



THE  
DEERINGS OF MEDBURY.

BY  
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AUTHOR OF "THE HOLLANDS," "MILLS OF TUXBURY," ETC.

"I count that Heaven itself is only work  
To a surer issue."  
— MRS. BROWNING.

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## THE DEERINGS OF MEDBURY.



### CHAPTER I.

It was a wonderful day for the Deerings of Medbury. That long, long road of fortune, which had been such a rough, scrambling, hand-to-hand fight with them, had turned at last of a sudden, and the outlook made them a little dizzy and bewildered; much as one is apt to be, climbing up a mountain side, the path rough, stony, gullied with freshets, shut in by scrub oak, and white birch, and mountain pines, when you turn suddenly and find yourself on the summit.

There it is; the view which has been waiting for you since the dawn of creation, — the vast, green spaces of woodlands, cool, sunny valleys, like dimples in the landscape, the silver cordage of the streams, the reaches of still, moist meadows. Looking out on all these, you draw a deep breath full of delicious pleasure, yet a little scared. So did the Deerings.

Yet, when you come down to the plain facts, the plum which had fallen into the family lap seemed of no astonishing size or sweetness, for it was simply the engagement

of the eldest daughter; and in a country where, according to Jefferson, "all men are born free and equal," and princes and nobles in disguise cannot fall in love with charming dairy-maids and shepherdesses, and end with setting them in palaces and castles, and making them queens and duchesses, the engagement of a well-bred, intelligent, lady-like, and very pretty young woman, to a man not more than half-a-dozen years her senior had no savor of the miraculous, — a man, too, of whom the most that could honestly be said would hardly amount to more than that he was rich, or in a fair way to be so; intelligent, good-natured, and moderately good-looking, — no very dazzling summary, as you see, of personal qualities for a young New Englander, especially for one who had had an unusually fair start at the beginning.

Yet I doubt whether any peasant-damsel, whose fair face shines down on us, embalmed in the sweet ballads and madrigals of mediæval times, ever felt her heart swell with a prouder joy over the wooing of her noble lover, or a keener sense of the great honor that had fallen to her, than did Agnes Deering on the morning when, full of blushes and tremors, she confided the fact to her family in the little sitting-room after breakfast.

It took them all thoroughly by surprise, too, for Agnes had been absent from home during the last three or four months, teaching a district school, on a low salary, a few miles from Medbury.

It was not precisely a case of love at first sight, yet it came as near this as most novels do which are founded on fact.

Leander Sullivan had seen Agnes Deering at church and at singing-school several times, and her face had always pleased him. Every man, I suppose, has his favorite type; and this girl's was young Sullivan's, because it was totally unlike his own, perhaps.

It happened just at this time that the young man had some marsh lands in process of draining in the township where Agnes was teaching. This took him out often to the house of a general overseer of the business, who happened to reside opposite to the boarding-place of the young teacher.

She was at this overseer's one afternoon, when young Sullivan came in. A pretty woman may at times be a beautiful one. A sudden dye of blushes, a ribbon at her throat, a knotting of hair, will sometimes work wonders. For some occult cause, Agnes Deering had never looked better than she did on this especial afternoon. Perhaps her surroundings had something to do with her appearance, too, for a homely, old-fashioned country-house and people made a stronger background of contrast with Agnes' lady-like appearance and manner. They set her, unconsciously to herself, more at her ease than she would have been among the conventionalisms of Medbury.

The two had a long chat together; and when his overseer appeared on the ground at last, young Sullivan went away quite fascinated with Miss Deering.

The marsh-lands took him out of town very often that summer; and it went hard with him if he did not manage to see the young teacher's graceful figure, and get at

least a bow and a smile, if not a few words, before he returned.

He soon learned the school hours, and contrived to waylay the young lady several times on her coming home at night, and both seemed to glide with marvellous smoothness into animated conversation.

Of course, there is no lack of truth in the homely old distich about

"Many a slip  
"Twixt cup and lip."

Still a great point is made towards a final climax, when a woman has once, consciously or unconsciously, gained a strong foothold in a man's thought and interest.

The more young Sullivan saw of Agnes Deering, the more he reflected about her when absent; and at last, from meetings on the roadside, and brief chats at the gate, he grew, whenever business brought him out, to stopping at the house where she resided, and he brought her flowers, a rare bouquet or two from his sister's conservatory. Agnes had occasionally passed by it, stopping to gaze at the beautiful flowers behind the glass, and fancying it must be much like dwelling in Paradise to live amidst all that luxury and loveliness.

The young man also brought the teacher books, poems, and volumes which he happened to hear her say she fancied; and, last of all, he had invited her two or three times to take a short drive with him.

Of course, Miss Deering had her flurries and flutterings. She was a young woman of native good sense, and by no means the typical, modern heroine who figures

so charmingly in novels, and who is so blissfully oblivious of the most salient proofs of a man's interest in her, until the final denouement completely overwhelms her with blushing confusion.

But Agnes Deering did not feel assured that young Sullivan's attentions amounted to anything more than pleasant friendliness on his part. She was a little afraid of him, and the consciousness of his wealth, in contrast with her poverty, although it slipped into the background when she was under the magnetism of his presence, was sure to return in painful force with his absence.

There was a certain native dignity in the girl's manner, partly the result of circumstances, partly that of innate self-respect, which did not make any lover-like demonstrations easy on the man's part; indeed, this good-natured Leander Sullivan was less his free, careless, natural self in the presence of this woman than in that of any other.

Then Agnes Deering had an uncomfortable feeling, at times, that the young man was trying to flirt with her. The thought brought such a sting of pain and self-humiliation, that she resolved not to see him if he should call again; but somehow Miss Deering never found quite the courage to put her resolution into practice. In her visits home, too, the girl wanted to enlighten her people respecting the young man's calls; but when it came to the point she could not make them a matter of jest, as she could any other young man's attentions, and she was too proud to treat the matter seriously, so she kept her secret. It was like a woman.

Then, these visits home seemed to bring out with painful



sharpness the contrasts in the positions of the Deerings and Sullivans, contrasts which, after all, money would have bridged over smoothly.

Leander Sullivan was regarded as the best matrimonial prize in Medbury; the marriageable young men of that place, as in most New England towns, being in alarming minority.

Miss Deering had had her admirers, of course, dapper, commonplace men, who failed to vitally interest a woman of more than ordinary intelligence and native refinement. She was conscious that she was pretty, and glad of it, still she was hardly vain; her good looks, thus far, had served her little purpose, and she was twenty-five already.

Finding that she could not talk about Leander Sullivan as she could about anybody else, Agnes was obliged to content herself with relating to her family the accidental interview she had with the young man at his overseer's, and how agreeable and natural he was, — no airs, nor consciousness of any Sullivan superiority about him.

Poor Mrs. Deering was weak enough to remember that now Agnes would be on speaking terms with a Sullivan if the two chanced to meet in public, and Medbury folks were apt to take note of such things; but Mrs. Deering was too sensible a woman to repeat such a thought to her daughters, which all mothers might not have been.

On the day that Agnes' school closed, Leander Sullivan came out and invited her to drive. Agnes had promised herself that she never would accept another of these invitations; but this was to be the last one, smothering

down a pain, which was like a knife's, with the thought. The temptation proved too strong, and she went.

All this time that sturdy self-respect, which the girl inherited with her blood, and which had tided the Deerings over many a heavy sea, prevented her from admitting, to her own heart even, that she felt any especial interest in Leander Sullivan. But, for all that, this summer had brought Miss Deering the keenest joy and the sharpest pain of her life. She was full of moods and unrest. She had lost self-poise, was gay sometimes, miserable at others, but altogether prettier, and with a sparkle and brilliancy in her talk and manner which made her more attractive than ever.

Leander Sullivan had no settled purpose beyond seeing Agnes, when they started out on the drive; but he was an impulsive fellow, and had always been used to having his own way, and Agnes was so secretly at strife with herself, that she was half reckless that afternoon, overflowing with jest and mirth, her face full of a bright defiance, that would have excited some grave doubts in any one who knew her and womankind tolerably well. But to Leander Sullivan she was simply more charming than ever; the one woman sitting by his side, whom, out of the whole world, his heart craved to possess, and love and cherish for his very own.

There was a pause in the talk, and the fellow made a dreadfully bungling matter of it. A man is apt to when he feels he puts his whole life at stake in a few words.

"Miss Deering," he said, "I don't want to tell you so, but I can't help it. The fact is, I'm in love with

you!" and then he sat still, wondering the heavens didn't fall, and cursing himself for a thundering fool.

"Mr. Sullivan!" exclaimed Agnes, turning cold all over, and for her life the poor girl could not get any further.

But the fright and amazement in her voice brought Leander to his wits again. He turned and faced the girl, although he felt that act required a greater effort than walking up square into the cannon's mouth, and — Well, it seems sacrilegious, after all, for you and me to go over it. It is their own love's holy ground. We have no right there.

As for Agnes Deering, she returned to her home at Medbury the next day. It made even her own great joy sweeter to think of the surprise and delight she was carrying to her family; but, once in their presence, the very weight and depth of her happiness held back the words from her lips. She was half afraid to touch on it, and actually went to bed, leaving everybody as much in the dark as ever.

But the next morning, after breakfast, it came out. Her father was just about starting for his work, and the little ten-year-old house-maid, who could wash dishes and wait on the door, and whose services the Deerings could ill afford to maintain, although they stretched the point hard, for gentility's sake, had left the room, when Agnes burst out with, "Father, don't go yet; I've something to tell you."

Marcia, the next sister, and Hollis, the youngest, looked up in surprise.

"I hope it's nothing bad, daughter?" said the mother, with a little anxiety in her tone, the natural habit of her voice nowadays.

"Oh, no, mamma; I think it will give you a profound surprise, but beyond that a greater pleasure."

Agnes spoke now with some feeling in her tones, which struck them all.

"Why, what is it? Don't keep us waiting, Agnes," said more than one voice.

"Last night Leander Sullivan took me to drive, and he asked me if I would be his wife; and I promised him I would. O papa! mamma! girls!" — voice and face suddenly all breaking up, — "how shall I tell you? Won't you give me joy?"

To attempt a description of what followed would be hopeless. There was a dead silence; they sat staring at her and each other, in doubt whether the girl had not gone suddenly distraught, and Agnes, seeing that in their faces, broke out again: "It's the solemn truth. God knows it, and Leander."

At last the tongues were loosed, and such a storm of exclamations and questions as followed! Agnes had the whole story to go over with now.

It was the crowning moment of her life; she would never forget it, sitting there in the midst of the dear, eager faces, full of amazement and joy, and going over the story of her betrothal.

There the family sit, — five of them, "all told," — father, mother, and three girls; and thus far their rôle

in the drama of life has been set down to them,—a very bitter one,—Pride and Poverty!

Behind this lies usually some weakness or wrong, far oftener than inevitable misfortune. In this case, the blame or fate lies at the door of the head of the family. He is one of those men who seem to have a mysterious affinity for bad luck. He came of good stock at the start, with an inheritance that in thrifty hands would have laid the foundations of an ample fortune. But give this man a fee simple of the Indies, and it would all have slipped through his fingers in visionary speculations.

The best that Wallace Deering could do for himself was to fall into some regular business-routine, planned by shrewder heads, where he would carry himself faithfully and respectably. He had, for half a score of years, occupied a situation as clerk and book-keeper in a small manufacturing establishment. He received a salary which involved all sorts of domestic shifts and economies on the part of the family, and brought life down to the daily solving of the one hard, ever-present problem,—how to make both ends meet.

You can imagine something of the sensation which Agnes Deering's announcement created in the family heart. They all, father, mother, and sisters, went up to her and kissed her with something of the feeling with which in ancient times they rendered homage to one of their household, exalted suddenly to a new rank, as the betrothed of prince or noble. It was evident that from henceforth Agnes was to be the grand lady of the family, and it was amusing to hear these people talk — touching, too.

"I think I've had my reward at last," said poor Mrs. Deering, with eyes full of pride and tenderness on her first-born. "The Lord has seen how hard and faithfully I've struggled to bring up my family properly and respectably."

Propriety and respectability were parts of this woman's creed, you saw.

"Why, Angie," broke in Hollis, in her quaint, down-right way, "I think you must be better-looking than we ever fancied, to have Leander Sullivan fall in love with you. Perhaps you are a beauty, after all, and we never found it out!" and she looked at her sister curiously, with wide, intent, brown eyes.

Everybody laughed; but then a very poor joke would have set the Deerings laughing that morning, or crying either.

"I always thought, mother, Agnes was more like what you used to be than either of the others," said Mr. Deering, rubbing his hands with pleased briskness.

A gratified smile glowed in the mother's worn face.

She looked at her husband, a tall, thin man, with sparse, grizzled hair and beard, in a suit of rusty black. She did not see him as he was now, for the years, more than a quarter of a century of them, had slipped away. She was a young maiden, as Agnes was now, in the dew and blossoming of her first love, looking off with careless, confident hope and pride to her future.

Most sorely had the years disappointed Mrs. Deering. Medbury had formed the stage of her life; and it was an ambitious little town, with its petty social cliques and

castes, almost as absolute in their way as the Brahmins.

Mrs. Deering had had a terrible struggle to maintain what she regarded as a decent foothold among her friends and neighbors, on very inadequate means. She had been worn, fretted, almost crushed at times in the strife. She had her little history of secret slights and neglects, which had gone to the very quick. Do not smile over this, as though it were hardly above the warfare of some colony of ants. It was all real to Mrs. Deering. She was a mother, and had her ambitions for her daughters. She was a woman, and had her creeds and grooves, all of which, it is true, a broad, finely tempered nature would have regarded with lofty indifference; but Mrs. Deering was only a very commonplace, well-meaning, average woman.

All that morning there was a buzz of tongues. The father was at last obliged to tear himself away to business most reluctantly, and the women had it to themselves.

"To think you've kept it all this time to yourself, Agnes Deering!" said Marcia, in a half-injured tone. "How we should have felt had we known! Why didn't you tell us?"

"Because I was not sure it would ever amount to anything; and then, though I wanted to, I found I couldn't talk about it."

"I understand all about that, my dear," interposed the girl's mother, with another of the proud, tender glances, of which Agnes had been the object all this morning.

"But what will folks say when the thing actually

comes out? That's what I'm thinking," continued Marcia. "All Medbury will be alive with it. Our Agnes actually engaged to Leander Sullivan! You know that he is the greatest match in town. And just think, mamma, you will be the mother of Mrs. Leander Sullivan! Doesn't that sound well? And our Agnes here will have her elegant home, and her handsome carriage, and live in style —"

"Oh, do stop, Marcia, do!" screamed Agnes, her face scarlet as she buried it in her hands.

Marcia is a slender, lady-like girl, with a general resemblance to her mother and elder sister. She has a fair complexion, set off with peachy bloom, and bright eyes. She will never startle one with any marked originality of thought or feeling, but will keep herself in her own orbit, that of traditions and commonplaces; decencies and gentilities being her creed also, as her life will always be in the surfaces of things.

Hollis speaks again. She is two years younger than Marcia, and as unlike either sister as possible. Where she came on her brown skin, her mother cannot imagine; on her brown eyes, too, with their large, bright, intent look. She is not so pretty as her two elder sisters; and yet, once in a while, something will come into her face, exalting and irradiating it out of its ordinary mood, and then somebody, seeing it, will call Hollis Deering beautiful, and others will search her face for some hidden meaning and magnetism there, and perhaps they will find it, but more likely not.

There is a kind of honest downrightness in the girl,

which has always given her mother a good deal of perplexity. Hollis is as odd as her name, Mrs. Deering thinks sometimes, and looks anxiously at the girl, in doubt what sort of a woman she is going to make; whether she is not the speckled sheep of the family.

The sex of her youngest daughter was a grievous disappointment to Mrs. Deering. She had set her heart on a son, who was to bear her own name, and redeem, sooner or later, the family fortunes; but fate, with one fell stroke, swept away all those pretty vistas, only Mrs. Deering would not be worsted about her family name, and with a sigh she set it down on the head of her youngest daughter.

"How do you think Leander's family will feel about his choice?" asked Hollis, in her blunt, positive way of getting at facts.

There was a little uncomfortable silence.

"He has a right to his own preferences, and people always make the best of those things," said the mother, choosing to regard from a general stand-point the particular fact, which affected them all so closely.

Agnes flushed up with some secret pain.

"Of course, his family would prefer that Leander had chosen a wealthy wife," she said; "but I am sure it will make no difference with him. I doubt if he has once thought of it."

"Of course," said Hollis, walking up and down the room in her rapid, positive way, which had little of Marcia's swinging grace, "his family, being the people they are, will be anything but gratified with his choice, — you

must make up your mind to that, Agnes. When he says to them, as he will, for he has proved himself a man true enough, and strong enough to say it, — 'I have not chosen Agnes Deering for my wife, because of her riches, or her position, but because she was the woman after my own heart; because of her own self; because she is good and fair and lovely in my eyes, above all living women,' — when he says this to them they will think he is a fool, as men always are when they have fallen in love with a woman.

"But Leander Sullivan will say this from his heart, Agnes, and all the life to come you will remember that; and I think it will be more to you than the fact that he is a rich man, and that he will place you in a new social position, and surround you with elegance; and the sweetest thought in all your future happiness must be, — 'He sought me, and loved me only for the woman I was, and for what I could be to him.'"

Sometimes this brown, shy Hollis flashed out in sudden warmth and eloquence, which shook the family heart to its centre, lifting it out of its warping pettinesses and worries, and small ambitions, into a clearer, loftier mood.

In prettiness, in grace, in bright, foamy, effervescent talk, Marcia quite put her younger sister to shame; but when Hollis was aroused, her words went down into immortal deeps of truth and feeling, where Marcia's shrank back like cowered, affrighted things, not daring to follow her.

Hollis Deering's words struck now to the quick, not

alone of the newly betrothed maiden, but of all the others. "Dear Hollis, you are right," Agnes said, her voice choking through her tears. "That one thought will be sweeter than riches or splendor, and if these should go, I should still have the other, the best. I see now how unutterably good God has been to me!"

And then these four women did, after the manner of women, — all cried together, — and after that, Marcia did not talk much of the mere good fortune, of the position, and the splendor that had fallen to Agnes. It seemed somehow to slip away into the background, where it would be a sort of sacrilege to follow, — for that morning, at least.

## CHAPTER II.

"MOTHER," said Mrs. Hester Kittredge, coming into Mrs. Sullivan's room, her hat on, and her India shawl dragging along the carpet, "I believe our Leander has been making a fool of himself."

"What do you mean, Hester?" asked the elder lady, laying down her sewing, and removing her glasses, which Mrs. Sullivan, being a remarkably well-looking and well-preserved matron, had only begun to use at intervals.

"Just what I say, and I am seriously annoyed and alarmed. The fellow is actually smitten, I fear."

"Oh, nonsense, Hester!" in a tone of relief. "Is that all? I thought you knew Leander too well to be startled by any buzz of Medbury gossip. If he looks at a girl, somebody's sure to fancy he has 'fallen in love' with her."

"But, mother, it isn't best to be too secure. You never can be certain what tack a man's fancy may take; and I hardly made a call this afternoon, where there was not some allusion to Mr. Sullivan's attentions to Agnes Deering. I paid no regard to it at first, but when I found he was really in the habit of calling at the house, nobody knows how often, and that they had been seen within the last week riding out twice together, why, I



began to feel it was high time to look into the matter."

"Deering — Deering!" said the mother, in a half-convinced, half-incredulous tone, — "I don't seem to remember the name."

"Of course you don't. It doesn't belong to anybody who visits in our set. Indeed, these people have no position, for they're poor as church mice — and respectable, of course; but there is an end of them. The father, it seems, is a book-keeper, on some starvation salary, in Maxwell's grain-house. Can't you remember, when we have driven out on Birch Avenue, a little straw-colored cottage, that stands back from the road, and a door-yard full of flowers and vines; just the sort of house which makes me think of genteel beggary? Well, these Deerings live there."

"I think I recall the house," said Mrs. Sullivan, reflectively.

"This Agnes, it appears, is the eldest daughter. I've met her occasionally, I think, at public places, fairs and concerts, etc. A pretty, presentable girl enough; but, then, what's that? We don't want the boy to marry her."

"Of course not," answered the mother, decidedly enough. "But I cannot think that Leander has ever seriously thought of such a thing. Still, it may be time, as you say, to look into the matter. Such things are best nipped in the bud."

"Of course they are; and you know Leander is stubborn as a mule, and once get him deeply interested in a

woman, no matter what she was, or her family, there would be no moving him."

"That's very true, Hester," answered the elder lady.

"I've made up my mind to break the ice at once with him, and find out if there's danger ahead," added Mrs. Kittredge. She was a woman of energy, a woman to do in a certain sphere just what she said she would. You saw that in her face, felt it in her tones even. She was a handsome, stylish woman too; one who attracted attention anywhere by her bearing, her grace, her elegance. She was younger than her brother, having only been married three years. People said Hester Sullivan had made a splendid match when she married Ambrose Kittredge, the wealthiest and most influential man in the ambitious little town of Medbury. He was president of the bank, and of the slate-mines a dozen miles out of town, and a large stockholder in the iron-works, and a heavy real-estate dealer into the bargain. His age considerably doubled his wife's, but he looked like a man hardly past his prime, and he had the business genius. On whatever thing Ambrose Kittredge brought his clear intellect, his shrewd foresight, to bear, that thing was certain to prosper. The world needs just such people. It would be far better off if it had more of these practical brains; but the trouble is, people do not use the brains they are started with, and then inveigh against God, man, fate, everything but their own selves, where the fault lies.

The Kittredges lived in the substantial elegance their wealth and position demanded. In the midst of hand-

some grounds, just in the suburbs of Medbury, stood the large stone house, flanked with towers at either end; if it was somewhat ambitious, it was solid, too, like everything about Ambrose Kittredge. Inside, everything was in exquisite taste; not ostentatious; the mistress of the house was too refined for anything of that sort, and took a genuine delight in her pictures and conservatory, quite outside of their market value.

The Sullivans had long before been the wealthiest family in Medbury; and, although of late years their prosperity had suffered some decadence, their position was a substantial fact, and they had always maintained it. Since Hester's marriage, the old home had been broken up, the mother and brother residing with her. Both of the ladies doted on Leander, as was natural, he being the only son and brother, and one, on the whole, to uphold the family pride and honor.

He was social, and fond of ladies' society, and his relatives had taken it for granted that his marriage, if the fellow ever really came to it, would be one to gratify the family ambition.

Mrs. Kittredge, however, had seriously taken the alarm from all which she had heard that afternoon, and succeeded in more or less infecting her mother with her own fears respecting Leander's attentions to Miss Deering. But the subject of their conversation himself suddenly startled the ladies by entering the room.

"Why, Leander, what has brought you home so early to-day?" inquired Mrs. Kittredge.

"Got through business promptly, that's all. Been out driving, Hester?"

"Yes," making a straight path to the subject on her mind; "and I heard some strange stories about you, young man, before I returned."

Leander was used to his elegant sister's imperious manner, and could retort on occasion, though he was naturally good-natured.

"What did you hear about me, pray?"

"Enough to be sincerely desirous you would be a little more careful, Leander Sullivan, for your family's sake, what company you keep, and not get your name mixed up with all sorts of people."

