himself has made up his mind to the same thing; so I don't see that there is much for you to do but submit."

"You know me no better than they do, Madelon, if you think so."

"I know you a great deal better, my dear," said Madelon, quietly, "and that is the only reason I have taken the trouble to speak to you. I know that you will make a death-fight, but I know, also, that in the end you will be obliged to succumb."

"Why?"

"Shall I tell you why?"

"Yes, tell me—I should like to know what reason you could possibly have for such an assertion."

"My reason is simply this: I am sure that the possession of your fortune is a matter of financial life and death to the Erles. It is their last card; and you can judge for yourself whether they are likely to allow your fancy to stand in the way of their playing it."

"Do you mean that Mr. Erle is threatened with danger or embarrassment in his business?"

"Hush! for Heaven's sake, speak lower! I mean that I would be willing to stake my existence that he is on the brink of absolute failure. Don't ask me how I know it. You could not understand if I were to tell you, for I have ways and means of information which would seem to you trifling and unimportant. Only be sure it is a fact. Ermine, you were an heiress when your father died: ever since then your fortune has been in the hands of the best business man in Martinique, so you can imagine whether or not it is worth Mr. Erle's while to hazard a great deal for it now."

"If I were of age I would give it to him,"

said Ermine, passionately; "but I will never, never marry Raymond."

"And yet, you absurd child, that is the only way in which you *can* give it to him. What would your husband, when you marry, say to your having quixotically bestowed your fortune on your step-father? What would the world say of Mr. Erle if he accepted it? Where is the hardship of marrying Raymond, after all?" the girl went on, with her cold, trenchant cynicism. "Isn't he handsome?—isn't he clever?—isn't he sure to surround you with comfort and luxury all your life? *Mon Dieu!* Think of the men some women are obliged to marry—think of Mr. Saxton, for example!"

"But why should I think of them? Nobody can oblige me to marry Raymond."

"Nobody can shut you up on bread-and-water, or use any romantic mode of compulsion, I grant you; but other means are sometimes quite as effective. Sooner or later, you will have to do it. Therefore, why not do it at once?"

Ermine drew herself up haughtily. Just then she looked like a young princess.

"You seem to think I am a child, Madelon, to be frightened by vague threats," she said. "I will *not* have to do it, sooner or later. Nothing shall ever make me marry him. If mamma requested you to speak to me, you can tell her that."

"Aunt Victorine has never mentioned the subject to me," answered Madelon. "I spoke of my own accord, because I was foolish enough to wish to do you a service. You have always been kind to me, and, if I have a soft spot in my heart for anybody—a fact, by-the-way, which I sometimes doubt—it is for you, Ermine. However, it is all very useless, I perceive; and my hair is being sadly neglected. It must be late. I stayed out longer than I meant to do, but the Battery was charming this afternoon. What were you doing with yourself?"

"I was painting," said Ermine, with something—a soft sort of mystical light—in her eyes. "Colors are like opium to me—I forget every thing disagreeable or painful when I am with them. Sometimes I think I am color-mad. Every thing in the world—no matter how purely abstract—has a tint to me. I never hear a strain of music that it does not suggest a color or a shade of color. This afternoon I have been working at my sea-

piece with such energy that it is almost finished. Madelon, shall I show it to you?"

"It is not much in my line," said Madelon; "but still—if it will not inconvenience you—"

"It is just here," said Ermine.

She laid down the brush, which Madelon regretfully took up and began using, and passed into a small room adjoining her chamber—originally a dressing-room, at present a studio. From this she reappeared, after a moment, bearing a small canvas—in dimension not more than twenty-four by eighteen inches—which she held in her white, outstretched arms before Madelon.

The bright lamplight quivered softly on the clear, transparent tints—tints so exquisite that only an artist's soul could have felt them—and, turning, Madelon took in at a glance the design of the picture. The sea—no shore, no rocks, no suggestion of distant land—but such a sea that it was simply a marvel how a tyro's hand could have painted its divine, perfect, eternal, yet ever-changing loveliness! A great, blue, waveless southern ocean, spread out in lustrous calm beneath a sky like a dream of heaven—stretching away, as it seemed, to infinite distance, and melting at the horizon into the translucent sapphire of the great vault of ether, until it was impossible to tell where the water ended or the sky began. And in all the wide world of space, one object alone visible—a single, shattered spar, to which was lashed the slender figure of a woman with white, motionless face, upturned toward that distant, serene heaven whence cometh sometimes hope, and sometimes, again, despair. The sea had done its work. No gleam of life would ever again come to those sculptured features, nor would any living hands ever lay that fair form away, into the kind embrace of Mother Earth. What the sea possessed, the sea would keep, and the placid water seemed idly toying with the rounded limbs and floating hair, as if exulting in its power, and gilding, with a bright, treacherous smile, the destruction which it had worked. With all its faults—and faults, of course, were many—there was a fascination about the picture which must have arrested any eye, and held, for a time at least, any attention spell-bound. A stranger could scarcely have believed that this beautiful conception was from the hand of a girl of twenty, whose art-training had been of that entirely amateur kind

which is bestowed upon young ladies who have a weakness for spoiling canvas and wasting paint. There was none of that weak prettiness which usually damns even the best of such efforts; the very faults of the piece were faults of power, and there was a dramatic intensity about the whole scene which proved—more conclusively even than the wonderful coloring—the God-given power of the born artist.

Such as it was, it startled even Madelon into forgetfulness of her yet undressed hair and probably waiting escort.

"Ermine," she cried, "it is wonderful!—it is beautiful! It is the best thing by far you ever did! I have no fancy for such work, you know, but, if it strikes me, it must be worth something!" Then, after a moment's pause, "Oh, why did not God give me such a talent? It might have saved me, perhaps—it might have made something of me! But you—what need have you to labor like this?"

"You might as well ask me what need I have to breathe," said Ermine, placing the canvas on a chair, and kneeling before it like a reverential worshipper at a shrine. "I love it!—I love it! I ask for nothing, hope for nothing, desire nothing, when I am at my paints. O Madelon, I would give every thing in this world—except my guardian and Alan—to be an artist."

"And can't you be one? You are rich enough to do any thing you please, I am sure."

"But I want to give my life to it—to study, to work, not to be merely an eccentric young lady who dabbles in oils when she has no engagement to ride, or drive, or walk, or talk. I want to go to one of those delightful art-schools, to learn to paint as well as woman can learn, and then to live in Rome, in some pleasant studio with plenty of pictures, and only a crust of bread, perhaps—but I should eat it with such a light heart."

"*Vraiment!* how easy it is to be romantic when one is rich!" said Madelon, in a tone of overwhelming scorn.

Yet it was a subject more fit for sadness than for scorn—this fair young creature, endowed with all earth's brightest gifts, longing to shake them off and give heart and soul to the service of that divine Beauty which is known to us through Art. Ah me! is it not ever so? Was any existence ever so bright that discontent had no place in it? Was any

human soul ever without these strange longings for another life than that which God has given? Was any heart ever so happy that it has not beat against its cage, yearning for better wings and wider flight? Was any glance ever so sunny that it did not turn from the brightness around it, to gaze wistfully toward some distant spot of happier light? Even if such natures were, who could envy them? Is it not better to dash hopelessly against the bars, than to sink down on the floor of some dreary prison and believe that its walls bound the world?

"But my hair," said Madelon, coming back to present reality. "Are you, or are you not, going to finish it, Ermine?"

"Of course I am," said Ermine, rising to her feet.

But at this moment a pleasant-faced, bright-eyed maid entered the room, whom Madelon greeted with enthusiasm.

"Thanks to kind Fate, here comes Lena!" she said. "Now, perhaps, I may hope to go to the concert to-night. Ermine, pray don't let me detain you any longer.—Has Margaret gone down, Lena?"

"Just this minute, Miss Madelon."

"I suppose she looks as pretty as ever?"

"Oh, yes'm, she looks very pretty, but" (a slight, insignificant hesitation here) "she was mighty hard to suit to-night. I'd have been here before, Miss Madelon, but for that." "Hum!" said Madelon, grimly, "I can imagine it. Being an angel to one's lover and an angel to one's maid are quite different things. Come, though, Lena, and make up for lost time now."

The maid fell skilfully to work on the rich masses of hair, and—after tenderly conveying her painting back to its easel—Ermine left the room. As she descended the staircase, a latch-key rattled in the front-door, and, as her foot was on the last step, a gentleman entered the hall, whom she met under the chandelier, and with whom she exchanged a greeting.

"Why, good-evening, papa! I thought I was late, but it seems I must be early, since you have just come in."

"Good-evening, *petite*," said "papa," with a smile. "You are right in your thoughts. It is late—that is, late for me. What are you looking so radiant about? Another party to-night?"

"Oh, no—the concert. Is it possible you have forgotten the concert?"

"Indeed, I am sorry to say it is possible," answered he, with a smile.

When he smiled, Mr. Erle positively did not look more than twenty-five; and, whether he smiled, or whether his face was as grave as it could occasionally appear, he was in either case a remarkably handsome man—a man whose good looks were of that delicate blond order which preserves the appearance of youth longer than any other. As he stood for a moment, speaking to his step-daughter, with the light of the chandelier streaming over his chiselled features, his clear complexion, his rich, fair curls, and violet eyes, he looked as if he might have rivalled the lovely Margaret herself, if Nature had only given him the right to wear soft green silk and delicate point-lace. It was only on scanning the face more closely that you saw a few insignificant lines about the eyes and mouth, which told the story of years and of passions. The man had "lived" every day of his life—with all his beautiful *petit maître* appearance, you were sure of that as soon as you marked the face more closely, and, although Nature or habit had provided him with a very convenient and very becoming waxen mask, which he wore on most occasions, the inner and more passionate self sometimes broke through and left its traces behind it.

"I suppose Raymond is here?" Mr. Erle went on. "He left the office very early this afternoon, and I have not heard of him since. I should not have been so late, if his absence had not thrown several important letters on my hands. I wonder if he will have the grace to blush at sight of me?"

"If so, you will have to teach him how," said Ermine, smiling. "I am sure he has not been guilty of such an indiscretion since he was five years old."

"He shall answer for himself," said Mr. Erle, drawing her hand under his arm.

Mr. Erle was a model of a step-father, everybody said; so nobody was surprised when he and Ermine entered the sitting-room in this confidential fashion. The light evening meal was served on a small round table, among lights and flowers, at which Mrs. Erle and Mr. Saxton alone were sitting. The latter had evidently just arrived, and while he drank a cup of scalding coffee (which had the becoming effect of throwing him into a profuse perspiration), having declined the iced tea which Mrs. Erle herself was sipping, he watched alternately his lemon-

colored gloves—on which some drops of the dark beverage had already fallen—and his lady-love, who sat by one of the open windows overlooking the garden.

As a matter of personal comfort, Miss Erle would have preferred her usual downy nest among the cushions of the couch, but, whatever her shortcomings in other respects, she always knew better than to allow her dress and surroundings to "swear at each other," as the French expressively have it. An instinct—the artistic instinct which seems born in some women to whom art itself is a dead letter—always served to guide her right; and, being "cast" for Sabrina to-night, in sea-green silk, and misty lace, and coral ornaments, she kept very clear indeed of the blue background of the couch. Leaning over the back of her chair, and half concealed in the shade of the curtains, was a young man who raised his face as Ermine entered, disclosing the features of the Raymond of whom we have already heard so much, and of whom, fortune favoring, we shall hereafter hear still more.

Like every other member of the family, Mr. Raymond Erle was handsome. People often marvelled over the chance which had brought so many remarkably good-looking people together in this household. "We have not a single plain face among us," Madelon often said, exultingly; and it was quite true. Once gathered together, the entire Erle clan and the pretty creole cousins, they formed a rare galaxy of masculine and feminine beauty, comprising several widely dissimilar types. Raymond, for example, was, in appearance, a law unto himself: that is, he did not resemble any other known Erle, least of all his uncle. It is tolerably hard to photograph him in the few words which are all that custom allows to a "description," and yet the attempt must be made; for, to leave his appearance merely to conjecture, would be to do that appearance a grievous injustice. The "medium height" is such a very indefinite phrase, and varies so much according to the physical standard of different localities (a tall man on the seaboard, for instance, being quite a pigmy among stalwart mountaineers), that it may be well to state positively that he was in height just five feet nine and a quarter inches. His weight was not so certain, but it could not have been very considerable, for his figure was slender even to fragility—though not without certain signs of muscular strength which a practised

eye would have recognized at once. There was an elegance about this figure, a *je ne sais quoi* of well-bred style, which rendered Mr. Raymond Erle a marked man in any assemblage, and his picturesque face certainly did him good service in whatever society the caprice of Fortune saw fit to cast him. A singularly handsome face it was—with an olive-pale complexion, faultless features, raven hair, heavy mustache, eyebrows pencilled like a Circassian's, and large, dark eyes, full of velvety softness which no one could mistake for gentleness—yet, withal, not in the least a face which could be styled effeminate. On the contrary, men felt instinctively that its owner was not to be trifled with; that this keen, fearless, determined face indicated a nature ready to meet any emergencies, and not likely to regard any obstacles to a desired end. Not always, nor altogether, a pleasant face; but a face with an attraction which it was impossible to deny, and sometimes very hard to resist.

The two cousins made such a lover-like tableau, ensconced in the shade of the window-curtains, with the fragrant night, all glittering stars and silent flowers, beyond, that Mr. Saxton's wandering, jealous glances were scarcely remarkable; yet Raymond's face, when he raised it, wore any thing but a lover-like expression. It would be hard indeed to imagine a more angry countenance. The dark-red flush which suffused the usually pale complexion, the knitted brows, and compressed lips, were all such unmistakable signs of deep and bitter vexation that even Ermine, usually well acquainted with the amenities of the household, was surprised. At sight of her, however, the lowering features quickly smoothed themselves, and a smiling cavalier came forward.

"Don't you think we had better be in haste, Ermine?" he asked, after they had bidden each other good-evening. "It is never good style to be late at a concert; and then I know you would not like to miss the overture to the 'Midsummer-Night's Dream,' which is first on the programme."

"Mayn't I eat a wafer and take some tea first?" asked Ermine, looking up at him with eyes in which there was something of the gleaming yet transparent lustre that water shows under a starlit sky. "Surely there is time enough for that?"

"Oh, yes, time enough for that; indeed, I will bear you company as far as regards the

tea. It is a wonderful stimulant, and may serve to keep me awake."

"Awake, when you are going to hear the best orchestra and the finest *cantatrices* in the country!" said Ermine, with the marvelling scorn which he had meant to provoke.

They sat down, however, in very companionable fashion to their iced tea, and wafers so light that a puff of wind would have blown them off the table. Mr. Saxton, seeing his opportunity, finished his cup of coffee at a draught, made a half-muttered apology to his hostess, rose in a steam, and betook himself and his lemon-colored gloves over to where his "goddess of the silver lake" was sitting.

"Bah, what a porpoise!" said Raymond, in a low voice, watching him with disdainful eyes.

"At least he is not a 'laggard in love,'" said Ermine, smiling. "See how eagerly he goes, though Margaret does not look particularly gracious by any means."

"Who can blame her?" asked Mr. Raymond, magnificently; in fancy, he could not avoid contrasting his own appearance with that of the rival to whom he had surrendered the fair field of his cousin's affections. "It certainly requires all his wealth to gild the fellow's mere appearance. By Jove! he looks almost as rough as a sea-captain!"

Ominous comparison! Whether innocent or not, who can say? At all events, at the mere sound of those two words, Ermine's ever-ready color flashed into her face, and she turned upon the speaker with startling impetuosity.

"I should think you would grow tired of that sort of sneers, Raymond," she said; "especially when you know that there are many sea-captains who are as polished gentlemen as—as you are!"

"Many, my dear Ermine, or only one?" asked Raymond, with a smile which nobody could possibly have fancied genial.

"There may be many, for aught I know; but there is one, I do know," she answered, quickly.

"Granting even that, does one swallow make a summer? or, because a gentleman chooses to lower himself to the rank of a certain class of people, does he thereby lift his new associates to the grade which he has forfeited?"

"Raymond," said the girl, quickly, "I don't want to hear any more! You never

lose any opportunity to scoff at Alan and Alan's profession, and there is no good in answering you. Only," with sarcasm almost as trenchant as Madelon's, "I should like to know why it is any more lowering to a gentleman to trade on sea than to trade on land?"

"Ermine, you forget yourself," said her mother, sternly.

"Oh, let *la petite* talk!" said Mr. Erle, indulgently. "Words hurt nobody except poor Raymond, who must look after himself; and the heiress of half the island of Martinique can afford to regard with scorn a mere commission-merchant."

Poor Ermine! Almost any one might have felt sorry for her just then, that burning flush dyed her white cheek so hotly and painfully once more.

"I—I did not mean that," she said, quickly. "Papa, I beg your pardon. I did not intend any thing disrespectful to your trade—that is, profession. Only Raymond might let Alan alone!"

"To the best of my knowledge, I have not mentioned Alan from first to last," said Raymond, in the most injured tone imaginable. "This is a sample of the way you always treat me, Ermine. I cannot make the most incidental or general remark, but you accuse me of a particular intention to sneer. I am heartily ashamed of Alan and Alan's profession," said the young man, with energy; "but he chose it with his eyes open, and that is an end of the matter."

"I only wish it was an end of the matter," said Mr. Erle, in a resigned tone. "But unfortunately Ermine's friendship is of such an enthusiastic nature that Alan and Alan's affairs seem to me to furnish the staple seasoning of our life."

"There is certainly no need to inform the world that one of our near connections commands a trading-vessel," said Mrs. Erle, in her dignified voice, "yet I heard Ermine tell General Borne the other day that her 'cousin' was not in the navy, but in the merchant service."

"I did not say so, mamma, because the merchant service is more creditable than the navy, but because it is a fact."

"It is not always necessary to proclaim facts," said Mr. Erle. "That idea, my dear Ermine, is your greatest error."

"I hope it will remain my error a long time, then," said Ermine ungratefully. "And as for Alan, the rest of you may be ashamed of him,

if you like, but I am proud of him—prouder than I ever was of anybody else in my life."

"You can afford to indulge those fine sentiments, since he is no relation of yours, and does not disgrace you in the least," said Raymond, shying scraps of wafer at a pet-dog belonging to one of the children, who caught them eagerly, and found them exceedingly unsatisfactory morsels.

"As far as that is concerned, you know I consider him my cousin as much as Margaret does."

"By brevet appointment, I presume—yet I cannot claim a kinsman's most distant privilege without incurring rebuke."

"My dear boy, there are Erles and Erles," said his uncle, smiling benignly. "You are a commission-merchant, and Alan is a sea-captain—the distinction makes the difference."

"I am inclined to think there is another distinction which makes another difference," said Raymond, meaningly—then he leaned back in his chair and watched Ermine, with a glance which she felt though she did not see, as Mr. Erle left the table and walked across the room, followed by his wife. "There is another distinction—is there not, Ermine?" he asked after a while in a quick, low voice, inaudible at five paces off.

"Yes," answered the girl, glancing up at him with fearless candor. "There is another distinction—and you know what it is, Raymond."

"What is it, Ermine?"

"It is that Alan is open and true as the day," she answered, in the same tone. "It is that there is no more narrowness in his heart, than there is pettiness in his soul; that he could no more shackle himself with the bondage of worldly opinion than he could stoop to a mean action; and that God gave him so generous a spirit, so fine a nature, that, if he were a hod-carrier, he would still be a gentleman."

The young man looked intently into her glowing face.

"Well," he said, dryly, "now for the companion-sketch—the reverse-picture."

"You have heard that often enough, Raymond."

"Yes," he said, with a faint, bitter laugh, "I have certainly heard often enough—perhaps a little too often—all the bad qualities with which you are pleased to endow me. I should be worse than Iago if I possessed half of them, Ermine."

"I can only hope that you don't possess any of them, then, Raymond."

"Do you never mean to do me any justice?" he asked, with a certain subdued vehemence of manner.

She looked up at him with a quick flash in her eye.

"Set me an example, by doing Alan justice," she said, curtly.

The dialogue has reached rather an exciting point. Both their faces are flushed, and their eyes glowing, as Madelon enters the room and takes in the situation at a glance. As she crosses the floor, Raymond bends down and says hurriedly, but in a concentrated sort of voice:

"By Heaven, Ermine, instead of teaching me to do Alan justice, you are teaching me to hate him as fast as one man can learn to hate another!"

Then before Ermine—startled and angry—can reply, he has risen and walked away.

"May I have a cup of coffee?" said Madelon, coming to the table. "There goes that horrid door-bell—Major Hastings, of course!—Ermine, how does my hair look? You are lovely, my dear—and what a color! You ought to get Raymond to talk to you whenever you are going out. He leaves such a charming bloom behind him."

CHAPTER IV.

UNDER THE STARLIGHT.

THE orchestra is pealing away at the fairy *scherso* of the overture to the "Midsummer-Night's Dream"—that pulse of joy which seems beating for all time—when Ermine and her escort file softly down the carpeted aisle of a crowded house, and are ushered to their seats among a decorously silent and well-bred audience. The color has not yet left the girl's face—only it has ebbed from the lily-white cheeks to concentrate, as it were, in the vivid carnation of the lips, and brighten the soft, full-orbed lustre of the eyes—so that she never looked more lovely than she does just now, seeming, to the fancy of more than one among those who level glance or opera-glass upon her, like some fair, delicate, passion-hued tropical flower.

"That girl's eyes always remind me of lotos-eating and floating down the Nile," said

one poetically-inclined gentleman in a low aside to his companion. "I suppose she and Erle are engaged; but I can't say I approve of the match. They are entirely too much alike. You've read 'Counterparts,' haven't you? People of the same temperament should never marry."

"Yes, I have read 'Counterparts,'" answered the companion, who chanced to be an unusually bright and clever girl; "but I don't agree with you in thinking that Mr. Erle and Miss St. Amand are of the same temperament. One cannot go by the simple fact that they both have dark eyes, you know. I will wager you any thing you please, that, if you ask somebody who understands such things, he or she will tell you that, if not counterparts, they are at least totally unlike."

"But how am I to find the somebody? Who does understand such things?"

"Indeed, I don't know. Temperament is a dead letter to most people, undoubtedly—but hush! You must not talk while this heavenly music is going on!"

It is heavenly indeed; and Ermine is rapt in a trance better by far than the lotos-eating of which her admirer has spoken—better than any thing else in the world save that divine beatitude coming from the pure love of the saints for God, of which this is no place to speak. Music—and of all music that which comes like a breath of fragrant incense from Mendelssohn's heart—has led her into a palace of calm delights where none can follow to molest her. The exquisite rise and fall of elfin melody, the very sound with which the bow first kisses the silver strings of the violin, stirs and soothes her at once. Other critical ears are there which listen and admire, as who could fail to admire that harmony which dies away "like the sweet south wind over a bed of violets," that perfect mechanism; that superb orchestration, which Mendelssohn alone perfected as an art; but, although they enjoy with intense appreciation, they are not borne away on the overflowing tide as Ermine is. She leans back quite silent, quite motionless, only her expanding eyes—which momentarily grow larger, fuller, and more lustrous—tell the story of her perfect beatitude. Who can say what dreams the music wakes, what visions which only a painter could conceive, or a poet describe, float through her brain on the golden tide of melody? Into the fragile girl-form God had seen fit to infuse the true artist-soul

—that soul which can enjoy more keenly, suffer more exquisitely, and live more wholly alone than any other which He, in His boundless, fathomless wisdom has ever created. Form, color, sound, each and all have a different meaning to her from what they have to the mass of mankind. She feels them, as she feels joy and sorrow, in superlative degree. Those who follow the short record of her short life will do well to bear this in mind—well to remember that to such natures do not apply the cast-iron rules which govern the world at large. Wholly, sometimes fatally different from all others, are they, and, seeing with sad eyes how cruelly their tender flesh is sometimes bruised by the sharp thorns of earth, we can only hope that compensation is given them by that serene Heaven whence pity as well as mercy oftentimes "droppeth like the gentle rain."

After the orchestral overture, the house broke into a tumult of that kid-glove applause which is so significant of what the newspapers call "a select and fashionable audience"—applause not meant for those soft, dying cadences, like fairy "horns of Elfland blowing," but for the graceful, girlish figure, the piquant girlish face which came before the foot-lights, the young singer—now world-renowned, then in the first flush of her youth—whom they had assembled to honor. When she began to sing—ah, well! the ravishing notes of that sweet voice dwell yet in the hearts of some who heard her in those long-vanished golden days, and it may be that the fascination of the past hangs over them. At all events, it boots little to repeat the verdict which the world has long since passed on the fair *cantatrice*, or praise the power which wrought her audience out of dreaming, critical calm, into a fever of enthusiasm on that by-gone night. Perhaps, for all their high-bred languor, the warm Southern current of their blood was ready enough to be stirred. Even unimpressible Raymond, who had yawned behind his hand at the overture, beat one palm upon another, as he said, "She is divine!"

"Yes, she is divine!" echoed Ermine in such a tone that he turned and looked curiously at her.

"One would think that you had been taking opium," he said. "I never saw the pupils of your eyes dilated as they are now! You look as if you were dreaming dreams, or seeing visions. Is it hashish or excitement?"

"The soul of the music has gone into my blood, as Tennyson says of the rose," answered she, smiling. "You are too cold—you don't know any thing about it. No wonder Mirabeau wanted to die to the sound of music. It would surely take the pang out of dying—if any thing could!"

"I thought painting was your hobby," said he, glancing over the programme, to see how much longer it would be before the concert ended.

"And isn't it all the same thing? Oh, if you could only tell what pictures I have seen—what exquisite, lucid, beautiful tints—since I have been sitting here. But then it is not heaven. It must end."

"Soon too, I hope," said he, devoutly.

But none of this concerns us very much, save in its effect on Ermine—which effect could scarcely be overrated. She might have been taking opium, hashish, any thing, from the expression of her face, the rapture of her sensations, when at last she rose to go. At another time she would not have felt the music so intensely; but the excitement of the evening had come too closely—too entirely without intermission—on the excitement of the day, on the long, feverish strain over the picture that had mastered her soul as the music mastered her mind. Now she was "deified," she trod in supreme exaltation on air; yet a wise physician looking at her would have foreboded terrible things from the reaction so pitilessly sure to come. Do you remember the wonderful description of an opium-trance which De Quincey gives in the "Suspiria?" Something like this was upon Ermine when, pouring out with the crowd, she found herself driving home, under a dome of deepest steel-blue, thickset with glittering stars. Sleep! How should she sleep with every pulse throbbing, every nerve quivering, every faculty of being strung to its utmost tension? Surging through her brain—dominating even the jubilant clash of the orchestra, and the pure tones of a silvery voice—she seemed to feel the mighty pulse of the sea, to hear the soft swish of the waves, to catch the liquid sound of that grand ocean-monotone which, old as Time itself, will only end when "Time shall be no more."

"Raymond," she said, as they alighted before the door of the Erle House, from the open windows of which laughter and merry voices floated out on the odorous night air, "I cannot go in and face all those people—the

noise and the light and the talk would drive me distracted. I am going down to the Battery to listen to the water. It may quiet me."

"Quiet you!" said Raymond, naturally much astonished. "My dear Ermine, what quiet do you need? You have not spoken three words since the concert ended."

"Ah, but you don't know what I have felt! How could you? I should not be surprised if you were sleepy; but I am confident I shall never sleep again."

"The best remedy for that will be to go to bed, I think."

"Go to bed! The mere idea of such a thing is abhorrent to me! I should simply lie and toss and toss and toss—until finally in despair I might go to my paints. Then wouldn't I look a ghost to-morrow! If you want to avert that calamity, you will not say a word while I run down to the Battery."

"You forget your mother—what will she say?"

"If I were Madelon, I should answer, *au diable* with mamma! As it is, I don't care what she says. I must go—I will go! Won't you be a good boy, and stay here till I come back? I pledge you my word, I sha'n't be gone ten minutes!"

"Stay here! I should think not, indeed! I will be a better boy, however, and go with you."

"Oh, no, no—I must go by myself. I want the silence, and the night, and the water. Raymond—please stay!"

"Don't be a—don't be foolish, Ermine!" said Raymond, almost roughly. "If you have a mind for romantic star-gazing, of course I will take you to the Battery; but as for letting you go alone—that is nonsense! Your mother placed you under my care, and, whether you want me or not, I shall accompany you."

"Then," said Ermine, with a slight stamp of her foot on the pavement, "I won't go!"

"Then," said Raymond, with a very perceptible accent of anger, "you will be doing a much more sensible thing than I could have expected of you."

"You are impertinent!" cried she, blazing out upon him.

"Pardon me," said he, biting his lips. "I had forgotten that women think they have a monopoly of incivility."

"Raymond, you know that is not true!"

"Whatever it is," said Raymond, coldly,

"I think this discussion had better be concluded in the house."

"I am not going into the house," retorted Ermine, haughtily. "I am going down to the Battery."

"Then I shall accompany you."

"You may follow me, if you choose—you certainly shall not accompany me."

A pause. Affairs being at a "dead-lock," both combatants stop for breath, and eye each other in wrathful silence. Just then a hand pushes back a curtain of the bay-window, and two figures—a man's and a woman's—stand relieved against the brilliant light behind. The woman is tall, slender, white-clad, with heavy dark plaits binding her head, and a scarlet flower burning among them: the man is also tall, well made, and handsome. Their voices float out distinctly on the still night air.

Says the gentleman, "Your Benedict and Beatrice have not arrived yet."

"No doubt they have stopped *en route* for a sociable quarrel," answered Madelon's silver, mocking voice. "Benedict and Beatrice have a weakness that way, you know."

"They certainly are an interesting pair of lovers," says the deeper tones, languidly. "But can you tell me—why is quarrelling always an incipient sign of love?"

"How should I know? I never quarrel, and I never was in love."

"You never quarrel!—you never were in love! My dear Mademoiselle Lautree, how shocking! If some one made you very angry, then, you might, perhaps, condescend to begin the first—and, having begun the first, you might glide into the second."

"Scarcely, I think."

"May I try?"

"To make me angry? Oh, certainly; but I think it right to give you warning that you will not be likely to repeat the offence."

"Why not?"

"Simply because I regard it as such a foolish and undignified amusement that I always drop the acquaintance of any one who has once led me into it."

"Thanks for the warning—I shall be careful, then. But why make such a rule?—why leave such a charming character as that of Beatrice entirely to your cousin?"

"Probably because I have no fancy for a Benedict."

"Would a Romeo suit you better?"

"To smother me in sweets? No. '*Aucun chemin de fleurs ne conduit à la gloire*'—and I take it that love and glory are much the same thing."

"Perhaps Mark Antony—"

"Ah, now you touch me more nearly—only, instead of losing a world for me, I should much prefer that he would gain one."

"With you for inspiration, who could fail to do so?"

"Now, that is very pretty, Major Hastings. I am sure you have nothing better in your quiver; so, on the principle of the best thing last, we will go back and report to Aunt Victorine that Ermine has not come."

The curtain fell again as they passed away. For a moment there was silence between the two eavesdroppers outside; then, in a hard sort of a voice, Ermine said:

"If you have no objection, I believe I should prefer for you to come with me. I have something to say to you."

"I am at your service," he answered, stiffly.

Side by side they walked away. Raymond did not offer his arm—probably because he knew that it would not be accepted—and neither of them spoke until they reached the Battery. Then, for the first time, Mr. Erle opened his lips.

"Give me your hand, Ermine—you will miss the step."

"No, thanks—I can see perfectly," replied Ermine, coldly. Having ascended the steps, she turned from him, and, walking some distance, stood leaning against the railing—a white shape, faintly outlined in the dusky gloom—gazing seaward, and listening to the waves beating softly at her feet.

What her thoughts were, Heaven only knows—perhaps she did not know herself—but the quiet of Nature stole over her like a subtle spell. Excited fancy, indignant anger, both died down; both seemed hushed into insignificance by the wonderful power that wrapped water and shore in their "tranced calm" of perfect rest. In a little while she might have been herself once more—the self that shrank morbidly from giving pain—if Raymond had only been wise enough to leave her alone.

But Raymond was no observer of that subtle flux and reflux of feeling, which—chiefly for the want of a better name—we call mood. Eminently practical himself, the sensi-

tive, artistic temperament was to him more than a marvel, worse than an enigma: it was sheer folly and imposition. As he stood silent, striving to read the riddle of that white, steadfast face, he registered a solemn vow that if this wayward, haughty girl were ever in his power, her romantic fancies should be very summarily dealt with, and her proud spirit be broken if it would not bend. At present, his predominant feeling with regard to her was one of intense irritation; and unfortunately he was not entirely successful in keeping this sentiment out of his voice, when he finally lost patience and spoke.

"Did you bring me here to gaze at you, while you gazed at the stars, Ermine? If there were a little more light, I might find the rôle interesting; but at present it is rather unsatisfactory."

Ermine started, and, frowning slightly under cover of the darkness, turned toward him. No one could have told how keenly this discordant voice jarred on her at the moment.

"No," she said, with more repellant coldness than he had ever seen in her before, "I did not bring you here to gaze at me. That would have been a very poor inducement indeed. I brought you to speak a few plain words—for I think it is time that we came to an explanation."

"Indeed!" said Raymond, a little startled, yet not ill pleased that his opportunity had come thus unexpectedly. "I am a plain man," he went on, "and therefore always ready for plain speaking. Let us have an explanation by all means; the sooner the better."

"Yes," said Ermine, "the sooner the better." Then she stopped a moment to collect herself, for in truth it was a bold step she was about to take, and one from which she would have shrunk if this tide of excitement had not been giving her a fictitious strength. "Since you are fond of plain speaking, Raymond," she continued, before he had time to do more than feel the pause, "I hope you will not be surprised if I speak to you very plainly—so plainly that I may perhaps shock you. You heard what Madelon and Major Hastings were saying. Of course, it is not necessary for me to tell you that such things are not true. Since they are not true—since they never will be true—you can imagine how very disagreeable they are to me. In fact, I will not tolerate them. Being a man, you must find some

way to let people understand that you and I are nothing to each other."

"Being a man, my dear Ermine, that is just what I cannot do," said Raymond, folding his arms and leaning against the railing so as to face her.

"Why not?" she asked, haughtily.

"Simply because it is not my place to do so; and simply also because we are a great deal to each other now, and I hope we may be more hereafter."

"You forget yourself," she said, growing in *hauteur* every moment. "You are nothing to me either now or hereafter; and certainly I will never be anything to you!"

In the clear starlight they could see the outline of each other's face, but all play of expression was of course veiled in obscurity. If Ermine had been able to watch the effect of her last words, she would have seen that Raymond paled in very marked degree, though his tone was as easy as it had been before, when he answered:

"I can prove that you are mistaken, Ermine. The man who loves you passionately, and wishes to devote his life to proving that love, cannot possibly be 'nothing' to you; while you are simply every thing to me."

"Raymond!" She was so young that for a moment she lost dignity in passion. "How dare you utter such words to me! You know they are not true. You know that, if you ever loved anybody besides yourself, you loved Margaret, and that she—poor girl—loves you still!"

"Margaret!" he repeated, and his face lightened, for he thought that, if she were jealous, his chance was better than even he had dared to hope. "Is it possible you think me such a fool as to love Margaret, Ermine? You might know me better. You might know that the beauty of a doll is not likely to attract me; and Margaret has little besides that."

"I am very well aware that she has not a fortune," said Ermine, bitterly.

The shaft was too keen not to strike home; for, let a man be ever so conscious of mercenary motives, a taunt concerning those motives is none the less hard to bear. The dark-red flush common to Raymond's olive complexion surged over it, as he answered, raising his figure a little, and slightly throwing back the chest across which his arms were folded:

"I see you think that woman may use insult as well as incivility with impunity, Ermine. However, it is well for us to know exactly on what ground we stand. Do you mean to imply that my object in addressing yourself is purely mercenary?"

The question was pointed and direct. Ermine's clear tones answered it without a shade of wavering or hesitation:

"Knowing no other object which you could possibly have, I am constrained to say that I do."

"Then," said he, haughtily, "justification is impossible to me, and, if it were ever so possible, would be beneath me. In this, as in many other things, I must bear as best I can the odium of your injustice."

"I am tired of that charge," said she, passionately. "Prove to me that I am unjust, and there is no one living who will sooner amend a wrong. You know that of me. Prove to me that I misjudge you; do not content yourself with mere assertion."

He bent forward and laid his hand down upon hers. Even in the starlight she seemed to feel the fire which gathered in the velvety depths of those dark eyes.

"If I prove your injustice to you, Ermine, will you let me name my own reward?"

She shrank back from him—shrank involuntarily, and in a manner which would have cut to the very heart a man who truly loved her.

"No," she said, "I can make no such promise, because, if I were ever so much mistaken, I can only beg your pardon for my unjust suspicions."

"Will you give me leave to convince you of the sincerity of my love, Ermine?"

"No, Raymond." She spoke more gently now, because in truth it was hard to believe that the earnestness quivering in his voice was all for her fortune. "It would be useless. I can never love you."

"Many women have said that who learned the lesson of love at last."

"Perhaps so—but I am not one of those women."

"Give me at least leave to try. You shall be free as air—bound to nothing. Only let me try."

"No," said she, quickly—almost sharply. "That would be next thing to an engagement, and people would have some right to talk of us, while you would have some right

to reproach me when I came to say, at last, what I say now—I do not love you, and I can never marry you."

"You had better consider that decision, Ermine."

"If I considered it forever, I should never change it," said she, relapsing into haughtiness.

"You are sure of that?"

"I am perfectly sure of it."

He shrugged his shoulders slightly, and again she seemed to feel the light of the dark eyes facing her own so steadily in the soft starlight.

"I am not a betting-man, Ermine," he said, quietly, "or I should be willing to lay heavy odds that you will live to regret those words—and to unsay them."

Why was it that at this moment a cold hand seemed to grasp Ermine's heart, and hold it in a vice? She was free as air; no human being had any power of compulsion over her—least of all, the man who stood beside her—yet Madelon's words seemed to come back on the soft flow of the water murmuring at her feet: "Sooner or later, you will have to do it—why not succumb at once?"

But the *serrement du cœur*, as the French call this contraction, did not last more than a second. Indignation rushed over her all the more strongly for the momentary terror which had preceded it; and her words, when she spoke, seemed to sting like a whip, in their contemptuous scorn.

"It is time for this conversation to end, since you think it worth your while to try to intimidate me. I think I have said all that I wished to say—that I have definitely made clear all that I desired to make clear. I brought you here to tell you, once for all, that the plans which you have been building will never be realized; and, having told you this, my conscience is clear."

"In other words," said Raymond, whose anger was so great that he could not restrain the expression of it, "you did me the honor to reject me before I had ever made a proposal."

"I knew you would not spare me that taunt," said Ermine, quietly. "I expected it, and it does not wound me in the least. Of its generosity I leave you to decide. Once more, however, I must request that it may be definitely understood by everybody concerned, that there is no truth in the rumors which

have been circulated—by whom, I know not.”
 “Perhaps I can enlighten you on that point.”

“I do not care to be enlightened,” she returned. “The subject has no interest for me. Now, if you please, we will go back. Madelon and Major Hastings may make some other pleasant and good-natured remarks on our absence if we remain longer.”

“One moment,” said he, laying his hand again on hers. “You have had your turn to speak—now I must be sufficiently discourteous to detain you until I have had mine. In the first place, I do not accept your decision as final. No—you need not start and draw yourself up. That should be made clear at once. I do not accept it. I shall endeavor to induce you to reconsider it, and *I think you will do so*. Next”—was it Ermine’s fancy that the voice took a slight tone of menace here?—“I wish you to understand that I know perfectly well who has been at work to prejudice you against me, and that I generally pay my debts—with interest.”

“Raymond,” the girl gasped—for the first time unnerved and thrown off her guard—“I do not understand you. I do not know who you mean. No one has ever spoken against you to me. On the contrary, everybody—there at home—is only too anxious for me to marry you. I—I do not know whom you mean.”

“You know perfectly well whom I mean,” he answered. “You know perfectly well that I mean that—that brother of mine, whose business in life has been to annoy and disgrace me. The day may come, perhaps, when he and I will settle scores, and then I shall not be likely to forget to-night.”

“Alan is capable of taking care of himself,” said Ermine, in that voice of indescribably mingled pride and tenderness which is so significant from a woman’s lips. “Your threats do not frighten me—they only prove how right I have been from first to last in my opinion of you. As for his having ever influenced me against you, I will not defend him from such a charge. Even while you make it, you do not believe it yourself.”

“In other words, you accuse me of deliberate falsehood. Go on, Ermine! Fill up the full measure of your injustice!”

“Raymond, I am tired,” she cried, with a sudden sound like a moan of pain. “Oh, why have you forced me to all this?—why

will you not be content when I tell you that I do not love you? I can say no more than that.”

“There is no effect without a cause,” said he, grimly. “You do not love me because, with all your haughty pride, you *do* love some one else—and I know only too well who that some one is.”

He uttered the last words with ill-concealed malice, and paused for an answer, but no answer came. Ermine turned from him, and took two or three steps away. Then in the starlight he saw her pause, and apparently kneel down against the railing. He waited a minute or two, but she remained so silent and so still that he went up to her, and, after his questions received no reply, laid his hand on the white shoulder that gleamed like polished marble through her muslin dress.

Then he saw that the reaction had come, and that she had quietly fainted, with her head pillowed on the railing, while the starlit waves rippled softly just below

CHAPTER V.

ERLES AND ERLES.

PERHAPS there is nothing more trying to the patience of a story-teller, than to be forced to pause in full tide of dramatic action to furnish some tiresome bit of explanation, description, or retrospection, which, ten to one, will bore the reader almost, if not quite, as much as it has already bored the writer, yet which the exigencies of the narrative render imperatively necessary. At such times one yearns for the liberty of a playwright, who leaves his characters to tell their own stories, and describe their own antecedents in that epigrammatic flow of language with which everybody is gifted on the stage—wasting neither time nor paper on the excessively “heavy” business of filling in and filling out, of narrating family circumstances, and recounting family genealogies, which falls with such a desponding weight of weariness on the unfortunate novelist. What must be, must be, however; and sometimes matters come to such a pass that a few plain words are absolutely essential to set them straight, to place the reader in that properly confidential position which a reader should always fill, and—as they expressively have it at sea—to “clear the decks for ac-

tion” in such a satisfactory manner that there shall hereafter be no troublesome interruptions to the smooth working of those different threads which go to form the story. Thus much by way of preface and apology for a few words which duty—not inclination—necessitates, concerning the Erles. Somebody says that the writer who goes back in his story for any purpose whatever, loses ground and goes back just that much in the estimation of his reader. If this rule hold good, I fear that I must prepare myself for an enormous retrograde movement in the minds of all who may glance through the pages of this sketch, for the necessity of which I have already spoken requires a backward leap of several years from the date on which my story opens.

To begin in rather irregular fashion, there once lived an English governess in the household of the Erles, a certain Miss North, who, being of a decided literary turn, and of decided scribbling propensities, kept a journal in which were recorded many things, curious and otherwise, concerning the family in which she resided. It occurs to me just now that I can lighten my own shoulders of a considerable burden by throwing the labor of describing the past circumstances of the Erles on the willing shoulders of Miss North. Her journal—which I chance to possess—is temptingly explicit on this point, and, as far as I can judge, moderately attractive in style, so I cut therefrom a few pages, paste them in my MS., and head them in approved romantic fashion.

Leaves from the Journal of a Governess.

April 1, 185—

(A date three years before the story.)

“To-day being Friday, I did not begin school, but I saw my two pupils, who are kept much more to their own domain of nursery and school-room than American children in general, tested their acquirements, settled the order of their studies, and gave them some lessons for Monday. They are very bright children, perfectly polished in manner, and quite well instructed in all the *bienséances* of social life, but as ignorant as little pigs of the most common rudiments of every-day learning. Reginald could not spell his own name, when I told him to do so, but shrugged his shoulders with the air of a Chesterfield as he said, ‘*Eh bien*, he would write his initials

as Cousin Raymond did!’ I strove to explain that, in case of emergency, it would be as well to know how to write it in full, and I think he at last admitted the force of my reasoning. I have taken quite a fancy to him, although he frankly informed me that he hated governesses, and wanted to go to school with other boys. ‘Suppose other boys asked you to spell your name?’ I said. And at that my young gentleman hung his head. As for Louise, she is a little fair-haired doll, a pocket edition of Margaret, with her head so full of toilets and *chiffons* that I despair of ever putting much else into it. She smoothed out her pink-silk skirt, in which she looks like a little ballet-dancer, and sat on my lap with her tiny-slipped feet crossed, her small hands demurely laid over one another, her large blue eyes on my face, and answered all my questions with an *aplomb* and ease of manner that would have done credit to a young lady of two seasons. She told me exactly what sort of ‘point’ it is that ‘mamma’ wears on her handkerchiefs, how many beautiful bracelets and rings Margaret has in her box on her toilet-table, and oh! what a lovely gold-colored silk came home for Ermine the other day, with flounces just so (showing on her own diminutive skirt), and trimming across the body this way. But I shall never forget her face when I asked her the result of adding two and two together.

“After I had disposed of the children, I sent for Ermine, who came, with a glow of pleasure that made her look fairly beautiful, and conducted me to her chamber.

“‘Mamma orders that all painting be done in the school-room,’ she said, ‘but I draw here as much as I please, and I want you to look over my portfolio. My teachers used to compliment me a good deal on these sketches, but I hope you will not hesitate to express your real opinion about them.’

“I assured her that I would certainly express my real opinion, whatever that opinion might be; and, with her mind apparently much relieved on this point, she placed me in a delightful easy-chair by an open window, whose lace curtains the soft southern breeze was fluttering to and fro, drew a low ottoman forward for herself, and laid a richly-embossed drawing-portfolio in my lap.

“To say that I was astonished, when I untied the strings and began to look over the different sketches, is a very faint way of ex-

pressing what I really felt. I am forty-five years old, and I have been tossed about the world ever since the day I entered a *pensionnat des demoiselles* at Paris; I have visited numberless schools of design, and seen the sketches of hands with whose works the world is now familiar; I have frequented exhibitions all my life, and taken the greatest interest in artists and their productions; but I had never seen any thing to equal the exquisite delicacy of finish and power of touch which were visible in these sketches of a girl barely seventeen, and almost entirely untaught. As I turned them over, I remembered the day when I, too, had hoped to do something with colors; I remembered the bitter death of that hope, and, for the first time in all my life, I felt resigned. My rough counsellors had been right. Talent was mine, never genius like this. One after another I placed aside the sheets of bristol-board, and still wonder grew upon me; for, whether it was an elaborate drawing where stroke was laid on stroke with the beauty of a line-engraving, or the merest outline unfilled by any detail, the same facile pencil showed itself, the same bold freedom of hand was there, the same marvellous power of conveying expression in a single line or dot, the same divine inspiration caught from Nature's self.

"I looked entirely through the portfolio before I said any thing; then, as I began to replace the sketches, I saw that Ermine was gazing very wistfully into my face.

"I see what you think," she said, in a very subdued voice. "Don't pain yourself by telling me, mademoiselle. You think I have been flattered and am very foolish—that is all."

"I looked down at her; the soft, dark eyes met mine very bravely, though a little sadly, and, after a while, I laid my hand on her shoulder.

"Child," I said, gravely, "I wish it were some voice of more authority than mine to tell you that God has given you one of His great talents, and that in this portfolio is that which, if you choose, can make you world-renowned."

"She started violently, and looked at me incredulously.

"Mademoiselle, you—you are jesting!"

"I shook my head.

"No, I am in earnest—do you think I would jest on such a subject?—as much in earnest as when I tell you that all question of teaching is at an end between us. We can

paint together, and I may be able to give you a few practical hints in the use of colors; but instruction I am unable to render."

"She looked at me half startled, almost awed.

"Mademoiselle, pardon me; I can scarcely believe any thing so strange! Is this really true?"

"I answered as gravely:

"It is certainly true."

"Then, to my surprise, she bowed her head down on her hands, and I saw quick tears gush through the slender fingers.

"Alan was right," she said, in a low voice.

"After this we adjourned to the school-room, to see what she could do with colors, and here I found that my instruction was very much needed. She knew very little indeed of painting, and even what she did know had evidently been taught by incompetent masters. Her aptitude and eagerness to learn, however, I had never seen surpassed. She threw herself, heart and soul, into the lesson, hung upon my every word, watched my manipulations of the brush with eyes that fairly glowed, and at last dashed off a bit of foreground that elicited my warmest praise.

"Is it really good?" she asked, still somewhat suspiciously.

"It is really wonderful, for a beginner. What a pity you are an heiress, my dear! You ought to be what Nature has made you, an artist."

"Oh, how I should like it!" she cried, eagerly. "I would rather be an art-student, and work for my daily bread, than the richest heiress in the world."

"Does it never strike you that a good many art-students would gladly exchange their lives for yours?"

"Sometimes," she answered, retreating a step back to look at a rock she was painting—"sometimes, and then I wish we could manage to do so. It would make me very happy, I am sure."

"And would you give up your beautiful island?"

"I would go to see it. I could enjoy it as much as if I owned the whole of it, you know."

"And your guardian?"

"Her face fell; it was almost as mobile and candid as a child's, that face!

"True. I would have to give up all my friends to the new Ermine. Then I don't think I could possibly exchange with her. I would not resign my dear guardian and Alan for all the paints in the world!"

"What a strange girl she was! Her dear guardian and Alan—not a mention of her mother or any member of the household in which she lived?"

"Yes," I said, laying an artful little trap, "the new Ermine would take all your friends as well as your fortune—she would be your mother's daughter, and you would have no more interest in her than a stranger."

"She was standing with her profile to me, and I thought I saw her lip quiver at the last word; but, if so, it was only for a second, and she answered, after a moment, quite as easily as before:

"I hope she would be fair, then, and like dresses and visiting, and—Raymond! Mamma would gain by the exchange, in that case. Poor mamma!"

"There was a sudden change of tone—a sudden giving way—a sudden pathos in the last two words, that took me completely by surprise. I looked up quickly; the girl's face was quivering all over as if with unshed tears, and she suddenly threw down her palette and brushes.

"That is enough for this morning, don't you think so, mademoiselle? It is nearly dinner-time, and I must change my dress, for look what paint-stains are all over it!"

"You must have some aprons," said I, looking at the pretty muslin which was ruined. "Don't forget!—long aprons that will cover the whole front of your dress. I will not give you another lesson until you have put one on."

"Very well," she answered, a little absently. "I will tell Lena to make me some at once. What are you going to do, mademoiselle?"

"I am going to clean this palette of yours," I answered, a little severely. "It should never be left in this condition."

"At which Mademoiselle St. Amand very forcibly took the palette out of my hand.

"Let it alone," she said. "I mean to send Lena to do it."

"Lena! But how should a maid know—"

"She knows," interrupted my companion, decisively. "Alan showed her how when he and I used to play at painting, and were both

of us too lazy to clean the palettes and brushes ourselves."

"But my dear Ermine, do you never do any thing for yourself?"

"The young West-Indian shrugged her graceful southern shoulders.

"*A qui bon*, mademoiselle? If I were poor and an artist, I should have to, you know—but I am not either poor or an artist, and that is an end of the matter!—Come, I want to wash my hands, and then—do you know what I mean to do?"

"No. How should I?"

"She bent down, laughing, and made the portentous announcement in a very dramatic whisper:

"I mean to show you Alan's sketches."

"Indeed!" said I, not quite so overwhelmed as she seemed to expect. "Then perhaps you will also enlighten my ignorance as to who Alan is. I have not heard yet, you know."

"Have you not? Well, then, you shall hear—all about him! Come, now."

"She ran lightly down-stairs before me—the school-room is in the third story—singing a gay French song as she went, and seeming to fill the whole house with the grace of her sunshiny presence. I could not help following her fondly with my eyes—it is such a pleasure to see a young girl who is still enough of a child to enjoy her youth. At the foot of the stairs she paused to wait for me, and we both went back to the pretty chamber we had left an hour before—the chamber that looked as pure and sweet as its occupant.

"I sat down in my former seat by the open, jasmine-hung window, while Ermine washed her paint-smeared hands, and, that duty over, crossed the floor to a little inlaid cabinet, unlocked it with a key that hung at her *châtelaine*, and gazed down at it as she might have gazed at the tiny altar arranged with such care in a curtained recess not far off—the altar with its ivory crucifix and holy-eyed Madonna, its withered palm-branch and flask of holy water, its silver lamp and all the other tender arrangements, which, strict Protestant though I was, had touched my heart strangely when I first entered the room.

"This is where I keep every thing connected with Alan," said she, glancing back at me. "I love dearly to look at them—but still, they make me sad. I cannot exactly tell why, but they do. Here is a little boat he

made me once—long ago. See! It still has its pennon and the name he gave it—*La belle Ermine*. Poor Alan! He was always so fond of the sea, but he expected to be a naval officer in those days. And here is his own portfolio, with his own sketches in it. Now, mademoiselle, prepare to be dazzled.

"I am bound to say that, if I had done so, I should have been grievously disappointed—for the important sketches were by no means extraordinary either in conception or execution. The ordinary efforts of clever talent, without one spark of genius—that was all. Better sketches certainly than are usually found in an amateur's portfolio; better, even, than those of many would-be artists, showing considerable knowledge, and great appreciation of art, showing also a certain spirit and vigor that made you like them better the longer you looked at them; but not worthy of being compared with those exquisite efforts of the girl who now looked up in my face, expecting praise as naturally as she had before expected censure. I praised honestly, but what I said did not seem to satisfy her.

"Mademoiselle, you speak so coldly!" she cried, half indignantly. "Surely you think them more than just 'well done.' You wasted so much praise on my foolish drawings, and now you have nothing to say that is worth saying about these sketches—Alan's sketches."

"Do you really think these are as good as yours, Ermine?" I asked, with a smile.

"As good as mine? Mademoiselle!"

"It was almost anger that spoke in the astonished tone, almost anger that mounted over cheek and brow in a sudden, burning blush.

"Because, if you do," I pursued, very coolly, "you are wonderfully mistaken—and either partiality blinds your judgment, or your skill is even more instinct than I thought it."

"For a moment I really did not know whether she would throw the portfolio at my impious head, or take me by the shoulders and put me out of the room, she faced me with such indignant eyes; but I held myself prepared for either event, and endeavored meanwhile to look as quiet as possible, so the storm blew over in words.

"Mademoiselle, I did not think you would have treated me so. I would never, never have shown you Alan's drawings, if I had not thought you would appreciate them—if I had ever suspected that you would have said such cruel things! They are cruel, and—and fool-

ish, too. I draw like Alan? I do any thing like this foreshortening, or that sea, or those figures? Why, it is ridiculous! I could not do it if I were to try forever!"

"Very well," said I, with a little sigh of resignation, "we won't argue the point. You'll allow me, however, to retain my own opinion, I hope. It is all a matter of taste, you know—most things are, in this world. So!—is it possible?"

"What is the matter?" she asked, for I had suddenly paused, with my eyes fixed on the portfolio in great surprise.

"I pointed to the inside, where, in a large, flowing, rather boyish hand, was written several times over the name of 'Alan Erle,' and a date eleven years before.

"Yes," she said, "the portfolio was his when he was a boy, but the sketches have been drawn at various times since. A good many are foreign, you see—all those South-American scenes, for instance—and that picture of the Adventure he drew for me the last time he was at home."

"I was noticing the name," I said. "I had no idea he was—"

"Papa's nephew? Had you not? But he is—and Raymond's brother, too."

"I suppose I looked astonished, for she went on quickly:

"They are only half-brothers, and I sometimes think that they must be even less than that—they are so totally unlike. Raymond is so worldly, so mercenary, so cold-hearted and narrow-minded, while Alan is—well he is my *preux chevalier* whose praises I never grow weary of sounding!"

"But he is no relation of yours," said I, a little suspiciously, as befitted forty-five and my preceptress responsibility.

"Yet I could not help feeling a little ashamed when the soft, dark eyes lifted themselves to my face, candid and pure as the first mother's before the fall.

"I have always thought that there are some ties stronger than blood, mademoiselle—and that gratitude is chief among them. I have never had but one friend since I left my dear island, and Alan is that one. I shall never forget the first time I saw him. I was a poor little wretched, homesick creature, with the heaviest head and the sorest heart that ever a child carried about, to its own discomfort and the annoyance of other people. I had done nothing but fret and wail and weep from the

hour I went on shipboard to the hour I landed, and from the hour I landed to the hour I first saw Alan's face. I had worn out everybody's sympathy, and worried everybody to death. I had even so far exasperated mamma that she forbade my appearing in her presence "until I could behave myself properly." I was as much an object of disgust to Margaret as she was an object of detestation to me. I hated Mr. Erle, I hated the city, the house, the servants, every thing about me, I even fairly loathed the daylight; and I was lying on a trundle-bed in the nursery, sobbing my very heart out, and wishing I could commit suicide—you need not smile, mademoiselle, for I remember distinctly that I was wondering how I could manage to do it—when the door opened, and it seemed to me an angel stood there. But it was only Alan—dear old Alan, in whom there was not much of the angel! He had been writing in the school-room, and heard my sobs. To this day I remember the expression of his face—its supreme pity and gentleness, though he was only a boy, and a very rough boy, of sixteen. To this day I hear his voice as he said, "Poor child!"—and took me and all my misery up in his arms. From that hour I loved him, and from that hour I have been resigned to my life of exile. Mademoiselle, do you wonder at it?"

"I smiled. It was so like an intense Southern nature to magnify such a simple act into such large proportions!

"At the loving, or the resignation—which, Ermine?"

"The loving," said she, frankly. "Ah! if you only knew how good and true and tender he has always been to me! And they try to make me ashamed of him! Ashamed of him! My brave Alan! Why, I honor him more, as the simple captain of the Adventure, than if he were an admiral of a hundred navies!"

"I contented myself with simply asking, 'Why?'"

"Then the impulsive tongue was loosed, and she told me a very touching story in a few words:

"Fifteen years ago, by far the largest and wealthiest business-house in Charleston—one which dealt in all commercial enterprises with a bolder spirit and on a surer basis than any other—was that of Erle Brothers. They were, it seems, for a time, the veritable money-kings

not only of Charleston itself, but of the whole rich country which was, in a trading sense, tributary to it. Their ships were on every sea, their indorsement was received as gold in every mart of commerce, their enterprise and prosperity were building up the city as well as their own fortunes, when there came a year to be long remembered, of monetary panic and crash—a time when all credit failed, when gloom overspread the whole country, when disaster and ruin were so common that men merely shrugged their shoulders over a new failure. Yet, even at such a time as this, the tidings echoed like a thunder-bolt that the house of Erle Brothers was bankrupt! It was only the old story, with the old tragic ending—for the elder brother, unable to face his darkened life or shattered fortunes, put a pistol to his head and ended both! The younger acted more sensibly. Thanks to a very handsome face and a very beguiling tongue, he married a charming and wealthy West-Indian widow whom he met while temporarily rusticated in those lovely islands. Then, with his wife's fortune, he came back to Charleston, and resumed the old business on a much smaller scale. The dead brother's oldest son brought so much untiring energy and skill to the cause of reestablishing the fallen credit of the house, that he was rewarded with the position of junior partner; and, from that day to the present, this second firm has been steadily advancing in the public confidence, until there are now few more influential houses in the city. But, meanwhile, there was another son—this Alan—who, from his boyhood, had loved the sea as only sailors of Nature's own making ever do love it, who was his father's pride and delight, and who, while Raymond was destined to the gloomy tread-mill of the counting-house, had always been promised his heart's desire—a naval appointment. He received it at last, and had already made his first cruise, as a midshipman, when the awful blow came. It was the first news to greet him when he reached his native shore—the first item that met his eye in the first newspaper carelessly thrust into his hand—the one topic upon every tongue. Even the very newsboys cried in his ear, 'Failure of Erle Brothers! Suicide of the senior partner!' It was good for the poor boy that he had a mother—else the blue water was very close at hand, and youth is little able to bear those two spectres that daunt the oldest and the hardest

—Disgrace and Mortal Agony. He came home, however—to be congratulated that the crash left his prospects comparatively unhurt. His mother—the father's second wife—had been moderately independent, and, with a thoughtfulness very rare among American men, her husband had insisted that all her fortune should be settled on herself. This was safe, this would support her in case, and also give Alan an independence of the world; but the two only looked in each other's eyes, and saw the same desire in each. 'My son, it is for your father's good name!' the mother said. 'Give it up, mother,' said the boy. 'I will work for you.' So, despite the angry remonstrances of the elder brother, the fortune was resigned to the creditors of the firm, Mrs. Erle opened a school, and Alan gave up his profession and ambition forever!

"For, you see, he could not continue in the navy," said Ermine, who had warmed with her story until her eyes were glowing with enthusiasm. 'He had to make money—for he was determined his mother should not drudge at school-teaching longer than he could help—and the navy is the last place in the world for that, you know; so he entered the merchant-service. Nobody, except his mother, encouraged him in the step—everybody thought it was a dreadful thing for a gentleman's son to do—Raymond fairly raged against it—but Alan held firm. "I was born for a sailor," he said; "I shall never be content anywhere but on the sea, and I can be content there in any capacity. When Nature makes a man one thing, he never does any good by going against the grain and becoming another. I shall not cease to be a gentleman because I enter an honest profession, nor lose any regard that is worth keeping." And he carried out his purpose—his two purposes. He became a seaman, and he has risen so steadily that, although he is only twenty-six now, he is captain of one of the finest vessels that leaves the port of Charleston. He supports his mother so well that she gave up her school long ago, and lives in one of the most charming little houses in the world, where I will take you to see her some day, for I love her dearly, and she looks just like a fairy godmother!'

"Of course I said I should like it very much, but, staid governess as I am, I believe Ermine's enthusiasm has so far infected me that I feel more inclined to see her wonderful

hero—the naval officer turned sea-captain—than even the mother for whom he made his sacrifice."

This is as much of Miss North's journal as concerns us at present. She has told—amply at least—the story of the Erles; and it is to be hoped that her conclusion may find some faint echo in the minds of all readers, gentle or otherwise; for the "naval-officer turned sea-captain," whom she desired to see (and whom, by-the-way, she *did* see, and liked extremely), will soon make his bow before the foot-lights.

CHAPTER VI.

"SEE, THE CONQUERING HERO COMES!"

"Well, my dear, how do you feel this morning?" asked Madelon, as she entered her cousin's chamber, somewhere about 10 A. M., on the day after the concert. "I should have been in to see you before, but Lena reported that you were asleep, and I thought it a pity to disturb you. One should be allowed to sleep after achieving such a fainting-fit and such a sensation as you did last night. *Ma foi!* why do you look so much astonished? Had you forgotten all about it?"

"No, indeed. I remember the fainting perfectly," said Ermine, ruefully. She presented a very woe-begone and dishevelled appearance just then as she lay among the white draperies of the bed, her head on one pillow, and her hair tossed over another, dark circles under her languid eyes, her lips so pale that they looked as if the blood had been drained out of them, her whole system unstrung, and apparently passive under the terrible reaction, which is the Nemesis following close upon every excitement of the nervous temperament. "I remember the fainting perfectly," she continued. "It was very foolish of me, but I could not help it; it came on me too suddenly. But I don't remember any sensation which I caused. I thought you were all taking it very quietly, when I came to myself."