In an instant Leander's suspicions were awake. He was a brave fellow enough; but, if the truth must be told, he had been secretly dreading the moment when he must avow to his family what manner of woman he had chosen for his wife. He knew perfectly well that his selection would not gratify their pride and ambition; and though he was prepared to brave anything for his love's sake, still Leander Sullivan would have been a worse son and brother than he was, not to feel a keen regret that his choice of a wife would be a sharp disappointment to the mother and the sister who idolized him.

He flushed now up to the roots of his sandy hair; but the time had come, and Leander Sullivan was man enough to meet it.

"I have never kept any company, or mixed up my name with, people who would disgrace my family. I

shall not be likely to do it now," he said, quietly enough, but with some dignity not exactly his habit.

The reply was not assuring. Mrs. Sullivan entered the lists now.

"But, Leander, I understand precisely what Hester means; and really she has reason to be annoyed."

"At what, mother?" drawing himself up as he stood by the mantel, and fingering one of the vases a little nervously.

"It appears you have been visiting some young lady, and taking her out to drive frequently of late."

"Of course you know whom I mean," broke in Mrs. Kittredge. "That Agnes Deering!"

"What do you know of her?" putting down the vase, and standing still.

"Not much. She's good enough in her way, no doubt; but her circle is an entirely different one from ours."

The flush had not died out in the young man's face, and his manner did not satisfy the ladies.

"I suppose there may be young women out of our circle who are quite as interesting, and worthy, and lovable as those in it."

"Very likely," said Mrs. Kittredge, with sufficient asperity, gathering her shawl about her graceful shoulders. "I do not dispute that point. Only, Leander, do be reasonable. You know that, socially, the position of such young women, whatever their virtues may be, is beneath yours, and that your attentions in such quarters only open the door to gossip, and, in the woman's case,

awaken hopes that you can never gratify. The whole thing is injudicious; and you are old enough, and ought to be wise enough, to see it, and carry yourself accordingly."

"Yes, my son," again interposed the mother. "Really, Hester is right."

"No, mother, Hester is wrong," speaking very quietly, and with a kind of slow resolvedness in his voice, quite at variance with himself. "I shall never awaken any hopes in Agnes Deering's case that I shall not fulfil to the utmost."

The ladies looked at each other in startled amazement.

"What do you mean, Leander?" cried Mrs. Kittredge. "Do come a little closer to the point."

"Well, I will, Hester. I mean simply that I asked Agnes Deering, three weeks ago, if she would be my wife, and she consented!"

Mrs. Kittredge sprang to her feet. "Good heavens!" she cried, in her consternation.

"Leander Sullivan!" exclaimed his mother; and neither lady could get any further for the moment.

Leander Sullivan felt braver, more of a man and of a hero, at the moment, than he had ever felt in his life before. He drew a deep breath or two. It seemed as though some weight rolled off his soul.

"I know that Agnes Deering will come to me without a dollar; I know that her family and her position are not such as will gratify your pride or ambition; but when it comes to the woman of my heart's love and choosing,

would you have me such a coward and monster as to weigh those things in the balance? Her sweetness, her truth, her goodness, are the things which drew me to love her; they will make a stronger and a better man of me, and for the rest, — what more can you ask? — is she not intelligent, graceful, beautiful, as ever woman can be?"

"Leander," interrupted Mrs. Kittredge, impatient and scornful, "you talk like a man in love, and the whole race are fools and madmen, and ought to wear a cap and bells when their time comes. I've seen this paragon, about whom your son raves after the fashion of lovers," — turning to her mother, — "and as for beauty, she is no more than a moderately good-looking girl; and for her intelligence, I presume she is fairly fitted to be what she is, — a village district school-teacher. Really, Leander Sullivan, I wish you joy in your choice selection of a Dulcinea!"

It was hard on Leander. For one moment the blaze in his eyes daunted the woman standing before him in her pride and beauty, and who, in her grief and anger, had probably gone a little farther than she intended.

It would certainly have been a relief to Leander Sullivan if he could have knocked her down, but she was a woman, and his sister.

To have his Agnes, whose face, he thought, must be in all eyes what it was in his own, sweet and radiant as an angel's, called only a moderately good-looking girl, and all the gifts and graces of a mind, he believed so fine and rare, flouted in that way!

But at that precise moment Mrs. Sullivan, who was



usually a very dignified and imposing matron burst into tears.

"To think that any woman should have caught my only son, the pride of my heart, in her toils!" she cried.

Just then Mr. Kittredge entered the room.

## CHAPTER III.

AMBROSE KITTREDGE, Esq., — it is a curious fact that the names of some men seem to require a title, or, at least, an appendage, significant of the weight and dignity of the owner, — Ambrose Kittredge, Esq., was a man of rather remarkable presence. You would have taken him at once for a representative of a certain order of men, — the solid and prosperous. A compact head and figure, with grizzled hair, with heavy beard and eyebrows, and a large breadth of well-shaped features, the man had a comfortable conviction of his own good looks, as he had of everything which belonged to Ambrose Kittredge.

The gentleman was really quite startled at the scene which presented itself on his entrance into the room, — his mother-in-law in tears, his wife pacing the room, her handsome face in a flush of angry excitement, and Leander, who perhaps formed, on the whole, the most thoroughly good-natured element of the family, drawn up rigidly by the mantel, his face livid and fierce with some feeling which had touched him to the quick, and roused his whole nature.

Scenes of this kind were something to which Mr. Kittredge was not used in his own household. It was too orderly and too well-bred to be strongly dramatic on slight occasions.

“Mother — Hester — Leander! what is to pay here?” inquired the gentleman, standing still, and turning from one to the other of those whom he addressed.

His wife answered, with a sort of deliberate sneer in her tones, which was particularly irritating, “It means, Mr. Kittredge, that your brother-in-law intends to honor the Sullivan family by bringing into it, as his wife, some obscure young woman of low breeding and barely respectable origin, whom his fancy has exalted into a Venus for beauty, and a paragon of all conceivable virtues and gifts.”

“I say it’s a lie!” broke out Leander, fairly beside himself, clenching his fists with rage; and for the second time he wished that Hester were a man, that he could knock her down.

For a second time, too, the proud woman quailed a little before the glare of his eyes. She looked at her husband, and, disagreeable as it was, he felt that he must come to the defence of his wife.

“Leander,” he said, “I think you forget it is your sister to whom you are talking in this fashion.”

“No, I don’t, Kittredge; but I should be a brute to stand here any longer and hear the woman whom I’ve asked to be my wife insulted in this fashion. So long as I’m a man I’ll defend her!”

There was a force in Leander’s remark not easily assailed. Baffled here, Mr. Kittredge turned to Mrs. Sullivan, who, dismayed at the strong feeling exhibited by her son and daughter, was actually wringing her hands.

“Mother,” said the gentleman, “this agitation only



does harm to everybody concerned. Will you try and command yourself, and give me a plain, succinct statement of the facts in the case?"

Appealed to, in this way, by that strong, practical common sense which always inhered in the talk and dealings of Ambrose Kittredge, Esq., and which had gone far to make his name and place in the world, Mrs. Sullivan, after a sob or two, controlled herself sufficiently to reply: "Hester has good reason to be very much aggravated. We have just made the discovery that Leander is engaged to a young woman far beneath him in family, position, culture, — everything, in short, which we could desire for his wife."

"I can't think of it calmly, Mr. Kittredge," broke in his wife, stopping short in her walk, and actually stamping her foot on the floor. "It is a cruel thing thus to disgrace the Sullivan name and blood."

"Disgrace!" fairly roared the son and brother.

"There, there, Hester! Leander! nothing is to be gained by these mutual recriminations. Who is the lady?" — driving straight at the facts, you see, as was the nature of Ambrose Kittredge. In the eyes of this man, the world, human life itself, were a vast array of facts, with which one had to deal according to the skill and foresight that were in him.

Of those finer spiritual forces which lie at the centre of all this array of material facts, Ambrose Kittredge had little conception.

"Her name is Deering, — Agnes Deering; the family live on Birch Avenue, and in character and genuine

worth are quite a match for the Sullivans, although I doubt whether they could raise money sufficient to buy out the furniture of this room," with a cool glance about the elegant apartment.

Mrs. Sullivan looked shocked, and Mrs. Kittredge as though she could almost have annihilated her brother as he stood there, seeming rather to glory in his shame.

"Deering — Deering," repeated Mr. Kittredge, taking no notice of the last part of his brother-in-law's speech. "I don't seem to remember the name."

Here was another chance which Mrs. Kittredge, in her present inflamed mood, could not resist.

"It is not surprising, Mr. Kittredge," — a tantalizing smoothness in her tones. "You are not used to associate with factory employes and people of that sort."

Leander's eyes blazed again on his sister; then he said quietly, "Mr. Deering is a book-keeper in a respectable house. I think you were once that yourself, Mr. Kittredge, but I never heard anybody call you a factory operative in consequence."

This was a home-thrust which, to tell the truth, Mr. Kittredge rather enjoyed, for he prided himself on having been the architect of his own fortune, almost as much as his wife did on her Sullivan blood. He was glad, too, of any chance of lighting up this unhappy complication with a jest; so he settled himself down in a chair, laughing pleasantly to himself.

"Well, Leander, that was a lucky hit, — turning the tables on me handsomely. But don't you see, boy, you are distressing your mother and sister, and you owe

something to them. Can't we all talk this matter over in cooler blood? Is it a fact that you intend making this Miss Deering your wife?"

"It's a fact that I've asked her to be, and Leander Sullivan, though he is no saint, was never yet such a scoundrel as to break his word to a woman."

The young man looked handsomer — more like a hero than he had ever done before in his life. The truth was, love was bringing out whatever good stuff of honor, strength, manliness, was in the fellow. Against their wills, his mother and his sister felt it.

"It is a pity you've been so rash, Leander, when — when your family are so strongly opposed to your choice."

"Let them bring forward one valid reason for it," spoke Leander Sullivan, just as the lazy, good-natured fellow was not in the habit of speaking. "The only one they can possibly urge is her family poverty; all the rest is cruel slander. Agnes Deering is a sweet and noble woman, a lady by her own birthright. I am not afraid to match her with any woman in Hester Kittredge's choicest circle. And would you have a man such a miserable poltroon as to think of money when it comes to taking a wife? I tell you" — his whole face kindling into something that idealized and exalted it out of the ordinary face of Leander Sullivan — "I glory in Agnes' poverty; it is for herself that I wooed her; it is for herself that I love her as I never have, as I never could have loved another woman; and the only thought this moment which makes me feel I am not utterly

unworthy of so precious a thing as the love of Agnes Deering, is the knowledge, in my own heart, that if she were to-day a beggar in the streets I would choose her and marry her above any other living woman, although that other were a crowned queen."

This was probably about the best speech which Leander Sullivan had ever uttered in his life. It came right from his heart, and had the ring of Hollis Deering's own courage in it. Such speeches were not indigenous to the climate of Ambrose Kittredge's elegant home, but this one could not fail to make its impression, to reach down to some eternal instincts in the hearts of all who listened to it.

Ambrose Kittredge turned and looked at his wife. There she stood, in her youth, and grace, and elegance, and yet he knew as absolutely that his money had bought all that, as he knew it had bought the splendid roof over his head, the handsome horses down below in his stables. It had never entered into his heart to blame her; it did not now. Money was a substantial fact in the world, and a woman only acted wisely, when settling in life, to look out for the main point.

Then Ambrose Kittredge turned and looked at Leander, and away down in the elder man's heart something warmed towards the younger. As for this love that the latter placed above all the material facts of life, its riches, ease, honors, Mr. Kittredge had always regarded it with a kind of half-contemptuous complacency, much as we do the picture of Shakespeare's moonstruck lover. That

stage had its period in the drama of human life, just as much as the drums and doll-babies had theirs.

Ambrose Kittredge himself could look back on a time when he might have felt, if he had not talked, much as his young brother-in-law did.

From cool, green river-banks of his youth, a wind blew in upon him suddenly, the sudden quiver and the fresh scents all finding their way across wide, gray steppes of the years.

Ambrose Kittredge had not married, for his first wife, the woman of his first loving. She had rejected him, and he had taken up, in the second place, with a wife after the Dora Copperfield type, sweet, insipid, helpless. She had dropped early out of life, and left the man to raise the goodly superstructure of his fortunes, and when all was done, to buy, as their last and crowning grace, the elegant Hester Sullivan.

At any rate, that talk of his young brother-in-law did the latter's cause no harm with Ambrose Kittredge. Its manly, outspoken courage appealed to the elder's common sense, and, I think, went a little deeper than that; and when he spoke it was with that sort of calm, deliberate judgment which always carried weight with it.

"Well, mother — Hester, you hear what Leander says for himself. We must make due allowance, of course, for a young man's enthusiasm in these matters; but really if he believes this young woman is the only one in the world for him, and if she be, allowing, as I said, a fair margin for a lover's natural extravagance of fancy, what he describes, I cannot clearly see that her lack of money

ought to make a very strong case against her. In fact, my observation has taught me that it is rather a dangerous experiment for a man to marry a fortune; the toll is apt to be high on that road."

"Mr. Kittredge," — her husband's speech having allowed his wife a little time to recover her forces, which had been a good deal discomfited by Leander's broadside, — "I am astonished at the position you take. Neither mamma nor I have desired Leander to marry a fortune, as you call it, but he does owe something to his family; and despite all that *colour-de-rose* talk about marrying a beggar and glorying in her poverty, this Miss Deering is entirely out of our sphere. Her antecedents — her whole habits of life and society — have not fitted her for it. We shall have the pain and mortification of dragging her up, as his wife, to our level. She is not his equal socially, and the world knows it, and however Leander may put it, with his high-flown stuff and sentiment, we must feel — mamma and I — that our son and brother has brought disgrace on us."

"You know that's a lie, Hester Kittredge," flamed up Leander again, in his wrath. "You know that it is just as your husband says, — the lack of fortune and nothing else which lies behind all your opposition; and why won't you be woman enough to say so?"

"If Agnes Deering were precisely the woman she is this hour, and worth a hundred thousand dollars, you would never couple her name with disgrace, and I will not, as I said before, be such a brute as to stand by and hear the woman whom I love, so shamefully maligned."

"Leander," said Mrs. Sullivan, on whom, despite all her preconceived ideas and prejudices, her son's talk had not been without its effect, "if Hester uses strong words, you ought to remember that her provocation is great. It is a dreadful blow which you have dealt your family. We hoped to welcome to our hearts with joy and pride the wife you would one day bring to us."

It was Leander's mother who was speaking now, and if her words did not goad him as his sister's had done, they hurt more cruelly. Leander Sullivan loved and honored his mother, and he knew she would have laid down her life for him.

There was a real pain in his eyes and voice now, as he answered: "It grieves me to the heart, mother, to disappoint either your joy or your pride in my choice of a wife;" but his voice changing suddenly: "O mother! do tell me the honest truth; would you have your son so base as not to have taken the woman whom he found he loved with all his heart, the only one with whom he could be content or happy, simply because she was not rich?"

Mrs. Sullivan was never in her life more at a loss for an answer. She could not fairly meet her son's question, and took refuge in generalities. "But, Leander, young men are so often led away by their fancies, and act rashly in matters of this sort. There are plenty of women worthy and lovely in your own sphere. They may not have fortunes, but I think Hester and I would not the less cordially receive them as your wife."

Of course, this had a sound of plausibility and good sense, but a man less shrewd than Leander Sullivan

could have penetrated right to the heart of the sophistry.

"But, mother, you are a sensible woman; you cannot blind your eyes to the fact, that, after all, the matter comes straight down to the bare, hard fact of dollars and cents."

Another sledge-hammer blow, straight to the point. Seeing her mother at her wit's end, Mrs. Kittredge came up to the rescue with a sneer, that unfailing resource of a losing argument.

"At any rate, your paragon seems already to have impressed you with very democratic notions. Under her influence, I expect to see you soon take the stump for perfect social equality, and all that nonsense, which rolls with such edifying smoothness from the mouths of lovers and politicians."

"I believe, Mr. Kittredge," said Leander, turning composedly to that gentleman, "that we are all native-born Americans; that I have neither ancestral title nor lineage, nor coat-of-arms, and, therefore, in that respect, Agnes Deering and I meet on common ground, my only advantage being that I bring to her the overshadowing honors of the Sullivan set, whatever these may be."

Mr. Kittredge laughed good-naturedly, and secretly thought Leander had the best of it; although the women pitted against him were apt to come off with flying colors in that sort of light-skirmishing argument, for which the feminine tongue and temperament seem to have an especial adaptation.

"You may find it, Leander, very agreeable to make

the Sullivan name and position a matter of ridicule," subjoined Mrs. Kittredge, more nettled than ever, "but I fail to see the point."

"I make neither the Sullivan name nor society a theme of contempt," said Leander, hotly. "I suppose you would not disgrace either by marrying a man for his money. Do allow me the same privilege in taking a wife."

This was a terrible home-thrust, perhaps an ungenerous one; but then Leander had been dreadfully aggravated by his sister that afternoon. What made the matter worse, too, was the presence of her husband, and Mrs. Kittredge actually felt her face flushing to the temples, and her mother moved uneasily.

Now, to do the lady justice, she had never admitted to herself that she had married Ambrose Kittredge for his money. Her own self-respect would not allow her to face so ugly a fact, and she could always slip away from it with the conviction that, if she had not liked the man himself, all his wealth, although a most desirable adjunct, could not have induced her to marry him.

This was measurably true. "School-girl sentiment" was not much in the line of Hester Sullivan. She fancied a man of portly presence, and pleasant, rather patronizing manners, which gave one a sense of social weight, and all this was characteristic of Ambrose Kittredge.

His wife was a woman of quick parts, and could parry a stroke gracefully; and although this speech of Leander's could not have produced the generally uncomfortable sensation which it certainly did on the trio of hearers,

if there had not lurked in it some secret element of truth, Mrs. Kittredge recovered herself in a moment, and turned to her husband, composed and smiling, saying, "You were not poor when I married you, Mr. Kittredge, but I think, if I had not liked the man behind his money, I should not to-day be his wife."

"I never had any doubts on that score myself, my dear," answered the gentleman, and he did feel a little provoked with Leander.

To do Mrs. Kittredge justice, she herself believed that she had spoken no more than the truth. Probably she had not. Just then the dinner-bell rang. I think it was a relief to everybody.

## CHAPTER IV.

THERE came a morning when the family carriage of the Sullivans actually drew up before the front door of the Deerings. There they stood, the handsome, high-mettled animals, the liveried coachman, the elegant vehicle, all together an exponent of the wealth and taste of the owners.

The ladies descended at the small rustic gate. They had come, not without a struggle, especially on the part of Mrs. Kittredge; but she was a sensible woman, and saw that there was nothing to be done but to make the best of the inevitable. Neither was she an utterly heartless woman.

In the first disappointment and chagrin of learning her brother's choice, she had gone a little farther than she would ever do again, and Leander had never experienced a recurrence of the storm which followed the announcement of his engagement with Agnes Deering. The ladies, it is true, still made no effort to disguise their pain and disappointment over his choice, and he was made uncomfortable, in a thousand small, stinging ways; but Mrs. Kittredge never attempted any such salient exhibitions of her displeasure as she had given at first. "It was not best to provoke Leander too far," she reasoned, "else he might turn savage," and then — no, she was

not a malignant woman; sorely as her brother had disappointed her ambition, she was incapable of a persistent purpose of making him miserable. She disliked Agnes Deering, whom she had never met, whom she could scarcely have identified on the street, more than she did anybody else in the world, because she had frustrated a pretty matrimonial scheme on which, of late, the lady had begun to set her heart. Yet, for all that, as time went on, both the mother and sister of Leander Sullivan began to feel that their part in his engagement could no longer remain a simply passive one.

They must submit, sooner or later, with a bad grace or a good one, both ladies reasoned; and their disapprobation of Leander's choice would soon become common matter of Medbury gossip, if it was known they had not paid the smallest courtesy to his intended bride. So it came about at last, that one morning, as I said, the Sullivan carriage stood in all its magnificence before the Deerings' front gate; and — alas for poor, curious, gossipy, human nature! — there was a general fluttering behind the window-blinds in that immediate neighborhood of Birch Avenue.

During these weeks, Agnes' great happiness in her new love had suffered a serious alloy in the conviction of the family disapproval of Leander's choice. Had it been otherwise, I should regard this girl unworthy her place in my story. The woman who, however she may better her own fortunes, can accept the suit of any man, and take her rightful place in his family, knowing she comes unwelcomed to its love and heart, and only accepted as a matter of necessity, — the woman who can do this



without pain, ay, worse yet, with any feeling of exultation over her triumph, may be certain of one thing,—she is unworthy of husband and place.

Pride or prejudice may lie at the bottom of the opposition, whether it be salient or passive. A woman might fairly sin against her own soul and that of the man who loved her, if she sacrificed her future to the feeling of others; but, for all that, no nature, not essentially coarse, could feel other than a poignant regret on entering a family circle to whose heart her only welcome was one of hard necessity.

Not of such stuff was Agnes Deering made. As the days wore on, and she became certain that the engagement must have transpired, while there was not the slightest movement towards a recognition of herself on the part of any member of the Sullivan family, Agnes became fully alive to the real condition of affairs.

It wounded to the core a nature always sufficiently sensitive, to reflect that Leander's family considered itself humiliated by his choice; that it would receive her, at best, coldly and reluctantly, when the issue could be no longer avoided. She knew perfectly well what was at the bottom of the Sullivan dislike,—her want of wealth and position. The feeling might do nobody any credit, but for all that it belonged to Leander's family, and that was the reason, and reason sufficient to give the thought its sharpest sting.

Once she attempted to speak to her lover on the subject which lay so heavily at her heart, but the tears came and nearly choked her. She made bungling work of it.

But Leander answered like a lover, or rather like a man, and he was certainly more of one these days than he had ever been in his life before.

"Agnes, never speak to me of that thing again. You are, in my eyes, a treasure surpassing all the gold and lands of the world. Let that suffice you, my darling."

There was another view, a pleasanter one, to this engagement of Agnes Deering.

It has often struck me as a curious fact in this many-sided human nature, that the very people who are ready to hunt you down with gossip, slander, backbiting, will yet somehow seem to take a genuine pleasure in any good fortune that befalls you.

It took an incredibly short time for the engagement of Sullivan and Deering to become noised throughout Medbury, and at once the latter family rose into prominence. People of a sudden made the discovery that the eldest daughter was a remarkably attractive girl, handsome and stylish, and all that, and Miss Deering could not fail to have a flattering consciousness that she was an object of interest and curiosity whenever she went out nowadays. People on every hand grew wonderfully suave and cordial to her; everything she said and did seemed invested with a new interest and importance. And the matter did not stop there; Agnes' glory was, of course, reflected on the whole family. Poor Mrs. Deering was wonderfully flattered by it all. Her neighbors were so ready to call nowadays, to stop her on the street and shake hands, and then there were smiles and significant shakings of head, and hints and half-clipped congratulations, all

of which, I verily believe, did the poor woman's soul good.

Hollis took the whole thing in a characteristic way. One morning, coming home from some small shopping expedition down town, she untied her hat very gravely, played with the strings a moment, and then broke out, of a sudden, most energetically, with, "Oh, dear! what an awful humbug this world is!"

"Why, Hollis, what has put that into your head at this time?" asked Marcia, who was certain something lay behind the exclamation.