"Oh, then I suppose we were," said Madelon, sitting down on the side of the bed, and beginning to sniff at a *flacon* of cologne which had fallen from the slender hands that looked too nerveless to clasp even a bottle. "But Mr. Saxton, and Major Hastings, and the Dunwardins (who had spent the evening playing

whist with Aunt Victorine and Mr. Erle), were all here when Raymond entered bearing the insensible form of Mademoiselle St. Amand in his arms! Pray, can you imagine *what* a sensation there was in that case!"

"Madelon, how have you the heart to treat me so! You—you know you are only jesting. It is not true."

"Jesting! Good Heavens, Ermine, can't you tell jest from earnest? On my honor as a Christian, it is every word true."

"Those people were really here?"

"Certainly they were—every one of them. Of course it is a pity" (philosophically), "for the Dunwardins are the greatest gossips in Charleston, and everybody will hear of it before noon to-day."

Ermine sat up in bed, pushing back her hair with both hands, and looking so piteous that she might have moved even her cousin's compassion.

"O Madelon!" (gasping as if for breath), "don't tell me that Raymond took me in there—straight in there where they all were?"

"Yes, he did," said Madelon, decidedly. "It would be a cruel kindness to keep the truth from you, because you will be obliged to hear it as soon as you go out. Instead of calling Aunt Victorine to see about you, he brought you straight into the sitting-room; and I think, for my part" (waxing a little warm), "that it was very ungentlemanly conduct."

"It was infamous conduct," cried Ermine, sinking back upon her pillows in a wild passion of tears, "and I will never, never, never forgive him for it as long as I live!"

Madelon made no answer. In fact, the tears did not give her much opportunity for reply. She quietly waited for them to subside, sniffing meanwhile, with meditative calmness, at the cologne, and sprinkling herself with a fragrant shower now and then.

"Don't cry so, Ermine," she said at last, a little sharply. "What on earth is the good of it? You'll only spoil your eyes, and make your head ache. I can tell you" (significantly), "you will be sorry if you do. Of course, it was outrageous in Raymond; or would have been outrageous, if matters had not been settled. I take it for granted, however, that you are engaged to him."

"You know better than that," cried Ermine, with a smothered, wrathful sob. "You know I would die first!"

"*Mon Dieu!*" (with surprise which, if simulated, was the perfection of art), "do you mean to say you are *not* engaged to him? Well, my dear, I congratulate you upon being the most imprudent and the most inconsistent woman in Charleston. If I had a fancy to compromise myself, and to be town-talk, I think I should select a man whom I liked, and not one whom I professed to hate."

"Profess to hate! I don't know what you mean by that, Madelon. You know that I do hate him!"

"I know it, do I?" said Madelon, sarcastically. "Well, really you must excuse me if I differ with you on that point. I know you say you hate him; but actions speak so much louder than words, that incredulity is pardonable."

"What actions of mine have ever spoken any thing but detestation for him?" demanded Ermine, turning round with eyes which began to blaze through their tears.

"Did your actions last night speak very much detestation? Instead of coming home from the concert, didn't you dismiss the carriage and walk down to the Battery?—didn't you stay there for an hour or two?—and didn't you finally make your entrance in Mr. Erle's arms?"

"Don't you believe that, if I had known any thing about it, I would have done any thing before he should have touched me?"

"I am not speaking of possibilities," said Madelon, coldly. "I was simply mentioning facts."

"Well, I can mention a fact also," said Ermine, suddenly changing to ominous calm. "You wonder why I didn't come straight home from the concert. I will tell you. The music excited me very much—as music always does—and when we reached here, and I saw how many people were assembled, I told Raymond"—the very pronunciation of his name cost her an effort—"that I wanted to run down to the Battery and quiet myself with the sound of the water. He refused to let me go alone, and I refused to allow him to accompany me, so the matter would probably have ended by my coming in, if you had not gone to the window just then with Major Hastings. You remember what you said"—her eyes brightened and expanded until even Madelon's lids sank beneath their glow—"I was not more than a stone's-throw from you, and of course I heard it all. It surprised me, for I could not

have imagined that you would so easily reconcile it to your conscience to give currency to a report which you knew to be false. However, that does not matter. Another disappointment, more or less, is of small importance. I was going to say that what I heard made me determine to come to an explanation with Raymond. I requested him to accompany me to the Battery, and I told him explicitly that these things must end, for that nothing on earth should ever induce me to marry him."

"In other words, you were kind enough to reject him before he had ever offered himself."

"He said that too; and it hurt me no more from his lips than it does from yours."

"And have you any idea what will be said of you—especially after last night?"

"I am past caring what is said of me by any gossiping tongues whatever."

"I can assure you, however, that Aunt Victorine will care."

"She will have no right to do so, since it is her own fault."

"I think you will be sorry for all this one day, Ermine."

"Not half so sorry as you will be for lending yourself to such a scheme, Madelon."

"The odds are too unequal," said Madelon. "You will be forced to come to terms."

Ermine clinched her hands together, and, pale as she had been before, grew still more pale with resolution, not with fear.

"You will see," she said.

"Yes, I will see," the other rejoined. "I think it right to tell you one thing, however: I have made my last effort in your behalf, and given you my last warning. I am a soldier of fortune, as you well know: I have my own way to make in the world, by my own wits, and I cannot afford to let sentiment or feeling hold my hands. Heretofore I have tried to serve you—honestly tried, according to the best judgment I could form, little as you may think it. Hereafter, I shall serve myself. If my interest clashes with yours, I give you fair warning that I shall not surrender an inch."

"I can credit that, Madelon," said Ermine, coldly. "I only do not understand why you should think it necessary to give such a warning."

"Simply because I wish the point made clear. I owe the world nothing," said the girl, setting her teeth, "and I am determined to

take all that I can gain from it, by cunning or by force."

"Why not follow Margaret's example?" asked Ermine, with bitter weariness. "Why not sell yourself to the highest bidder?"

"Nobody has ever bid high enough," answered Madelon, throwing her head back with the air of a De Rohan. "Poor as I am, I have that which many a millionnaire lacks, the knowledge how to spend wealth. Oh, if I were rich"—clasping her hands with that dramatic fervor which comes by nature to all of French blood—"juste Ciel! what a *grande dame* I could be!"

"What a pitiful ambition!" said Ermine's face—though not her lips. Then she added aloud: "I wonder you don't consider what a sinful thing such an inordinate desire for wealth is; and to what consequences it may lead. It seems to me that it is at the bottom of nearly every crime of earth since our Lord Himself was betrayed for thirty pieces of silver."

"Why don't you preach to Margaret?" asked Madelon, with her trenchant sneer. "She practises, while I only theorize."

"Margaret has not a tenth part of your sense, Madelon, and therefore she is not a tenth part as accountable. Besides" (with a sigh), "she is only making a *mariage de convenance*, as hundreds of other women do. No doubt she will be happy enough. She will have laces and jewels in abundance, and they constitute happiness for her. But you—you are different."

"I hope so indeed," said Madelon, shrugging her shoulders. "By-the-by, I must not forget that I have two items of news for you. First, that Mr. Saxton has been formally accepted."

"I am not surprised at that," said Ermine—and a vision of Raymond's face seemed to rise before her as she had seen it behind Margaret's chair the night before.

"Secondly, that Captain Eric, of the good ship *Adventure*, has delighted his loving relations by an appearance this morning."

Ermine started, and a flash of rapture came over her face; bathing every feature in such a flood of radiance that, for a moment, she looked fairly transfigured.

"Alan!" she cried, eagerly. "O Madelon, has Alan come?"

"Do you suppose I would be likely to tell you so, if he had not?"

"And is he *here*—down-stairs?"

"I left him at the breakfast-table when I came up."

"And why did you not tell me before? To think that I should have stayed here all this while, and my dear boy down-stairs! Ring the bell for Lena, please, Madelon—I must get up at once."

"And make yourself sick."

"Who cares? But I shall not; Alan is better for me than any tonic. Oh, why don't Lena come? I am so afraid he will go somewhere before I can get down!"

"I don't think there is the least fear of that; but I can go and tell him that you *will* be down, if you like."

"Yes, thanks, I should like it, if you don't mind. Tell him he has made me well—or no! Don't tell him that, because he will ask what is the matter with me, and I would rather he did not hear about my folly last night."

"You may set your mind at rest on that score," said Madelon, coolly. "I left Aunt Victorine giving him a minute account of it when I came up."

"O Madelon! how could she?"

"Nonsense, Ermine! Could she know by intuition that you did not want Captain Eric to hear of your flirtation with his brother?"

"Madelon, how dare you say such a thing? I never flirted with anybody—much less with Raymond—in my life."

"Then I have an amazingly little idea of what flirtation is! However, we won't come to blows; our 'little hands were never made,' etc. And, fortunately, here comes Lena to keep the peace. *Au revoir*."

Enter Lena, and exit Mademoiselle Lautrec, singing as she went. Ermine heard her clear voice lilting "*Chagrin d'Amour*" all the way down-stairs; and, as she went to her toilet, she could not help wondering how much heart her brilliant cousin really possessed. It was a question which everybody who knew Madelon was sooner or later forced to ask, and which nobody had ever yet been able to answer to his or her satisfaction.

Ermine, as a general rule, was remarkably dilatory about dressing, but on the present occasion she went to the business with such a rush of energy (energy which might have astonished Lena, if that astute personage had not known the cause of it perfectly well), that her toilet was soon an accomplished fact, every garment donned, every ribbon tied, every hair in its place, if hairs so wandering could

possibly be said to have a place. She gave one last glance in the mirror when all was completed, saw the graceful figure, clad in misty, transparent white, the sweet, low-browed face, the delicate, sensitive lips, the wonderful eyes, crossed with a shade of languor through all their happiness, and, giving one last touch to the coral-tinted ribbon tied in a careless knot at her throat, went down.

What a day it was which came with fragrant kisses to her languid brow, as she crossed the lovely, marble-paved hall, the wide-open doors of which let in bounteously the glory outside! The smile of God seemed to rest upon our insignificant planet, making it for a time almost as fair as heaven's self. It was a triple bridal of earth and sea and sky, which was taking place out where the shining waves were coming so gently to kiss the blooming land; and far, far in the lucid depths of sky—

"Where, through a sapphire sea, the sun
Sailed like a golden galleon!"—

straight on to that high noontide splendor, when men, perforce, must veil their faces from the transcending beams of his majesty, and only Nature can still look bravely upward, with "all her quaint, enamelled eyes"—sending the while sweet odors, like holy prayers, on every breath of the capricious south wind, which kissed the "plumy palms" of the tropics, before it came to roll the sparkling waves upon their golden sand, and die like a god on a royal couch of perfumed roses.

These same roses were sending their messages into the sitting-room—filling every nook and corner with a fragrance like no other fragrance of earth—when Ermine entered. How many people were in the room she did not know. On crossing the threshold she saw but one face, a bronzed, handsome, thorough-bred face, with limpid eyes, half-blue, half-green, as if they had caught their tint from the sea on which they loved to gaze, smiling a welcome to her.

"Alan! Alan!—I am so glad to see you again!" was all she could say, as she felt the clasp of those kind hands which embodied almost the whole of tenderness that her life had known.

"Glad to see me! I wonder if any words can make you understand how I have wearied for a sight of you—wearied until I knew what it was to be homesick even on the blue water!"

said the voice, for the sound of which her soul had thirsted even as men, fainting in a desert, thirst for a draught of cool water. "My pet! my pet! what have they been doing to you, that you look so pale?"

"I am always pale," said Ermine, gazing up at him with the air of one who, having entered some long-desired haven of repose, has neither wish nor care left.

"Pale! Do you think I don't know that? You were always a lily, but such a pure and stately lily. Now you droop your white petals wearily."

"Do I, Alan?"

"Yes, you do. And your eyes—they are happy but so languid—as if you were tired in spirit. Come here, and let me look at you. Unless I have lost all my skill, I can soon tell what is the matter with you."

"Nothing is the matter with me now I have seen you," said Ermine with a childish truthfulness. She was a woman with Raymond—a woman who could hold her own against any odds. But with Alan she was still as much a child—as purely and simply at her case—as on that by-gone day when he had taken her and all her misery into his arms. As he led her across the floor to the full light of one of those windows through which the sweet breath of the roses came, she noticed for the first time that by some rare, happy chance, the room was empty of all save they two. Where all the rest were—her mother, Margaret, Madelon—she did not pause to wonder. It was enough that Fate for once had been so kind. She sank with a deep sigh of satisfaction into the easy-chair which Alan drew forward, and folding her hands in her lap—they were absurdly small, those hands—glanced up at him with an expression of perfect beatitude.

"Sit down there," she said, pointing to a low chair in front of her. "I want to look at you, and I cannot do so unless you are on a level with me. Now, that is it. Alan" (gazing at him critically after he had obeyed), "you—are—browner than you were!"

"Then we are quits, since you are whiter than you were," replied Alan, who had managed to accommodate himself not very ungracefully in the small chair aforesaid, and looked as well contented with his quarters as Ermine did with hers.

"How often must I tell you that my paleness is of Nature?" said she. "If you talk of it much more, I will buy or borrow

some rouge and use it for your especial benefit."

"That would be to paint the lily, indeed. No" (shaking his head), "I see how it is: they have been bullying you among them all, while I was away."

"No, Alan; on my honor, no."

"On your honor, Minnikin?"

"Yes, on my honor. Ah, you don't know me" (shaking her head in turn), "I have such a bad temper that nobody could bully me!"

"Who ought to know you better than I? Didn't I have the onerous duty of bringing you up? Don't try to abuse yourself to me, for it is perfectly unnecessary, I assure you. I know all the good, and all the bad, of you; and, O child, child, how little there is of the latter!"

"I am glad you think so, Alan, but indeed I am very wicked."

"Are you?" (with a half-amused, half-sad sigh), "then God knows I wish I was wicked, too. Perhaps those dear little white hands might come and teach me of their own accord."

The dear little white hands in question came, at this, and smoothed back the short, thick curls—not exactly gold, nor yet exactly brown, but something between the two—from the broad, untanned brow which lay under them like a snow-drift.

"Alan," said the gentle voice, soft and sweet as Cordelia's own, "I hope my hands will wither away, if ever they become too good to touch you—you, who alone have kept my heart from withering all these years."

"And do you know what you have kept mine, Ermine?"

"A little warm, I trust; a little conscious of prayers and blessings following you when you were tossing about on the ocean."

"A little pure, too," said the young man, sinking his voice slightly. "I am sinful enough, God knows—it is hard to live a man's life in the world and not to be—but I might have been infinitely worse had it not been for you, Ermine, you stainless lily, praying for me (God bless you!) far away. Often your sweet eyes have risen and shamed away some devil's thought from my soul. Often your sweet voice has come to still some tempest, such as you cannot even dream of, in my heart. I wonder, sometimes, what you have ever found worth caring for, worth praying for, in a great, rough fellow like myself."

"What did you find worth caring for in the fretful, tiresome child whom you saw and comforted long ago?"

"I found the warmest heart and the sweetest nature in all the world," said he, taking the tiny, lissome hands and brushing them with his heavily-mustached lips. "How you cried yourself to sleep in my arms that day! I shall never forget your poor, little, pale, tear-drenched face, with its great, dark, tired eyes! Do you know that something in your appearance when you came into the room a while ago recalled that homesick child to me, and I felt strongly inclined—foolish enough, wasn't it?—to comfort you again as I comforted you then?"

For the first time in her life Ermine felt that she was blushing under Alan's gaze and Alan's words. She began to wish that she was not facing that flood of relentless light from the window, as she felt the roseate flush coming like a wave into her alabaster cheeks.

"Your presence is comfort enough," she said, meeting the limpid eyes with her soft, dark orbs. "You don't know how uneasy I have been about you. Your letters said you would probably be here the first of May, and I haunted the Battery daily, until yesterday mamma forbade it."

"And so you concluded to stay in bed today! Was that the reason I was so grievously disappointed when I came in and did not find you at the breakfast-table?"

"No," said Ermine, appreciating this artful trap as it deserved. "I stayed in bed because I was not well."

"And why were you not well? Aunt Victorine told me that you fainted last night. What made you faint?"

"The reaction from excitement, I suppose. I painted hard all day, and heard some glorious music at night. Between the two I was color-mad and sound-drunk. So, when the excitement was spent, I made a fool of myself and fainted."

"And Raymond—confound him!—brought you home."

"Yes, Raymond brought me home."

Silence for a while. Captain Erle gnawed his mustache, and looked out of the window, while Ermine let her loving gaze linger on him.

"They will kill you among them," the former said, at last, in a tone of exasperation. "From your mother down, they know nothing about you, and every thing they do is harm

instead of good. The life you are leading here is written in your pale face and your weary eyes. Ermine" (with sudden energy), "you need not deny it, they have been trying to make you do something. Was it" (with rising wrath) "to marry Raymond?"

"Nobody has been trying to make me do any thing," said Ermine, astonished at the astuteness of this marine gentleman. "You forget that I have my dear guardian to whom I could apply, if any thing of the kind were attempted. As for Raymond" (indignantly), "I detest him."

"Do you really, Ermine?"

"How can you ask me such a question, Alan? You know I do."

"Then" (with a deep breath) "thank God for that load gone! Ermine, my pet, do you know that when I came in this morning they all hinted, if they did not assert, that you were engaged to him?"

"But you did not believe it, Alan?"

"Not I, until I saw you. But when you came in, like a pale little statue stepped from a niche in some cathedral, I thought they might have bullied you into measures. But you are all right, and I am as happy as an admiral!"

"Foolish boy," but her smile was a caress; "we have been having a liberal allowance of 'treasons, stratagems, and spoils,' however. Do you know that Margaret is engaged?"

"And Madelon, too, I hope. There's inflammable material in that girl, and the sooner she is safely tied in the halter of matrimony the better. *A propos* of halters, Ermine, would you like to go to ride this afternoon?"

"Oh, of all things, if I can—if mamma will let me!"

"We'll make her let you," said he, gayly. "A sailor on land is like a school-boy at home for the holidays—a privileged character, whom it is everybody's duty to humor and amuse. Here comes Aunt Victorine. I will ask her."

Mrs. Erle entered at the moment, and Ermine at once understood why this *tête-à-tête* had been permitted. Astonishment and vexation were plainly legible on the lady's face, as she caught sight of that confidential scene at the window: she had evidently fancied her daughter safe in her chamber and in bed.

"You here, Ermine!" she said. "I was just on my way to your room to forbid your exerting yourself by getting up to-day. I should have been there before, but I had to

settle the new governess in her duties with Regy and Louise." (After the departure of Miss North, Mrs. Erle had eschewed a resident governess and employed day-teachers, who, as a general rule, were changed every two or three weeks.) "You look wretchedly," she went on. "I must insist on your going back to your room and lying down, while I send for Dr. Cuthbert."

"Dr. Cuthbert does me no good, mamma," said Ermine, wearily. "Please let me stay. I feel so much better down here than I did upstairs."

"You are excited again," said Mrs. Erle, feeling her pulse. "The next thing will be another fainting-fit. I must insist on your resting to-day, even if you don't see Dr. Cuthbert."

"Let me prescribe for her," said Captain Erle, who had risen, and stood tall and stately by the window. "Let her go to ride this afternoon, and I will wager any thing that we hear no more of fainting-fits."

Ermine looked imploringly into her mother's face, but a flint could not have been harder than that pleasant, gracious countenance.

"Impossible!" she said. "It would be the most perfect folly, and, in her present weak state, might bring on a serious illness. Ermine, I insist on your going to your room."

"Very well, mamma," said Ermine, rising; "if you insist, I can go. But it is very useless.—Good-by, Alan!"

"Good-by, St. Agnes," said Alan, smiling, as he clasped the soft hand extended to him.

The clasp, the smile, went up-stairs with the poor little, lamb-like martyr, and sweetened her exile more than it is possible for words to tell. After all, what did any thing else matter? Alan had come!

CHAPTER VII.

STRATAGEMS AND SPOILS.

ERMINE discovered, before long, however, that there were a few things which still mattered to the degree of discomfort—even though Alan *had* come home. Having been remanded to her chamber, and feeling too happy and lazy even to paint, she subsided into a chair before the open window, and, leaning her arms on the broad sill, bathed

herself in the glory and beauty of the day like a very sun-flower. Looking out on the green, happy earth, the wide, laughing water, or far up into the blue, intensely blue sky, arching over all things like the dome of some vast cathedral, it was easy to be happy even without any tangible cause; easy to lose one's self in vague, sweet dreams, and vaguer, sweeter fancies; easy to forget that there were such things as sin and suffering on earth, that, under this hyacinthine sky, hearts were breaking, sobs were uttered, curses breathed, death-gasps given, souls, alike of sinners and of saints, going forth on the wings of every idle, golden minute, to face the justice of Him who, mid all the mad carnival of human misery, insanity, and crime, is still "patient because eternal." On many a changeless, dead face throughout the smiling land, these quivering sunbeams fell, yet they brought none the less of life-giving warmth in their touch when they glanced athwart the happy face, pillowed on a pair of soft, white arms, in this open window. O lovely and most loving face! It was well, indeed, that the world had little to do with your short life, that its kiss was never laid on your sweet lips, or weighed down earthward the lids of your pathetic eyes. It was truly well, for, among all those glorious blessings and tender promises which we call "the beatitudes," what so glorious, what so full of tenderness as the one which tells us that "blessed are the clean of heart: *for they shall see God!*"

But golden as Ermine's day-dream was, it did not remain uninterrupted. In such trances, we literally "count time by heart-throbs, not by moments," so she had no means of telling what exact number of seconds elapsed from the time she sank into her chair, to the time when a knock sounded on the door. "Come in," she said, lazily, and, lifting her face, looked round as the door opened. To her surprise, Margaret stood on the threshold.

"I suppose I may come in," said the latter, hesitating a moment under her step-sister's involuntary glance of surprise. "I thought you were in bed, Ermine."

Oh, certainly, come in," said Ermine, rising and drawing forward a chair. "No: I am not in bed—I dressed to go down and see Alan, but mamma insisted on my coming back to my room, though" (with a sigh) "I am sure it was very unnecessary. It is kind of

you to come and see me, Margaret. Sit down."

Margaret sat down—a billowy mass of blue drapery, crowned by a lovely but most pettish face. Signs of storm, past, present, and to come, were written on the vivid coral lips, in the violet eyes half veiled by their milk-white lids, on the brow like smoothest marble or finest satin, drawn just now into a petulant frown of discontent.

"I am sure I think you look as well as usual, Ermine," she said, with a half-offended, half-aggravated intonation of voice. "Fainting seems to agree with you; and it was a very nice way to get up an interesting scene, and let everybody know the degree of your intimacy with Raymond."

"You are mistaken," said Ermine, coldly—she was so well used to the beautiful goddess's ebullitions of spleen, that neither the tone nor the form of this address surprised her—"fainting does not agree with me, for Alan says he never saw me look so badly; and, as for getting up a scene to let everybody know my intimacy with Raymond, considering that I am *not* intimate with him, I don't see why I should have wished to leave the impression on anybody's mind."

"Not intimate with him!" repeated Margaret, in a high key. "Not intimate with him, when you are out together at all hours of the day and night, when you faint in his arms, and when" (a still higher key) "everybody says you ought to be engaged to him, if you are not!"

"Did anybody ever say that to you, Margaret?"

"Yes, plenty of people—Mrs. Dunwardin said it when she went away last night."

"Then give Mrs. Dunwardin my compliments the next time you see her, and request her to be kind enough to mind her own business."

"Oh, it is very fine to carry off matters in that way; but telling people to mind their own business—which is very uncivil and unlady-like, by-the-way—won't keep them from talking. Of course you don't care, though" (relapsing into grievance); "as long as you can play off Raymond against Alan, and Alan against Raymond, it makes no matter to you *what* people say."

"Margaret, such nonsense is not worth getting angry over," said Ermine, with determined calmness, though two scarlet spots be-

gan to burn in her white cheeks. "Will you excuse me if I ask you to change the subject? I am very tired of my unfortunate escapade of last night; and Raymond's name is fairly hateful to me!"

"Oh, no doubt it is hateful to you since Alan has come back!" cried Margaret, with quivering lips, and eyes that blazed through all their odalisque softness. "It was very far from being hateful to you when you stayed on the Battery till after midnight last night, however! I wonder you are not ashamed to play fast-and-loose in such a disgraceful manner!"

"Margaret, I won't tolerate this!" said Ermine, rising. "You have no possible right to speak to me in such a manner, and I will not listen to it."

"You *shall* listen to it!" said Margaret, rising, too, and stamping her foot to give emphasis to her words. "I have the best possible right to speak, for you took Raymond from me to make a toy of him for your amusement. Don't I love him better than anybody else in the world?" cried the girl, with a ring of pathos through all the vituperative passion of her voice—"and am I not forced to marry this horrid Saxton, while you—you who might be happy with him, throw him away for a disgrace—"

"Hush!" said Ermine, with eyes blazing in turn. "Say what you please to me, and, for the sake of Christian charity, I will bear it; but you shall *not* say any thing about Alan! I won't stand that!"

"Really, it seems to me that Alan is my cousin, and that unless you are engaged to him, he is nothing to you."

"He is a hundred times more to me than any cousinship can make him to you; and, as I told you a moment ago, you may say any thing you please to me, but you shall say nothing of him."

"I have no desire to say any thing of him—there is nothing to be said. I only want to tell you that I might have forgiven you for taking Raymond from me if you had loved him and married him; but that I will never, never forgive you for making him leave me, only that you might treat him like this!"

For the first time Ermine saw how this beautiful, tame face—this face so often petulant, so rarely moved by any deeper expression—looked, when convulsed, changed, intensified by the master-passion of human nature,

the passion which had stirred even this shallow nature to its depths. Through her preoccupation—her pity mingled with indignation—the quick artist-eye caught, the retentive artist-mind remembered, the transformation, and many a long day afterward the same face stood out clearly on canvas—a loveliness eloquent of rage and scorn.

"Margaret," she said, gently, "stop a moment, and be reasonable. How did I ever make Raymond leave you? Have I not discouraged him always, and always plainly showed that I did not like him? Do you think that, because you find him attractive, everybody else must do the same? I assure you that, if any thing could make me despise him more than I have always done, it has been the manner in which he has treated you."

"It is no affair of yours how he has treated me," cried Margaret, with a foolish woman's illogical wrath. "Do you suppose I imagine that he gave me up for you?" she went on, with a scornful laugh. "It is some consolation that it was for your fortune, not for yourself, that he left me."

"I am perfectly well aware of that fact," said Ermine, coldly. "But I cannot realize the consolation of it. One would not despise a man for being fickle, but one would despise him for being mercenary."

"And do you flatter yourself that your new lover is any more disinterested?" asked Margaret, bitterly.

Ermine drew up her slender *élancé* figure haughtily. "I do not know of whom you are speaking," she said, proudly.

"You may find out some day," said Margaret with a slight gasp—a premonition of hysteria—in her throat. "But it is hard that I am the only one to be sacrificed," she went on, sinking back into her chair, while a shower of sudden tears washed all the fire out of her eyes. "You are not made to marry Raymond—though he told me only last night that it is a matter of life and death to him that you should do so—while I am sacrificed to this hor—horrible man whom I detest!"

"You are not a Circassian," said Ermine, with an inflection of unconscious contempt in her voice. "Nobody could sacrifice you, if you did not sacrifice yourself."

"It is easy for you to talk!" said Margaret, indignantly. "You are rich, and your own mistress; nobody can force you to do any thing. But I am different."

"You are a puppet in Raymond's hands, and for Raymond's selfish, mercenary purposes," said Ermine, indignantly, in her turn. "Do you suppose that I don't know that you accepted Mr. Saxton at his bidding? It is incomprehensible to me that you should suffer his influence over you, when he uses it for such an end as this. Margaret, for Heaven's sake, ask yourself could he ever have loved you and yet urge you—force you—to such a step as this?"

"What can you know of his love?" asked Margaret, blazing out once more. "Is it impossible for any one to love me? Plenty of people have done so besides Raymond; you know that as well as I do. He *did* love me, but he said—he still says—that we are too poor to marry, that we should only drag each other down, instead of benefiting each other. That I must sacrifice myself to make a brilliant match, and he—and he—"

"And he will magnanimously sacrifice himself to my fortune," said Ermine, smiling sarcastically. "It is quite an able programme, and I congratulate you upon carrying out your share of it so well. I wonder" (this to herself, as she turned and looked out of the window) "if that man ever spoke the truth in all his life?"

But meanwhile Margaret's second explosion, like the first, was quickly drenched in a lachrymal shower-bath, and noticing that the sobs were momentarily becoming more hysterical, Ermine began to think of some mode to allay this tempest in a teapot.

"Margaret," she said, "if the idea of marrying Mr. Saxton makes you so unhappy, why not ask your father to break the engagement?"

No answer—only louder sobs, and more threateningly hysterical signs about the throat.

"I have told Raymond that I can never marry him," Ermine continued, thinking that this information might prove comforting. "If your engagement with Mr. Saxton were broken, you might—"

What Miss Erle might or might not have done can only be surmised, for the consoling suggestion was very abruptly cut short.

"I can do no—thing b—but marry Mr. Saxton!" cried Margaret, as vehemently as her sobs would permit. "Somebody must be sacrificed, and of course I am the one! You can do as you please, but I hate you worse than anybody in the world, and I

will never, never forgive you for the way you have treated Raymond!"

"Good Heavens, Margaret!"—began Ermine, confounded by the extraordinary logic of this resentment.

But Margaret was past listening to any thing by this time. Violent hysterics set in, accompanied by the usual kicking and screaming symptoms, and Ermine flew to the bell. Her first energetic peal brought Lena hurrying upstairs—for it was not often that her mistress's bell rang like this—and, as Margaret was by this time very nearly unmanageable, Mrs. Erle was summoned. It was surprising how her presence, the first moment she crossed the threshold, had a sedative effect upon her step-daughter. The screams died away, the kicking subsided, and even the sobs soon became less convulsive. By the time that Madelon, the governess, the children, and half a dozen servants arrived on the scene of action, Miss Erle had subsided into an unconscious condition, and was borne away to her own room—notwithstanding Madelon's unfeeling assurance to the company in general that she was sure she could walk—without further resistance—a beautiful but decidedly heavy piece of inert flesh and blood.

The train moved away after her—all except Mrs. Erle, who, giving a few directions to Madelon (over which the latter shrugged her shoulders), came back into Ermine's chamber and closed the door.

"My patience is almost exhausted with that girl," she said, sinking down into the chair which Margaret had vacated. "I scarcely know whether her folly or her affectation is most trying. What brought on this scene, Ermine?"

Now, Ermine was perfectly well aware that her mother knew as well as herself what had brought on the scene, but she had lived long enough with Mrs. Erle to give the answer which was expected of her.

"Margaret has been talking about her aversion to marrying Mr. Saxton," she said, "and she worked herself into the state in which you found her by simply giving way to her excitement."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Erle, with a world of meaning in the single interjection, and then she looked full into her daughter's eyes. "Was she talking of anybody besides Mr. Saxton?" she asked, with a slight shade of significance.

"Yes," answered Ermine, indifferently. "She was talking of Raymond."

"What of him?"

"Indeed, mamma, that is hard to say, for her complaints were rather obscure and very inconsistent. She was apparently angry that Raymond had transferred his attentions from her to myself, and yet outraged that I had not accepted them. I did not see the reason of it," she concluded with a tired sigh.

"Did you expect reason from a jealous and very silly woman?" asked Mrs. Erle, contemptuously. "I am sure you know Margaret well enough to be aware how little credit is due to any thing she may say. She has accepted Mr. Saxton of her own accord, yet she gives herself the airs of a martyr, and, because she has chosen to fancy herself in love with Raymond, she thinks that she has a fee-simple right over him. You will be doing him a grievous injustice, Ermine" (this very earnestly), "if you allow Margaret's jealous folly to prejudice you in any way against him."

"Margaret's jealous folly, as you term it, mamma, does not weigh with me in the least; but what I have seen with my own eyes and heard with my own ears, I confess that I believe."

"You mean—?"

"I mean that if Raymond ever loved anybody besides himself, he loved Margaret, and that he gave her up—nay, more, he forced her to engage herself to a man whom she detests—that he might be free to devote himself to my fortune."

"Ermine, I am astonished at you! It is incomprehensible to me that you should let Margaret's absurd complaints weigh with you for a moment. There is not one word of truth in what she asserts concerning Raymond. I know this. With regard to Mr. Saxton, no doubt she made you believe that she is a victim to her family, when in reality she is only a victim to her own mercenary ambition. I should think that by this time you would appreciate her vanity and selfishness sufficiently to rate her sentiments as they deserve."

"I think I do," said Ermine, quietly.

"And I should think you might know that I have no possible reason for representing matters in any but their true light."

No answer to this. Ermine was gazing out of the window at the blue sky beyond, and she did not withdraw her eyes or utter a syllable.

"While I am on this subject," Mrs. Erle continued, a little sharply, "I must say a few words concerning the occurrence of last night. In the first place, may I ask for an explanation of your fainting? Raymond, of course, gave none."

"There is very little to give, mamma. I was excited, and fainted from the reaction—that is all."

"What excited you?"

"The music first, I presume, and my conversation with Raymond afterward."

"And may I beg to know the subject of a conversation which took you down to the Battery at eleven o'clock at night?"

"Certainly, if you feel any interest in it." Then she recounted substantially what she had told Madelon, all of which, by the same token, Mrs. Erle had heard before, adding when she concluded, "I am glad to tell you this, mamma, because I am anxious that there should be an end of all expectations that Raymond and I should ever marry. You may believe me when I say that there are no possible circumstances which could bring such a thing to pass."

"However sorry I may be to hear this, and on your account I am sorry," said Mrs. Erle with dignity, "I must beg to correct you on one point. You speak as if there had been some plot or plan to marry you to Raymond. I owe it to myself and to my husband to declare that we have never done more than wish to see you established in life under the protection of a man who, notwithstanding the interested motives which you impute to him, is sufficiently attached to you to bear with your peculiar and most trying disposition. That we ever formed this wish, you owe to yourself, and the heartless manner in which you have flirted with him."

"Flirted with him—with Raymond! Mamma, how can you say such a thing, when you—you alone—have always thrown us together?"

"Did I throw you together last night?" asked Mrs. Erle. "You know my rules—you know how much I am opposed to any thing like the fast manners of the day—yet you wander off at midnight with Raymond, and finally make your appearance, before half a dozen people, in his arms."

"Mamma!" The poor, much-tried blood mounted in a torrent over neck and face. "Consider for a moment—how could I help it?"

"Not understanding the eccentricities of a sensitive temperament, that is more than I can answer," said Mrs. Erle, coldly. "If it was necessary for you to faint after the concert, it was at least not necessary that you should have gone down to the Battery to accomplish it. I confess that I am losing patience with your fancies and caprices, Ermine," she went on more sternly; "and, since you seem to have no regard for what people will say of your conduct, I must endeavor to have some for you. If you were engaged to Raymond, the gossips might hold their tongues. Since you are not engaged to him, I can scarcely imagine how severe the strictures will be on you; and, naturally, also, on me."

Ermine was silent. She knew from long experience that there was nothing to be said when her mother took this tone. Justification was useless—still more useless any thing like softening or appeal.

"I know perfectly well where your spirit of rebellion has been learned," Mrs. Erle went on, in the same hard, passionless voice. "Your guardian has always encouraged you in defying my wishes, and you think that you will soon be the legal mistress of your own actions. But none the less, one thing is certain—so long as you remain under my control, so long I shall insist upon your keeping within the bounds of decorum. I should never have allowed your flirtation with Raymond to go to the shameful length it has done, if I had not supposed that you meant to marry him. Having had this warning, I shall certainly not allow you to enter upon another, as you seem disposed to do."

Still silence. Sometimes—often, in fact—the only hope of restraining a torrent is to keep the flood-gates resolutely shut. What Ermine would have said if she had unclosed her lips for the passage of even one word, there is no telling. It was not because she did not feel, that she was silent. On the contrary, burning indignation strove for expression, side by side with that sickening sense of being wholly misjudged and cruelly misunderstood, than which earth has no pang more poignant. But she was resolutely silent. What good would it do to speak? She had learned from long and bitter experience that her mother and herself were like two jarring chords in music, never by any chance giving forth a note in unison. This realization had wellnigh turned her child's heart to gall, and it had hardened her

face now into something of a statue's white, steadfast immobility.

"Understand this," said Mrs. Erle, raising her voice not more than a shade of a semitone, but still enough to mark how keenly she was provoked by the reticence which met her like a granite wall, "I desire to hear no more of your romantic, childish nonsense about Alan Erle, and I expressly forbid your appearance in public with him, or taking any rides or drives of the kind which he proposed this morning. You have been already sufficiently talked about; and it is my duty to conduct you, since you do not seem capable of conducting yourself." A pause—then, sharply: "Do you hear me, Ermine?"

"I hear you, mamma."

"Do you intend to obey me?"

"Is that question necessary, mamma? Have I ever disobeyed you when you explicitly stated your wishes?"

"Your conduct is indeed most exemplary," said Mrs. Erle, bitterly. "You obey my wishes in the letter, and make it the business of your life to violate them in the spirit. My duty is none the less my duty, however, and I am determined to give no further sanction to an intimacy which has already done you nothing but harm."

She uttered the last words in a tone of decision which left no room for demur, if Ermine had been inclined to make any. But the girl received this sentence with the same passive calm which had characterized her manner all along; and, after waiting for a moment for the rejoinder which did not come, Mrs. Erle rose majestically and swept from the room.

Ermine remained motionless—changing neither feature nor expression—for some time after the door had closed on her mother's soft draperies. Then something like a shiver of passion seemed suddenly to pass over and shake her from head to foot.

"I comprehend it perfectly," she said, half-aloud. "It is my punishment for rejecting Raymond. Oh, if they tried to make me hate him, could they do it any better?"

She rose from her seat restlessly and paced the floor for a minute. It seemed so hard, so cruel! She had longed for Alan with such heart-sick longing, and now that he had come, she was not allowed to be happy for one day. Even her intercourse with him—that joyous freedom of manner which it had been so much pleasure to indulge—was placed under a con-

straint by this new talk of flirtation and love and marriage. One of her old floods of childish grief came over the poor girl—poor, though an heiress—as, throwing herself upon her bed, she buried her face in her hands, sobbing bitterly.

"O Alan, dear Alan, if I were only a child, so that you could come and comfort me!" she said. "It seems as if my heart will break. How they all are banded against me—mamma because I cannot obey her wishes; Margaret, because I have stood between Raymond and herself; Madelon, because she is selfishly bent on her own fortune. If ever there comes to me a time of desperate strait or extremity, may God help me, for I cannot count upon one friend among them all!"

Looking back afterward, Ermine remembered this thought, but it is good to believe and to trust that, in any time of desperate "strait or extremity," God does help those for whom mortal help is not.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ENCHANTED LAND.

ERMINE spent the entire morning and the whole long afternoon in her own room. Of course, she could have come forth if she had chosen—since Mrs. Erle's purpose had been accomplished when she ended that tender interview with Alan—but it may have been that the girl was glad enough of the rest which is doubly sweet after combat or excitement. At all events, she did not appear at dinner, and it was only when twilight was trembling softly over the earth that she came down-stairs. The large, cool, fragrant house was wholly empty, and as silent as that enchanted palace on which Merlin laid his spell. Ermine wandered through all the rooms, finding no trace of human presence anywhere. The beauty of the dying May day seemed to have tempted all Charleston abroad, and every member of the household save herself had caught the infection. She was all alone—alone to do what she pleased, and go where she pleased, to pace back and forth, and wander here and there, in luxurious idleness of motion. She strolled into the garden and decked herself with roses, like a Greek divinity; then came back and sat in the open window with "Tennyson" in her lap, not reading save by snatches, and repeating to her-

self, whenever her eye rested on the fair scene beyond, the exquisite "Move eastward, happy earth." If she and Tennyson had had the sunset all to themselves, this would have been very pleasant; but, unfortunately, there were numbers of other people privileged to enjoy the hour, people riding, driving, sauntering past, bowing to the pretty face framed in the window, and necessitating a bow in return. It seemed to Ermine that everybody whom she knew went by—everybody except the one for whom her eyes were watching and her heart longing. Even Major Hastings rode past, and uncovered his handsome head—wondering a good deal at the stiff inclination which was all he received in acknowledgment. It was just after this that Ermine rose. "It is a bore to sit in the window and be bowed at," she said, pettishly; and then she sauntered away toward the back drawing-room. Twilight, in which it was impossible to read—

"Labor's brief armistice!
Best, loveliest interlude of dark and light—"

had already gathered here; so, putting down her volume, she went to the piano, lifted its lid, and, slowly touching "the beautiful cold keys," which gave back lovingly their rich tones under her hands, began to play the marvellous "Moonlight Sonata."

She played it once—twice—thrice—not so much because she loved the repetition of its melody, as because it chanced to suit her mood, and the tender, passionate chords made an accompaniment to her thoughts, which never flowed so smoothly, never so sweetly, as to the sound of music. She was well on in the third repetition, playing, as it were, unconsciously, with her eyes turned on a glimpse of the "fringes of the faded eve," seen through a vine-draped window near by, and her mind far away, when the sound of a distant footstep caught her ear. Instantly the white hands stopped short on the ivory keys, she turned her head—the breath suspended on her parted lips—and listened.

After a moment, her listening was rewarded. Footsteps crossed the hall, crossed the front drawing-room, came toward her retreat, the silken curtains of the arch were pushed aside, and in the opening there appeared—a dog literally as large as a pony, a magnificent creature all tawny gold, dashed with black, whose hair, soft as silk, curled round him in every direction, and whose large,

bright eyes were full of indescribable beauty and expression. This formidable visitor entered with the stately tread of a lion, his plummy tail drooping, his superb head erect, his whole face—where gentleness and strength were so marvellously mingled—full of vivid expectation. At sight of him, Ermine made one spring from her music-stool.

"Nix!" she cried, joyfully. "Oh, my dear, dear old fellow, is it you?"

Nix gave one short, hoarse bark of delighted recognition, and, to attest that it was indeed he, then rushed full at her, wagging his tail like an insane dog, and fairly knocking her into a convenient chair with the weight of the two monstrous paws which went at once to her shoulders, while her hands clasped eagerly round the silken mane that covered his immense throat. It was an affecting embrace, only Ermine, being much the smaller, had much the worst of it. She was indeed in rapid course of suffocation, and Nix's large, red tongue was licking her face with unmolested delight, when fortunately a tall gentleman stepped from behind the arch and came to the rescue.

"Nix! you scamp!—have done!" he cried in a tone which Nix at once obeyed by dropping on all-fours and proceeding to make a comma of himself.—"Ermine, are you not almost smothered? The rascal is overpoweringly affectionate if you let him be!—No, sir—you've done embracing enough for once—stand back!"

"Oh, don't scold him!" said Ermine, recovering her breath. "Bless his great, splendid, affectionate heart!—he was so glad to see me.—Nix, Nix! Oh, you beauty!"—as Nix came and laid his broad head in her lap—wagging his tail, meanwhile, in the same frantic manner—"you are more magnificent than ever!—O Alan, what a grand, sweet face! Does it not remind you of Lord Byron's epitaph on his dog?"

"What! the verses about—"

"To mark a friend's remains, these stones arise—
I never had but one, and here he lies."

I don't see how that is applicable to Nix—or to me, either," said Alan, standing by, and looking tenderly at the hands that were stroking and caressing Nix's silken ears and head.

"Pshaw!" said Ermine, laughing. "That was not what I meant. Don't you remember the inscription on the tombstone?—Nix, dear old fellow, I hope it may be many a long day

before you need a tombstone, but, if you ever do, those words shall go on it."

"Nix shall be buried at sea, he loves it as dearly as I do!" said Nix's master, drawing a deep arm-chair forward, and sinking into it. "Nix, you unruly beggar, come here! Now"—as Nix obeyed—"lie down and keep quiet while Miss St. Amand pays you a compliment. No"—catching hold of his silken mane, as he was springing back to Ermine—"we've had enough of that. I don't wonder your head is turned by the sight of her—so is mine, for the matter of that. But discipline is discipline. Down, sir, down!"

Nix crouched in couchant, leonine fashion on the floor, but kept his plume-like tail waving in the air, and his liquid eyes fastened on his master's face.

"Let him alone," said Ermine. "He does not annoy me in the least."

"He annoys me, however," said Alan, frankly. "I am jealous of the scamp when you fondle and caress him so. Not but that I am fond enough of him myself. We are inseparable companions on shipboard—aren't we, Nix?"—Nix beat his tail assentingly on the floor—"You've had a splendid bath and a new collar to-day, haven't you, old fellow? That was in honor of Miss St. Amand. I brought you up to see her because she has a dear, little kind heart, and is not a bit ashamed to recognize old friends, even if they are disreputably fond of the sea."

Here Nix gave a howl, being perfectly well aware that these remarks were addressed to himself, and thinking that civility required a reply.

"Hold your tongue, will you!" said his master. "Keep quiet till you're asked to speak!—Now, Ermine, let us have the epitaph. Deuce take my memory if I remember a word of it!"

"I think the deuce must have taken your memory if you could forget it," said Ermine. "Let me see!—dear me! I hope I have not forgotten it! Don't laugh, Alan—I remember at least that he—the dog, that is—'possessed beauty without vanity, strength without insolence, and courage without ferocity.' I also remember that 'This praise which would be unmeaning flattery above human ashes, is but a just tribute to the memory of Boatswain, a dog'—and I think that the description suits Nix exactly."

"Beauty without vanity, strength without

insolence, and courage without ferocity'—so it does!—Get up, Nix, and make a bow. If ever you have a tombstone, we will certainly borrow Boatswain's epitaph for you. Ermine, isn't it amazing that the rascal knows you after all this time?"

"And he was so young when he went away! Do you remember how furious Margaret was the day he came in dripping wet, and spoiled her new poplin?"

"Don't I indeed! I only brought him this afternoon because I knew they would all be out, and I hoped you might be in. Are you still a prisoner?"

"No. I stayed at home of my own accord, partly because I was lazy, and partly because I thought you might come. I can't afford to lose any of your society, especially since—"

"Especially since what?" asked he, as she suddenly paused.

But Ermine had remembered that dreadful word "flirtation," and the tide of her candor was abruptly stopped. She hesitated, and blushed in such an unusual manner that, even in the dusk room, Captain Erle's quick eye detected the suffusion.

"What is it, little one?" he asked, leaning forward. "Don't deny that there is something—I see it in your telltale face. Nix and I are ready to receive your confidence, and to guard it sacredly. What is it?"

"It is nothing of any importance," said Ermine, turning her back on the light, as she felt herself blushing still more. "I only meant—that is, I didn't mean—I only said—"

"You only didn't say exactly what you should have said," interrupted the young man, cutting her confused sentences short. "Come, Ermine, who is your best friend in the world?"

"You, Alan." (Without a second's hesitation.)

"Of course I am—and, being your best friend, isn't it my business to see that you come to no harm, and?"—the genial brows knitted slightly here—"that nobody dares to trouble you?"

"You absurd boy!—who should trouble me?"

"Somebody has been troubling you, however.—We see that plainly, don't we, Nix?"—Nix growled deeply.—"Ermine, you affirmed positively this morning that nobody had been bullying you. I wonder if you could put

your hand on your heart and say the same thing now?"

"Indeed, Alan, I—I don't know.—Mamma said something this morning—"

"Exactly. I'd have felt safe in wagering any thing that she did. And that something was about me—was it not?"

"How could you know?"

"How could I help knowing, with her face to enlighten me this morning, and your face to enlighten me this afternoon? Come, Ermine,"—leaning luxuriously back and watching her closely with the limpid, sea-colored eyes—"make a clean breast of it and have done. You can't hurt me, *petite*. I care for nobody's good opinion but yours—and yours, thank God, I have! As for *madame ma tante*—I know of old in what estimation she holds me."

"She said nothing against you, Alan. I would not have stood that."

"She might have accused me of every crime in the Decalogue, and I should have forgiven her much sooner than for making you look as pale as you do—or rather as you did. Somehow or other, you've managed to get some color within the last ten minutes, and I am curious to know the cause. Who are you blushing about? I am sure it would never enter your head to blush about me!"

"I'm not blushing about anybody," said Ermine, indignantly. "If I am a little flushed, it is owing to the heat, and to Nix."

"Oh! It is owing to the heat and to Nix—is it? Well I will accept the explanation (to save time), and return to the point under discussion. What did *ma tante* say of me?"

Ermine moved restlessly under the half-laughing but determined eyes, shrugged her shoulders, and finally said petulantly, "Nothing that you will care to hear."

"But I do care to hear," said he, leaning forward again. "Ermine, don't tantalize so—what was it?" A pause—then impatiently: "Good Heavens, child! why should you hesitate? Do you suppose I care for *any thing* she might say? Of course the longer you wait, the more terrible I shall think it, and, if you don't mind, you will make an anti-climax of it at last."

"Who cares about an anti-climax? I don't mean to tell you at all."

"Then I shall simply have to guess until I find out. Of course, it must have been some-

thing about you, too, or you would not be so reluctant to repeat it. Eureka! I have it: she said I meant to make love to you for your fortune!"

"She never even hinted such a thing!" cried Ermine—and how hotly the blood rushed over neck and brow again.

"Then what was it, you absurd little Sphinx? If you don't tell me, I will set Nix on you, and let him do his worst."

"Alan," said she, tragically; "I *can't* tell you. I cried over it desperately, but I am sure you would only laugh."

"I should never laugh at any thing you thought worth crying over, you may be sure of that!"

"Well then—for one thing, mamma says I must not ride with you any more."

She thought this would be a terrible blow, and she was rather disappointed when Alan's only comment was a cool—

"Indeed!"

"Nor walk with you, either."

"Nor talk with me, I presume?"

"Nothing was said about talking, but I don't think we shall be able to do much of it, for she also says—"

Here the voice stopped short again, in embarrassed silence. Captain Erle was still leaning forward, absently caressing his mustache with one sunburnt hand, while his eyes followed every change of the mobile face before him. "Well, what is it she also says?" he asked, dryly, as Ermine paused.

"She says that I flirted with Raymond," cried Ermine, with a burst of determined indignation, "and that—and that I shall not flirt with you too!"

"How good of her to take such care of me!" said he, ironically. "But if you have a fancy for flirting, Ermine—an amusement which, by-the-way, I took to be Madelon's and Margaret's monopoly—I hope you won't hesitate to make use of me."

"I knew you would laugh," said Ermine, struggling with an inclination to tears, "and I really think it is very—very unkind of you!"

"If I laugh, it is because I should like amazingly to do something else; and that being impossible, I must find a vent for my feelings some other way," said he. "In short, Ermine, the upshot of the whole matter is, that you and I are to be kept from seeing any thing whatever of each other."

"Yes," said Ermine, in a lugubrious tone, "I think that is it."

"And do you mean to submit to it?"

"How can I help submitting to it, Alan? You don't know"—once more a burning blush spread over her face—"you can't tell what things have been said to me."

"Yes, I can!" said he, almost fiercely; "and, by Heaven! I wish I had the people, who said them, here this minute, Ermine!"—his voice changed and softened so suddenly that she fairly started—"will you go and play some for me? I must think a minute, and your music may help me to a decision."

"What do you want to think about?" asked she, in surprise.

"I want to think how I can best defeat the kind intentions of these dear friends of yours," answered he, bitterly. "I am not likely to sit down quietly and let them have their way. If I had to walk over a dozen mothers, I would do it without a thought, so I won my way to you."

"It is hard," said Ermine, while her sensitive lip quivered slightly. "You have been away so long; and now that you are at home—"

"Now that I am at home, I'll have what I want—that is, your society—if I have to fight for it!"

"I'm not worth fighting for, Alan."

"Let me be judge of that, an't please you! Now go and play for me."

"What shall I play?" asked the obedient slave of this marine Selim Pacha.

"Any thing you please. Didn't I hear the 'Moonlight Sonata' as I came in? Play that."

She went to the piano, and, sitting down, began the beautiful strains for the fourth time. If any one had chanced to glance in just then, the dusk room with the twilight gathering in its deeper corners, and the dying Southern day outside, would have made a picture worth remembering. Through the soft gloaming the white statues—pedestal-throned—looked almost eerie in their cold, motionless grace; one large, gleaming mirror caught the orange sunset, and held it, as it were, imprisoned in its depths; through the vine-draped western window a flush of rosy light fell over Nix, as he lay in leonine grandeur on the velvet carpet, prone at his master's feet, while of this master himself, the light only caught the white polish of his brow, and the hand that still stroked absently the long, silken mustache. The

piano was entirely in shade, but its tones—now deep and rich as an organ, now clear as a silver bell—swelled out softly on the flower-scented air, the subtle harmonies melting into that composition which had for its inspiration the sole attachment of the great master's life, and through which there seems quivering, like moonlight on a mountain lake, all that is most exquisite, most tender in passion, all that is most apart from and above the love of the senses.

"Whom God loveth not, they love not music!" Oh, poor, darkened minds!—poor, dust-steeped souls!—poor, earth-bound spirits! Do they never feel that there are heights—even on earth—forever beyond them? Do they never yearn to soar aloft—were it only for once—into the realm of light and life which music, alone can lend to the spirit still bound within its prison-house of clay? "Having ears," do they always "hear not" the echo of those marvellous strains which speak to the soul of man as no other mortal power has ever done, can ever do? Do they never long for one moment in the enchanted palace of harmony and tone, the glowing world of feeling and sensation, shut from their obtuse faculties forever? Do they never lift their heavy eyes toward the golden cloud-heights far beyond them, and wistfully sigh for one faint glimmer of the influence which eludes all echo in the language of earth, because in it is more of heaven than in any other memorial left us of the time when angels walked with the first man, and when the two in paradise may have hearkened in the purple dawn and rosy twilight to the silver harmonies of the choirs of heaven?"

When the last echoes of the sonata died away, the twilight had deepened like a transparent veil through which there still lingered the last kiss that the sun had left to sweeten his brief parting from the fair, entrancing earth. A soft, wistful sigh came to Ermine's ear, as the last chord sounded under her lingering touch. Then there was silence.

"Alan," she said after a while, gently, "Alan—has the music put you to sleep?"

For answer Alan rose and crossed the room to her side. That electric current of sympathy which is one of the strangest things about our strange organism—whether physical or mental, who can say?—made her conscious of some mood on which her question had jarred, and kept her from saying any thing more, even

when the tall figure came and stood over her, leaning slightly against the carved instrument.

Nix raised his great head lazily, and looked after his master; but he did not feel inclined to move, and the twilight baffled even his keen eyes. He could see nothing more than two shadowy forms—two suggestive outlines of manhood and womanhood—at the piano, though his quick ear caught the murmur of a low, well-known voice. He listened for a moment, but the subject under discussion did not interest him. He yawned, dropped his massive head again, and dreamed probably of the last bone he had buried, while Captain Erle was saying:

"To sleep, indeed! Could such music put anybody but Nix to sleep? You never played better in your life. I wonder what magic entered into your fingers, you little white witch! I thought of the 'Lorely,' and all the songs of the sirens. If I did not go to sleep, I dreamed a dream better than Tennyson's 'Dream of Fair Women'—for mine was only of one fair woman. Shall I tell it to you?"

"Yes," answered the low voice, like music out of the fragrant dusk. "Only I warn you that I shall expect something very exquisite, since it was inspired by the 'Moonlight Sonata.'"

"I think it was very exquisite—at least it seemed so to me. On second thoughts, however, I won't tell it to you—that is, not just yet. We have business to settle first, you know. I was to find a way out of our dilemma, was I not?"

"Of course you were. Didn't you send me to the piano as an excuse to think? And then you tell me that you only dreamed."

"Sometimes our best thoughts come from dreams, *mignonne*. God only knows where mine has come from; but I have it, and I mean to hold it fast. Little one, look at me!"

"How can I look at you, Alan, when it is so dark?"

"Why, I see you perfectly—or is it because I see you always—absent as well as near? I am inclined to think that your best portrait will be found on my heart, after I am dead, Ermine."

"Like 'Calais' on that of your Queen Mary? What a fanciful idea, Alan!"

"Love teaches us fanciful ideas. Who was it said that once in his life every man is a poet? There is more truth in that than the world wots. Little one, gentle one, sweetest one of all the earth, suppose I tell you that

there is but one way out of the difficulties which have been placed around us?—suppose I ask you if you love me well enough to place your hand in mine and let me claim you as my own before all the world?"

"Alan!"

What a sudden, low cry it was—smiting almost painfully on the yielding air, and making Nix raise his head with a deep, bass growl! It reminded Alan of the cry which she had given when he bade her good-by to go upon his first long voyage. Then he had taken her in his arms and comforted her with softest kisses. Now he only knelt (not as a suppliant, but simply to place himself on a level with her), and, bending his head, laid his lips on the two little hands that lay like fragments of rare statuary in her lap.

"Ermine," he said—and the sweet syllables of her name had never sounded so sweet before—"have I startled you? Child, don't you see how it has been? I did not mean to ask you to marry me, because I had no mind to be branded as a fortune-hunter, and I thought you would in time love some man who might be able to match you in worldly advantages. But after all, this is cowardice. Shall I make no effort to win the prize and pearl of my life, because people for whom I care nothing may call me mercenary? If I had feared that you might think so, I should have been silent forever. But I know better than that. Even if you cannot give yourself to me so that no human power can ever come between us again, I know you will do me the justice to believe that I love you so well, so dearly, that every other gift of earth seems worse than useless without you!"

"O Alan—Alan!"

A different cry, this time—a soft, glad utterance of happiness, so pure, so tender, that the angels of God might have looked on and blessed it with a smile!

"Will you come to me, my Ermine, my heart's darling?" asked the low voice, infinitely gentle in its cadence. "If you say 'Yes,' nobody in the world shall ever harm or trouble my spotless lily again!"

She looked up at him with something almost infantine in the sweet, pathetic eyes shining out of her white face in the soft gloom.

"Do you really want me, Alan?"

"Has there ever been a day or an hour when I did not want you, my darling, my beloved?"

"You are sure that it is not only because you are sorry for me, as you were sorry once long ago?"

"I am very, very sure, my pet. Ah, Ermine" (with a thrill of passion), "don't hold back like a pale shadow, and tempt me to take you whether you will or no! Come to me!—say that you are mine!"

Then the hands which he had kissed, but, like a chivalric gentleman, left otherwise untouched, came to him with a quaint mingling of child-like simplicity and womanly dignity.

"Here I am, Alan," said the tender, loyal voice. "Take me if you choose: I am yours."

Then he took her—safe into his arms, close to his faithful heart. In the fragrant May gloaming, they forgot the past or the future, and, living only in the magic present, passed, like happy children, through the gates of Fancy into that fair, enchanted land where Love dwells forever as an immortal.

So they stood, and so they spoke not, for many minutes. Then Ermine lifted her face—her soft tones breaking on the air with a cadence like that passionate thrill which we catch in the words of the sweet Italian maiden who had "no cunning to be strange."

"Alan dear, was this your dream?"

The last, faint flush of sunset—how loath the day is to give place to night, in the sweet May-time—fell over the shadowy picture which they made, standing together—the delicate, white-robed woman clasped close in the embrace of her stately lover, her head thrown back a little, and her face upturned to catch the light in his eyes as she asked her question.

"You want to know about my dream?" he asked, smiling. "Ah, best-beloved, there is now, as ever, but one fair woman for me."

"And she?"

He bent and kissed the eager lips passionately, before he answered—

"She is here."

CHAPTER IX.

FLOOD-TIDE.

WHAT a good thing it is to be happy! Of course it is a pleasant thing—everybody knows that—but I contend that it is also a good thing; that it warms our hearts, expands

our minds, makes us more gentle, more tender, more full of charity to men, more full of love to God! In short, it is to human nature what the blessed sunshine is to the plants of the earth—warming, fructifying, bringing forth fair flowers and sweet fruits even from barren ground, until we are almost tempted to ask why it is that so little of such an influence should be found in the world—

"Which God created very good,
And very mournful we!"

Only in this, as in many things else, it is easier to ask than to answer. In this, as in many things else, faith speaks to us of the gracious intentions of a kind Father, and sight shows us the perverse rebellion of disobedient children. We were meant to be happy—every thing goes to prove that—and we have to thank each other chiefly and primarily for the pangs and tears and bitter sufferings which frustrate that intention.

Sometimes, however, we *are* happy—supremely and wholly happy—in spite of all that can be done by friends or enemies to reduce us to our normal warfare with Fate. Sometimes the sunshine comes upon us with a rush, and oh, how we bask in it, how we drink deeply of its tropical warmth; and, even when the clouds gather again, how we feel that what we have enjoyed once is ours forever! So it was with Ermine now. Born of the South, and in the South, she was Southern in every fibre of her being, and every tissue of her organization. To say this, is to say that she lived a whole life of sensation where one of colder temperament would have felt scarcely a throb stirring the even current of existence. It was enough to look at her slight, nervous *physique*, her pale, intense face, her dark, unconsciously passionate eyes, to understand that, for once, Disraeli was right when he wrote—"all is race: there is no other truth," and that the wonderful Dr. Sarna was equally right when he added—"all is temperament: without understanding it, there is no arriving at truth."

Race and temperament had both conspired to make the faithful, tender, passionate creature, at whose feet the flood-tide of perfect happiness flowed now. This story—being simply the story of her life—has little to do with others, save in their effect upon this life; therefore it will not pause to tell how the storm of family indignation burst on the heads of the lovers, who had dared to bring their

tendresse to an open engagement. If either of them had regarded this tempest, it might prove worth while to devote a little space to what was said, by whom, and how, and when, and where. But in truth they did not mind it in the least. The absorbing preoccupation of passion was upon them, and they heeded too little, perhaps, the bitter storm around them. No one had a right to say them Nay, and for simple disapproval they cared nothing. The whole course of their love had consisted in braving this disapproval, until it had assumed the bearing of a settled and unalterable fact—somewhat disagreeable, it is true, and, if possible, to be ignored. They did ignore it. Oh, how easy it is to let any and every untoward circumstance pass by like the wind, when one is happy! When one has an inner refuge of calm, vexations do not ruffle, and even disappointments can be borne with sublime philosophy! On high moral and social grounds, Mrs. Erle took her position, and absolutely refused her consent to the engagement; but then (as no one knew better than herself) her consent was a mere matter of form, her husband's will having denied her even the shadow of authority over her daughter. She often waxed pathetic over this "posthumous injustice and wrong;" but the probabilities are that the dead St. Amand knew very well what he was about, and that Ermine's life would not have been gladdened by even its one gleam of sunshine if her mother could have prevented it.

Prevent it, however, she could not—except thus far. When Alan came, like the thoroughbred gentleman which Nature had made him, to ask her consent to her daughter's engagement, she coldly reminded him that her consent was not of any importance, since Ermine's self and Ermine's fortune were quite independent of her control. Said she, with a keen bitterness which he never forgot:

"It is to Colonel Vivieux—my daughter's guardian—not to myself, that you should apply. I must refer you to him, and I can only speak as his representative to a limited extent, when I say that, although I cannot forbid, I must decline to sanction the engagement into which Mademoiselle St. Amand has seen fit to enter. Apart from my personal regard for yourself, I consider it a very unadvisable and very ill-judged affair. It is my duty, therefore, to beg that no steps may be taken toward making the engagement public, until

Colonel Vivieux's consent has been formally obtained."

Answered Captain Erle with unusual but (all things considered) scarcely unnatural *hauteur*: "You may be sure, madame, that your wishes shall be observed—would, indeed, have been observed even if you had not expressed them. Neither Ermine nor myself is anxious to make our engagement public, and I had no intention of doing other than applying to her guardian for his consent. In coming to ask your approval, it seems that I have made a mistake—but I cannot regret it. I recognized—I still recognize—a higher than legal right which you possess in your daughter's happiness. Therefore I ventured to ask your sanction on the only way in which this happiness can be secured."

"My daughter knows my wishes with regard to her," said Mrs. Erle, icily. "She does not recognize 'the higher than legal right' of which you are kind enough to speak, and therefore I may be pardoned if I waive it."

Alan looked steadily into the handsome face confronting him, and it seemed to his gaze at that moment as if no human countenance could possibly have been more repulsive or more unlovely.

"Madame," he said, "I do not need for you to tell me how unworthy you consider me of your daughter—and," he added, half proudly, "I know as well as you do that I am unworthy of her. But, one thing, at least, I thank God that I can give her in abundant measure—that is, love."

It is likely that Mrs. Erle felt the rebuke as keenly as he meant that she should. Yet no outward sign betrayed this fact, save only the stinging shaft which she sent back in return.

"As I have already remarked, Captain Erle, the onerous responsibility of the guardianship of Ermine does not rest in my hands; but I think it right to warn you that Colonel Vivieux is an exceedingly practical person, and that he may not think the boundless love which you are good enough to offer an exact equivalent for the 'material advantages' which you would gain by an alliance with his ward."

Can anybody offer an insult as neatly and effectually as a woman of the world, when she chooses to try? It is really almost edifying to mark with what perfect art she knows how, and when, and where, to plant a sting which cannot be extracted by any degree of mortal

skill. In the present instance, Alan had sense enough to restrain himself, and not to own, in vulgar parlance, that the cap fitted, by putting it on. When he could speak—which was not by any means immediately—he answered coldly, but quietly enough:

"Allow me to tell you, madame—what I shall tell Colonel Vivieux, when I have the pleasure of seeing him—that, in asking Ermine to marry me, I do not propose that all the 'material advantages' shall be on her side. That she is unfortunately rich, I know; but—although I am at present a poor man—I, too, have sanguine hopes of wealth. According to my present expectations (by detailing which I could not hope to interest you), I am sure that my next voyage will go far to make me independent of any fortune—be it large or small—which Ermine may possess."

"In other words, you propose that my daughter shall waste the best years of her youth in an aimless engagement, while you—excuse me if the truth sounds rude!—are pursuing some visionary scheme of wealth on the other side of the globe?"

"Not visionary, if you will excuse me, in turn. I cannot think that details of maritime enterprise could be interesting, or even intelligible to a lady, or I should endeavor to prove to you—as I hope to prove to Colonel Vivieux—that my expectations rest on a very sure basis. At all events, you may be sure that I shall not press the question of marriage on Ermine, until I can offer her something besides an empty name, and the love which—as you are kind enough to remind me—contrasts but poorly with the wealth which she will bring to her husband."

With this assurance—spoken in a tone which it was impossible to doubt—Mrs. Erle was certainly justified in thinking that she had gained an advantage which might prove of very solid importance and benefit. After this, she felt that it was wisest to succumb a little to the inevitable, to conceal a slight acknowledgment of the engagement, to patch up a truce, with a perfect understanding on both sides of its hollowness.

But harder even to bear than the lady's refined sarcasm were the significant comments of Mr. Erle and Raymond. A man cannot well knock another man down, for smiling in very cynical fashion and saying, "My dear fellow, you certainly have wonderful luck—allow me to congratulate you!"—but he can at least

feel very much inclined to do so. In truth, nothing tried Alan's patience more sorely than the consciousness that his uncle and brother measured him by their own standard—as everybody more or less does in this world—and considered simply that he had been more lucky or more far-seeing than themselves.

"Upon my word, my dear boy," said his uncle, smiling benignly, "your quixotism in resigning your mother's fortune is very prettily rewarded—quite like a moral story, indeed. Having no particular interest in Ermine's heiress-ship, I don't know the exact figure of her fortune; but I think I am justified in assuring you that it will reach a very handsome amount—very handsome indeed! I take it for granted that you will retire from the—ah—sea immediately."

"On the contrary, sir, I expect to go to sea again within a month," answered Alan, quite brusquely.

He was too proud and too worldly-wise both, to attempt any disclaimer of interested motives to men like these. There are people in the world who are honestly incredulous of anything more than what they find in themselves. These people yield you a sort of reluctant admiration while they think you a mercenary scoundrel; but, if you disclaim the scoundrelism or the mercenary intentions, they change their minds only just sufficiently to consider you a hypocrite. All the eloquence of all the angels, archangels, thrones, dominations, and powers, could not have convinced a single member of the Erle family that Alan sought Ermine simply for herself and the pure, sweet womanhood which God had given her. So, the young sailor held his peace, and wasted not even a word on them. The misconception hurt him, of course—does misconception ever *not* hurt?—but he was enough of a philosopher to take it for what it was worth. Or, no—he was not enough a philosopher to do that. He thought he did, but he was mistaken. If he had rated it at its true value, he would never have let it influence him even to the degree of making the resolve which he had opposed to Mrs. Erle's barbed arrows. If he had done what was wise, he would have taken the gift which Fortune had bestowed; he would have regarded the tender, loving, human heart more than the dross of earth which went with it; he would have sacrificed his own pride to secure the happiness of the woman who had trusted all to him. But he did not do this. He let his

opportunity pass, and Fate seldom offers twice a chance which has been once neglected. There are few of us who have not learned from bitter experience that—

"We must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures."

Delay a day, delay even an hour, let the ebb once come, and not even Shakespeare ever said a truer truth than that the voyage of our lives will be for aye

"Bound in shallows and in miseries."

But the ebb had not come in the lives of the two of whom this story speaks. Just now that "tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune," rolled its bright waves to their feet. If they had embarked—Ah, well! let the future tell its own story. We deal simply with the present.

And how bright the present was! Not even Romeo and Juliet telling over the poetry of their immortal love, "in the land where love most lovely seems," were ever more rapt in golden enchantment than these two, in the spring-tide of that happiness like unto no other happiness of earth. Any one who has ever known any thing of the sensitive, artistic temperament—the temperament so closely allied to genius that we can scarcely dissociate one from the other—may perhaps imagine (for words of common prose can never tell) what this period of her life was to Ermine. She was in a dream somewhat like the trance into which she might have fallen over the "Wal-purgis Night," or the Madonna di San Sisto; only those states of passionate feeling would have been but types of the great love which came to her now, even as this love was again but a type of the eternal Love toward which our earth-weighted eyes are rarely lifted.

Madelon regarded her cousin during this time with the cool, calm, scientific curiosity of a person to whom such extravagance was utterly incomprehensible, and (but for the testimony of sight) utterly incredible.

"I try my best to understand you, Ermine," she said, a little plaintively one day, "but I can't! Are you really so happy as you seem? It is the most extraordinary thing to me that you should be! And, if you are happy, where on earth are your rational grounds for it?"

Ermine laughed—a soft, sweet ripple, common to her lips of late.

"What do you call rational grounds?" she asked.

The other shrugged her shoulders in the significant Gallic fashion which she possessed to perfection.

"Something more than fine abstractions, you may be sure. Excuse me if I speak plainly; but indeed I am so very curious, and if you will only tell me what you find in Alan Erle to elevate you to the seventh heaven at the mere proposal of bestowing all your wealth, and beauty, and talents on him, I shall be contented. I can't bear to be puzzled, and this does puzzle me. He really seems to me one of the most commonplace men in existence."

"You know nothing about him, Madelon."

"I am not in love with him, my dear—thank Heaven for it!—but I fancy I know him all the better on that account. He is moderately good-looking—but so are hundreds of other men. He is moderately clever—but so are dozens at least of others. He is a good sailor, no doubt—but that does not concern you. He is sufficiently amiable and kind-hearted to let that abominable dog of his break other people's vases—but I really don't see the virtue of *that*. Now, tell me, if you can, what else he is?"

"Indeed, Madelon, if I talked forever, I could not make you understand any better than you do now, what he is."

"Why not? Am I so stupid, or are his virtues so exalted?"

"Neither—as you well know. But he is simply Alan, and that is the end of the matter. His character is written on his face, for all to read; if you have not read it there, you would not be likely to read it any better in my words."

"But, Ermine—"

"Well, Madelon?"

"Do try to tell me what you see in him. He is not like you in the least—though you are both fond of dabbling in paints. What is his spell?—what is his charm? It can't be only because he was kind to you when you were a child!"

"No," said Ermine, "of course it is not that. If he had been a different person, gratitude would have stopped short at gratitude, and never gone on to love. I can't tell you why it is that every thing he does is pleasant to me, every thing he says, music to my ears; but so it is. You are right in saying that we are not alike; but I suppose we differ in order to correspond. At least I am sure there is al-

ways harmony with us—we never differ to jar."

"In other words, you love him."

"Yes, I love him till I tremble. I am so happy that I would not care if the world ended to-night; for I know I can never be more happy, and fear I may be less."

"*Mon Dieu!*"

Madelon's astonishment culminated in this exclamation. She looked at her cousin several minutes without speaking—then shook her head with the air of one who says, "I give it up."

"For the mere novelty of the thing, I believe I will cultivate a *grande passion!*" said she, meditatively. "I wonder if any man in the world could ever make a fool of me! I don't mean that you are a fool, Ermine—I don't pretend to decide that point. I only mean that I should be, if I ever fell in love. And when, pray, is the contract of marriage to be formally made out—Ermine Hélène St. Amand, of the island of Martinique, and Alan Erle, of—what shall I say, the good city of Charleston, or the good ship Adventure?"

"The good ship Adventure always, if you have no objection," said a voice behind the two girls—a voice which made Ermine start and turn, with light flashing to her eyes, and color to her cheeks.

Alan stood in the outer door—tall, handsome, stately—seeming to bring a breath of the fragrant outer world with him, in his smile, or in the rose in his button-hole—it was hard to say which. He looked much more like a cavalier than a sailor, for he wore riding-gloves and spurs; but the limpid eyes had a gleam of amusement in their sea-colored depths, as he lazily answered Madelon's glance of interrogative surprise.

"Are you wondering where I came from, Miss Lautrec? Ask Ermine, and she will tell you that I sometimes rise out of the floor, and then again, vanish in a cloud of sulphur. Nobody can talk of me with impunity—I always appear on the scene in time to say a good word for myself."

"Then," said Madelon, very dryly, "I shall be careful how I talk of you hereafter. I assure you it is by no means a common or favorite amusement of mine to canvas either your character or your local habitation. I only spoke of you by chance a minute ago."

He raised his eyebrows a little—so much malicious meaning quivering around his lips,

that she knew in a minute that he had either overheard or guessed at more than her closing remark.

"Indeed I'm sorry for that," said he, coming forward and sitting down by her. "I was in hopes you had been telling Ermine what a nonpareil she had secured. Your good opinion would be worth having, because I am inclined to think that you don't give it very often."

"You are perfectly right in that."

"I wonder if I could not secure it *par droit de conquête*? I've a mind to try while Ermine changes her dress!"

"Change my dress! What for, Alan?"

"For Mignonne, who is at the door. I did not send you word that I was coming, because I knew from experience how quickly you can put on a habit."

"I shall not be ten minutes," said she—and was out of the room as lightly and as swiftly as a bird.

In the course of the next half-hour she came down—looking two degrees more slender than when she had gone up, in consequence of being robed in close-fitting black, which showed every line of her figure to the best advantage. After all, there is no possible costume in which a pretty woman looks prettier than in the dear, well-known habit, the fashion of which varieth not through many generations. Barring the detestable high hat (which is as ugly as any and every other fashion that ever came from England), it is the most graceful and most universally becoming costume that ever was invented. Ermine's artist eye and French taste prevented her disfiguring her toilet with this monstrosity of a head-gear. On the contrary, she wore a soft, low-crowned felt, one side of which was looped with an aigrette of cut steel, while an ostrich-plume swept entirely around the other. "You look like a pretty little Spanish contrabanda!" Alan had said, laughing, when she first made her appearance in this; but he confessed that a more bewitching *chapeau* never was invented, and Ermine was doubly fond of wearing what had met with such unqualified approval from him.

"Ready, Alan?" she asked, pausing in the hall to draw on her gauntlets, and glance into the sitting-room where Alan and Madelon were still *à-la-tête*.

"Ready? certainly," answered Alan, rising, and coming forward. Then, after making his adieux to Madelon, they went out together.

Before the door, a groom was standing with two animals—a graceful, thorough-bred bay mare, and a well-built horse of the color known as chestnut-sorrel—while Nix lay on guard beside them, not having been allowed to cross the threshold, because his ever-waving tail had, a few days before, swept a rare marble vase from its pedestal.

What a comfort it is when a man knows how to put a woman on horseback! Alan knew perfectly. He held out his hand, Ermine placed one daintily-booted foot in it, gave one elastic spring, and was in the saddle as securely as Di Vernon; the *modus operandi* on the gentleman's part reminding one somewhat of "Young Lochinvar," who, according to the ballad, must have been an accomplished proficient in this rare art:

"One touch to her hand, and one word to her ear,
When they reached the hall-door, and the charger
stood near;

So light to the croup the fair lady he swung,
So light to the saddle before her he sprang.
'She is won! We are gone o'er bush, bank, and
scour—

They'll have fleet steeds that follow,' quoth young
Lochinvar."

It would not have required very fleet steeds, however, to follow this pair as they rode down the street, escorted by Nix, and followed by the admiring gaze of the groom, and one small boy who paused and looked, and looked and paused again, while he balanced a tray on his head. Madelon, too, looked over the blind, with a cynical smile curling her scarlet lip.

"As happy as a couple of children or a couple of fools!" said she to herself. "*Grace à Dieu!* what incomprehensible absurdity—on Ermine's side at least! Of course, *he* is doing amazingly well for himself; and, no doubt, he finds it pleasant enough to make a fool of her. Would I—could I—shall I—ever fall into a like plight? Bah! not I—Nature left the troublesome organ called a heart out of my composition, and hearty thanks I owe her for it. How many men would have liked to amuse themselves with me if I had only been of the proper impressionable material! As it was, I think I may flatter myself with having turned the tables on most of them! After all, if I were rich like Ermine—pshaw! if I were, I should find a better mate than the captain of a trading-vessel, let him be ever so agreeable, ever so handsome, and I must confess that he is both. How well he rides, for a sailor! There—they are gone. Well" (yawning),

"where on earth is my novel? That trouble-some man had it, and of course" (suddenly spying it out and taking it up) "it smells of horses and cigars! What horrid creatures men are!—and yet they certainly give a spice to life! Even when one don't care for them, one can't well do without them—at least, as material for amusement."

CHAPTER X.

"LOVE HATH SET OUR DAYS IN MUSIC TO THE SELF-SAME AIR."

MEANWHILE, Ermine and Alan, having left the city behind, were riding farther and farther into the lovely, flower-scented country, with the dying glory of the June day all around them. They were so happy—and every thing seemed to conspire to give this happiness such a fair and gracious framework! Somebody says that Nature apparently takes pleasure in surrounding young lovers with brightness; and that Fate, otherwise a stern task-mistress, finds delight in casting their lines in pleasant places. Certainly it was the case, for a time at least, with these. The sweet idyl of their love flowed all the more brightly in that it was reflected from every bright scene around them; and the dumb face of Earth seemed in this happy summer-time, this glorious June, to be wreathed with gladness in their honor. As they rode they talked, and talking smiled—not so much because their words were other than commonplace, as because they had what George Eliot calls "the ineffable sense of youth in common."

"What were you saying to Madelon?" asked Ermine, after a while. "She is so pretty, and can be so charming when she likes, that I felt half inclined to be jealous when I came down-stairs and saw your confidential-looking *tête-à-tête*."

"She is pretty," said Alan, coolly, "and I suppose she can be charming when she likes—a woman with that kind of eyes usually can—but she does not often like, so far as I am concerned. If she were a princess, she could not hold herself more haughtily aloof," he went on, with a slight laugh. "I suppose it is on account of the marine taint upon me. Ermine, my darling, you are a brave woman to make up your mind to marry a sea-captain!"

"I did not need to make up my mind,"

said Ermine, candidly. "I was very glad to take you, sea-captain or no sea-captain. Indeed," she added, with a little sigh of compunction, "I am afraid I should take you all the same, if you were a pirate, or any thing else disreputable."

"I am sure I should find more favor in the eyes of your cousin in that case," said he. "We became rather confidential during your absence, and she was good enough to tell me that the chief reason why she had never liked me was that my moral sense was too strong. 'I like a man who would walk to his end over any thing,' she said; and by Jove! she looked amazingly as if she would not much mind doing it herself!"

"You must not judge Madelon by her words," said Ermine. "I never knew any one who talked more recklessly; but I am sure she does not mean a tenth part of what she says."

"I am not by any means so sure," said Alan, skeptically. "Where there is so much smoke, there must be some fire, even if it only smoulders; and I am inclined to think that a smouldering fire is sometimes worse than a blaze. I have always told you that there is dangerous material in that girl, and I never felt more sure of it than to-day."

"What did you say when she accused you of having too strong a moral sense?"

"What could I say but that if I had been aware of the reward in view, I should certainly early in life have turned highwayman or forger?"

"And then?"

"She shrugged her shoulders and said that she had no fancy for vulgar villany. 'Crime for the mere sake of crime is not at all attractive to me,' she explained; 'but when a man commits a great crime to secure some great end—' 'You are kind enough to approve of it,' I suggested as she paused. 'I cannot help admiring it, at least,' she said, 'provided always that he is subtle, and daring, and ready, if the worst comes to the worst, to face the consequences of his act.'"

"Nice moral sentiments for a young lady," said Ermine, more amused than shocked, for she knew Madelon too well. "Poor girl! her head has been turned with Eugene Sue and George Sand. Don't let such nonsense prejudice you against her, Alan. She really has a very kind heart."

"I suppose she has," said Alan. "At

least, if I had not thought so, I should not have asked her something that I *did* ask her this afternoon."

Ermine looked up at him a little curiously. "Something that you asked Madelon, Alan?"

"Yes," he answered, smiling. "Could you possibly guess what it was? No! I am sure you could not, so I must tell you. I asked her to be a friend to you while I am gone."

Ermine's lips sprang apart in her surprise; her eyes opened on him, large and startled.

"Alan! what do you mean?"

"Nothing to look so scared about, my pet," answered Alan, half laughing. "You know, as well as I do, that every member of the family is opposed, either directly or indirectly, to our engagement, with the single exception of Madelon. She has no interest to serve in the matter, one way or another; so I begged her to stand by you when I shall be far away."

Ermine choked back a rush of salt tears, and pulled Mignonette's rein nervously, as she managed to say:

"That was quite unnecessary, Alan. Madelon has always been a good friend to me. But she is selfish. Almost everybody is, I begin to think," she added, mournfully.

"Of course she is selfish," said Alan, quietly. "As you remark, almost everybody is; but her selfishness can't possibly clash with her love for you. I considered that point. Do you suppose I should have asked her to stand by you if it had been her interest to stand against you?"

"O Alan!"

"What is the matter? Do you think I have taken a leaf out of Balzac and Sue? Stop a moment and ask yourself, would you trust Madelon's friendship, if Madelon's interest were opposed to yours?"

Ermine was about to say, 'Of course I would,' when a sudden remembrance of Madelon's own words came to check her. She recollected how her cousin had bade her take warning that, if ever their interests clashed, she (Madelon) would not be the one to give way; so, after a moment, she replied:

"Perhaps not, Alan—I can't tell. But one thing is certain: Madelon's interest is not likely to clash with mine, since you are not likely to fall in love with her, and" (half-laughing) "I am sure she would not marry you if you did."

"She is not likely to have the chance," said Alan, philosophically. "But all the same,

she promised me to stand by you. 'Through thick and thin?' I asked. 'Yes,' she answered, 'through thick and thin.' Then she gave me her hand on it; and by Jove! Ermine, it is a wonderfully pretty one!"

"Of course it is a pretty one," said Ermine, smiling, yet pondering a little in her own mind on the difference between men and women. Could she, by any possibility speak in that tone of the hand, or foot, or mustache, or any thing else whatever, belonging to any other man? Her masculine world was as narrow as Eve's. This Adam was all she saw or knew; all other men were to her as if they had not been. But Alan had not the least objection to clasping Madelon's white hand, and gazing into Madelon's dark eyes, appreciating both the one and the other as much as if there had been no Ermine in the world. Did this curious fact come of "man's love" being of man's life a thing apart, she wondered; and, so wondering, was silent for so long that Alan spoke.

"What are you thinking of, little one? Your face might serve as a cast of *Il Penseroso*, as you ride along there. Do you imagine that there is any prospect of your needing Madelon's championship while I am gone?"

"Scarcely," answered she. "They" (by this ambiguous phrase she meant the Erle family) "know that I am independent of them, and they will not trouble me, I am sure. Then there is my guardian. He is a tower of strength."

"But an uncomfortably distant tower of strength. O Ermine, Ermine—"

"Well, Alan, what?"

"I was only going to curse the poverty which necessitates my leaving you. But that is cowardly and ungrateful. Suppose I had never won you—suppose I had come home and found you married to Raymond?"

"Suppose something possible while you are about it, Alan."

"You are sure it is impossible, Ermine?"

"Sure, Alan!" (indignantly). "What do you mean? At this absurdly late day, are you going to pretend to be jealous?—and of Raymond, of all people!"

"Jealous! Well, no. Only distrustful of my own great good luck. What on earth you see in me, Ermine, I am sure I can't tell."

"And what on earth you see in me, Alan, I am sure I can't tell!"

They look at each other and laugh—happy as the children to whom Madelon had contemptuously likened them.

"Well, well," said Captain Erle, with a short sigh, "we shall have to learn the worst of each other hereafter, for we certainly know only the best now. I wonder if you have any worst, Ermine?"

"Have you, Alan?"

"I! Good Heavens, yes! My dear child, whatever you do, don't go to work and make a paladin of me. I am only a commonplace man, with the devil's own temper, sometimes."

Ermine shook her head with a laugh.

"I don't believe one word of it! You need not abuse yourself to get into my good graces. I am not Madelon."

"Thanks to a merciful Providence, you are not indeed!"

"Alan!" (with a ridiculous attempt at a frown), "don't be irreverent."

"Is it irreverent to thank God that you are what you are, sweetheart? I'll not believe that. But, as for my temper—let anybody molest you while I am gone, and I can promise them a taste of it when I come back!"

Ermine glanced at him from under the rolling rim of her hat, and was a little surprised and a good deal edified to observe that a considerable gleam of the temper of which he spoke had flashed into his usually genial face and sunny eyes. She liked him all the better for it, since it is an astonishing but most undoubted fact that women—especially when they are very young and consequently very foolish—do like this thing which of all others most surely promises a plentiful harvest of future wretchedness and tears. There is a certain popular proverb, which is not in the least complimentary to the weaker sex—about a woman, a spaniel, and a walnut-tree—but, taking it in a moral sense, we are sometimes compelled to acknowledge that it is in a measure true. Most men certainly like to domineer, and most women (until the delightful pastime has lost its novelty) like to be domineered over—which is a convenient arrangement of Nature, to say the least. Let it not be supposed, however, that Alan was at all inclined to Caesarism, or that Ermine would have been at all partial to being browbeaten. Only the instinct of the woman was gratified by that gleam of menacing light which was called forth at the mere thought of harm or wrong to her.

"Alan dear," she said, after a moment, "since you think it right to go, I have not, as you know, even a desire to keep you; only—only—" here the rebellious tears rose up—"I have felt an instinct from the first that if you do go something will happen; and that, after this dream is broken, we can never, never be so happy again."

"But, my darling, that is nonsense!"

"I know it, and I have tried—oh, so hard!—to put it from me. But I cannot. I am sure all this is too bright to last—it is too good to be true. Earth is not heaven—nor meant to be. Now, it would be heaven to me if I spent life with you, as I have spent these last few weeks. So I know it will not be permitted—something will come between us."

"But," said Alan, with hard, logical common-sense, "what can possibly come between us, save your own will?"

"I don't know," said she. "But"—and riding along in the warm June air, he saw her shiver—"I am sure that, if we ever meet again, it will not be as we meet now. You need not reason with me, Alan, for I have reasoned with myself. You need not even laugh at me, for I have laughed at myself. Nothing shakes the deep, settled impression. Echoing through my mind all the time are two verses which I saw not long ago:

Some there be that shadows kiss,
Some have but a shadow's bliss.

Will it be so with us? Shall we only kiss this shadow of love which seems so bright and sweet?"

"You must choose your metaphors better," said he, trying to smile away the sudden cloud of pathetic sadness which had fallen over her face. "Our love is not a shadow—it is a reality. Ermine, if I know that you are making yourself miserable with such thoughts as these, how can I be other than miserable in leaving you?"

"Forgive me," said Ermine, penitently. "I did not—indeed, I did not—mean to speak of it. I am sure I don't know why I did. Only, Alan—"

"Well, my love?"

"Must you go?"

Oh, world of entreaty in three small words! Transcribed, they look like the most ordinary question; but, with the heart-eloquence that stirred them, and the dark eyes that seconded

them, Alan Erle had a hard tug with himself before he could answer:

"My darling, don't you know that I must?"

"How can I know it?" she asked. Then as a sudden rush of tears came, "O Alan, Alan, if you were only going to take me with you, I should be content!"

"But, Ermine—"

"Yes," said she, hastily, "I know you can't, and I know, also, that it is not at all 'proper' for me to say such a thing. I love you too well, Alan" (smiling at him through her tears), "I am sure I shall spoil you. They say—experienced women say—that it is always bad policy to show one's affection to the man for whom one cares."

"Confound such hypocrites!" said he, ungallantly. "Let them practise their own precepts if they choose, but, for God's sake, don't you take a leaf from them! I would not have you altered by one jot or tittle, for all the experienced women in the world. I wish to Heaven I could take you with me! But, since that is impossible, I will do this—I will leave it for you to decide whether or not I shall go."

"No, no, Alan" (shrinking), "I cannot accept such a responsibility."

"I confess it would be a little sacrifice to me," said he, looking away from her. "You see, Ermine, your wealth stands like a wall between us. I cannot forget it—nor will other people forget it either. The devil himself seems to inspire most of the congratulations that I have received!" he went on, savagely. "The significant words and looks and tones—nobody in the world will ever know, half the people in the world would never believe, how they have cut me to the quick!"

"I know, Alan"—and a tiny, gauntleted hand went involuntarily out toward him. "It is because I know so well, that I have not said one word before—that I am sorry for having said one word now. Go, dear, if you must go. I can wait—as I have waited before."

The pathetic eyes looked at him as she uttered the last words—steadfast and brave, though the lips quivered piteously. Alan had ridden close beside her, and was holding the hand which she extended clasped close against his breast, as he gazed into the pure, dark depths, trying perhaps to read the riddle of his fate there. The horses, feeling the reins slack and more slack upon their necks, had come down to a snail's pace, and were indulging the vagaries of their own sweet wills, in

the way of sociably rubbing their noses together, while Nix stood on the side of the road, and, no doubt, wondered in his own mind what on earth his master was about.

"Ermine," said Alan, passionately, "my faith in you is like the rock of Gibraltar—it is too great to be placed in a mere fallible creature. Child, for God's sake, take heed what you do! If you should ever fail me—how could I forgive myself for having gone?"

"I cannot say that nothing will befall me, Alan," said the sweet, loyal voice, "for life and all the circumstances of life are in God's hand; but I can say that I will never fail you. Nothing but death shall ever take me from you."

"I ought to be sure of that," he said. "I have known you as child and woman, and never yet found a flaw in you. They did well to name you Ermine," he went on, tenderly; "the ermine is the purest and whitest of all God's creatures, and dies if so much as the least spot soils its snowy purity. I ought to trust you—I do trust you, perfectly—and yet, I think your fears have infected me. Somehow I feel—What the deuce are you after, sir! Hold up your head, can't you?"

This unromantic conclusion was addressed to the horse, whose head had gone lower and lower between his legs, as if he meant to indulge in a mouthful of nice white sand. One sharp jerk of the bit brought it up again in short order, however, and then Captain Erle concluded his speech:

"Somehow I feel more unwilling to go to sea than I ever did in my life. It is natural, though, since I leave you behind—my hostage in the hands of Fortune. Ermine" (fiercely), "if God does not deal well with you, I shall not believe that there is a God!"

"O Alan, hush!" cried she, shrinking as she might have shrunk from a blow, for she was of a nature wholly and unaffectedly devout. "Don't talk in that way, it sounds like a defiance—which is so awful! Don't you remember what somebody says, not very reverently, perhaps, but still very sensibly—'It is never wise to try conclusions with the Almighty.' Who am I, that I should be exempt from the suffering of earth?"

"You shall be exempt from it when once you are mine, to have and to hold—safe from all others," said he, boldly and not over-reverently. "Ermine, Ermine, stop—think—must I, shall I go?"

She stopped and thought—long and deeply. What a struggle it was with her to decide as she did decide, no one, save God, could tell. She fought the fight deep in her own breast, and it was only the calm result of victory which he saw at last.

"Alan, dear," she said, in a voice as soft and low as the "wind of the western sea," "I know that you want to go—that is, I know that you will not be content unless you do go—so I will not say one word to keep you. After all, what are these fancies, but fancies? Nothing can harm me while you are gone; all the powers of earth cannot make me unfaithful to you; and I shall remember that our own dear Lord watches over the sea as over the land, and will hear my prayers for you let you be where you will. The days will be weary and long while you are away; but I can think of you, and look for your letters, and remember that every hour takes me nearer the blessed hour of your return."

"And so you say—'Go?'"

"No, I cannot say that—but I will not say, 'Stay.'"

"Then you mean, 'go'—and you are right. A man in the full prime of all his powers would be a contemptible fellow indeed who threw up all his hopes of fortune or advancement in the world, and sat down to be happy—on his wife's wealth. Perhaps some men might stand it and not lose all self-respect; but it would crush all the manhood out of me! Nobody could despise more than I should despise myself—and you would despise me too, Ermine."

"Should I, Alan?"

"Yes, my pet—my pretty, soft-eyed darling—I think you would, after a time. Even Nix would turn the cold shoulder on me. So it is better as it is. I have lingered in this paradise of roses a little too long already, or I shouldn't have hesitated over such a plain duty. The sea is what I need—the sea will soon take all the nonsense out of me!"

"Well," said Ermine, with a sigh, "if it is settled, it is settled. We will make it a tabooed subject, Alan. I don't mean to think of it any more until it is time to say good-by. Now, let us take a canter."

"With all my heart," said Alan; and, touching their horses, away they went, cantering lightly down the level stretch of shining road, with the last rays of the sun streaming

over them and seeming to surround them with a halo of brightness.

So, they pass from sight—loving and beloved, crowned, as it were, with every gift of life, and worthy, one would think, of envy, only that one catches the low, soft murmur of that receding tide which, having flowed once

to their feet, will flow not ever again through all the years of life.

"Ah, never more,
Ah never, shall the bitter with the sweet
Be mingled so, in the pale after-years!
One hour of life immortal spirits possess.
This drains the world, and leaves but weariness,
And parching passion, and perplexing tears."

PART II.

THE TIDE EBBS.

"All's over, then. Does truth sound bitter,
As one at first believes?"

I.—From a Charleston paper, date June 13, 185—.

"Died, at Fort de France, in the island of Martinique, on the 29th of May, Henri Charles Vivieux, a native of Bordeaux, France, and former colonel of Voltigeurs in the French service, aged seventy-four years and eight months. May he rest in peace!"

II.—From the same paper, date October 12, 185—.

"We regret to learn that the brig Adventure, Captain Erle, homeward bound for the port of Charleston from Buenos Ayres, was caught in the terrific storm which visited the whole Atlantic coast on the 20th of September, and wrecked off the coast of French Guiana. A portion of the crew were rescued by a French transport out from Cayenne; but the large majority, it is feared, have perished, with the captain and cargo. The latter, we learn from Messrs. Miller & Sons, who were the principal consignees, is partly covered by insurance. Captain Erle was well known and highly esteemed in our community, and we tender our condolences to his relatives and friends."

III.—From the same, of a week later.

"We learn, from a New York paper, that the survivors of the shipwrecked crew of the brig Adventure reached that port a day or two ago in the packet Elvira, out from Havre fourteen days. Meeting the latter, they were transferred from the French transport L'Hirondelle, and so reached their destination much sooner than would otherwise have been possible. The party consists of seven men—the mate and six seamen—and their narrative extinguishes the last faint hope that Captain Erle might have escaped a watery grave. This gallant sailor remained on his vessel to the last, and, having sent off one boat, was preparing to launch the second, when, with an unexpected lurch, the ship went down, carrying all on board with her. Once more we must record our regret at the accident which has thus cut short the valuable life of one so well fitted for usefulness and honor. Captain Erle leaves a large circle of friends who will long deplore his loss."

IV.—From a New York paper of November 16, 185—.

"Married, yesterday, at the house of the Rev. J. W. Guérin, Ermine Hélène, only child of the late Gustave St. Amand, of Fort de France, in the island of Martinique, and Raymond Erle, of Charleston, South Carolina."

"Charleston and Martinique papers please copy."

CHAPTER I.

DOES TRUTH SOUND BITTER?

"CHRISTMAS comes but once a year," say the children, regretfully; but it is likely that their elders, as a general rule, are heartily glad of the fact—for, to all, save the extremely youthful, Christmas represents more of annoyance than of pleasure. It is a glorious and thrice-blessed season, regarded from the Christian point of view; but, regarded from the side of the earth earthy—a side which unluckily every thing more or less possesses—it is a season from which the vast majority of people shrink nervously; a season when the poverty of those poor whom we "have always with us" seems to weigh more heavily upon them than at other times, by contrast with the wealth and luxury so lavishly displayed; a season when heads of families are sometimes driven to absolute frenzy in the effort to accomplish that financial result known as "making both ends meet;" a season when parties, balls, receptions, and all those gather-

ings which go to make "society," are in full blast, and when all the heartaches and headaches, the torn dresses and torn affections, the outrivalled jewels and rejected addresses, which accompany them, are in full blast also; a season when dolls and tea-sets, hobby-horses and drums, are rampant, when one's house is filled, one's pockets emptied, and one's temper, like as not, ruffled to a degree from which it will not recover for some time.

Yes, Christmas comes but once a year, and it came with a leaden sky and stiff northeast to Charleston on the 24th of December in that year which had given to Alan Erle and Ermine St. Amand their happy May-time of youth and love. The gay little city wore her gayest holiday dress, the shops were thronged with eager purchasers, the streets filled with bright faces, and various penny trumpets had already sounded the prelude of that discord which was to break forth at nightfall, when a tall, handsome man with something unmistakably sailor-like in his appearance, a man who was followed by an immense leonine dog, entered the warehouse of Erle & Co., and asked the first clerk he met if Mr. Raymond Erle was in the counting-room. The clerk in question was a new-comer, and did not recognize his interlocutor. Being in a preoccupied and Christmas-eve frame of mind, he barely glanced at the speaker, saw that he was evidently a person of some consequence, despite a rough pea-jacket and a loose handkerchief knotted around his throat, and, answering in the affirmative, said something about "stating business" and "letting Mr. Erle know."

The sailor smiled a little, and, with a single motion of the hand, stayed his steps. "I won't trouble you to let him know," he said. "I will see him myself.—Stay here, Nix!" he added, to his canine companion. The dog crouched obediently down, and, before the clerk could expostulate or interfere, the stranger had passed into the inner sanctuary of trade.

As it chanced, Raymond Erle was alone. On the eve of the great holiday, he was sitting at the desk, his slight figure bent over an enormous pile of ledgers, while the clerks lounged aimlessly about the warehouse, and even the book-keeper read a newspaper over the fire of the outer room. In truth, the accounts of the firm needed the careful revising of the master-eye and master-hand, and on this the junior partner—looking more pale and

thin than when we saw him last—was deeply intent. Hearing the door open, he looked up, frowning, from a balance-sheet. The tall figure standing before him uncovered with a smile.

"Merry Christmas, Raymond!" he said. "You see I am back, like a bad penny, after all!"

Raymond Erle sprang from his seat, white to the lips, and quivering like a man who meets the ghost of one long dead.

"Good God!" he gasped, clutching at the table—"Alan!"

"Alan, or his ghost," said the other, advancing nearer with a smile, "only I'd make rather a substantial ghost, don't you think so? It is flesh and blood, beyond a doubt; shake hands and see! By Jove, my dear fellow, how glad I am glad to see you again!"

One would have thought that these cordial words should have come from the other, from the pale man who barely suffered his hand to be pressed in his brother's earnest grasp, as he managed to say:

"What an extraordinary surprise, Alan! For Heaven's sake, where do you come from?—how did you escape?—and why didn't you write?"

"Where do I come from?" repeated Alan, with some surprise. "From the brig Dolores, out from Rio Janeiro, that has just dropped her anchor in the bay. How did I escape? That's a long story, and can be given in full another time; only I can tell you that, if it hadn't been for Nix, I should be at the bottom of the Atlantic now. Why didn't I write? Why, I *did* write from Rio to Ermine. Has she never received the letter?"

"N—ever."

"And she—you all—thought I was dead until this minute?"

"Until this minute, I assure you."

"Good Heavens! what a lucky thing that I did not go up to the house and startle her! You must go at once and break the news to her, Raymond. She"—through his bronzed skin it was evident that he paled a little as he asked the question—"she is quite well, is she not?"

Raymond's hand went suddenly to his throat and pulled open his cravat. "What devil's luck!" he thought, "has brought him to me!"

"She?—Ermine, do you mean?" he asked aloud—nervously anxious to gain a little time.

"Ermine, of course," answered Alan, rendered suspicious by this hesitation. "Who else should I mean? For God's sake, speak quickly! Is she well?"

"She is quite well."

Hoarsely and with an effort, these few words were spoken—so hoarsely, with so much effort, despite all the speaker's well-trained powers of dissimulation, that Alan would have been both blind and deaf if he had not noticed it. One other step brought him close to his brother's side; and he grasped his arm with no gentle fingers.

"Raymond," he said, shortly, "you have something to tell me. Out with it at once! I am no woman, to have news 'broken' to me. Is she sick?—is she dying?—is"—he almost choked here—"is she dead?"

"She is neither sick, nor dying, nor dead," answered Raymond. "I—I will tell you all about it, Alan, if you will sit down and hear me patiently."

But, instead of sitting down, Alan tightened his grasp until it was many a long day before the mark of those muscular fingers left his brother's arm.

"Tell me," he repeated, savagely—"tell me at once, or, by God, I will tear it from your throat! Where is she?—how is she?"

Now, Raymond Erle was no coward—physically, indeed, there were few braver men—yet there was something in the face confronting him, and perhaps—who knows?—something also in his own conscience, that made him shrink and quail.

"For Heaven's sake," he expostulated, "remember that we thought you were dead."

"That is outside the question," said Alan, sternly. "Once more, and for the last time, I repeat, where is Ermine?—what has she done?"

The answer came in three short words, trenchant as steel, and cold as ice:

"She is married."

"Married?"

Alan heard, but, as is often the case with some great and sudden shock, scarcely understood the word he repeated. His hand still retained its grasp, but through all its sunburnt hue his face grew ashy white, and his eyes opened in startled amazement on his brother. If he had heard that she was dead, he could at least have comprehended the height and depth of the calamity; but now—

"Raymond," he said, hoarsely, "what do

you mean? You are mistaken—you don't understand—it is of *Ermine* I am speaking. You dare not tell me that she is—is—"

"Married," said Raymond, as coldly and mercilessly as before. Then to himself, "Thank God, it is over!"

It was over indeed with Alan. The strong man staggered back as men stagger under a mortal blow, and sat down in a chair without another word. What, indeed, could he say? What do any of us say when the stroke of some keen dagger goes home to our hearts?

Raymond stood still and watched him. Even at that moment, he had time to curse the unlucky fate which had failed to bring the letter that would have prepared him for this. Hypocrite as he was, he was not enough of a hypocrite to go forward and put his hand on his brother's shoulder, or to utter any words of condolence or regret. Besides, he was not sure that it might prove safe. There may be death in a lion's claws even after he has got his mortal wound. So he stood watchfully quiet and on guard, till Alan looked up with a face which hardly seemed his own, so drawn and changed was it. Meeting his brother's eyes again, he rose to his feet and confronted him.

"Raymond," he said, huskily, "it depends upon one word whether from henceforth we are brothers or mortal enemies. Whom did *she*"—he could not force his dry tongue to utter her name—"marry?"

There was a glance in his eye, a tone of menace in his voice, that made Raymond Erle hesitate and look round as if for some weapon of defence, before he answered. Finding none, however, he threw back his shoulders and folded his arms defiantly. The worst had come; through any thing and over any thing the game must be played to its end now.

"Alan," he said, trying to speak kindly, "believe me I am deeply sorry—believe me this never would have occurred if we had not believed—"

Alan cut him short—sternly and decisively.

"I want no lying excuses to gloss the truth," he said. "Did she marry *you*?"

"Yes, she married me," Raymond answered, thinking that, after all, he bore the revelation with encouraging quietness. "You must let me remind you of one thing," he went on—as his listener stood stunned, quiescent, simply looking at him—"my claim on Ermine



"He literally flung him from his hand, and leaving him stunned, almost senseless, strode from the office."

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was prior to yours, and, although she may very likely have deceived you in the matter—"

The next instant he found himself pinned against the wall, with his brother's hand on his throat.

"You are an infernal hypocrite and scoundrel and liar!" said Alan, with his eyes gleaming like blue steel. "Do you dare to slander her to me, though you were ten times married to her? The devil only knows by what arts of hell you have gained your point, and gained her fortune; but, if the same blood were not in our veins, I would kill you where you stand! As it is, I warn you that no law of God or man shall stand between us if so much as one hair of her head has been injured! Now go, like the carrion that you are! I will find the truth elsewhere."

He literally flung him from his hand, and, leaving him stunned, almost senseless, strode from the office.

Outside the door, an eager group was awaiting his appearance. The sight of Nix told the story of his master's return; and round the dog were gathered the book-keeper, the clerks, and two or three outsiders who had heard the news, and were on the *qui vive* to see the sailor who had been dead and was alive, had been lost and was found. When he came out, half a dozen hands were thrust forward at once in cordial welcome—that welcome which not one of his own kindred was likely to give him.

Now, Alan was "game" to the backbone, and so it is scarcely necessary to say that, staggering as he yet was under that cruel blow which had been dealt him so suddenly and unexpectedly, he gave no outward token of the fact beyond that pallor which sat so strangely on his sunburnt face. He smiled in his old frank, genial fashion—smiled, however, only with the lips, not with the eyes—as he grasped one after the other the hands extended to him, saying to each man a few words of cordial thanks.

But they did not detain him long. All their hope of hearing some thrilling story of hair-breadth escape was nipped in the bud. Without a discourteous word, or look, or tone, Captain Erle made them understand that, having offered their congratulations, they must fall back and let him go his way, free from molestation. This they did after first wishing him with genuine heartiness a merry Christmas in celebration of his return.

"Thanks," said he, with a slight, almost imperceptible quiver of the lip. "I have looked forward to this Christmas for many days," he went on, with a vibration of pathos which the ears of his hearers were not sufficiently finely-strung to catch. "I hope—I sincerely hope—that it may prove a happy one to you all."

They murmured their thanks; and, with a bow which each man appropriated as a special compliment to himself, he passed from among them, followed by Nix.

Out into the crowded holiday streets he went, out among the gay holiday crowd; crowd not so intent upon its business of pleasure, but that many old friends recognized the returned wanderer, and greeted him with amazement and delight. Poor Alan! Brave as he was, his endurance and self-control were tried to their utmost within the hour following his departure from the counting-house where he had left his brother. Everybody was overjoyed to see him, everybody was eager to welcome him back with enthusiasm, and more eager (with natural curiosity) to hear his story. But nobody heard it save in the baldest and barest outline. Courtesy bore him through the ordeal—together with a dull, leaden, yet unrealized sense that all was over—but talk at length he could not. After the first congratulations and inquiries, people felt, as the clerks of Erle & Co. had already felt, that they were detaining a man who was feverishly anxious to accomplish some end apart from them. They hoped to see him soon again, and to hear his story, they said; so, bidding him merry Christmas, they passed on.

Merry Christmas! Ah, happy the heart whose grief has never felt the sting of mockery in those words of peace and good-will, whose leaden heaviness has never been beyond the reach of Christmas smiles and cheer; happy the eyes that have never been too thickly blinded by tears to catch a gleam of earth's brightness, or even of that brightness not of earth, which streams from the Manger of Bethlehem; thrice happy the soul for whom no bitter trouble or dust-stained care has ever darkened this most fair and glorious Feast of all the Christian year! Trouble seems twice trouble, grief more than grief, whenever voice—human and divine—bids us lift our heavy lids and rejoice. We turn our eyes from the brightness, we close our ears to the mirth, we cry out, "This is not for us!" and

we forget—O hearts of little faith!—what few, short steps, along the bloody *Via Crucis*, lead from Bethlehem to Calvary, from the new-born King to the crucified God!

The words of Christmas greeting which fell from every lip scarcely jarred on Alan, however—at least not yet. His preoccupation was too great. Wounded and bleeding as he was, he felt also dizzy. He could not rid himself of the thought that he was going to Ermine—his Ermine—to the meeting for which his faithful heart had yearned, which his faithful fancy had painted, through all these months of absence. Married! He said it over and over to himself, but, say it as often as he would, he could not realize it. He had not yet realized it when his footsteps paused on the well-known threshold of the Erle house. There he stopped a moment. How could he meet her? What should he say to her? He knew that some black treachery had been at work to make her seem so bitterly faithless; but, none the less, a gulf had been dug between them which no human power could span. "His Ermine—his pure, spotless lily—had been wrested from him, and the robber who had done the deed was no man whom he could shoot down like a dog, but his own father's son! Alan was not much more than a savage, as he thought of the cruel and enduring wrong that had been done to the tender and helpless creature whom his supposed death had left unfriended. He steeled himself against all the tender memories of love (memories which would only have unnerved him), and thought only of the stern duty of vengeance, when at last he put his hand on the bell, and sent a resounding peal through the house.

The servant who opened the door looked so amazed—so utterly aghast—at sight of him, that he remembered for the first time his ghostly character.

"It is I, Robin, not a spirit," he said, with a faint smile. "Don't look so scared! There, isn't that real?"

He held out his hand as he had held it for the same purpose to his brother, and Robin—who had known him from their common boyhood—seized it in a grasp different indeed from the fraternal one, his whole face changing from amazement to delight.

"Fore God, Mass Alan, I'm glad and happy to see you back, sir!" he said, forgetting his usual decorous "Captain Erle," in the excitement of the moment. "I always said there

wasn't water deep enough to drown you, sir; but we all heard, sir, that you *were* drowned, and no mistake about it."

"I wasn't though, you see—the worse for me, perhaps! Thank you for being so glad to see me, Robin. I am not sorry that somebody is glad—*here*. How are—all?"

"All very well, thank you, sir; but"—Robin hesitated a moment—"but our family is not as large as it was when you left us, Mass Alan."

"I suppose not," said Alan, turning away—for he did not wish even a servant to read his face just then. "Is any one in here?" he went on, walking toward the familiar sitting-room.

"No one at all, sir," said Robin, going forward to open the door. "Shall I let my mistress know that you are here?"

"No—let Miss Ermine know." (He would not say "Miss St. Amand," and the tortures of the rack could not have drawn the other name from him.)

Robin stood motionless—transfixed, as it were, by astonishment—with the door-handle in his fingers.

"Miss Ermine!" he repeated; "I thought you knew, sir. She's—she's married!"

"I do know," said Alan, through his set teeth. "All the same, let her know that I am here."

"But *she's* not here, sir!" said Robin, with his eyes like saucers.

It was now Captain Erle's turn to stare.

"Not here!" he repeated. "What do you mean? Where is she, then?"

"She's in Mart-neck, sir," said Robin, with dignity. "Miss Ermine has never been back since she was married."

"In Martinique!" Alan was absolutely stunned. "Are you mad?" he asked. "Do you know that—that Raymond Erle is in the city?"

"Mr. Raymond came back only last week, sir—and he said he left Miss Ermine quite well, and so pleased with the island she wouldn't leave it. I assure you, sir, she has never been back since she went away last summer."

"Last summer! Where was she married?"

"In New York, sir."

There was silence for a long minute—then Captain Erle walked into the sitting-room, saying, briefly:

"Tell Miss Lautrec that I will be glad to see her."

"Miss Lautrec is in Europe, sir," answered Robin, compassionating this wonderful degree of ignorance, yet not insensible to the pleasure of enlightening it—that curious pleasure which the vulgar always feel in telling news either good or bad.

"What!" said Alan, facing round in new astonishment.

"Miss Lautrec is in Europe, sir," repeated Robin, modestly. "I told you, sir, that the family is a good deal changed. Miss Margaret's married, and so is Miss Ermine, and Miss Madelon's gone away."

"Is anybody left?" asked Alan, gazing at him in a sort of blank desperation.

"Mrs. Erle is at home, sir, and Miss Louise, and Mass Regy."

"Tell Mrs. Erle that I shall be glad to see her."

He said these words almost mechanically, and, as Robin closed the door, he looked round the room, searching wistfully for some token of the presence for which his heart was yearning. Alas! there was not one. Like the golden May sunshine, that presence had passed away, and the place which knew it once would know it never again.

CHAPTER II.

THE TRUTH ELSEWHERE.

Robin's announcement to his mistress, that Captain Erle—"Mass Alan that we heard was drowned, ma'am"—desired to see her, proved by no means the shock which he had doubtless anticipated. He had not been in the secret of a note which was brought to the house by a panting messenger and delivered into Mrs. Erle's own hand, half an hour before. The first use which Raymond had made of his recovered senses was to scribble three lines of warning to Ermine's mother:

"Alan has turned up, as you prophesied, and received the news like a madman. He will come to you for particulars. For God's sake, take care what you say to him!"

"R. E."

Thus warned—thus given half an hour for reflection—Mrs. Erle, who was a born Talleyrand in petticoats—felt justified in considering

herself fully equal to the emergency. She went down-stairs with her mind fully made up concerning every word she meant to utter. A distrust of her own diplomatic address did not once occur to her, for she had known Alan of old as entirely so belonging to that class of men who are like wax in a clever woman's hands, that she had no doubt of finding him plastic under her fingers. "Men are so clumsy," she thought to herself, in that scorn with which women often repay the cool superiority of the stronger sex; and, so thinking, entered the sitting-room with one hand extended in cordial welcome—now, as ever, the stately and gracious lady whom Alan well remembered.

"My dear Alan, this is a most unexpected pleasure!" she said, in the old, clear, well-modulated voice, which somehow seemed to him now to have a metallic ring. "I cannot tell you how happy I am to see you back again—alive and well! It has been such a long time since your shipwreck that we had almost surrendered all hope of your escape. It is true, I still trusted that you might return; but then a woman is more influenced by her own wishes than by reason, you know. Have you only just arrived?" (This, with a glance at his costume.)

Alan looked at a small French clock over the mantel before which he stood.

"I landed two hours ago," he answered, briefly—and, as he said it, he stopped a moment to wonder if it was *only* two hours.

"Indeed! How kind of you to come at once!" said Mrs. Erle, still graceful, still cordial. "Of course, you are going to stay with us." (He had never done such a thing before; and it was strange, to say the least, that she should imagine him likely to do it now.) "Will you go to your room at once, or will you sit down?"—(she drew a chair forward)—"and let me hear the story of your escape? I am sure it must be thrilling."

Now, next to his brother, Alan Erle's heart was hardest toward this woman—this smiling, courteous model of elegant propriety—and he felt no inclination to spare her one of the bitter truths burning within him. He frowned a little as she drew forward the chair. Uncompromising Arabian that he was in all his ideas of hospitality, it would have gone hard with him to accept even a seat under his enemy's roof.

"If you will allow me to stand, I should

prefer to do so," said he, courteously but coldly. "I shall not detain you many minutes. I did not come to claim your congratulations on my escape—which, just now, God knows, I cannot consider very fortunate—but to ask you a few plain questions. Few as they are, however, I must beg you not to let me detain *you* standing while I ask them."

"I am not in the habit of sitting while my guests remain standing," said Mrs. Erle, with dignity. "If your questions relate to my daughter," she went on, "I shall be happy to answer them; although" (she emphasized this), "I do not recognize that you have any right to ask them."

"No right!" he repeated. Steeled as he was against the rebuff which he had expected, the blood rushed over his cheek and brow at this cool retraction of the pledge once given him in that very room. "No right!" he said again. "Allow me to ask if you have forgotten that I had the honor to be engaged to your daughter with your own consent?"

"With my sufferance," quietly corrected Mrs. Erle. "If you will do me the justice to remember, I merely tolerated the engagement until Ermine's guardian could be communicated with. I have every reason to believe that Colonel Vivieux would have regarded the affair exactly as I did; and therefore any one would hold me justified in considering that no actual engagement ever existed. A foolish love-affair is quite a different thing. This was the view which I forcibly represented to Ermine before her marriage."

"And found a willing listener, apparently!" said Allan, bitterly.

Yet the words were hardly spoken before he repented them, and, true as the needle to the magnet, his heart flew back to its allegiance. No! Let circumstances say what they would, let the whole world say what it would, he defied any or all of them to shake his faith in the gentle creature who had ever been to him so "tender and true." Is it De Maistre who says that mankind should be divided into two classes, "le chat et le chien"? Certainly Alan had much of the canine nature in his stubborn, dogged fidelity. There was in him no making of an Othello. A thousand handkerchiefs would not have shaken his trust in the woman he loved. They had played him false, they had wronged her deeply, they had parted them forever; but, none the less, she still remained firm on her pedestal, a pure,

faithful, passionate woman, who might be betrayed, but who could never betray.

"My daughter proved herself amenable to reason," answered Mrs. Erle, coldly. "I should have been exceedingly disappointed in her if she had not done so."

"Did she prove herself amenable to reason or compulsion?" asked Alan, striving hard for self-control. "Knowing Ermine as long and as well as I have done, I cannot believe—and, by the God who will judge me, I do not believe—that she acted in such a manner of her own free will and choice!"

Mrs. Erle drew herself up haughtily.

"When I agreed to answer your questions, I should have made a reservation that they should be sufficiently respectful to be worthy of attention," she said. "Since you have known Ermine so long and so well, you might also have known her stubborn and intractable disposition. Will you tell me how I should have set about exercising 'compulsion' over a self-willed girl whom the law emancipated from every shadow of my control?"

"There are many modes of compulsion besides those of which the law takes cognizance," said Alan, bitterly, "in all of which you, madam, are, I am sure, an able proficient. At least you cannot deny that it has always been your wish that your daughter should marry my brother."

"I have no intention of denying it," said Mrs. Erle, speaking still with haughty dignity. "My daughter has always been a source of great anxiety to me, and I have always desired to see her happily married to some man who could bear patiently with, and yet firmly control, her wayward fancies. Your brother is such a man, and his suit received from the first my warmest sanction."

"Yet you were kind enough to give this same sanction to *my* engagement."

"Pardon me" (she made an ineffable, and as it seemed, inexpressible gesture of scorn), "I gave only my tolerance to that. To have given more would have been impossible—yet, under the circumstances, I could not give less."

"And these circumstances were—?"

"The fact that I was not Ermine's guardian."

"You were her mother."

"Yes, I was her mother," said Mrs. Erle, with one single flash of her clear, hazel eyes—the scabbards had been thrown away before

this, and for the first (and last) time, the naked swords of these two combatants clashed blade against blade—"and, as her mother, I felt deeply disappointed and deeply wounded by her choice."

Alan suddenly raised his hand to his face. He did not choose that his adversary should see how the strong, white teeth involuntarily went deep into his lip under the shade of the heavily-fringing mustache. Even when he spoke—and that was after a minute—his voice shook a little.

"And may I venture to ask if Colonel Vivieux agreed with you in your view of the engagement?"

Mrs. Erle looked at him a little curiously—this savage of the sea, who seemed in utter ignorance of facts long since grown old and stale to the dwellers of the land.

"Colonel Vivieux never heard of the affair at all," she answered. "He was dead before the news of it reached Martinique."

Alan passed his hand over his eyes. He felt like one who, having waked from sleep, begins to recall some dormant recollection.

"I had forgotten that Ermine's first letter contained the news of her guardian's death," he said aloud. Then in a lower tone: "My poor darling! so you had not even one friend to fight your battle for you!"

There was silence after this for several seconds. Standing strictly on the defensive, it was no part of Mrs. Erle's policy to speak first, and Alan shrank nervously—shrank "like a woman," as he indignantly thought to himself—from opening the immediate subject of the marriage. At last, however, he steeled himself and spoke.

"Will you allow me to inquire the date of Miss St. Amand's marriage?"

"The 15th of November," answered Mrs. Erle, briefly.

"And may I also ask when she heard the news of my shipwreck?"

"As well as I remember, it was somewhere about the middle of October."

"And did she accept the fact of my death at once, or did she require a little time to verify it?"

"She accepted it at once," said Mrs. Erle, decidedly, "especially after she had seen the sailor—your mate, I think—who escaped."

At these words, the scarlet blood rushed in a tide over Alan's face.

"She saw that cowardly dog!" he said.

"She took the account of my death from *him*! My God, madam, if it had not been for that man, none of my poor fellows would have been lost, and I myself should not have needed to be saved almost as it were by a miracle!" He said this passionately—then stopped, and the blood died down again. "My story will not interest you," he went on; "so I will not weary you with it. I came home full of hope and faith and happiness—all of which one hour has ended. But I have something yet to do. I have to hear the truth of her marriage from Ermine's own lips, and to right her, wherever or however she has been wronged. This is my work; and for this I shall always believe that God brought me back to life out of the jaws of death."

The concentrated passion and resolve of his two last sentences seemed to move Mrs. Erle a little. She looked at him, and there was a slight whitening about the lips, which betrayed that she felt some emotion when he mentioned Ermine's name.

"I waive any notice of the insult which your suspicions are to me," she said. "For the gratification of my curiosity, I should like to know *what* you suspect. Who could have wronged Ermine?—or what interest do you imagine that I, her mother, could have had in suffering her to be wronged?"

Alan replied by taking from the inner pocket of his coat a very battered-looking pocket-book of Russia leather. From this he extracted several letters, discolored with salt-water, and handed to Mrs. Erle.

"Will you look at these, madam," he said, "and will you judge whether I am likely to credit that the woman who wrote these letters—the woman whom I have known from her childhood as the most faithful of God's creatures—could willingly have married another man in less than a month after she heard of my supposed death?"

Mrs. Erle declined the letters by a gesture. She had no sentimental weakness about the matter; but it would have been exceedingly disagreeable to her to read the words of passionate affection addressed by her daughter to this man whom she hated as much as it was in her to hate anybody.

"Such evidence as this is apart from the question entirely," she said. "I decline to read the record of a folly which my daughter has happily outlived. Your obstinacy," she went on, "compels me to assure you that if you

had not been shipwrecked—if your voyage had been successfully accomplished—you would not have found Ermine the foolish girl you left her."

"You mean—?"

"I mean that she had begun to appreciate life a little better, and to learn—what many another woman has learned before—that her first matrimonial choice was a very unwise one."

"In other words," said Alan, with determined calmness, "you assert that she was prepared to break her engagement whether I proved to be dead or alive?"

"Since you prefer to put it plainly," said Mrs. Erle, with decided dignity, "I confess that I am prepared to assert and to maintain that fact."

"Then, madam," said he, curtly, "you compel me to decide between your assertion and my knowledge of your daughter. When Ermine assures me of such a fact with her own lips, I shall believe it—not before!"

The lady flushed a little, enough to show that she felt the full meaning of his words. "Mindful as I am of the excitement under which you are laboring," she said, with stately hauteur, "it is impossible for me to endure such a conversation as this much longer. Will you be kind enough to end it, or shall I be forced to leave the room?"

"I am sorry to have inflicted my society upon you even for these few minutes," he answered. "I should be still more sorry to inflict it upon you any longer. With one more question, I am done. Will you tell me why Miss St. Amand was not married in Charleston?"

"That is easily answered," said Mrs. Erle, coldly. "We had been spending the summer in Canada, and since it was necessary that Ermine should go to Martinique to look after her property—Colonel Vivieux being dead—we concluded that it would be better to hasten the marriage so that she could sail at once from New York."

Alan answered nothing. What could he say to such reasons as these? They looked plausible enough on the outside, but a voice within him cried, "False, false, false!"

"I regret not being able to see Miss Lautrec," he said, at last. "I had hoped—very much hoped—to meet her."

"Madelon also left us in New York," said Mrs. Erle. "An opportunity offered, and she sailed for Havre, intending to spend some time

with her relations in France. By a chance, her departure was given in the same paper which published Ermine's marriage."

She crossed the floor, and, opening a small secretary, took from it a newspaper. Returning, she pointed out two paragraphs to Alan. One was the marriage of Ermine Hélène St. Amand to Raymond Erle; the other, the name of Miss Lautrec in a list of passengers who had sailed for Havre in the steamer Golden Bells. Thinking at the time merely of the paragraphs in question, it was not until afterward that the manner in which the paper had been retained and brought forward struck Alan as a little singular.

When he laid it down, Mrs. Erle saw that the interview was at an end. He turned to go, and his last words—being indeed the very last that were ever spoken between them—were such as she was not likely to forget.

"I came to you for the truth, madam," he said. "I have obtained only evasion. But this I beg you to remember—I will have that truth. I resign my profession, I put aside every aim and object of my life, until I shall explore this mystery—for mystery it is to me—to the bottom. And I warn you—Ermine's mother—as I have already warned the man who calls himself her husband, that, when the day of reckoning comes, I will return a hundredfold, upon those who have wronged her, every pang which she may have suffered, and every tear which she may have shed!"

She did not answer. With those passionate words still vibrating on the air, he turned and left the room.

CHAPTER III.

"GO TO MARTINIQUE!"

"ALAN! Is it possible this is you?"

These words, accompanied by a half-startled cry, fell on Captain Erle's ears as he was making his way, with an apathetic disregard of the comfort of other people, through a crowd which jammed the sidewalk almost to suffocation before a large fancy establishment on King Street. He turned sharply—wondering a little who would be likely to call his name in that familiar tone—and faced a beautiful, golden-haired woman who, followed by a servant with his arms full of bundles, was stepping across the pavement to her carriage. The color had

fled from her cheeks, and her turquoise eyes expanded with amazement, almost with fright, as she looked at him. As he turned, she put out one daintily-gloved hand and touched his sleeve.

"Alan!" she gasped, rather than said. "Is it—is it you?"

"Of course it is," answered Alan, recognizing her in a moment. "My dear Margaret, don't look so frightened! It is I, in veritable flesh and blood; and very glad I am to see you again. Must I congratulate you on having changed your name and estate?" he went on, taking her hand and looking at her with a smile. She was of his own kindred, and she, at least, had done nothing to wrong him. Why should he not smile and be honestly glad to see her?"