"I don't wonder," continued Hollis, still speaking mostly to herself, and fingering the ribbons of her hat, in her rapid, excited way, "that the Lord repented he had ever made man, when he saw what dreadfully poor stuff the raw material turned out to be."

All the family laughed. They were used to such sort of speeches from that blunt, odd Hollis.

"Something must have happened to you down town, daughter," said the mother.

"Yes, there has; nothing unusual of late, though, only perhaps it struck me more forcibly this time. There were the Mandrakes, you know; we were well acquainted once, — went to school together; but after we grew up, they took on airs, and cut me on the street, because we were poor, of course, and they were ambitious, and had a few thousands. To-day they stopped and shook hands, and were as cordial as when we were school-fellows. The whole thing struck me half comically, half painfully. I believe I could have stood still right there on the

street, and preached those girls a sermon. It was on my tongue's end to say, 'Poor things! do you take me for such a fool as not to see through all this sudden politeness? It just comes of my sister's being engaged to Leander Sullivan.'"

"I've no doubt it did," replied Mrs. Deering. "Well, one must expect such things;" feeling somewhat gratified, and yet not just certain but she ought to be ashamed of the feeling.

"I suppose one of these days people will plume themselves on an invitation to Mrs. Leander Sullivan's grand parties," said Marcia, with a beaming smile on her eldest sister.

"O Marcia! do stop that nonsense," replied Agnes, bridling and blushing.

"I hope," said Hollis, going to the door and standing there a moment, her brown eyes fairly ablaze as she faced the others, — "I hope that she'll despise everybody who does. I hope she'll remember she is not one bit finer, or better, or nobler, as Mrs. Leander Sullivan, in her elegance and splendor, as you like to put it, Marcia, than she was as plain Agnes Deering;" and Hollis shut the door.

They all laughed; but that last bomb-shell of Hollis' in the door-way, that morning, had done some good work.

But at length the moment had come, looked forward to so long, half dreaded, half hoped for, and the elegant mother and sister of Leander Sullivan sat in the little front parlor of the Deerings, and the small serving-maid carried up their cards to the family with a look of mysterious awe on her face, which could hardly have been

intensified had she received a communication from beings of another sphere.

The announcement made a terrible fluttering in the family heart. This was not, perhaps, much to the credit of the Deerings, but they were dreadfully human folks, and instead of being dignified, calm, possessed of themselves, as they ought to have been at this juncture, they were just shaken and flustered, and quite thrown off their balance.

There were little attempts at improved toilets on all sides, smoothing of hair, and pinning of collars; and Marcia looked at her mother's old black silk, which had done its best through half-a-dozen turnings and refittings.

"I do wish it wasn't quite so rusty, ma, and your cap-strings were a little fresher," sighed the second daughter.

Poor Agnes! It was the hardest moment of her life, she thought. She knew perfectly well that she was about to pass through an ordeal of personal criticism, such as she had never done in her life before, from cold, unfriendly, half-disdainful eyes. Whatever she might be in those of Leander Sullivan, she would be something totally different in those of his stately mother and haughty sister.

How she dreaded to go down and meet them in the little parlor, where everything had been strained to the uttermost, and only just succeeded in giving to the room, with its old-fashioned furniture, a half-genteel, half-shabby air! How would it look to these women, just come out of their own elegant splendor!

All these thoughts crowded upon the poor girl, and

made the moment very trying for her, as she turned to Mrs. Deering, who, quite as much agitated as her daughter, was struggling after the matronly composure due to the place and the occasion, saying, "Mamma, you must go in first; and I and the girls will follow."

Hollis had been watching all these movements with those bright, swift, brown eyes of hers.

It was a singular fact, that any grand crisis always brought out a great central calm in this girl.

She was often shy and ill at ease among the common-places of life; her mother had always felt that Hollis barely escaped native, hopeless awkwardness in her gait and manner; but I verily believe that girl, on a given occasion, would have faced undaunted a king on his throne, — would have gone down into a battle with eyes as calm and clear as Joan of Arc's.

As Mrs. Deering stepped to the door, her youngest daughter spoke, and when Hollis' tones took that soft, clear ring, they always stopped to listen.

"Mother," she said, "I think this must be the proudest, happiest moment of your life, as you go down to Leander Sullivan's mother and sister, feeling that you can say to them, 'This is the daughter I have given your son to wife!'"

"And when these two women look in the face of Agnes Deering, and see there, as, if they are not blind they surely can see, the mind and the heart of the woman Leander has chosen, they will think as he does, how poor and mean and shrivelled a thing, in comparison with herself, and with what she can bring him, would be any

riches, or position, or honors, and if they think otherwise, the blindness and the folly will be their own, not yours."

It was strange how that young girl's words strengthened and steadied the family heart, lifted it out of all the jar and tremulousness into something higher and nobler, into a possession of itself.

"Come, daughter, we are all ready," said Mrs. Deering, laying her hand on Agnes' arm, her voice quiet and prompt now, like that of one not afraid, who would dare to trust herself, and who felt the ground secure under her feet.

In the parlor below, the elder matron and the younger waited, cold and critical. Mrs. Kittredge was in a particularly unpleasant frame of mind against the world in general, and her brother and this Deering family in particular. Her fine eyes took in the contents of the room at a glance, saw all the shifts to make the most of the furniture, to hide the worn places in the carpet and rug.

"As Leander wants to glory in poverty, there seems to be no lack of occasion," said Mrs. Kittredge, turning to her mother with a half sneer. "And yet, when one remembers what the fellow might have done, it is tantalizing enough!"

"I know it, Hester," replied Mrs. Sullivan, whom the sight of the parlor had not made more complacent towards the owners. "But there is no help for it. Young men seem to take some perverse delight in shocking their families when it comes to choosing a wife;" and she drew a deep sigh; and then both the ladies waited,

stately and frigid, the disagreeable ceremony that was impending.

The door opened, and Mrs. Deering entered with her eldest daughter, a small, faded matron, somewhere among her fifties, in her worn black silk and best cap, with the satin ribbons a little faded; and there was a decided contrast betwixt her and Leander's mother in velvet and laces, which seemed to add to the natural dignity of the latter's presence.

The visitors half rose, and Mrs. Deering came forward and greeted them with a quiet cordiality for which, somehow, her guests were not just prepared. They had anticipated a constrained, awkward meeting on the part of people unaccustomed to the best Medbury society. But Mrs. Deering went through the ceremony of presenting her daughter to the latter's future mother and sister as though it were a very commonplace affair; and Agnes bowed and took her seat, with her fair, delicate face as composed as their own.

If they condescended to thaw at all out of their staidness, Mrs. Sullivan and her daughter had expected to go through a patronizing rôle; but there was no room for anything of that sort. There were a few commonplaces on both sides, and it must be confessed that neither Mrs. Deering nor her daughter seemed at all oppressed by the elegance of their guests, or to have any overwhelming realization of the honor being done them.

That little gray parlor might have been a court-chamber, so utterly unconscious the inmates seemed of their surroundings.

In a few moments, Marcia and her sister came in, and the introductions were quietly gone through with once again, Mrs. Kittredge taking a rapid survey of the two, and settling it in her mind that Marcia was really very pretty and presentable, and Hollis, hardly out of the gaucherie of school-girlhood, rather brown and rather homely, but then she might pass muster. Of course, Agnes was the central figure of interest to both ladies. Where did the charm lie which had touched the fancy and won the heart of Leander Sullivan? There she sat, with her rich brown hair and the soft bloom in her cheeks, in her face a sweet intelligence that bore witness for itself. Wherever Leander Sullivan placed this woman of his choice, she would not disgrace him.

As his mother gazed on Agnes Deering, the proud woman's heart melted towards the younger.

Her boy's life, for good or for evil, was in the hands of this girl. On the stuff that was in her, on the temper of her heart, the forces of her character, depended the future happiness of the boy Mrs. Sullivan had rocked on her knees, and sung to sleep in her bosom. How wealth and family and position shrunk and shrivelled away in the presence of this one great truth! Mrs. Sullivan forgot everything for the moment, saving that she was Leander's mother, and that this girl was to be his wife.

The call was necessarily a brief one; no allusion on either side was made to the young man; but, as she rose up to go, Mrs. Sullivan unconsciously drew off her glove, and took Agnes' hand in her own, — a soft, delicate hand, — she noticed that. She looked in the girl's face,

and the heart of Mrs. Sullivan pleaded, what the lady herself was too proud and too well-bred to say: "Only be a true wife to my boy."

But the lady smiled a soft, kindly smile upon Agnes. "I am glad that I have seen you to-day, my child," she said; "and there is somebody else who will be very glad too."

It was not very much, it is true, but the words went to Agnes' heart, and Leander's mother was something to her afterwards but the stately, elegant Mrs. Sullivan, whom she had hitherto feared and dreaded. Mrs. Kittredge, too, made her adieus graciously, a little impressed by something in these people's manner, — she could not exactly tell what, but at the bottom of which, she certainly never dreamed, was that shy young girl, who bore least part in the interview.

The horses, prancing back and forth through the avenue, paused again before the gate; the ladies resumed their places in the carriage, and all Medbury knew that the Sullivans had called on the Deerings; for all of which one cannot help exclaiming with Hollis: "Oh, dear! what a grand humbug this world is!"

## CHAPTER V.

MRS. KITTREDGE sank her elegant person among the cushions of her carriage with a slight feeling of relief. "Well, that unpleasant duty is over with," she said. "If it were the last, one could endure it; but when you come to reflect that it is only the commencement of an interminable series —" She shrugged her shoulders. You know how elegant women can do these things.

Yet, although she would not admit it to herself, Mrs. Kittredge was secretly a little annoyed. She had a kind of uncomfortable instinct that her wealth, her position, her splendor, had all been set slightly in the background that morning. She had expected to overawe the Deerings, and meant to take little stinging revenges — all of which well-bred women can do — by making them feel their immense inferiority to the Sullivans in worldly goods and social rank. It would afford her a certain degree of gratification to make them conscious and awkward, for presuming to aspire to the Sullivan level.

The woman honestly felt herself aggrieved by these Deerings. They had wounded her in her strongest feelings, — her affection and her ambition; and any petty revenge seemed to her justifiable. It was aggravating, too, to reflect that the advantage would, in the end, be on

Agnes' side, as it always is in cases of this sort with the woman who secures the husband.

Would to God there were always women of too noble tempers and too generous hearts ever to take any glorying in their triumph! Of this sort, at least, was Agnes Deering.

That interview with Mrs. Sullivan's future daughter-in-law had not vanquished the elder lady's prejudices. They were naturally stubborn things, as in women of her type they are apt to be; still, beneath all these, her heart was softened towards Agnes Deering and her whole family. She had been agreeably surprised and disappointed with the looks and manner of her son's betrothed, for she had expected to meet a pretty-faced, *smartish* young woman, with little airs and affectations cropping out here and there. And the utter freedom from these in the quiet, ladylike bearing, and the fair, intelligent face, had not been without a strong modifying tendency upon the lady's preconceived notions.

Under the influence of this feeling, she spoke now. "Of course, Hester, we shall never cease to regret that Leander's fancy did not run in a different channel; but when you have lived as long as I have, my dear, you will learn that in this world things have a dreadful tendency to go cross-grained, and it is not best to harrow ourselves too much over them. Indeed, it might have been far worse in this case. Let us be just to Leander and Miss Deering. I frankly acknowledge, for myself, that he has not shown so bad a taste, after all. Nobody can deny that she is intelligent and ladylike, and I must



own, remarkably pretty. In herself she will never disgrace him."

It was hard for Mrs. Kittredge to consent to all this graciously. Still, she virtually admitted it when she added, "But, O dear mamma, think of that house; look at that parlor from which Leander Sullivan is to take his bride!"

"Yes, dear, I know it; but let us be just again; they seemed quite oblivious of all that. The facts being what they were, these people carried off the whole to their credit."

"Well, yes, I suppose they did," subjoined Mrs. Kittredge, half reluctantly, playing absently with the clasps of her card-case. Then she added, in a sudden burst of honesty, "Perhaps, mamma, I should be disposed to view this whole matter in a less ungracious light, if it had not so cruelly disappointed all my plans for Leander. I had the whole thing cut and dried for the foolish fellow. I had set heart and soul on it. And now these Deerings must step in and ruin my pet plan. And when one compares the two families—their wealth, position, influence, the 'Is' with the 'Might Have Been'—it galls to the quick, and I feel disgusted, and outraged with the whole of the Deering tribe. And I shall never feel otherwise, whatever smooth face I shall be forced to put on the matter; and there is an end of it."

"I appreciate all that, Hester," the talk following too much in the line of her own feelings not to influence the mother. "If any amount of regret on our part could

undo matters as they now stand, I would indulge it. I only think it wisest to make the best of facts."

"Yes; you and Ambrose are right, I suppose."

After a little pause, Mrs. Kittredge resumed: "I see perfectly well where the attraction lay, in the first place, with Leander. The foolish fellow always had a hankering for the shade of hair and eyes after Miss Deering's style. From a boy he used to admire it; don't you remember, mamma?"

"Oh, perfectly well. It is strange what freaks of this sort men's fancies will take."

"The next step now will be, having these Deerings out to dine with us some day. One needn't be in a hurry though, and we have eased our consciences for the present."

As the younger lady said these words, the carriage rolled into the handsome grounds of Ambrose Kittredge once more. The visit to the Deerings was not alluded to that day at dinner. Mrs. Kittredge still felt too aggrieved to talk over the matter with Leander, and she left the thing with her mother, to manage as she pleased.

The young man was leaving the room, when his mother called him back, Mr. and Mrs. Kittredge having, meanwhile, gone to take a walk in the grounds. "Don't be in a hurry, Leander; I have something to tell you."

He came back and stood before her. "Well, mother, what is it?"

"Your sister and I called, this morning, on the Deerings."

"You did?" What a flush of surprise and pleasure came into the fellow's face! It touched the heart of the mother. He drew up a chair and sat down. "Well, mother, you saw her?"

"Yes; her and her mother, and both her sisters, Leander."

"Ah, you did! I think, now you have seen her, you must wonder less at my choice." It was natural that Leander, being a lover, should suppose the charms and virtues of his betrothed as patent to all eyes as his own.

Mrs. Sullivan's reply was guarded. She could not yet bring herself to bestow any very flattering encomiums on Agnes Deering, yet she meant to be just. "I was agreeably disappointed in Miss Deering, Leander. She has an interesting face and ladylike manners. In herself, at least, I saw nothing to find fault with."

This sounded like very scant praise in the ears of the young man, but he had to swallow it as best he could, and he was so full of eager curiosity about the whole visit, and so pleased with the first step towards a family recognition of his relations with Agnes Deering, that he was disposed to ignore all unpleasant matters connected with his courtship.

"Well, mother, I think you will, at least, be candid enough to admit that, however her position and circumstances may not gratify your pride and ambition, Agnes Deering herself is a woman that your son will never have cause to be ashamed of when she is his wife."

Something half pleading in his tones touched the mother's heart again, forced her, half against her own

will, to tell the honest truth. "You are right, Leander. Miss Deering, in herself, will never give you cause to blush for her. In looks, in manner, in character, in all respects I was disappointed in her."

What a light came into his eyes at these words! Mrs. Sullivan began to realize for the first time that Leander must have suffered a good deal himself during all this family opposition to his engagement. She reflected, too, that he had been a good son and brother, ready, on the whole, to gratify his mother and sister. But his affections bestowed and his honor at stake, what could the fellow do?

"I am glad to hear you say all that; gladder than you can ever know," answered Leander.

That drew the mother out further, and she went over the whole little history of the call on the Deerings, much as she would to a woman, and it was amusing to see how the big, careless fellow drank in every incident, with the eager pleasure of a girl for details.

"What a solemn fact, after all, this love between man and woman was! People might joke and sneer about it, but —" Mrs. Sullivan's reflections did not complete themselves.

Leander broke eagerly into them of a sudden: "Mother!" and then he stopped.

"Well, my son?"

"I've been thinking, of late, that I must get an engagement ring, — a diamond, you know, of the first water. Poor, little, white, soft fingers! They've never been used to such things." He said that half to him-

self, but that little involuntary burst of tenderness touched the mother's heart again, as nothing had hitherto done. It brought back to the grave, dignified matron, the blossomy time of her maidenhood, the flutterings and dreams, the tender romances, the glitter of dews, the radiant atmospheres of days that would never shine on her again, and the love of this woman's youth had been the father of Leander.

That thought came over her suddenly with a kind of awful force, and, looking up now, she smiled with a touched, half-tremulous smile. "Ah, my boy," she said, "you are like all lovers, I see."

Something tender and sympathetic in his mother's tones drew Leander out, as an hour before he would not have deemed possible, for his pride had made him very reticent over Miss Deering, since that first unhappy explosion.

"I have been thinking, mother, that I should like to have your advice in the choice of this ring. You know it is a gift for a lifetime, and it would be such a pleasure for her, for me, too, to remember always that you had a share in the matter."

Mrs. Sullivan hesitated a moment, and thought of Hester. But she was a mother, and just now her heart was stirred with a strong sympathy with her son's joy.

"When did you intend to get the ring, Leander?" hesitating a little.

"I was expecting to ride down town this very afternoon to see about it. Won't you go with me, mother?"

Mrs. Sullivan drew a long, long breath. She looked at her son. Her pride and her thoughts of Hester strug-

gled with the mother in her, which entered into her son's feeling at that moment. If she refused him now, he would never forget it in all the life to come.

"Well, Leander, if you desire it so much, I will go with you."

"Oh, thank you, mother!" and he put his arm around her neck and kissed her.

Half an hour later, Mr. and Mrs. Kittredge came from their walk in the grounds, and found Mrs. Sullivan waiting for Leander.

"Why, mother, are you going out now?" asked the lady, in surprise.

"I am going with Leander, Hester. He has desired me to assist him in selecting his engagement-ring for Miss Deering, and I have not the heart to refuse him;" thinking the worst had better be told at once.

Mrs. Kittredge sat down in the first chair. "Well, I am quite stunned," she said. "I did not suppose you would do that thing, mamma."

"Neither did I, Hester. But when the boy came to ask me in the way he did, I could not find it in my heart to say no, as I told you; and, perhaps, when you come to look at it on all sides, it will not seem so strange to you;" nevertheless, it was sufficiently evident that the mother was ill at ease.

"I can't conceive, for my part, how the fellow ever had the face to ask you," added the younger lady, not exactly facing her mother's remark.

"It seems to me, mother is acting wisely," said Mr. Kittredge, who had not spoken before. "You can't do

things by halves in this world, and, as the young lady is soon to be a member of our family, and, as it appears, you have taken the first step toward a recognition of this fact, you had better face all the consequences fairly, and not chafe over them."

Mrs. Kittredge, during their walk, had related to her husband the main facts of the call on the Deerings that morning.

"A ceremonious call, Mr. Kittredge, to which circumstances at last compelled us, reluctantly enough, as everybody knows, is an entirely different thing from taking any share in engagement-rings, and nonsense of that sort. I did want Leander to feel, from beginning to end of the matter, that we had not swayed; that in our secret hearts we still deeply deplored his choice."

"I presume he feels that yet, Hester," replied Mrs. Sullivan. "What I am doing by no means proves the contrary. Leander knows I am going simply to oblige him."

Mrs. Sullivan hardly did herself justice in this matter. In spite of her prejudices, she would think of the first flush of delight on the sweet young face she had seen that morning, when Leander should slip the jewel on the girl's finger, and then, lifting up the soft, white hand, flash the blaze in her eyes. This thought, unnoticed and half denied, even to herself, would lie away down in the woman's heart that afternoon. We are often so much better or so much worse than our talk.

"Well," added Mrs. Kittredge, in the tone of frosty displeasure with which one disposes of an unpleasant mat-

ter, "my opinion was not consulted in the first place, and it is not likely to be in what follows. Leander will do as he likes, and I shall not interfere; but I mean he shall feel to the end," — and her eyes flashed, — "yes, even when she is his wife, that I wish he had never looked on the face of Agnes Deering."

Mrs. Kittredge would have her revenge so, for she knew of a dead certainty that this knowledge would dash with some bitterness even the joy of her brother's bridal.

Just then Leander came in. "Well, mother, all ready?" he said briskly.

"Yes, Leander," going to meet him.

He looked at the others, and, although nobody spoke of it, the young man was quite certain that Mr. and Mrs. Kittredge knew the errand which was taking him and his mother to town that afternoon.

"Do you see that, Agnes?" sitting by her side in the little parlor, which, notwithstanding its half shabbiness and its immense contrast with his own elegant home, had come to seem to Leander Sullivan about the dearest and fairest spot in the world.

A moment before he spoke, Agnes had been conscious that something smooth and cold slipped among her fingers.

The window was open, and the moonlight filled the little parlor with its white, solemn magic, when the bright, half-scared eyes of Agnes Deering caught the blaze of the ring on her finger, holding a large, precious "solitaire." You might be certain it would be no less, knowing it was

Leander Sullivan's betrothal gift to the lady of his wooing.

"O Leander!" — her whole face trembling, her breath coming quickly, — "is that for me?"

"For whom else should it be, my darling?"

Some other words followed, which might sound a little silly or sentimental, writing them down in a book; but there alone together, in the gracious enchantment of that lover's moonlight, if you had listened, putting yourself in Agnes Deering's place — well, I should not envy you if you could laugh at that speech of Leander Sullivan's.

As for the girl, with the splendor of the jewel blazing right up into her eyes, she could hardly believe them. Here was a tangible evidence of the new life of grace and luxury on which she was to enter. Diamonds and Agnes Deering!

And in the midst of all those crowding thoughts and feelings, she heard Leander's voice speaking: "We selected the ring yesterday afternoon, mother and I."

"Your mother!" faltered Agnes. "O Leander, do you mean to say that she went with you, and knew for whom you were getting this ring?"

"I mean to say just that, Agnes."

The girl's face quivered, and the tears slid into her eyes and over her cheeks now. The jewel on her finger was more to Agnes than diamond or betrothal ring; and I think if Mrs. Sullivan, or even Hester Kittredge, could have seen the look at that moment on the girl's face, neither would have been sorry for what Leander's mother had done.

## CHAPTER VI.

THE vehement displeasure which always marked the talk between Mrs. Sullivan and her daughter, whenever Leander's engagement was the subject of conversation, became considerably modified after their call, especially on the part of the former.

It might have amused one versed in the subtleties of human character to perceive how the lady always started with a disparaging preface when the Deerings came up.

"Of course, my dear, I shall always maintain my first position, and never cease to regret your brother's choice. It is always a very serious matter to a mother when her son, and especially her only one, like Leander, makes up his mind in the selection of a wife. Yet we cannot deny, Hester, that as the case stands, it might have been far worse. Mothers and sisters have had to put up with more than we are called to bear. If Miss Deering was simply a handsome, showy, underbred, and, at heart, vulgar woman —"

"But, mamma," the younger lady would interrupt a little impatiently, "can you imagine Leander Sullivan, with his family and his breeding, doing anything so disgraceful as that?"

Mrs. Sullivan shook her head with oracular gravity. "There is no telling, my dear, what tangent a young

man's fancy may go off on. I have lived long enough not to be surprised at anything in that line."