Instead of answering his question, however, Margaret, according to her old habit, burst into tears.

"O Alan! Alan!" she cried, "they told me you were dead!"

"Instead of that, however, you see that I am alive," answered he, considerably astonished by this unexpected display of emotion. "My dear cousin, let me put you into your carriage," he continued, as he saw how the scene was drawing an interested crowd around them. "You almost make me think that you are distressed to find me alive!" he said, with a smiling attempt to quiet her, as he drew her hand within his arm, and led her to the carriage.

"No, no!" cried Margaret, with a tragic emphasis which amazed him. "God knows how glad I am, Alan—how truly, honestly glad—to see you back in safety. I would have done any thing sooner than—than been glad that you were dead."

"Indeed, I should really hope so," said he, smiling again. "What possible reason could I have for suspecting you of such an enormity? Are your bundles all in safety? Yes, that's right! Now tell me where you live, so that I can come to see you soon, and good-by."

He put out his hand. But the words had not left his lips before Margaret interposed eagerly:

"No, you must come with me now. I am sure you are not going anywhere—at least anywhere that matters. Come, Alan—I insist upon it! I have so much to say to you."

He hesitated; but, as she had said, he was not going anywhere that mattered, and he felt

in that mood of recklessness when one is glad to escape from the society of one's self into any other whatever. Besides, she was his cousin, and she was glad to see him. His heart—yearning for hopeless affection—caught even at this.

"Really, Margaret," he began, wavering and evasive.

But Margaret swept aside her silken skirts, and beckoned him imperiously into the carriage.

"Come!" she said. "You *must* come; I will take no denial. What! risen from the dead, as it were, and leave me like this! Come!"

Her feverish anxiety influenced him, whether he would or no. He entered the carriage, the footman closed the door, and they rolled away.

Then the crowd began to chatter! Heaven only knows how many different versions and interpretations of the scene flew from lip to lip, the favorite rendition being a modified form of "Auld Robin Gray."

"Did you hear about Margaret Erle?" people asked each other. "You know everybody said she married Mr. Saxton against her will, while she was really in love with that cousin of hers who turned sailor, and was drowned, or reported to be drowned at sea. Well, it was all true enough. On Christmas-Eve she suddenly met him—the cousin, I mean—just as she was coming out of Guthrie's, and, right before everybody, she went off at once into hysterics, assuring him she would never have married if she had not thought he was dead!"

The subjects of this bit of popular history—then in active course of preparation—had meanwhile stopped before an "elegant mansion" (that is the correct term for a comfortable house, I believe), into which Captain Erle followed his cousin. The mansion in question was elegant within as well as without; and the sailor, fresh from the sea, could not but be struck by the judicious manner in which the ethereal inspiration of poets and painters had in the end feathered her nest.

"I am inclined to think that, after all, Margaret, you made a wise choice," he said, a little sardonically, as he was led into a dim, flower-scented, rose-hung, mirror-embellished room which Mrs. Saxton called her boudoir, and inducted into a chair that might have tempted an anchorite to repose. "Love

sometimes flies through the window," pursued the cynic, "but statues, and mirrors, and French furniture, are not disturbed by any such freaks of passion. One's heart might break, but a chair like this would be a comfort all the same."

"I am not so sure of that," said Margaret, laying aside her bonnet, and sinking into a corresponding chair, with her wealth of amber hair crowning her like the halo of a saint. "Sometimes I would not care if it all *did* fly through the window," she went on. "Sometimes, Alan, I can't help thinking that I have paid a little too dear for—for every thing."

"What do you mean?" asked Alan, bluntly. "Didn't you choose your husband of your own free will? That being the case, what right have you to complain because your bargain may not be exactly to your taste?"

"My own free will!" repeated Margaret, scornfully. "I wonder when a man—a man like *you*—ever comprehends that a woman's free will, from her cradle to her grave, means less than nothing? 'No right to complain!' I *don't* complain, I'd die before I would complain. My husband is good and kind to me—kinder by far than I deserve—but none the less I suffer more than you would believe if I were fool enough to tell you!"

Tears rose to her eyes—hot, angry, scorching tears; but she choked them back. Life was beginning to teach even this spoiled butterfly a little self-control, and the wisdom which is learned only by experience. Alan's heart—always a tender heart to the distress of women or children—was touched. He leaned forward and took the hand with which she has just dashed away one or two briny drops.

"Forgive me if I spoke roughly," he said. "God knows I am the last man in the world to jest at scars, when I carry within my own heart a gaping wound. Come, Gretta"—this had been his name for her when she was a child, and she had not heard it since—"you used to be fond of me long ago, and, although of late years you have outgrown all the fondness and acquired instead a considerable degree of shame for your sailor-cousin, I am sure you still know that I can be trusted. Tell me your troubles—it will be some relief to you—and let me see if, two heads being better than one, we cannot find a remedy for them."

To his surprise, Margaret drew her hand quickly away from him, and shrank—nervously shrank—into the depths of her chair. "Don't, Alan—don't!" she gasped, rather than said. "I—cannot!"

"You mean you can't talk of them?"

"Yes, I mean that. I can't talk of them—at least not to *you*."

"Better talk of them to me than to any one else, Margaret. I would hold your confidence sacred."

"And you think nobody else likely to do so? Well" (with a sigh), "you are right! You must not think that I have any complaint to make of my husband," she went on, with an eagerness which surprised him. "He is devoted to me—much more so than I deserve, as I cannot help thinking when I remember that I married him caring no more for him than for that dog of yours!"

"But you care for him now?"

"Yes, I care more for him now," answered she, a little doubtfully. "He gives me every thing in the world I want, and is as kind as he can be; but—but—"

Here the turquoise eyes filled up with tears again, while Alan's face grew hard. He began to suspect that his cousin's heart was still yearning after the accomplished gentleman whom he had the honor of calling brother.

"Margaret," he said, sternly, "I know you once had a foolish fancy for—for—" he hesitated, struggled with himself, finally wrenched the words out, and fairly flung them at her—"for my brother; but it is impossible that you can still waste a thought on such a scoundrel! If so—"

An unexpected gesture from Margaret interrupted him here. Her eyes blazed through the tears which had welled into them, and she suddenly brought one foot down with an unmistakable stamp on the carpet.

"He is a scoundrel!" she said. "Thank you, Alan, for calling him so. No, I would tear my heart out sooner than—than care for him! He has poisoned my life for me—that is what he has done! It was bad enough while I thought you were dead," she went on, with passionately-clasped hands and a strangely-excited face, "but now—now—oh, I don't know what to do!"

She broke down in this way with another burst of tears, and Alan—after looking at her silently for a moment—rose, came to her side,

and laid one sunburnt hand down on her silken-clad shoulder.

"Don't, Alan—don't!" she said, shrinking away from his touch, as she had shrunk before. "I—did not mean any thing!"

"Yes, you did mean something," said Alan, in a low, determined voice. "Margaret, look at me—I insist upon it! You won't? Well, then, listen to me at least. You know something about Ermine—and I charge you, for your soul's sake, to tell it to me instantly!"

"Why should you think I know any thing about Ermine? What is Ermine to me?" she asked, still without looking up. "I—I never liked her. You know we never got on well together."

"I won't stop to ask whose fault that was," he answered, in a tone that fairly awed her, it was so grave and stern. "But this I see plainly—you know the truth about Ermine's marriage, and you must tell me at once what it is—what it was!"

"Why do you come to me with such a demand?" she cried, drawing herself away from his hand. "Why not go to Ermine's mother or to—to her husband?"

"I have seen them both," he answered, "and found them as false as false can be. Margaret, you are my last hope—here, at least. Tell me the truth, for God's sake, and you will never regret it."

But, as he made the adjuration, he saw how hopeless it was. His influence, and the influence of her own conscience, were both but weak and faint compared to the influences which had ruled and fashioned her whole life, and which still held their sway, almost, if not quite, as strong as ever. Let her inclinations be what they would toward honesty and truth, Raymond still stood like a lion in her path. She might talk of hating him, but his spell had been laid upon her for good or for ill, and she was now, as ever, his obedient slave.

"I can tell you nothing," she cried out, passionately. "What is there to tell? For Heaven's sake, let me alone! What is Ermine to me, and what is she to *you*, now? I should think you would hate and despise her."

"Then you know very little of her, and still less of me," he answered. "She is every thing to me now, and she will be every thing to me till I die. I know that there has been foul play in this marriage, because I know that she is the most tender and faithful of

God's creatures—utterly incapable of betraying any trust once given to her. There is no fear that I will not find out the truth sooner or later," he went on; "for I have already devoted to the task every energy which I possess; but I am sure that you can help me, Margaret, and I trust that you will."

"No, I cannot help you," said Margaret, "except"—and here she looked at him with suddenly shining eyes—"I can tell you this: if you want the truth—*go to Martinique!*"

Now, Alan had already made up his mind to go to Martinique, but the tone of this recommendation seemed suddenly to fill him with vague apprehensions. Most of us have known what such apprehensions are, most of us have known how an accent, a look, is sometimes more darkly suggestive of unknown terror than any spoken words could be.

"Margaret," he said, quickly, "for God's sake tell me what you mean! Has any thing befallen Ermine? What have they dared to do to her? Speak, if you have any mercy! Don't leave me to torture myself with every black fear that love can suggest!"

"Ermine was very well when I saw her last," said Margaret, a little sullenly. "If any thing has befallen her, it has been since then."

"And when did you see her last?"

"I parted from them all in New York, in October. Mr. Saxton was anxious to come home, while they decided to remain there for the marriage."

"You were not at the marriage?"

"No."

"Then why do you advise me to go to Martinique?"

"I thought you wanted the truth," said Margaret, looking steadily and studiously away from him.

"I do want it, and" (with an emphasis which she never forgot), "by the God who made me, I will have it!"

"Well," said she, with something of the same glance which he had noticed before in her usually languid odalisque eyes, "it is to Martinique that you must go to look for it."

"But you will not condemn me to days and weeks of suspense, when a word from your lips could end it!" said he, passionately. "You will not send me to Martinique to learn what you could tell me here and now?"

"I have nothing to tell you," she answered.

"But, Margaret—"

"I know nothing!" she repeated, facing round upon him suddenly. "How should I? Do you think Raymond is likely to take me into his confidence? Leave me alone! I am sorry that I brought you here to torment me like this!"

"And I am sorry that I came," he said. "You have, if possible, given an added weight to the anxiety which is already well-nigh crushing me."

He sat down again in the chair from which he had risen, and almost unconsciously his head sank into his hands. Strong man as he was—strong, indeed, in a higher sense than the mere physical—something like a deadly faintness came over him. If the shadow of mystery looked so black, who could say how much blacker the reality might prove?

As for Margaret, she sat still and looked at him; sorry for him somewhat, but sorry for herself still more; lacking courage to be silent, lacking yet more the courage to speak. After all, she was of a very commonplace type, by no means wholly bad, yet assuredly by no means wholly good. After a fashion, she was capable of friendship, gratitude, and love; after a fashion also, of hatred, enmity, and revenge. But her love would never have been equal to a sacrifice, and her revenge would have always taken the form of petty malice. Of any thing positive her nature was literally incapable. She had not strength of character sufficient to proclaim her cognizance of a guilty scheme, and yet she had enough of a conscience to be restless under the weight of its knowledge. The medium course which she took at the present time was the temporizing course which moral cowards always take. She was not true to either side; she did as much harm both ways as she was capable of doing, and then shrank back, hoping to go scot-free of the blame which she dreaded more even than the responsibility of crime.

"There is one thing I can do," said Alan, raising his head at last, and speaking a little hoarsely. "I can go to your husband. He, I presume, knows something of the matter as well as yourself, and the world mistakes him greatly if he is not an honest man. At least"—not a little bitterness rang in the tone here—"he will not be afraid of Raymond."

"Are you mad?" cried Margaret, springing forward with a pale, excited face, and catching his arm. "Do you want to ruin me

forever? If you do, go and put such suspicions as those into my husband's head! He will never forgive you, never, and he will never forgive me, either! He is honest—as honest as the day—and he knows nothing which might not be published to the whole world. If—if he even suspected that I knew any thing which was wrong, I don't believe he would ever speak to me again. O Alan, for Heaven's sake, don't—don't go to him!"

"Then tell me the truth," said Alan, seeing his advantage in her imploring face, and so intent upon his point that he did not stop to consider the means by which he hoped to gain it.

For answer, Margaret burst into passionate tears.

"You are cruel! you are cowardly!" she cried. "I have done for you what no one else has done—I have shown you how to gain the truth—and, for thanks, you try by threats to force me into betraying secrets which are not mine, secrets which would be my ruin if I did betray them. Is this honorable?—is this manly? I am a weak woman, and you come and overawe me—why don't you go to Raymond and make him tell you what you want to know?"

"I appealed to your honor and conscience," said Alan. "You know, as well as I do, that I might as well appeal to the honor and conscience of the devil as to those of my brother. It seems, however," he went on, gloomily, "that it was quite as useless to appeal to yours. I beg your pardon, however, for having forgotten myself so far as to utter what seemed like a threat. Since you assure me that your husband knows nothing of the matter, I shall not speak to him. But I think it would be well for you to ask yourself whether the path you are following is likely to lead to happiness. You have confessed that you hold secrets which would be ruin if you betrayed them. Stop and consider whether they are most likely to be your ruin when told voluntarily by yourself, or when exposed by another; as they will be if God gives me life to do it?"

"We do not know what may come before the exposure," said Margaret, evasively. "You, I, any of us, may be dead. Besides, if the matter is merely exposed, my husband will have no proof that I knew of it. You may believe me, Alan—I speak as I might if I were on my death-bed—I had no share in it."

She laid her hand on his in the energy of

her last words, but he shook it off as though the fair, white flesh had borne the taint of leprosy.

"What do you call the share of aiding in a criminal concealment?" he asked, hoarsely. "Don't blind yourself, don't think that your hands are clean because they were passive. Remember that you have had the opportunity to clear your conscience, and to right those who are wronged, and you have refused it. Hereafter I shall not trouble you. But when the day of reckoning comes, I shall not spare you, the passive instrument, any more than I shall spare the active authors of the wrong. I will take care of my life, too—mindful always with whom I have to deal—and trusting that I may not gratify you in the death on which you build your hopes."

"Hopes! O Alan, how you wrong me, how bitterly you wrong me! Was I sorry to see you a little while ago?"

"No," said he, softening somewhat. "I believe you were not. But you have taken your first step on a dark road, Margaret, and who shall say where it will end?"

"It should end here and now, if I only dared," said Margaret—"if I only dared!" she repeated, wringing her hands.

"Dare for God's sake, for the sake of your own conscience and your own soul!" said he, with passionate earnestness. "While I was considered dead, you had an excuse for silence; now I am alive, you have none! Trample your fear of Raymond under foot! I will protect you against him!"

But she shrank back, her whole nature recoiling from the path which he marked out. Potter, hesitate, temporize, if need be, but never face a direct issue, or tell a direct truth. That was her creed—the creed which every natural instinct seconded so strongly that perhaps she did not merit all the indignant wrath and contempt that Alan felt. Do we not pity the man whose cheek grows white in the face of a danger from which he dies, not one but a thousand deaths? And should we not doubly pity the soul which shrinks from any and every ill; save, indeed, that ill which is eternal?

"I see that it is useless to urge you; I see that you will not take courage and do the thing which is right," said Alan, after a pause. "Well, then, here we part—not to meet again until the truth has seen the light. Remember—if, indeed, we should not ever meet again, that you might have spared me much suffering,

which, instead, I shall go forth on my errand bearing with me. Now, good-by. Will you—can you—wish me God-speed?"

"Yes—yes—with all my heart," said she, speaking through tears. "Believe me, Alan, I would tell you, if I could; and, believe me, you will be very near the truth when you reach Martinique. But don't make this good-by—pray, don't!" she went on, eagerly. "Come back and dine with us—Mr. Saxton likes you so much, and will be so glad to see you."

"You are very kind," he said; "but I should be ill company for any one just now—save the one whom I shall go to see," he added, lowering his voice.

"And who is that one?" asked Margaret, a little curiously.

"My mother," he answered, simply.

"Your mother!"—the blue eyes sprang wide open, for, two years before, while Alan was far away, the reaper Death had come and garnered into his sheaf the fair, sweet lady for whom the young man chiefly toiled, leaving to him, when he returned, only a short mound of earth, and a memory which could never die—"Alan—what do you mean?"

"Not that I have turned spiritualist," said Alan, smiling a little sadly, "or that I would call her back for an hour, if I could. But I always go to her grave when I come home. Somehow I think she may know it and like it."

"You are as faithful as a dog," said Margaret, touched unawares; and is it not a fine irony on this human nature of ours that we can find no higher praise or better comparison for its fidelity than this?

So they parted, not in anger, nor yet with that cold challenge of opposing interest and aim which had been Alan's farewell to Mrs. Erle. Their hands clasped, they bade each other good-by (which, being interpreted, means "God be with you"), and if Alan had not heard from his cousin's lips the truth for which he thirsted, he had at least heard that recommendation which accorded so well with his own desire—

"Go to Martinique!"

CHAPTER IV.

CHECKED AND CHECKMATED.

THE dusk of Christmas-Eve was dying away over the city roofs and spires, and the

"night before Christmas"—eagerly watched, eagerly desired by how many childish eyes and hearts!—had already fallen, when a sharp peal of the door-bell echoed through the Erle house. For a marvel, Regy and Louise chanced to be, not in the nursery with their *bonne*, but in the sitting-room with their mother—the sitting-room brightened just now by the glow diffused from a vivid mass of coal which heaped the glittering grate, and looking rarely attractive with its bright pictures resting easily in carved frames on the softly-tinted walls, its slender vases full of those fragrant flowers which the sweet South rarely refuses to her children, and one fair, cold statue standing in motionless grace just within the bay-window, thrown into relief by the rich sweep of the maroon curtains, and "bathed in the bloom of the firelight" which reached even this distant nook.

"Now you must go, children," said Mrs. Erle, as soon as she caught the sound. "You know I only allowed you to stay on condition you gave me no trouble in case any one came in. You shall come down again after a while, but you must go now."

"Mamma, you *might* let us stay!" said Regy, in a tone of expostulating persuasion. This young gentleman was lolling luxuriously in the depths of a capacious chair, and looked like a Louis-Quinze page in his blue-velvet suit, his delicate lace ruffles, and long, fair curls. "It's sure to be nobody but Cousin Raymond, or Mr. Saxton—and it's Christmas-Eve. There isn't any good in dressing up to go and stay with Marie. Do, please, pretty mamma, let us stay!"

"Yes, mamma, please let us stay!" pleaded Louise, fired by the contagion of example, and mindful of her rose-colored silk and the broad sash which Marie's Parisian fingers had tied so deftly. "We won't say a word—will we, Regy?"

"Not unless somebody says something to us," answered Regy, not quite ready to make such an unconditional covenant of silence.

"Reginald, take your sister and leave the room at once," said Mrs. Erle, concisely. "Go up-stairs and stay with Marie until I send for you."

Master Reginald, somewhat crestfallen, tumbled out of his cosy retreat and took Louise's tiny, outstretched hand. They were both beautiful children, and they looked like a little fairy prince and princess, as they made

their graceful courtesy (the courtesy taught to French children as soon as they walk), and left the room. Poor little elves! Their rearing was a queer mixture of two essentially different systems—the nursery, which is unknown in French life, being their habitual home; while they were sedulously trained in that charming courtesy and docile obedience so remarkable in French children, and, for the lack of which, English (and, how much more American!) children are, in nine cases out of ten, veritable little boors and plague-spots in society.

As the small pair ascended the staircase, with disconsolate faces, Robin opened the front-door and admitted into the hall a gentleman who, only stopping a moment to throw off his overcoat, passed directly into the sitting-room.

"It's nobody but Cousin Raymond!" said Louise, in an injured tone, pushing back her yellow curls and peering down through the balustrade which she was not tall enough to overlook.

"Mamma might as well have let us stay," said Regy, also injured, and commanding a better view of matters and persons on account of his more exalted stature. "It's a shame to send us up-stairs Christmas-Eve," pursued the young gentleman. "I say, Louise, don't let's go to Marie. She's in her room, finishing a present for her sweetheart—he knows all about it, though, for I saw her working his name on it, and I told him so—and we can go and have a peep at the Christmas-tree without anybody knowing it!"

"Oh, but Regy, there isn't any Christmas-tree yet," said Louise, breathless and open-eyed. "You know Santa Claus never comes till midnight."

"Then what is the nursery locked up for?" demanded Regy, with superb skepticism. "You may believe in Santa Claus, Louise, because you are a very little girl; but I know better. I saw Robin carry the tree into the nursery, and I saw Marie hanging the lights on it. She shut the door in my face, but I knew what she was doing. Now, if we go and peep through the key-hole, we can find out what we are going to have."

"Can we?" said Louise, yielding to temptation with Eve-like readiness—violet eyes wide open, and coral lips apart—"then, Regy, let us go!"

"All right," said Regy, "come this way!"

And, hand-in-hand, the two young conspirators marched down the thickly-carpeted corridor to the nursery-door. There they remained, engaged in alternately applying one eye to the key-hole and being rewarded by a view of the extreme corner of the table on which the Christmas-tree was supposed to rest.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Erle was saying to Raymond, with an unusual degree of solicitude in her voice:

"Do sit down and get warm—I am sure the weather must be horribly damp. You look pale. Are you sick? Will you have a glass of wine?"

"No, thanks," said he, sinking into the chair which Regy had vacated, and basking in the genial warmth of the fire very much as that young gentleman had done before him. "Do I look pale?" he went on, tossing back one or two dark locks that had fallen across his gleaming forehead. "I am not at all sick—only, perhaps, a little tired."

"I am afraid you have had a very trying day," said she, looking at him closely, almost anxiously.

"Rather more trying than I anticipated this morning, certainly," he answered, carelessly. "But I can take my ease to-night"—he leaned back in the soft velvet depths, and looked as if he was taking it—"with the consciousness of rest well earned—of difficulties and dangers successfully met and left behind."

Mrs. Erle started and glanced at him keenly—a shade of color, which was not cast by the fire, flickering into her alabaster cheek.

"You don't usually underrate difficulties or dangers," she said; "else I should think that you were surely unaware what an enemy this day has raised up for you."

"Do you think that an enemy who comes and throws his intentions like a challenge in your teeth, is much to be feared?" he asked, with a curl of his well-cut lips.

"Not to be feared, perhaps, but certainly not to be despised. That would be a great error—the greatest of the two."

"My friend, I never despise anybody," said Raymond, more earnestly than before. "I know the world too well for such folly. Nobody is too insignificant either to serve or to injure one's interest. It should be a cardinal principle with every wise man never to make an enemy wantonly—never to offend the most humble, unless absolutely forced to do so.

There are few better fables than that of the lion and the mouse."

"Yet you make enemies without heed—apparently without care—when compelled to do so."

"You say right—when compelled to do so. If I have a great end in view, I don't let a few individuals bar my way to it, but neither do I ever neglect any reasonable precautions against their malice. Of course, these precautions are rendered much more easy when my adversary is kind enough to show me his hand, and make me a confidant in his plans for my defeat."

"Do you think that Alan has done this?"

"I received your note, written just after he left. If he had conceived any plan more brilliant than the one with which he favored you, he would certainly have returned to let you hear it."

"Don't be too sure of that, and don't, *don't* let your contempt for him lead you into carelessness. If ever a man was in earnest, that man was in earnest to-day! If ever a man was dangerous, that man was dangerous to-day! Don't deceive yourself—don't think that his bitterness will evaporate in idle threats. There was the look of a bloodhound in his eyes when he said he would track the matter down!"

"Very likely!" said Raymond; but, with all his superb carelessness, there was something of a dangerous gleam under his own sweeping lashes. "The bloodhound is an unreasoning brute, who is simply useless when you throw him off the scent."

"You will find it hard to throw this man off the scent."

He laughed—a low, slightly mocking laugh—which would have roused Alan to frenzy if he could have heard it.

"On the contrary, very easy—so easy that the fact may be regarded as accomplished."

"How can that be possible?"

"How could it be other than possible when you consider how lacking in acuteness, how full only of brute strength and brute tenacity such a man is?"

"But—do you know that he is going to Martinique?"

"Have I not said that I received your note? Of course, therefore, I know it."

"And he will find—"

"The island, and the mountains, and no doubt some old friends—these sailors know

people everywhere—but not the person of whom he is in search."

"You talk enigmas," said Mrs. Erle, with an impatient gesture. "You forget that the risk is as much mine as yours. I must hear plainly what you have done."

"You will hear in a moment," he answered.

"Is not that my uncle's step?"

He turned his head as he spoke, and Mr. Erle—handsome, smiling, debonaire as ever—entered the room. If Raymond looked thinner and paler than he had done the preceding May, Mr. Erle, on the contrary, looked even better in health and spirits than on that bygone evening when we saw him first. Contrasting the two faces, almost any stranger would have regarded the nephew as the elder man of the two, and would certainly have been astonished to learn how the difference of age in reality existed. In truth, the slight, graceful, blond gentleman who came forward, did not look as if the vexations and cares of life had ever cost him many unquiet moments, or as if his mind was ever ruffled by any thing deeper than the tie of his cravat, or the arrangement of his golden curls. Regarding him abstractly, it might have proved hard for the apocryphal stranger aforesaid to realize that this was indeed the man of whom his very rivals admitted that no keener, shrewder, subtler intellect had ever come within the range of their experience—the man in whose hands Raymond, clever as he was, had been throughout life little more than a puppet, and with whom had originated every well-planned scheme which had gone to make or to secure their common fortune.

As he passed on his way to the fire, he lightly brushed his wife's forehead with his amber mustache, and gave Raymond a note of recognition. Then he took his stand on the rug, and surveyed the company.

"Have you been talking sentiment, that the gas is not lighted yet?" he asked, smiling. "This firelight is very pretty, and makes my Clytie yonder look as if she were veritably alive; but I have a weakness for bright light as well as for warm fires. Do you object, *m'amie*?" This to his wife, as he took a prettily twisted and fringed *allumette* from a stand on the mantel.

"Not at all," Mrs. Erle answered. "Indeed, I should have had the gas lighted before this, only dusk deepened into night so rapidly that I forgot to ring for Robin; and neither Ray-

mond nor I have been doing any thing to feel the need of light."

"You have been talking," said Mr. Erle. "Do you call *that* not doing any thing? For one fact that you learn from words, you can learn twenty at least from the eyes and the expression of the face."

"But that is a sword which cuts both ways," said Raymond.

"Ah," said his uncle, with smiling benignity, "you mean that your own face might turn traitor and tell tales? Bah! my dear boy, not if you discipline it properly. Did Richelieu's waxen mask ever betray him? And why should we not all be Richelieus in private life? There!—is not that beautiful?"

He lighted the *allumette* as he spoke, and held it to the cup of a bronze lily, from which instantly sprang a sheet of vivid white flame—filling the whole room with dazzling radiance, and banishing mercilessly the soft, rosy tint of the fire. Mrs. Erle and Raymond shaded their eyes from the sudden glare, but Mr. Erle regarded it steadily. "There cannot be such a thing as too much light!" he said, emphatically; yet in consideration of the optical weakness of his companions, he tempered the jet with a porcelain shade, that mellowed the white glow to a lustrous moonlight. Then he came back and resumed his place on the hearth-rug. After a moment's silence, Raymond looked up and spoke.

"I am sure you would not have left the office unless some answer had come," he said. "What was it?"

"Now that the gas is lighted, you can read for yourself," said Mr. Erle, taking a folded paper from his pocket and handing it to him.

The young man received it with something of a flush on his clear, dark cheek. When fortune or ruin is staked on a single chance, a single turn of the wheel or throw of the dice, does not the most immovable gambler betray the sharp tension of hope and despair by some such token as this—some token so slight that only the keenest eye could detect it? Raymond's dark lashes swept his cheek as he glanced over the few lines written on a slip of paper containing the printed form of the telegraph company—but when they lifted, there was a bright, satisfied glow in the eyes thus unveiled.

"You asked what I had done," he said to Mrs. Erle. "Read that."

She took the paper eagerly from his outstretched hand. It was a short telegram, dated in New York, at four o'clock that afternoon, and signed by a business agent of the Erle house, containing these words:

"Your message has been received and enclosed in a letter to Mrs. Erle's address. The steamer leaves punctually at twelve, to-morrow."

She read these lines twice over, before looking up. Then:

"I see—partly but not entirely," she said. "Tell me exactly what it means."

"What it means," repeated Raymond, rising like a man who flings off some great weight, and standing by his uncle's side. "It means that your 'bloodhound' is thrown off the scent—that he is checked and checkmated at his very first move."

"But how?" (impatiently).

"*Bel'aimé*, you do injustice to your own quickness of perception," said Mr. Erle, breaking in here with a smile. "Placed in Raymond's position, your own instincts would have suggested, I am sure, exactly what Raymond has done. When Alan was kind enough to tell you that he was going to Martinique (or at least something equivalent to that), what was your first thought?"

"One of despair," answered Mrs. Erle. "I knew that he could go there as soon as Raymond could, and equally of course as soon as a letter. I confess I saw no mode of escape."

"And I confess that I shared the same feeling for a short time after he left me," said Raymond. "I did little more than curse the fate which failed to bring his letter, and thus left me unprepared for his appearance. But my uncle came in, and his first word was a ray of light in the darkness."

"I merely made a suggestion," said Mr. Erle, modestly. "Your mind at once caught at it, and supplied every thing necessary for following it out. You had been shocked, and had not quite recovered from the effect of it—that was all. In a little while the same idea would have occurred to yourself."

"I am not so sure of that," said Raymond, a little bluntly. "Your suggestions, sir, are always somehow the germ of all that comes after. Well, at all events" (speaking to Mrs. Erle), "my uncle asked me when the mail-steamer for the West Indies left New York—and, like a flash, I saw what to do! I remem-

bered that the steamer left either to-day or to-morrow, giving, as you perceive, no time for a letter or for my own departure, but being as conveniently ready for a telegram as if it had been my private property. I telegraphed, therefore, to Forbes to the following effect" (he took a note-book from his pocket and read): "'Write by the Martinique steamer to Mrs. Raymond Erle, care Delaroche & Co., St. Pierre, Martinique, giving *this* message: 'Do not wait for me, but leave the island at once for France, *via* any port on the continent of Europe. Do not delay a day, but write me from Paris. I will meet you there.' Enclose the present telegram as an authority, and answer at once, saying when steamer will leave.' Now" (closing the book and returning it to the breast-pocket of his coat), "you have heard that the steamer leaves New York to-morrow at twelve o'clock. Could any thing, short of a balloon, get a man who is in Charleston now, there in time to leave in it?"

"When does the next steamer leave?"

"The next direct steamer does not leave for a month. He must therefore take some indirect steam-line, or else go in a sailing-vessel. In either case the bird will have flown before he reaches the island."

"Are you sure that she will go?"

"Perfectly sure of that" (very dryly).

"I cannot help doubting it. She is both perverse and obstinate."

"Not with me," said Raymond, dryly, again. "She knows that when I am in earnest, I am not to be trifled with, and I am perfectly satisfied that she will obey that telegram as soon as she receives it."

"But *he*! Will not his suspicions be more than verified when he reaches Martinique and finds her gone?"

"Why should they be when he will have no proof of my having had any communication with her? Not that it matters, however, if they are. She will be gone."

"He can follow her to France; and I think he will!"

Raymond shrugged his shoulders.

"Let him! Once in Paris, I defy him!"

"And then," said Mr. Erle's quiet, pleasant voice, "you forget, my love, that in Paris he will find Madelon Lautrec; and Madelon has wonderful dramatic capabilities undeveloped. I always told you that. Trust me, a little self-interest will develop them amazingly."

Mrs. Erle glanced from one to the other—

from the clear, handsome, dark face, to the fair, handsome, blond one—as if trying to take in the full significance of her husband's words. Then the white lids fell over her eyes, and the white hands lying in her lap clasped themselves together.

"I see!" she said. "But it is a dangerous game."

"What game worth the playing is not dangerous?" asked her husband, with something like an inflection of disdain in his well-modulated voice. "By-the-by, I forgot to say that Major Dunwardin will look in after tea for a game of whist. Do you think you would care to play if you were entirely certain of the result?"

"I am no coward," said Mrs. Erle. "But some risks seem to me too great to be run. I may be wrong, or I may be right, but I distrust Madelon; and I should never, under any circumstances, allow her to meet Alan."

"You forget," said Mr. Erle, with unmoved quietness, "where Madelon's interest lies. She is in the same boat with ourselves, and no degree of sentiment is likely to induce her to throw herself out, only to be drowned."

"Still it would be safest—"

"Always to play a bold game," interrupted he, putting out his hand and smoothing her hair with a caressing motion. "Cowardness has wrecked more fortunes than rashness ever did, *m'amie*. If the chances were a thousand to one against success, I should still stake all on the one chance. But as it is—"

"The chances are a thousand to one for success," concluded Raymond, as he paused.

"Exactly," said Mr. Erle, smiling. "And after a time we may hope that our marine Don Quixote will fall in love with somebody else and go back to his legitimate business. Until then, our friend here" (smiling at Raymond), "will have to prosecute his training in a diplomatic point of view, for I agree with you" (this to Mrs. Erle), "in thinking that even brute courage, when once roused, may be dangerous. But muscle is no match for mind, in the long-run, and what Raymond has I am sure Raymond will keep."

"To the last gasp!" said Raymond, between his set teeth.

His uncle patted him on the shoulder approvingly, then turned away, and, humming in a soft tone of voice the "*Ah! che la morte*," walked across the room toward the lovely

statue in the bay-window; before which he paused.

"Women of flesh and blood," said he, meditatively, "are sometimes sources of great annoyance, but, to compensate for it, women in marble are certainly sources of rare enjoyment. Could any thing be more exquisite than this Clytie? Ah, Raymond my dear boy, when will you learn to love art as art should be loved! For myself," he went on, casting a regretful sigh over his shoulder, "I confess that I should have been the happiest man in the world if Fate had only been kind enough to have made me a sculptor!"

CHAPTER V.

AN EMPTY NEST.

As all the world knows (or might know, if it felt any interest in the matter), communication with the different islands of the West Indies is not quite so open and direct as with Liverpool, Havre, or Bremen; in consequence of which fact it followed that, despite a great deal of fiery impatience, Alan Erle verified his brother's kind prediction, and was some time in reaching his destination. In truth, the month of January was wellnigh spent when a steamer from St. Thomas touched at St. Pierre, the commercial metropolis of Martinique, and landed several passengers. Of these passengers, Alan was one. Declining the kind invitation of a fellow-traveller (a creole planter who had taken a great fancy to him, and who pointed out his pleasant country-seat as they ran along the shore of the island), the young man made his way to an hotel, and thence, without loss of time, to the commission-house of Delaroche & Co., whom he remembered as the business agents of Colonel Vivieux.

Arriving at the latter place, the mention of his name proved a passport which admitted him at once to the senior partner—a white-haired old Frenchman, courteous as all Frenchmen are, and sallow as all inhabitants of the tropics soon become—who manifested a considerable degree of surprise at sight of him.

"Erle!—Monsieur Erle!" said he, looking in almost amusing bewilderment at the tall, stately figure, and bronzed, handsome face before him. "I beg your pardon, Monsieur; I fancy there is some mistake" (bowing as only

a Frenchman can bow), "I was told that *Monsieur Erle* desired to see me."

"Erle is my name," answered Alan, in French as good as he could muster. "But it was my brother, Raymond Erle, perhaps whom you expected to see."

"Yes, it was Monsieur Raymond Erle whom I expected to see," said M. Delaroche. "But" (with another bow), "you have the happiness to be his brother" ("A very precious happiness!" thought Alan, grimly). "In that case, it affords me great pleasure to make your acquaintance, monsieur."

It was now Alan's turn to bow, and to mutter something about "*plaisir*" and "*honneur*" under his mustache. He certainly had not come with any intention of exchanging compliments with Ermine's business agent, but the graceful and unaffected courtesy of the Frenchman shamed the brusque directness with which his countrymen (learning a faithful lesson from those admirable models of breeding, their English forefathers!) thought and still think it necessary to treat every thing relating to the ordinary affairs of life. Having accepted a seat, he was silent for a few minutes—trying to collect his thoughts, which of late had acquired a habit of deserting him at the moment of need—and, since he did not produce any thing like the letter which M. Delaroche very likely expected, that gentleman spoke again.

"In what way, monsieur, can I have the honor of serving you?"

Alan started. His truant thoughts came back with a flash, and he blushed like a school-boy as he said, quickly:

"Pardon me, I should have explained. I have often heard Mademoiselle St. Amand—that is, Madame Erle—speak of you, and, having just landed in Martinique, I thought I should save time if I came to you at once to inquire where I can soonest find her."

"I am always happy to afford information to any friend of Madame Erle's," was the suave reply. "But, in the present instance, I fear that you will be disappointed. The lady of whom you speak cannot be found anywhere very soon. She is not in Martinique."

"Not in Martinique!" repeated Alan, paling as suddenly as he had flushed the moment before. "Good Heavens! What do you mean? Where is she, then?"

The old Frenchman put up his eye-glass and regarded the young man for a moment with

eyes which age had not robbed of their brightness or their keenness. Then, dropping the glass with a little click, he answered with undiminished courtesy:

"Madame Erle is on the ocean at present, monsieur. She left the island last week."

"Left the island!"

If a chasm had yawned beneath Alan's feet, he could scarcely have been more astonished. Left the island! Ermine left the island, while her husband was in Charleston! Thought has lightning-wings, as we all know, and, while he still gazed silently at M. Delaroche, he was wondering if despair had driven her to this desperate step—if, like many another wretched woman, she had found too late the weight of the chain which she had assumed?

"Left the island, monsieur!" he said, at last. "Pardon me, but I scarcely think that can be possible. My brother is still in Charleston—unless" (a sudden angry thought sending blood to his brow and fire to his eye) "he has reached Martinique very recently."

"Your brother has not returned to the island since he left it in December, monsieur," answered M. Delaroche, quietly.

"And yet his wife has gone! How did she leave?—and when?—and with whom?"

Up went the eye-glass again. With all his courtesy, it was very evident that M. Delaroche did not understand this excessive anxiety and interest in—a brother-in-law.

"Madame Erle," said he, a little formally, "came over from Fort de France last week. She did my wife and myself the honor of remaining with us a few days—having business to transact before she took her departure. She was anxious, also, to procure a companion for the voyage. Fortunately, a lady—an estimable widow of our acquaintance—was returning to France, and Madame Erle—"

"To France!" said Alan, interrupting this history with merciless impetuosity. "To France, monsieur! You must be mistaken! Surely Ermine—surely Madame Erle went to America, if she went anywhere?"

"Your pardon, monsieur, she went to France," said M. Delaroche, with unchanged courtesy. "I had the honor of attending to all her arrangements, and of bidding her adieu on the deck of the steamer *Ville de Paris*, which sailed for Marseilles last Wednesday."

He spoke with a positive certainty, which could not have failed in carrying conviction to

the most obstinately incredulous, since we cannot well disbelieve that which a man tells us he has seen with his own eyes, and heard with his own ears. To poor Alan—for whom the tide of fortune had, to all appearance, ebbed indeed—the realization of this second shock was terrible. Almost involuntarily, he put out his hand to grasp some steadying support. Gone! But *why* had she gone? That was the question which sprung instantly to his mind, and which his lips uttered—a little hoarsely:

"This is strange news," he said; "so strange, that I shall be glad if you can throw a little light upon the matter. What reason did my sister-in-law" (he uttered the last words with a sort of savage emphasis) "give for such a sudden and extraordinary departure?"

"Monsieur," answered the old Frenchman, with an air so stately that it would not have misbecome a De Rohan, "Madame Erle gave no reason for her departure, and it certainly never occurred to me to ask her for one."

"Perhaps you think it singular that I should ask for one," said Alan, amused in a certain unamused way by the quietness of this rebuke. "But you must do me the justice to remember that the lady of whom we speak is my brother's wife" (why is it that we sometimes find a fierce pleasure in stabbing ourselves with our own words, as Alan stabbed himself with these?); "I have a right to feel some interest in her movements, therefore."

"It is a right which I have not denied," said M. Delaroche, with another bow."

After this, there was silence for several minutes. M. Delaroche coughed gently behind his hand, and tried not to look as if he expected his singular visitor to take his departure; while the singular visitor tried vainly to think how he could best introduce several questions which might fairly be said to burn his tongue. He would quite as soon have thought of cutting his throat as of giving to this stranger even a hint concerning his story, yet—how else excuse, how else account for his interest in the affairs of his "brother's wife?"

"Monsieur," said he at last, with a wistful accent in his voice, and wistful look in his eyes, "you say that Madame Erle spent several days in your house before her departure. You must therefore have seen her very constantly."

Again M. Delaroche bowed. Surely, by-

the-by, a Frenchman's backbone must be composed of much more pliant material than that of other people (people of the race of pokers, otherwise Anglo-Saxons, especially), else how would the constant demand for bows be so constantly honored as it is by that urbane and charming people?

"I had that honor, monsieur," said he.

"Perhaps, then," said Alan—desperate now, and determined to fight his way to the truth through any opposition or misunderstanding—"you will allow me to ask if she impressed you as a happy or a contented woman?"

"Monsieur!"

The old Frenchman moved a little backward in his amazement. For a moment he thought of lunacy, and cast about in his mind for a means of rescue from this eccentric companion—but something sad as well as sane in the clear sea-colored eyes regarding him, went far to reassure these fears.

"Monsieur," said he, "I confess that I do not comprehend you."

"I am aware that my French is by no means very good," said Alan, smiling faintly. "Still I think you might comprehend me—if you desired to do so. Understand this," he went on, earnestly and a little proudly, "I ask nothing which the strictest sense of honor could prevent granting. I came here hoping to see Madame Erle. I am an old and deeply-attached friend, besides being" (a bitter accent here) "a newly-made relative. You tell me that she is gone, and that I have had my voyage for nothing. At least, then, I can ask a question which my own eyes would have answered for me, if I had seen her—at least you can tell me if she seemed happy?"

Said Raymond once, in speaking of his brother: "The secret of Alan's success in life is his moral force. That gives him an ascendancy over men independent of any other power. He says to them, 'Do this,' and they do it before they stop to consider that he had not the least right to issue such a command." On the ground, then, of this moral force—a subtle but certainly a manifest weapon of aggression—we may account for the effect which this last speech had upon M. Delaroche. The eye-glass came into play again, but Alan's honest face seconded his honest words so well that the old man could not distrust their evidence—full as he was of shrewd, worldly experience. Now, although we are accustomed

to think that worldly-wise people are also, of necessity, suspicious people, it remains a question whether the man who suspects every thing is not farther removed from trustworthy knowledge of his kind, than he who believes every thing. One thing is certain: if worldly wisdom indeed be worth the price which some of us are willing to pay for it, it should bestow upon us the power of discriminating between what is true and what is false, what is genuine and what is sham, by some infallible test. Real worldly wisdom does this; spurious worldly wisdom (the kind which flourishes before our eyes to such an aggravating extent) never achieves it. With the disciples of the latter school, "to doubt" is the only verb which they are able to conjugate.

This, however, is a digression. Said M. Delaroche, kindly, but with a certain stiffness.

"If you had seen Madame Erle, monsieur, I think you would have been satisfied that she bears no outward signs of unhappiness. Of her inner life"—with a French shrug—"God and herself alone can tell."

"Does she seem in good health?" asked Alan—thirsting as men in a desert thirst for water, for one glimpse of the face on which his companion's eyes had rested so recently.

"In very good health, I think," said M. Delaroche, looking a little puzzled. "She is pale and slender, but I should say that both these facts were constitutional with her."

"Yes, she was always pale and slender," said Alan, remembering, with a sharp pang, how often he had likened her graceful, stainless beauty to a lily.

There was another pause. This time M. Delaroche did *not* try not to look as if he expected this peculiar visit and more peculiar catechism to end—and Alan saw the expectation very plainly. He rose to his feet, therefore.

"I have to thank you for a very courteous reception, monsieur," said he, "and to express my regret at having troubled you. Before I leave Martinique, however, I should like to see and to enter the St. Amand house, of which I have heard Ermine speak very often. Is it possible to do so?"

"Perfectly possible," answered M. Delaroche. "I shall be happy to furnish you with a letter of introduction to the persons left in charge of the establishment, and they will give you admittance at once."

"It is in Fort de France, is it not?"

"In the neighborhood of Fort de France—a most beautiful place, and I assure you, monsieur, the finest sugar-plantation on the island. Its yield during the past year has been enormous."

"Indeed!" said Alan, listlessly. "But it is only the house I desire to see."

In fact, he felt wrathful toward the unoffending plantation, and would have been glad to invoke the green waves of the sea to cover its fertile acres. Would not Ermine still have been his but for those hogsheads of sugar, and the tempting sum which the accumulation of their proceeds had made during a long minority?"

After this, he and M. Delaroche parted very amicably. Having been questioned concerning the mode of reaching Fort de France, and having answered that the small passenger-steamer which plied between the two ports would not go down until the next morning, the latter yielded to a sudden attack of that mania of hospitality which afflicts everybody in these

"Summer Isles of Eden, lying in dark-purple spheres of sea"—

and begged Alan to do himself and his wife the honor of dining with them that evening. This, however, Captain Erle declined, pleading the weariness of being just off a voyage—which would have been a sufficiently absurd excuse from any one, but was most particularly so from a sailor—and, with renewed compliments, and much more *plaisir* and *honneur*, on both sides, he and M. Delaroche parted and went their ways like two ships of different nations, which, having met in foreign seas, exchange a few words of friendly greeting, and then pass on—to cross each other's paths never again.

Often as Alan had been within the tropic belt—often, indeed, as he had cruised in the enchanted waters of the Spanish Main, and lingered among the fairy islands which these waters encircle—he was almost tempted to think that he had never appreciated the full glory of tropical scenery until he stood on the deck of the steamer which ran from St. Pierre to Fort de France, and looked at the panorama of sea and shore spread before him. Was it because this was Ermine's native island—the island of which she never spoke save in tones of tenderest affection—that it bore to his eyes such a radiant seeming? This may have been

so, since we know that love has power to gild all things connected with the beloved. Yet, apart from such association, any one blessed with that keen sense of the beautiful which is classed under the general and indefinite head of "loving Nature," might well have been enraptured, for, in all the lovely tropical world, there is no lovelier spot than the fair isle of Martinique!

It is mountainous, as everybody knows (that is, everybody who has paid proper attention to the study of geography), and when we put mountains, and sea, and tropical vegetation, and a tropical sky together, what more of beauty *can* we have, short of that Celestial Country of which we dream, and of which St. Bernard wrote? Indeed, there are some of us who would freely sign away three hundred and sixty-five of life's short, golden days to gaze at length upon the scene on which Alan gazed that morning. It was a glorious morning—even for the tropics—and, through the sparkling purple air, the blue, misty hills in which the birthplace of the Empress Josephine is pointed out to strangers, seemed marvellously close at hand, while the foreground of the coast, with its shining beach, its feathery palms, its fields of sugar-cane, and its picturesque country-houses, made a picture never to be forgotten. Of the nearer mountains, robed in the gorgeous robes of tropical verdure, there are no words to speak! And then the sea, the divine, translucent sea! Ah, it was a thing of which to dream; stretching away in lustrous calm beneath a sky like a vault of sapphire, yet changing and shifting in opalescent glory with every ray of light which the sun sent through the wide world of space to kiss its laughing waters!

The quiet little town of Fort de France looked as quiet as tropical towns always look after sunrise and before sunset, when Alan reached it. The St. Amand residence—by name Lieu Désiré—was a few miles distant, and, the climate rendering pedestrian exercise out of the question, it was some time before the young knight-errant could find any mode of conveyance to the shrine which he had made up his mind to visit. At last, however, his efforts were crowned with success, and he set forth in the face of a heat which inhabitants of the temperate zone would find it hard to associate with the thought of January. But sunstroke, like hydrophobia, is fortunately unknown in the tropics, and the roads, like every

thing else in the island, were admirable. Leaving the town and the beach behind, Alan soon found himself in the open country. To one less absent in mind, less heavy in heart, the ride would have been like a glimpse of fairyland, like something too bright and magical for reality; the eye was charmed at every step by some new vista of enchantment, some new combination of trees and shrubs, while on every hand gorgeous creepers and parasites seemed running riot in very wantonness; even the fields of sugar-cane and the red-tiled country-houses adding to the general impression of abounding beauty in form and color. The road, for some distance, at least, was of a quality that would have done credit to a colonial Baron Haussmann. In fact, it was more of an avenue than a road, macadamized to perfect smoothness, and lined with the magnificent shade-trees of the tropics—gigantic cactuses and waving palms making an archway overhead like the groined roof of a cathedral.

On approaching a spur of the hills, on a ridge of which Lieu Désiré was situated, the path, however, grew less even, and the scenery changed greatly in character, becoming more bold, though scarcely less luxuriant, and uniting the grandeur of a mountain-region with the glowing verdure of the tropical belt, in a manner which defies all description. Sad and more sad as Alan felt, he could not but halt now and then to gaze in silent rapture on the marvellous wealth of loveliness around him. Grand hill-sides rose over him, crowned by plummy sentinels, and covered by broad succulent leaves and myriad flowers—fairy-like clefts and ravines opened on every side, giving glimpses and suggestions of beauty, such as no words could paint—now and then there was a distant view of the sea, then a flashing stream sent up a shower of silver spray as it tumbled over a precipice, or sang to itself with a sweet, rippling murmur, as it glided far away into the dim, aromatic recesses of the forest. Everywhere flaunted the wide leaves of the cactus, everywhere drooped the graceful foliage of the palm, everywhere shone the passionate-hued flowers—crimson and scarlet, golden and purple—of this land of the sun; and everywhere a sweet, spicy fragrance came, like the soft south wind, on "subtle wings of balm," to add to the intoxication of the senses.

"It is no wonder that my darling is an artist!" thought Alan—forgetting how many are born in the midst of this lavish glory, for whom

it has no more meaning or expression than sunlight to the blind.

When he reached Lieu Désiré, he found a graceful and airy country-house, on the usual tropical model—colonnades without number, perfect irregularity of outline, French windows opening on every side of the ground, and a court-yard containing a fountain, overhung by orange and lemon trees, of which he had often heard Ermine speak. He was admitted without difficulty—thanks to M. Delaroche's letter—and as he roamed through the spacious, elegant rooms, and the wide, empty galleries, the very echo of his footsteps seemed to add to the mournfulness of his heart. How often in that brief, golden month of their happiness, had Ermine and himself talked of her tropical home, how often had she dwelt on every detail of its loveliness, and how often they had pictured the manner in which they would live here—together!

Now he stood on the threshold—a stranger and alone!

Well, it was bitter, but men's hearts are tough, and Alan's did not break, however much it might throb and ache. Oh, those dreams of which they had spoken—dreams never to be made reality! Oh, those

"Days of summer-colored seas,
Days of many melodies,"

which they had lived in fancy, and would never live in fact! Could any sting of earth be sharper than their mockery now? They seemed to haunt him, as he roamed to and fro, through the house and over the garden, drinking in the glorious prospect on which Ermine's baby-eyes had opened first, and longing, poor fellow! with heart-sick longing, to be *some-where*—beyond the blue sea and blue sky—at rest from this gnawing pain.

"Am I mad?" he thought, sitting down under the orange-tree of which he had heard Ermine speak most often—the one whose golden fruit brushed her casement—"does every man love like this? What is life to me now that she has gone out of it? Nothing! less than nothing!—save for its duties; and they still remain to be fought out to the end. I should be glad to fling the useless burden down into the dust. I *would* fling it down at her feet, God knows, if by such a means I could spare her one pang. Oh, my darling! my darling! my fair, stainless, gentle lily! what devil's art has come between us and torn

from you the one man in the world who would give his heart's blood to serve you!"

Alas! answer there was none. Serenely the fair sky looked down, serenely the fountain sent up its soft murmur and misty spray, serenely the glossy leaves rustled overhead, and the cry of the passionate human love fell back on the passionate human heart like the unalterable sentence of God.

After a while he rose and went into the house. One more last glance around the dainty room which the cicerone (with whose services he had dispensed) told him was "madame's boudoir," and then he would be ready to say good-by forever to this fair, tropical paradise, this sweet, empty nest from which the bird had flown.

Round and round this room he wandered. It was so hard to go! Some aroma of her presence seemed to his fancy to linger here, and it was almost like the pain of farewell to leave it. Every thing in the room he touched with tender reverence, the tall Parian vases which he could fancy her hands filling with flowers, the keys of the piano over which her fingers had moved, the table on which her writing-desk and work-box had evidently stood, and the deep, luxurious chair in which he could almost see her slender figure nestling. On a couch near the chair, he sat down for a few minutes, and, as he did so, displaced a cushion evidently placed to support the head of a recumbent figure. Under the cushion lay a book which he took up—not because he cared intrinsically for any book under the sun—but because Ermine's hand had no doubt placed it there. Turning over the leaves absently, he saw that it was a novel, and that there were two marks between the pages—one of these was a faded flower which he gently kissed; the other, a card on which was written a few words in pencil—brief yet in a measure significant, since but for them the description of this visit might have been consigned to the class of

"All the fine books that have never been written,
And all the bright things that have never been said."

Still absently, Alan glanced at these pencilled words; but, as his eye fell on them, something like light and life flashed into it. "By Jove!" he said half aloud. Then he turned the bit of pasteboard several times over, read the inscription again, pondered a while, finally took out his pocket-book and carefully stored it away. After this he rose, and, with one last

glance around the vacant shrine, went out with something almost approaching to alacrity. In his state, a straw depresses or raises that subtle mercury which we call the spirits; and this straw had been beneficial in its effect.

Yet if anybody wonders what it was, there is no need to make a mystery of such a trifle—trifle, at least, to all appearance—for those few words in pencil merely jotted down a Paris address. To some people this would not have meant very much, but to Alan it meant a great deal, for he knew that this card had been misplaced through carelessness or mistake, and that it was to *this* address in Paris that Ermine must have gone. We have spoken of his dogged fidelity and tenacity of purpose before; it is almost useless, therefore, to say that this fruitless voyage to Martinique had not damped his resolution to see his lost love, and "learn the truth from her own lips," and that he was still determined to follow her to France, or, if need be, to Persia. But France is a large country, and has a considerable number of feminine inhabitants. A search through the country at large would have been rather vague—almost as vague as that of Japhet for his father—and therefore we see the importance of that forgotten card, left in the novel with which Madame Erle had whiled away some languid *siesta*.

When Alan returned to Fort de France, the sun had gone down—sinking like a great ball of fire into the placid, azure ocean—and the world of Fort de France had begun to bestir itself, the first gentle movement of the land-breeze having ended the reign of heat and wakened that multitudinous insect choir which the katydid leads. Poor Nix had been left at the hotel (the heavy weight of hair which he carried making pedestrian exercise under a tropical sun impossible for him), and woe-begone enough he looked as he lay with his enormous muzzle on his leonine paws, waiting and listening through many long hours for his master's return. When that master came, he rewarded his patience with the thing which Nix liked, next best to a swim—a walk. A military band was playing at the *Place d'Armes*, and thither Alan bent his steps. It was necessary to lounge somewhere, and this was as good a place as any other—or better, perhaps.

If he had been in another mood, he would have asked nothing brighter or more attractive

than the scene which he found, for the *Place d'Armes* is situated on the very margin of the bay; and, in the midst of the graceful, well-dressed throng who loitered to and fro, Alan took Nix down the beach and gave him his heart's delight, a scamper in the rippling tide. Many bright glances followed the handsome stranger and his superb companion; but even these fair countrywomen of Ermine and the Empress Josephine could not win a glance from those abstracted eyes, or quicken interest in the abstracted face. Yet the scene was very fair, and sometimes came back with picture-like distinctness to his memory; the rippling music of the tide on its smooth, pebbly beach, the martial strains of the band, the laughter of rosy lips, the sound of sweet voices, the lovely bay with its anchored ships, the distant ocean in its twilight veil, the silver sickle of a new moon over the background of mountains, the heavy drooping verdure lightly swayed by the fragrant breath of the newly-risen land-breeze, and, above all, the picturesque assembly, the dark-eyed creole ladies, full of French grace, and clad in French toilets, the army and naval officers in their gleaming uniforms, the priests in cassocks, a sister of charity in her white head-dress followed by a merry crew of children, here and there a flower-girl, or vender of sherbet and ice-cream.

It was a picture worth hanging in the gallery of memory, and, as Alan went back to his hotel, he could not be sorry that he would carry away one such scene to gild with its brightness the remembrance of Ermine's birthplace.

CHAPTER VI.

A NEW CHAMPION.

Of all things in the world, a day of early, opening spring is the most enticing. To make a slight parody on Dr. Johnson's famous remark about Marathon and Iona, I do not envy the sentiments of the man, or woman, or child, or horse, or dog, or cat, or rabbit, or any thing that has eyes in its head and blood in its veins, that does not feel in every fibre the divine exaltation of such a day! Who can willingly stay in-doors during its bright hours? Who does not long to bathe in the tinted sunlight, to inhale the sweet fragrance of violets, to listen to the merry chirp of birds, to be as merry and chirp as loudly as they, perhaps, to fling care

to the winds, to feel the magical softness of the purple air on cheek and brow, to watch the opening blossoms and bursting buds, to pull tiny, feathery leaves off the trees, and, in short, to be thoroughly pastoral and happy and foolish for once in life? And if people feel this everywhere, how much more do they feel it in Paris—Paris, where the only question is, what place of sweet idleness to choose!

The gay sunshine of such a day was gilding with a flood of glory the palaces and gardens, the arches and columns, the boulevards and bridges of that fairest of all fair cities, when a lady, dressed evidently for promenade or driving, stood at the window of a pleasant saloon overlooking a handsome, busy Paris street. The lady was young, tall, slender, and dark-eyed; the saloon was imposing and luxurious, full of long mirrors, and cabinets, and vases, while the hangings and furniture were all of white-and-gold. It seemed a fitting shrine for the stately creature who moved slowly to one of the mirrors and stood there knotting into negligent grace the lace strings of her bonnet, while the silvery tint of her costume seemed in harmony with the tender budding verdure and the soft blue sky outside. She had arranged the strings to her satisfaction, and was beginning to draw on her gloves, when a sudden peal of the door-bell made her start. She frowned a little and stood listening with her head slightly bent, while something of an altercation went on between the visitor who rang the bell and the servant who answered it. Finally the latter brought in a card.

"Would madame look at this?" he asked, in a somewhat injured tone. The gentleman was very persistent. He insisted upon seeing madame, and would take no denial. He was the same gentleman who had called twice the day before, and to whom, on both occasions, madame had been denied.

Madame looked at the card and frowned again.

"Did you tell him 'Not at home?'" she asked.

"I told him so several times, madame."

"And what did he say?"

"He said he would wait at the *porte-cochère* till madame came in, or—went out."

At this, madame stamped her pretty foot.

"How dare he be so insolent?" she cried.

"I will not submit to it! I will not be persecuted in this manner, or be blockaded at my

own door! I will call in the police first—you may tell him so, Jean."

"Oui, madame," said Jean, quietly, and walked toward the door.

But cooler reflection prevailed in madame's mind before he had more than half crossed the polished floor. She called him back, and then asked quickly—

"Did he say any thing else?"

"He asked to see Madame Villarot," answered Jean, still quietly, "but I preferred to speak to madame first."

"Then why did you *not* speak to me, stupid?" demanded madame, impatiently. "That is just the thing! He shall see Madame Villarot. Why did I not think of that sooner? Admit him at once," she went on, "while I go and tell my aunt."

As Jean walked out of the saloon by one door, the lady left it by another. It was as close a thing as possible—as close as we sometimes see in dramatic situations on the stage—for the latter door had scarcely closed on her silvery draperies, when the former door opened as Jean admitted the persistent visitor.

This visitor, it is scarcely necessary to say, was the tall, bronzed gentleman whom we saw last in the *Place d'Armes* of distant Fort de France—the gentleman who had found the address of these charming apartments *au premier*, under a sofa-cushion in the boudoir of *Lieu Désiré*—who looked a trifle paler than he had done in the tropics, but who sat down quietly in the midst of these Parisian splendors to wait for Madame Villarot.

After a short interval—during which he heard a band playing away in the garden of the Tuileries near by—the door of the saloon again opened and admitted a slender, elegant woman of middle age, dressed exquisitely in half-mourning, with something about her clear features and dark eyes which, reminding him of both Ermine and Madelon, proved that, whatever she was now called, she had been born St. Amand.

Alan rose to his feet, and, as he looked at the pale, high-bred face before him, something like reassurance crept into his heart. There are some people who seem to carry in their mere presence the most eloquent assertion of that grand old motto—*Noblesse oblige*. Of these, Madame Villarot was one. No man could see her and believe for a moment that she could ever be made an active or passive

agent in any deception, far less in any fraud. Only to look at her was sufficient conviction that her white, blue-veined, aristocratic hands were not less stainless in reality than in seeming.

"With such a woman as this," thought Alan, "my way will be clear."

"Madame," he began, respectfully, "I have been bold enough to beg the favor of an interview with yourself because I have been denied all access to your niece, Madame Erle. It is her whom I desire to see; but, failing this, I should like to know her reason for declining to hold any communication with me."

"As far as I can judge, monsieur," said the lady, in pure Parisian French, which made Alan exceedingly conscious of his own shortcomings in the matter of language, "my niece is acting very prudently and with my entire approbation in declining to see you. Will you allow me to inquire in turn what possible reason *you* can have for persecuting her as you have done within the last two days?"

"Persecuting her!" repeated Alan, while a sudden flush dyed his sunburnt face. "Pardon me, madame, but I cannot think that Ermine—that Madame Erle regards my desire to see her in the light of persecution! If so—"

He stopped suddenly, and swallowed his indignant words with a gulp.

"If so," said Madame Villaret, seeing her advantage and following it up with a very gracious smile, "I am sure that monsieur is too much of a gentleman to pain or distress any one—especially a woman whom he may have loved."

"A woman whom I *do* love, madame," corrected monsieur, coolly, "and whom I have followed across the Atlantic that I may learn from her own lips the truth concerning her marriage. Have you heard my story, madame?" he went on, "or shall I weary you if I repeat it? Otherwise my conduct may seem to you to need an excuse."

"I have heard the outline of your story, monsieur," answered Madame Villaret, kindly, "and I willingly grant to you all the excuse which you may desire to claim. But do you not see that you are *too late*? The marriage-knot, once tied, cannot be untied, and what good, therefore, could ensue from explanation of what is past? Harm, rather, might—nay, would—follow if you met Ermine. She herself shrinks from the meeting. Can you not realize this feeling, and generously respect it? Sure-

ly, if you love her, you must desire to serve her."

"God knows that I desire nothing else," said Alan, gravely.

"Then, monsieur," said the lady, with her dark, eloquent eyes fastened full on him, "as a gentleman and as a Christian, *leave her*. I, who have a woman's heart to feel and to sympathize with you—I, who admire and respect your rare fidelity—I bid you do this in that holy Name which you have invoked! If you love her, you are the last man in the world who should linger by her side, or look into her eyes! You are the last man in the world who should bring dissension between herself and the man to whom she gave her hand before God's holy altar!"