Mrs. Kittredge, flitting among her birds, and flowers, and fishes, as she always was before they drove out in the morning, was quite apt to let her mother have the last of the remark whenever Agnes Deering was the subject of any sparse praise. The figure of another young lady, fair, and tall, and gracious, always rose up before her at such times. It had been her fondest dream, of late, to welcome it one day, with gracious smiles and tender words, under her elegant roof, the wife of her brother. And this Agnes Deering had come between Mrs. Kittredge and her darling ambition. And with pride, the ruling passion in the character of Hester Kittredge, it was no wonder that she could not feel very cordially towards the woman who had so sorely, although unconsciously, checkmated her.

Still, the second disagreeable fact came in due time to be faced, and the Deerings at last actually received cards for an evening party at the house of Ambrose Kittredge.

Poor Agnes! She sometimes wondered to herself whether it would ever be possible for her to go up those massive stone steps and through the grand, carved doors, with any home feeling, any sense of right and relationship.

The height to which he had lifted her, at least from the Medbury point of view, made her lover a still greater hero even in the girl's eyes. But Agnes saw him through the magic atmosphere of fancy and love. I suspect that it is best women should usually do this with the men

they are to marry; but Agnes would learn her mistake slowly.

Leander Sullivan was no paladin of ancient romance, no Bayard nor Sydney. He had plenty of self-conceit and selfishness, and they would come to the surface in time; for he had been spoiled a good deal from his boyhood. His love for Agnes Deering, loyal and unselfish, was the best thing about him, and it had wrought, as a genuine, honest love for a woman always does, some new strength and manliness within him.

The day before the party was to come off, Mrs. Kittredge entered the breakfast-room, which her mother, occupied with the morning paper, had not yet left. She carried an open letter in her hand.

"Mamma," she cried out, evidently quite excited, "the Wentworths are coming!"

Mrs. Sullivan looked up, and her paper slipped to the carpet.

"Why, Hester, do you really mean that?" she said.

"Yes, here is the letter written by Alick before they started. They were to sail in the Scotia, and Ambrose read me she was in this morning. They had decided to come on to Medbury without delay, not stopping in New York to rest at all; and so I shall expect them in this evening's train."

Then the mother and daughter looked at each other, with the same thought, and a great bitterness rose and grew in Mrs. Kittredge's face.

"Well, Hester?"



"Isn't it most aggravating, mother? My plan, you see, was working delightfully. O Leander Sullivan, what a fool you have been! what a chance you have thrown away!"

"Yes, it is true, I fear," said Mrs. Sullivan, drawing a deep sigh, her pride and ambition awake now, and she forgot all about the diamond ring which Leander and she had selected, the mother entering eagerly into it all for her boy's sake at the time.

"It would have gone hard if I could not have managed to bring about the thing, and the two thrown constantly into each other's society; all the little strings in our own hands, and I understand Leander so well, — his taste and notions," said Mrs. Kittredge, in a tone about equally balanced between indignation and despair.

"Well, Hester, what is the use of making one's self miserable over it? Let us be philosophers," added her mother, dignifiedly resigned.

"That's all we can do; yet, just at this juncture it will be particularly aggravating to treat those Deerings with common hospitality. I don't want to see one of their faces under my roof, flaunting their triumph in my eyes; and we should have been so proud and so delighted, mother, to have beheld the day when Leander Sullivan led to the altar Honora Wentworth."

Mrs. Sullivan herself said nothing, but her silence did a great deal. "Is there nothing from her in the letter?" she inquired at last.

"Oh, yes; the dear child adds a postscript to Alick's letter, in her bright, piquant fashion. The Rhine and

the Alps, Rome and Paris, she declares, have quite worn her out, and left her with a solitary longing to nestle down, a bundle of limp, tired nerves and muscles, in the quietest, darkest corner of the house, and lead the life of a dormouse for, at least, a couple of months. Wit and sense have fairly oozed out of her with the last two years' tumbling about the continent."

"Poor child!" laughed Mrs. Sullivan. Then she added, "I wish, as things have turned out, we had urged Leander's going abroad last spring. You know we never encouraged it then, though his heart was half set on it."

"Oh, dear, yes! But who could ever have been on guard against this miserable Deering business? One cannot see ahead in this world, unfortunately."

So the ladies talked until, at last, Mrs. Kittredge was summoned away to give some orders for her anticipated guests, and she left her mother with Alexander Wentworth's letter. Who Alexander Wentworth was, I may as well tell you now, perhaps, as at any other time.

He was Mr. Kittredge's nephew, the son of his sister, the latter having died in her son's early boyhood, as his father had also. So his Uncle Ambrose, who was also his guardian, was the boy's nearest relative on the mother's side. The gentleman had always been fond and proud of his nephew, indulging him to the utmost.

He was a handsome fellow, with plenty of high spirits, and something dashing and magnetic about him. He was the best kind of company for a picnic, a sail, a dinner-party, anything of that sort. As for any latent forces that were in this Alick Wentworth, as his family name

went, that remained to be proved. But he was young yet, not more than twenty-four, and thus far he had had quite enough to do, sucking his juices out of the plump cluster which life had dropped into his hands.

He had lounged through college in a lazy, luxurious sort of fashion, having that bright, comfortable sort of memory which easily absorbs the surfaces of knowledge; then he had taken a fancy to go abroad for a couple of years, with a general purpose to see all he could, and have a good time generally, and cultivate himself in the prominent continental languages where they were vernacular. Meanwhile, he wrote home to his uncle bright, amusing letters, with the sparkle of his own wit through all of them.

Alick had a sister, Honora Wentworth, a tall, showy, elegant girl, a year younger than himself. In her way she was as socially attractive as her brother, with a good deal the same flash and glitter of wit; lady-like, agreeable, with that sort of culture which is most available in society. For the rest, let Honora Wentworth speak for herself, as she comes to take her place in my story.

The Wentworths came of old and distinguished family stock, governors, and senators, and foreign ministers, among one and another of the branches. It is true the family numbers and wealth had suffered some decadence of late, but still there was the old name and stock to fall back upon.

The Sullivans were proud of the Wentworth connection, and Mrs. Kittredge had set her heart on Leander's

taking to wife Honora, more than she had on almost anything else in the world.

She had her matrimonial programme all nicely arranged, and she had plenty of feminine tact, and would be very likely to carry her point here as elsewhere.

At any rate, her first move had succeeded nicely. Young Wentworth always kept up a brisk correspondence with his uncle, and Mrs. Kittredge had insisted that her husband's niece and nephew should come to Medbury immediately on their return to their native land.

She intended to secure Honora for the winter, and then to devote herself to the carrying out of her dearly cherished plan. She knew Leander thoroughly, and the ways in which he could be most readily reached and influenced. And Mrs. Kittredge had that fine tact which would never allow her purpose to show itself precipitately.

As for Honora Wentworth, Mrs. Kittredge stood on the most cordial possible footing with that brilliant young lady. It is true their personal intercourse had not been large, as the Wentworths had gone abroad almost immediately subsequent to their uncle's marriage, delaying the journey, in fact, in order to attend the wedding ceremonies at Medbury.

But there were plenty of reasons why the Kittredges and Wentworths should be on friendly terms; and the young matron intended to sound her guest thoroughly, and learn whether the heart, the fancy, or the ambition of Honora Wentworth would prove the most sensitive feature of her character.

The prospect certainly would have looked encouraging

if that hateful apparition of Agnes Deering had not risen up in the way. I am afraid the conscience of Mrs. Hester Kittredge would not have been over-scrupulous about setting the girl aside, if only there had been the smallest chance of success.

You may be certain that the invitation to the Kittredges made no little flutter in the Deering household. The mother very soon decided that she was not equal to an evening party, and must send regrets. But it is my private opinion that if Mrs. Deering's wardrobe had been equal to a fresh silk and a handsome lace coiffure, her strength might have proved sufficient for the evening exertion.

It strained, to the utmost, the family taste and funds to get up those three girls in becoming toilets for the grand party. Hollis cared less for dress than either of her sisters; but Marcia's genius always won a triumph in such crises. It was wonderful what that girl's fingers could effect with scanty materials. And the result this time did her credit. It is probable that her own dress and that of her sister's cost less than that of any of Ambrose Kittredge's guests on that eventful night; but nobody would have suspected it.

Mr. Deering actually hired a carriage for the occasion, and sent his daughters off in state.

"We must do it, pa, you know, if we starve for the rest of the year," said the mother, solemnly.

Of course, the salient features of all elegant parties are much the same. Mr. and Mrs. Kittredge's did not all below its class in blaze of lights and beauty of flow-

ers in gorgeous dresses and gay dances, crowned with a splendid supper.

The Deerings were objects of great interest and curiosity to the Sullivan set, especially the betrothed of Leander, for this fact had been important enough to electrify even the topmost circle of Medbury society.

The young lady, as well as her sisters, received a good deal of attention from people who had hitherto ignored their existence.

As for Leander the proud and happy fellow really thought there was not a woman in the room to compare with Agnes. That conviction, of course, had its foundation in a lover's partiality; but, brought face to face with his own circle, Leander Sullivan had no reason to blush for the lady who was to bear his name.

Marcia was quite in her element, and carried herself through all the ceremonies of the evening with a grace and ease which certainly did her credit.

Poor Hollis was the least conspicuous and the least admired of the three. She never would make much of a figure at parties. It was not in her, yet she enjoyed the whole thing with a keen zest; but she liked best to sit quietly, and watch the brilliant scene going on before her, with busy thoughts going on too, under the still, grave face, which would have startled and shocked the elegant people around her.

Of course, the one topic of conversation, the next day, among the Deerings was the Kittredge party. Mamma was as eager as the girls to hear and to talk about it; and it was amusing to see how her thin, faded face lighted

up with pleasure over every attention which had been bestowed upon her daughters.

For a long while Agnes and Marcia had the talking mostly to themselves, but her mother wanted at last to get Hollis' view of the matter too. That youngest girl of hers had a way of seeing things, and a quaint, picturesque style of showing them off, which neither of her other sisters possessed, and which set the whole before you vivid as a picture.

It was worth while to hear Hollis go over the party and the people. Her talk made the whole seem as fresh and new to her sisters as though they had not been there, and Marcia said, "Why, Hollis, how did you really manage to see so much that we did not?"

"And didn't anybody show my little Hollis any attention?" asked the mother; for you must remember that Hollis was her baby, and, added to that fact, Mrs. Deering was not quite so certain about her looks and bearing as she was about the elder girls.

"Oh, yes, mamma, at least, quite as much as I wanted. It is vastly pleasanter to sit still and watch the people, and have one's thoughts about them, than to be bored with commonplaces."

"I'm sure, Hollis," said Agnes, kindly, "you did not go without your share of attention. There was young Wentworth, Mr. Kittredge's nephew, took you out to supper, and when I glanced at you, you were talking bravely together."

"Yes. What in the world, Holly, did you find to talk about with young Wentworth?" asked Marcia, curiously;

for Hollis, although she was twenty-one, had scarcely had a beau in her life.

"He was relating something about a month he passed in Wales. I am sure I cannot tell how he came to talk about that; but I grew interested, and asked him questions. It was very entertaining — what he said."

"And he really took you out to supper. It was quite a feather in your cap, my dear."

"Hardly, mamma," with her little, fresh, amused laugh, like a child's. "It was very good-natured of him though, for he saw I stood quite a chance of being left solitary in the drawing-room, if he did not take pity upon me."

"And Mr. Kittredge took you out, you say, Agnes?" said the mother, recurring again to that pleasant and significant fact. "It was a very handsome way of recognizing your position in the family."

"I've no doubt Leander envied his brother-in-law, although the elegant Miss Wentworth was hanging on his arm," added Marcia, in her bright way, glancing archly at her sister.

"Yes, Miss Wentworth is certainly very elegant," said Hollis, reflectively, as though something lay back of her remark.

"She is called very handsome also," continued Marcia.

"I presume she is all that too," replied Hollis, still with some doubt or dissent in her tones.

Her family had all come, by this time, to have a high regard for Hollis' opinion of people. It was wonderful

how that shy, quiet girl's instinct went straight to the real character of man or woman.

"Well, Hollis, what do *you* think about her? Is she handsome or not, to you?" said Marcia.

"I think she is handsome on first sight, but —" she stopped there.

Hollis Deering had a conscience. It would not let her tongue glide smoothly and easily over hard judgments of others; moreover, she saw, with her clear, inward vision, far down into the meanings of her speech, if she made it, and to her it held severer significance than it probably would to the others.

"Oh, go on, Hollis. It is only among ourselves, you know," said Marcia, impatiently.

"It seems to me that Miss Wentworth has a face, that, though strikingly handsome on first sight, would grow less so each day as you grew in intimacy with it, until at last it might come to weary you, or something worse even than that."

## CHAPTER VII.

AT their late breakfast, next day, the party of the night previous was the principal topic of conversation between the Kittredge family and their guests.

At his own table the virtues of Ambrose Kittredge shone conspicuous. He was in his element, presiding there, — the bland, attentive, dignified host, dispensing the hospitalities of his elegant home.

"Well, Alick," — glancing towards his handsome young nephew, — "lost your heart last night, or did it get bewildered among such a crowd of beautiful damsels? Let me send you a bit more of the steak, my boy."

"Thank you, sir; I am positively incapacitated for another mouthful."

At this juncture Honora's laugh — a light, slippery thing — rippled into the talk: "Alick's heart! Uncle Ambrose, your innocence does amuse me. The idea of your nephew's possessing any organ of that sort sufficiently vital to give him a sensation for a moment!"

No doubt whatever that Alexander Wentworth had plenty of vanity and self-conceit, but he had too much good taste ever to make these qualities salient in his talk or manner; and, at any rate, he was not silly enough to find any especial flavor in that foolish speech of Honora's, neither did it annoy him. Alick Wentworth took his

elegant sister, as he did the world in general, with a good-natured indifference. He put down his coffee-cup, wiped his handsome brown mustache with that indolent, graceful air which was his habit. "If the thing were really worth it, I might retort by inquiring how many flirtations Miss Honora Wentworth has carried through admirably since her heart gave its final twinge over one of my sex."

"Children," said Mr. Kittredge, half gravely, "I suspect, if one could get at the facts, we should find you had carried very loose reins ever since you put the ocean between us. I felt a little alarmed, sometimes, lest it was a dangerous experiment, letting two such high-mettled young things set off by themselves to try the other side of the world."

If his handsome mustache had not hidden his mouth, one on the watch might have detected a curious fleeting expression on the lips of Alick Wentworth; but he said nothing, and Honora answered, with another of her smooth, slippery laughs, "O uncle! whatever we may have done, we are going to reform, and be solemnly good and proper, now we are back in dear, dull, dingy, moral old Medbury. If Alick has sown any wild oats, or if I have had a harmless flirtation or two in atmospheres where such things are native as heath to Scotland, or hawthorn to England, in our 'dear native land,' as the poet says, you will find me a model of prudery, and Al. of propriety."

Now, although this may sound like very small talk, come really to put it down in a book, nevertheless, at Ambrose Kittredge's breakfast-table, set off by Miss Wentworth's voice, and grace, and manner, nothing she

said struck the listeners as silly, or at best superficial, but as bright, piquant, sparkling with wit and humor.

Why, on precisely such talk as this, young men, at home and abroad, had hung entranced for hours, and swore Miss Wentworth was a magnificent, splendid creature, a Beatrice or a Cleopatra. Perhaps Alick, for some occult reason, did not just relish this vein of conversation. At any rate, he brought it back to the old starting-point of the party. "American women fairly deserve their reputation for being the most beautiful in the world. When did we ever, Honora, in all our ramblings, find in a single assemblage so many really pretty women as we did last night in Uncle Ambrose's parlors? That was a strikingly interesting girl you yourself took out to supper last evening, sir."

This last clause created a sensation at the breakfast-table. Alick Wentworth, of course, having arrived only the day before, had not the faintest suspicion that anybody took vital interest in his remark; but, of course, too, that fact only gave additional weight to his compliment, his judgment of a woman or a picture being regarded as conclusive authority — in his uncle's household.

As for Leander, whatever he felt on this occasion, he wisely helped himself to another slice of omelette without a word; but I doubt whether there was a man in the world toward whom he was conscious of such a glow of cordiality, at that moment, as towards his friend, Alick Wentworth.

Mr. Kittredge felt bound to come to the rescue. "Yes, that was Miss Deering; a very interesting young



lady, as you remarked, Alick, — a friend of Leander's too."

There was nothing which struck either of the Wentworths as remarkable in that clause. Leander might be friend or "beau" to a hundred young women, for that matter.

Miss Wentworth sparkled up again. "I cannot say as much for the young lady *you* took out, Alick Wentworth. I said to myself, 'How did the fellow come on that thin, brown, weird-looking model for one of the three Fates?' She, at least, was hopelessly homely. Did it suit you to act the part of 'Good Samaritan' towards her?"

This time Mrs. Sullivan kindly stepped to the rescue. "That was a Miss Deering also; but she is in every respect unlike her sister."

"Deering," repeated Alick. "Oh, yes, I remember the name now. Somebody — I forget who — introduced me to the girl, and as she appeared to stand a fair chance of going out to supper alone, I could do no less than offer her my arm. But, on my honor, I was not thinking of the 'Good Samaritan' at that moment, Honora."

"How did you like the part, though, when you were surprised into it?" continued the girl.

"If you choose to put it in that way, excellently well. Better, I honestly believe, than if I had had my pick in any group around me composed of my blooming and beautiful young countrywomen."

"Do explain yourself, Alick," exclaimed Leander Sullivan, who, in his intimate relations with the family

during the last two months, had learned something of the stuff that was in Hollis Deering, although her character was one he could never widely comprehend.

Alick Wentworth settled his graceful limbs back in a chair. "The truth is," he said, "I've known charming women, — lovely, beautiful, fascinating, — the whole gamut of adjectives, — all my life. My sister Honora is one of that kind. Cousin Hester here," turning to Mrs. Kittredge, that being the name by which the nephew and niece usually designated their uncle's young wife, "is another, and, saving the latter's presence, I should say I believe I've grown tired of them. It isn't a fellow's fault, you know, if he does get surfeited on sweets; and that's a little my state of the case, with smiles, and bloom, and brilliancy, and all that."

There was a laugh around the table.

"So, for a change, you tried the antithesis of beauty and charms," said Honora. "I am curious to know how it worked with you, Alick."

"Admirably, Honora. I found this girl, under all her brownness and homeliness, although I am not so clear as to the latter, had a brain and a soul, where your women all brightness and charms are sometimes fatally lacking. This girl was to me a good deal like a whiff of fresh, strong sea-air, after a sultry summer's day, or a bank of clover blossoms after an hour in your conservatory, Cousin Hester. Of course the clover can't compare with your roses and geraniums, — any man with eyes and taste knows that, — but, after all, there is something in sweet, homely scents, in fresh dews and wild

bloom, that does not belong to your exotics, — all luscious color and musky fragrance.”

Everybody laughed again. Alick Wentworth had an odd, picturesque way of putting things.

“I wonder if Alick’s rule wouldn’t work equally well with regard to men too,” rattled on Honora. “I’m tired of gallant and interesting gentlemen. Cousin Leander, won’t you find me some shy, awkward, blundering specimen, just for a variety, here in Medbury, and I will do my best to be agreeable to him.”

Mr. Kittredge, feeling a secret uneasiness lest this subject should not prove as pleasant to Leander as it would if Hollis Deering were not his prospective sister-in-law, found some excuse now for breaking up the breakfast-party, and it being a pleasant November morning, a frosty briskness in the air, a dream lingering in blue sky and fair, faint sunshine, of the summer that had been, a prophecy haunting the winds and the bare, chilled earth of the winter that was to be, Leander proposed to Alick that they should have a drive together.

“Nothing would suit me better, my dear fellow. A ten-mile drive over your fine roads in this frosty weather will help to get the rocking of the sea out of my brain.”

The two young men went out to the barn together, and passed half an hour among the fine blooded horses in Mr. Kittredge’s stables, that gentleman priding himself no little on these rare equine specimens. Then the two went bowling over the road in a phaeton, behind a span of fine, slender gray ponies, joking and telling stories in

the very best humor possible, one would have fancied, with themselves and the world at large.

When the gravity slipped in, I cannot tell, but like the fine, half-visible vapor upon the distant hills, it fell between those two. Could it be that careless, prosperous, petted Alick Wentworth had any secret of care or trouble down deep in his soul? One might half have fancied so, catching the look of his face for a few moments as they dashed along the broad, smooth road, with the wide, damp, yellowish meadows lying low on either side.

Suddenly, with a little start, like one who wakes from an uneasy sort of dream, young Wentworth roused himself and glanced at Leander.

“You’re in a brown study, Sullivan. It can’t be wine at this time of the day, so it must be woman. Come, make a clean breast of it. You may rely on my sympathy.”

Of course, all this was said in joke. Was it to hide his own gravity of a moment before?

To tell the truth, Leander Sullivan had been utterly unconscious of the seriousness on the part of his friend, his thoughts going over with the talk that morning at the breakfast-table.

Whatever pain and chafing his family opposition to his engagement had caused him, Leander Sullivan had borne all in silence. A sudden impulse came over him now to unbosom himself to “the fine, good-hearted fellow” by his side.

It was very doubtful whether Leander would have

opened the door of his secret trouble during their ride, if Alick's praise of his betrothed had not slipped back the bolt, when they sat together at the breakfast-table that morning.

"You are right, Alick," cracking his whip, so that the high-mettled creatures plunged, pricked their ears, and their feet hardly seemed to touch the ground as they flew along. "It isn't wine, but woman."

"What? A flirtation, or anything of that sort?"

"No, nothing of that, — solemn, dead earnest this time, Alick."

It was almost as hard for Leander as proposing to Agnes Deering had been. A woman would have got at her confession so much more naturally and gracefully. But I suppose these things are not in the masculine genius.

"What, serious, old fellow?" slapping him on the shoulder. "I thought you were as good proof in this line as I. But" — seeing the other's face — "there's an end to the joking, Leander. Let's have the story in dead earnest."

It was easy to young Sullivan after he had once plunged into the tale. He told it as a man would, to whom it was a matter of vital interest, with something, too, of the natural, dramatic effect of a woman. He went over the whole story, — his acquaintance with Agnes Deering last summer, which grew into love; the engagement, and the contempt and anger with which his family had learned his choice of a wife. Leander Sullivan was too much of a man to dilate upon what he had borne all

this time; but one who heard his story could not fail to perceive it; and I think anybody listening, as Alick Wentworth did, would have admired and honored the fellow a little more when he had finished.

Whatever there was at the basis of his character, Alexander Wentworth had on the surface a good-humored, impressible nature, easily stirred at sight of courage, honor, generosity.

Leander's story roused this better, impulsive side of Alick Wentworth. He turned to Leander when the latter was finished.

"Shake hands on that, old fellow," he said; "shake hands. I honor you from my soul for the brave part you've acted. When a man loves a woman — such a woman as the one you do — what right have money or position to stand in the way of his wedding her? You've got the right stuff in you; you've proved it, Sullivan. Good luck to you and your lady!"

"Thank you, Al.; I meant to play the part of a man, and, sir, I've done it. I ought to have been hanged on the nearest tree if I hadn't. How such a woman as Agnes Deering could ever take up with such a good-for-nothing rascal as I am, will be a mystery to me to the end of my life. You've seen her, Alick?"

"Yes; I watched her going out on Uncle Ambrose's arm last night. Does your taste honor, Leander."

Alick Wentworth's good nature always incited him to say pleasant things; but this time he honestly felt all that he expressed.

"But if you knew her well, — knew what an angel she

is!" continued young Sullivan, forgetting in his eagerness and pleasure that he was a lover.