"She was mine before she was his!" said Alan, fiercely. "She has been stolen from me! Madame, madame, do not try to make me believe that I have not a right to say to her what I will!"

"It is not necessary for me to try to make you believe it," said Madame Villaret, still kindly, still gently; "your own conscience,—your own sense of right and wrong—speak to you with more authority than my feeble voice. Monsieur, I pity you from my soul, for I see the fight which you will have to wage—and it is a fight in which there can be no compromise. Now, listen to me—you acknowledge that you love my niece?"

"Yes," said Alan, bitterly, "one does not unlearn the lesson of a lifetime in a few months."

"You acknowledge also that she is married—why or how, does not matter. It is enough that, being married, she is irrevocably lost to you."

"Yes," said he, between his set teeth. "I acknowledge that. She is irrevocably lost to me."

"Then," said the lady, "realizing these things, why do you still wish to see her? What end can you possibly desire to gain by distracting her mind and harrowing her heart by a last interview—which," she added, with keen, worldly wisdom, "if once granted, would not be the last."

"I desire one thing, madame, which you have not taken into account," said he, almost sternly—"that is, revenge! You are a woman—a good one, I am sure," he added, earnestly—"therefore, it is impossible for you to imagine the manner in which a man's thoughts

turn instinctively to that resource, when he has been injured beyond hope of cure. I know that there has been some black villany in this work—and I will yet lay my hand on it. But Ermine alone can enable me to do this."

"And what would you think of Ermine if she gave you the information you desire, if, in so doing, she turned against the man who, whether for good or for evil, is her husband?"

"You don't see—you don't understand—" he broke out, vehemently.

But a white, slender hand, raised for a moment, stayed the words on his lips.

"Believe me, I understand perfectly," said Madame Villaret, gravely. "Ah, yours is no new case. We all agree that moral laws are very useful things as long as they do not bind our own inclinations. When they do this, however, we all think that we have some exceptionally good reason for bursting them asunder. Monsieur, I am sure that you are honorable, and I think that you will prove reasonable—therefore, I speak to you plainly. I entered this room inclined in a measure to your side—thinking that Ermine might consent to see you—once at least. I recognize now that she was wiser than I. She distrusts herself—no doubt with good cause. She distrusts you—no doubt with better cause yet. The interview, she says, would be acutely painful to her. I see now that it would be worse than painful—it would be dangerous. Such passions as yours are not made for playthings. You must go! Being a gentleman, being a Christian, you *will* go! And, if you are wise, you will put land and sea between yourself and this woman whom you love, and who is now separated from you—irrevocably."

We have all of us heard of personal magnetism, and once or twice in life we may have met it, as Alan met it now in this fair, graceful Frenchwoman. Whether the power was in herself or in the words which she uttered, it is hard to say. But power of a certain subtle kind existed in every glance of her eye, every accent of her voice—power which it was impossible even for his obstinate will to resist. Like wax exposed to the white heat of fire, his fierce passion and steadfast resolve seemed to melt away before the simple words of this stranger—the woman whom half an hour before he had never seen. When she laid her delicate, thorough-bred hand down upon his,

in the energy of her last word, he felt as if the blackness of despair were gathering round him—as if, indeed, she left him no alternative but to go.

"Madame," said he, after a pause, "you are right—I am wrong. I have acted and wished to act like a mad fool. God forgive me if, in trying to serve Ermine, I have only pained and injured her! I see that I must resign the hope of avenging her wrongs, since the blow which struck others would, in a measure, recoil upon herself. But, madame—and Madame Villaret never forgot the passionate eyes which met her own here—"when a man is going forth on a long journey, never to return, can you deny him one farewell? Can it injure *any one* if he looks his last into the eyes which have been the sweetest eyes in the world to him for many years, or if he clasps the hand which has lain in his a thousand times, and was to have been his own? I promise you that I will say nothing which the whole world might not hear. Only let me bid adieu" (if he had been speaking his native tongue, he would have said "good-by," but there is no equivalent for that sweet word in the French language) "to the one light of my life—and go."

Ah, love makes poets as well as fools of us all! There was not in the world—in that fine, English-speaking world which has set its surly face against "sentiment"—a more practical person in the ordinary affairs of life, than Alan Erle. But his love for Ermine had been, indeed, and in a different sense from that in which Byron meant the expression, "of his life a thing apart." This life had been like a rough cloth, strong in fibre and coarse in grain, but through which there ran a single golden thread—the poetry of a love which the rare, sweet nature of its object exalted above the ordinary passion which bears that much abused name. So, when he made an appeal to say good-by to that love forever, the love itself loosed his tongue, and inspired the words whose unconscious eloquence Madame Villaret long remembered. "Ah!" she would often say in speaking of him, "believe me, there was a chevalier of Nature's own making—a generous nature, a faithful heart, a love such as we do not discover in the fine gentlemen of our nineteenth century. They fritter away their hearts (or whatever is supposed to do duty for their hearts) on a hundred different follies and fancies, until a feeble liking is all that

they have left to give to any one; but that man—there was passion which deserved the name in him!"

She did not say this to the "chevalier" in question, though—she only shook her head and gazed at him with kind, steadfast eyes.

"Be brave!" she said. "Do not ask it. Go without it. You do not realize—you can't imagine—how much harder it would make the separation. You would transform a wound which is closing—I do not say healing—into one which would be open and gaping. No, my friend, no! Be generous—be courageous—go!"

"I must see her—I will see her!" said he, hoarsely. "You shall not keep her from me! My God! madame, have you no heart, that you cannot even grant me this?"

"It is because I have a heart that I refuse it," answered she, gently. "Monsieur, do you know what you ask! When you do know, you will thank me for standing between you and your own desire. Once more I warn you that this passion of yours is no plaything. On the contrary, it is a mine of gunpowder which one spark will ignite—and I know enough of human nature to be sure that one sight of Ermine (whom you acknowledge you have not seen for nine months) would prove such a spark. Therefore, no such meeting shall take place within my doors, and I am sure you are too chivalrous a gentleman to meet my niece elsewhere."

"O madame," said he, bitterly, "do not trust to my chivalry in such a matter as this. I would set aside any thing—break through any law—to reach Ermine. She is mine! I have a right to meet her when and where I will!"

"Not against her own will," said Madame Villarot, gravely. "Your chivalry will grant that much, I am sure—especially when I pledge my word as a Christian, and my honor as a Frenchwoman, that the thing of all others which Ermine is most anxious to avoid is an interview with yourself. The fear of meeting you has kept her a prisoner in the house ever since you have been in Paris. Now, will you force this which she dreads upon her? Will you distract her mind, which has settled itself to accept the inevitable? Will you inflict pain upon yourself, and worse pain upon her, merely to gratify your own desire? Monsieur, I think not."

Again she conquered. He looked at her

for a moment with a pale, blank face—then quietly rose to his feet.

"Madame," said he, simply, "you have left me nothing to say—but farewell. I shall leave your doors a little wiser than when I entered them, and I shall leave Paris to-night. Your niece, therefore, need no longer be a prisoner on my account. If you tell her any thing from me let it simply be 'God bless her!' For yourself, I shall never forget the generous kindness and sympathy with which you have received and listened to me. The reward, your own heart must give you. Adieu."

She held out her hand, and, as if he had been born and bred in France, he bent and kissed it.

"Monsieur," said she, gently, "take with you not my pity, but my admiration. Out of such stuff as you heroes are made!"

They were brave, gracious words, and, as he passed out, they went with him like a cordial. But for them, his strength might have failed when the door closed behind him, and he felt that the last strand of hope had slipped from his grasp.

Meanwhile, it is hard to say what Madame Villarot would have thought if she had only seen, in its true colors, the cause in which she had fought and triumphed. Pure and noble lady that she was, we may be sure that it would have gone bitterly hard with her to know that her efforts had turned the scale of victory for wrong against right, for treachery against truth. Yet she might have consoled herself by the reflection that she had battled not for an individual merely, but for an abstract principle—and that principles never change. Yet it was at least a strange freak of circumstance which thus arrayed such a champion on such a side, and lent such stainless weapons to such a warfare. But then it not unseldom happens "in this riddling world" that weapons stainless as hers are unsheathed to do battle for some cause which cloaks the malicious form of a demon under the stolen raiment of an angel of God!

When Madame Villarot went to the chamber of her niece, she found her sitting by an open window, with the quivering sunlight pouring down upon her idly-clasped hands, her shining dress, her rich, dark hair (the bonnet had been laid aside), and her white, sculptured face. The immobility of the attitude struck the elder woman with pain, as she entered the room—and, crossing the floor, she

said a few words—purposely tender—hoping that tears might break through this rigid calm. But no tears came. Gravely, quietly, without a movement of feature, or of glance, the girl heard the circumstantial account of the interview—and, when it was ended, she said in a low, even voice:

"Thank you, *ma tante*, for your great goodness and kindness—to him as well as to me. Now, if you will not think me ungrateful, will you add one favor to the rest? Will you leave me, and see that I am not disturbed until dinner?"

"But, my child, you were going to drive with me," said Madame Villarot, kindly. "Do you not think it would do you more good than staying here alone?"

"Not if you will excuse me. My head aches, and I should like to be alone."

"At least let Clemence stay with you. You may need something."

"I prefer to be alone," was the answer. Then with passionately uplifted eyes, "Ah, dear aunt, grant me to-day! To-morrow I will be all you wish!"

"My child, do as you please—no one shall disturb you," said Madame Villarot, gently.

Then she bent down, kissed the white brow, and gently rustled from the room.

"After all, the child is wise," she thought—"wise to take it in this way. Perhaps it is best to let her fight it out alone. She has a brave heart, and the holy angels are near to help her."

Ah, sweet lady, near indeed—ever near—but bearing no part save that of sad spectators in such a conflict as this.

Soon afterward, Madame Villarot drove away from the *porte-cochère*; and soon again, after that, a daintily-dressed lady, wearing a heavy veil, passed out of the same door, and took her away along the Rue Royale, across the Place de la Concorde, and into the open gates of the Tuileries, where a tall man and a large dog had entered not long before.

CHAPTER VII.

DRAMATIC CAPABILITIES.

THE Tuileries! Ah, what a chord of bitter grief and more bitter rage—to which there has come as yet no comfort—that name awakens! Alas for the beautiful palace, and

its beautiful gardens! Alas, yet more, for that fair and noble France whose own ungrateful children have proved her bitterest and direst enemies! On that by-gone day of which I write, however, the bright spring sunshine still slept on the stately column of the Place Vendôme, the imperial city still wore her crown of peerless beauty, the golden grain and the purple vintage still ripened peacefully on the broad plains of Normandy and the sunny hills of Provence, the noble fortresses of France still echoed the *reveillé* of French drums, and the royal façade of the Tuileries still crowned its beautiful terraces, while its many windows gave back the sunshine in a blaze of glory, like an illumination over some great victory where French heroism and daring had again received their baptism of blood! In the garden, with its fountains, and statues, and green arcades, soldiers still paced, military music played, the glittering crowd moved to and fro; children, followed by white-capped nurses, scampered along the paths; people sat on the benches under the budding chestnut-trees, reading or gossiping, while numberless other people strolled past; birds twittered in the boughs, early spring flowers gleamed along the borders, and the fragrance of bursting buds seemed to fill the air with a delicious sense of Nature's awakening vitality.

Fresh as Alan was from the enchanted tropical world, the beauty of the scene pleased and soothed him. Followed by Nix, whom he had not admitted to Madame Villarot's saloon, he strolled down one path after another, past merry groups of children playing hide-and-seek about the statues, past old gentlemen and young gentlemen, past grand ladies, and ladies who were not grand, finally paused for a moment near the music, then rose and began to stroll away again toward the Rue de Rivoli. But he had not taken many steps in this direction, when a lady rose from a bench under the soft, flickering shade, and, lifting her veil with one hand, held out the other.

For an instant, Alan recoiled as if he had been shot. Ermine was so entirely in his thoughts, that, for the space of a second, he almost thought she was before his sight—the graceful figure, the clear, white complexion, the delicate features, the large, dark eyes, making an *ensemble* strikingly like her own. Then he recognized Madelon Lautrec.

"Madelon!" said he, eagerly, so surprised and delighted to see her that he made one

quick step forward and clasped the extended hand in both his own—"what extraordinary good fortune that I should meet you—otherwise I might have left Paris without knowing that you were here! What are you doing?—where did you come from?"

"Have I not a right to see the world as well as my betters?" asked she, looking up at him, with the bright, mocking smile which he well remembered, and which carried him back to the familiar scenes in Charleston, as if by a flash. "*Ma foi*, M. le Capitaine, railroads from every part of the world run into Paris, and for the rest—even a penniless maiden may enjoy a bench in the gardens of the Tuilleries for nothing!"

"May she?" said he, smiling a little; "but then she must expect to share it, if an old friend comes by. You will sit down again, won't you? I have so much to say to you."

"Yes, I will sit down again," answered she, lowering her veil, "but not just here. You must remember that we are not in Charleston now. My aunt would be shocked if she knew that I was in the open and flagrant act of talking with a man—absolutely a man—without any chaperone near by to overlook my deportment. Under these circumstances, I don't care to meet any of our acquaintances, and therefore I should prefer some more secluded part of the garden."

"We can easily find one," said he. And, side by side, they walked away, leaving the music and the chief part of the glittering throng behind them.

In Paris nobody is observed, unless it be a pretty woman quite alone, and they soon found the nook of which they were in search, a pleasant seat just large enough for two, under a spreading horse-chestnut-tree, with a fountain playing not far off, and a group of statuary in front. As they sat down, Madelon felt sufficiently secure to take off her veil, and Alan could not forbear saying:

"You are handsomer than ever, Madelon, if that be possible."

"Am I?" asked she, with bright, half-lifted eyes. "I am so glad to hear it. I was always vain, you know, and never made a pretence of concealing my vanity, as most women do. I am proud of my *beaux yeux*, and I mean to make them do me good service in this gay world of Paris. Ah, Alan," with a sigh, not of pain but of deep enjoyment, "now I know what it is to live. Before this, I have merely existed."

"When did you come here?" asked he, absently, pulling Nix's silken ears as he spoke.

"About a month ago," answered she, then correcting herself with a blush, as he quickly looked up, "How foolish I am! You mean, of course, when did I come to France. That was last November. But I came to Paris a month ago, to meet Ermine, who wrote that she would be here at that time."

"Are you staying with Ermine?" asked he, looking at her in some surprise.

"Did you not know it?" said she, returning the gaze with eyes which did not blench or turn away. "Did not Madame Villarot tell you?"

"No, she did not tell me. Why did you not come in to see me? It would have been only friendly to do so, and we were always good friends, were we not?"

"In America—yes. But in France there is no such thing as friendship between a man and a woman, unless they are brother and sister, or *fiancé*, or old—as Mount Horeb."

Alan laughed. One can laugh even when one's heart is broken, you know.

"And if Madame Villarot is such a drag-oness—she does not look it. By-the-by, how do you come to be wandering about the Tuilleries alone?"

She glanced up at him with a petulant motion of her scarlet lip, which was very pretty and piquante.

"Your gratitude, monsieur, is only equalled by your discernment. I came because Madame Villarot has gone to drive, and because I wanted to see you—for old acquaintance' sake, perhaps—or because I thought you might like to hear the news of Ermine from Ermine's Siamese Twin, as they called me in Charleston."

"I see that I was not wrong when I used to say that, notwithstanding all the keen thrusts of that sharp sword, your tongue, your heart was in the right place," said he, smiling kindly. "Thank you very much, dear Madelon, for coming to see me, whether for old acquaintance' sake, or for that other, better reason. But" (looking a little puzzled), "how did you know that you should find me here?"

She smiled—the smile of one secure of her own discernment, and proud of her own skill.

"I was sure of it," said she. "Could any one—especially a stranger in Paris, with no friends, and no places of familiar resort—pass

the open gates of the Tuilleries without entering? *C'est impossible!* I felt confident you would be here, and so I came. I saw him" (motioning toward Nix) "before I saw you. Then I knew I had not been mistaken."

"And," said Alan, drawing his hat a little lower over his eyes, and setting his lips a little more firmly under the drooping mustache, "and you come from Ermine? Did she know that you were coming to me?"

Madelon shook her head, her bright, dark eyes meeting his as steadily as ever.

"No, I dared not tell her. It would have served no good purpose, but would only have unsettled her, and wakened the storm again. When things are at rest, they had better be left so," said she, with an expression, which he did not exactly understand, flitting across her clear-cut, resolute lips. "Ermine's passion has expended itself—for the present at least—and where would be the sense of rousing it again, of overturning every thing and of making everybody miserable? It would be worse than folly, worse than madness, and *it shall not be done!*"

"Did you come to tell me this?" asked he, looking at her a little curiously, for he did not comprehend what interest of hers could have inspired the passionate energy which lent force to the last words.

"Not entirely," answered she. "In fact, scarcely at all. I thought that Aunt Hélène might have been unnecessarily peremptory, in refusing to allow you to see Ermine, and that I would come and explain any thing which might need explanation."

"You are very kind," said he, gratefully, "kinder than I deserve. Don't mind my *brusquerie*, Madelon. I never was much of a *preux chevalier*, at the best of times, but this trouble has made me harsh and suspicious toward every one. Your aunt was gentle and considerate in the extreme, a woman among ten thousand," said he, smiling slightly, "for knowing how to govern the flux and reflux of a man's mood. I have promised her that I will not trouble Ermine again, and you may be sure that I shall keep my word."

"Did you ever fail to keep it?" asked Madelon, her voice toned to sympathizing softness, with just a thrill of admiration through it—a voice admirably calculated to sink into the depths of the confiding masculine soul. She scorned herself for the part she was playing, scorned herself with a scorn that fairly

tingled to the ends of her fingers; but, all the same, she took an artist's pride in doing well what she attempted to do at all. "I have known you a long time," went on the sweet woman-tones, seconded by the lovely woman-eyes, "and I never knew you to break a promise yet, Alan."

"It is more than can be said of some other people, then," answered Alan, forgetting his gallantry, in a sudden remembrance of his wrongs. "Madelon, what promise did you give me in Charleston last May? And how have you kept it?"

"If you mean the promise to befriend Ermine," said Madelon, quietly, "I have done my best toward keeping it, from that day to the present."

"And do you call it your 'best' to have let that scoundrel of a brother of mine inveigle, force, or persuade her into a marriage?—a marriage accursed, not blessed of God, since fraud was at the bottom of it!"

"There you are mistaken," said Madelon, still quietly—as, leaning back, she held a dainty, lace-covered parasol to ward off the sun, from which the leafless boughs above were but small protection—"there was no inveigling nor forcing—nor persuading, I was about to say; but I presume there was some of *that*—in the marriage, and certainly no fraud. Everybody clearly understood the terms of his or her bargain, for" (with a shrug) "there certainly was not much sentiment in the affair. Raymond wanted money: Ermine wanted freedom to leave America. She furnished the first—he gave the last. *Voilà tout!*"

"But she was engaged to me!" said Alan, fiercely.

"Engaged to you!" repeated Madelon, staring at him in honest astonishment. "Is the man mad? Engaged to you! Why, you were drowned!"

"Was I?" (with a short, unmirthful laugh). "You see I have managed to come to life, nevertheless."

"Well, we thought you were drowned—which comes to the same thing. It never occurred to us that you would overturn things by coming to life again—so nobody took the event into consideration."

"Apparently not. It showed great want of foresight and consideration in you, Nix" (pulling the dog's long, silky ears again), "to drag me on that sand-bank when my strength

had given way, and I was comfortably going to the bottom, unconscious of the good news in store for me. We made a hard fight to live, down there under the scorching, tropical sun, didn't we? How much better every thing would have been, old boy, if we had not made any fight at all, but had resigned our souls to God, and our bodies to the sharks, with what philosophy we could muster!"

"Don't talk that way," said Madelon; "it is sinful, and it is foolish. Of course, it was your duty to try *not* to be drowned. But then, when you came to life and found that things were irrevocable, why could you not have kept quiet, like a sensible man? Why need you have come and tried to disturb and distract Ermine's mind when it could do no good?"

"You follow the laudable example of the world," said he, gloomily. "Hit a man when he is down—the harder the better, by all means! You ask me *why* I did these things. Good Heavens! You might as well ask a mad dog why he turns and bites."

"So, you have been mad? Well, I can believe it. But you are sane now, are you not?"

"After a fashion—yes. At least I am sane enough to see that, since things are irrevocable, I must endure, if I cannot accept them. But it is hard to go away without seeing Ermine—without hearing from her own lips why she married that man; and why she could not have paid me the slight respect of waiting to learn whether I was really dead, or of giving me a few months' mourning if I were."

"It is not necessary for you to see Ermine that those questions may be asked," said Madelon. "I can answer them as well as she. In the first place, you know how acutely sensitive she is, how intense both her sufferings and her enjoyments always are. You ought to be able to imagine, therefore, what a blow the news of your death was to her. You can fancy, perhaps, how it stunned every faculty of her mind, and seemed to wrap her in such a state of lethargy that she did not care what became of her. Her only active wish was, a desire not to return to Charleston—where, as she often said, she had been 'so happy.' She wanted to leave the country, but Aunt Victorine refused to accompany her, and she could not go alone. Just then, she learned that Mr. Erle's house was on the verge of

bankruptcy. You know Ermine—you know her impulsive generosity. Can you not realize that, stunned as she was, hopeless for you, caring nothing for herself, she should have been willing to sacrifice herself and her fortune in the only possible way?"

"But the news of my death was merely a rumor. She should not have acted so hastily—she might at least have waited to hear the truth."

"And do you suppose that she did not take every means to learn the truth? Do you think she would ever have consented to the step of which I speak, unless she had been sure of your death? She clung desperately to hope, until she had summoned to her presence, and drawn every particular from, a sailor—your own mate—who said that he had *seen* you perish. After that, how could she doubt?"

"The infernal liar!" said Alan, between his set teeth, while one strong hand twisted itself in Nix's luxuriant mane, as if that had been the throat of the liar in question. "Well, life is long, and I shall pay off that score some day—until then, the devil can afford to wait for his instrument. Good God!"—what a passionate cry it was which seemed wrung from his lips—"why is it that our lives, our loves, our very souls, lie at the mercy of such villains as these?"

Life is full of such questions; but from the blue sky above there comes no answer. Never yet has human despair, or human presumption, wrung a solution of its perplexities from that dread yet glorious Presence, behind the veil of our mortality. In truth—

"Our warfare is in darkness. Friend for foe
Blindly, and oft with swords exchanged, we strike:
Opinion guesses: Faith alone can know
Where actual and illusive still are like."

"Well," said Madelon, after a pause, "you can see the rest for yourself. When Ermine heard of your arrival in Charleston, and of your intention of coming to Martinique, she left the island at once—preferring to take a long ocean-voyage alone sooner than meet you. Judge, therefore, what she felt, when you presented yourself in Paris! Judge, if you are acting kindly or generously in thus making her hard lot infinitely harder to bear!"

"Is that so?" said he, in a low voice. "Did she leave Martinique to avoid *me*? Poor child! To think that I—of all men—should become her persecutor!"

He uttered the last words to himself. Then, almost unconsciously, his face dropped into his hands and he sat silent for several minutes. Madelon would not disturb him. Unlike most women, she knew when to be silent—when to rest on her oars, conscious that the current was doing her work for her better than she could possibly do it for herself. She read Alan thoroughly, and she did not even need to ask "How goes the fight?" for she felt sure that it was going excellently well from her point of view, and that victory would soon perch on her banners. Meanwhile, two little birds were singing the most charming possible duet on the lightly-swaying bough just over her lace-covered parasol; the music in the distance was thundering away at a grand march that made military visions dance through the most soberly civilian brain; the waters of the fountain rose and fell in their marble basin with a soft plash; every now and then loiterers strolled past, of whom one in ten, perhaps, admired the pretty picture made by the group—the lovely, freshly-dressed girl, the bronzed, handsome man, the magnificent dog lying at their feet, and the tender shadows flickering over them. There was quite an idyllic grace about the little scene. Unluckily, it is not always that the poetry of reality and the poetry of appearance go together.

After awhile Alan looked up—somewhat to Madelon's surprise, smiling a little.

"How quiet you are!" he said. "Did you know that I was saying good-by to—*every thing*, and were you silent out of respect? Well, it is over—and you may be sure I don't mean to be melodramatic about it. I am not the first man who has lost the woman he loved—though I can't help thinking that mine is an aggravated case. But, if Ermine can only learn to be happy, I can bear my own share of the robbery—for it is that. Madelon, do you think that she is—that she will be—happy?"

"She has learned content, at least," answered Madelon. "In time—if you leave her alone—she may very reasonably learn happiness. I think she is on the road to it."

Poor Alan! Loyal and unselfish as he was, this was hard to hear, hard to receive as "good news," while his own heart was still sore and sick and throbbing with great pain.

"You are not deceiving me, Madelon?" he asked. "People sometimes think themselves privileged to do such things, 'for your own

good.' For my part, it is saying very little to say that I should have no patience with such a pious fraud; I would never forgive it, or trust the author again."

"Don't be so fierce," said Madelon, smiling. "I have committed no 'pious fraud.' I have told you the simple truth."

"Honestly?"

"Honestly."

"Then," said he, with a great effort, "she shall have the opportunity to 'learn happiness'—if she can! God grant that she may! But it is not like the Ermine whom I have known all my life—the most faithful and gentle of women—to find even content such an easy lesson. I do not understand it, Madelon."

"Why not?" asked Madelon, with an uneasiness which she could not entirely conceal. "You made a goddess of Ermine, but in reality she is only a woman—neither better nor worse than most of us. Then you should remember that this blow, which is fresh with you, is old with her. But" (eagerly), "you must not misunderstand me—you must not think that she is *not* suffering acutely, suffering so much that I speak as her best friend when I beg you to go out of her life, and, if possible, not to let even your memory come back to torment her."

"I will go," said he, sharply. "If possible, even my memory shall not come back to torment her! I promised Madame Villardot that I would leave Paris to-night, and, as you remarked a little while ago, I always try, at least, to keep my promises. I shall keep this one. I shall go to-night."

"Where?" asked she, eagerly—a little too eagerly, as it chanced; but it is hard to be always on one's guard.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Who can tell? Not I. To the devil, probably! That is where people in my condition mostly go."

"Not to America?" (again a little too eagerly).

He looked at her keenly. As she had good cause to know of old, those sea-colored eyes could occasionally be very keen.

"No," said he, slowly, "I scarcely think I shall go to America. Thanks for your interest. But why do you ask?"

"Ermine will like to know, I am sure—for, if you remain in Europe, her life will be passed in a continual fever and dread of meeting you."

He laughed bitterly.

"And so you think the Continent of Europe not wide enough to keep us apart? Why, are you not content, will she not be content, if I covenant not to return to Paris?"

"But she may leave it."

"Tell me where she is likely to go, and I will avoid all such places."

"It is hard to tell exactly," said Madelon, drawing her straight, dark brows together. "We have relations in different parts of France, and then Aunt Hélène talks of Baden for the summer—of course, too, Ermine will go to Munich and Dresden, on account of art."

"Then," with a smile which she did not altogether like, "I am formally excluded from France and Germany. Pray does Italy share in the prohibition?"

"I don't know," said Madelon, rising and looking a little offended. "You seem to think that I have some interest to serve in the matter. I only spoke for your own good and for Ermine's! Of course it is a matter of indifference to me where you go."

"Forgive me, Madelon," said he, rising too, and standing before her. "Don't let us part in vexation. That would be a poor return for your kindness in coming to meet me. I had no right to speak so rudely; but I meant nothing—save that such things come hard on me. I will do my best to keep clear of Ermine's path—I promise you that. Now, must you go?"

"Indeed I must," answered she, with a dismayed glance at her watch. "Aunt Hélène will be back, and what will she think of me? No, no, Alan, you must not come with me—that would be adding double weight to the enormity of the misdemeanor. You must say good-by here, please"—putting out an exquisite little gray hand.

"I suppose you know best," said Alan, taking it, regretfully, "but it seems hard lines that I cannot even walk with you to your own door. Think better of it, Madelon, and let me make your excuses to Madame Villaret. We are such old friends!"

"Good Heavens, no!" cried Madelon, agast at this proposal—as well, indeed, she might be, since the game which she was playing would have delighted Mr. Erle for its boldness!—"she would never forgive me! And you, Alan—surely you would not return to the very house which holds Ermine."

"This minute, if I thought only of myself,"

answered Alan. "No—you needn't start. I try to think of her, and so it is not likely that I will do it. Confound that impertinent fellow!" (glaring at a loiterer who had lifted his eye-glass in passing, and taken a scrutiny of the pair more keen than polite). "Are these French manners, Madelon?"

"They are manners of all over the world, I fancy," said Madelon, smiling, "when a gentleman continues to hold a lady's hand in the most affectionate manner on a public promenade. Say good-by, Alan—I really must go!"

"Good-by, then," said Alan, giving the hand in question a pressure which made it ache for a good ten minutes afterward. "God bless you, dear Madelon—and stand by her as a faithful friend!"

"I will," said Madelon.

And she absolutely meant it.

CHAPTER VIII.

"MON CAMARADE!"

"Le mieux est l'ennemi de bien," says a sensible French proverb—and a better example of its truth could not be given than that which the interview just concluded had afforded. "Le mieux" had certainly proved with Madelon, in marked degree, "l'ennemi de bien." Every thing which she desired had been effected for her by Madame Villaret, yet she distrusted so thoroughly the sincerity and stability of Alan's resolution that she was not content until she had endeavored to lend to this resolution added force. The result was, that she overshot her mark—as many a clever archer has done before.

Having already spoken of the spell of goodness and honor which seemed breathed like an aroma over Madame Villaret, it is almost unnecessary to say that it was this alone which enabled her to conquer Alan's stubborn will, and to induce him to leave the woman he loved. But there was no such magnetism about Madelon. Fascination of a certain sort was hers, in hountiful measure; but it was the fascination which dazzles—not that which inspires an abiding sense of trust. No one could ever say of her, "I believe in this woman because goodness and purity are written on her face;" it was only possible to say, "I believe in this woman because she is of exceeding fairness because her voice is sweet, and her

eyes are eloquent." Now, this is a mode of reasoning with which ninety-nine men out of a hundred are eminently satisfied, and, no doubt, if Alan had been in love with the fair face, the sweet voice, and the eloquent eyes in question, he would have found it satisfactory also. But, as it chanced, he had always distrusted the beautiful creole; and never did this distrust press so strongly upon him as after he had given that parting clasp to her daintily-gloved hand, in the garden of the Tuileries.

When she was gone, he sat down again on the bench from which he had arisen, and addressed himself to the task of "thinking over" the interview just ended. The more he thought it over, the stronger the feeling of distrust, which at first had been purely unconscious, became. Her account of Ermine's marriage was plausible enough—that he acknowledged—but her eagerness to send him out of Paris, her desire to keep him far from Ermine's possible path of life, struck him as suspicious. It was true this might have been accounted for on the score of unselfish affection toward her cousin—but no one who knew Madelon could possibly have affirmed that unselfish affection was her strong point. Self had always subordinated every other consideration with her, despite a certain fitful attachment to a few persons, a certain fitful power of making now and then a sacrifice—provided always that there was some element of grandeur about it. With the glamour of her eyes and smile withdrawn, her words, which still lingered in Alan's memory, seemed to have the ring of false coin—coin which, instead of being sterling gold, is base metal—and, try as he would, he could not banish this impression. When he left Madame Villaret, notwithstanding all his bitter pain and sadness, he had felt secure, secure that truth, and truth only, had been spoken to him, secure that, with that gentle lady, Ermine would at least be free from annoyance or pain. He was ready to leave Paris then, ready to go back to America and covenant never again to look upon the sweet face of the woman he loved. But all this was changed when Madelon's ill-omened beauty and fascination crossed his path. He distrusted her—he said that again and again to himself—swearing, too, a deep oath that she would not compass her end, whatever that end might be. "She is Raymond's tool, no doubt," said he, bitterly—"paid, very likely, to keep me from seeing Ermine! Well, what I have promised, I will

do—the more readily since Ermine herself is anxious to avoid me. Madame Villaret's word is good for that. I shall leave Paris to-night—but I shall not leave the Continent of Europe. My health is suffering from the hardships of my shipwreck, and a little travel will do me good. We need to shake off morbid feelings and thoughts, don't we, Nix? We will shake them off, too, old boy! We'll climb Mont Blanc, and sail on Lake Lemman, and go to see your canine brethren at the Hospice of St. Bernard. Mademoiselle Lautrec is very clever, but with all her cleverness she has not disposed of us yet—and by the Heaven above, old dog, she never shall!"

From which it will be seen that Mademoiselle Lautrec had certainly overreached herself in no slight degree. After all, it is a fortunate thing that the good old times of poisoned roses and gloves are over—else Captain Erle's days might have come rather abruptly to an end, if Madelon had chanced to overhear or suspect the resolution with which his soliloquy had closed.

Madelon, however, had gone home congratulating herself on the successful issue of her bold experiment, had looked approvingly at her fair face in the mirror draped with pale-blue hangings, had laid aside her promenade costume for a gold-colored silk with a golden rose in her dark hair, had clasped on her statuesque arms and neck the jewels for which she had signed away her honor, had finally gone forth to astonish Madame Villaret by "her wonderful fortitude," and to win the admiration and flattery which had become as necessary to her existence as the air she breathed. She was so exultant over the bright prospect opening before her, that it required all her well-trained dramatic power to preserve even a semblance of pensive sadness. She would have liked to laugh, to sing, even to dance along the polished floor, bidding life come and be enjoyed. Did she feel no remorse over her accomplished work? She would have laughed in your face if you had suggested such a thing, and told you that she was not "sentimental."

These things were her rights—this wealth, and enjoyment, and happiness—and Alan was the robber who had come to wrest them from her. Why should she not be glad, then, that she had so successfully met obstinate strength with subtle strategy, and done the best, not only for herself, but for everybody else?

"Belle à faire peur!" said she, making a sweeping courtesy before one of the grand mirrors of the saloon, as the soft wax-lights flashed back from her diamonds. "Now, at last, I am happy!—now, at last, I live the life for which I was born! If that horrible man would only go and be drowned in earnest, my cup of felicity would be full to the brim!"

The horrible man, thus devoted to watery destruction, had, several hours before this time, left his pleasant seat in the garden of the Tuileries, and strolled away into the busy city—the city so wonderful that one might think it enchanted if one did not know that here, as well as elsewhere, tears are shed, pangs suffered, and death-gasps given. But these things seem far away out of sight. To the stranger there is nothing to suggest such awful, and, alas! such common extremes and possibilities of human anguish. It is her brightest face which the fair city shows on the Rue de Rivoli, the Faubourg St.-Honoré, the Palais Royal, the Champs Elysées, and the beautiful Bois with the glory of sunset reflected in its magical lakes. The very atmosphere seems golden with the glamour of fancy and the poetry of romance! In Notre-Dame the air is full of faint fragrance, like a dream of incense, while a stream of light, falling athwart the marble pavement, pales with its glory the steady lustre of the sanctuary lamp suspended in front of that majestic altar on which the hands of martyred prelates have offered the consecrated Host. Under the grand old arches that have echoed the divine eloquence of Lacordaire, shadowy forms pass to and fro; here and there, at the different chapels, candles flicker in the mellow gloom; every thing is full of harmony, every thing is wrapped in tranquil silence and holy repose.

Little as Alan could boast of any thing save that natural reverence which it speaks ill for any man to forget, the gay sunshine and the jostling crowd jarred on him, as he came out from the dim, religious hush of the great cathedral, and bent his restless steps toward the Louvre. If he was not an artist, at least he had artistic appreciation in no common degree; so it was no wonder that the remaining hours of the afternoon were all spent among the marvellous paintings and statues gathered in those great, golden halls. It was worth while to roam and loiter there at will, and after a time to watch the close of the radiant day from the tall windows, to see the sunset tints

streaking the tender sky, the evening vesper of light and perfume ascending, the wonderful glory spreading over the heavens and resting like a benediction on the churches and palaces, the flashing river and stately columns, the ancient quarters and new boulevards of "the town of Clovis, of Clotilde, of Genevieve, the town of Charlemagne, of Saint-Louis, of Philip Augustus, and of Henry IV., the capital of the sciences, the arts, and of civilization."*

So absorbed in the beauty without as to be forgetful even of the beauty within, Alan scarcely noticed how the galleries were thinning, how the well-dressed loungers and the busy artists were alike departing, but still stood with folded arms gazing on the matchless scene outspread before him, when a hand was suddenly laid on his shoulder, and, turning, he faced that which he least expected, and perhaps desired—an acquaintance.

"This is Alan Erle, I am sure," said a slender, dark-eyed young man. "I have been watching you for at least ten minutes, but you would not turn round, and so I was obliged to claim your notice in this way. Have you forgotten me—Stuart Lamar, of Georgia? I went to school with you, if you remember."

"I remember perfectly," said Alan, frankly shaking the extended hand. "In fact, we have met since then, I think. Didn't I dine at your father's house in Savannah, two years ago?"

"Certainly you did!" responded the other, smiling; "and didn't you return the compliment when I went over to Charleston, by introducing me to three of the prettiest girls I ever saw?—Have you been long in Paris?"

"Long enough to be tired of it. And you?"

"Well, I am fresh at sight-seeing—I haven't been here more than a fortnight, so I have not begun to be tired yet. The greatest drawback to my enjoyment has been an incapacity to understand or be understood. I thought I was a pretty fair French scholar, but the confounded people will talk so fast. Don't you find that rather puzzling?"

"I am a sailor, you know, and used to speaking many tongues of many lands. I understand, and manage to make myself understood—after a fashion, at least."

"It is very refreshing to meet you," said

* Letter of the Count de Chambord on the bombardment of Paris.

Lamar, with evident sincerity. "After a man has been roaming about in a foreign land, he appreciates a familiar face."

"And a familiar tongue," said Alan; "that's better yet, isn't it? But see! unless we mean to spend the night among the pictures and statues, we'd better be moving. This place will soon be shut up. Are you with a party?"

The other made a comical gesture with his shoulders and eyebrows.

"No such good luck! Several of us started from home together, but, somehow, no two had the same idea about the tour, and we had scarcely landed before we separated. As for me, I came to Paris, and devilish heavy work I've found it all alone! My principal amusement has been to walk about the streets, listen to the bands—does it strike you that a band always is playing somewhere?—look in at the cafés, and say with Hood:

"When you go to France,
Be sure you know the lingo,
For, if you don't, like me,
You will repent, by jingo!"

Let me return your question, by-the-by, and ask if you are with a party?"

"No such bad luck!" answered Alan, shrugging his shoulders, as they went downstairs. "Where are you staying?" he went on. "I am leaving Paris to-night, but still—"

He stopped in his speech, amused by the dismay which came over Lamar's face.

"Leaving to-night!" he repeated. "Good Heavens! what do you mean by that? Why, Paris is glorious just now—and I have been thinking what a splendid time I should have, with you to do the talking for me. We would go to Versailles, and Fontainebleau, and St.-Cloud, and—and the opera every night. I like that better than the theatre, because I can understand the music. My dear fellow, pray think better of it! Consider—"

"The lilies of the field?" asked Alan, laughing. "It is rather early for them, my dear boy—at least just here. Perhaps I shall find them in their glory when I reach Italy next week."

"Italy!" repeated the other, still petulant. "What the devil are you going to Italy for? Do you expect to meet anybody there?"

"One never knows who may turn up in the way of friends and acquaintances—*vide* our pleasant encounter—but I have no such definite expectation."

"Then why on earth do you go? Excuse

me! I'm afraid I'm awfully rude, but it is really enough to try a man's patience! Stay, Erle—do stay! I'll wager any thing you won't regret it. You *can't* have seen every thing in Paris, you know—or, if you have, it will all bear being seen over again."

"My dear fellow—"

"Oh, deuce take it!—that tone tells the tale. 'My dear fellow, I am sorry to be disobliging, but must really, etc., etc.' 'Pon my honor, it is too bad! It is like the dear gazelle, when one finds a friend, only to lose him. Look here, Erle!—will you be honest and say 'No,' if what I am about to propose does not suit you?"

"Without the least hesitation," answered Alan, truthfully enough.

"Then tell me frankly if you are anxious to go to Italy alone, or if you would like a companion?"

"Yourself?"

"Myself, of course. Now, don't say 'Yes,' unless you mean it."

"Let me think a minute," said Alan.

So, as they walked along in the dusk, he considered the proposal. He knew very little of Lamar; but that little assured him that the young Georgian was a thoroughly good fellow, a genial, frank gentleman, and the person of all others to cast the sunshine of bright spirits over a journey by land or sea. If Alan wanted a companion at all, certainly he might go farther and fare worse than with the one who was ready to his hand just here. But *did* he want a companion? That was the rub, and, if he had answered the question according to his first impulse, he would certainly have uttered a negative. But Lamar's fresh, eager face and the accents of the home-voice had unconsciously attracted him. After all, he was setting forth to shake off morbid thoughts, not to nurse them, and, if he travelled alone, was there much hope of his doing the former, or his *not* doing the latter? Would not such a companion as this be really worth more than any amount of other remedies? As he hesitated—and ah! would he have hesitated at all, if he had only known how much hinged on this decision!—one fair, pure star quivered into sight above the house-tops, and his decision was suddenly taken.

"Lamar," said he, "don't misunderstand my silence. I shall be sincerely glad if you will go with me to Italy. I meant to go to Switzerland, but it is too cold for that just yet.

But I must start to-night. That is imperative. Would you care to make such a sudden move?"

"I sha'n't break many hearts by my departure," answered Lamar, with one of his boyish grimaces, "and my traps are few. I don't see why I can't start to-night, therefore. If you'll take me, I think I'll go! I feel like a man who, having been shipwrecked, suddenly meets—Hullo! What the deuce—why, man alive! I have just remembered that the last I heard of you, you were drowned! How, in the name Neptune, did you come to life again?"

"Under a galvanic battery," responded Alan, grimly. "Nature's patent, not likely to be stolen by art—only, as a friend, I wouldn't advise you to try its effect. A sand-bank in the tropics isn't the best possible place for any constitution short of a salamander's. It is in consequence of this that I am going to recruit mine in Italy."

"I thought you looked badly," said Lamar, simply, "but, like a fool, I did not think of the cause. Really, I am ashamed of myself!"

"Don't be, my good fellow! There isn't the least need of such a sentiment."

"But I ought to have remembered! I recollect well how shocked I was when I read the announcement of your death. But, somehow, the whole thing went out of my head when I saw your familiar shoulders this evening. I said to myself, 'There isn't such another pair in the world,' so up I marched, without thinking for a moment that the shoulders in question might be ghostly nothings. But I forgot—where did you say you were staying? I'm at the Hôtel du Louvre, near by."

"And I at the Hôtel du Rhin. Will you come with me? I left my dog there, and, unless I go to him, he will enliven the establishment by such a series of howls that the police will very likely have to be called in. That is a Parisian's remedy for every ill, you know. Come, and you shall order the *menu* yourself. We don't leave till 11.50, so that will give you time enough to look after your traps."

"All right," said Lamar, receiving any and every proposal with the utmost amiability, provided he was not called upon to relinquish sight of his new-found comrade.

Having refreshed the inner man, the two friends found that their "traps" required very little arrangement, and that, after this duty had been dispatched, a whole evening

yet hung heavily on their hands. Lamar yawned so piteously, that, compassionating his *ennui*, Alan carried him off to the Comédie Française, where they saw a sparkling comedy charmingly acted, then they strolled back to their hotel through the illuminated streets, and, as Madelon was taking the golden rose from out her hair, and the brilliant ornaments from off her arms, they dashed away into the night, with the head of their fiery horse turned straight toward the fair South.

CHAPTER IX.

"ONE FACE!"

UNDER the blue, rarely blue sky of Italy, the Lago di Como lies like a sheet of lapis-lazuli in the noontide sun. There is scarcely breeze enough to ripple the glassy surface of the water, or steal through the closed jealousies of the palaces and villas which gem its winding shores, while in the shade of their deep arched entrances, or beside the marble steps, against which the azure waters softly plash, lie the brightly-cushioned pleasure-boats, motionless and unoccupied. The rustle of a leaf is scarcely heard on the steep mountain-sides, which, girt by the olive and fig, the laurel and cactus, tower above the placid lake, flanked by the grand, snow-clad peaks of the higher Alps. In the fairy hanging-gardens, and on the terraces studded with baskets of orange, oleander, and myrtle, every sound is mute. The embowered convents and the picturesque villages with their tapering spires lie wrapped in such absolute repose that it is almost possible to imagine that an enchanter's wand has hovered over the fair scene and bound it with a spell. Even the swarthy, sunburnt fishermen have fallen asleep in their boats, secure in the grateful shadow of some olive-shaded, land-locked bay. In truth, a potent enchanter has been at work—that high-noon of the South, whose imperative ardor proclaims an armistice of labor. Spring has melted into summer, and even on the Lago di Como the scorching heat of the latter season holds triumphant sway.

Scorching it is; for not one breath of the welcome north breeze has come down from the Alpine hills, to stir the drooping leaves of the foliage, or ruffle the mirror-like surface of the lake. On the terrace of a villa near the beautiful promontory of Bellagio, two ladies are

seated under an awning, both of them waiting eagerly for the first breath of this breeze, and one of them now and then leaning over to fan the other. A very strong, pleasant face the latter has, a face surrounded by bands of iron-gray hair, and brightened by keen, intelligent brown eyes. These eyes are a little sad and very tender as they rest on her companion, a pale, slender, dark-eyed girl, who seems wasted away to a shadow; whose fragile hands as they lie in her lap look almost transparent; and whose feet are plainly standing on the verge of that unknown sea which mortals call immortality. After a while, she looks up at her companion with a sweet smile, speaking English with a soft, Southern accent.

"Thanks, dear Miss North, you are so kind. But please don't tire yourself; it is always tiresome to fan anybody."

"Not to me," answered the elder lady. "But, if it worries you, I can call Lucia. She does it well, and never tires."

"No, no, let poor Lucia sleep. You know she was awake all night. My cough is so annoying at night, and then the fever makes me restless. I am afraid" (with a short sigh) "that I am very impatient, and give a great deal of unnecessary trouble."

"You impatient! My darling, how can you say such a thing? Only the other morning I found Lucia crying, and I asked her what was the matter. 'The signorina is too good,' she said, shaking her head and sobbing 'She is ready for paradise.' So you see" (with a faint smile) "she does not find you very troublesome."

"That is because she is so faithful and devoted. Ah, how fortunate I have been to find such a friend as you, and such a servant as Lucia, in my hour of need! Dear Miss North, I wonder if you will thoroughly realize, when you go back to your own life and your own friends, what gratitude and love the girl for whom you have sacrificed so much felt for you?"

"I have sacrificed nothing," said Miss North, hastily. "Ermine, my child, don't you know that you have grown nearer to my heart than anybody else in the world, nearer by far than my own kindred? Is it a sacrifice to live in these beautiful lands with you, and try to take care of you? My bonnie darling, stay with me! That is all I ask."

"But that is not for me to grant," said Ermine, putting out her frail, burning hand—

burning with the fever which had sapped the foundation of life. "Dear friend, kind friend—the kindest, save one, that I have ever known—I am not sure that I would grant it if I could! Life is very sweet to those who are rich in its gifts and goods—but what have I?"

"You have youth, beauty, great talent, and many possibilities of happiness."

"When health is gone, youth is gone," said Ermine, sadly, "and beauty too. With my talent—such as it is—I have done what I could, and, if God spared my life, I should hope to do more. But He knows best. As for the possibilities of happiness—well, Art is fair, and Nature is fairer. But are not these only types of that Beauty on which the eyes of the spirit shall open? We think that nothing could be more exquisite than this lovely lake; but surely the Hand which gave this to the material senses can give something better yet to those which are immortal?"

"My child, who doubts it?"

"Ah, then" (with passionately-clasped hands), "why wish to stay? If love is sweet, think what it must be to *love Love itself!** If beauty is fair, think what it must be to see Beauty such as '*it hath not entered into the heart of man to conceive!*' Now, those have been my two passions—love of love, and love of beauty. God made them both. It cannot be wrong, then, to climb by them to Him."

"Wrong!" Miss North could say no more, for tears rose up and choked her.

"Am I paining you?" asked Ermine, gently. "Ah, dear Miss North, don't shut your eyes to the truth. I talk of these things because I am very near them—so near that fear seems to have left me, and I feel the trust of a little child who is led by its mother's hand into the dark."

"Ermine," said Miss North, suddenly dropping her fan, and seizing the girl's delicate hands, "tell me—in the midst of your grief, did you ever pray for death?"

"Never," answered Ermine, simply. "How could you think such a thing? I have never been so wicked as *that*. But, somehow, the burden of life seemed too heavy for me when my boy went out of it. You know it was not as if he had been any ordinary friend or ordi-

* These words are borrowed from an expression in "Le Récit d'une Sœur."

nary lover—but he had been the stay and idol of my life. I hope I was not sinful in my grief—I tried not to be. But existence looked so blank—so dreary. I thought to myself, 'How shall I bear this desolation through the long years of a lifetime?' Of course, people told me I would forget it; but I knew better—I knew that I never forgot anything. I was a little child when my father died, but I shed tears for him now as bitter as those which I shed then. I knew that, if I lived to be seventy, I should still mourn for Alan. And God knew it. So He called me from the burden and heat of the day, and I—how can I be sorry? If I lived longer, I might commit some sin which would shut me out from heaven forever. Now I have not much to reproach myself with—except being too little resigned when love and happiness went from me—last October."

"Child," said the elder woman, sorrowfully, "I never knew before what a good thing inconstancy is."

"Is it?" said Ermine, smiling—a shadowy but ineffably sweet smile. "Ah, no! Blessed be God for memory! If every bright gift of earth were offered to me in exchange for the recollection of my darling, do you think I would take them? Do you think I would buy health, and beauty, and happiness, at such a price? Do you think I could even resign myself to death if I did not know that the recollection will go with me into life? Perhaps I think of it too much" (with a wistful, pathetic look), "but I cannot help it. The saints loved God purely in and for Himself, but we must go to Him through our earthly passions. I am sure our dear Lord will not be hard upon me for being too faithful to my poor human love. But see!—here comes the breeze!"

She turned her pale face toward it as she spoke—drinking in its cool refreshment eagerly. As her gaze wandered toward the distant snow-clad heights from which it came, Miss North's eyes dwelt on her. Ah, what ravages the last few months—nay, even the last few weeks, had made! Over the pale face and the fragile form, the very shadow of Azraël seemed to hover. Life, deprived of its only light, had indeed proved too much for the great, passionate heart, the gentle, faithful nature. Some people have one gift, some another; few are so poor as to be without any. Ermine's was the gift of constancy. Alan Erle might have been dead to all the rest of the world, but to

the tender heart which, winning once he had won forever, he still lived, and still—

"One face, remembering his, forgot to smile."

The wasted lines of that face spoke so eloquently to Miss North's heart, that many salt tears dropped in her lap before she could find voice to speak. Then she said, gently:

"Ermine, darling, don't you think you might be better if you tried to cross the Alps? It seems to me that this climate may account for your extreme debility."

"I cross the Alps!" said Ermine. "I could not even cross that promontory yonder! Dear, kind friend, why won't you see the truth? I would rather you did, because there is no telling how soon the realization may be brought home to you. If I needed any confirmation of my own knowledge, I should have found it in the doctor's face when he saw me this morning—and in Père Aubré's" (this was a French priest who chanced to be staying at Varenna), "when he left me a little while ago. No, the end is very near, and I think I may say I am ready for it. If it came to-night—as it may do—I can go, having left no duty knowingly unfulfilled. I have written to mamma and to Madelon. You will find the letters in my desk. Then I left some instructions—a will, I suppose it might be called—concerning the little property which I retained. Some of it goes as a marriage-portion to Lucia; the rest I have left to charity. For you, my kind and only friend, I have but my love, my gratitude, my prayers, and every thing personal to myself which you may desire to keep. What you do not keep, give to Lucia. No one else will care for them. I did not leave you any money" (smiling a little), "because I know that, with the property left by your brother, you are able to provide for all your wants, and it would have seemed like—like paying you for all you have done!"

"I am glad you did not," said Miss North, between her tears. "Love's service can only be paid with love."

"I know it," said Ermine, softly.

After this there was silence again. Lightly the breeze came over the water, rippling it into a myriad tiny waves which broke with soft, musical plash against the flight of steps reaching from the terrace, not to the water's edge, but to the very water itself. The eyes of the dying girl gazed wistfully on the fairy beauty and brilliancy of the scene—the azure

lake, the lofty mountains, covered with almost tropical verdure, the gleaming palaces, temples, and villas, the nimbus of golden sunlight over the distant Alpine peaks, the fish darting to and fro in the pellucid water. Happy fish, to live in the waters of Como, we are almost tempted to think. But no doubt even fish have their troubles—especially when they are caught. As Ermine gazed in silence on this wealth of magical beauty, a small boat, which had been lying in a shadowy cove near the promontory, pushed out from the shore, and, propelled by lazy but evidently practised strokes, began to move over the water, leaving a track of glorified sunlight behind. It had an awning, and, as well as could be seen, contained only one occupant, though, as a matter of fact, another recumbent figure lay in the bottom, while a large dog crouched motionless at the stern. Though the little craft was far from being one of the gay *barcolinas* which tourists and sight-seers patronize, it made a pretty adjunct to the scene, and Ermine watched its course with that interest which trifles sometimes waken in the sick.

Near and more near it came, until at last it glided in front of the villa, only a few feet distant from the terrace on which the ladies sat. The oarsman—a young, handsome man, wearing a broad-brimmed straw hat—suffered it to float slowly by, as he caught sight of the two figures under the orange-trees. Sickness had not robbed Ermine of all her beauty. Her eyes still remained—larger, darker, softer than ever—and the outlines of her face were all fair and pure. Just now she looked like a "marble saint niched in cathedral-wall," with her white robe falling to her feet, her hair pushed back behind her dainty ears, and in her slender fingers the glittering beads of a gold-and-amethyst rosary. Something like a luminous calm seem breathed over her. The struggle had been bitter and fierce—had drained, indeed, the very life-blood of the suffering heart—but victory had brought a peace like unto no peace of earth, a peace which comes only as the *avant courier* of that dread angel whom the children of men account a destroyer, but the children of God a deliverer.

"Look, Alan!" said Lamar, in a low tone—"look what an exquisite face that girl has! There's something half divine about it, only it seems to me I have seen it somewhere before."

"It isn't the extreme of good-breeding to

stare at people as you chance to row by their terraces," said Alan, lazy and sleepy, and thoroughly indifferent to all the exquisite faces in the world. "Beauty is the birthright of these Italian women; and as for seeing this face before, you may have seen it on the Corso the other day: a great many Milanese have villas on the lake here."

"But look!" persisted Lamar. "We shall be beyond sight in another minute, and I don't think that a sweeter face was ever seen. The complexion is like a magnolia-petal, and the eyes are full moons, as the Turks say."

"Full moons they may remain for me," said Alan. "I would not lift my head just now to see Sabrina herself rise from the lake. I begin to appreciate what *dolce far niente* means, and—Nix, keep still, sir! What the devil is the matter with you?—Hallo! Look out there, Lamar, or the fool will upset this cockle-shell!"

The warning came too late. Nix, who had been whining and moving restlessly ever since they came in front of the terrace, now made a sudden dart overboard, which capsize the craft, and, in a second, the two young men found themselves in the lake.

Now, a plunge-bath is never pleasant, not even when you have had time to think about it. But, when it has the additional drawback of being totally unexpected, it is difficult to imagine any thing more absolutely disagreeable. Leaving the two struggling swimmers to their fate, let us go back a moment and explain the cause of the disaster.

It is probable that, by some sympathy known only to canine intelligence, the dog had been aware of the neighborhood of his quondam playfellow and patroness, as soon as he came near the villa, but he only manifested this consciousness by restless movement and whining, until they were abreast of the spot where Ermine sat. It was then that she suddenly exclaimed:

"Ah, what a magnificent dog! Look, Miss North—in the stern of the boat! Does he not remind you of—of Nix?"

Low as it was, her voice was singularly clear, and Nix's ears were attentively pricked. Lamar saw her lean forward with sudden interest and speak to her companion, but he did not catch the words—in consequence of not being gifted with the auditory powers of a dog. The word "Nix" had scarcely passed

her lips, however, when the owner of that name sprang overboard; and, disregarding the catastrophe which he left behind, swam straight toward the terrace.

"I never saw—" Miss North was beginning, when this event occurred.—"Good Heavens!" she cried, springing to her feet. "The dog has capsized the boat!—the men will be drowned! What on earth are we to do?"

Though she was unable to do any thing, she ran down to the steps excitedly, while Ermine sat still, with sympathizing eyes of interest on the scene. She soon saw that there was no question of drowning, for both men were expert swimmers. Instead of making any effort to save their lives, they were simply endeavoring to save the boat—to catch it, and, if possible, to right it. This, however, was difficult.

"Bring it here!—bring it here!" cried Miss North, standing on the steps, and gesticulating wildly. The familiar words (used quite unconsciously) rang clearly over the water, making Lamar say to Alan in somewhat spluttering fashion:

"By Jove! those people yonder are English—and the old lady is a trump! Look at her, standing on the steps waving her handkerchief!" Then he shouted in return: "Thanks!—we are coming!"

"How ridiculous they look!" said Miss North, beginning to laugh as soon as she saw that there was to be no tragedy. "And they are En—Oh, you horrid creature! I don't know how you dare to show your face! You are the cause of it all!"

These last remarks were addressed to Nix, who just then emerged from the water, and, without stopping for even a single shake, rushed past the dismayed lady, full at Ermine.

"Nix!—it is Nix!" cried the girl, in a voice of mingled amazement, terror, and delight. "O my God, what does this mean?—Nix!"

"Bow, wow, wow!" said Nix, lifting up his great throat, and opening his great mouth to attest his joy. Then—with a perfect river of water pouring from him—he sprang, in his old fashion, straight on the trembling girl.

Miss North gave a shriek, and flew to the rescue—for she thought Ermine was verily being eaten. Alan heard the shriek, and, having seen Nix bound up the steps, suspected what was the matter (suspected, that is, that the dog was making himself obnoxious); so, leav-

ing the boat to the care of Lamar, he struck out with a will for the villa. In a minute he reached it, and, as he sprang on the steps, Miss North turned round.

"Oh, sir!" cried she, "for Heaven's sake come quickly! I can't get this dreadful dog away, and I am afraid the young lady has fainted."

"Nix, you scoundrel, get down this minute!" cried Alan, in wrath, as, giving himself one vigorous shake to relieve his clothing of its superfluous weight of water, he strode hastily forward.

But the first tone of his voice had fallen like a thunder-clap on the little group. Nix dropped to the ground as if he had been shot—Miss North dropped into a chair, as if she had been shot—while Ermine rose to her feet with a look of such transfigured joy on her face, that "ecstasy" is the only word which will apply to it. There was no amazement, there was no doubt, there was no questioning. Joy was so great and so overwhelming that it swallowed every other feeling, as the ocean swallows the rivers which flow into it.

"Alan!" she said, in a tone which neither of the two who heard it ever forgot.

Then she made a step forward, and fell lifeless into his arms.

CHAPTER X.

THE TIDE GOES OUT.

"Has she fainted?" Alan asked, looking at Miss North, as his eager words remained unanswered, and he felt the fragile form grow heavy on his arms.

"God only knows," was her reply, as she came forward and touched the marble brow, the nerveless hands, the thread-like pulse. "She has only fainted—as yet," she said, after a moment. "Bring her into the saloon, and let me try to recover her."

She led the way, and he followed without a word, bearing the light burden which he had thought never to bear again. With him, amazement subordinated every other feeling. How did Ermine, whom he imagined in Paris with Madelon and Madame Villaret, come to be here on the Lago di Como with her old governess? His whole frame thrilled with the passionate delight of feeling her close to him once more; but, even in the first moment

of meeting—that bitter-sweet moment when she came to him straight as the needle to the magnet—he had remembered that she was his brother's wife. Not his—not his—never again his—was the thought which ran through his heart and mind, even while he pressed kiss after kiss on the dark, silken tendrils of hair, the pale, unconscious, sculptured face.

"Put her down here," said Miss North, indicating a broad couch, on the cushions of which a faint impression bore evidence to its having been lately occupied by the same slight figure. "Take that pillow from under her head—now open the blinds, and fan her gently."

She crossed the floor and rang a bell—then came back, and, kneeling down by the couch, began to chafe the girl's hands. Her heart sank within her—the swoon was so deep that she almost feared breath would never come again to those half-unclosed, motionless lips.

"On that table yonder you will find a flask of ammonia," said she, to the drenched Triton beside her. "Bring it here."

He moved away—leaving a pool of water on the marble floor to mark where he had stood—and in a second returned with the flask. Then he, too, knelt down, and laid his hand over the almost silent heart.

"I can scarcely feel it," he said. "Are you sure she is not dead?"

"Not yet," said Miss North, a little bitterly, "but this may kill her. The shock was enough—and then look at these drenched clothes! They must be changed at once. Will you ring the bell again?"

He was rising to do so, when a dark-browed Italian maid came hastily into the room. "Ah! la signorina, la signorina!" cried she, breaking into lamentations as soon as she caught sight of the motionless, death-like form on the couch. She, too, came and flung herself on her knees beside it.

"Silence, Lucia," said Miss North, in Italian. "She is not dead—she has only fainted. Help me to bring her back to life."

"But she has been in the lake, signora!" (touching the damp, clinging draperies wonderingly).

"Not quite—only something very near it. Go quickly for dry clothes—and bring the brandy with you. As for you" (looking up at Alan, and speaking in English), "you must go, too. Her eyes must not open on your face—that is, if they open at all again. If you will

wait yonder"—she pointed to the terrace—"I will come to you in a few minutes."

"But you will let me return as soon as she is conscious!" said he, almost imploringly.

"That will be for her to say," answered Miss North, almost sternly. "Ah, see!—life is coming back. Go!"

Life was indeed coming back. Faintly, slowly, with a long, tremulous sigh, the breast began to heave, the lips parted a little wider, and gave a glimpse of the teeth, like pure, white cocoa-nut within, the dark lashes quivered, and it was evident that in another moment the white lids would lift.

"Go!" repeated the ex-governess, imperatively. "It will never do for her to see you here. Go!"

"I am going," he answered, in a low voice. And, with one lingering glance, he went.

On the terrace outside Nix was lying, looking very crestfallen; on the steps Lamar was standing, a dripping Triton number two, watching the boat with a rueful face as it lazily floated farther and farther away.

"I say, Erle," he cried, as soon as Alan appeared, "don't you think these good Samaritans must have a boat? Everybody has, you know. If they would be good enough to lend it to us, we could catch that confounded craft quick enough. As it is, what the devil will old Beppo say?"

"Let him say what he pleases," said Alan, flinging himself into the first one of the vacant chairs. "The thing will be picked up somewhere—and we can pay him for damages."

"He'll swear it hadn't a sound plank left in it!" grumbled Lamar, watching the truant craft. "And yonder goes my hat following leisurely in the wake! Well" (sitting down on the topmost step), "I suppose it is the will of God! That is what these pious people say whenever any thing happens.—Nix, you rascal, come near me, will you, and I'll take pleasure in breaking every bone in your body!"