"I mean to see more of her," broke in Alick. "You must take me round there when you go courting. There's that younger sister of hers, — something quaint, and fresh, and honest about her that one doesn't meet in a half century of women."

Then both remembered what Honora had said about Hollis Deering that morning. They laughed heartily over it, Alick declaring that brilliant and beautiful women, such as everybody called his sister, were dreadfully severe on their own sex, "get them started." However, they never meant a hundredth part of what they said.

Leander replied that, "As for the brownness and homeliness, it might all be true; but for all that, some wonderful stuff had gone to the making of Hollis Deering."

"That's a fact. I must see more of her," added Alick; and, as they swept homeward, it was arranged between the young men that they should call at the Deerings in a day or two.

"Capital, good-hearted, honest fellow you are, Alick," said Leander, settling himself back in his seat. "Always liked you, but never so well as this morning."

Alick Wentworth looked off to the pleasant noon sunshine, lying bright and soft on the long, gray reaches of the meadows, clinging to the hills, and drawing wreaths of faint, white fog, hanging like thin, fluttering, glazed

ribbons in the air; then he looked up the long, straight line of dull, dun-colored road.

"Honest, Leander!" he said; and it half seemed as though his voice played with a kind of scorn and satire with the dissyllable. "I suppose it is an old habit of association, but I never hear that word that I do not think of Iago, 'that honest man, Iago,' Leander."

While the two young men were having their confidential talk together, the ladies in Mrs. Kittredge's room were having another with their guest.

"The facts about Leander would have to transpire sooner or later," Mrs. Kittredge had told her mother; "and the quicker the story was over the better."

Mrs. Sullivan commenced the relation with impressive solemnity. "My dear Honora, Hester and I have had a very painful family chapter to go through with since you left us."

Miss Wentworth was idling away the morning in an easy-chair, with a kind of general purpose of concentrating her energies to the work of going upstairs and unpacking her trunks, still doubtful whether she had sufficiently recovered from her voyage for so much exertion.

She was in just the right sort of mood to enjoy a little gossip, and Mrs. Sullivan's solemn preface startled her a little.

"Aunt Harriet, you alarm me. What in the world has been happening to you and Hester?"

Then the ladies told the story, — Mrs. Kittredge

taking the lion's share of it, after all, setting the Deering position and poverty, and the Sullivan distress and dismay over Leander's choice, in the strongest possible lights.

Of course, Miss Wentworth was shocked and sympathetic to the last degree. She was a little chagrined, too, at Leander Sullivan's falling in love at all; it almost seemed like a defection towards herself, for she had rather counted on having a flirtation with him during her visit at Medbury. She had her intuitions, too, as to where the choice of his sister and mother would have inclined when it came to selecting a bride for Leander; for there had been vague hints and half-clipped sentences in letters, which Honora Wentworth, wise in all that concerned herself, would not be slow to comprehend.

As for Leander, the lady and himself had got on nicely and grown very well acquainted when they had been brought together on a certain family footing, during the wedding festivities which had celebrated the union of her uncle with Leander's sister.

Honora Wentworth liked the brother well enough, precisely as she did a dozen other young men. And under his sister's roof, with all the family influences brought to bear on her, it was by no means impossible that Leander Sullivan might have been a successful wooer, and carried off triumphantly the coveted prize of Honora Wentworth's hand.

That her chances, however, were gone in that quarter, did not give Miss Wentworth a solitary pang. She had a high estimate of her own value in the matrimonial market, and had no doubt in her own mind that there

were plenty of suitors in store with quite as many worldly advantages to offer her as Leander Sullivan, although he had a list which, had it been offered to Honora Wentworth's acceptance, that young lady would probably have gone over in her mind, with a feeling that it was not to be sneered at.

"I should think you justified in taking almost any measures under the circumstances, Cousin Hester," said Honora, in the course of that morning's talk.

"Young Adam Cupid, he that shot so trim,  
When King Cophetua loved the beggar maid,"

lightly hummed the young lady; then catching the dark look on Mrs. Kittredge's face, she continued seriously, "You have more than your share of woman's wit. Can't you devise some method of breaking this engagement?"

Mrs. Sullivan started the ball in a dolefully impressive manner, but her daughter had taken the story out of the elder lady's lips, and painted Leander's engagement, and the awful disgrace which he was bringing upon Sullivan root and branch, in such vivid colors, and with such dramatic intensity, that her mother grew seriously uneasy as she listened.

With all her pride and prejudices, with all the conventional ideas which had shaped this woman's thought and life, Mrs. Sullivan was a mother, and she had proved that she had a mother's feeling. Miss Deering was, in a little while, to be Leander's wife.

His honor, dignity, good-name, were all to be identified with hers, and it cut closely to the mother's heart, to hear

the woman who was to bear Leander Sullivan's name held up to view as one wholly, by position and breeding, beneath the notice of his family.

Under the influence of this feeling, Mrs. Sullivan felt it was high time to come to the defence of Agnes Deering.

"O Honora, my dear, we wouldn't think of going to such lengths, even if it were in our power," she said. "Sorely as we regret Leander's choice, so long as he honestly loves the girl, and has pledged himself to her, none of us would be justified in interfering. I am compelled to say, also, that Hester's feelings carry her a little too far when she gets to talking of this matter. As for Miss Deering herself — you heard what Alick said of her this morning."

"Oh, yes, and I remember what I said of her sister, too!" — a little startled as she recalled the emphatic adjectives she had bestowed on the young woman who was soon to be Leander Sullivan's sister-in-law.

"What will your brother think of me, Cousin Hester? And what if it had been his future wife all this time whom I was sentencing to block and axe in that fashion?"

"I just wish it had been, Honora. It would have served the fellow right for all the misery he has given his family."

Honora Wentworth laughed the memory off. As for hurting anybody's feelings when her own interests were not involved, that never gave her any serious concern,

although she was not malicious, — only vain, and conceited; and selfish.

And I wish that Honora Wentworth was the only woman I have ever known, who, to turn a joke, or raise a laugh over her own piquant wit, would not stop for the pain, or ridicule, or misery she was making for another.



## CHAPTER VIII.

OF course, by this time, it had come to be nothing very remarkable for Leander Sullivan to call on the Deerings, but it did create a fresh sensation in the family when the young man brought his friend, Alick Wentworth, with him one evening.

All the girls happened to be in the parlor at the time, and looking, even to Hollis, their best; and the little, old-fashioned room, with the bright fire in the grate, and the young life all around, had a warm, home-like air, if the daylight did prove everything plain, almost to shabbiness.

It was an additional feather in the Deering-cap, to have a Wentworth under the roof, and it seemed as though the very timbers ought to have a consciousness of the fact; but the family, to their credit be it said, took the matter as simply as they had, a little while before, the visit of Mrs. Sullivan and Mrs. Kittredge.

If there is good stuff in character, prosperity as well as adversity brings it out, and that there was something of the sort in these Deerings, even in the poor, nervous, faded mother, with all her little notions and grooves, was proved by the fact that they took on no airs nor affectations during all the period of Agnes' engagement. Even the neighbors, who were on the keen scent for something

of the kind, admitted that the eldest daughter did not carry her head any higher because she was to marry a rich man, which a vulgar woman would have been most likely to do; and that pretty Marcia, who, behind all her bloom and wavy grace, had the brain most likely to be turned by the new honors, was sufficiently steadied by the family influences to bear herself with simplicity through all the crisis.

Alick Wentworth had come here to-night, partly to get rid of some secret, uncomfortable reflections which came out of the past like ghosts, and always haunted him now, when he was alone, partly also for Leander's sake, and partly to see that quaint, brown girl, who had struck him as something odd and fresh that night of the Kittredge party. Accustomed as he was to elegant rooms, that plain little parlor had a pleasant, cheery look to Alick Wentworth. For the first hour the elder girls did the entertaining mostly, Hollis usually leaving it to them, with a feeling that her elder sisters were more agreeable than she was.

That pretty, lady-like Marcia beamed and smiled her brightest on the new guest; but prettiness and grace could only make at this time a very passing impression on Alick Wentworth.

Hollis Deering was a little surprised when, at last, young Wentworth strolled over to her side of the room; for in company the poor child was quite used to being set in the background, and, what is more, she usually enjoyed herself there, having little relish for the platitudes and commonplaces of average society. She liked, too,

to sit still and hear others talk, watching them with those bright, still eyes of hers, — eyes which dived far down into thought and character. Indeed, Hollis used to say, hearing people talk was sometimes better than reading a book, and those who knew her understood that, with Hollis, this comparison formed her highest standard of human enjoyment.

Alick Wentworth had that native tact which men of the world cannot wholly acquire. He soon led the conversation back to the point where they had left it at Mr. Kittredge's party, and Hollis was soon as absorbed and eager over it as before.

As everybody knows, one of the most curious problems in the world is the fancies people take to each other! Look at the friendships, look at the marriages of men and women! Just the sort of people brought together whom you would never suspect would have the slightest affinity for each other.

Now, here was that pretty, stylish Marcia, with her smiles and graces. It would not have been at all unaccountable if young Wentworth had gone into a flirtation with her; but of conducting that, Hollis Deering would have had no more conception than a baby.

Alick Wentworth had not a very high opinion of women in general. It is always a great misfortune to a man when he has not, as it is to one to have a low estimate of his kind; but he had seen women on their weakest side, the side of their frivolities and selfishnesses and vanities. This was largely his fault, of course. He ought to have brought out something better in them,

but he had not; and he regarded his sister Honora as about a fair average specimen of her sex, and Alick Wentworth had, at least, read *her* pretty thoroughly.

But here was a young woman, who had not, evidently, a suspicion of making a conquest, who never once had a thought of the impression she was making on him, fresh and honest as sunlight. There was a flavor about her of the broad out-door life, of clover and daisies, which he relished. She was like a wind from the sea, blowing in salt and cool and wholesome upon him, just as he had said.

Not that it ever entered his thought to fall in love with Hollis Deering. Alick Wentworth had something just now to be thinking of, very different from falling in love with the most captivating woman in the world. Indeed, it seemed to him that one phase of his life had gone long ago, — the one that belonged to the indolent, luxurious, careless, pleasure-taking years, which could never come back again to him, Alick Wentworth. Just at this time, too, I think that he was better and worse than he had ever been in his life before. That may seem a paradox, but there were forces within him alive and at work which were dragging him down, down — I say it solemnly — to the devil; and what in him was best and truest turned, at this juncture, with a sort of loathing from all that was superficial and false to a character simple and honest to the core.

He had a vague feeling that, while from day to day the ground slipped away under him, he had hold of something real and true in Hollis Deering's presence. Per-

haps this was the secret of her strange charm for him; and perhaps, if we could see into the moods of human souls, we should find these moods the real key of many singular attractions.

With her native downrightness, which had something of a child's clearness and honesty about it, Hollis Deering had a great deal of original fun and playfulness sparkling and glimmering through all her talk.

It came out to-night in a hundred ways,—the little, swift, quivering laugh, and her great brown eyes widened and warmed, and her cheeks flushed; and again her companion thought: "You may be brown and homely; but under the brownness and homeliness there is a wonderful beauty which will grow with the years, and make your face serene and noble, when your merely handsome or pretty woman—the woman whose charms are all those that belong to youth—the woman of soft tints and delicate bloom—will have settled down into a mass of wrinkles and dull old age."

So they sat on by the grate-fire in the little parlor, and outside the winds of the early winter chafed and moaned, while the young man and woman talked to each other. What was most singular of all, they seemed to find topics enough in common,—he, the elegant, accomplished man of the world, and this poor, little, quaint, shy girl, who had never in her whole life been a hundred miles outside the town of Medbury.

Hollis Deering puzzled Alick Wentworth, stimulated his curiosity; he told her amusing stories of his travels and adventures, and her laugh broke swift and clear as

fresh sunlight among his dark thoughts, and seemed for the moment to chase them away with wholesome warmth and brightness.

She asked him questions, too, one after another,—straightforward, curious, just as a child would,—blundering sometimes, as those must who have never beheld the scenes of which they talk, but amazing him on the whole by the breadth and correctness of her knowledge.

He told her so; and her answer was characteristic. "Oh, there is a large town library in Medbury, and I am very fond of reading, and they tell me I have a remarkable memory."

On the opposite side of the room, Leander Sullivan and Agnes Deering were having their talk, too, of a very different sort.

On that day, Leander had purchased, just on the environs of Medbury, a choice building site. In a little while he intended that a home should arise there, of which the girl by his side should be installed the fair young mistress.

He went over a general plan of the prospective house now, and Agnes listened, and thought that in all God's world there would be no woman so happy, no wife so blessed as she.

"There's one thing," said Leander; "a fellow can't wait forever, and what's the use of his doing it? So long as you are to be mine, Agnes, the sooner you set the happy day, the better;" and a great deal more of that sort of talk, which every woman who has ever had a lover can easily supplement for herself.

So at last Leander won a tremulous promise that the great day of his life and of Agnes Deering's should come among the early blossoms and songs of the spring that was lying, bound, and silent, and biding its time, under the winter. It was high time to leave when that was settled.

"I've actually talked with a woman for two mortal hours, and not paid her a compliment, and she hasn't dropped her bait for one! That's a new event in your life, Alick Wentworth," mused the young gentleman as he and Sullivan took their departure.

There was plenty of fun in the Deering household that night, after the young men had left.

It does seem a pity, when you come to think of it, that one's best, finest sayings, the words that flash and effervesce with sudden inspirations of wit and humor, are mostly confined to the household or one's dearest friends.

Agnes and Marcia Deering were in the merriest possible mood over their sister's beau, when they got up to their mother's room, that night, and Mrs. Deering listened, amazed and flattered, and for once waxed merry with her girls.

"To think, Hollis, you should have cut me entirely out with young Wentworth! I could see you were the magnet for his eyes and thoughts all the evening," said Marcia.

"But what in the world, Hollis, did you find to talk about?" asked Mrs. Deering.

"Talk about, mamma!" exclaimed Agnes. "There was no lack of topics. Why, I caught fragments of their

conversation, and do believe they made the grand tour of Europe together."

"To think," continued Marcia, enjoying her younger sister's blushes and confusion, "that you have made a conquest, actually carried on a flirtation with young Wentworth! I thought you had too much conscience for work of that sort, Hollis Deering."

The appalled look which came into the girl's face was thoroughly amusing. "Conquest! — Flirtation!" — going over the words much as though she had been accused of some crime. "You don't suppose he fancied I could be thinking anything of that sort, do you? I was only interested in his travels and his funny stories."

"O you dear, honest old thing!" answered Agnes, coming to the rescue. "Of course he thought nothing of the kind. Anybody would know better, to look in your face or hear your voice. Why, Hollis Deering, to save your life, you couldn't carry on a half-hour's flirtation with any man."

"No — nor I wouldn't if I could," answered Hollis, drawing a breath of relief.

She went up to her room, leaving her sisters, merry and loquacious, below. If anybody felt any pleasure or triumph, because of her Benjamin's share of Alick Wentworth's society, it was not that downright, honest Hollis.

Sitting on the side of her bed, though, a grave look came into the girl's eyes; she remembered, during the course of their conversation, the sudden lapses into silence on the young man's part, — the serious, absent look which came into his face, the awakening out of all this, just as

he had awakened that day on which he and Leander Sullivan had driven out together.

"There is some trouble on that young man's mind, and it is no light one — no light one," — going over the words gravely to herself.

With that fine, true instinct that went down to the core of things, you might be well-nigh certain that Hollis Deering had made no misjudgment here. All the women he had danced and flirted with, and flattered, would not have found out so much of Alick Wentworth as this brown, shy girl, in her two hours' talk.

## CHAPTER IX.

DURING the month that followed, Alick Wentworth was frequently a guest of the little cottage at Medbury. He came often in company with Leander Sullivan, in whose eyes, held by a charm potent as the one which Oberon's sly Puck carried about him, the small straw-colored dwelling, behind its rustic fence, was fairer than the stateliest palace.

But Alick Wentworth came without his friend quite as often as with him, at the most unaccountable times and seasons too, early in the morning or late in the evening, just as the fancy seized him.

I cannot tell precisely how, but it came to be understood in the Deering household that Hollis was the loadstone which drew young Wentworth across the threshold. Not that he confined his attentions to the youngest daughter; there were times when he and Marcia ran a tilt of jest and wit against each other, and there was plenty of sparkle and merriment in the encounter.

Young Wentworth was altogether the most accomplished and agreeable gentleman who had ever crossed Marcia Deering's path. She found his society altogether fascinating when he chose to make himself so; but, for all that, she never regarded him in any other light than than that of her young sister's friend, — that is precisely

the word, neither lover nor admirer fitting the relation between Alexander Wentworth and Hollis Deering.

It seemed odd enough, on the surface, that, of all the charming damsels of Medbury who would gladly have beamed and sparkled on the handsome, fastidious young fellow, that quaint, quiet girl, without one of the attractions which pass muster in society, should yet draw young Wentworth to her side by some magnetic power which all the others did not possess.

The Sullivans learned this state of affairs through Leander's talk, he regarding Alick as a powerful ally on his side. Mrs. Kittredge, half contemptuous, half laughing, told Honora she had better keep a grave lookout upon her brother's movements. Leander's choice was bad enough, but if the youngest of that Deering brood managed to get Alick Wentworth into her toils, she would just settle it in her mind that the whole family were lineal descendants of the Salem witches, and ought to be hanged for sorcery.

As for her brother's actually falling in love, Honora Wentworth considered that too absurd to bestow a serious thought on; she believed him as staunch proof to all such weakness as herself, notwithstanding she was a good deal provoked "at the ridiculous tack which the fellow's fancy had taken," thinking it afforded a rather disparaging reflection on his good taste. So, when an opportunity offered, she, to quote her literally, "hauled him over the coals" with sisterly freedom and fervor.

"What under the sun has got into you, Alick Wentworth? I should be ashamed of myself."

"Wherefore?" asked Alick, turning his face from the window, where it had been moodily studying the landscape for the last few minutes before his sister's entrance, — in his eyes, if anybody had been there to see, some growing gloom and desperation.

"As though you couldn't find anybody better to spend your time on, than that small, brown Hecate, — what do you call her? — on Birch Avenue! Complimentary to your taste, I must say, Alick Wentworth! I should think it was bad enough for Leander Sullivan to disgrace himself and his family by such a *mésalliance*, without your abetting him by taking to the same rut. If you want to flirt, — and I am sure I have not the slightest objection, — why, there are plenty of pretty, attractive women in the town ready for anything in that line."

"The devil take all pretty, attractive women, and fly off with them in a heap," said Alick, in a hard, dry, bitter tone, the gloom hardening on his face.

The elegant Miss Wentworth looked severe. "Alick, I am shocked at you! Such talk is worse, even, than vulgar; it is wicked."

"And you and I are saints, Honora, I suppose," and he laughed again, — a loud, grating, bitter laugh. It struck Honora so far that she turned and looked at her brother, thinking Alick was in a wonderfully bad humor this morning. He was usually good-tempered, and, in a certain way, fond of and proud of his only sister; tolerably ready to indulge her, when she was unreasonable and exacting even, which was not unfrequently the case;



and as for his satire, it might have stung some people, but Honora was quite impervious.

"Has anything gone wrong with you to-day, Alick?" she inquired.

"Why do you ask me, Honora?"

"Because you've not spoken this morning without a growl. One would think, to hear you go on that way, you had been rejected by some of these charming women, and consequently were so savage on the sex."

Alick Wentworth rose up, went to the mantel, and, leaning his arm on it, looked at his sister a few moments intently; and it seems to me a woman of quick, tender sympathies would have felt something half wistful in the gaze, — as though the man wanted some help, counsel, strength, and was half wondering whether it were possible for her to give it to him.

"Honora," he said, "you're one of the pretty, attractive women, you know; but I honestly wonder how much real heart, come to sound for it, one would find behind that handsome face of yours!"

"What a strange way you have of talking, Alick!" a little resentfully.

He went on, without observing her remark, in a light, dry, half-indifferent tone. "I think you care a little more for me, Honora, than you do for anybody in the world; but if I were in any trouble, or peril, or disgrace, do you suppose I could come to you with it — that if I wanted any sympathy, comfort, courage in my utmost need, I should find it in you?"

"I should do the best I could for you," slipping the

rings around her fingers complacently enough. "Only" — she looked up suddenly with some feeling in her face — "if you had disgraced me — I could never forgive *that*, Alick, never. You know I have always been proud of you."

"Disgrace," he repeated after her. "What would you call disgrace, Honora?"

"Alick Wentworth, you are the oddest mortal, — anything that the world calls it; but," glancing at her repeater, "I promised to ride out with Tom Rushmore at ten, and I've only time to dress. You are right, however, Al., in one thing: I do care a little more for that handsome, unconscionable, grizzly bear of a brother of mine than for anybody else in the world;" and she went off, humming a tune to herself; and Alexander Wentworth took a cigar out of his case, and strolled downstairs among the grounds, and had his own thoughts over all that had just been said between himself and his sister. Alexander Wentworth had a great many thoughts these days that nobody dreamed off; and it was to get rid of these, sometimes, that he went to see — of all the world! — Hollis Deering.

He had a feeling that if she could look right down, with her clear, honest eyes, to the bottom of those thoughts, whatever they were, that one solitary girl would not turn away with the wrath and contempt which Alick Wentworth, the admired of men and women, the favorite of fortune, fancied sometimes he saw in all other eyes.

All this time his visits made no flutterings at the

family heart, aroused no expectations in the Deering consciousness. Nobody there ever thought of him as a lover, — least of all, Hollis Deering herself.

Still, this man's society, friendship, was a new and pleasant element in the girl's life. She enjoyed, with a keen relish, the long talks with Alick Wentworth, in the little parlor which had looked so poor and mean in the eyes of Mrs. Kittredge and her stately mother.

Yet that very room, plain and homely as it was, in comparison with his uncle's elegant drawing-rooms, had some atmosphere of attraction for young Wentworth. Nobody, seeing him and Hollis Deering together, would ever have suspected they were lovers. All the tender speeches were left to Leander's share, sitting on the other side of the room with Agnes by his side.

Yet such bright, earnest, animated talk went on between the two, — grave sometimes as a couple of old statesmen discussing profound problems of international law and political economy; indeed, it was not at all unlikely that the two might get on these very topics — for the subjects discussed between the young man and woman were a perpetual amusement to Hollis' sisters.

Indeed, the youngest girl was a kind of standing joke in the family; but Hollis' temper was imperturbable on this side. The youngest of a household grows old slowly in the family thought. Hollis was still only a child in her mother's regard, and this was very much the case with the others. They thought her curious and quaint enough on the surface, but with some wonderful acuteness and cleverness beneath they did not

precisely understand. So they settled it that it was not so singular, after all, that young Wentworth should like to talk with her. As for his falling in love with Hollis Deering, that might all do for a joke, but it never seriously entered the minds of one member of her family.

Among other luxuries, Alick Wentworth had brought back a horse from England; a small, slender thoroughbred, dun and gray, a beautiful, high-mettled creature, who used frequently to come dashing up Birch Avenue to the little straw-colored cottage, high-mettled horse and handsome rider making a wonderful sensation behind the window-blinds in the vicinity. The neighbors all fancied that Marcia was the magnetic force this time, and wondered whether another plum, marvellous for size and sweetness, had actually fallen into the dish of the Deerings.

Now Hollis had a wonderful liking for all dumb creatures; but a fine horse was one of the girl's passions, and riding one of her few accomplishments.

She had acquired this when a child, off on a country farm, at a distant relation's, where her mother sent her for two or three summers to gather some muscle on her little, scrawny limbs, and some bloom on her thin, sallow cheeks. Here, in a little while, Hollis had learned to mount any one of the half-broken colts on the farm, and go dashing off on the still country roads, through the light and dews, and fresh, crisp air of the summer mornings.

The memory of those hours, the hankering and thirst

for all their wild, joyous freedom and beauty, were forever stinging the girl's thoughts and blood, and the sight of the beautiful creature pawing at the gate, stirred within her the soul of Hollis Deering.

One morning, the two young people were alone in the parlor, the elder girls being off on some shopping expedition. Alick Wentworth had been more absent and restless than usual even, on this call, talking gravely enough with Hollis Deering at one time, and then dashing off into some of his brilliant jests and comic descriptions of men and things, making Hollis laugh until the tears came into her eyes, and she held her breath. Out of all this, suddenly, he came to a pause, some hardness and silence settled upon his face, and he sat there gazing drearily into the grate fire; and Hollis sat a while, too, looking at him with her gray, wistful, brown eyes. Part of the secret of this girl's attraction for Alick Wentworth consisted in the fact that he was absolutely at rest with her. She never tried to attract him by any arts; he could sparkle with wit one moment, and freeze into absolute silence the next.

As the two sat by the fire, Hollis heard the pawing of the horse's hoofs outside. She rose up and went to the window. There the slender, dappled creature stood, quivering with fiery life, his long, shining, brown mane sweeping across the arch of his neck.

Hollis stood still and gazed; the hunger of those wild, free summer mornings of her childhood, the scents of clover through the crisp air, the flutter of winds among the leaves, the singing of bobolinks and thrushes,

the wet, lush grasses, all the glory of those old June mornings came over her, and she was clattering through them once more on the colt's back, as full of wild, palpitating life, as birds in the thickets, or squirrels by the roadside. She drew long breaths, her face quivered and flushed, a great craving came into her eyes. Suddenly Alick Wentworth sprang up, and one would have fancied, to see him as he set his foot on the rug, that he was trying to shake off and stamp down some slimy, foul thing that clung and stuck to him — clung and stuck — body or soul. Then he came over to the window where Hollis stood, and caught a glimpse of her face.

"What is the matter, Miss Hollis?" he asked.

"Oh, that horse, that horse of yours, Mr. Wentworth!" speaking under her breath, but with something plaintive and hungry in her voice that struck him.

"Yes, Dapple is a splendid creature; but I did not know you had such an admiration for horse-flesh, even rare and dainty as his own."

In a few words she told him about those summer mornings in the country. Hollis' thoughts were on fire now, and one could almost hear the birds sing, and the winds, fresh and cool, blow through her talk.

Alick Wentworth listened, full of interest, forgetting the Thing, whatever it was, that had clung to him a few moments before.

"I want you should see Dapple a little closer than

this. He is a fiery creature, but I think you won't be frightened, Miss Hollis."

"Frightened!" a smile, half amused, half scornful, about her mouth. "Of all things I should like to get near him."

"Come, then," he said; and Hollis actually started off, seized the first old shawl she could lay her hands on, threw it across her shoulders, and went outside the gate with young Wentworth; and there were all the neighbors behind the blinds of Birch Avenue to see and talk, both of which they did to the utmost limit of their possibilities.

Neither of Hollis' sisters would have done this thing; and I think, if Mrs. Deering had been aware of what her younger daughter was about at that very moment, she would have gone instantly to the door and summoned her inside; but that good woman sat upstairs at her sewing, in blissful unconsciousness, dreaming happy dreams of Agnes and her future.

But Hollis! — you ought to have seen the creature out there; it was a cold day, just on the skirts of winter; gusts of dry, sullen wind, with a menace in them, blowing up the avenue; overhead, a cold, bitter-looking sky, with the sun shining feebly at intervals out of light-yellowish, spongy piles of cloud.

As for Hollis, she thought neither of gusts of wind nor heaps of cloud. She went right up to Dapple, thrust her thin, soft fingers into his heaps of shining mane, played with it fondly, threw her arms about the creature's long, arching, neck, smoothed his glossy skin, talking to

him all the time; and the animal actually pawed with pleasure, and ran his nose into her palm.

The sight greatly amazed Dapple's master. "I never saw anything like it," he said; "he is as shy as a fawn usually, and will never let anybody mount him but myself."

"Dumb creatures somehow always seem to like me; it is a little singular," answered Hollis, simply enough.

Alick Wentworth regarded her a moment, — the flushed lips, the bright eyes in the sallow face, and the old plaid shawl. "I don't think it is at all singular, Miss Deering," he said; and really it was about the nearest he had ever come to paying her a compliment.

Meanwhile Hollis went on talking to the animal in her own fashion, calling him by his name; and he drooped his beautiful head to the swift caresses of her soft hands.

"O Dapple! I should not be afraid to mount you this moment, and go plunging off for miles into the woods. You and I would know each other."

"There is no reason why you should not have a chance to try Dapple. I will bring him around to-morrow morning, with one of Uncle Kittredge's horses, and we will have a ride together, if you will allow me so great a pleasure, Miss Hollis."

"I wish I knew how to thank you," — her face radiant. "I don't know what mamma and the girls will say to it all, for they stand in more or less awe of Medbury gossip, which, singularly enough, has not the faintest ghost of terror for me."

This characteristic conclusion amused young Wentworth a good deal.

"Then you will go, Miss Deering; that is settled?"

"Yes, Mr. Wentworth, — quite settled. I cannot tell you how happy you have made me."

"Happy!" — his voice echoing the words with something which made Hollis Deering shiver. It set her to thinking, for the moment, of Dante's Second Circle of spirits, —

"By the black air so scourged;"

and she turned on the young man the doubt and amazement of her great, startled, honest eyes.

Young Wentworth tried to laugh off the effect of his speech, and went on to tell her how he came into possession of Dapple. The animal belonged to a young Englishman, the son of a nobleman, and Alick Wentworth had won him in a large bet at the races. Hollis only took in part of the story.

"Betting, Mr. Wentworth! Excuse me, but that always seemed to me very much the same as gambling."

The young man laughed, and again Hollis shivered a little.

"According to your notions, I must be very wicked, Miss Deering, for I have done worse things than betting."

They went up to the house together, Hollis grave and absent now, going over with what the young man had just said. When they were in the parlor once more, young Wentworth looked at his watch, and said he must take leave at once. "You will be ready by nine tomorrow morning, Miss Hollis?"

"Yes," she said, — "oh, yes!" but the radiance had gone out of her eyes, and her voice dropped the words emptily enough.

Young Wentworth came and stood before her. "I should really like to know what you are thinking about, Miss Hollis."

"I am thinking about you, Mr. Wentworth," and again the wistful, honest eyes looked him in the face.

"I wish you would tell me the thoughts," still standing before her; and it seemed to her, as he spoke, that a great flash of misery came and went in his face.

"I am not certain that it would be best, Mr. Wentworth," her eyes dropping away from him, and speaking half to herself.

"Yes, it is. I shall not be afraid to hear. Let me have them, Miss Hollis."

She looked up at him again. "I have felt, almost from the first time that I saw you, that you had some secret trouble on your thought or heart. I cannot get rid of the feeling, although, of course, it is one which I have no right to intrude on you."

The young man set his jaws together. It seemed to the girl that his face grew hard and white. "Yes," he said slowly, after a little silence, "you are right; I have a great trouble."

"I should be glad to help you if I could," her voice full of sympathy.

He looked at her now, and the hopelessness and anguish in his eyes made the girl shiver again.

"Yes," he said; "I believe you would help me, Hollis Deering, if mortal could; but there is nobody in the world, not even you, can reach my trouble," a sudden swell of agony in his tones, which she saw he made a great effort to repress, but it well-nigh mastered him.

"When one's trouble gets beyond the reach of any mortal help, there is God, you know," her voice shaken with pity, but she spoke the name steadily and tenderly, like one who knew.

"God! God!" said young Wentworth, as though that word had no meaning for him. "You believe in him, then?"

"Believe in him! O Mr. Wentworth, you do not mean to say *you* do not?"

Alick Wentworth turned and strode up and down the room once or twice; then he came back and stood by Hollis Deering. It seemed to her, in her whole life that she had never seen anything so awful as the deadly despair at work in his face.

"If there be a God, it is not in his power to help my trouble," said Alick Wentworth.

At that moment there were voices in the hall. The girls had returned. Hollis heard the man, a moment later, jesting with her sisters outside, and, by the merry peals of laughter, she knew young Wentworth's wit and humor were flashing at their brightest.

In a few moments the young ladies came in.

"Why, here is our little, quaint Cinderella's god-mother by the fire!" exclaimed Agnes.

"Yes, and she looks as though she had had black news instead of a beau," laughed Marcia.

But Hollis was thinking, — "Something that God even cannot help!"



## CHAPTER X.

THE next morning an event transpired on Birch Avenue which created an immense sensation in that locality. There was no lack of spectators, nor of comment of tongues, when young Wentworth actually seated the youngest of the daughters of Wallace Deering on his own steed, vaulting himself on the back of his uncle's magnificent "roan;" and the two rode down the avenue, in the full light of day, between the lines of houses and the watchers inside of them.

It was the most triumphant moment of Hollis Deering's life, if she had only known it. Her family had come to the door to see her off, and they, at least, had their share in her triumph.

Hollis sat her horse, the dainty-stepping, fiery creature, as gracefully and naturally as a sail-boat rocks on the roll of summer seas, her small, slender figure, in its black velvet hat and riding skirt, having its own picturesque effect at that moment to all those who had an eye for such things.

Marcia thought her labor had been well bestowed; for when Hollis had repeated young Wentworth's invitation to her mother and sisters, and it became settled in the family conclave that the girl was to ride out with him next day, the first thought — which you may be certain was

Hollis' last one — was the necessary outfit for so grand an occasion.

The family wardrobe was levied on, and Marcia sat up for half the night to complete the riding-gown and small velvet hat, which certainly made Hollis Deering look something, that morning, she never had before in her life.

Her mother had, at first, some natural anxiety over the adventure.

"My dear, I am afraid you are risking your neck on that high-spirited horse. I dare not trust you off on it."

"O mother, I'm not afraid, — not a particle. I can manage that horse easily as a kitten."

Hollis' confidence in some way communicated itself to the others. That girl was not apt to imagine she could do things and fail.

"It would be too bad to disappoint her," said Agnes; "and I have a feeling she will prove herself equal to the occasion."

The eldest sister only spoke the family sentiment.

So the two rode slowly out of Birch Avenue.

It was a pleasant winter's morning; a sting of frost in the air, and a few light wind-clouds swooping across the sky. But after they left the town behind them, the young man and woman gave the rein to the eager horses.

It seemed to Alick Wentworth that he had never known this girl before, as he watched the thrill of new life and beauty in her face. It seemed as though her soul touched her lips into new bloom, and kindled and blazed in her wide, brown eyes.

How those two did ride for a couple of hours, sweeping

over the dry, frozen country-roads together, clattering over old bridges, past wrecks of old mills and lonely farm-houses; out on the broad, still meadows, faded and gray with clinging frosts; through the forest roads, and down among damp dells, and along the river banks, with the dark, sullen swash of waters beneath, and then bearing out again into the open country and the woods and hills!

The animals seemed to enter into the spirit of their riders as they dashed over the ground; yet even the high-mettled creature that Hollis rode answered to her lowest word, to the lightest touch of her hand, and would stand still in a breath, his nostrils quivering with excitement, and every nerve vibrating with the race.

After a couple of hours' ride, the two drew up on the roadside, about ten miles from Medbury. Over one side was a deep, precipitous descent into a gorge, where, many feet beneath, a freshet tore itself during the spring rains over the rocky ground with stormy shout and cry. It was silent enough now. One looking far down, saw the stony bed of the torrent, the leafless trees clinging to the banks. A wild, sullen scene enough, — not without a certain picturesque charm.

"Oh, this is freedom, Mr. Wentworth!" exclaimed Hollis Deering, with her cheeks aflame. "I breathe it; I bask in it as fish in water, or flowers in sunshine. I dread to return to the old town yonder, with its narrow grooves of thought and feeling, its petty social ambitions, its fool's chases of one sort and another; worst of all, its gossips and heartburnings and jealousies."

The young man looked at the girl with some unutterable pain and despair in his eyes now.

"Miss Hollis," he said, "I wish years ago some woman could have spoken a few words to me, brave and strong. I fancy — maybe it is a mistake, but I cannot help fancying — they would have made a better man of me."

The wind had gone down now, and the noon sunshine over the bare earth, crisped and faded by the frosts, had something soft and wistful in it.

"A better man," Hollis Deering repeated. "Your life is all before you, Mr. Wentworth, to shape it to what fine and noble issues you will."

The stern despair which darkened in his face made the girl shudder.

"I tell you, Hollis Deering, it is too late. A year ago all that might have been true; but now it is too late!" a kind of deadly desperation in his tones that rung down among her thoughts like a knell.

Before she could reply, his tone changed. "Let us alight a few minutes and rest our horses and ourselves," he said.

Hollis assented, for the truth was, the girl was a little breathless with their long race, and they got off their horses and walked up and down the road, and looked over the precipice into the dark, stony hollow below.

On one side of the road was a great boulder, half covered with gray moss. Young Wentworth brought the girl here, and sat down by her side.

"How warm and pleasant this sunshine is!" speaking half to herself.

"Yes, it does one good," he answered; then, after a little pause he turned to her suddenly. "Miss Deering, you said yesterday you would like to help me if you could; I never doubted you. You are the only woman whom I ever met who always said to me just what she meant. There is a way now in which you can fulfil your wish."

"Oh, what is it, Mr. Wentworth? I shall be glad to serve you in any way which lies in my power."

"You are a brave woman, but I think you will be shocked when I come to tell you precisely the one, only way, in which your soul and hand can serve me."

"Try me," said Hollis, and her eyes shone on the young man, wide and bright and steady.

He looked at her a moment, half doubtfully. "Well, I will. Give me your hand a moment."

She had drawn off her glove, and she laid her soft, thin fingers in his without a word. "The only way in which you can help me, Hollis Deering, is to go to yonder precipice, and push me over on the rocks below; I would leave you my dying blessing; and I am a miserable coward — I fear when the moment came my courage might fail me, and all alone I might not take the fatal leap. Will you help me?"

Hollis Deering's face grew ashy white while she listened. She drew away her hand quickly, with sick faintness going all over her.

"O Mr. Wentworth, this is horrible!" she moaned.

"I thought you would take it so," speaking quietly enough. "Yet you are the only woman to whom I should have dared to say these words, and you fail me."

She looked up then quickly, fronting him with her white, shocked face.

"That is not true, Mr. Wentworth. You know it in your own soul. Whatever the wrong is, and I see it is an awful one, you will not take the only help that can reach you."

"You mean God, I suppose, Miss Deering." One might almost have fancied there was a little sneer on that name.

"Yes, I mean him, because that means help, hope, everything you can need."

A smile of unutterable bitterness on his face. "It does very well for you, and all good, honest, innocent souls like you, to talk of God; but if you should ever stand where I do to-day, you would find this God was powerless to reach you."

"Powerless! As though that could be, when he lives in his heaven, and you are on his earth," answered Hollis.

She was not certain he heard her. There was an awful pallor in his face; and in a few moments young Wentworth arose and strode two or three times up and down the road. Then he went over and stood on the edge of the precipice, looking far down the chasm, with a still gloom in his eyes that was more terrible than any fierceness.

Hollis looked at him a few moments, then rose, gathered up the folds of her riding-dress, and went over to him. She touched his arm.

"Come away from here, Mr. Wentworth."

He looked at her, a smile coming into his face.

"Did you fear I might do that?" he said. "There is no danger. Whatever I may be, I am not such a poltroon as to bring a woman out here and leave her in that way. I shall see you safely home, Miss Deering," a light satire along the last words. And a moment later he turned to her, saying, with his old, gay smile, "Well, Miss Deering, what do you think of me by this time? I value the opinions of people; I always did; so much so, indeed, that, when it came to a choice, I could front death, but not —"

He stopped there a moment; then, with some effort, the word came out. She could have added it for him — "not disgrace."

She did not wince or turn away. He thought with what a rage of scorn, reproaches, hysterics, Honora would have listened to that word. This girl only looked at him with her shocked face and her great, pitiful eyes.

"Well, Miss Deering, I ask you again, what do you think of me now?"

"I do not dare to tell you, Mr. Wentworth."

"Yes; let me have the truth; no soft handling, you know; the words straight, and hard, and cruel. I can bear them from you."

"I think, Mr. Wentworth, *you have committed some crime.*"

The man stood still at that awful word. He did not blench, but his face was white as though death had smitten it.

"*That is true.*" The monosyllables, hard and slow, dropped from his lips; and the two stood there in the soft noon sunshine, and confronted each other.

He spoke again, some dreadful bitterness in his smile. "Well, you, of all the world, Hollis Deering, know me for precisely what I am. In the world I pass for something honorable, fastidious, elegant. Why do you not turn from me now with scorn and loathing, knowing the truth, Miss Deering?"

"Scorn and loathing, Mr. Wentworth," the tears choking her eyes and voice. "God knows that in my heart is only room for pity for you."

Something worked in his face then; something broke up all its hard bitterness, and Hollis Deering turned away her eyes. After a moment he came a little closer to her.

"Will you deign to shake hands with me now?" he asked humbly and doubtfully.

She gave him, at once, both of her little, cool, thin hands.

"I feel better, now I have told you. I think it will help me to bear it awhile longer."

"Awhile longer!" — catching hold of the ambiguity of his words. "What do you intend to do?"

"Nothing at present. Do not doubt me. I pledge

you my word there; and after what I have said this morning you will not doubt that. You shall know the worst of me only from my own lips, Hollis Deering."

With all her courage and her generous heart, the girl had sensitive nerves, and these had been dreadfully shaken the last hour.

She did not dare ask him what his crime had been; indeed, she was not certain that she wanted to know that morning. But she did know that she wanted to talk to Alick Wentworth of God; to set before him, if any burning words of hers could do it, the sin and cowardice of self-murder; but the words seemed now to fail on her lips, and young Wentworth led the girl back to the stone by the roadside, and she sat there silent and breathless, half dazed, and wondering that the heavens did not fall.

She might have sat thus until night, if her companion had not been full of care and anxiety for her.

"You look cold and wearied, Miss Deering," he said.

"I believe I am both," with a little flicker of a bewildered smile on her face.

"I ought not to have told you," he said.

"Don't say that; I think it was best. I want to help you, if I only knew how," speaking low and swiftly.

"You have helped me already, Miss Deering," and his voice shook.

But it was high time to be going. The people at home must have been looking for them back these two

hours. So, at last, they mounted their horses again and turned homeward.

An hour later they rode through Birch Avenue; and there was a hurrying of faces to the windows, and many a fair damsel that day, looked with envy upon the youngest daughter of Wallace Deering, as she drew rein at last before her father's gate.

Ah, if they could only have seen beyond the surface, into the thoughts of those two! But that is the way we go through life, and the harrowing griefs, the wearing sorrows, the awful tragedies, lie beneath the fair, smooth outside, as, far beneath the "humming, shining fields," the sprouting of her grasses, the cool, silver water-courses, the beauty of her flowers, lie at the earth's heart the vast rage and tumult of her central fires.

## CHAPTER XI.

THERE was company again at the Kittredges', — a small dinner-party to-night; not more, probably, than twenty guests, the most select of the Sullivan circle.

It is true that less than half the invited company had arrived, as Ambrose Kittredge's residence was a mile from the town, and a day gloomy with clouds and spasmodic menaces of wind had settled down at nightfall into snow and sleet. Once inside the warm, bright, elegant rooms, however, nobody thought of the raging storm outside. Everybody was in the best sort of humor, and there was a hum of pleasant voices and there were bursts of laughter in the parlors and through the conservatory, brilliant with lights, and fragrant with bloom.

The elegant hostess, amid all her smiles and graciousness, had her Mordecai in the gate that night, for Agnes Deering was among the guests. Of course, Mrs. Kittredge had been compelled to invite her future sister-in-law, and Leander had driven over just at nightfall, in a close carriage, and insisted on bringing Miss Deering back with him, — wrapping her from head to foot, with his own hands, in the embroidered afghans.

The sight of Agnes Deering always stirred whatever was worst in the soul of Hester Kittredge. She actually hated the fair, sweet face which had won the heart of her

brother; fancied she could detect a smirk of conceit and exultation in it over her triumph in having "bagged a Sullivan." Especially were these feelings stimulated whenever Agnes Deering was placed in juxtaposition with Honora Wentworth. Then was there brought home to the soul of Hester Kittredge all the sharp contrasts of what was and what might have been, and indignation with her brother for his folly, and hatred of Agnes Deering for her triumph, were sure to take stormy possession of the lady's soul.

Of course, she was too well bred to let this be apparent, and she had, too, an instinct that her most devoted friends — the very people who came to her parties eagerly, and sat at her fêtes — would enjoy her humiliation over her brother's *mésalliance*; so, before the world, Mrs. Kittredge swallowed the bitter pill without a grimace, when people congratulated her over her brother's engagement; but for all that she bided her time.

It came to-night. Hester Kittredge had spoken the truth when she told her mother, in their talk, as they rolled away from their first reluctant call at the Deerings, that she meant her brother should feel, through all his engagement, — nay, more, when Agnes Deering was his wife, — that his sister, in her secret soul, considered that his choice and his marriage had disgraced his family.

Whatever pain could be in that knowledge for Leander Sullivan, his sister had her own way of inflicting it. It is true she could not poison the sources of his new happiness; perhaps, as things had gone so far, she would herself have shrunk — had time and chance favored — from



breaking her brother's betrothal; but there were times when she could wound him, and she never avoided one. There were allusions and suggestions of which the young man could never make anything, but which, nevertheless, stung him, although now, of course, the engagement was never made a topic of conversation between the brother and sister. Still, Leander was certain that she never forgave him, and he loved her enough to have that consciousness bear its own sting.

"Hang it!" he would sometimes mutter, pulling on his boots or brushing his hair with an energy wholly disproportionate to the occasion, "what an awful thing a woman's pride is — so absurd, too. I say it's a shame, an outrage, an abominable wickedness!" getting red all over his face.

There was a little group in one corner, looking at a couple of sea-views, companion pictures, which Mr. Kittredge had deputed his nephew to select while abroad, and which had been hung that very day.

Everybody, of course, felt bound to admire the pictures, but they did Alick Wentworth's taste in the fine arts credit; the massive frames this time surrounded gems of art in their way. One represented a sunset; another a storm at sea. There was the wide, clear atmosphere, the long, gray lines of beach, the green swell and glitter of incoming tides; a sail here and there, far off on the water, like a gleam of snow-bank in the distance; a white rush and plunge of sea-gulls, and beyond that the low, fiery line of the sunset. Just opposite was another mood of the sea, a wild, dark force and fury of storm, that made

one fairly hold one's breath. There was the black swirl and leap of the waves against the rocks; the solitary schooner with the lights at the mast-head, drifting helplessly before the awful tempest; the distant heaps of gray fog. It could not be possible that among the group of gazers were not some who took a genuine delight in the pictures for their own sake.