"Here's a chair, Lamar," said Alan.

"I look like sitting in a chair, don't I?" said Lamar, surveying himself grimly. "By-the-way, Alan, was the young lady hurt or only frightened? I think that dog of yours must have gone out of his wits."

"Nix recognized her," said Alan, putting out his hand to pat the dog's great, curly head. "But for him, I should have passed by

without even faintly guessing who was so near me."

"What! you know her?"

"Know her! It was Ermine St. Amand!"

Lamar sprang to his feet—sat down again—gave a long whistle—and finally said:

"By Jove!"

After a while, he recovered sufficiently to add something else. "I thought I knew her! I thought I could not be mistaken in imagining that I had seen that face! What did she do when she saw you, old fellow?"

"Fainted," said Alan, laconically.

"And has she come to, yet?"

"Not yet."

"By Jove!" said Lamar, again.

Then he suddenly dashed his hands into his hair and tossed it about in such an extraordinary fashion, that he speedily assumed the appearance of a well-drenched maniac.

"This is horribly awkward," said he—"for you, at least. I say, Alan, can't we get away? There must be some way of leaving here by land! For Heaven's sake, let us try it!"

"I shall not stir a foot," said Alan. "Fate, chance, the mercy of God, what you please, brought me here. Being here, I shall stay."

"But, my dear fellow, you know you can't—you know it is impossible! What good will it do? Come, be reasonable! You will do the poor girl herself an inestimable benefit, if you will only go before she comes out of her swoon."

"Stand back, Lamar!" said Alan, shaking off the hand which the other, coming forward, had laid on his shoulder. "Don't try to preach to me! By God, I will not endure it! I see in her face that she is dying!—do you hear me?—*dying!*—and no power of earth shall tear me away from her now."

"But what is the good of it?" persisted Lamar. "You know as well as I do that she is married."

"That she is *what?*" asked a sudden, deep voice behind the young men.

They both turned quickly, and faced Miss North. Unperceived, she had come through the open window of the saloon, and, advancing on them from the rear, had caught Lamar's last words.

"Of whom are you speaking?" demanded she, looking from one to the other. "Who is married?"

"We were speaking of Miss St. Amand," said Alan, as Lamar's self-possession entirely

failed. "My friend was reminding me that she is married. It is a fact which I had not forgotten—which I am not likely to forget."

"It is a lie, rather, of which you have come in time to hear the contradiction," said she, almost fiercely. "Come away—farther away! Ermine must not overhear this."

She walked quickly to the farther end of the terrace, and Alan followed. Lamar, with instinctive delicacy, remained where he was. "The devil is to pay!" he thought. "They won't want me!"

They did not want him in the sense of needing him, but neither of them would have hesitated to speak freely before him—Miss North, because she would willingly have told her indignant story to the whole world; Alan, because a sincere and abiding friendship had long since sprung up between himself and the young Georgian. If Lamar had followed them, he would have seen how quickly two honest, straightforward natures can tear away the veil which falsehood or intrigue may have woven before the truth.

Alan's side of the story we know.

Miss North's was this: The year before, she had been teaching in Montreal, when she met the Erie party, who, *en masse*, had accompanied the Saxtons on their bridal tour. Ermine was delighted to see her *ci-devant* governess, and they were together a great deal. The girl was very sad concerning Alan, from whom she had not heard for a long time, and it was evident to the keen eyes of the shrewd Englishwoman that the family determination to marry her to Raymond was, if possible, on the increase. "But she was like a rock," said this faithful friend; "I have never seen constancy and resolution that equalled hers, with all her childlike gentleness. After a while, they resigned their persecutions for a time; and I think they had almost resigned all hope of compassing their end, when the news of your death came."

"I cannot tell you what that news was to Ermine. You must look at her face to read it there. My poor words would very faintly describe such a death-blow to hope, and love, and life. It has simply killed her. Well, they scarcely gave the desolate child time to realize her grief, before the plots, and plans, and persecutions, began afresh. Mr. Erie came on in person, and I have always suspected that he originated and was chief in executing the scheme which was finally carried out when

they found that the will which opposed them was like granite. He paid me the compliment of suspecting that I inspired Ermine's obstinacy, so his first move was to carry the whole party off to New York, under pretence of seeing the sailors who had arrived at that port and hearing the whole truth of your shipwreck. I confess I was very uneasy after they left. Ermine was in that horrible numb state which follows a great shock, and I feared that, in her lethargic indifference to every thing concerning herself, she might be persuaded or forced to ruin her life forever, as such a marriage would ruin it. Judge, then, of my relief, when, after an ominous silence of several weeks, I received a very gracious letter from Mrs. Erie, begging me to come to New York and thence accompany Ermine to Germany, where she desired to go and study art. I threw up my situation and went at once. When I reached New York, I found your brother engaged to Madelon Lautrec."

"To Madelon Lautrec!"

"Yes, to Madelon Lautrec. Worked upon by every possible appeal to her generosity, indifferent to every thing save her determination to remain faithful to your memory, and anxious only to be left in peace, Ermine had made over her fortune to her cousin, between whom and your brother a mercenary bargain was speedily struck. I found that, of all her wealth, she had retained only a portion sufficient to insure a support apart from exertions which might have proved unsuccessful, and at least could not soon have been remunerative. The whole thing seemed simple enough to her. To be relieved from the anxiety of wealth, for which she had no love, to be able to go to Europe, and to endeavor to forget her desolation in the art to which she was born, this was all for which she cared. This was all she did. Of the fraud which came after, her hands were stainless."

"How, then, did it come? How could she be robbed, not only of her fortune, but of her very identity, without at least permitting it?"

"Listen: you shall hear. 'If you are going to Europe to study art as a profession, and if you mean to make your bread by it,' said Mrs. Erie, 'you must take some other name than your own. I cannot suffer my daughter to do such a thing as *my daughter*.' (You remember Ermine had surrendered her fortune to save her step-father from bankruptcy.) 'Well, mamma,' said Ermine, listlessly, 'I

promise that you shall not be disgraced by my labors. Tell me what name to take, and no one who knew me as Mademoiselle St. Amand shall know me as an art-student. What shall I call myself?' I remember how Mrs. Erie seemed to think for a moment before she said: 'Suppose that, as Madelon is about to resign her name, you were to take *that*? It is a family name; there was a Lautrec St. Amand several generations ago, and therefore not like one which would be only assumed.' Ermine assented to this as indifferently as she assented to every thing else, and also bound herself not to seek out her relations in France. You will consider me very stupid, perhaps, that I did not see the drift of all this, that I did not suspect the contemplated change of identity, but in truth people are slow to see such things when they occur under their own eyes. In books we are always expecting wiles, and intrigues, and villainies, but, in real life, nothing is farther from our thoughts. We can scarcely realize it, in fact, when it is forced upon our perception. Ermine and I sailed from New York before the marriage, and it was not until long afterward that I began to think what had been done. I was not sure of it, however, until I came out and heard your friend say that Ermine was married. Then, like a flash, I understood every thing.

"Well" (as he stood utterly silent, utterly passive, stunned apparently by the blackness of the abyss of treachery into which he had fallen), "you wonder, perhaps, how we came here. We went to Germany, as I have already said, to Munich, to Dresden, to Dusseldorf. But even art had lost all power over Ermine. She looked with strange, absent eyes at the most beautiful pictures; she would sit before her easel with her brush in her hand all day, and scarcely paint a stroke. At last she took a cold, which very much alarmed me. She never complained, but she wasted away like a shadow, and at last I called in a physician. He told me that the climate was too severe for her, that I must bring her to Italy. 'She is a child of the South,' he said, 'and the South alone can cure her.' But he was wrong; the South has not cured her. Slowly but surely she has faded away before my eyes. We spent the spring in Rome, and, as summer came on, moved gradually northward. I was anxious to go to Lake Lemano, but Ermine clung to Italy. She could not bear to cross the Alps; and so we stayed here until her strength was

too far spent to take any journey whatever. An English friend of mine who occupied this villa was suddenly summoned home, and we moved into it. It would have been a charming place to linger in, only—only—"

She stopped short and her fortitude gave way. Leaning down on the carved balustrade below which the magical waters, that a hundred poets have sung, were softly plashing, she burst into a passion of tears.

"O my God! my God! is not this too bitter!" she cried. "If you had come one month earlier, there might have been hope—who can say? Now, you have only come to fill, with the longings of time, the spirit which stands on the brink of eternity! Oh, it is too cruel! Oh, it is too hard! Oh, why has it been permitted!"

So she moaned to herself in the anguish of her grief and love, while Alan—dry-eyed, and as he felt, almost dry-hearted—quietly watched her. With him, even grief was swallowed up in the passionate desire for revenge which took possession of his soul like a burning tempest. There were solace and comfort *there* at least. He would fulfil his vow, he would return every pang which she had suffered, every tear which she had shed, on the authors of this treacherous wrong. He would hurl them down from their high places in the world's esteem, and point them out as the cowardly traitors which they were. He would hold them to account for the life which they had murdered. And then he, too, broke down, not in sobs, but in one great groan, which seemed as if it might have rent his chest asunder. The thought which proved too much for him was, how near he had been to the truth in Paris; how only a thin veil had separated him *then* from the knowledge which was *now* gained, too late. Alas! it is just such veils as these—such fine, impalpable tissues of falsehood, or deception, or misunderstanding—which make more than half the bitter misery of this bitter life.

"Don't regret that I have come," said he, at last, almost harshly. "Don't grudge me one hour of happiness to sweeten a lifetime of desolation! Don't think that, if angels and saints are calling her, she will pine to stay with me! God did not mean that she should pass away holding a lie for truth, and so He sent me. So long as He gives me life, I shall thank him that He did so. After Him, I thank Lamar, who would insist on coming

here, though I have long been feverishly anxious to go back to the sea."

"And so you had given her up?"

"Could I do other? Ah, how could I dream—each day I have hoped that, perhaps with every hour, she was drawing nearer to happiness?"

"And so she has been," said Miss North, gently. "After all, does not God know best? Nothing is chance. He would have sent you before *this*, if he had meant you to come. But" (with a sudden start), "you must go now and dry your clothes, you and your friend. I have neglected it so long, that I am afraid you will both be ill. Yonder is Lucia; she will show you a room. When you are ready, come back here to the terrace, and I will let you see Ermine."

Three hours later, the golden day is slowly drawing to its close. Fair, on the immemorial mountains that mirror themselves in the azure waters below, sleeps the incarnadine glory of an Italian sunset. A thousand sweet sounds and perfumes, sounds and perfumes fraught with the aroma of enchanted Italy, steal in through the open casement of the saloon to the dying girl lying there so quietly at peace. The loveliest scene of earth is spread before her eyes, but it may be that already the gaze of the spirit has caught the marvellous towers and battlements of that fair "city of the saints of God," beside which all earthly beauty pales into insignificance. At least these things appeal but faintly to her now. The tide is going out, going so gently, that those around can scarcely realize how near at hand is the last ebb. Alan, who has seen men die, can scarcely force himself to believe that this is death, that any child of earth can lie in the embrace of the terrible messenger as if encircled by a mother's arms. At one side of the couch he kneels: at the other, Miss North is seated; Lucia is at the foot, sobbing over an ivory crucifix; Lamar slowly paces the terrace outside. It is only within the last few minutes that these have been called in. For nearly three hours the two so cruelly kept asunder, so strangely brought together, were left alone. What passed in that last interview, none knew, save, indeed, that Ermine's dying prayer had made her love forego his revenge.

"Leave them to God, dear love—oh, leave them to God!" she said. "It seems almost too hard that we should have been kept apart

so long!—that we should meet now only to say good-by!—that we should have suffered so much and so bitterly!—but remember how they will have to answer for every causeless pang at God's tribunal, and do not darken your soul by usurping His office. You see"—putting her tender arms around the throat, which *something* was almost choking—"I am going first, but I shall watch and wait for you, and O Alan, dear Alan, *try* to come! It seems to me that I shall miss *your* face even in paradise!"

"My darling, I will try!" he answered, brokenly. "Tell me how."

Then in her sweet, low voice she told him things which have no place in such a page as this. Some themes are too holy to be handled save by a reverent pen for reverent eyes to read. It is enough that on her death-bed this frail, dying girl spoke some simple words which God was good enough to touch, as it were, with His divine power, and which, falling deep into the heart of her listener, brought forth good fruit in the after-time.

But all this is over now. The long exertion has taxed her strength so much that she can only lie with her head pillowed on Alan's arm, her eyes in their deep gladness fixed on his face—and, so resting, softly pass from time into eternity. The good priest who was there in the morning had given her the last rites of the Church, and she had refused to allow him to be summoned again.

"It is useless," she said. "It would only trouble him—and he looked sick when he left this morning. Give him my love and my rosary, dear Miss North, and tell him how grateful I am for his great kindness to me."

No one was forgotten in these souvenirs—even Lamar received a tiny gold charm from her *châtelaine*. "In memory of your shower-bath," she said, with a smile, which the young man thought was the sweetest he had ever seen.

And so, while they watch and wait, the sun begins to sink. The "vast-skirted clouds" gather about the lofty peaks, and form harmonies of color for which language has scarcely a name. The waters of the lake catch the glory and give it back increased a thousand-fold. The golden and rose-colored tints fling a tender radiance into the saloon, filling it with a strange, luminous light, like the atmosphere with which some of the old painters surround the figure of a saint.

"How lovely!" says Ermine, turning her languid gaze to the shining waters outside. "Alan, do you remember the evening before you went away, when we stood on the Battery and watched the sun go down over the bay of Charleston? It was not half as fair as this peerless Lago di Como, yet it seems to me that I can see it all now—and your smile when you said, 'Only four months to wait!'"

Alan cannot answer. The scene of which she speaks comes back to him, too—the familiar home-scene on which his eyes have gazed a thousand times—on which, if they ever gaze again, it must be alone! He remembers how blooming and lovely with the tints of youth and health was the pale face beside him, then—and, so remembering, a great ocean of bitterness once more wells up in his heart.

"Oh, my darling! my darling!" he cries, throwing his arms around her and straining her passionately to him. "Stay with me!—stay with me! My God, what shall I do with this useless life of mine when you have gone from it forever?"

"Forever is not of time," answers she, softly—even this passionate cry being unable to stir the ineffable peace which Death brings with him to the great in faith and the pure of heart—"that belongs to eternity, Alan. O dear love, may it indeed belong to eternity for us!"

"But I cannot give you up to eternity—I will not give you up!" cries he, madly. "O Ermine, *try* to stay! Are we not told that all things are possible to will? Surely your place is here! Surely God does not want you as I do!" cried the poor fellow, in the greatness of his grief unconscious of his own irreverent words.

Something like a look of pain crossing her face, however, makes him suddenly aware that this fever of earth is marring the calm which is already of heaven.

"But suppose I would rather go?" she whispers. "For a long time death was very terrible to me, and I shrank from it—but now it seems so easy. Pain and strife are all gone—and would you bring them back? Ah, Alan, you say our Lord does not want me. At least He loves me, for He takes me from every possible grief of life, to give me this painless death in your dear arms—and ah, who can tell what more beside! But for your grief, poor love, I should be quite happy!"

At this he chokes it back. After all, life

is long, and he has all its years for mourning—if he choose to use them for such a purpose. Surely, then, he can refrain from breaking the divine peace which hedges around this gentle handmaid of the Great King—this tender martyr, who bore her cross unflinchingly until she sank in the dust of the wayside, and to whom has come now the rest which follows faithful combat.

"Alan," whispers again the sweet voice whose music will soon be hushed for earth, "will you promise me once more that you will not endeavor to avenge our wrongs—on any one?"

She had read well the direction of his thoughts, she had understood well the ominous knitting of his brows. He started, and blushed like a convicted school-boy.

"My darling," he said, "can you not trust me to do what is right, can you not believe—"

"You must promise me," she interrupted, eagerly. "I cannot die in peace unless you do. I will not leave you with a possible sin to stain your soul, and perhaps—who knows—keep us apart forever.—Lucia!"

She extended one transparent hand, and Lucia—seeing what she meant—placed the crucifix in it.

"Promise me on this!" she said to Alan. "See!—I cannot argue with you any more; I can only ask it of your love. Remember it is the last gift you will ever be able to give to me."

He bends his head, and, taking her hand, kisses the crucifix which she holds before him.

"I promise," he said; then, with a burst, "O Ermine, there is nothing I would not promise you!—but this is hard!"

"Is it?" said she, with a tender smile. "Where there is no sacrifice, there is no merit. Our Lord will know how to repay you all its costs. One thing more, and I am done: will you give this to Madelon"—she unclasped a small cross and chain from her neck—"and tell her from me that I beg her, by the love she used to bear me, to take her own name, and, for her soul's sake, not to live under the weight of a constant lie? Give her my love, but say nothing of my forgiveness—I cannot think that it is needed; I cannot think that she dreamed of this."

He took the chain and looked at it irresolutely. He knew that he could not trust himself to see the treacherous woman from whom he had parted in unsuspecting friendship.

"Can I not send it in a letter?" he asked, at last.

"Yes," she answered, "that will do. I have written myself." Then, after a short pause, she glanced at the maid.—"Lucia, is it not nearly time for the Angelus?"

"It will ring in a few minutes, signorina," answered Lucia, sadly.

"Then say the Litany for a Departing Soul. I am a little tired now."

The girl at once began the litany in the usual sing-song Italian fashion. All was hushed and silent in the saloon, while her voice rose and fell over every supplication. The cadenced tones came out to Lamar, and, though he did not recognize the beautiful words which they chanted, instinct made him pause in his tread. He knew the end must be at hand. Meanwhile, Ermine lay white and silent as a lily in her lover's arms, and, even when the last supplication had died away, she remained so motionless that Miss North's heart stood still.

"Ermine!" she said, leaning over.

But the soul had not yet gone. The lids lifted from the dark eyes—the light of affection flashed into them. She held out her arms toward her faithful nurse.

"Kiss me!" she faltered, gently. "I—I think it is very near."

After this long embrace was over, she gave a kind farewell to Lucia—whose passionate grief alone found vent in sobs—then, looking up at Alan, she smiled faintly, and said—

"Nix!"

In a few minutes the dog was brought. He seemed to know that something not usual was the matter, for he scarcely needed his master's warning, and placed his leonine paws with great gentleness on the couch. For the last time those slender, wasted arms went round his massive throat.

"Good-by, dear old fellow!" she said, with loving tenderness—and kissed him gently between the eyes that were gazing at her with such strange, wistful intelligence.

"Let him stay," she murmured, brokenly, as Alan tried to make him go away. "He reminds me of the old times—the dear old times! Love, do you remember them? Ah, how happy we were!—Is it not something to have been so happy once?"

Then the lids fell again. Her head lay on his shoulder—for he had raised her that she might give her farewells—and her pure, ala-

baster cheek rested against his own, hot with the fever which was consuming him. His passionate kisses woke no flush on the white skin, kindled no fire on the sweet lips. Even when he called her name in love's tenderest tone, the dark lashes which veiled her eyes scarcely trembled.

But now the sun had gone, and suddenly over the shining waters came the soft sound of a bell chiming from the tower of an embowered convent not far away. As Lucia sank on her knees, and Miss North involuntarily followed her example, the lids lifted once more from those eyes which Alan had thought closed for-

ever. Feebly she raised her hand and made the familiar sign of the cross. Her ear caught the familiar words which Lucia was sobbing forth. When the verse was ended, she joined softly in the "Ave."

"Hail, Mary, full of grace—"

There the voice stopped—forever. The last words she spoke on earth were the words uttered eighteen hundred years ago by the angel of the Annunciation to the Holy Virgin of Nazareth.

And so, while the whole world of faith were on their knees, the tide ebbd gently away upon the Unknown Sea.

MISS INGLESBY'S SISTER-IN-LAW.

A STORY IN SIX CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER I.

"I WONDER what she will be like?" said pretty Rose Inglesby, half musingly, half pettishly. "She might have had consideration enough to send one her photograph! It is very tantalizing to be expecting a woman, and not even to know what she looks like—not even, in a general way, whether she is pretty or ugly. Suppose I toss up a sixpence, and decide that point at least by heads and tails? Mamma, have you a sixpence?"

"Don't be foolish, Rose," answered Mrs. Inglesby, placidly.

This was Mrs. Inglesby's usual reply to her daughter's usual flow of gay nonsense; and on this occasion the remark had a decidedly sedative effect. Miss Inglesby leaned back, yawned, and said no more. The flies hummed drowsily, the clock ticked obtrusively, and for five minutes an unbroken silence reigned in the bowery drawing-room, with its lace curtains and India matting, its graceful furniture, and cool, Venetian blinds. The two ladies, who were its only occupants, had the width of the room between them; and, although it was evident that they were both enduring that unpleasant expectation which is the same in kind, however much it may differ in degree, whether a battle or a guest is impending, yet it was also evident that they bore this trying ordeal very differently. Mrs. Inglesby—a model of the "fair, fat, and forty" type of good looks—seemed indemnifying herself for her broken siesta by a luxurious rest in a deep *fauteuil*, while Rose—who was seated in an inscrutable school-girl fashion in the corner of a sofa—did not keep still

for two consecutive seconds. At last, restlessness prevailed over indolence, and with a quick motion she rose to her feet.

"This is intolerable!" she said. "What with the heat, and the waiting, and the uncertainty, I am so nervous I don't know what to do with myself. Mamma" (indignantly), "I believe you are absolutely asleep!"

"No I am not," said Mrs. Inglesby, in a suspiciously drowsy tone of denial.

"I only wish I was!" said Rose; and then she began pacing to and fro. As she moved across the floor, practising various steps, and various modes of carrying her shoulders and arms, by way of passing the time, she suddenly caught a glimpse of herself in a large mirror, and this glimpse made her pause. She stopped and gazed, fascinated, as any one else might have been, by the freshness of her complexion, the grace of her features, the sheen of her hair; and as she gazed she smiled—first unconsciously at her own loveliness, then consciously at her own vanity.

"Mamma," she said—paused a moment, considered, and finally went on—"mamma, I wonder if she will be prettier than I am?"

"Prettier than you are!" echoed Mrs. Inglesby, with a start. Then she looked up at her daughter, and it was easy to see from the coolness with which she went on that this egregious want of modesty was not uncommon on Miss Inglesby's part. "I can't say, Rose; but I should think it was very probable. She had quite a reputation before she was married, you know; and Harry—poor fellow!—always spoke of her as a great beauty."

"I have something of a reputation, too," said Rose, still looking at herself in the glass; "and if I married I am sure I should feel very

badly if my husband did not think I was a great beauty. Thank you for your information, mamma; but neither of those two points is very novel or very conclusive. She really might have had sufficient consideration to send one her photograph," repeated the young lady, impatiently. "This uncertainty will drive me distracted!"

"Isn't that five o'clock striking?" asked Mrs. Inglesby. "The train is due so soon now that it would hardly be worth while to go distracted, I think, Rose."

"It is due at 5.10, I believe," said Rose.

This reflection sobered her, for she walked to the window and looked out silently on the broad street with its rows of green shade-trees, the golden sunshine streaming through them, and the long shadows thrown across. She made a pretty picture, standing by the window in the green dimness of its half-closed blinds, with the lace curtains all around her, and a hanging basket swinging just above her head—such a pretty picture that a gentleman, who at this moment came down the quiet street, paused suddenly at sight of it. He was a dark, slender man, of medium size, who, as he paused, took off his hat and spoke in the tone and with the manner of a familiar acquaintance.

"Good-evening, Miss Inglesby. What miracle have I to thank for the unexpected pleasure of seeing you? It surely must have been a miracle to bring you down from your siesta at five o'clock on such an afternoon as this—the warmest of the season, everybody says."

"Good-evening, Mr. Kennon," returned Miss Inglesby, with a smile and a blush. "You haven't any miracle at all to thank for seeing me. I cut short my siesta unwillingly enough, I assure you; and I only did so because we are expecting my sister-in-law this afternoon."

"Your sister-in-law!" he repeated, starting slightly, and, as it were, unconsciously.

"Yes, my sister-in-law. Is that a very disagreeable anticipation? You look as if you thought so."

"Did I look so? Well, it is disagreeable so far—that I can't ask permission to ring the door-bell and profit by your exemplary virtue."

"No, I am afraid you can't. The train is due by this time, and no doubt they will be

here very soon—more's the pity!" added she, with a grimace.

"Yes, the train is due," said he, glancing at his watch; "but it will be some time before your sister-in-law can arrive—fifteen minutes, at least. That gives me ten. I hope I am not detaining you from any thing more pleasant?"

"Oh, not at all," answered Rose, quite deaf to various significant sounds that were proceeding from the part of the room where her mother sat. "If you don't mind standing on the pavement, I am sure I don't mind standing here. It's rather entertaining, in fact."

"Come out on the balcony, then, won't you? That Undine light is very becoming, but I should like to shake hands, and I can't well manage that across the balcony and through the blinds."

"You will have to dispense with that gratification, I fear. I cannot come out on the balcony at this scorching hour of the day—(No, mamma—I have not an idea of going)—and I must say you look very comfortable where you are, Mr. Kennon."

"I am very comfortable," said Mr. Kennon—which in truth was not remarkable, as he was leaning against a large elm, with his face to the window and his back to the tree, thus enjoying at his leisure the shade cast freely down upon him, and the pretty picture arranged before him. "I am very comfortable indeed; and I will unite usefulness to comfort, by letting you know as soon as the carriage containing your sister-in-law comes in sight. Does your brother accompany her?"

"My brother!" For an instant Rose opened her eyes. "Oh, you are thinking of my other sister-in-law—my brother Robert's wife. This is the widow of my brother who is dead—my poor brother Harry. She is travelling alone, and papa has gone down to the station to meet her. We have never seen her," proceeded the young lady, waxing quite confidential. "She and Harry met in Europe, and were married there, and went straight to Brazil, where he had a position as engineer; and"—her voice fell—"he died there. When his wife came back, she went to her own friends, and so, though it is three years since she returned, we have never seen her, and—O Mr. Kennon, we do wonder so much what she is like!"

"Do you?" said Mr. Kennon. "I am a little surprised at that. Of course most women have reason to be curious about another woman; but you need not fear a rival near the throne."

"I am not sure about that," said Rose, candidly. "Widows are very fascinating; and I think I have heard that she is a beauty."

"Her beauty ought to be worn off by this time," said Mr. Kennon, with the sneer that often disfigured his handsome mouth. "Can a woman bury husbands *ad libitum*, and show no sign of it? If there is one popular belief more than another which fills me with disgust, it is the belief that widows have any attraction to men who do not prefer all their goods and chattels second-hand," he went on, with a bitterness which surprised Rose, yet pleased her, too; though it would have waked the suspicion of a more worldly-wise woman. "There is something about a widow that smacks of the charnel-house," he continued. "Either she loved her first husband, or she did not—in either case, who cares to be his successor?"

"Then I suppose the *belle veuve* of French comedy has no attraction to you?" said Rose, half archly, half shyly.

He laughed—not pleasantly, by any means.

"If ever I make up my mind to marry one," he said, "I shall order my wedding-coat from a pawnbroker's. There would be an exquisite fitness in the association of things. But I think I see the carriage coming—so your curiosity with regard to this particular widow will soon be gratified. I hope she will prove every thing she should be, and I hope you will let me come to see you soon."

He lifted his hat and bowed. But Rose did not return the salutation. She had turned to tell her mother that the expected guest was near at hand; and, when she turned back again, he was already walking rapidly away. She had meant to say something before he went—something that would bring him back soon—but it was too late now. The carriage was approaching, and, even while Mrs. Inglesby was saying, "You might really have some regard for my wishes, Rose, in the matter of encouraging that Mr. Kennon," it drew up before the house.

The two ladies went out at once to wel-

come the stranger. As they reached the front door, they saw Colonel Inglesby assisting a tall, graceful woman in a long crape veil, and a long black cloak, from the carriage. Rose's heart gave a bound. "A beautiful figure, at any rate," she thought; "and still in widow's weeds!" The next moment, there was the rush of reception and greeting—hands clasped, kisses given, half-uttered words spoken, a few tears shed, perhaps, for this visit could not be other than sad in the thoughts and associations which it wakened, and, when all this subsided, the young widow was within her husband's home.

"You would like to go to your own room at once, would you not, my dear?" asked Mrs. Inglesby, as they entered the hall.

"Thank you, yes. I am very tired," the stranger answered, in a sweet voice.

So she was borne away to the upper regions, while Rose—who was intensely curious to see that veiled face—found herself left to endure her curiosity as best she might.

She did not endure it very well. She was impatient and unsettled, and she roamed restlessly about the drawing-room waiting for her mother to return, and quite unconscious that Mrs. Inglesby had come down-stairs and been absorbed into the dining-room, whence proceeded, ever and anon, that friendly clatter of dishes which speaks so confidently of coming cheer. John was a good servant, but rather stupid; so his mistress, who was naturally anxious that, on the first day of the stranger's arrival, every thing should be right and proper, had thought it best to go and superintend matters in person. Hence, Miss Inglesby fidgeted in the drawing-room quite alone; and hence, also, she went to the window and stretched her neck to gaze up and down the street, in faint hope of seeing Mr. Kennon on the visible horizon. While she was thus engaged, the rustle of a dress sounded behind her, and a melodious voice said:

"Have I drifted into the right room?" and, turning suddenly, she faced her sister-in-law.

In a moment she saw what she was like, and in a moment, too, her heart, without rhyme or reason, sank down into her very shoes. "Yes, this is the right room," she said, "and I am very glad to see you. Pray sit down." Meanwhile, she thought, "What a vain fool I was to wonder if she would be prettier than I am!" In truth, Mrs. Henry

Inglesby was a woman such as one does not see very often. As she stood in the soft, golden light, with her graceful figure, her flowing dress of lustreless black silk, and the folds of sheer white crape at her neck and wrists, she looked so queenly and imposing that pretty, dainty Rose shrank into absolute insignificance before her. Then, what an alabaster complexion; what statuesque features; what large, full eyes of the rare golden-brown tint; what rich, heavy masses of magnificent golden-brown hair! Altogether, she was a woman whose beauty no one could deny, a woman born to lead hearts captive by right divine of her witching face, and a woman with a fascination quite independent of these personal gifts, as Rose herself was soon forced to acknowledge.

For, beginning with soft, sad remembrances of the bright young engineer, who had been the link between them, Mrs. Inglesby soon won her way to the girl's heart. Her manners were very sweet and gracious—a little too dignified, perhaps, for the taste of the present day, but very perfect, for all that; and very well calculated to wear away, by gentle degrees, the barriers of shyness and reserve. Though the dead "Harry" had been only Rose's half-brother, she was very tender toward his memory; and, despite the beauty which at first had startled her, was very well disposed to like the wife of whom he had been so proud. The two were talking like old acquaintances when Colonel Inglesby came in after a while—a little shaken from his ordinary calm, a little subdued in his ordinary manner; for, though he had said nothing about it, this visit was a trial to him, recalling, as it did, the son who had been, of all the children, his favorite and pride. He was relieved when he saw how matters were progressing, for Rose was an uncertain girl at all times, and in nothing more uncertain than her likes and dislikes. It had been a matter of doubt how she would receive the new sister-in-law; and, therefore, her father was relieved to see that friendly relations were already established between them. Soon after his entrance Mrs. Inglesby appeared, and, presently, dinner was announced.

The evening which followed, though a strictly domestic, was far from a dull one. The Inglesby house was, of all houses in Northorpe, the most popular in a social way; and, though to-night not one of its usual vis-

itors rang the door-bell, or dropped in for the "half-minute" that always lengthened into a half-hour, or probably several half-hours, no one missed them, or felt time tedious because of their absence. True, Rose looked once or twice wistfully toward the street, as a masculine step rang on the pavement, or a masculine voice floated through the window; but she bore the unusual isolation very well, and even she acknowledged, when the evening was over, that the new sister-in-law was a singularly charming person. What the latter had said or done that was specially attractive nobody knew; but that whatever she said or did had a grace of its own they all felt. After she had bidden them good-night, and retired to her chamber, they each looked at the chair where she had lately sat, and where the fragrance of her presence still lingered, and each expressed, in different ways, the same degree of admiration.

"Poor Harry!—poor fellow!" said the colonel, rising and walking to and fro. "It was even harder on him than I thought—to leave all his bright prospects in life, and such a wife, so soon. I have not seen as fine a woman—I don't know when," he went on, quite regardless that his wife and daughter were listening to him. "I hope you will take some lessons from her, Rose. Her manners are perfect."

"They are very good, papa," said Rose, with a slight toss of her head; "but, as for their perfection, that's all a matter of taste, you know. Some people might think my manners perfect, and then I should be sorry that I had changed them for those of my sister-in-law. She is as pretty as she well can be, however—don't you think so, mamma? Oh, if I only had such a complexion, and such a nose, and such eyes, and, above all, such a figure, I should be happy—happier than I ever shall be again after seeing them in the possession of another woman, and that woman a widow!"

"Widows are usually considered very attractive," said Mrs. Inglesby, in her quiet way. "I remember, when I was young, I used to be more afraid of them than of girls, a great deal. Alice is so lovely, too—I don't wonder poor Harry used to rave about her. She won't be a widow long—you may depend on that, Rose!"

"It don't concern me one way or another," said Rose, carelessly. "I like her very

much—a great deal better than I expected—and that is all. I believe I'll go to bed. I'm a little sleepy and tired, though I haven't the excuse of a journey, as Mrs. Inglesby had. By-the-way, I must make up my mind before to-morrow what I shall call her. 'Sister' is absurd, and I can't say 'Alice.' She is far too grand—I should much sooner think of saying 'your majesty.'—Good-night, papa. I will practise manners, if you think I need improvement so badly."

The spoiled child kissed her father, bade her mother good-night, and went her way upstairs. When she entered her chamber, and closed the door, she walked straight to the toilet-table, turned up both jets of the gas, and looked at herself from head to foot in the large, swinging mirror. This careful survey lasted about ten minutes, then a satisfied smile came over her face, and she nodded complacently to the reflection smiling back at her. "You don't lose so much by the comparison, after all," she said. "And Kennon admires little women—he told me so himself."

CHAPTER II.

La belle veuve, as Rose inwardly styled her sister-in-law, made her appearance the next morning in a becoming trifle of a Marie Stuart breakfast-cap, of the sheerest white crape, which gave to her costume the last possible touch of refined elegance. "Why did Providence ever see fit to make such a ravishing creature a widow?" was Miss Inglesby's thought, as she watched the graceful entrance of the stranger, and exchanged a moderately affectionate greeting with her.

"Am I early or late?" asked the latter, in her rich, sweet voice—the voice of a born contralto. "You did not mention the breakfast-hour last night, and I am always lazy on the least provocation."

"You are early, as it chances," said Rose, watching her with unconscious envy, and almost wishing herself a widow, that she might be able to wear such an irresistible coiff. "Mamma is not down yet, and breakfast is not ready."

"And are you always so early?" asked Mrs. Inglesby, glancing at a hat and veil near by, which had apparently just been laid aside.

"Not always, but I have been a little unwell this spring, and Dr. Rawdon advised a

walk before breakfast, so I try it occasionally. There is a very pleasant square near us, and it is always deserted early in the morning. One might practise gymnastics there with perfect impunity."

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Inglesby, smiling. "I am rather fond of a constitutional myself," she went on. "If you have no objection, I think I will join you some morning."

"I—of course I shall be very glad," said Rose—but she stammered, and, despite herself, looked unmistakably dismayed.

This expression, quickly as it was banished, did not escape her sister-in-law. The beautiful brown eyes gave one keen glance which Rose did not soon forget, and then, as a flush came over the delicate guelder-rose complexion of the girl, Mrs. Inglesby walked to one of the low French windows which overlooked a garden blooming with the royal beauty of May.

"What beautiful flowers you have!" she said. "I suppose the dew is gone by this time, and one may venture out with impunity?"

"Jackson, our gardener, is so careful to keep the walks clear of grass, that you need not fear any amount of dew," said Rose, following her, and unclosing the sash.

They walked down the garden-paths together; but, while Mrs. Inglesby was delighted with the dewy freshness and fragrance of every thing around, and while she stopped continually to admire or gather some tempting bud or half-blown blossom, Rose seemed strangely indifferent to the winsome charm of these bright darlings of the spring. She sauntered listlessly along, and looked so often in the direction of a house near by—a large, handsome, old-fashioned house, set in a large, old-fashioned garden, which was divided by a high wall from their own—that at last her sister-in-law remarked the fact.

"Who is your next-door neighbor?" she asked. "Being so near, you ought to be sociable."

"We have no next-door neighbor," answered Rose, a little shortly. "The house is unoccupied."

Mrs. Inglesby stopped in the act of pulling a Noisette bud, and looked at the house in question. For an unoccupied dwelling it certainly presented a strange appearance just then—blinds were open, windows were raised, stir and movement were plainly visible within. As she looked, a gentleman showed himself

at one of the open windows, and then hastily vanished.

"If your house is not occupied, it must be haunted," said she, turning to Rose with a smile.

But Rose was frowning as she gazed in the same direction, and her companion, whom nothing escaped, saw that one tiny foot was beating nervously on the gravel-path.

"The new owner must have come," answered she, almost bitterly. "When I said it was not occupied, I meant that the old man who used to live there is dead, and that his nephew, who inherits the place, had not arrived."

"So it has changed hands," said Mrs. Inglesby, looking with considerable interest at the stately house over which the bright May sunshine slanted as lovingly and gayly as if no coffin had ever passed across the threshold. "I think I should hate to leave such a home. What was the name of the old man of whom you speak?"

"He was an old wretch," said Rose, vindictively, "and his name was Devereux."

More than this meagre information Mrs. Inglesby did not receive. As Rose uttered the last word, there came through the open windows the clear, ringing sound of the breakfast-bell, and the two ladies retraced their steps to the house.

The day passed very quietly, and so, likewise, did the evening. But again no visitors dropped in; and it really seemed as if the curiosity of Northorpe was to be restrained in simply heroic degree. This evening, however, Rose showed unmistakable signs of ennui. She strolled listlessly to and fro, haunted the neighborhood of the front windows, started whenever there was a step on the pavement near the door, and finally committed the enormity of an undisguised yawn. Somewhat ashamed of this last achievement, she went to the piano; but, in the midst of her very first song, there came a sharp peal of the door-bell that made her start and turn. A moment later John passed through the hall to answer the summons, and Mrs. Henry Inglesby, who was listening, with exemplary patience, to her mother-in-law's placid stream of small-talk, looked up with a little interest in the interruption. As she looked up, her eye chanced to fall on Rose, and something in the girl's face attracted her attention. She was listening eagerly—listening with lips

parted and color varying—to the sounds at the front door; to John fumbling an instant or two at the handle before turning it, and to a voice—a round, jovial voice—inquiring if Colonel Inglesby and the ladies were at home. The bright brown eyes that were watching it saw a swift flush of vexation come over the listening face, and the lips meet only to be impatiently bitten. "Poor child!" thought the elder and more experienced woman, "she is looking for some man who has not come."

Somebody had come, however; for, besides the voice aforesaid, a hat and stick were audibly deposited in the hall, and a stout old gentleman, in a wig, soon made his appearance at the open door.

He was greeted cordially by the colonel as "Brent," and was plainly an intimate friend, from his own greetings to Mrs. Inglesby and Rose.

When he was presented to the young stranger, he at once claimed the privilege of shaking hands, on the score of having been a life-long friend of her husband and her husband's family.

The bustle of reception being over, and all due compliments paid, he sat himself down and plunged at once into social topics, in which Rose alone seemed to take no interest. While he talked at one end of the room, she went on playing at the other, and it was not until the name of Kennon caught her ear that she took her hands from the keys and turned round.

"What was that, Mr. Brent?" she asked, quickly. "Did you say that Mr. Kennon has left town?"

"I said he intended to leave," said Mr. Brent, while Mrs. Inglesby exchanged a quick glance with her husband. "I met him on the street to-day, and he told me that he was off—to be gone a week, I think he said. But I rather incline to think"—here the old gentleman looked very significant—"that he has gone for good."

"Why?" demanded Rose, with ill-restrained eagerness.

Mr. Brent glanced round at his audience before he tapped his snuffbox gently, and answered, with a smile, "Because Philip Devereux has arrived."

To say that this item of news made a sensation would be to state an extreme fact as mildly as possible. Whoever Mr. Philip



"Down came the music-book on the piano-keys with a crash, and Miss Inglesby rose to address the company." p. 121.

Devereux might be, it at least was evident that his arrival in Northorpe was a matter of importance.

The colonel said: "Bless my soul! you don't say so?" Mrs. Inglesby dropped her crochet-work and said: "Dear me! is it possible?" while Rose, turning first red and then pale, uttered never a word.

"Devereux!" said Mrs. Henry Inglesby, speaking quietly in the pause which ensued. "Is not that the name of the person who lives next door?"

"It was the name of the person who lived next door," said Mr. Brent, "and—yes, it is the name of the person who *does* live next door. Mr. Devereux, the old gentleman—a fine old fellow he was, too—eh, Inglesby?—is dead; but his nephew, who succeeds to the property, and who, I was just saying, has arrived in Northorpe, is named Devereux also."

"It is a good thing that the old name won't die out among us," said Colonel Inglesby, straightening himself back in his chair.

"I *thought* I noticed a great commotion of house-cleaning over there to-day," said Mrs. Inglesby, in her mild way; "but it really did not occur to me that Philip Devereux had arrived.—Dear me, colonel, you must call on him at once. We were such good friends with old Mr. Devereux; and you remember how he used to come sociably through the garden of an evening to play whist with us?"

"I shouldn't be surprised if Mr. Philip Devereux learned to be sociable in the same way—to play something besides whist, perhaps," said Mr. Brent, with a laugh and a glance at Rose, both of which Rose treated with silent disdain.

"Odious old wretch!" she thought to herself; but she would not gratify him by deigning to resent the point of his feeble little joke.

"Of course he has come to take possession of the property," said Mrs. Inglesby, after a minute. "But will he—a young man and a bachelor—live in that rambling old house, Mr. Brent?"

"He needn't always be a bachelor, you know, my dear madam," answered Mr. Brent, with another "odious" chuckle. "There'll be caps enough pulled for him among the girls of Northorpe, you may be sure—that is,

if he stays long enough to give them a fair chance."

"He may sell the real estate," hazarded the colonel. "Unless he *does* mean to marry and settle down, such a young man would scarcely care for that kind of property."

"That is more than I can tell you," said Mr. Brent. "Nobody knows—I doubt even if he knows himself—his final intentions about the property. A very fine property," pursued he, "and a very fine young man to inherit it. No comparison between him and a reckless adventurer like Kennon, eh?"

Before the colonel could give the assent which was plainly expected, down came a music-book on the piano-keys with a crash, and Miss Inglesby rose to address the company.

"That is the way of the world!" she cried, with a ring of genuine indignation in her voice. "Everybody is always against the unfortunate, and—and always ready to call them names. I don't suppose that Mr. Kennon is any more of an adventurer than all poor men are obliged to be; and, if *he* had obtained the fortune, Mr. Brent, you would say of him exactly what you now say of Mr. Devereux!"

There was quite a pause after this. Nobody answered the impetuous girl. The three old people looked at each other, while Rose looked at them; and, if anybody had glanced aside at Mrs. Henry Inglesby, he would have seen that she was smiling a peculiar sort of smile to herself as she bent her face down over a photograph-album which she had taken up.

It was Mr. Brent who spoke first, indulgently and kindly, as one might speak to a child.

"That's hardly a fair conclusion, Rose, when I say of Kennon only what everybody said long before his grandfather's death, and before the suit about the property was decided. Everybody knows, too, that he has only himself to thank that his cousin inherits the estate. Mr. Devereux would never have disinherited his grandson for his nephew if he had not had good reason for it."

"His mind was poisoned against Mr. Kennon," said Rose, with the promptness of one who has learned a lesson and knows it by heart.

"Nobody who knew him is likely to credit that," answered the old gentleman, with a shrug. "There never was a juster man, or a

man less likely to be deceived. It must have gone hard with him when he was obliged to leave the bulk of his fortune away from his own grandson; but I doubt if anybody who knows any thing about Laurence Kennon could blame him."

He spoke the last words gravely; then, before Rose could reply, turned to the colonel and proposed a game of whist.

"We are four," he said, "even if Mrs. Inglesby"—glancing at the stately young widow—"does not play."

As it chanced, however, Mrs. Inglesby did play, and willingly agreed to take a hand.

So the card-table was brought forward, and the quartet sat down—Colonel Inglesby claiming his daughter-in-law as partner, and bidding Rose give them some music as accompaniment.

The girl obeyed, playing waltzes, galops, and the like, for some time; but at last the gay strains ceased, and, when her father looked up at the close of a hard-fought game, the piano-stool was vacant, and the musician gone.

Several days went by, and the tide of Northorpe society flowed in again upon the Inglesby family, receiving, indeed, an unusual impetus from Northorpe curiosity to see the beautiful young widow, concerning whom many good judges of beauty had already begun to rave.

"How does Rose like a rival so near the throne?" people asked each other, shrugging their shoulders; but as yet nobody could say that Rose showed any signs of uneasiness or jealousy.

It was rather providential, from a social point of view, that just in this languid summer weather, two sensations came to Northorpe at the same time—i. e., Mrs. Inglesby and Mr. Devereux.

According to the spirit of the gallant French proverb, we have given precedence to the lady; but the popular mind arranged the matter just the other way.

During these days Mr. Devereux was the theme of every visitor who came in state, or dropped in sociably at the Inglesby house.

"I am sick of his very name," Rose declared, passionately; while even her sister-in-law, who said nothing, began to look a little weary when the threadbare subject was again, and yet again, lugged to the front of conversation.

But Mrs. Inglesby did not weary of it, and seemed to feel as much interest as the rest of Northorpe in penetrating the shell of reserve which, provokingly enough, Mr. Devereux had seen fit to draw around himself. He mingled freely enough with men, but to ladies he was an enigma who deliberately avoided their society.

"Very pleasant fellow, indeed, but shy as a girl," was the verdict of all the gentlemen who had called on him and been received with courteous cordiality; but the invitations which society showered upon him had so far been persistently declined. It was of no use at all to worship the rising sun when he obstinately refused to let his rays shine upon them.

"Laurence Kennon would have done better than *that*," people said, indignantly; which was going very far indeed, since, as a general rule, Northorpe held Laurence Kennon in holy horror.

At last, however, relief came to the afflicted community.

A certain Mrs. Reynolds, who was the acknowledged leader of fashion in Northorpe, returned from a visit of some weeks in a neighboring town, and announced her intention of storming Mr. Devereux's castle in person.

"His mother was a dear friend of mine," said this lady—who belonged to that benevolent class who have "dear friends" in every direction—"and I mean to bring her son forward. It will never do to let him make a hermit of himself like this. Shy men need to be forced into society. I shall give a dinner next Thursday, and take no denial with regard to his appearance."

This gratifying intelligence spread like wild-fire through society; and, when the invitations to dinner appeared in due form, it threw all dinner-going Northorpe into a twitter of excitement, for, knowing their leader, they knew well that the matter—the Devereux appearance, that is—was an accomplished fact.

It was during this momentous time that Mrs. Henry Inglesby (whom, to cut a troublesome title short, we shall hereafter call Alice) was alone one morning in her room, when there came a slight, hesitating knock at the door. When she said "Come in," the door slowly opened, and her mother-in-law stood on the threshold.

"Excuse me, my dear," she said, hurriedly, "but here is a note which I brought for you to read. I should not have disturbed you, only it must be answered at once."

She came in, and, closing the door behind her, extended an open note. Alice received it, and, glancing over the few lines which it contained, found that it was an invitation to the dinner, from Mrs. Reynolds, who had called on herself the preceding day.

"This is for you to decide," she said, after a minute. "My decision will depend entirely on yours. Do you mean to go?"

"My dear, that is exactly what I came to see you about," said Mrs. Inglesby, solemnly, whereupon she sat down and heaved a sigh. "Rose is the best girl in the world," she went on, "but she is very wilful sometimes—so wilful that neither her father nor myself can do any thing with her. You would scarcely believe that, for half an hour, I have been trying to induce her to accept this invitation, and that she absolutely declares she will not do so!"

She paused after this statement; but Alice's only reply was a slight arch of the eyebrows. She had been long enough in the Inglesby household to find no difficulty whatever about crediting the assertion.

"It is quite true," said Mrs. Inglesby, in reply to this little token of attention. "Now, for a particular reason, I am very anxious that she should accept it, and—and—but, my dear, I may speak to you in confidence, may I not? Well"—when Alice had assured her that she might—"the truth is, that a gentleman whom I desire very much that she should meet is to be at this dinner; and, if she does not go, she will lose the best opportunity of attracting his attention. Other girls will be there, you know; and, though Rose is the belle of Northorpe, still, my dear, there's nothing like being first in the field, especially when a young man is a stranger in a strange place."

"I suppose the gentleman is Mr. Devereux?" said Alice, who had not listened for nothing to all Northorpe's stream of conversation.

"Yes, it is Mr. Devereux," said Mrs. Inglesby, blushing a little. "But," she went on, hurriedly, "I must not let you think that it is only because he has inherited a fortune that I want Rose to attract him. He is a young man of whom everybody speaks well,"

said the mother, looking pathetically into the beautiful eyes bent on her. "He is steady and well-principled, and he would make a good husband for Rose; while, oh, my dear, my heart aches to think she may be led away to marry a man who is none of these things!"

"Let us hope not," said Alice, touched by the tone of these last few words. Then her voice grew quiet and indifferent again, as she added: "I suppose you mean that she may be led away to marry Mr. Kennon?"

"Yes, I mean that," said Mrs. Inglesby, too full of her subject to wonder at this knowledge of it in a stranger. "Rose seems infatuated about him, while he—my dear, I am confident that he is nothing but a fortune-hunter, who, because she is an heiress—my fortune was all settled on her, you know—thinks he will be doing well to marry her."

"Some men who are fortune-hunters make tolerably good husbands," said Alice, in a cold, abstracted way.

"But this man is a wretch!" said Mrs. Inglesby, indignantly. "You have no idea what he is. Why, he acted so badly that his grandfather disinherited him, and left his estate to Mr. Devereux. And *that* man for my Rose! I—I had almost rather see her in her grave."

"Think twice about that," said Alice, quietly. "Every thing in the world leaves room for hope, excepting death, you know. I see your difficulty, and I appreciate your confidence. Tell me how I can help you, and I will do it."

In her own way, Mrs. Inglesby told her, and, after a good deal of questioning, Alice arrived at a knowledge of the service she was requested to render. In brief, it was this—that the invitation of Mrs. Reynolds should be accepted by herself, but that Mrs. Inglesby should decline going—an attack of rheumatism from which the colonel was suffering giving her a convenient excuse for remaining at home. In this case, Rose was placed in an awkward dilemma. Either she must be guilty of the rudeness of allowing her sister-in-law to make a first appearance in Northorpe society quite alone, or she must change her mind and accept the invitation. Alice having given her consent, Mrs. Inglesby went to place the matter before the young insurgent, and soon returned with a submission in due form. The invitation was, therefore, accepted; and, the principal points being settled, all other

issues were allowed to rest until Thursday—the day of the dinner—should arrive.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN Thursday at last arrived, it brought quite an assemblage of guests into Mrs. Reynolds's drawing-room. Northorpe was not only a flourishing place, but it was also an extremely fashionable place, and, as has been said before, of all the fashion in Northorpe Mrs. Reynolds was the acknowledged leader. It cannot be saying too much to hazard the assertion that, on the Thursday in question, this lady was a very happy woman. She was not only giving a dinner, such as no one in Northorpe besides herself could give, but she had secured for this dinner the persons of all others concerning whom Northorpe was most full of curious speculation. Then, the beautiful Mrs. Inglesby would also make her first appearance in public on this occasion; and, if Mrs. Reynolds had been a euchre-player, she would certainly have said that, if Mr. Devereux was her right bower, Mrs. Inglesby was her left.

The gentleman was the first on the field of action, and was made warmly welcome by Mrs. Reynolds. When he was presented to the assembled guests, they all expressed their pleasure in extremely flattering terms; but they all acknowledged to themselves that Mr. Devereux was by no means so distinguished in appearance as they had been induced to expect—why, it is hard to say—that he would be. It is true that he was tall, and that he had a well-built figure—two trump-cards in the popular estimation of good looks—but his manners were reserved in the extreme, and his face was of that excessive fairness which, blotting out all tints, leaves only the beauty of feature and expression. In this case, the features were very indifferent, and the expression, like the manner, very reserved. A physiognomist, looking at the face, might have seen that it would light up well, that the gray eyes would grow luminous under excitement, and the quiet mouth break into pleasant smiles. But people in general thought the countenance dull as well as plain; and, if its owner had not been a person of importance, would not have hesitated to express this opinion. He gave them good opportunity to scrutinize his appearance; for,

instead of devoting himself to the entertainment of some of the ladies who were momentarily growing more numerous, he kept his place by Mrs. Reynolds's chair, leaning against one corner of the mantel, eying the gay company with the gaze of a contemplative recluse, and looking, as more than one young lady declared, "the very picture of a diffident man."

Suddenly, however, there arose a diversion—suddenly, for a moment, even Mr. Devereux was forgotten. At the door there was a stir, in the room there fell a pause, and while everybody was gazing eagerly around, Rose Inglesby and her stately sister-in-law swept up the long drawing-room.

Mrs. Reynolds met them half-way with great *empressement*, and, while her greetings were made, a whisper of irrepressible admiration was passing from group to group. "Is she not superb?" "How dazzling she looks to-night!" "That is my idea of a beautiful woman!" "What graceful manners!" etc., etc.—men and women rivalling each other in open, honest praise. For once, nobody even noticed Rose. Pretty as she was looking, charmingly as she was dressed, the belle of Northorpe obtained scarcely a glance in the scene of her own triumphs and in the midst of her own vassals. No eye left Mrs. Inglesby to dwell on the dainty, blue-robed girl beside her. "Rose looks very nicely," was all that people said; and they only said that after a time, with a start of recollection.

If Mr. Devereux made only a questionable success, Mrs. Inglesby created a sensation. Mrs. Reynolds was fairly besieged for introductions; and before long the young widow's gracious manners had completed what her beauty had begun. Every woman in the room was charmed, and every man was at her feet. The finishing touch to this success was given when the duty of taking her in to dinner devolved on Mr. Devereux; and, having thus safely paired off her lions, Mrs. Reynolds felt the ease and repose of a well-satisfied conscience.

At first Alice fell into the common error of taking Mr. Devereux's quietness for stupidity, and pitching the tone of her conversation accordingly. But she was too clever a woman not to learn better than this from his first remark, and in a few minutes she had drawn him out sufficiently to see that his reserve was not unconquerable, nor his quiet-

ness of that troublesome kind which degenerates into heaviness. He was a cultivated man himself, but it had been his misfortune to know very little of the society of cultivated people; so, a woman who was young and beautiful, with sense enough to meet him on his own ground, and lightness enough to lend grace to the dullest themes, was a phenomenon to which he bowed at once. Before dinner was over, Rose saw how matters were drifting. And, though she had angrily repelled the idea of attracting Mr. Devereux, and had even gone so far as to declare that she would have nothing whatever to say to him, she felt a throb of genuine disappointment that she was not to have the opportunity of showing that she did not care for the attentions of this desirable cavalier.

Before the evening was over, everybody saw that Mr. Devereux was quite captivated by the beautiful widow. He did not absolutely spend the whole time at her side; but, whenever he was with anybody else, he relapsed into his usual reserve and silence, proving such a very unsatisfactory companion that several young ladies were reduced to the verge of despair by a total exhaustion of their conversational ideas. It was only when he was again under the influence of Mrs. Inglesby, that he revived and became once more a genial and pleasant companion. Of course there was but one explanation for a state of affairs like this; and that explanation the company in Mrs. Reynolds's drawing-room were not slow to give. "Your handsome sister-in-law has accomplished what all the young ladies in Northorpe promised themselves the pleasure of doing," said an old lady to Rose; and Rose made the most foolish speech in the world when she answered: "I beg you will make one exception when you speak of the young ladies of Northorpe, Mrs. Holmes. I have neither promised myself the pleasure, nor felt any desire to attract Mr. Devereux." "Oh, my dear, you can't suppose that I was thinking of you," said Mrs. Holmes, apologetically. And in truth she had not been thinking of Rose at all, knowing that she was an heiress, and therefore quite able to please herself in a matrimonial way. But, after this speech, her eyes were suddenly opened. Soon everybody in the room knew that "Rose Inglesby was ready to bite off her sister-in-law's head because she had secured Mr. Devereux."

Great was Mrs. Inglesby's dismay when she heard how matters had gone on that momentous evening. Too late she recognized her own folly, too late she felt that she would have given any thing to undo her own work. It is the highest compliment to the good lady's simplicity to say that such a fear as this had never entered her head. Rose, in her eyes, was invincible, and she had boldly thrown Rose in juxtaposition with a woman whom any ordinary mother would have avoided as men avoid the plague—a woman of beauty so remarkable, of attractions so great, that no girl could safely have encountered her as a rival. When Rose made her malicious report of how the fortunes of the night had gone, Mrs. Inglesby could freely have choked herself, if choking herself would at all have mended matters. But, as that was out of the question, she could only think, "Perhaps he will change his mind when he sees Rose by daylight."

The fallacy of this hope was soon demonstrated. Two days later, Mr. Devereux called—supported by the liberal aid and countenance of Mrs. Reynolds—saw Rose by daylight, and barely said six commonplace, civil words to her. It is impossible to be very devoted in the course of a ceremonious morning call; but, as much as was possible, he devoted himself to Alice. His eyes followed her, his whole attention was engrossed by her; and, when he left, Mrs. Inglesby was justified in her despairing thought—"It is all over. That dreadful Kennon is inevitable."

A week passed; another week followed, and still the dreadful Kennon had not made his appearance. Some people smiled, and said he would not come back at all, that he had no desire to see his cousin basking in the prosperity which might have been his own, and that he had quietly taken himself off the scene. Others thought differently; and among the latter was Miss Inglesby. Rose kept her opinion to herself; but, in her own mind, she was firmly persuaded that Kennon would return. That fund of vanity, which often stands a woman in good stead, assured her that he would come back, if only for the farewell that had not been said, for the last words that had not been spoken. "He might leave Northorpe in this ungracious way, but he never would leave me," she thought, considering the while what a pleas-

ure it would be to show him that she at least did not court Mr. Devereux's society, nor desire his attentions. True, it would be several degrees better if she could show him that these attentions had been at her command, and that she had declined them; but, since this was impossible, she was fain to console herself with the thought that it was at least the more dignified position never to have received them—never, as she flattered herself, to have appeared conscious of Mr. Devereux's existence.

This dignified pose, however, became rather trying and awkward, as time went on, and, the ice having once been broken, Mr. Devereux found his way very frequently into the Inglesby circle. At first he came like every other visitor, in orthodox and formal fashion, through the front-door; but before long he discovered that a short cut through the garden was much more convenient, and that it was very pleasant indeed to drop into a sort of *ami de la maison* place in the bowery drawing-room, full of the scent of roses, the graceful presence of women, music now and then, bright smiles and social ease always. Despite her bitter disappointment, Mrs. Inglesby could not help liking the young man. He was so quiet, so unobtrusive, so thoroughly refined, so genial, when he once fairly thawed. "Oh, if he would only fall in love with Rose!" she said to her husband. But, provokingly enough, the colonel seemed excellently well satisfied with matters as they were.

"He's a trifle too grave and dignified for a butterfly like Rose," he said. "I think he shows his sense and his taste in choosing Alice. She's a grand creature, and, by George! any man might be proud to win her. There is nothing I should like better than to see her settled with us for life—just over the way, in that fine old Devereux house, too!"

"The house where I have always hoped to see Rose!" said Mrs. Inglesby, in a tone of exasperation.

It was trying to the poor woman, beyond doubt—and the more trying because she had no sympathy from anybody, unless, indeed (as she often imagined), there was sympathy in Alice's large, golden-brown eyes. Mr. Devereux's devotion to the fair, young widow became, in a short time, exceedingly manifest, but it was impossible for the most carping tongue in Northorpe to say that she

"encouraged" him. Neither did she repel his attentions. The gentle stateliness, the absolutely perfect courtesy of her manner, was the same to him as to every one else—a trifle warmer, perhaps, because of the familiar position which he had gained, and also because she liked him sincerely.

Rose, on her part, could not help feeling a little sore about the unconscious yet most successful rivalry of her sister-in-law. Everybody in Northorpe was raving over "that beautiful Mrs. Inglesby," and Rose would not have been human if she had not felt that it was a little hard. Her own friends, her own admirers, her own vassals, were offering their incense at another shrine before her very face. "I can't see why a woman should not be satisfied with having had one husband!" thought the girl, resentfully, as she watched some of these scenes of homage. "I think widows ought to shut themselves up in convents, or spend their lives doing good to the poor, instead of looking ravishingly lovely in black silk and white crape, and Marie-Stuart caps, to—to turn silly people's heads!"

It was a matter of satisfaction during this time that Kennon did not swell the number of these silly people. Often when Rose was worn out with the manner in which everybody chanted the praises of her sister-in-law, there was a very great and sensible satisfaction in recalling those bitter words concerning widows which Kennon had spoken when she saw him last. As was said at the time, the girl was not enough of a woman of the world to suspect what might underlie this bitterness. She only smiled to herself as she thought there was no fear that *he* would ever swell the new beauty's train! She might ensnare the rich cousin, but the poor one could be trusted to withstand her fascinations.

It was about this time that Mr. Devereux came to Mrs. Inglesby one day and asked if she would be kind enough to do the honors of an entertainment which he had thoughts of giving. "It is not a pleasant thing to do," he said; "but I have been very hospitably received in Northorpe, and a return is only courteous. Besides, since I intend to live here, I—perhaps I should begin to cultivate society a little." Mrs. Inglesby agreed that this was entirely right, and, smothering a sigh, asked what kind of entertainment he wished to give.

"I leave all that to you," said he, looking

a little puzzled; "but I thought of a dinner, and a—dance, perhaps, in the evening."

"That is just the thing," said Mrs. Inglesby; "but you must not ask *me* to do the honors of the occasion. You must go to Mrs. Reynolds. She would be mortally offended if you did not ask her; and she has so much taste that, if you give her *carte blanche*, she will arrange something very charming for you."

"But I would rather you managed the affair," said the young man, simply.

She shook her head, laughing.

"I have too much regard for your interest to do it," she said. "I could arrange the domestic part of your entertainment—and I will give you any assistance in my power—but, for the social part, you need somebody like Mrs. Reynolds."

"Won't you plead for me?" said he, turning to Alice and Rose. "Mrs. Reynolds will simply extinguish me."

But he found that there was no appeal. Everybody decided against him, and said that Mrs. Reynolds was the only person for the occasion; so, he was forced to submit, and, with what grace he could muster, go and lay his petition before that social sovereign.

It was very graciously received and granted. All was grist, in the social way, that came to Mrs. Reynolds's mill; and soon Northorpe rang with the anticipated *fête*, and the splendor of the preparations which were in progress at the Devereux house. For the space of an entire fortnight every thing within the staid old mansion was turned upside down in the most complete and exasperating manner. Sounds of hammering resounded all over the neighborhood. Curtains, carpets, furniture, all were renovated and changed. Having obtained entrance into the house, Mrs. Reynolds found it delightful to give her taste (which was certainly excellent, though rather extravagant) full rein for once. Partitions were knocked down, and partitions were put up—the quiet old rooms scarcely knew themselves in their bright, new guise.

As for Devereux, having called down the inflection upon his own head, he felt that there was no hope of redress, no refuge but submission. He might, however, have ignominiously fled, or ended his existence with prussic acid, if he had not possessed the quiet retreat of the Inglesby house, and the Inglesby garden. But, coming over in the

dewy softness of the summer evening, and pacing by Alice's side up and down the green paths, with the fragrant roses blooming all around, the stars faintly gleaming into sight, and a mocking-bird singing a sweet love-song in the jasmine-hedge, he could almost forget his troubles, he could regard carpenters and upholsterers without enmity, he could even cover with the mantle of Christian charity the whole race of "society-leaders."

When at last the day of trial came, he girded himself up like a soldier going to battle, and really acquitted himself so well that he surprised everybody. Alice, in especial, was charmed with his bearing—its quiet dignity and graceful courtesy.

"You don't know what credit you have done yourself," she said to him with a smile, when he came to her after dinner.

"You don't know what agonies of shyness I have endured," he answered.

"And conquered," she added, with a glance of approbation that would have repaid him for any thing.

"You are very good to say so," he replied, gratefully. "But, since duty is over, pleasure ought to follow. Will you let me name my reward, and—give it to me?"

"You are at liberty to name it, of course; but how can I give it to you?"

She looked at him so kindly as she uttered the last words, that he did not lapse into the diffidence with which a cold or a flippant reply would assuredly have overwhelmed him.

"I have a friend who is an artist at Dusseldorf," he said, "and by my request he sent me several paintings, which I have received within the last few days. They all have great merit; but one, in especial, I should like to show you. It is an exquisite bit of Thuringian landscape. I have hung it in the library for the present. If you would come and let me show it to you—"

"So it is a pleasure you mean to give me," she said. "I thought it was to be the other way. But, of course, I shall be very glad to come."

By special stipulation, the library had not been included in the transformation which the rest of the house had undergone. About it, therefore, still hung the mellow aroma of age. It looked very inviting when they entered—with its books and pictures, and white

busts gleaming in the shaded lamplight. The windows were all set wide open to the soft summer night, while the fragrance of roses, jasmine, and honeysuckle, was wafted in on the night breeze, and seemed to fill every corner of the room.

Removing the shade from one of the lamps, Devereux held it up so that she could see the picture of which he had spoken. She had no special prepossession toward art, but her culture had been too thorough for her not to cordially recognize and fully appreciate excellence in this respect. She praised the picture—which was truly worth praising—as much as he could possibly have desired. Then she began to look about the room. Some of its old family portraits elicited her admiration—in the very old time, family portraits were not *always* daubs—and then she began to examine various French and German engravings hung here and there in nooks and corners.

"So this is where you write!" said she, pausing before a table upon which signs of literary occupation were to be seen. "What a pleasant place for authorship—at leisure! You ought to be a poet, Mr. Devereux, sitting in this charming old library, with a rose-garden under your window, and a view of lovely scenery beyond! But what is this hanging over your table?"

"Only an engraving I found among my things the other day," answered he. "I hung it here because I thought—or I fancied—that the feminine figure resembled yourself."

"Indeed!" said she, smiling. "In that case, I must see it more closely."

He held the light for her, and she saw that it was a scene such as some of the minor English artists are rather fond of painting. Even in the engraving, it showed considerable art and skill. A fair, stately woman dressed in widow's weeds—a woman whose general appearance was so like her own that the resemblance was patent even to herself—stood in a church-yard by a large white marble cross that marked the head of a freshly-made grave. It was evident that she had just arisen from her knees, for the grass was bent down all around her, but the proud, expressive dignity of her attitude was matchless, though there was a certain pathos on the lines of the steadfast face. A strong contrast was made by the figure at the other end

of the grave—a slender, handsome man, who stood with folded arms fixing on her a glance of fierce passion and fierce disdain. The background of the picture framed these figures admirably. There were green yews drooping over an old Gothic church, quiet graves and crosses hung with wreaths of immortelles.

"It is a good picture, and, I should think, well painted," said Alice, at last; "but I don't like the subject. There is something repulsive about a love-scene in a grave-yard."

"Do you call *that* a love-scene?" asked Devereux, in surprise. "I should call it any thing else. It is evident that he is an old lover whom the lady had forgotten or rejected; but it is also evident that he has come not to sue, but to upbraid. See, however, the magnificent repose and dignity of her whole face and manner! That is what reminds me so much of you."

"You flatter me," she said, smiling. But she moved away from the picture, as if she did not like to look at it.

"Take my advice," she said, after a minute. "Hang this exquisite head of St. John over your writing-table, instead of that scene which leaves one in doubt who was right or who was wrong, and gives no clew to the result of the dramatic situation."

"Uncertainty is not always the worst evil," said he, half sadly. "There are many others much worse. Sometimes certainty is one of them."

She answered nothing, but moved on a little farther, and paused before one of the open windows, gazing out on the fragrant stillness of the summer night. She looked like a fair dream-lady in her sweeping white dress, yet her pulses were beating very quickly, and the atmosphere about her seemed full of a certain thrill. She knew that a word—nay, a glance—would bring upon her the issue which she had fully expected to meet that night. But, somehow, this picture had unnerved her, and she could not resolve to meet it. Old memories came back with strange force. Something in the dark, scornful face of the man at the foot of the grave—something of expression, not of feature—had awakened much which she had thought long since dead. For once her usual stately self-control did not come at her call. Devereux, for his part, felt chilled by her

sudden silence and reserve. His heart sank—he feared more than he hoped. He hesitated—doubted—asked himself if he had not better wait.

They were still standing apart in this way when a whist-quartet came in, and the opportunity was lost.

CHAPTER IV.

"If there is a bore in this world greater than the bore of going to see 'views,' I don't know what it is!" said Rose Inglesby, as she sat at the breakfast-table in her riding-habit, eating her muffins and drinking her coffee with the air of a martyr. "I hate scenery!" the young heretic went on viciously, "and of all kinds of scenery I think I hate cascades most. There is no end to the shoes I have worn out over those abominable rocks—you need not laugh, papa! You really haven't an idea what it is to be made a victim in this way."

"My dear child, why don't you stay at home, then?" asked Mrs. Inglesby, mildly.

"That is just like you, mamma," said her daughter, hopelessly. "If I did stay at home, you would be the first to say that it was awfully uncivil to let Alice go alone, especially since the party was made up for her. I fancy she is nearly as much bored as I am, only she takes good care not to say so."

"It isn't everybody who is as blind to the beauties of Nature as you are, Rosie," said her father. "I've no doubt Alice will enjoy the cascade very much."

"Well, perhaps she may," returned Rose the skeptical. "I forget that she is going in Mr. Devereux's new dog-cart, with Mr. Devereux himself to talk 'the sublime, the heroic, and Mr. Carlyle,' all the way. These things may season the cascade for her. Not possessing them, they naturally don't season it for me."

"Mr. Anson is very pleasant, Rose," said Mrs. Inglesby, in deprecating support of the gentleman who was to have the honor of riding at Miss Inglesby's bridle-rein.

"He was pleasant six months back," said Rose, coolly; "but I exhausted him long ago—most men are not good for more than three months—and he tires me to death now. Oh, dear!"

This apparently rather irrelevant sigh was addressed to the memory of Kennon. "If *he* were only here!" Rose thought. In that case it is probable that her martyr excursion would have worn a very different seeming.

Mrs. Henry Inglesby entered just here, and her appearance ended the conversation. She was dressed in driving-costume, and displayed a pair of wonderfully strong boots for the colonel's admiration.

"They have told me so many frightful things about the rocks," she said, "that I have shod myself as if for an Alpine ascent. I am afraid I am late. Rose, isn't it nearly time to start?"

"Indeed, I don't know," said Rose. "I only wish I had been there and was safely back again."

It may be well to premise that the excursion which Miss Inglesby regarded with so much discontent was one that no stranger visiting Northorpe was ever suffered to neglect—to wit, a visit to a certain famous cascade near the town. On the present occasion the excursion was to take the form of that most tiresome of all social amusements—a picnic. At the Devereux entertainment the plan had been mooted. Mrs. Reynolds, who was the most obliging of social purveyors, said at once that she would chaperon any party desirous of visiting the falls; and a party was forthwith arranged. Of course, Mr. Devereux placed his equipage at Mrs. Inglesby's command; and when this attention was gracefully accepted, Northorpe, of course, nodded its head more sagely than ever, and said, "What a suitable match it will be!"

It is one thing to drive with a man, however, and quite another to marry him. Mrs. Inglesby found the first very pleasant as she bowled along in the early freshness of the bright, summer morning; but perhaps it was because she had not quite made up her mind with regard to the second that she kept the conversation steadily on the smooth ground of ordinary subjects. Those topics which Rose included under the general, or rather vague, head of "the sublime, the heroic, and Mr. Carlyle," served very well for the five or six miles of moderately good road traversed before they reached their destination.

"I believe we must alight here," said Mr. Devereux, drawing up his horses on the summit of a hill, where the road they had been following suddenly came to an end in the

midst of some woods. "You see the equestrians have dismounted," he went on, pointing to several horses fastened under the trees, "and the best thing we can do is to follow their example. Now"—after they had alighted—"shall we make the descent?"

"Had we not better wait for Mrs. Reynolds?" said Alice, who felt indolent and ready to stay where she was, at least for a time.

"The others have not waited for us," said her companion, in reply to this; "and it is a case of every man for himself in the matter of descent. Mrs. Reynolds has three or four people with her; but, if even she were alone, I am sure I could not render assistance to any one beside yourself."

"Wait and see if I need it," said Alice, smiling. "I am trained in the matter of mountain-climbing—and the only time I ever absolutely needed help was in ascending Mont Blanc. That was terrible! Is this the way we go? Then lead on, and let me see if I cannot dispense with the assistance of which you speak."

"You surely will not be so unkind as to deprive me of the pleasure of rendering it," said she, with a great deal of seriousness in his eyes, despite the jest in his voice.

"I will make no rash resolutions," she answered. "Lead on, and let me see."

Without another word, he obeyed, leading the way along a narrow path, and, after a moment, down an almost precipitate hill-side. The way was very winding, so winding that it was hardly possible to see more than a step in advance, and Alice soon found herself slipping and sliding from one steep rock to another, with the least possible amount of personal volition, and the least possible idea where she was going next. Before very long, she came to a halt.

"I think you will have to help me over this place, Mr. Devereux," she said, in a hesitating voice.

And Mr. Devereux, who had been listening with painful intensity for this sound, turned in an instant.

"I thought you would find it very rough," he said, as if apologizing for the roughness. Then, with a thrill of pleasure, he took the small, gloved hand outstretched to him, and carefully assisted her along the descent, which momentarily became more difficult.

"Surely we must be nearly down, now," she said, at last; and, as she spoke, they

made a sudden turn, stumbled over some sharp rocks for about twenty feet farther, and then found themselves on smooth ground, with the cascade before them.

Now, there can be no doubt that there are many cascades far more beautiful than this which was the pride and boast of Northorpe. Still it was beautiful enough to warrant a considerable amount of enthusiasm from enthusiastic people, and beautiful enough to startle Alice Inglesby into silent admiration when she came upon it thus. She had not expected much, and it was with a feeling of surprise that she found herself quite taken by storm. Looking round, she saw that they were in a deep gorge between the hills, or rather in a sort of basin, which at one end opened into a ravine. On the opposite side to where they stood rose a stately hill, crowned to the summit with foliage almost tropical in its luxuriance; on the other, a frowning cliff of dark gray rock leaned far over, and threw its deep shadow down below. This cliff extended round in circular shape, and, where it met the green hill already mentioned, a small stream forced its way between enormous moss-covered rocks, and sprang over the precipice, sending up a shower of spray and foam, and spreading out at the bottom into a glossy pool that lay like a sheet of crystal at Alice's feet. As it glided away down the ravine, falling in miniature cascades at every step, the same stream filled the solitude with the fitful monotone of its voice, like a poem of Nature's own singing.

After a long silence, Mrs. Inglesby turned to her companion. "We are poorly off for adjectives," she said, "or else we must use them too freely. 'Beautiful' seems to me a weak word for all this lavish glory; yet what better word does the language afford? Can you suggest one?"

"There are a good many," he answered, "but they are all liable to the same objection. We use them for lesser things, until they lose force, and are unfit to express our admiration of the greater. When you see a green meadow, or a sunny hill-side, or a stretch of shadowy woods, what do you say?"

"Generally, 'How beautiful!' or else, 'How lovely!'"

"Or else, 'How picturesque!' or sometimes even 'How grand! Well, when you stood on the summit of Mont Blanc, what did you say?"

"You have never stood there, or you would not ask me. I said—nothing."

"And you said nothing here—and I can suggest nothing that is worth saying. We must blame ourselves—not the language. It gives us terms, but I am afraid there is no doubt that we debase them. Unless we say 'Stupendous!' I really think we must hold our peace."

"Let us say 'Stupendous!' then, by all means," answered she, smiling; "and, having said it, let us sit down."

"Stop a moment," said he, as she was about to suit the action to the word, and sit down on a convenient rock near by. "This is such a public place—that is—you know Mrs. Reynolds and her party will be upon us before long. Let us explore a little, as those who reached here first have done."

She hesitated an instant, then consented, and they moved away. As they skirted the pool, and crossed the stream that was hurrying down the ravine, they caught sight of several of their companions—some making very picturesque effects as they were perched on overhanging rocks, and others climbing, with laborious energy, up the steep mountain-side.

"We will go over yonder by the cascade," said Devereux. "Are you fond of ferns? I see some beautiful ones growing there on the rocks."

So, over to the cascade they took their way, and led on, partly by Devereux, partly by the ferns, and partly, also, by her own inclination, Alice ascended from point to point of the rocks, until at last she found herself elevated much above her former stand-point, but profiting very little in the way of prospect. The dense undergrowth of the mountain shut in the view on one side; on the other, the whirling rush of the falling water was all that could be seen.

"I hope this is sufficiently secluded for your taste," said she, looking up at Devereux with an air of resignation. "I am very tired—may I sit down now? Thanks—yes, I would like my ferns."

She sat down on a stone, and, leaning back against the massive gray rock, began examining the ferns and lichens which her companion laid in her lap. She had taken off her hat, and laid it beside her, as a receptacle for the selected specimens. Her rich hair caught the sunlight as she bent her head,

and exercise had given a very clear and brilliant color to her cheek. Beautiful always, she was almost more than beautiful now; and it was not strange that Devereux held his breath as he stood looking at her. She did not notice the gaze, partly because it was her policy to ignore it, but kept on talking in her light, graceful way about botany in general, and ferns in particular, until at last his continued silence forced itself on her attention. She looked up, then, with a laughing question on her lips; but, despite her self-possession, stopped short. The moment that she met them, his eyes told her that the issue was at hand.

Now, it is not to be supposed that she needed to be told—but she had not expected it just then. She was off her guard, as it were, and a shock is always unpleasant, let it come how it will. She colored vividly—flushing, indeed, to the very roots of her hair—then, as he was about to speak, rose to her feet.

"I think we had better go back," she said, hurriedly. "I am quite rested now."

But Devereux had no mind to let his opportunity slip in this way. There had been nothing premeditated in the matter. The situation had taken him as much by surprise as it had taken her; but it was upon him now, and he meant to seize its advantages. The fever of sudden resolution took possession of him, and, as is the case with a great many quiet men, its very novelty lent it force. He had not meant to speak just now; but her beauty first unnerved him, and then her strange embarrassment lent him courage. When she rose, he stepped before her.

"No, Mrs. Inglesby," he said, "don't go back now. Stop—at least for a minute. I have something to say to you."

"You can say it down below," answered Alice, suddenly, unaccountably, nervously anxious to get away. "Pray, Mr. Devereux—pray let us go."

"Of course we will, if you desire it," he said; but with such a look of pain on his face that, although he moved aside, she stood still. After all, what folly was this? Why should she act so rashly? Why should she not hear him? She knew, or thought she knew, what answer she intended to give. Why not, therefore, have it over at once? In a second these thoughts flashed through her mind, and, in a second, also, she acted on them.

"Pardon me," she said, looking at him with her own gracious glance and manner. "I did not mean to be rude. I will stay if you wish it."

"Thank you," he answered, hastily. Then he was silent for a moment, looking at the spray of the cascade as it dashed by, and striving to grasp words in which to express the feeling that overmastered him. Words did not come to him readily at any time, but now he seemed to have lost all command of them. As her embarrassment had given him courage, so her self-possession robbed him of it. He hesitated so long that, at last, in desperation, he was about to speak, when there came the sound of crackling boughs and twigs, as somebody forced a way through the luxuriant undergrowth, and a distant shout from below was answered by a voice near at hand, saying, "Thanks, yes—I'm looking for Miss Inglesby." The next moment a man's hand and arm appeared over the rock, grasped firmly the bough of a tough shrub, and, with this help, the body to which the arm belonged made an agile spring and lighted at Alice's side. As she drew back, the new-comer gained his feet, and she stood face to face with Laurence Kennon.

If Mr. Devereux had been questioned half an hour later, it is to be feared that he would have been found to entertain but a confused remembrance of the events, of the next few minutes. The appearance of his cousin (whom he thought far away from Northorpe) was surprising enough in itself; but this surprise deepened into amazement when he saw that a recognition instantly took place between Kennon and Alice Inglesby.

"You!" said the former, catching his breath with a gasp, while his face paled, and his eyes dilated almost instantaneously—"you!"

"Yes—it is I," said Alice, quietly; then, after a minute, she held out her hand, saying a little wistfully, "Fate has ordained it, Mr. Kennon. You see I remember that we are old friends." But, instead of taking her hand, Kennon folded his arms, and recoiled a step.

"There is no question of fate or friendship in the matter," he said, coldly. "This is simply a mistake. I was looking for Miss Inglesby, and I was told that she was here. I see that she is not, so I beg pardon for my intrusion, and leave you to the *tête-à-tête* which I disturbed."

He shot one dark, resentful glance at Devereux as he said the last words; but the latter was too puzzled to notice it. Indeed, as it chanced, there was nothing in his mind but cordial kindness toward his kinsman, and, if he could have secured a moment's time before complete bewilderment overtook him, he would have liked nothing better than to express this kindness. As it was, he stood still, and said nothing. Not so, Alice, however. She was mistress of the situation by right of her supreme self-command, and, as Kennon turned to go, she laid her hand on his arm. Holding him captive thus, she spoke to Devereux with the same gracious smile that had given him hope when she agreed to stay, ten minutes before.

"Mr. Kennon and I are old friends," she said. "We knew each other long ago, and he is naturally surprised to see me again—to see me here. If you would not mind—if I might ask you to leave us for a little while? He will take me safely down the mountain, I am sure."

Within bounds of civility, a plainer request could hardly have been made. What Devereux replied, or how he got away, he never knew. He went, of course—there was no alternative to that—but he carried a sore heart with him, and it would have been yet sorer, if he could have heard the first words which Alice spoke after he was safely out of ear-shot.

CHAPTER V.

"So this is the meeting for which we hoped ten years ago," she said, in her soft, full voice. "We meet, and you repulse even my friendship, because you are looking for Miss Inglesby, and I—am her sister-in-law."

There was a tone in this sentence that stung Kennon with some latent meaning; for a flush came over his face, and he lifted his dark eyes suddenly to her own.

"You know that is not true," he said quickly, almost fiercely—"you know I have not forgotten ten years ago—or the woman who promised to be faithful to me, either. That woman, however, was Alice Chisholm, and not"—he paused a moment, and added bitterly—"Miss Inglesby's sister-in-law."

"We won't tear open the old wounds, or reopen the old quarrel," said she, gravely.

"It is all over—utterly past and gone. But fate having brought us together—in a manner, too, that will make it hard for us to avoid some slight intercourse—you will pardon me if I ask why Alice Chisholm cannot be your friend."

"Alice Chisholm was a woman of the world ten years ago," he answered, still full of bitterness. "She has not so far forgotten her worldly knowledge that she should need to ask that question now."

"Granting that she was a woman of the world," said she, with a vibration of scorn in her voice, "do you think that she did not know then, and does not know now, that you—*you*, Laurence Kennon—are the last man in the world to feel deeply or resent bitterly a mere love-disappointment? If you still refuse to take the hand which I offer—for the last time, remember—I shall know that it is not wounded love, but wounded pride, which has made you so implacable."

"You can think what you please of me," said he, leaning back against the rock from which she had risen, and looking passionately at the beautiful face before him. "My God! how I *ought* to hate you!" he went on. "To think of your treachery and your coquetry—to think how you have wrecked my life, as much of it as was left to wreck—and then to think that I should come here now—"

He broke off here with something like a gasp. She did not answer, her color did not deepen, her eyes did not quail. She stood before him like a proud, calm statue, daring him, as it were, to say and do his worst.

Suddenly he advanced a step and grasped her arm.

"You talk of Alice Chisholm," he said, almost fiercely. "What if I were fool enough to call her back to life and accept her 'friendship'? Would she like to play the old game over again? I believe once was enough for me. Am I any better, any more desirable now than when so dutifully and obediently she gave me up—left me to live or die as best I could—and married—"

She lifted her hand with a silencing gesture. "Hush! For the sake of the old time, you can say what you please of me; but he was my husband—and he is dead."

"Yes, he is dead: and I did not mean to speak ill of him. Why should I? No doubt he was a good fellow enough—only I hated

him too much ever to find it out. Well, you married him—not me. Now, that you are free again, would you marry me if I gave my heart up for your sport again, and asked you to do so?"

Passionate as the question was, and full of bitter scorn—the scorn of one who meets some sore temptation beyond his strength, to which he must succumb—it was earnest with an earnestness that few things possess in this world of sham and sentiment. Perhaps the fire that rang in every tone stirred the heart of Alice Chisholm sleeping in Mrs. Inglesby's breast. But she *was* a woman of the world, and no outward token of this appeared on her proud, calm face, no glance of it flickered into the clear, brown eyes steadfastly facing his own. When she spoke, her voice was soft and even:

"Tell me, rather, if you would advise me to do so? Those prudent counsellors of whom you spoke are all gone now. I stand quite alone, with my own life in my own hand to make or mar as I please. Laurence, should I make or mar it by marrying you?"

There was something of solemnity both in the form and in the tone of her appeal. For reply, the lids sank slowly over Kennon's eyes, and once more the dark flush rose in his cheek.

"You know yourself," he said. "You know what people say of me. Why ask me?"

"I ask you because you can tell me best."

"Then I tell you that you would mar it beyond all hope of redemption," he answered, violently. "Is that enough? Ten years ago, when they warned you against me, I was a paladin compared to what I have been since. You did well to marry Inglesby then. Trust me, you will do better still to marry Devereux now."

She started.

"So—you know that?"

"Know it! Would I not have been blind and deaf if I had seen him standing here, and not known it? But I did not need to discover it for myself. I reached Northorpe this morning, and I heard the news from half a dozen people before I came out here."

"You credit it, of course?"

"Yes; why not? We are both ten years older, and you are beautiful and poor, while Devereux, thanks to my folly, is rich, and ready to be won."

"You forget yourself," said she, haughtily.

"No," answered he, recklessly, "I only forget my new rôle—that of being an 'old friend' of the charming Mrs. Inglesby. Alice, Alice," he went on, suddenly changing his tone, and seizing her hands, "Fate, as you say, has brought us together once more—let us not throw away our last hope of happiness. Why should we not cast away all these bitter years, and their bitter memories? Why should we not live our lives out as we once dreamed of doing?"

She left her hands in his clasp, but she smiled coldly.

"You forget," she said, "you forget that we are ten years older, and—poor."

"I forget every thing but you," he answered, passionately; "every thing but the hope that is shining for me in your eyes."

"Shining only to deceive, then," she said, bitterly; but suddenly she cried out as if in pain: "Laurence, let me go. I—I cannot bear this. Let me go—let me think!"

He let her go; and, as she sat down on the same stone where she had been sitting when Devereux's glance startled her, he turned his back, and, walking to the extreme verge of the rock, stood looking down at the white waters of the foaming cascade. After awhile she called his name, and, when he turned, he saw that her resolution was taken.

"It would never do, Laurence," she said, gravely. "When you think it all over, you will see for yourself that it would never do. Just now you have been led away by impulse, and you forget the gulf that lies between us. No, I don't mean your life or any thing connected with it," she said, as he was about to speak. "I mean the change that time has wrought in our characters, in our very selves. If we had been let alone ten years ago, the end might have been very different—but now it is too late. We have grown apart, instead of together: you have lost your inheritance—I am entirely without fortune. We should, in every sense, mark each other's lives if we cast them together. Laurence, is it not best for us each to go our own way, and live, in the future as in the past, apart?"

"It is for you to decide," he answered, striving to repress the emotion which he could not altogether conceal. "You were always reasonable and prudent in the ex-

treme—even ten years ago. You mean, then, that we shall each continue our present game—that you will marry my precious cousin, and that I must play the fortune-hunter with that girl down yonder?"

"Laurence" (she turned on him sharply), "do you mean to say that you do not—that you never have—cared for her?"

"I mean to say that I never cared for but one woman in the world, and that she threw my love away, like *that*"—(he snapped off a twig and tossed it on the whirling waters)—"I mean to say, too, that you may judge whether this love was dead when I tell you that the mere sound of your name was enough to drive me from Northorpe as soon as you entered it; and I came here to-day—and this is the end!"

She put one merciless question directly to him: "What did you come here to-day for?"

He answered as briefly: "To ask Miss Inglesby to marry me."

"And yet you have asked me?"

"Yes, I am a fool. I have asked you."

"Well, I will not be a fool and take you at your word. We are old friends—that is all. On the strength of that friendship let me wish you success in your wooing. Only promise me one thing—that you will be kind to her."

"She would thank you for such consideration," he said, bitterly—adding, with a sudden passionate vehemence, "and I thank you for proving to me, once for all, that ten years ago or to-day I am equally nothing to you!"

"Laurence!" she said, startled in spite of herself. But she spoke too late. He had already flung himself from the rock and was gone.

Poor Rose! It was hard on her when she heard—as she did hear before long—that Kennon had come to the falls with Mrs. Reynolds; that he stayed but a short time; that he saw Mrs. Inglesby; and that he had gone back to Northorpe without seeing her. "No doubt it was on account of Mr. Devereux that he went," people said to each other, as they ate their luncheon, scattered about in picturesque groups over the rocks. But Rose knew better. A sudden instinct, an intuition of the truth, enlightened her; and, when she was told that he had met her sister-in-law, nothing more was needed for its confirmation. "So she has got him, too," thought

the girl, looking with gloomy eyes at Alice, as she sat in all her brilliant beauty not far off. It was very bitter—it was surely very hard. Was it not enough that Devereux, who had been predestined her own captive, should fall into the stranger's toils, but Kennon, too, must be a victim? Could not Alice be content with the rich prize, the desirable cousin, but must she lay hands also on the one whom everybody cried out upon as undesirable, and for whom she could have no possible use? Of course it will be seen that Miss Inglesby was taking a great deal for granted; but that was her way, as it is the way of most imaginative people. And her instinct certainly pointed very shrewdly to the truth.

It would be difficult to say whether her fears were most relieved or realized when, as she sat silent and distraught in the drawing-room that evening, Kennon made his appearance. She knew his step in the hall, and animation flashed instantly into her languid face. Alice knew it, too, and her eyes immediately sought Rose with a strange, intent gaze, of which the girl was wholly unaware. Her own color did not vary by a shade, nor did her manner change in the least, even when Kennon entered, and when she was obliged to explain their former acquaintance to Mrs. Inglesby. Rose heard the explanation, and, when Kennon came over to her, she was too much disturbed to notice his bearing as closely as she had wished to do. Instead, he was able to notice and to set his own interpretation upon the flushed cheeks and wistful eyes uplifted to him. But, in truth, this preoccupation mattered very little. If Rose had been able to judge, she would have found that he was entirely the same in manner as when she had seen him last. He had been quite unnerved that morning; quite thrown out of the artificial self which years and much experience of life had fashioned; but with such a man such a state of feeling is only temporary. To-night he was himself again; and all the more steeled in his purpose by a fierce contempt for his own sentiment and folly. When he saw Rose's emotion, he thought, "The game is won;" and when he sat down by her side, it was with the determined resolve to make good use of his time.

Good use of his time he certainly made; for, though he did not absolutely ask her to marry him—Mrs. Inglesby's watchful care

and the lack of opportunity prevented that—he did every thing else which it is practicable to do in a room full of people. When he went away at last, he left Rose in a fever of excitement, triumph, and indecision. He had asked her, at parting, if she meant to walk the next morning, and she had told him yes—feeling confident that he would meet her, and ask the question he had not been able to ask that night. Yet, strange to say with regard to her answer, she was by no means clear. It is one thing to like a man and flirt with him to the very verge of love-making, and quite another to promise or intend to marry him. Rose had long since taken the first step, but, when it came to the second, she had still sense enough left to pause. She knew what a storm of opposition she must expect from her parents; what an outcry from the world; but these things counted little with her. In the ignorant boldness of youth, she was ready to defy them. The fear that tugged at her heart-strings, the fear that made her hold back, was the fear of Kennon himself. Not the fear of what his life had been and might be yet—for there, again, her ignorance made her bold—but the fear of his love, the distrust of his sincerity. She had felt it always, more or less; but, notwithstanding that he had never been so devoted as on that night, she felt it that night more than ever before. Perhaps it was his strange departure from the cascade, or that "former acquaintance" with her sister-in-law, of which he had spoken so lightly, or the earnest gaze in Alice's eyes when she met them once or twice, or perhaps only that intangible something which can always be felt, if not detected, in an acted or spoken falsehood. Whatever it was, the fact remained the same. Once at least, before it was too late, she wavered—once at least, asked herself whether the gain was worth the risk. But such questions are easily answered when years are few and impulses strong. "If I must be miserable," thought the girl of eighteen, "it is better to be miserable with him than without him. Besides, I do believe—I will believe—that he loves me!" And so the die was cast. When she laid her head down on the pillow that night, her decision was made—she would accept him, and abide the consequences.

Meanwhile there was another person besides herself whom indecision and conflict kept

wakeful during much of that night. Long after Rose's eyes had closed in slumber, Alice Inglesby still paced her room, with a face strangely set and brows strangely knitted. It was evident that she was thinking deeply; and truly she had cause enough for thought. In the course of our lives it chances that most of us influence directly or indirectly, in greater or lesser degree, the lives of others. But, as a general rule, we do not recognize even this influence until after the effect has taken place. We are rarely conscious of it at the time, for we walk ever in a mist; and the day of our death is not more effectually hidden from us than the consequences of our least actions. Yet sometimes this veil of ignorance is lifted—partially, at least. Sometimes we are able to behold, as in a mirror, the direct results of certain acts, and, beholding them, we must be strangely reckless of things present, and things to come, if we do not pause—awed a little by our own responsibility. It was such a moment, just now, with Alice. She was painfully conscious that she held in her hand the thread of fate for three lives besides her own. She was oppressed with the sense that, on her decision, rested the future of three people; and that circumstance—the potent monarch of human life—seemed for once passively awaiting her command. All day the sense of this responsibility had been with her, and all day she had rebelled against and denied it. "I am only one of the actors," she thought. "I have no more control over the drama than they." But to-night this flimsy self-deception was at an end. To-night she saw before her the stern array of inevitable consequences, and, since they were inevitable, faced them steadily. "Once for all, I will weigh the matter in every aspect," she thought; and, as the hours went on, she still paced the floor, and still weighed it.

She had summed up the whole case in its personal application to themselves, when she spoke to Kennon in the morning; but there was the other side, the side *not* personal to themselves, to be considered. When she said to him, "You have lost an inheritance; I am wholly without fortune. We should, in every sense, mar each other's lives if we cast them together," she stated a truth which he could not gainsay; but when she was called upon to decide for Devereux and Rose, it was not so easy. "They go into the matter with their eyes open," she said. "Rose loves Kennon,

and Devereux loves me—is not that enough?" But then came the question—*Did* they go into it with their eyes open? Would Rose be likely to marry Kennon if she could hear him declare that he had never loved but one woman, and she the woman who had given him up ten years before? Would Devereux accept even her hand if he could read her heart and see how persistently it clung to the man who had first awakened its romance and passion? Yet what of these things? Was it once, in a thousand cases of marriage, that love was equal on both sides? Did not hundreds of men and women marry from motives more unworthy than Kennon's or her own, and yet make excellent husbands and wives? She could answer for her own after-conduct, she was sure. She liked Devereux well enough to do more than tolerate him. His character was pleasant to her, his manners suited her, and his tastes agreed with hers. This was a good foundation, and of herself she had reason to be confident. But Kennon! There, indeed, was cause for hesitation. What his life had been, she knew; what it would be, she had sufficient experience of the world to foresee. Knowing the one, foreseeing the other, could she stand aside and let Rose rush headlong on her fate? In vain she thought that it was none of her affair; that the girl's self, and the girl's parents, were alone concerned. Conscience rose up in reply, and said: "It is you alone who can save her." "But why should I save her?" she asked. "She is nothing to me; while Kennon—whose interests I am serving—is very much."

She had scarcely asked the question when she stopped a moment, and her glance, by some strange magnetism, was attracted to a miniature that lay on her toilet-table. Almost unconsciously, she took it up and opened it. When the lid of the case flew back, the face of a young man looked at her from the ivory. It was the likeness of her husband. For a second she was startled, since usually this miniature remained in her writing-desk, and she could not think how it chanced to be here, until she suddenly remembered that Mrs. Inglesby had asked for it several days before, and that doubtless it had been returned that day during her absence. But, however the fact of its presence might be explained, there was no ignoring the effect which this presence produced. She looked steadfastly at the

bright, young face, until large tears gathered in her eyes, and misted her sight. She had loved this dead man very tenderly—more, perhaps, as she might have loved a favorite brother, than as women usually love their husbands—but still with a depth and pathos that could not but rush back over her when she gazed thus on the shadow of the face that was forever gone from earth. "My poor darling!—my poor, gallant boy!" she thought, weeping softly, and wiping away the tears as they fell. "He loved me very dearly, and I can never prove my love for him!—I can never repay the tenderness he gave me." She said this half aloud, and she had scarcely finished saying it, when she started. Were her eyes bewitched, or did the face bear a likeness to Rose which she had never noticed in it before? People spoke of the resemblance, she knew; but she had never been able to discover it until now. Now suddenly it flashed upon her. Those violet eyes, looking up at her, were strangely soft and wistful for a man's; and how like they were, in form and tint, to those she had seen gazing into Kennon's face that night! Those lips, so softly curved and clearly cut, wore Rose's own smile—the smile half arch, half sweet, which she so well remembered. Then it came back to her, like a forgotten dream, how the dead brother loved the little sister who had been his pet and darling, how tenderly he spoke of her, and how often he wished that Alice could see and know her. "You would be able to do her so much good," he had said; and now—it was no wonder Alice closed the case with a sharp pang, and turned away. Was it good she was about to do this sister of her dead husband?

CHAPTER VI.

It may be imagined that, with thoughts such as these for her companions, Mrs. Inglesby was little disposed for sleep. In fact, she still paced her chamber long after the other inmates of the house were wrapped in quiet slumber—long after even Rose's white lids had sunk over her violet eyes. It was well on toward two o'clock when, at last, she suddenly stopped and made an impatient gesture.

"Things seem fantastic and unreal at night," she said. "Somehow, they are al-

ways magnified, and events or feelings of really small importance assume gigantic proportions when viewed at such a time. I know perfectly well that all these absurd scruples on the one hand, these old, sentimental recollections on the other, will fade into absolute insignificance to-morrow morning. Therefore, why should I torment myself with them? Has the surprise of the day unstrung me? Am I mad that I don't see, not only what I could, but what I *must*, do?"

She walked abruptly across the floor, and drew back a curtain from one of the windows—a window looking out over the garden and toward the Devereux House. The fragrant stillness of the starlit summer-night seemed to come to her like a soft caress; there was not the faintest gleam of light anywhere, not the faintest sound of moving life—only the perfume of the flowers, the brightness of the stars, and the dark outline of the stately roof cutting against the steel-blue sky. As she stood quite motionless, she heard a clock, far away in the heart of the silent town, striking two; and at that moment, almost as if the stroke had been a signal, a wild glare of flame burst forth from the hitherto dark and silent Devereux House.

For an instant, Alice stood petrified, absolutely doubting the evidence of her senses, and chained to the spot by sheer amazement; but this inaction did not last more than an instant. She was a woman of rare coolness and presence of mind, and she realized at once that, owing to the lateness of the hour, the flames were likely to make fatal headway before any one was roused in the quiet neighborhood. She could see that the fire had burst forth in the kitchen wing of the house. If the alarm was given immediately, therefore, it might be possible to save the main building. She sprang from the window, and, running hastily down the corridor on which her chamber opened, she was soon thundering vigorously at Colonel Inglesby's door.

"What's the matter? Who the deuce is that?" cried a startled voice within.

"It is I—Alice!" she answered. "Mr. Devereux's house is on fire! The alarm ought to be given at once! Oh, sir, pray—pray get up!"

Colonel Inglesby needed no further adjuration. She heard him say, "The devil!" and make one spring to the floor. "I'll be there

in a minute," he answered. "Rouse the servants, Alice! Send somebody to knock 'em up over there. Where did the fire burst out? Has no alarm been given?"

"I have not heard a sound," she replied. "There are never any policemen in this part of the town, and everybody seems asleep. The glare must wake them soon, however."

"Is the fire serious?"

"Very serious, I should think."

She waited to say no more, but hastened back to her own room to see how matters were progressing. Even in these few minutes, the fire had gained considerably; but the house itself was yet wrapped in utter stillness. A sudden, horrible fear came over her. What if one of the tragedies so rife in these days of terror had been perpetrated? What if the household had been murdered, and the house fired to conceal the crime? Any thing seems possible in a moment of panic, especially if that panic comes at night. Her heart seemed to stand still for a minute; then a sudden flood of resolution came to her. She turned, left the room, ran down-stairs—thinking, even in this moment of supreme excitement, that it was fortunate she had not undressed—and, groping her way through the dark house, managed to unbar one of the dining-room windows, and let herself into the garden. The whole thing occupied such a short space of time that she saw scarcely any change in the state of affairs when she stepped out into the open air. She did not stop to wonder at the quietness which still brooded over every thing, nor to admire the effect of the flames so vividly thrown into relief against the deep-purple sky. She sped swiftly down one of the paths which led to the gate opening into the Devereux grounds. It was as she reached this, and laid her hand on the familiar latch, that the first cry of "Fire!" rang out in the street; and, the next moment, the deep tones of the alarm-bell sounded.

"Thank God!" she said—but still she held on her way, knowing that succor could not come for some time, and that meanwhile the fire might render the escape of those within difficult, if not dangerous. Quickly she sped across the flower-beds, quickly through the hedges and under the drooping vines laden with odorous blossoms, quickly across the lawn damp with clinging dew, quickly up the broad stone steps into the portico. Then seizing the bell-handle, she pulled

it violently again and again. Still, no sound answered—though she could hear it tinkling far away.

"Good Heavens! what can be the matter!" she thought, turning round to see if no rescue was at hand. As she looked, she saw a man come dashing hurriedly over the lawn toward her. The front gates were still fastened, so that he had evidently leaped the palings. As he sprang up the steps, and they stood face to face in the bright glow, she saw that it was Kennon.

"Laurence!" she cried.

"Alice!" said he—in the tone of one overwhelmed with surprise.

But the next instant he remembered himself and drew back stiffly.

"I beg pardon, Mrs. Inglesby. I was surprised to see you here; but I suppose that, like myself, you wish to rouse the inmates. Is it possible nobody is awake yet?"

"Nobody has stirred," she answered. "It seems to me exceedingly strange! I am very glad you have come. I saw the fire first," she went on, quickly, "my room is on this side—I left my father-in-law dressing—and—and—oh, pray ring the bell!"

This confused speech did not sound very much like the stately Mrs. Inglesby, but in truth Kennon's dark eyes were reading her face so keenly, and she was so well aware that he was wondering how she came to be awake and dressed at such an hour of the night, that her usual self-possession quite forsook her.

"Ring the bell!" she repeated, sharply, as he still stood looking at her. "Surely they must wake after awhile!"

Peal after peal at the bell, knock after knock on the door producing no effect, Kennon shrugged his shoulders.

"Devereux always slept like one of the seven champions of Christendom," he said, "and it is evident his servants share the peculiarity. If you'll stay here, Mrs. Inglesby, I'll go round and try to get into the house another way. This really does begin to look serious!"

"Surely the fire-company will be here soon," said she, anxiously—very anxiously, he thought.

"The alarm has just been given," he answered. "They are not likely to be here very soon. I am afraid the old house will certainly go."

"Oh, what a shame—what a pity!"

"Quite a pity!" said he, philosophically.

"How are you going to get in?" she asked, as he turned away.

"I shall break a window of the conservatory," he answered, coolly.

Then he walked off, but when he reached the conservatory, he found, much to his surprise, that she had followed him.

"If you have no objection, I will go in, too," she said. "I can wake the servants, while you rouse Mr. Devereux."

"Are you afraid to trust me with him?" asked he, with a sudden bitter tone in his voice, a sudden angry flash in his eye. "I have not taken a degree in assassination yet."

"You know better than that," she answered, haughtily. "Mr. Devereux is no more to me than any other acquaintance whose life I desire to save—no more than one of his servants. But if the house is doomed, I may be able to save a few valuables; and since there is nobody else to do it, I feel it right to go in."

"I feel it right to tell you that there's risk in it."

"Scarcely just yet, I think."

He glanced up at the roof which was already beginning to blaze in several places—shrugged his shoulders again—smashed a window, climbed in, and opened a door for her. Together they entered the house, and soon found their way to the upper regions. While Kennon went to wake his cousin, Alice roused the startled servants, who scarcely waited to throw on their clothes before they fled in wild alarm.

Then suddenly, as if by magic, the grounds became thronged with people, the engines of the fire-company came up at a gallop, and began to play upon the roof, adventurous spirits thronged the house, tossing the costly furniture recklessly out of the windows and injuring far more than they saved. Others again, came in to pilfer, the flames rushed steadily on, the people talked, the engines played, the flowers stared at the light of the great conflagration, or withered away beneath its fierce heat—a scene of wild pandemonium replaced the odorous quiet of the summer night.

In the midst of this, Devereux came hastily up to Kennon, who stood on the outskirts of the crowd, talking to Rose Inglesby. It

struck them both, as he approached, that he looked singularly pale and agitated, even for a man whose house was burning down.

"Kennon," he said, hastily, "do you know where Mrs. Inglesby is? Have you heard—have you seen her anywhere?"

"Mrs. Inglesby!" Kennon repeated, starting, and growing so pale that the pallor of the other face was, by contrast, insignificant and natural. "My God—no! Is she missing?"

"I can't find her," the other answered, "and one of the servants says something about seeing her in the library. But she can't have been so foolish—so mad—as to stay there until now. Perhaps she has gone home.—Miss Inglesby, do you know?"

"I am sure she has not gone home, Mr. Devereux," Rose answered, trembling with a sudden, vague fear.

The two men looked at each other. In all their lives neither of them ever forgot that horrible, sickening moment.

"Did you leave her in the house?" Devereux sharply asked.

"I left her for you to bring out," Kennon as sharply answered.

It was easy, then, to see how the thing occurred. Devereux had not heard of her presence in the house when he hastily left it. Kennon had quitted it even before that, thinking Alice safe under the guardianship of the man she had been so eager to save. She, on her part, had lingered in the library until escape was cut off by the flames.

"What are we to do?" Devereux asked, in the midst of the awful, hushed panic which seized them.

"You may do what you like," said Kennon, fiercely. "I am going after her."

He turned quickly toward the house, but Rose caught his arm. At that moment she forgot every thing—her sister-in-law, Devereux, maidenly reserve, every thing but the fear that he would rush madly into danger.

"O Mr. Kennon," she cried, "don't—don't be rash! Perhaps Alice has gone home!"

Kennon answered nothing; he only brushed her aside as if she had been a butterfly, and went on his way.

Of what ensued he had never more than a vague remembrance. He recollected mounting a fireman's ladder to the library-window—that same window at which Alice had stood a few nights before, thinking of him—and

climbing into the room already full of dense, black smoke. But all this was singularly confused; nothing was clear, until he found himself kneeling over a half-suffocated and unconscious woman on the sward below. Even in her unconsciousness, however, she did not relax her clasp of a small picture which she held.

Strangely enough, it was the engraving which had hung over Devereux's writing-table.

How brightly and joyously the next morning broke over the blackened ruin of the once stately Devereux House! How gayly the birds sang among the roses, how softly the shadows flickered over the green turf! How little any thing in Nature seemed to reck of the destruction which had been wrought between the setting and rising of the sun!

"And it would be all the same if it had been a human life instead of a house!" thought Alice Inglesby, as she rose and stood at the same window where she had been standing when the flames broke forth the night before. Her attack of unconsciousness had been very slight—for she was not a woman prone to fainting-fits—and, thanks to a superb constitution, had left no ill effects beyond a little languor and paleness. There might have been more, however, if she had not been "kept up" just then by the fictitious strength of excitement. During her vigil of the dawn, she had taken a resolve which had been lacking in her vigil of the night. Somehow, light had come to her, as well as to the world. Things which had been conflicting before, seemed thoroughly harmonious now. Standing there in the bright sunlight, her future life showed itself in a new aspect. Every thing within her was so changed, that the whole outside world seemed changed also. Should she ever forget the look in Kennon's eyes, when she opened her own on his face, there on the turf last night? It had gone straighter to her heart than if he had pleaded with all the passionate eloquence that ever stirred a human tongue. And here let it be said that, being a woman of sense, and not a sentimental fool of any age (for sentimental folly is not limited to sixteen), she did not for a moment think of attaching the least importance to the mere fact of his having, in romantic parlance, "saved her life." She knew perfectly well that he would

have done the same good office quite as willingly for the cook or the chambermaid. It was that look in his eyes which haunted her—which seemed to beckon her on to the perpetration of the rankest act of folly ever perpetrated by a "woman of the world."

Then the thought of Rose and of Harry—the two strangely mingled—came back to her as they had come the night before. She seemed to see the fair, rose-bud beauty of the girl, and to feel the same pang of absolutely painful pity which she had felt the night before, when she saw her falling into the toils of the adventurer, who avowedly wooed her only for her fortune. Yet the night before she had steeled her heart and said, "Where is the remedy?" Now she seemed to see the remedy.

"My life does not matter," she said aloud. "I have only myself to consider; and, therefore, why should I consider at all? Nobody can be injured or aggrieved if I throw myself away; while Rose—ah! it is different with her. She has a mother's heart to be broken. Poor, foolish child! she has even a heart of her own to suffer!—and how it *would* suffer when she learned the truth! How little she will thank me for such consideration," she added, with a short laugh; "and yet—if she only knew it—how infinitesimal is the heart-ache or two she will suffer now, to the ocean of anguish I will spare her! Am I mad, I wonder?" she went on, walking to the mirror and looking at herself. "I should certainly have said so yesterday. But to-day I feel inclined to act before sanity comes back."

Mrs. Inglesby, senior, who, like all the rest of the household, felt singularly restless and unsettled after the night of adventure, had wandered into the garden, and was blankly surveying the smoking ruins which marked the place where the house had so lately stood, when, to her amazement, Alice advanced from one of the dining-room windows toward her.

"My dear, *you* up?" she cried, aghast.

"Thanks, yes, I have quite recovered," Alice answered. Then, hastening on to cut short the remonstrance she felt to be impending: "I saw you from my window, and I hurried down at once, because I thought I could not find a better opportunity for speaking to you—in confidence, if you have no objection."

Of course, Mrs. Inglesby had no objection,

and only a few words were necessary to put matters on a confidential footing between them. The mother's heart was too sorely anxious not to be glad of any counsellor, much more of any helper; and Alice spoke with the quiet composure of one certain of her own power. Before very long, Mrs. Inglesby's worst anxiety was relieved, and her worst fears allayed.

"Find some excuse for detaining Rose, this morning, from her usual walk," said Alice, "and I will guarantee that Laurence Kennon shall never trouble her again."

"But—but, my dear, how will you manage it?" Mrs. Inglesby cried.

"Never mind how I shall manage it," the other answered. "I promise to accomplish it—that is all. You will hear the result before very long," she added, as she turned toward the house; "and I hope you will be a little sorry when I say that it will probably force me to leave you."

"But—Mr. Devereux?" exclaimed the elder lady, who now began to have an inkling of the truth.

"Rose will console Mr. Devereux, I dare say," Alice answered, quietly. And then she walked away.

It would be hard to say how deeply Rose was chagrined when her mother made an absolute demand for her presence that morning, and when she found that, without betraying a most undue anxiety for her usual walk, she must submit to remain at home. Prudence, for once, carried the day. She submitted with a very bad grace, consoling herself with the thought that Kennon was again safely domiciled in Northorpe, and that opportunities for seeing him were many. So, although it is to be feared that Mrs. Inglesby did not have a very amiable companion, she still carried her point, and the field was left clear for Alice.

At the hour when Rose was in the usual habit of going out, Alice came down-stairs, and left the house. As she descended the front steps, she met a servant ascending them with a letter in his hand, and, when he touched his cap and extended it, she saw that it was addressed to herself. In a second, her heart gave a great leap. The writing told her at once that it was from Devereux, and she must needs have been dull beyond the measure of ordinary dullness, if she had not at once divined the nature of its contents. For

a moment she stood still, looking at the envelop as it lay in her hand—thinking, perhaps, how hard it was to fight against fate. She had thought to put temptation aside, and here it met her at the very threshold of her new determination. She had thought it would be easier to ignore the rich prize which chance had thrown into her life than to absolutely nerve herself to the point of rejecting it; yet here it was in her hand, and acceptance or rejection was now a matter of necessity. She would not have been a woman, if the temptation had not been great—so great that she dared not trust herself to consider it, that she dared not enter the house to answer that letter while still free to answer it as she chose. After a minute, she turned to the servant.

"I am just going out," she said. "I cannot stop to read this now. Tell Mr. Devereux that I will send an answer as soon as I return."

The man bowed and departed with this consolatory message. Turning hastily in the opposite direction, Alice went her way toward the square in which Rose usually took her morning walk, and where she was sure of meeting Kennon.

When she entered, she strolled up and down the paths laid out so trimly between plats of green sward; but no sign of Kennon appeared. Several nurses were sitting round the fountain that played in the centre of the square; children were trundling hoops up and down the walks; one or two men were resting on shady benches, reading morning papers; and a pair of school-girls strolled past, with their heads bent over their French grammars. For a short time, Alice was puzzled by Kennon's absence from the tryst; but then she remembered that she was early, and, choosing a walk which was uninvaded, she sat down on a bench to wait. Waiting is, at all times, tiresome work; and, being in a state of excitement, she found it more than usually tiresome this morning. So her hand soon found its way to her pocket, and brought forth Devereux's letter. Having brought it forth, the next step was to open and read it. She had read it twice, and her face was still bent over the page, when a ringing step on the gravel-path made her look up just as Kennon's shadow fell over her.

He looked astonished—as, indeed, there was good reason that he should be.

"I am glad to see you so entirely recov-

ered," he said, stopping before her, but speaking very frigidly. "I feared that the results of your adventure last night might prove very serious."

"It might have proved serious to some people," she answered. "Fortunately for me, however, I do not feel a nervous shock very much, and there was little else in that. If you had been ten minutes later, though—"

"You might have been beyond recovery," said he, coolly finishing her sentence as she paused. He was on his guard now, and not even into his eyes flickered any thing more than the quietest courtesy.

"It was very horrible," said she, in a low voice. "I never knew before what suffocation meant; but the dense smoke quite overpowered me, and I suppose I must have been insensible for some time before you came."

"Why did you go there?" he asked, unable to repress his curiosity on that point.

"There were some very fine pictures there," she answered. "I wanted to save some of them. After all, however, I did not succeed in doing so."

Then there was a pause. Kennon was still standing before her, but he now made a movement as if he would have bowed and passed on; only just then she looked up and spoke quickly—with the manner of one who had nerved herself to an effort.

"I believe you have an appointment with Rose," she said. "She is not here—will not be here this morning. If you do not object, however, I should like to say a few words to you."

She pointed to a vacant place on the bench beside her, and, after a slight hesitation, Kennon sat down.

"I confess I do not understand—" he began; but she interrupted him.

"You do not understand what brought me here? That is very likely; but, if you will be patient a moment, you shall hear. We are old friends, and I wish to ask your advice. Will you read that?"

She held Devereux's letter toward him, and, with increased surprise, he received it. He gave a start as soon as he saw the opening words, but he did not raise his eyes; and, as he read it, she watched him keenly. He held his face under tolerably good control, but she had once known its least weather-sign, and her eyes were not likely to deceive her now. Yet, when he finished, he looked

up and spoke with more passion and less bitterness than she had expected.

"Well," said he, "tell me now the meaning of this. You did not use to be cruel for the mere sake of cruelty, and I am loath to think that you have learned to find pleasure in the infliction of pain. Yet your motive for giving me such a letter puzzles me. Do you want me to go and cut this man's throat," he went on, with ill-restrained vehemence, "that you show me the words of love with which he offers you my inheritance?"

"I told you what I want," she answered. "I want your advice."

"My advice? I can give it to you in two words—marry him. He is rich, and he is a fool—marry him!"

"He is not a fool," she said, with something like indignation in her voice. "He is a man of whose love any woman might be proud—whom any woman might well learn to love. That letter"—she pointed to it as she spoke—"has touched me more than I can say. Only a fine nature and a gentle heart could have written such words as those."

"Marry him, then!—for God's sake, marry him!"

She rose from her seat, and took a turn down the walk—then came back and stood before him, the flickering shadows falling softly over her resolute face and earnest eyes.

"Laurence," she said, "do you remember yesterday?—do you remember telling me that Fate had brought us together once more, and that we should not throw away our last hope of happiness? Is yesterday to-day with you? Think for a moment, and then tell me—can you say that now?"

In a moment he understood her, and he, too, rose to his feet. They faced each other steadily in the golden sunlight before he pointed to Devereux's letter.

"I say it now as I said it then," he answered. "But, with this before me, I am constrained to add—don't let me stand in your way. There is the path to fortune—take it now, as you took it before."

"You are unjust!" she cried, passionately. "It was no path to fortune that I took before. And if I take it now it will only be because by such words as these you prove to me that Rose Inglesby's heirship is more to you than I am."

Her shaft struck home. Adventurer though he was, Kennon had still enough of

honor and sincerity left to feel it. A dark-red flush surged over his face, and, stepping forward a few feet, he caught her hands.

"Tell me what you mean?" he demanded, almost roughly. "I am dull at reading riddles, and this has grown beyond my comprehension. Why have you come here?—why have you showed me that letter?—why do you speak to me like this? You know that Rose Inglesby is nothing to me; and that you—are every thing. Do you mean that you are willing to give up *him* for *me*?"

He pointed once more to the letter—now lying on the ground at his feet—and Alice's gaze followed the gesture half sadly. Stooping, as if by a sudden impulse, she lifted the open sheet of paper, gently folded it, and laid it aside on the bench. Then she turned back to Kennon, and held out her hand.

"Just that way I put him out of my life," she said. "If you wish to take me, here I am."

At this point our story ends. At this point the sister-in-law, who had entered Miss Inglesby's life, and changed its whole current and meaning, went out of it again, and left—for a brief space, at least—not a little of desolation behind her. Of course, Rose was too proud to show how deeply and sharply the blow had struck; but, despite her bravery, she suffered many a sharp pang, and knew many a dreary moment, before it even slightly healed. Can we wonder at this? The girl had not given her heart unasked, as some girls do, and therefore she had not incurred the legitimate penalty of folly. She had merely suffered it to be won; she had merely fallen into a snare which might have entrapped an older and wiser woman; and, instead of waking slowly, and with a sickening consciousness of "too late" to this knowledge, it was forced on her by one sharp stroke. It may be said that she had cause for gratitude in learning the truth so soon.

No doubt she had, and no doubt she felt this before very long; but at first—well, suffering is apt to make even the wisest unreasonable, and it was not strange that at first she only felt the sore bitterness of affection wasted and trust betrayed. She was very young, however; and the young rally quickly from even the deepest blows. After a while, her parents took her abroad, and then Alice's prophecy came true. While travelling they met Devereux, who—whether to solace his disappointment, or to improve his mind—had also left Northorpe. Rose thought that he improved on acquaintance very decidedly; and, when she returned to America, he accompanied her. The latest news from Northorpe leaves no doubt but that they will soon be married.

And Alice? Well—Alice is not unhappy. In the first place, she is married to a man whom she loves, and, in the second place, she is married to a man who loves her. These two facts would enable her to bear much, if she had much to bear, which, in truth, has not been the case. Men of Kennon's stamp do not reform suddenly; but there is at least reasonable ground for hoping that with him the worst is over, and that he will never fling himself quite as recklessly against public opinion in the future as in the past. Let what will come, however, his wife has girded up herself to bear it; and, if gentleness, and courage, and devotion, can save him, he may yet be saved. With all the troubles that have encompassed her, it is not probable that Mrs. Kennon has ever regretted her choice. From the first she realized how inadequate Rose's strength would have proved for the burden laid on her; how terrible on both sides would have been the marriage which her intervention alone prevented. Feeling this, she is recompensed; but it is doubtful whether Miss Inglesby ever has known, or ever will know, all that she owes to her sister-in-law.

THE END.

THE STORY OF A SCAR.

IT was a very pleasant group that was assembled in the drawing-room of Colonel Dulaney's country-house, as the dusk was dying away over the wintry hills, and the short December day drew rapidly to a close—a very sociable group, too, although it was composed entirely of ladies. They had shortly before come up from dinner, leaving the gentlemen to the enjoyment of their olives and wine, and, finding twilight in possession of the room, had unanimously agreed in thinking that it would be a pity to disturb it by the invasion of lamps. So the only light in the apartment was that given forth by a large wood-fire, which illuminated every thing in its immediate neighborhood, while shadows gathered deeply in all the corners, and the silvery moonlight traced pale outlines on the carpet at the other end of the long room. There is nothing prettier than this soft mingling of twilight and firelight, and the four ladies grouped around the hearth-rug made a charming picture as the red radiance flickered over them—shining on the rich silks which two of them wore, and flashing back from the bright eyes of the other pair, who were dressed simply, as became their youth, yet elegantly, as became their station.

The first of the silken-attired ladies was lying indolently back in a deep chair, while one of her slender hands held a fire-screen of Oriental device before a very fair and high-bred face—a face over which thirty-five summers had passed so lightly as to leave only added beauty behind them. This was Mrs. Dulaney, the most charming and popular hostess of all the gay and hospitable countryside; and whoso caught one gleam of her frank blue eyes, never marvelled even once

concerning either the charm or the popularity.

Next to her a bonny brown-haired, brown-eyed girl was nestling on an ottoman, with her tinted face half shaded by the sweeping draperies of her hostess—a dainty, *petite* creature, dressed in a soft blue fabric, the Vandyck corsage of which showed the whitest neck in the world, and a diamond pendant that glittered in the firelight. It was a proverb with her friends that Ethel Lamar was never silent for five minutes; but more than five minutes had elapsed since her last remark, and still the little lady sat quiet—her bright brown eyes fastened on the glowing coals as intently as if she were reading her fortune there.

In the corner of a sofa not far distant sat a lady who was dressed in black silk, so heavy and stiff that it rustled like armor whenever she moved—a lady whose face, in repose, was somewhat plain, somewhat severe, and marked by the lines of at least fifty years, but whose smile, when it came, was so cheery and good-humored that it left nothing to be desired either in appearance or expression. She was the only one of the quartet who was busy with any occupation, but her nimble fingers were knitting soft, white wool; and, as the firelight glanced back from her polished needles, it also gleamed over her firm hands, across one of which there ran a deep-red scar, exactly like a sabre-stroke.

On the other end of the same sofa, in an attitude of supreme comfort, a stately, rich-hued brunette was reclining, with her feet doubled up in some inscrutable girl-fashion, and her dress sweeping the floor like a royal train. Do what she would, Alice Palmer al-

ways looked queenly and imposing, and people who did not know her felt a sort of awe of her on this account—an awe absurdly misplaced, since she was in reality as simple and unaffected as a child. Of the four ladies, she was the only one who was not gazing into the fire; her eyes, as it chanced, were turned on her companion's hands, and her voice was the first to break the stillness which had settled over them all.

"Mrs. Stuart!"—she spoke so abruptly that the lady who was knitting started at the unexpected sound of her own name—"Mrs. Stuart, may I ask you an impertinent question?"

Mrs. Stuart gave one quick glance out of her clear hazel eyes, while the smile that came over her face showed that the speaker was a favorite with her.

"You may ask me a question if you like, my dear," she said, "but I shall reserve the right to answer it, on account of its impertinence."

"Yes," said Miss Palmer, with a smile. "Well, then, will you please tell us how that singular scar came on your hand? I have wanted to ask you often, only I did not like to do so. But, if you would not mind telling, Ethel and I are desperately curious."

Mrs. Stuart looked at Ethel, who blushed; then down at her hand, which seemed to blush also, as the red firelight flickered over it; then up at the dark eyes fixed on her with a half-laughing appeal.

"I have no objection to telling you, my dear," she said. "Indeed, there is a tolerable moral attached, that might do good to young ladies who are fond of flirting" (it was now Miss Palmer's turn to blush); "but it is rather a long story."

"A long story!" cried Ethel Lamar. "Oh, then, dear Mrs. Stuart, it is the very thing we want; for you know it will be an age till the gentlemen come up, and this is the time of all others for story-telling. Please do tell us, if you don't mind."

"So you think you need the moral, too, girikin?"

"I am sure she does," said Mrs. Dulaney, with a smile.—"Ah, my little lady, that is a very fine look of reproach, but do you think I was deaf all through dinner, and I did not hear poor Charley—so you know what I mean?" she broke off, with a laugh, as Miss Lamar flushed crimson.—"Give us the story

by all means, Mrs. Stuart. I am sure it is worth hearing, and I am also sure that these young ladies are sadly in need of missionary labors."

"Alice, can't you say a word in our defence?" asked Miss Lamar, peeping over the arm of the sofa with her glowing face.

"Alice has some conscience," said Mrs. Stuart, shortly. "I should like to hear her say a word in her defence when she remembers what I overheard in the conservatory this morning. That poor Colonel Fairfax!—Well, if men will be fools, I suppose women have a right to amuse themselves with their folly—only take care, my dears, that amusement does not run into harm."

"How could it?" asked both girls, a little curiously.

"I'll tell you how," answered Mrs. Stuart, briefly.

Then she braced her shoulders back like a veteran general, gave her needles a click together, and began her story.