Among these was Agnes Deering. It happened that Honora Wentworth was there also. She had been in half the picture-galleries in Europe, and could at least "talk art," having learned the Shibboleth. She was looking wonderfully well to-night, almost outdoing herself in grace and brilliancy.

Mrs. Kittredge, moving up to the group, met her husband, who had just come away from it.

"Where is Al. to-night?" he suddenly inquired.

"That's precisely what I've been asking, myself, the last hour."

"Curious proceeding! Can't imagine what has taken the fellow off at this precise juncture!" he muttered to himself; and then some gentlemen came up and bore him away.

Mrs. Kittredge joined the group in the corner. Some of them were talking pictures, some of them gossip. Under the smile with which she compelled herself to greet Miss Deering, rankled an unusual bitterness that moment.

"What is that you are saying?" turning towards some of the guests who were intent over some gossip, and catching the word "*mésalliance*."

"Dear Mrs. Kittredge," said a lively young girl, with

a pretty, silly sort of face, "we were talking over that absurd marriage of Colonel Fortescue's. Of course, every man has a right to his own taste; but it is singular that his choice could not have fallen on some woman a little nearer his equal in birth and position."

"Such things are quite shocking. I don't wonder the family are outraged," said Honora Wentworth, and her gaze swept the circle, and took in, without seeming conscious of it, Agnes Deering. She always had a spite against the girl; regarded her, somehow, in the light of a successful rival. A Deering for a rival, and she with the old and honorable blood of the Wentworths in her veins!

Mrs. Kittredge's time had come now. The hatred,—for it really, in secret, amounted to that,—which she had nursed against Agnes Deering, heightened by seeing her now in juxtaposition with Honora Wentworth, seized its opportunity. "Oh, yes! I have heard of the story," she said. "Colonel Fortescue's new wife was a servant girl, or a district school-teacher, or something of that sort, I believe. I wish the legislature would take the matter in hand, and pass a law to save men from making such fools of themselves; but as they are free to marry whom and where they will, of course, their families, in such cases, can only resign themselves to the unhappy facts."

Of course, everybody in the group knew that Agnes Deering had been, last summer, a district school-teacher. You could be certain on Medbury people being always well-primed regarding each other's antecedents. Everybody knew perfectly well, too, whom the speech was

intended to strike, and that it must inevitably wound to the core the young, helpless girl standing in their midst.

It was a cruel insult. Agnes Deering felt it as a woman must,—as a woman keenly sensitive, and keenly alive to all the contrasts between her own family position and that of her lover, naturally would.

She remembered, afterwards, that a cold shiver struck all over her, as though some one had dealt her a stunning blow, and the fair, gracious face of her hostess seemed suddenly transformed into a mask, grinning and jeering at her. Yet she marvelled afterwards that she did not lose her self-possession. There was a hot, swift flush in her face; that was all the sign which she gave to the people around her of any consciousness of the insult, and she stood still, wondering if she was turned to stone.

I hope, for the honor of human nature, there were few in that group of people malicious enough to take any pleasure in what they knew must have been Agnes Deering's feeling at the moment; still, I am not so positive, as I would to God I might be; there is an element in the worst side of human nature, which is of the devil, and which takes delight in the hurt and humiliation of others.

But there were more among the guests than one who were honestly indignant with the elegant, gracious hostess, and who, with quiet good breeding, turned to Miss Deering, and made some commonplace remarks, to which she must have replied calmly enough, although she never remembered one word of what she said at that time.

"After all," perhaps you will say, "what did all that amount to? Agnes Deering ought to have risen above

it. Insults, and curses, and all things essentially malicious always come home to roost. Petty meannesses of that sort can never really harm their subject; they only disgrace their perpetrator."

Now, all that is certainly sound sense, not to be disputed. No doubt, a lofty, finely tempered nature would have felt that at once, and been calmed and steadied.

In time, such thoughts would come to Agnes Deering too, but just now — ah! she was dreadfully human. She felt only the cold sting of the words. She only knew that she had been insulted before all those people, and you must remember that although Medbury may be some very petty inland town to you, the opinion of whose inhabitants was not worth a second thought, still, it was Agnes Deering's world; she hardly knew any other.

In a little while she managed to steal out of everybody's sight into a corner of the conservatory. It seemed as though she could not have borne much longer the sight of all those hard, smiling faces. She found a shaded corner behind a large orange-tree, and she sat down here and listened to the dripping of the water on the marble floor. Her own hot tears, too, dripped among the fragrant, snowy blossoms. If Leander had seen her weeping there! Once there came across her a thought of the time, not very far off, when it would come her turn to triumph. When she was Leander's wife, she could make his haughty, insolent sister feel her power; but even in that moment of sore temptation, Agnes Deering was woman enough to put away that thought as unworthy of her.

"I will not tell the poor fellow to-night," she said to herself, after a little effort. "It would spoil all his pleasure. I will wait, at least until the first hurt has gone, and I can speak calmly. If it had only" — her lip quivering — "been anybody but Leander's sister!"

As for Mrs. Kittredge, she had had her revenge, but she was not quite comfortable over it. I wonder if people ever are, after they have done any despicable act.

Mrs. Kittredge was more gracious and beaming than ever that evening; but under all her smiles she had a consciousness that she had gone a little too far. It was hardly the thing for a hostess to insult, under her own roof, one of her guests, and, with all her social rank in Medbury, there were people for whose respect she cared, who would not allow the facts of wealth and position to blind their judgments with regard to the animus of her speech. She knew, too, that in Leander's presence, hardly in that of her husband or mother, would she have ventured to speak just as she had done to Agnes Deering.

Mrs. Kittredge's insult belonged to that petty class of which nobody can usually take any notice, and whose essential meanness consists in that fact.

Of this the lady was perfectly aware, and we are not apt to like those to whom we have done a real wrong, small or great. I do not think Mrs. Kittredge felt any more cordial towards Agnes Deering after that speech of hers.

In a few moments Leander came up to her. "Where, in the name of common sense, is Al. to-night, Hester?" in the crossiest of tones.

Despite her smiles and her blandness, Mrs. Kittredge was, to-night, in anything but an amiable mood. Whatever was due to her company, there was no need of disguises before Leander.

"Ambrose was after me with precisely that question a little while ago. I never suspected, before, that you both regarded me as Alexander Wentworth's keeper."

"It's a perfect outrage," burst out Leander, without regarding his sister's humor, "treating us in this way. Things won't go on well without him. What can have got into the fellow, Hester? 'Tisn't like him to go off in this way."

At that moment Miss Deering came out of the conservatory, with a feeling that so conspicuous a person as she necessarily must be at a Kittredge dinner-party had no right to absent herself longer from the company.

Leander's face brightened as he hurried towards her. "How well you are looking to-night, my darling! Where have you been hiding yourself so long?"

"I have been among the flowers for at least five minutes," as she took his arm. "Did you really miss me in that time?" looking up into her lover's face, with a smile half arch, half serious, at her heart some ache that made his care and tenderness doubly needed and precious at that moment.

"Did I miss you, dear child? As though I shouldn't do that among ten thousand! One glance at your face is worth hours of all these people, Agnes."

She smiled again, and yet the smile was not just clear. Through all her lover's talk was the echo of his sister's

soft, stinging tones. "Ah, Leander! you always make me wonder afresh when you talk like that. I am certain there is not one among all these elegant people who would agree with you."

"They are fools, and blind, then, the whole crowd of them," replied Leander, very decidedly.

Miss Deering hardly did herself justice. As she walked through the parlors, leaning on her lover's arm, every eye was upon the two, and more than one person, gazing on the graceful figure and the sweet face, thought: "Well, she doesn't do his taste discredit, anyhow;" and more than one who held that opinion would gladly have walked in the stead of Agnes Deering, leaning on the arm of Leander Sullivan.

## CHAPTER XII.

HOLLIS DEERING sat alone in the parlor that night; a book lay in her lap, — for it was the girl's habit to have one about her, — but she did not glance at the pages. Her eyes watched the glitter of coals in the grate, and the winds clamored to her outside.

There was no danger of interruption to-night. Mr. and Mrs. Deering were upstairs, the one deep in his paper, the other far deeper in the dinner-party, to which Agnes had rolled away in state a little while ago; while Marcia had gone to pass the day with a friend, and would not return that night.

On the whole, Hollis liked the evening and the solitude. Her thoughts, beating about, like the winds, soon came back and settled down on a subject they never long lost sight of now; it was the day, three weeks ago, when young Wentworth and she rode out together.

Since that time nothing unusual had transpired between the two. The young man came and went just as before, without ever alluding to the talk which had taken place between them on the hills that day. Yet Hollis remembers one word she had spoken to him then, and how he had answered. She seems at times to catch the low, awful sound echoing through all Alick Wentworth's jests and badinage with her older sisters, or his more serious

talks with herself, and she feels, with a kind of cold horror creeping upon her, that the evil Thing, whatever it may be, is there, — its nightmare and blight heavy upon Alexander Wentworth's soul; and he looks in her eyes and knows that she feels it.

She is not curious, nay, she has a kind of dread lest he should speak, with an instinct that, so long as he does not, the worst has not come. The worst! She does not know what that may be, but her nerves are thrilled and haunted all the time by some vague terror of evil to come.

There is a sudden knock at the parlor door. Hollis fancies it is their little serving-maid, and does not rise from her chair, when lo! to her reply, the door opens, and there stands young Wentworth. The girl stares at him in mute amazement, and rubs her eyes, half fancying she has fallen into a dream there by the fire. He comes straight forward, the sleet glittering all over him.

"Well, Miss Hollis, you did not expect me to-night; but for all that don't stare at me as though I were a risen ghost. I am not one yet;" and he laughs, and there is something hard and hollow in his laugh, which she feels, rather than consciously observes. She gives him her hand, though, and he holds it a moment, — not just as a lover would, but there is something in the cool, honest clasp of the small, thin fingers which Alick Wentworth likes.

"I am greatly surprised to see you, Mr. Wentworth. Such an awful night too! Besides, there is a party at your uncle's."

"Yes, they are having a gay time to-night out there, despite the weather; but I was in no mood for flirtations, and waltzes, and feasts, so I stole quietly out to the stables, mounted Dapple, and rode over here."

"But what will they say when they come to learn your absence? I don't see how you will be able to excuse yourself for such a flight in their eyes!"

"I think I shall be able to find a satisfactory excuse, — one they will all accept;" and again he laughed, the hard, desperate laugh of a man who, it seems, will never again laugh easily and merrily in this world.

Hollis Deering looked at her guest with her great brown eyes, in which some fear, she could not tell what, was wide awake now. His face was livid, and there was on it the look which she remembered that day as he leaned over and gazed down into the dark abyss by the roadside.

He sat down by the fire, and spread his hands over the grate in an absent way.

"You must have found it very tedious getting over here in this storm," said Hollis, feeling it was necessary to speak, her heart going loudly, with a prescience that that terrible Something which she had been dreading so long had come at last.

He stared at her a moment without answering, as though he was trying to take in the sense of her words. "Yes, I suppose it was tedious," he answered, "although I did not mind it."

Then he went on to apologize for entering the house in that informal way, telling her he caught a glimpse of her

through a chink of the curtains, sitting by the fire, and he fancied coming in to-night without arousing anybody.

"Yes," she said, — only a little, half-absent "yes," at the pauses in his sentences.

Then there was a silence between them, and outside wild, stormy bursts of wind. Hollis half fancied there were human voices in them, and the light shone on the white face and the set jaws of Alexander Wentworth, and she looked and shuddered.

At last he turned to her. "You remember that ride we took together, and what I said to you that day?"

"Yes," — and a burning flush, partly of shame, partly of pity, and both for him, rose in her face.

He noticed it. "Yes, it was an awful word, — an awful one, I know. There was no other woman in the world who would have taken it so, and who would have kept my secret as you have done. You remember that I told you, you should know the whole some time."

"Yes, I remember. But, O Mr. Wentworth, this is dreadful!" — a sudden anguish mounting in her voice. "Don't tell me to-night."

"If I don't tell you to-night, Hollis Deering, I never shall; and I had rather you, of all the world, should know it from me. I came here on purpose to tell you."

What could the frail, young, helpless thing do, sitting there? If her instinct seized, with unerring truth, the deadly meaning hidden under the ambiguity of this talk, she put it behind her, sitting still and shivering before the warm fire.

He looked at her, and then Alick Wentworth broke



out in a kind of plaintive, choked voice, that was like an agonized child's, — he, the elegant, high-bred gentleman! — “I cannot do it, Hollis, I cannot, before that kind, honest, faithful face of yours! I cannot do it, and yet I cannot go away, feeling that somebody else will do it to-morrow.”

“No, they shan't, — I won't hear them,” said Hollis, with a flash of defiance in her white, quivering face.

“But you'll have to, child; it will be in the very air. You can't keep it out of your ears, and it would be a comfort to me to feel that you had heard it all first from my lips, and that afterward, whatever they might say, you would know the worst. — You have spoken some kindly words to me, never looking on me once with contempt or loathing, only with pity, — such pity as I could bear, of all the world, out of your true, honest eyes, O Hollis Deering!”

They swam in tears now. “If I must hear it, I would rather hear it from your lips, then,” she said.

After that — she could not tell whether it was a short time or a long one, neither could he; and she quite forgot to hearken to the cries of the winds outside, and the human voices in them — she rose up, and turned her chair away from him, so that she could not see his face, and, walking up and down the room, she heard him ask her, in a low, strained voice, “You remember that word you used, the day we were out together, and that I acknowledged it?”

“Yes,” in a little, sharp whisper.

Hollis Deering could not remember what words fol-

lowed after that, nor how Alexander Wentworth commenced telling his story.

In the next hour, however, she learned it all, never once interrupting him from beginning to end. Inside the warm little parlor there was only the tramp of his feet, pacing to and fro, while he talked; outside, the grieving and swelling of the angry winds, which Hollis, listening only for his words, did not hear, — she would not, though whirlwinds had thundered about her.

The elder Wentworth, on his death-bed, fifteen years ago, had not left his son and daughter, between whom the property was equally divided, a large fortune. The Wentworths had always lived in a style which involved heavy expenses, and the family estates and resources had of late dwindled rapidly.

Under the management of their mother's brother, Ambrose Kittredge, the property had, however, yielded large dividends, carrying Alexander and Honora Wentworth through a youth hardly less pampered and luxurious than their childhood.

When, at the close of his nephew's college career, Mr. Kittredge found the young man and his sister had set their hearts on going abroad for two or three years, the man for the first time talked seriously of increased expenses, and the necessity of caution in the use of means; all of which was about as intelligible, in a practical way, to Alick and Honora, as Sanscrit; but they made ample promises of economy, and their uncle at last gave a reluctant consent to the journey.

Young Wentworth was now entirely master of his own

fortune. A few months' residence abroad proved the total inadequacy of his income to meet his expenses, — the luxurious, pleasure-taking youth, with his costly tastes and habits, — and, after a few spasmodic attempts at economy, he gave up the attempt of any practical solution of that disagreeable problem.

The good-natured, prodigal young American fell into the society of a class of social pleasure-mongers, parasites, who are always ready to seize any generous victim who falls in their way, and remorselessly suck what sap they can from him, as they would juices from mellow fruits. These men of the world flattered the young man's weaknesses, laughed at his jests, praised his dinners, drank his wines, and rode his horses, while all the time he was making heavy drafts on his capital.

Boating clubs, champagne suppers, Derby races, and heavy betting consumed the inheritance of Alexander Wentworth, as sands drink mountain streams and are yet dry; at last, when his own resources were exhausted, there was the half of Honora's fortune to command, and, in his extremity, the brother now availed himself of a portion of that also.

By this time the young man had grown desperate, and there seemed but one chance of redeeming himself. They were at Baden-Baden in the midst of the gay, fashionable crowd who frequent the hotels and gambling tables of that splendid resort of fashion and dissipation.

Honora was in her element, riding out daily with lords and counts, and with a score of titles on her visiting lists.

Her brother had something else to think of just now. He had "borrowed," to use his own phrase, his sister's fortune, at least, the half at his command; the other was, fortunately, in the hands of her uncle at home. And Alick Wentworth had, as you know, "the honorable blood of the Wentworths in his veins." He desired to refund every dollar of Honora's, of which, in his extremity, he had availed himself, and the only path which opened to him to do this led straight to the gambling saloons.

He played and won. Success brought feverish confidence and recklessness. He played and lost, and grew desperate. And at last — oh! honorable blood of the Wentworths! — he bethought himself of the old banking-house in Paris, with which, for years, his uncle had done business. Of course, Alick, who was well known to the capitalists, would have no difficulty in drawing money on his uncle's credit. There was a way to pay his debts. He shrank from the thought at first, as one would shrink from foul touch of pestilence or plague. But days went on that made him haggard, and nights that brought him no sleep, and the thought stayed with him until it grew familiar, and he disguised its foul features under soft terms of borrowing and lending; and at last, when his debts crowded, and he was desperate, he forged a draft in his uncle's name, presented it at the banking house, and it was at once cashed.

Three or six months' grace would afford him time to redeem himself, Alick Wentworth thought, as, with a desperate greed, he clutched his money.

After this, there were mad, reckless days and nights at Baden-Baden, while Honora flirted with her titled cavaliers, and was cross with "Al." when the humor took her, and little dreamed of the ruin that was gaping beneath their feet, under the flowers and the music and the splendor.

Brief gains flashed their sudden light through glooms of heavy losses, and again and again Alick Wentworth had to forge drafts and "borrow" money from the banking-house on his uncle's credit, until at last he found himself stranded, a debt of fifty thousand dollars upon his hands and heart.

He found there was still money left to return home with Honora, and he took a sudden fancy to plunge as far as possible from the scene of his shame and crime. Late in the autumn, Alick Wentworth concluded to return to America. "There would be plenty of chances to throw himself in the ocean on the way," he whispered gloomily and grimly enough sometimes.

But he was young, and life was sweet. This was his first trouble, and there were times when it all seemed like a horrible nightmare to him. Weeks were yet to intervene before the drafts would be presented for payment, and his crime transpire; and his spirits were naturally buoyant, and he clung to the hope that some way of escape must open up out of all this trouble.

So the ocean did not swallow Alick Wentworth, and he came back to Medbury, and Ambrose Kittredge little dreamed what a mine was one day to burst under his

own feet, or that the hand which had lighted the train was the nephew whom he idolized.

As for the latter, the old habits, and the old, light, gay spirits, enabled him to throttle for a while the monster that lay in wait for him. But that only bided its time. The day of reckoning was coming. It would be the day when the sight of the drafts, presented for payment, should furnish to Ambrose Kittredge irrefragable proof of his nephew's crime.

You must remember what Alick Wentworth was — what his indolent, luxurious life had been — you must remember his pride in his old family, in his honorable name; and now, when one awful hour was to crash down all that he had lived for, all the things in which his soul had taken delight, and brand him with the name of felon, Alick Wentworth told himself but one thing remained for him yet to do.

He would never front that disgrace. His uncle's fierce wrath, and Honora's stormy grief, and Mrs. Kittredge's contempt, and the great world's amazement and scorn, were things which Alexander Wentworth would never live to meet.

And the days went on and on, and the nightmare hung forever about his soul; but he laughed, and sang, and jested, telling himself he would not be a coward when the time came; he would eat and drink, and to-morrow he would die. As for the future life, and the God he must face there, young Wentworth told himself again there could be no perdition so awful as the dawn of that day

when he should stand before the world for precisely what he was.

Sitting there by the grate-fire, with the howling storm outside making a fitting chorus, Hollis Deering listened to Alexander Wentworth's story. It seemed that the man intended that this girl should know the worst that was in him. He went into the details with far greater distinctness than I have done, only holding back his deadly purpose.

He paused at last. Hollis had sat very still, drinking in every word, too shocked and strained to speak, if she had desired to, the quiet tears dropping upon her white cheeks and the hands in her lap.

"And now, Miss Deering, you see me for precisely the villain that I am; and yet God knows that I did not mean to be one when I commenced; but the road was so smooth and steep, and you find in what depths of infamy it has landed me."

She put up her hand with a little, deprecating movement, but she did not venture to look at him now. She only said, "To-morrow! — to-morrow!"

"Yes, — to-morrow, before noon, the drafts will be presented for payment. This is my last night as an honest man;" and his laugh fairly curdled the blood in her veins.

"Is it a very great deal of money?" she asked, in a few moments.

"Well, not over fifty thousand dollars. And I did not tell you all, — I used Leander's name for ten thousand of that sum. The poor fellow was talking over his

business-affairs last night with me, and said he wanted all his spare change to put into the house he intended setting about next spring. He will miss the money sadly, I fear."

"Fifty thousand dollars!" exclaimed Hollis, going over the words slowly, like one who found it hard to take in the vastness of that sum.

"Yes, forty thousand of it will be a heavy lump to Uncle Kittredge, but he is a rich man; it won't cripple him anywhere. The man has been fond of me. I think, perhaps, the knowledge of my crime will weigh heavier than the loss of the money, though he's fond of that too. I'm sorry for him," his voice shaking a little.

She noticed that he did not speak of his sister, but she thought that, perhaps, was too terrible for him to touch on.

In a few moments he came and stood before her. "I wanted to tell you my story," he said, in a low, unutterably mournful voice, "before I went away. I thought if there was one woman left in the world who, knowing the worst, would still shake hands with me, and smile upon me, — for I could bear the pity in your smile, — you were the woman to do it, Hollis Deering."

She turned now and faced him. "Going away? Where are you going, Mr. Wentworth?"

"No matter, — a long way. You will know to-morrow."

Something frightened her in his wild look, in his strange voice. She stood still, looking at him, un-

able to speak, her scared thoughts seeming to crowd and choke themselves in her throat.

"Well, won't you shake hands with me for the last time?" and he smiled such a smile, that, involuntarily, the girl shut her eyes.

"But if you should go the wrong way now! Wait and think, Mr. Wentworth. I want to help you," the words struggling out of her white lips.

"I know you do, but it is too late for that now. There is but *one* way, Hollis Deering."

She knew then, as well as though he had told her, what *way* that was he meant, and that Alexander Wentworth had resolved his eyes should never see the rise of that dawn whose day was to witness his disgrace. She knew he had gone over the scornful, angry faces, the reproaches and the curses, the clamor of tongues. Such a life as he had lived always makes a coward of a man when the test comes. He would be away from all that to-morrow — to-morrow!

Hollis Deering drew close up to the man. "There is but one way; you must take it," she said, her voice steady, her face clearing up out of its pallor and pain of a sudden.

"What's that?" sharply.

"Go straight to your uncle this very night, and tell him what you have told me."

His rattling laugh of ineffable scorn answered her. "Do you take me for a fool, Hollis Deering?"

"No; but for a man, Alick Wentworth, — a man who has slipped and gone down into fearful abysses of

wrong, but a man to whom life and youth yet remain to repair all that wrong. I take you for this, — not a coward — not something worse than that, Alexander Wentworth!"

"But I *am* a coward. I tell you, Hollis Deering, I would rather face a thousand deaths than my uncle with the story which I have told you to-night. Do you know it would send me to a felon's cell for a life almost as long as the one I have lived already?"

"Oh! you are not afraid of that; your uncle has a human heart!" she cried out.

"Yes; the man would turn me out-of-doors, but I don't think he would send me to prison, even for the loss of fifty thousand dollars."