"Thirty years ago, my dears, I was young and handsome. The latter fact seems a little strange to you, no doubt; but it *was* a fact, nevertheless, and I can speak of it now without vanity. I was a good deal admired, too, for, besides being young and handsome, I was an heiress—and wealth will bring a woman admirers quite independently of her looks, as you are all, no doubt, aware. My father was a widower, and very fond of me, as I was his only child; so I did pretty much what I pleased, and, as it chanced, I 'pleased' to flirt a great deal. I liked admiration just as you like it now, my dears, and I was quite as fond of leading my admirers into absurdities, and then laughing at them as they stumbled out, as you seem to be. I firmly believed that men were the legitimate prey of pretty women, and I felt no more compassion for them than a cat may be supposed to feel for the mouse she torments. People—kind, good-natured people—called me 'a heartless coquette,' and a few of my relations and friends even went so far as to remonstrate with me on my conduct; but I put their remonstrances scornfully aside, laughed, went my way, and played my fascinating game over and over again—each time with fresh zest. Yet I should do myself injustice if I allowed you to think that I was in truth entirely heartless, for there was one person with whom I never flirted, whom I sincerely loved, and honestly meant to marry

—after I had finished amusing myself. This was my cousin, Harry Wilmot. I had known him all my life, and loved him all my life; and, although he often expostulated with me about my coquetry, I bore with him in quite an exemplary manner—at least I thought so then. Now I think that it was *he* who bore with *me*, and that very patiently. I was engaged to him in a sort of tacit fashion that had never been publicly acknowledged, and did not bind me in the least. Nothing had ever been said about marriage, yet I certainly meant to marry him, and I am sure that nobody ever was more devoted to another than he—poor fellow!—was to me.

"Well, things had been going on in this way for some time, and Harry had to find what consolation he could in the number of my admirers, when a new family moved into our neighborhood, and, being people of evident wealth and culture, were received with open arms—more especially since they proved to be hospitable and charming in extreme measure. Their house was always open, and one elegant entertainment was scarcely over before another was on the *tapis*. This fact alone insured their popularity. The neighborhood, having been very stagnant before this new life flowed into it, was by no means disposed to be severely critical with regard to the pleasant sources of this life. One and all, we adopted the Claverings, and the Claverings in turn amused us. We had never been amused before, and our gratitude was extreme. The Claverings, *en masse*, soon became the county toast. I say *en masse*, yet the family was in truth rather small, consisting only of its respective heads, two handsome daughters, and (as report soon told us) a son absent in Europe. The eldest of these daughters, Isabel Clavering, was soon my intimate friend, as young ladies reckon friendship, and, as she was even more giddy and reckless than I, she speedily led me into more mischief than I had previously found for myself. Soon sober people began to be scandalized at our proceedings. In fact, they were what in these days would be called 'outrageously fast.' My dear, good father, in whose partial eyes I could do no wrong, said little or nothing; but Harry decidedly disapproved of Miss Clavering, and unhesitatingly signified as much. Our first serious disagreement was on this score. He begged me to give up a friend who did me only injury, and I indignantly refused. She

was my friend, I replied, in that spirited manner which young ladies so much admire, and I should not resign her, let people say or do their worst. Harry urged the point no further, but from that day a barrier of coldness rose between us.

"Of course, you can all guess what came next. The son and heir of the Clavering house—Edward was his name—came back from Europe, bringing a friend with him, and Woodlawn (the name of the Clavering villa) became more than ever the headquarters of gayety and dissipation. I profited in an especial manner by this, for the grounds of our respective residences immediately adjoined, and, when our friendship grew so warm that we were obliged to see each other every day, we found that a short cut through the shrubberies was pleasanter and more convenient than a long ride or drive round by the road, so a gate was cut in the wall dividing our domain, and of this gate each household kept a key. These keys were in frequent demand, for matters had now reached such a pass that, whenever I was not with the Claverings, some one or other of the Claverings was with me.

"As you may readily imagine, the two young men made the already attractive house ten times more attractive. They were both handsome, and both singularly fascinating—especially Edward Clavering, whose face I see as clearly now as I ever saw it in reality thirty years ago. It was a face of the type which I have always liked best—regular features, pale complexion, silken-brown hair, beautiful, soft, violet eyes, and the most perfect mouth I ever saw out of marble. In figure he was slight and graceful, with exquisite hands and feet. His friend—Ridgley, by name—was also exceedingly handsome, and second only to Clavering himself in versatile talents and accomplishments, while they were both full of that *je ne sais quoi* of travelled nature which is so peculiarly attractive to untravelled natures. "Don't think" (here Mrs. Stuart glanced round the listening trio, and shook her head very sternly) "that I am painting them in these bright colors to excuse the story which is to follow. Not a bit of it. If I met two such chevaliers now, I should be able to tell that there was something a little *bizarre*—a slight flavor, as it were, of Bohemianism—in their style, which might jar on conventional ideas,

and plant a vague distrust in the conventional mind. But at that time I was in the full noonday of the sublime scorn of conventionalities, with which every clever young person begins the world; so the freshness which these strangers brought into my life was all the more acceptable because it had just that slight flavor of Bohemia.

"Perhaps" (smiling a little) "you have some curiosity to know which of the two I flirted with. For the matter of that, I tried my hand on both, though Clavering was the one I liked best. Certainly he was a charming companion, and his flattery—of course, it was flattery, though I did not think so then—might well have turned the head of an older and a wiser woman. To say, in the language of the present day, that he was 'devoted to me,' is to say very little indeed. He tried every art in his power—and those arts were many—to make me fall in love with him. I did not exactly do that, but I liked him thoroughly, and am ashamed to say that I encouraged him to the top of his bent. Harry stood it all with tolerable quietness for a while—I think he wanted to see how far I would go, if left entirely to myself—but after a time even his patience gave way. I remember perfectly the day on which we finally arrived at an open rupture. He came in one morning, and, as usual, found Edward Clavering with me. Instead of paying a short visit, and then taking leave as he usually did, in a case of this kind, he established himself with a book in a corner of the drawing-room, and waited until Clavering was, in a measure, forced to take his departure very much in advance of his ordinary time for doing so. After he had bowed himself out, I, who was much provoked at losing another hour of tender and gallant compliments, vouchsafed not a word to Harry, but went to the piano, and, sitting down, began to play. My cousin read his volume of Bacon's Essays with exemplary patience through half an hour of musical *mélange* remarkable only for its noise, and it was only when I rose at last, and closed the piano with a perceptible bang, that he rose, too, and came forward.

"If you have no other engagement just now, Rachel," he said, quietly, "I should like to speak to you."

"I am at your service," said I, "though it seems to me that you might have spoken to me any time within the last two hours."

"'Might I?' he said. 'Well, it seems to me that you were occupied with Clavering until he left, and that you have been occupied with the piano ever since. However, I was determined to remain until you were at leisure to give me a little of your time, because I want to place a plain alternative before you, and ask you a long-deferred and decisive question.'

"'With or without my permission, I presume!' said I, with an emphasis which was meant to be very sarcastic.

"'Yes,' answered he, gravely, 'with or without your permission—though I scarcely think you will withhold it from me.'

"'And pray why not?' demanded I, haughtily.

"'Because it is to your interest as well as mine that the issue should be met and settled,' answered he, looking pale but determined. 'Rachel, you must know as well as I that matters cannot go on like this. I have borne a great deal from you, through my great love for you, but I cannot bear to be treated as a toy which you contemptuously fling aside, or more contemptuously take up at your pleasure. I recognize this at last, and I recognize, also, that you must choose between me and these new associates who have estranged you from me.'

"'Estranged me from you, indeed!' said I, with disdain. 'You are mistaken. It is your own senseless jealousy that has estranged us—if we are estranged. We have spoken on this subject before,' continued I, loftily, 'and I must beg you to understand that now, as heretofore, I decline to submit to dictation in regard to my friends or associates.'

"'Then,' said my cousin, 'you force me to place before you the alternative of which I have spoken. I do not think there is any need for me to tell you how truly and how faithfully I have loved you for many years. You know it. Yet the time has come when you must choose between the acquaintances of yesterday and the friend of your youth. Rachel, you must give up the Claverings, or you must give up me. My cousin—my dear cousin—which will you take? You can no longer have both.'

"For a moment this determined attitude of my vassal petrified me; but I had something of a temper, and, if my memory serves me right, I stamped my foot, and blazed

out like a tornado at my long-suffering cousin.

"'Are you trying to insult me, Mr. Wilmot, that you dare to come and talk to me like this!—that you dare to put such an alternative before me! Am I to give up my friends at the mere bidding of your caprice? Pray, tell me' (with a withering sneer), 'what penalty shall I incur if I decline to take advantage of the choice which you are kind enough to offer me?'

"'You will send away from you, perhaps forever, a friend who would do any thing to serve you, Rachel. Is that a little?'

"'I am young, and pretty, and rich,' said I, scornfully. 'I shall find plenty of other friends.'

"'If you think that,' said he, a little hoarsely, 'if you can take such a tone as that to one who has loved you as long and as well as I have done, it is time indeed to go. But, O Rachel, Rachel! have you never loved me—do you not love me—even in the least degree, that you can throw me off like a worn glove?'

"'I should like you very well if you would only let me alone,' said I, in the tone of one from whom a reluctant concession is wrung. 'But you do worry so, Harry, and you have taken such an unaccountable dislike to these delightful Claverings.'

"'Some day you will be able to account for the dislike easily enough,' said he, gloomily. 'But it may be too late then. Rachel, for God's sake, be warned!—for God's sake, drop those people! They are not fit associates for you.'

"'I won't hear another word!' cried I, stopping my ears. 'I won't listen while my friends are abused and slandered.'

"'Rachel,' said my cousin, growing momentarily paler and more earnest, 'would you like to know the character of the man who has just left you?'

"'Not from your lips,' answered I, angrily. 'I don't trust a word that you say of him.'

"'He is an unprincipled adventurer,' Harry went on, steadily, 'he is indeed nothing more nor less than a professional gambler. I can prove this.'

"'How, pray?'

"'By the testimony of people who have seen and known him at other places.'

"'I don't believe one word of it!' I said, stamping my foot again.

"'You accuse me of falsehood, then?'

"'No—but I accuse you of listening to his enemies, and of being blinded by jealousy. If it is true, why don't you expose him?'

"'Would you give him up if I did?' (this very eagerly).

"'Never!' answered I, grandly. 'I cling to my friends all the more when they are slandered and persecuted.'

"'Then you see why I don't expose the scoundrel. Can I have the whole county talking of your flirtation—God knows they might even call it your love-affair!—with a professional gambler, and *chevalier d'industrie*? I am not thinking of nor pleading for myself, Rachel, when I pray you to break off all connection with such a man.'

"'I am not to be dictated to,' said I, drawing back the hands which he attempted to take, 'and I positively decline to surrender a pleasant friend because you see fit to make vague accusations against him.'

"'I shall see if your father thinks them vague,' said he.

"'Do!' answered I, scornfully. 'The rôle of tale-bearer suits you so admirably that you must allow me to congratulate you on your new *métier*, and to wish you good-morning!'

"With that I courtesied grandly, and swept out of the room, leaving Harry still standing on the floor. A few minutes later, however, I had the satisfaction of hearing him gallop from the front-door, and I knew that he was gone—never to come back again, as he had done for so many happy years. Was Edward Clavering (whom I had not by any means made up my mind to marry) worth quite such a sacrifice as this? Even with all my ruffled pride to help me, I was not quite able to answer that question in the affirmative.

"I managed, however, to console myself very well with Edward Clavering. In the week which followed Harry's unusual assertion of himself, and consequent departure from the scene of action, I was more than ever at Woodlawn (for he did not fulfil his threat of speaking to papa; partly, as I learned afterward, because he was busy collecting tangible proof of Clavering's antecedents), and my wilful feet went daily nearer and nearer the verge of that fateful precipice of love, down which many women tumble headlong into misery.

"To let you understand exactly how near I was to it, I must tell you that, on a certain lovely

Indian summer afternoon, when Clavering and I were out riding, he formally addressed me—having seen, no doubt, that he might safely venture to do so. Now, of course I don't need to tell you that it is not every man who knows how to make a declaration, which, of itself, will go half-way toward winning a woman's heart; in fact, the art of doing so is more rare than any other with which I am acquainted. Clavering's proposal was simply perfect—passionate, graceful, chivalrous, all and more than all that the most sensitive fancy could have demanded, or the most sensitive taste sanctioned. If men would only comprehend that a woman's fancy *can* be shocked, and a woman's taste outraged, by *gaucherie* on such occasions, I am inclined to think that there might be fewer untoward wooings. Why I did not accept my suitor on the spot, I don't know, unless it was that my cousin's warning had, after all, left an impression on my mind, and inspired me with a vague distrust of this accomplished gentleman, which made me hesitate when it came to the actual point of putting all my future life into his hands. At all events, I *did* hesitate—I paused—wavered—finally asked for time to consider his offer. He yielded very gracefully to this request, and, having listened with tacit favor to his suit, I was pledged to give an early and decisive answer.

"The next day was stormy, and I did not go to Woodlawn—neither did any of the Claverings come to me. It was a day of such fierce rain and tempest as belongs only to the autumn, and, since I was entirely alone, I did not pass a very cheerful time. My father was at that time a judge on the bench of the Supreme Court of the State, but he did legal business for his friends occasionally, and it chanced that he had been summoned, early that morning, to make the will of a dying man—a very intimate associate, who lived a few miles distant. As the day advanced, I saw clearly that he could not return before nightfall—nor after it either, for that matter. The streams intervening between us would be too high for him to cross, I felt sure, and, if the rain continued, he might be water-bound for several days. I knew he would dislike this exceedingly, for he never left me alone when he could possibly avoid it, and on the present occasion he would be particularly loath to do so, since there chanced at that time to be a deposit of unusual value in the

house. Not long before, a very wealthy and eccentric old lady of the neighborhood had died, and left my father executor of a will in which she bequeathed all her property, and especially all her jewels (for, by a singular freak, she had invested to the amount of half her fortune in precious stones), to him, to be held in trust for the heir or heirs of a long-lost (and everybody said long-dead) son. These jewels my father had for some time kept in his own possession, meaning to take them to a city, the first time he went, and lodge them in a bank. You may think that it was very imprudent to have kept jewels to the amount of a hundred thousand dollars in an ordinary country-house for any length of time; but, in those days, and in quiet country regions, robbery was almost wholly unknown, and I have visited many houses where neither the plate-closet nor the jewel-box was considered worth the trouble of a lock. If these jewels had been his own, my father would have felt no anxiety about them; but, because they had been placed in his hands as a trust, he had been a little nervous, and wished to put them in safer keeping than his own. This had been deferred from time to time, however; and now, on this stormy November evening, he was on one side of a swollen stream, and I on the other, with the jewels of old Mrs. Hardie in my sole guardianship.

"I confess, however, that the thought of the jewels did not disquiet me very much. I only thought how lonely and *ennuyée* I was. So I wrote a note, begging Isabel Clavering to come and stay with me, giving the jewels as an excuse why I could not leave the house entirely unprotected. The note was answered, not by Isabel, but by Edward. He had come to bring his sister's regrets—she was quite unwell, and could not venture through the rain; but could not *I* be prevailed upon to come over and stay with her? This proposal was only too tempting to me, but I could not reconcile it to my conscience to leave the jewels; so I told Edward that I could not go. He urged me to do so—urged me strongly and repeatedly—but I could be very obstinate when I chose, so I resolutely declined; and at last, as night was closing and the storm increasing, he was obliged to leave without me. Reluctantly enough, he bade me good-evening, and started to leave the room, when suddenly he stopped, turned, and came back to where I sat by the fire.

"'Rachel,' he said, in a low, passionate voice, 'when am I to have my answer?'

"Now, this question provoked me. I was by no means a lovesick maiden, in whose eyes my lover could do no wrong, but a sensitive, fastidious woman, whose fancy was only too easily repelled by the slightest solecism of taste or chivalry. The circumstances of time and place branded the question as a presumption in my opinion, and I answered it haughtily and indifferently:

"'If you choose to wait for my answer, Mr. Clavering, you can have it when I have made up my mind; if not, you can take it now.'

"'And suppose I take it now?' said he, a little hoarsely.

"I looked up into his eyes, with a flash, I am sure, in my own. They were steadfast, determined, and anxious to a degree that startled me. His face, too, was pale and set, I thought, as the changeful firelight flickered over it. Still, I was angry—it seemed as if he took advantage of my loneliness to press his point in this manner.

"'If you take your answer now,' said I, coldly, 'you may not find it very much to your taste. It is, unequivocally, No!'

"'Rachel!'

"The tone in which he uttered this exclamation startled me even more than his eyes had done. It was violent; it was almost menacing; and for the first time I realized how late it had become, and how entirely alone I was. I rose to my feet and looked—or endeavored to look—like a tragedy queen.

"'Have you forgotten yourself, Mr. Clavering, or have you forgotten who I am, that you venture to address me in such a manner as this?'

"'No,' answered he, trying evidently to collect himself. 'I remember both perfectly. You have answered my presumption very well, Miss Huntingdon, and I accept your decision. It would be ungentlemanly, I presume, to hint that you may ever regret it. With my best wishes for your future happiness, I have the honor to bid you good-evening.'

"He bowed here, and, without offering to touch my hand, left the room. The next moment I saw him cross the veranda, and take the dripping path which led through the shrubberies to the gate communicating with

the Clavering domain, of which I have already spoken.

"Then I sat down—I confess a little stunned by this brief and most unexpected scene. What had so suddenly transformed the most gallant and tender of suitors I could not imagine, and my amazement was so great that for a time it certainly subordinated every other feeling. I had no doubt of my own power to lure him back if I wanted him—an important *if* already in my reflections—but what could possibly have changed him so completely in so short a time? Had he only been playing a part, and now, for some unknown reason, had it become worth his while to throw off the mask? Try as I would, I could find no clew to the enigma which satisfied me, and at last I started from my thoughts to find the room quite dark, and the fire gone down to a bed of ashes and coals.

"It is not a cheerful thing to be alone in an isolated country-house at six p. m. on a rainy November evening. I shivered, and rang the bell for lights. 'Make up the fire, John,' I said to the servant who brought them, 'and you must sleep in the dining-room to-night. Papa cannot get back, I am sure.' Having given this order, I felt somewhat relieved, for John was large enough and had pluck enough to be a match for any ordinary burglar. Of course, he did not fancy exchanging his usual comfortable quarters for a shake-down in the dining-room, but he said, 'Yes'm,' with a due amount of respect, and then retired, leaving me to face the evening as best I could.

"I faced it very badly. Those anxious eyes of Edward Clavering's gazed at me from every page I attempted to read, and that white, set face of his, seemed to lurk in the shadows that gathered about the corners of the room. I was heartily glad when nine o'clock struck, and I was free to go to bed without feeling ashamed of myself for keeping 'poultry-hours.' I rang for my maid, and astonished her by saying that I would sleep in papa's room, and that she might bring my toilet apparatus down to that apartment, which was on the ground-floor. I must do myself the justice to say that some vaguely-heroic idea of protecting the jewels was in my head, though I scarcely think it would have availed to make me change my domicile, if a very clear and unheroic idea of being protected by John—the dining-room was just

across the hall from papa's room—had not aided and abetted it.

"Now you must understand that, in the original plan of the house, papa's room had been meant for a smoking-den, but he preferred a chamber on the ground-floor, and so had chosen this apartment, for which he said there was 'no rational use.' It had two doors, one opening on the hall, the other on a side-piazza, from which a path led stableward. Both of these doors had locks; and the ease with which any ordinary lock gives way at the 'open-sesame' touch of professional fingers was at that time a fact which had never been brought to the realization of the rustic mind. I remember looking round, after I was in bed, and thinking how secure every thing was—the doors safely locked, the shutters closed with springs, and not an avenue of entrance left by which a mouse could profit. I gazed with complacent gratulation at the safe at the farther end of the room—the safe sitting modestly back in a corner, and giving no sign of the golden treasure within it—as I thought how emphatically we were burglar-proof. Nevertheless, seeing the firelight gleam on a dagger of papa's—a pretty, fanciful, Albanian trifle, which he had picked up in some of his Eastern rambles—I thought I might as well put it within convenient reach, so springing out of bed, I ran across the floor, and took it down from its place over the mantel. I remember distinctly how I felt its cold, keen edge as I went back; then, slipping it under my pillow, I extinguished the light and dropped comfortably into sleep.

"I do not know how long I slept, but I think it was about midnight when I waked suddenly with a strange sense of terror, a blind instinct of danger, which made the blood settle like ice around my heart. My senses did not, as is usually the case, struggle in the dim border-land between sleep and waking, but I was roused to perfect consciousness in an instant—consciousness as complete and clear as that which I enjoy at this moment. As well as I can recollect, my first physical impression was of a strange heaviness, together with a subtle odor which I knew perfectly, yet could not identify. When I lifted a little the lids which seemed held down by some indefinable weight, I saw that a light was in the chamber, and that a man, wearing a black mask, held a bottle of chloroform to my nostrils, while another, also

masked, knelt before the safe at the farther end of the room.

"You wonder, perhaps, that I did not faint, realizing my utter helplessness. I have sometimes wondered myself; but the truth is, that we rarely give way under pressure of great emergencies. On the contrary, I think we hardly know our own capabilities until we have been tried in some such manner. I closed my eyes after that one glance, and lay perfectly motionless, feeling instinctively that to feign unconsciousness was the only resource, the only hope in such peril as this. There was nothing to be done. To move, to attempt to cry aloud, was to seal my death-warrant, for the same hand which was holding the chloroform to my nostril could have been on my throat before more than a gurgle had been uttered. I did not move a muscle, therefore; I even regulated my breathing to simulate the soft uniformity of slumber. You think you could not have done as much?" (A murmur had risen from the audience here.) "Take my word for it, the most timid woman here would have done just as I did. You see there was no alternative. Death hung over me on a hair, and in mortal peril it is said that even cowards are brave. With all my acting, my heart beat so madly that I feared it would betray me, and there are no words to tell what agonizing thoughts were meanwhile surging in my brain. I knew that with every breath I inhaled the powerful anæsthetic, and the terror of unconsciousness grew momentarily greater. What could I do? O God! what could I do? I remember thinking little besides this while I lay motionless.

"I lived an age of horror in the few minutes that elapsed after my waking, until the voice of the burglar who was forcing the safe said something—so low and muffled that I did not catch it—which summoned his companion to him. I felt that the latter hesitated a moment and looked at me. Then, as I supposed, concluding that I was 'safe,' he withdrew the bottle; the next instant a handkerchief, saturated in the chloroform, was laid across my mouth and nose—after which, with light, stealthy steps, he moved away.

"I heard it all, with senses sharpened to tenfold their usual acuteness; and, when he was once safely gone, I moved the handkerchief slightly—just enough to allow me a little pure air, instead of the stifling fumes of the



"I put up my hand very softly, and drew the dagger from under my pillow."

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chloroform—and then I asked myself, wildly and desperately, if there was nothing I could do—if bitter necessity compelled me to lie there and watch this daring robbery without lifting a hand to protect the property intrusted to my father's honor. You will say that such a question, in my position, was utter madness, and so it would have seemed to me at any other time. But at *that* moment I forgot my weakness, my utter helplessness, in the burning sense of outrage which came over me as strongly as if I had been a very Samson. Watching the two burglars from under my eyelids, I saw the door of the safe (which was, in truth, little more than a strong box) yield to their efforts, and swing back. Was there nothing I could do, I asked myself again, in utter despair—and, as I asked it, I thought of the dagger under my pillow!

"I say that I thought of it, but I need scarcely add that an instant's consideration told me that no possible weapon could make me a match for two men, even if desperation lent me courage enough to face them. Still I put up my hand very softly, and drew the dagger from under my pillow—there being something singularly reassuring in the cold steel of its blade. It astonishes me yet to remember how cool I was all this time—so cool that I was sure my hand would not tremble if the safety of my life *should* depend upon one stroke of the poniard which I grasped as my only friend and refuge. I was naturally anxious to avoid any such unequal contest—both for my own sake, and that of the men whom I could not help remembering *were* men, with souls to be sent into eternity. I was, however, determined to save the jewels if possible; and, strange as it may seem, a plan of escape at last suggested itself to me—a reckless plan enough, as you may judge. As I have said, the safe was at the other end of the room from the bed, and the two burglars, in stooping over it, had turned their backs on me. The door leading into the hall was midway between the two ends of the room. If I could once reach it unobserved, I could escape and give the alarm.

"It was a forlorn hope, but I determined to try it. Perhaps I should not have ventured to do so if I had not been certain of at least one ally the moment I opened the door. This was a large mastiff, named Caesar. He was a great favorite with papa, and always slept on a mat in the hall. His instinct told him that

something was wrong, and for some time past I had heard him scratching and whining at the door. Once aroused, I knew that no bulldog could surpass him for strength, no bloodhound for ferocity, and so—if the worst came to the worst after the door was opened—I knew that Caesar was certainly good for one burglar, and perhaps—if God gave me quickness and strength when both were needed—I and my dagger might be good for another.

"Chance, and the absorbed preoccupation of the two men, favored me. One short prayer—how fervent you can never tell unless you are placed in some such strait—and, stepping out of bed with the dagger in my hand, I took the first steps, in my bare feet, on the thickly-carpeted floor. They did not notice me. All around them were gleaming masses of plate and jewelry. I crossed the floor swiftly, noiselessly, and with perfect safety. But, when my hand touched the lock of the door, it gave a sharp click, which made them both start and turn. A single glance was enough. With an oath I shall never forget, one of them strode toward me.

"Don't expect me to describe the scene that followed—I could not, if my life depended on it. I only know that, before I could unfasten the door, I was in the grasp of a man, whose hands might have been made of iron from the manner in which they caught me, and the manner in which I felt them in every fibre. The vast majority of women (in our class of life) go to their graves without ever having had cause to realize the brute dominion of man—when he chooses to use the strength given him by his Maker—over the frail *physique* of woman. In those days I was young, healthy, well developed, and somewhat vain of my strength; yet I was like a reed in that man's hands. Not even despair and loathing horror could give me energy enough to free myself from a grasp which felt as if it might crush every bone in my body. Half suffocated as I was, I had power, however, to raise my voice and give one cry—the utterance of mortal extremity and terror. In a second a hand was over my mouth, and another at my throat. 'Try that again, and you are a dead woman in two minutes!' the burglar hissed in my ear. The close grip on my throat rendered this more than a threat, and an instinct—the instinct that causes even the weakest to fight for life—made me lift the hand which was now free, and plunge the dagger

(which he had been on the point of wresting from me when I screamed) up to the hilt in his body!

"He dropped his hands from my throat, and, with one deep groan, staggered back. As he did so, I turned, and, with wildly-excited fingers, tore open the door. Then, with a deep, menacing growl, such as I never heard before, and hope never to hear again, Caesar rushed past me. I heard cries—oaths—the sound of fierce struggling—the deep bass mutter of the dog—as I fled from the room, but I dared not pause, and bursting into the dining-room, I faced John, whom my scream and the noise of the dog had at last aroused.

"In a few minutes the only other man of the establishment—the gardener—was awakened; and, armed with any available weapons that came to hand, the two men entered the now ominously silent room. Despite their entreaties, I followed them, and—shall I ever forget the scene which greeted me! There was the open safe, with a lantern on the floor beside it, the light flashing back from all the shining plate and dazzling jewels, which covered the carpet. Near the door—within five paces of where I had stood—lay the burglar who had caught me; and near the safe—with Caesar crouching on his chest—was the other. The two servants went at once to draw off the dog, and, while they did this, I bent to see if the man near me were dead or only wounded. I found that he was still living, though he had evidently tried to rise, and fainted from pain or loss of blood. Anxious to give him air sufficient for recovery, I lifted the crape mask from his face, and, as God sees and hears me, this midnight robber—this thief whom I had stabbed as an outlaw, in self-defence—proved to be no other than Edward Clavering, my father's constant guest, my own devoted lover!

"I knelt over him as if I had been turned to stone—striving vainly to realize the hideous horror of the discovery—when a stifled cry from John fell on my ear.

"'Good God!' I heard him exclaim. 'Sandy, here's Mr. Ridgeley—and he's stone dead!'

"They say that after this I uttered a cry—the second which had passed my lips—and fell back into a deep swoon. I only know that those words are the last I remember of that hideous night."

There was silence with the quartet for some time after Mrs. Stuart reached this tragic climax of her story; but, to make it satisfactorily complete, there was more yet to be told; and, after waiting as long as was possible, Miss Palmer at last hazarded a question.

"Was he quite dead, Mrs. Stuart?"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Stuart, speaking with great effort. "Caesar had done his work well. The wretched man never breathed after those strong teeth were once fastened in his throat. Edward Clavering, however, recovered, and, although I never saw him afterward, papa told me that he had confessed every thing with regard to himself and his motives. The whole family were adventurers, and he was—as Harry had declared—a professional gambler and *chevalier d'industrie*. Fortune had for some time been at a very low ebb with him, and to marry me was his last hope of retrieving his affairs. One or two people who knew his character had, however, chanced to come into the neighborhood of the county, and he was aware that exposure might overtake him any day or hour. Under these circumstances he grew desperate; and, knowing that there was very little hope of my father's consenting to the marriage (even if I should accept his proposal), he determined upon the bold stroke of 'securing' Mrs. Hardie's jewels. The plan had presented itself to him when he heard of my father's absence, and it was to facilitate the matter that he had urged me so strongly to leave the house. It was also on this account that he had brought matters to a decided issue with regard to his suit. He had always distrusted the marks of favor which I accorded to him; for my reputation as a coquette was wide-spread, and he had no idea of giving up a certain good (the jewels) for the uncertain good of being played with a little longer by an accomplished flirt. Still, if I had not been so decided—if I had given him any hope of my eventually saying 'Yes'—every thing might have been different. The unfortunate Ridgeley would not have been led to his death, and the exposure when it came would not have been so open and so terrible. One thing, however, is certain: his purpose would have been safely achieved—the jewels would have been lost, and my father's fortune, if not credit, seriously impaired, but for my whim of sleeping down-stairs. I alone had the credit of pre-

venting the robbery, and it was not until I waked from my long and death-like swoon that I found at how much cost to myself this credit had been gained. I was ill—I remained ill for weeks—and this hand" (she held up the one across the white surface of which the long, red scar was traced) "had been laid open to the bone by the keen edge of the dagger to which I clung in that short, close struggle.

"Was I cured of flirting? I think I may safely say that I was; but I never married Harry Wilmot, though we were good friends and cousins to the day of his death. In this respect, at least, you see, the whole course of my life was changed by the story I have told you."

The steady voice of the narrator sank into silence, the bright blaze of the fire had died down to a soft glow which did little more than reveal faint outlines of the four ladies grouped around it, and, as the gloom of twilight deepened into night, the large room looked almost eerie enough for a ghost-scene. The tragic narrative to which they had just listened had sobered the audience exceedingly, and no voice broke the stillness until there came sounds—footsteps and voices on the stair—which told that the gentlemen were coming up. Then there was something of a commotion. Mrs. Dulaney rang for lights, Miss Palmer's pretty feet resumed their proper place on the floor, Miss Lamar rose from her lowly seat, and sank into a deep chair somewhat outside the circle and in the shade. Here a tall, handsome gentleman found her when he glanced round eagerly for his "nut-brown mayde."

"Why are you looking so pensive?" he asked, leaning over the back of her chair. "Have you been frightening each other with ghost-stories here in the dark?"

She threw her head back and looked up at him with her liquid-brown eyes. Wretched little sinner that she was, she knew only too well how these same eyes were treacherous lakes into the depths of which men's hearts tumbled unawares and were heard of no more.

"Ghost-stories?" she repeated. "No, indeed! We have had something much more thrilling than a ghost-story, because it was true—a story of robbery, and danger, and courage, and death! With a moral, too!"

"Indeed! And may I ask what the moral was?—to get patent locks, and keep fire-arms by your bed?"

"No. The moral was less commonplace—at least in connection with robbery. It was highly edifying, I assure you, for it was this—beware of flirtation!"

He elevated his eyebrows and laughed.

"Is it possible? I think I shall beg for the story, for I cannot imagine two more incongruous ideas than burglary and flirtation. And are we to have a feminine Saul among the prophets—do you mean to swear off from your favorite amusement?"

"Swear off! As if I ever flirted! or, as if my poor shots could hurt anybody, if I did!"

"Don't lay that 'flattering unction to your soul,'" said he, in a whisper. "Your shots have crippled one bird for life, and Heaven only knows what you mean to do with him."

"Put him in my game-bag, of course," she answered, with a wicked glance.

THE END.

A DOUBT.

CHAPTER I.

THE day was bright, still, and balmy. Though January had told but a third of his span of days, Nature was already beginning to awake from her winter sleep. Flowers were blooming, bees were humming, and birds were singing gayly amid the ever-green shrubs, in the large garden attached to one of the handsomest private residences in the town of J——. All was sunny and cheerful without doors; all was bustle and excitement within. It was the eve of the wedding-day of the only child and heiress of the house, and, in anticipation of the important event, all heads and hands were busy with preparations.

Mrs. Blount, the lady of the mansion, was a little too busy for the comfort of her servants and assistants. She was here, there, everywhere; in the store-room, where the process of cake-making, cake-decorating, and the general manufacture of domestic confections, was in full tide—up-stairs, down-stairs—even in the kitchen, with questions, suggestions, directions, that infinitely disgusted the cook—hindering everybody, helping nobody, until the very rustle of her silk dress became an abomination in the ears of the much-tried household. The confectioner's man, who was in command of the store-room, had again and again respectfully represented that he "would have all right, without her troubling herself—she might depend upon *that*!"—the cook had exclaimed each time that the brown silk invaded her domain, "Now don't you be botherin', mistiss, and making yourself uneasy. You know I'm *bound* to have every thing fust-rate for Miss Emmy's weddin'!

breakfast!"—and her own maid had protested solemnly against her "breaking herself down this way, instead of keeping quiet, so as to be well to-morrow." But remonstrances were vain. Mrs. Blount could not keep quiet. Her spirits were at that altitude of exhilaration which must effervesce in restless motion. It was not only that she enjoyed intensely the fuss, excitement, and *éclat* of her daughter's marriage with one of the richest, handsomest, and most fashionable men of J——; the crown of her content was, that she herself had "made the match;" that, but for her, it "never would have been a match." And so, happy and self-congratulating, she wandered about, blandly unconscious of how much she was in everybody's way, and how heartily everybody was wishing her at the antipodes.

There were two rooms in the house, however, which, in all her wanderings, she left uninvaded. One of these was the chamber of her daughter, the bride-elect; the other was the private room of her husband—a small apartment adjoining the library—which enjoyed the prescriptive right of exemption from intrusion.

In this latter, Mr. Blount was now sitting, on a sofa drawn near to the fire. He had just turned from the library-table at his elbow, where he had been writing letters, and, leaning forward, took up the poker, and began to stir the fire mechanically. Mr. Blount was a man whose life was exclusively of the world. He ate, he slept, he entertained his friends, he read, wrote, and studied, under his own roof, and he paid all the bills his wife presented to him, without question or comment; but that was all. So far as any of the

usual influences of *home* were concerned, he might as well have been the celibate of an anchoress's cell. He had early in his married life discovered that there was nothing in common between himself and the vain, frivolous woman whom he had made his wife; for, though the world occupied an equal place in her regard as in his own, it was in a very different form. He was intellectual, energetic, ambitious, while she was a mere butterfly of fashion; far the more selfish and heartless, inasmuch as she was by far the most shallow nature of the two.

On the present family occasion, there was as little harmony of sentiment as usual between this ill-matched pair. As Mr. Blount bent over, and absently stirred the coals, his face, so far from exhibiting the expression of beatified content which his wife's countenance was bearing about, was very clouded. His eye was thoughtful, his brows somewhat contracted, and his lips compressed. He was thinking of an appeal which his daughter, to his great astonishment, had addressed to him the night before; and, as he thought, his face grew darker and darker—for he felt that, without any fault of his own, he occupied a very embarrassing and painful position; and the sense of this was not less disagreeable than novel to him. He had promised his daughter that he would consider the matter which she had so abruptly forced upon his attention, and he had kept his word—having spent the greater part of the night revolving it in his mind. But, look at the question as he would, he could find no satisfactory solution of the difficulty. For once, his keen intellect, and usual fertility of resource, were entirely at fault. He was hopelessly perplexed.

While he was still ruminating the subject, there was a low knock at the door. He hesitated a moment before he said, "Come in," and, for the first time in his life, was conscious of a positive sense of cowardice, as he heard the door open and shut, and a slight, quick step crossing the floor. It was not until this step paused beside him, that he turned and looked up.

A young girl, whose slender figure and delicate blond beauty gave her an almost painful appearance of fragility, was standing with feverishly-varying color, her eager gaze fastened upon him. At the first glimpse of his countenance, she seemed to read the de-

cision at that instant forming in his mind, and the lovely half-blushes, that were coming and going momentarily in her cheek, faded suddenly, leaving it as stony white as freshly-carved alabaster.

"Papa, O papa!" she cried, without waiting for him to speak, "I cannot, cannot marry him! Oh, have mercy on me, and send him away! I cannot, cannot marry him!"

She pressed her hands down one upon the other, on the edge of the table by which she stood, as if to steady herself—for she was trembling from head to foot—pressed them so hard, that they were almost as bloodless as her face; and there was a strange look of terror and anguish in her eyes, while her voice had the very wail of despair in its accents.

"My daughter," said Mr. Blount, gravely—taking her hands, he drew her toward him, and placed her on the sofa by his side—"my daughter, sit down and listen to what I have to say."

"O papa! O papa!" she gasped hysterically, "you do not mean—you cannot be so cruel as to mean—"

"Don't excite yourself in this violent manner," said her father, whose face had become a shade paler than usual. "Try and control this agitation—try and listen to me, Emily."

He was still holding her hands, but by a sudden effort she released them from his grasp, and began wringing them frantically.

"Tell me—only tell me," she cried, "that you will save me from this worse than death! That is all I ask!"

"I can tell you nothing until you are capable of listening to reason, my daughter," he answered, with the same gentle gravity as when he spoke first.

"Reason!" exclaimed she, passionately. Then looking at his face, and reading its expression, she added more quietly: "Forgive me for distressing you so much! I will try to listen to you."

He put his hand on the soft brown hair that was pushed carelessly back from her face, flowing in disordered ringlets on her shoulders, and smoothed it softly for a moment, before he said:

"Emily, if you had told me, at the time this marriage was first spoken of, that in accepting Madison you were acting under com-

pulsion of your mother's influence, I should not only have at once put a stop to the affair itself, but I should have taken care that such a thing never happened again, by peremptorily forbidding your mother's interference; either one way or the other, with your future matrimonial choice. But I understood from her that you accepted him voluntarily; and your conduct gave every color of probability to this assertion. I saw you walking and riding with him constantly—receiving his attentions at all times, as if they were agreeable to you; and when I made the direct inquiry of you—as a matter of form only, I confess—whether you wished to marry the man, you answered distinctly that you did."

"Yes, yes, I was a poor, miserable coward! As I told you last night, papa, mamma managed to throw me with—with him, against my will, and to commit me in so many different ways, that I was coward enough to feel it impossible to say no, when he finally asked me to marry him. But as to my receiving his attentions, that was not my fault. Mamma would promise him that I would ride or walk with him at a certain time, and would then insist on my fulfilling the engagement when he came to claim it. I never liked him—though I did not, when I consented to marry him, detest him as I do now. I thought that as I had unintentionally led him on, as mamma called it, to offer himself—that I would try to like him. And, O papa, I have tried so hard! But the more I saw of him, the more did I feel dislike, amounting to utter disgust; and though for a long time I would not acknowledge this, even to myself, as the time drew nearer and nearer for me to marry him, I—I—papa, I could not endure it! I abhor him—I loathe him! Death would be a thousand times preferable to marrying him! O papa! have mercy on me, and save me! I shall lose my senses or die, if I have to marry this man!"

"What can I do at this late hour? Consider, Emily—if you had spoken to me a month or even a week ago, it would have been different; but you let the engagement go on for months, you wait until the marriage has been publicly announced, every preparation completed, the very eve of the day arrives, and you wish to break it off then! Don't you know that to jilt the man in this notorious manner would be most unprincipled, most dishonorable conduct?"

She did not answer. She only wrung her hands again, with a look of utter despair.

"Do not think that I am indifferent to your wishes," continued Mr. Blount, after a little pause. "I would do any thing which it was possible to do, my daughter, to release you from a marriage that seems so repugnant to your inclination. But what you propose would be a disgraceful breach of faith. Don't you see that?"

"Is there no hope, no help, for me?" she asked, with a desperate sort of calmness.

"No help but in your own strength of character. Remember, it was by your own act that you were involved in this affair. A word to me, at any time, would have relieved you of all difficulty. You ought to have spoken that word in time. Since you did not do so, you are bound in honor to keep your faith."

"I would have appealed to you sooner, but I was always afraid of you, father," said the girl, bitterly.

"Afraid of me! What reason had you to be afraid of me?" demanded he, hastily. "Did I ever once act, or even speak, harshly to you?"

"No; you were always kind enough, but so cold! You scarcely seemed conscious of my existence, unless some accident reminded you of it."

"God forgive me!" said he, with a groan. "God forgive me! One false step, one error, is the fruitful source of many succeeding evils. I was not by nature what is called an affectionate disposition, not impressionable or demonstrative, and the little warmth and sentiment that I did possess was frozen by—"

He stopped, and was silent for some minutes.

"Emily," he said, turning suddenly to his daughter, "answer me one question. Is it some love-affair with another man which makes you so averse to marrying Madison?"

"No," she answered, meeting his keen glance without the slightest hesitation. "I do not love any other man. I wish I did; for I could ask *him* to save me, then. No. It is just that I detest—*loathe*—this man!"

She spoke quietly now, as if the climax of passionate feeling was past, and something very like apathy was stealing over her. Mr.

Blount looked with anxiety amounting to apprehension at her pale face and drooping form.

"My daughter," said he, abruptly, "you think the sacrifice which your own conduct has imposed upon you a hard one. Listen to me, and I will tell you of a much harder sacrifice which I once made to a sense of honor. Did it ever occur to you to wonder, Emily, why I married your mother?"

"I have always wondered at it," she answered, listlessly.

"She was handsome when I first saw her, and much admired; and, from the first moment of our acquaintance, she exerted every effort to attract me. I don't think that, intrinsically considered, I should have given her a single thought, or that it would have been possible for her to obtain my most transient attention. But I was young and vain, and, flattered by the favor voluntarily bestowed on me—a favor which I saw so many around me coveting—I was unhappily drawn on, until, despite my better judgment, and almost before I knew what I was about, I was engaged to her.

"It was at a watering-place that we met, just at the end of the season. On the very day after I had offered myself, and been accepted, we parted to return to our respective homes. I was startled to find that, as I journeyed homeward, I dragged a lengthening chain, not of regret at parting from her, but of repentance that I had been so weak as to yield to a momentary infatuation, thus binding myself in honor to marry a woman for whom I entertained not the slightest genuine regard. And, if I felt this at the time, how much more did I feel it afterward, when accident threw across my path a woman whom I could have really loved, whom I did love, notwithstanding my struggles against what my own folly rendered a hopeless passion! But I did not hesitate, my daughter, as to what I should do. The real passion which had taken possession of my heart filled it with a disgust for the woman to whom I had engaged myself, equal, at least, to that which you entertain for this man you are about to marry." The girl shivered at his last words. "But—I was bound in honor, and I kept my faith. Now, do you not see that my case was harder than your own? I loved another woman. You have just assured me that that sting is not added to your suffering. I was perfectly

aware that it was only for my wealth, and my reputation as an ambitious and rising man, that the coquette who had netted me wished to become my wife; while you must acknowledge that Madison is really attached to you for yourself alone. I do not admire him as a man; he certainly would not have been my choice as a son-in-law; but I must do him the justice to admit that his love for you is thoroughly honest and disinterested. I never was mistaken in my judgment of a man's character, and I am certain of this."

"What does it matter? I hate him—I abhor him—I loathe him! Father" (she caught his arm with both her hands, and looked despairingly in his face), "do you mean to tell me that there is no escape, that I must marry him?"

"My daughter cannot act dishonorably, and it would be dishonorable to draw back now."

"Then, God help me, since you won't!" she cried, burying her face in her hands. After a minute, she slowly withdrew them, and looked up. "I am sorry I have distressed you in this way, papa, since it has done no good. I suppose you are right—that every thing ought to be sacrificed to honor. I will try to be resigned, since it must be so."

She rose to go, and her father, rising also, bent his head and pressed his lips to her brow.

"My poor child!" he said.

That was all; but she saw that his eyes were full of tears.

"Are you so sorry for me as that?" she said, with a sad, faint smile. And then she repeated her last words: "I will try to be resigned, since it must be so."

CHAPTER II.

"What! not dressed yet?" said Mrs. Blount, sweeping into her daughter's room, resplendent in pearl-colored silk, early the next morning, and finding Emily still in her dressing-gown, standing before a window. "I thought I particularly requested you to be punctual, my dear," she added, with petulant reproach.

"I shall be ready in time," answered Emily, without turning round; and some-

thing in the tone of her voice grated very harshly on her mother's ear.

She had managed and manoeuvred, with all the skill of a cunning and perfectly unscrupulous nature, to force her daughter into a marriage to which, she was well aware, the girl's inclinations were violently opposed; and she felicitated herself on the success of her management. But still there was a little of the mother yet alive at the bottom of her heart, despite the mountain of selfishness overlying it; and latterly this feeling had given her some very uncomfortable qualms whenever she was in Emily's presence. The language of suffering was written so plainly on the pale and altered face, but a little time before so bright, that not all the specious arguments with which egotism is ever ready to justify itself to its worshipper could quite stifle the whisperings of remorse. "I have acted entirely for her own good, and she will thank me for it hereafter," was the stereotyped phrase which she was in the habit of repeating to herself when her conscience was a little more importunate than usual in condemning her arbitrary conduct in the matter of this marriage. She repeated it now, as she advanced to where Emily remained standing, and exclaimed, with ostentatious cheerfulness:

"Let me see if you are looking your best, my love, as in duty bound this morning!"

Her daughter did not reply, did not even seem to hear the remark. She was gazing vacantly far away into the blue sky at some fleecy white clouds that floated slowly along, and wishing, in an apathetic sort of way, that she was one of them.

"It is time that you were dressing," said Mrs. Blount, in somewhat less honeyed accents, for she began to feel both irritated and uneasy at this strange manner.

"Very well—I will dress," answered the girl, listlessly; but she made no movement toward doing so.

"Never mind, Mrs. Blount; I will take her in hand, and, trust me, she shall be forthcoming at eleven o'clock," cried a gay voice in Mrs. Blount's rear; and a young lady in bridesmaid's costume came forward from the other side of the apartment, where she had been busy at a toilet-table, putting the finishing touches to her own dress.

"Thank you, Miss Laura—I will leave you

to your task, then," said Mrs. Blount, graciously. "I am particularly anxious to be punctual to the appointed hour. It is always so tiresome and awkward when there is delay on an occasion of this kind."

She smiled, and the pearl-colored silk rustled majestically out of the room.

"Come, darling," said the young lady, who had so opportunely for Mrs. Blount entered an appearance on the scene—Emily's favorite friend and first bridesmaid—Laura Ashby—"come, you must dress."

"Very well," was the reply again; and this time she did move.

She walked across the room to the toilet-table, and resigned herself passively into the hands of Miss Ashby and her own maid, who went to work *con amore*, and, at least half an hour before the stipulated time, presented her to her own inspection in the mirror, in all the bridal glories of white silk, orange-blossoms, and veil, complete.

"You look lovely, perfectly lovely!" cried Laura, enthusiastically. "A little too pale, but then it is the regulation thing for a bride to be pale—but beautiful as a dream!—Don't she, Lucinda?"

"Deed does she, Miss Laura," answered the maid, in a glow of pride and admiration. "The prettiest bride ever I saw!"

"Run, now, and see whether all the bridal-party have arrived. I don't suppose they have; it is early yet. You wait down-stairs until it is time for us to go down, and come and tell me then.—You know," she continued, turning to Emily, as the maid left the room, "that the guests are to be in the front drawing-room, and the folding-doors will remain closed until we are all in our places in the back drawing-room. Then they will be thrown open, and the ceremony performed immediately. That, and the congratulations, and the breakfast, will—but what am I thinking of to let you be standing tiring yourself in this way? Come to the fire, and be quiet until we have to go down."

"I would rather go to the window," said Emily, returning to her former position. "Please to raise it up, Laura, I am so warm."

"It is a delightful morning," said Laura, pushing up the sash; "the air is more like April than January." She drew a large arm-chair directly in front of the window as she spoke, and made her friend sit down. "Don't

crush your dress, though," she entreated, as the other sank into its depths without any apparent recollection of that important consideration. "Mercy, child! you will ruin your head if you lean back against it in that way."

Emily looked up with a faint smile.

"You can set it to rights again," she said. "I must lean back; I am so very tired."

She closed her eyes, and Laura, who had been wondering privately all the morning at the strange manner in which she was acting, stood gazing at her now in positive dismay.

Everybody—that is, everybody who constituted the fashionable world of J—, was perfectly aware that this marriage of Mr. Madison and Miss Blount was a "made match;" everybody, excepting Mr. Blount, who was not in the way of hearing gossip, particularly about his own daughter, had known all along that it was a match not at all to the taste of the bride; and she had been very much pitied at first. But people took it for granted that she had "become reconciled to the affair," and it was with a sudden thrill that Laura Ashby now connected her singular conduct with the recollection of her aversion to the marriage.

"Good Heavens!" thought she, aghast; and she went and sat down by the fire to think the matter over.

A thousand little circumstances unnoticed at the time of their occurrence started up to corroborate the dreadful suspicion which had flashed upon her mind; and she was wringing her hands, metaphorically, over the miserable fate to which her poor friend was condemned, when the door opened, and a troop of bridesmaids were ushered in by Lucinda.

After exchanging a few sentences with Laura, they all followed her with gay words and laughter to offer their greetings to the bride, who still sat just as Laura had left her a few minutes before.

"She is asleep," whispered the first one who approached; and the rest moved softly, and spoke in low tones as they gathered around the chair.

"How lovely she looks!"

"Beautiful!"

"Exquisite!"

"Too pale!"

"Oh, she will have color when she becomes excited!"

Suddenly a silence fell over the circle—the silence of unconscious awe. She was so still. They looked at each other in surprise; then a chill doubt and terror came into their eyes, and they stood paralyzed.

It was at this moment that Lucinda approached the group, and, struck by the expression of all the faces before her, she pressed forward, as with an instinct of what was to come, gazed for an instant with starting eyes, then seized one of the white hands that hung loosely over the arm of the chair. A touch was sufficient. She fell on her knees before the motionless form, with a loud, piercing shriek that rang through the whole house, smote fearfully on the ears of the wedding-guests assembled in the drawing-room beneath, and, in the contagious panic of horror, was taken up and echoed by every one of the circle of girls around.

CHAPTER III.

Emily Blount had watched the sun rise that morning of her wedding-day in golden splendor; but clouds gathered at early noon, and the same sun sank to his rest in gloom and darkness. When the next day dawned there seemed a shadow over the heavens as deep as the pall of grief that had fallen on the house so suddenly changed from a house of joy to a house of mourning. The sky was one sombre gray; the air was still and damp. People who professed to understand the weather said that a heavy winter storm was coming on, which would last for days. There were speculations whether Emily Blount's funeral would not, or ought not, to take place that afternoon, as the weather was so threatening, the cemetery was a mile from town, and the road to it a desperately bad one after a rain. Everybody who entertained any interest on the subject—all the friends and acquaintances of the Blounts, that is to say—looked anxiously in the morning paper to see if there was a notice, but none appeared; and it was generally understood during the course of the morning that the funeral was appointed for the following day. About noon, however, there was a burial-paper carried round: the funeral would take place at three o'clock P. M. It soon transpired, further, that Mr. Blount had with difficulty been in-

duced to consent to this change of arrangement, on the representations of the physicians attending his wife, that, unless the body of her daughter was removed from the house very soon, they could not answer for her sanity, so violent was her grief and her remorse.

"No wonder Mrs. Blount feels remorse!" said Laura Ashby, as her brother sat down beside her in the carriage, to go to the funeral. "She is just as much Emily's murderer as if she had taken a knife and cut her throat!"

Then, with all the eloquence of grief and indignation, Laura proceeded to relate to her brother (who had returned home only two days previously, after a long absence, and consequently was not informed in the matter of the social gossip of J—) the whole history of the "match" over which Mrs. Blount had made so much rejoicing, and which had ended so tragically.

"O Duncan! if you had seen her smile, her face, as she looked up at me just before—"

The girl paused—her voice choked in tears.

"And she died of disease of the heart, it is thought?" asked Duncan, who was a physician, and naturally felt an interest in the subject of so unusual and sudden a death, but had had no opportunity of speaking to his sister about it before, as she had not been at home from the time of Emily's death until she returned half an hour before, to change her dress for the funeral.

"Of course it was disease of the heart," she answered. "The doctors said so—and what else could it have been? They were trying every thing to recover her yesterday morning; for the doctors thought at first that it might be merely a fainting-fit. But I knew better. I knew the instant I looked at her that she was dead! She was just as cold and rigid then—and it had not been ten minutes since she was speaking to me—just as cold and rigid as she is now. I want you to see her, Duncan; she looks so lovely!"

The carriage stopped at this moment. They alighted, and, entering the house, Laura led the way at once into the back drawing-room, where the body of Emily Blount was lying. It was before the days of burial-cases, and the top of the coffin had not yet been put on; the full-length figure was visible, in all the mocking glory of her bridal array.

"How beautiful!" was Duncan Ashby's first thought, as his eye rested on it; and then, with a sudden, sharp pain that surprised himself, he remembered a single line of poetry he had lately seen quoted in some novel he had been reading:

"Death holds not long his fairest guest unchanged."

The young man had been studying disease and death in all their numberless forms, in the hospitals of Paris, until, like too many of his profession, he had come to practically regard the human body simply as a curious piece of mechanism animated by the vital principle. But he could not look at the form before him in this cold, abstract manner. He could only gaze on it as a vision of beauty such as he had never beheld before. There was not the faintest shade of death's livid hue on the pure whiteness of the face; no sinking or sharpness of feature; there was, even, none of that peculiar expression around the lips, and in the fall of the eyelashes upon the cheek, which is the most invariable signet set by Death upon his victims. And yet it did not look like life, either. In both form and face there was a rigidity resembling marble more than flesh; and the complexion was unnaturally tintless; bloodlessly transparent as Parian. It seemed a thing that belonged neither to death nor to life—but, rather, to the realm of the beautiful in art; like

"Some bright creation of the Grecian chisel:
As cold, as pale, as passionless, as perfect."

How long Duncan Ashby remained in rapt contemplation of that lovely mould of clay, he could not have told. Indeed, he afterward had a very indistinct recollection of every thing that occurred during the following two hours. That double consciousness which often enables us to acquit ourselves creditably in word and manner, while our thoughts are far away from time and place, must have befriended him; for, notwithstanding that a very grave conflict was going on in his mind, no outward token betrayed it.

Though the hour was barely that of sunset when the long line of carriages that had followed Emily Blount's funeral left the cemetery gate to return to town, the sky was so overcast that dusk had already fallen; and when Duncan Ashby and his sister arrived at home, it was quite dark. Dinner had been

kept waiting for them, and to Duncan's satisfaction was served immediately. Laura, excusing herself on the plea of a bad headache, retired at once to her own room; and Mr. Ashby, *père*, though he had already dined, complacently sat down to keep his son company. He was rather shocked by the hasty manner in which Duncan dispatched the business. He ate—for he was hungry and needed his dinner—but he ate like a hungry man who was in a great hurry; and on rising from table surprised Mr. Ashby by leaving him for the evening. He had an engagement, he said, which would probably detain him out late; and so he would wish his father good-night before going.

A thin, drizzling rain had set in half an hour before, and had been increasing steadily in violence ever since; and consequently it was through a pelting shower that Duncan made his way to the house of Dr. Boyd, Mr. Blount's family physician. It chanced that the doctor, who was a widower, and kept whatever hours suited his convenience of the moment, having dined before going to the funeral, was just enjoying a substantial supper, in all the ease and comfort of dressing-gown and slippers. Duncan's ring at the door startled him to the indulgence in one or two expletives rather more emphatic than reverent, for he apprehended that it might be a professional call; and he felt irritated at the bare thought of having to leave his comfortable fireside—to say nothing of the whiskey-punch which was at that moment in process of brewing by his trusty housekeeper—and brave the inclement weather without. But, on learning that it was a visitor instead of a call, he ordered the servant to show the young man in, and rose with the greatest cordiality to welcome him.

The first salutations over, Duncan, after declining supper, as he had just risen from dinner, proceeded at once to the business which had brought him through the rain and the night.

"Doctor," he said, with a smile, "do you know a sane man when you see him?"

The doctor's eyes opened wide in astonishment. "What do you mean?" he inquired.

"Just put your finger on my pulse, will you," said Duncan, extending his wrist—"and look me straight in the eyes. Well, are they the pulse and the eye of health, bodily and mental?"

"What do you mean?" asked the doctor again.

"I have come to you on an errand which I am afraid you will consider so insane that, before telling you what it is, I think it well to take the precautionary measure of convincing you that I am *compos mentis*."

"We'll say that I am convinced, then. Go on," said the doctor, whose curiosity was considerably excited.

"In a word, I doubt if the young lady who was buried this afternoon, is dead; and I have come to ask you to go with me, without loss of time, and examine whether my suspicion is correct."

"What!" cried the doctor, as soon as he recovered himself sufficiently to speak, his breath having been quite taken away by Duncan's astounding assertion and proposal. "What!"

Duncan repeated, a little more at length, what he had said before.

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed the doctor, "what has put such an idea into your head?"

"It is not an idea, but a doubt, that I entertain—a faint doubt, I will say—but, a doubt. And it seems to me an imperative duty to clear it up in time."

"Unquestionably," answered the doctor. "What are your grounds for this doubt?"

Duncan proceeded to explain, in technical phrase, certain slight appearances and indications which he had observed, without at the time attaching much importance to them—but which gradually acquired more and more weight in his estimation, until he finally resolved, while returning from the funeral, to lay them before Dr. Boyd, and entreat his assistance in the investigation which he himself was resolved to make.

"But why the d—d—!" said the doctor, impatiently, "didn't you speak at once? You thought the girl was alive, and yet said not a word against her being buried! I'll be d—d if that looks as if you were *compos mentis*!"

"Well, in the first place, as I told you, these symptoms, or indications, did not strike me very forcibly at the time that I observed them. You must be aware, doctor, that there is such a thing as *dormant perceptions*. I am afraid that I must acknowledge that, so long as I was looking at the body itself, I was con-

scious of nothing but its wonderful beauty. It was afterward, as I was looking at the picture it left on my memory, that the doubt came like a flash to my mind, 'Is not this a cataleptic trance?'"

Dr. Boyd looked thoughtful; and then he asked various questions, all of which Duncan answered readily.

"I wish to Heaven," he said, finally, "that you had spoken in time to save all this trouble, or else that your 'dormant perceptions' had remained dormant until to-morrow morning! A pretty task this is that you've set yourself and me, to go diving into a vault on a business of this sort, at night—and such a night! Well, how do you propose to proceed in the affair?" he concluded, resignedly.

"I leave that for you to decide," answered Duncan. "If you agree with me in thinking that, slight as my doubt is, it justifies, nay, demands an investigation, you can best decide what is to be done."

The doctor wrinkled his forehead, and spent some minutes in profound cogitation. Then he rose and rang the bell once—and, after an interval of a few seconds, rang it again, twice.

"Bring round the barouche, Tony," he said to the man-servant who first appeared—and who, with a not well-pleased "Yes, sir," disappeared as a woman-servant entered. "Clarinda," said the doctor—"ah, you've brought the punch—just in good time.—Take a glass, Duncan!—Clarinda, I am going out, and may bring back with me, in half an hour or a little longer, a— a sick person. Have a room ready—with a good fire and a warm bed, and have plenty of hot water and hot bricks on hand, so as to be ready for any emergency. And, hark you! don't be scared at any thing you may see when I return. Bring my boots, coat, and overcoat."

With a heart-felt sigh, he put off his dressing-gown and slippers, induced the out-door costume, and, after paying his respects to the punch, he and Duncan sallied forth. They found the barouche and Tony waiting. The latter, to his great joy, having been informed that his attendance was not required, they entered the carriage and drove off at a pace which soon brought them to the door of the small house near the cemetery, which was occupied by the sexton who had charge of the place. By a considerable expenditure of time, patience, and argument, this personage

was convinced that their errand to Mr. Blount's family vault was not of an illegitimate and nefarious nature. It took all the weight of Dr. Boyd's character to reassure the natural distrust with which the sexton regarded the medical profession in connection with burial-grounds. Finally, however, his scruples were satisfied—more particularly as he was invited to inspect their proceedings with his own eyes—and, taking his dark lantern in one hand, and his keys in the other, he preceded the two gentlemen along the winding gravel-walk which led to their point of destination. In a few minutes they found themselves within the vault.

It was a dank, dismal place, ill ventilated, and consequently very damp; paved and walled with brick, and surrounded on three sides by a shelf of about two feet in width, on which was deposited half a score or so of coffins, some of which had mouldered almost to dust, while others were perfectly sound apparently, though all but the one which had been so recently deposited were mouldy and mildewed. Having lighted the candles which they had brought, and so disposed them as to throw a good light over their further proceedings, they, with the assistance of the sexton, lifted the coffin which they came to inspect from the shelf to the floor. The lid was unscrewed, and, after exchanging one glance, they lifted it from the shell.

There was no change in the appearance of the body. Dr. Boyd touched the brow, the hands; drew forth a pocket-mirror, and, holding it before the nostrils, examined carefully to see whether the glass was dimmed. Then he shook his head.

"We have our labor for our pains," he said, in a low tone. "Still I am glad we came. After you had once put that ugly thought of burying alive into my head, I could not have rested until I convinced myself, by ocular demonstration, that there was no danger of such a thing. I suppose you are satisfied now? I am, and I think we had better close the coffin and go."

"Stop a moment," said Duncan. "I will be satisfied, doctor, with two more tests. Try the first yourself; put your hand under the armpits, and see if there is the same chill there as here." He pointed to the brow.

Dr. Boyd did as requested. With some

difficulty he insinuated his fingers between the arm and the chest, on the outside of the clothing. His face changed a little. He thought or he imagined that there was not that penetrating chill of death here. To decide the point, he opened his penknife, and, with a hand that trembled slightly, he inserted the blade in the edge of the dress at the throat, and cut through the lace, silk, and linen, that enveloped the bust. He placed his hand first over the heart, waited patiently, examined closely, and again shook his head.

"The armpits!" said Duncan.

The doctor pushed his hand slowly along, finally paused and started; then, with almost a bound, he exclaimed, "By Heaven, you are right! there is warmth—she is not dead!"

"Now, see here," said Duncan. He lifted

her right hand, straightening the elbow, and putting the fingers into the position of pointing at the other side of the vault; after which he withdrew his hold of it, and it remained precisely as he had placed it.

"Catalepsy!" said Dr. Boyd. "God bless you—you have saved her!"

Yes, she was saved, but not without much suffering. For months she labored under the disease by which she had been so suddenly attacked, and which had so nearly caused to her the horrible fate from which Duncan Ashby's "doubt" rescued her. Skill and time conquered it eventually, however; and, when health again bloomed in her cheek, a second wedding-day dawned for her. And this time Mr. Madison was not the bridegroom.

THE END.

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