"Then go to him, Alexander Wentworth! it is all that remains for you to do; go to him this very night, and tell him the truth."

"I would shoot myself first, on this threshold!" turning away from her.

In the tumult of his thoughts and feelings, young Wentworth did not suppose that Hollis Deering had penetrated to his secret purpose that night. He fancied that he had thoroughly misled her, and that she believed he was going to run away, to hide himself in some distant corner of the world for the rest of his life.

She followed him. "O Alexander Wentworth, it is true what I say, true as that God hears me! He will, he must help you. I am your friend; believe what I tell you, you will live to thank me for it yet. Go back to your uncle and tell him the truth; — the whole truth."

He looked at her a moment, — at the white face, and the light that seemed to shine all over it, exalting it almost into the face of an angel. Her eyes shone bright on him through blinding tears.

His own faltered for a moment; then he cried out sharp and wildly, "I cannot do it! — I cannot do it! Good-by, my little friend!"

He seized both her hands, kissed them, and then, as though he dared not trust himself, rushed out into the storm and darkness, and left her standing there alone in the middle of the room.





## CHAPTER XIII.

ALEXANDER WENTWORTH had stumbled, in a swift, blind way, upon his horse, and had seized the reins, when a hand suddenly plucked at his arm, and, looking up, he saw, gleaming ghost-like on him through the snow, the face of Hollis Deering, — a face ashen white with horror and fear.

Out there, in the rush of the bitter wind and the blinding snow, the two looked at each other a moment in utter silence. The man spoke first, in a fierce, hard, angry tone, "Go back into the house, Hollis Deering; I want nothing of you now. Who told you to come out here?" And he tried to shake off the hand that clutched at his arm. But the soft, light thing held itself firmly.

"No, I will not leave you, Alexander Wentworth. You shall not do that thing you mean to do this night — so help me, God!"

Her voice not very loud, the bitter gusts of wind sweeping across it; but it held down, in every word, some deadly force of will, which no human being had ever heard before in the voice of Hollis Deering.

The man laughed out now, — a short, sharp, desperate laugh, breaking into the storm like the cry of unloosed demons. "I'd like to know what you or your God can

do to prevent it. You are too late now. Go back into the house, I tell you again, Hollis Deering."

Her hand upon his arm did not shake. It was literally a matter of life and death between the two now. "You shall grind me under your horse's heels before I will leave you like this," said Hollis Deering; and, by the faint light of the falling snow, the man looked in her face, and knew that she meant just what she said.

He swore a dreadful oath at her. He attempted to wrench her fingers away, but they only gripped him closer. Then he glared on her out there in the bitter wind, and the blinding snow, half resolved in his frenzy to strike her down and plunge away.

"I was a fool to tell you!" he cried, — "a mad, drivelling fool!" and again he cursed her. She did not shrink or shiver, even, at the awful words. She knew how life and death hung balanced on the slightest movement now.

"No, Alick Wentworth, it was your last chance, your last hope, and God put it into your heart to come to me;" the brave, decided voice holding its own fairly above the clanging of the winds.

"I don't want to hear about Him. It's too late, I tell you."

"It is never too late for Him, unless you do that Thing which will make it so. I stand here before you to-night, a timid, powerless girl, strong to help you only because I know that through me the voice of the God whom you deny is speaking to you."

He was silent one moment at that. Then he turned

upon her fiercely. "What is it you want to do with me?" he asked.

"To save your soul and body from the devil," she said. It was no time for dainty words on either tide.

Again that laugh, like the cry of demons, curdling awfully above the storm. "You can't do it. I belong to him, and I'm going to my fate. Good-by, Hollis Deering, kind, generous, little Hollis; my friend that would be to the last, knowing the worst;" his voice breaking down there a moment, and his hand dropping heavily upon her shoulder. "Forgive me all I said in my madness, dear child, and forget me. There, go ahead, Dapple," urging the restive, champing creature forward.

But Hollis was at the horse's head in one moment. It was well he had learned to know that voice and touch, and like them. She stroked his mane, she drew her soft fingers down his face. "There, Dapple, stand still, good Dapple, a minute."

And the restive, quivering creature bent his head to her hand, and stood still. She came back in a moment to Dapple's master, grasping his arm. I think, even in that instant, her power over his horse struck the man. This time he did not answer fiercely, he only said, "It's of no use, Hollis — of no use. I must go." And the snow swept, and the winds clamored between them.

"If you will only listen to me."

He did not answer her, but she heard him mutter: "To-morrow! to-morrow!"

"Face it beforehand, Alick Wentworth. Meet the worst this night, and when to-morrow's sun arises you will thank me for what I have done; and thank God, too, through all the life to come, that he put it into my heart to do and say this."

He turned upon her now with passionate fierceness. "What is it you want me to do?"

"Just what I said in the house. Go straight to your uncle, and tell him the worst."

"Do you know what that means, — that only scorn, and misery, and dishonor are in store for me? My life is wrecked and lost. What is there remains to me? I have looked it fairly in the face. Shall I drag my miserable carcass around the world, a mark for the sneers and contempt of all men? Shall I go to my uncle and look him in the face, and tell him that I deserve a felon's cell? I have fairly earned it; and if he does not pack me off to the herd of vile criminals there, where my place is, it will be because of the family-name and honor. Think of Honora's scorn and rage when she comes to hear that! I can face death, but not her!"

The elegant, admired, petted Alexander Wentworth! When you came to think what he was and what his life had been, one hardly wondered that his crime and the consequences which he must front had driven him to deadly desperation. Was it any wonder that heart and soul failed him, at the last; that he turned coward, and believed what the devil whispered to him, that nothing remained to him but to die like a dog?

"Yet you must do it. It is your only chance for

life!" burst out Hollis Deering once more. Ah! if I could only tell you what she said, and how she said it, — the brave girl, standing there, with the snow whitening upon her head, and the blast raging past her, and she utterly unconscious of all this, while the lights shone in the pleasant little parlor and from the chamber window overhead, where her father and mother sat in warm, cosy comfort, and fancied she was dreaming in the glow of the grate-fire beneath, — how she pleaded with this man for the life he was about to madly dash out of his brain! But I cannot tell you. Hollis Deering had never talked thus before; she never will again; and although only she and Alexander Wentworth will ever know what passed between them on that night, the girl believes to this day that for once God spoke through her lips to the soul of the man.

She pleaded with him; she set his future before him, — all that he might make of it for himself and others; the man he might yet become, putting the old life behind him and coming out into a new one, — that should be stronger and nobler, braver and better for this sin and anguish; pausing once in a while, in the midst of her talk, and stroking the restive horse's mane.

"There, Dapple, good fellow, there!" and at those words the creature would droop his head and stand still again.

Something in that girl's words found its way to the soul of Alexander Wentworth, roused within him that better, nobler nature, of whose existence he himself had hardly a consciousness.

What if this girl told him the truth? What if, after all, the God whom he had denied and defied were speaking through her?

Was there some future for him, nobler than his past? Was it the devil, after all, who whispered to him to slink out of life a coward and a poltroon? What if something still remained for him to do, and this night was the bridge which led out from the old, lounging, reckless, ignoble life to a new one,—one of toil, and sweat, and wrestling in the harness and heat of the day, but brave and honest, and better than the mean and selfish one which just now he hated and loathed?

He saw himself, this Alexander Wentworth, as for days the poor fellow had been seeing himself, lying limp and stark when the morning sun broke upon him, with livid, horrified faces of friends and kin gathered around—a little later they would learn the crime which explained and justified his self-murder!

What if this girl's voice, calling to him out of the blind darkness and anguish of this hour, was the true one? His soul groped toward it, and then drew back half doubting, all the fear and horror stirring in him again; yet through all he heard the voice pleading for his life, commanding, prophesying, and it was as if the voice of an angel spoke to him.

The tears came thick into his eyes, and dropped down on his brown, handsome beard, and glistened there among the snow-flakes.

She paused at last, drawing her breath heavily, and again he turned and looked at her in the light of the fall-

ing snow and the distant street lamps. "If I could know it was true,—what you say!" he said, in a tone whose terrible pathos went straight to her heart.

"But it is true, God knows it, and the other—that your life is wrecked and broken—is a lie, and of the devil," she said. "He and I, knowing the worst, have faith in you. O Alick Wentworth! live, live to thank me for this night's work."

"I must go before my uncle and look him in the face, and tell him the truth,—that is what you would have me do?" going over the words slowly, half to himself.

"Yes; go straight to him with the whole truth, just as you have told me."

The hand on his arm,—a small, thin hand, like the rest of the girl,—but it was all in that hour that held him back from death. It had grown numb and red now. It could not hold there much longer.

Suddenly his voice changed. "You must be very cold standing out here so long, little Hollis."

"Yes, I believe I am," she said indifferently.

"You must go into the house now," speaking kindly and naturally enough.

She put her face up close to his, with those great, brown eyes asking their life and death question.

"But you—you?" she faltered and choked.

"I will try—God helping me, I will try!"

Through the shaking back and forth of the winds, you might have heard this man's voice a good way off.

She gave him both of her numb, red hands then. Neither of them could speak for a moment. Before she

took her fingers away, she drew a little closer and whispered to him, "Have you a pistol?"

He bowed his head.

"Let me have it," she said.

He fumbled a moment at his breast-pocket, and drew it out,—a small Colt's revolver.

As her fingers touched the cold steel, she shuddered.

"Be careful," he said; "it's loaded."

Then he looked once more in her face, and, without daring to trust himself to speak another word, he struck his spurs into Dapple's sides and sprang off.

As for Hollis, she staggered into the house. She was a delicate creature. One would have fancied she must have taken her death-cold during the time she had stood out there in the blasts of wind and the blinding snow.

When she got into the hall, she shook off the flakes that clung to her, wondering at herself that she felt so cold and numb; wondering, too, whether she should ever be warm again.

She dragged her limbs into the parlor, and up to the grate, with its little red island of live coals. The warmth penetrated and stung her half-frozen limbs. She sat down, and the tears kept coming in her eyes and falling stilly over her cheeks. She was too worn out to cry passionately, after the dreadful strain which she had undergone.

She had placed the revolver on the stand before her. She kept gazing at it. What thoughts swelled in her heart, only God knew. But her eyes shone with great, radiant deeps of exultation, and through the tears a joy-

ful smile flickered sometimes, and once she placed her fingers on the revolver.

"O my God!" she said. "My God, I thank thee!"

Coming home that night, muffled up in the warm blankets, Agnes Deering looked out of the carriage-window, and half fancied something passed them through the gray, thick drifts of the snow.

"Did you see anything there?" she asked Leander, who sat by her side.

"No; what was it?"

"I'm not certain, but it seemed, for a moment, as though a man on horseback swept past us."

"It is not likely, such a night as this. Some freak of the snow-drifts, doubtless. Ugh! how the wind beats about! Are you quite comfortable, my darling?"

"Oh, yes, thank you, Leander."

"It is very singular about Alick's bolting to-night. I never saw Kittredge so cut up over anybody's absence. But then, you know, Alick is a kind of idol with him. And he is a capital fellow. I feel a little anxious myself about him."

So Leander talked, going home that night. Meanwhile, there was a sore place in Agnes' thoughts as she went over that evening. She was on the point of telling her lover all that had passed, but at the instant of speaking her words drew back. "It will only pain him," she thought. "Not to-night."

Leander and Agnes were a good deal surprised to find Hollis sitting up before the fire when they returned.

"You are an odd little elf, Hollis," said Agnes. "I fancied you would be in bed long ago."

"No; I didn't feel sleepy to-night," she answered simply enough.

She had laid the pistol out of sight when she heard the carriage drive up.

The young man only waited a moment; but just as he was leaving the room, Hollis rose up. "I want to see you an instant in the hall, Mr. Sullivan," she said very earnestly.

Agnes looked at her sister, half amused, half amazed. "Is it possible I am not to hear what you have to say to Leander, Hollis?" she asked.

"Not now, Agnes. Perhaps you will know some time."

"I shall be very much honored to hear what you have to confide to me, Miss Hollis," replied Leander, rather perplexed and astonished at the whole proceeding; but then, he had made up his mind, long ago, that his future sister-in-law was in the habit of doing quaint, out-of-the-way things.

So these two stood alone in the hall. Hollis looked at young Sullivan a moment, with her great, solemn eyes, as though she would search what stuff lay at bottom of the man before her. Then she broke out, "Mr. Sullivan, you will go straight home to-night?"

"Why, certainly, Miss Hollis!" wondering if the girl had lost her wits.

"You will find somebody there who needs you; and oh, I beseech you, be generous, be pitiful, as you will want God to be to you some day!"

Leander Sullivan stared at the girl, really shocked. "Had she gone suddenly mad?" he asked himself, half undecided whether or not to summon Agnes, who was walking up and down the parlor, wondering greatly what this mysterious tryst could mean which Hollis was holding with her sister's lover.

"What do you mean, Hollis?" inquired Leander, at last, in a soothing tone, such as one might use towards a frightened child.

"I mean Alexander Wentworth —"

He started at that name. "What! have you seen him to-night?"

"Yes; he has been here. He is in awful trouble, Mr. Sullivan,—such trouble as you cannot conceive of. If the others show him no pity — and I think they will not — you, at least, will remember what I told you,—he has been dragged back from the very mouth of death and hell to-night; he may go there again, if you all turn against him."

Leander Sullivan grew white at those dreadful words. Yet some sense of their truthfulness penetrated his soul. He no longer doubted the sanity of the girl standing there, with her white face and her great, shining, solemn eyes.

"Alick Wentworth — Al.," he said, and the figure of the graceful, luxurious, happy fellow, as Leander knew him, rose before the young man,— "in awful trouble! What has happened to him?"

"I can't tell you. He must do that. And you will have to know soon enough. Only don't forget what I said. You are needed by this time. Go now."



"Good-by, Hollis," giving her his hand, with some fresh sense of power in the girl.

"Good-by, Mr. Sullivan. You will understand in a little while." And she went into the parlor.

As for Leander Sullivan, he stumbled out through the storm to the carriage with a feeling that some mysterious evil menaced him, in which Alexander Wentworth was the central figure, and he shouted to the coachman, "Drive like all the fiends for home!"

## CHAPTER XIV.

THE party at Mr. Kittredge's had separated early on account of the storm. The gentleman's wife, and mother-in-law, and niece sat in an alcove, and went over the whole evening after the manner of women.

Mr. Kittredge paid little attention to their chatter. He was not in a good humor over Al.'s absence, and at the bottom was a little anxiety lest some accident had befallen him.

"Honora," he said, breaking suddenly into the talk, "did you ever know Al. to act in this fashion before?"

"Well, no, Uncle Ambrose, I can't say I ever did know him to serve his friends quite so savagely," replied the young lady, who was highly complacent over the sensation which her beauty and wit had created that evening. "That erratic brother of mine likes immensely to have his own way, and no doubt an absurd fancy seized him at the last moment to carry himself off. In this dreadful storm too! He deserves to be impaled for it!"

Honora Wentworth liked to startle people with extravagant speeches.

Mrs. Kittredge laughed. But at that moment the door opened, and a waiter, putting his head inside, said

to the lady's husband, "Will you be good enough to step here, sir? There's somebody wants to see you."

The gentlemen rose up and went out, Mrs. Sullivan, who had a son of her own, remarking, "I wonder if it has anything to do with Alick! Something may have happened to him."

"Oh, no," said Honora, carelessly. "It's only one of his odd freaks. Uncle Ambrose needn't fret his dear old soul over it. Al. always takes good care of himself." And she went back to the party, which happened to be the topic nearest her heart at that time.

Meanwhile Mr. Kittredge had been addressed by the waiter as soon as the door was closed, in a rather mysterious tone: —

"It's Mr. Wentworth, sir. He's in the library, and wants to see you; but he said I was to be sure and tell no one else."

Ambrose Kittredge, a good deal perplexed, and not a little provoked, made his way to the library, where his nephew awaited him. It was a large room, with dark, rich wainscoting, the lines of books marshalled orderly behind the thick glass and heavy carving.

The light shone dimly over all, but it showed Alick pacing up and down the room.

So the fellow's limbs, about whose welfare his uncle had felt a little secret uneasiness, were all sound. There was no excuse for his conduct then.

Then the uncle broke out in a way quite unusual with him, to his favorite, petted nephew: "Well, young man, I must say your conduct to-night has been most unaccountable."

Alexander did not answer at first. He went right over to his uncle and stood before him, his face haggard and peaked, like a man's grown suddenly old.

"Uncle Ambrose," he said, in a hard, rapid, excited voice, "I've got something to tell you. I meant, instead, to put a bullet through my brain to-night, and I fancied my dead face to-morrow, when you came to see it, might plead with you a little, — at any rate, it could not hear your curses!"

"God help us!" cried the man, staggering back and staring at his nephew; and I doubt whether in all his life Ambrose Kittredge had ever made a more devout prayer than that one. "What does the boy mean?"

Alick's gaze went over the fine, portly figure standing there, over the shocked face under the thick, grizzly hair. Some pity struggled up into the hunted glare of the young man's eyes. He was about to deal the elder a dreadful blow. He knew it, knew just how proud his uncle was of him, how fond too; and, thinking of all this, he groaned out sharply, "O Hollis, it would have been better to let me die!"

"Alick, boy, what ails you?" cried the elder, seizing his nephew's arm. "Are you gone mad?"

"No!" shaking off the kindly hand as though it was fire, and burnt him. But no soft words would smooth the story, else, for his uncle's sake, Alexander Wentworth would have gone hunting for them; and it was to his credit that, in this awful moment, he did think of his uncle with a real pity. "No, I am not mad, but I am worse than that."

"Worse than that!" — the man's face getting whiter with amazement and horror. "What do you mean, Alick?"

"I mean that I have committed a crime, — a crime that will shut me up for years in a felon's cell, unless you take pity upon me."

Ambrose Kittredge staggered, and grasped the chair-arm; his fingers clutched helplessly at his necktie, like one who was strangling for breath. It was pitiful to see him, — the dignified, stately gentleman. He gasped once or twice, and then he turned on his nephew the pallor and horror of his face.

"Have you told me the truth, Alexander Wentworth?" — in a stern, choking voice.

"I have told you the truth," said Alexander Wentworth, in slow, hard tones, and his arms seemed to hang limp and nerveless by his side, and for that moment he looked the criminal that he felt himself in every drop of his blood.

His uncle saw it. An awful wrath worked under the livid pallor of the man's face.

"Stand there, Alexander Wentworth!" — as he would hardly have shouted to a brute, — "and tell me your crime."

And Alick Wentworth did. It was a short story, — no need of many words. He held nothing back from beginning to end; he hardly attempted any palliation of his crime. He stood there, with his sin and his shame upon him, — he, the elegant Alick Wentworth, looking at that moment much like a convicted felon, bowed with guilt;

and he made a clean breast of his crime, — the use of Honora's money, the forgery of his uncle's name, and, at last, of Leander's. Ambrose Kittredge knew the whole story, just as Hollis knew it before him.

The elder was not a man given to swift heats of passion, and no human being had ever beheld him wrought into such a fury of rage as he was to-night. His face was deadly white as he dragged himself up and down the room two or three times, and Alick stood leaning against the heavy table, such an embodiment of wreck and misery that it was dreadful to see him.

At last his uncle came up to him, his eyes glaring with a frenzy of wrath. He shook his clenched fist in his nephew's face.

"You scoundrel! — you thief! — you shall pay the penalty. I'll have you locked up in the State-Prison to-morrow!" he shouted.

I hardly think the cruel words hurt much then. The younger man had gone through with too much that night for any fresh anguish. He only looked at his uncle with a dull kind of hopelessness in his eyes.

"I'm ready to go," he said, simply enough; and again he murmured to himself, "I told you so, Hollis. It would have been better to let me die."

His uncle only caught the last words.

"I wish you had died. I curse you, Alexander Wentworth, to your face, for the shame and dishonor you have brought upon all our heads."

Do not blame the man too much. His rage measured the depth of his love and pride for his nephew, and in

his frenzy he scarcely knew what he was saying; he who, amongst his fellow-men, was usually a model of dignity, composure, reticence.

There is no use of trying to relate what passed between the uncle and nephew during the next fifteen minutes. The elder man had it all to himself, pouring out awful reproaches, scorn, and menace upon the other; the other, who made no defence, only standing still by the library table, with all that hopeless misery upon his face, looking up occasionally to meet the blaze in his uncle's eyes.

"And there was Honora, too. If no sense of honor, no feeling of guilt or shame, could save you from your cowardly, infamous crime, one would have thought you might have felt some human pity for your sister. It will bow her head to the dust with grief and shame. Her brother a thief! It is time she should know it, sir."

"Yes, you may tell her," the hard, listless, worn-out tone, as though it did not concern him.

Just then, if the officers had stood ready to convey him to prison, I do not think Alick Wentworth would have made one movement, or one plea, save himself; he would only have turned and gone out quietly.

"It is time she should know it, I say. The world will have to learn it all to-morrow, for I want you to feel, you scoundrel, that neither your honorable old name nor your family credit will save you. I suppose you had counted on all that with me, and expected I would be a soft fool, that you could move to pity and forgiveness when the worst came. But you'll find I'm granite this

time, sir; and yet to think I had loved and trusted you as my own life, Alick Wentworth!" — a sharp pain breaking up into the glare of his eyes, into the frenzy of his voice, too, that went to Alick Wentworth's heart like a knife, and he groaned out sharply.

The two men had loved each other.

Then Mr. Kittredge left the room; his nephew knew well enough what he had gone for, and what was coming.

A fierce light shot suddenly into the sullen despair of his eyes, as though a new purpose had flashed across him. He fumbled a moment at his breast. Then his hands dropped limp and nerveless at his side again.

"She took the pistol away," he said, in a tone of dreadful pathos. "I had forgotten. It was cruel, Hollis."

A few moments later, Mr. Kittredge returned to the library, and there followed him his wife, and mother-in-law, and niece, their white, shocked, bewildered faces making a strange contrast with their elegant dresses.

Honora went straight over to her brother.

"Alick," she said, "Uncle Ambrose says you have been guilty of something, — I cannot tell what. Speak out now and say it is a lie."

He looked her in the face, the desperate anguish in his eyes.

"No, it is true, Honora!"

"O my God! my God!" she shrieked out, and she did not take his name in vain then, for the earthquake had opened under her feet.

Even then her uncle did not spare her.

"He is a thief and a forger; he has earned a place in the State-Prison and a right to a felon's cell for the next ten years. Speak, and tell them if it is not all true!" sternly cried the man.

"Yes, it is true!" answered the hollow, husky tone, but so distinctly that they all heard.

Mrs. Kittredge shuddered. She would have been less than woman if the heart under all her lace and jewels that night had not pitied the worn face, the wrecked, hopeless figure, standing there by the library table, that only a few hours ago had been the graceful, elegant Alexander Wentworth.

"O Ambrose, my husband, be pitiful!" the heart in her cried out.

"He had a mother once," sobbed Mrs. Sullivan, thinking of her own son. "Show him some mercy, Mr. Kittredge!"

At that name the man turned, and looked upon his mother-in-law. Those who saw the look could never forget it, never describe it either.

Then he cried out sharply: "Elizabeth! Elizabeth!"

It was the name of his sister, and she had been Alexander and Honora's mother; and it had been the proudest, happiest hour of her brother's youth when he led her to the altar, and gave her away to be the bride of a Wentworth.

"Elizabeth's son a thief, a forger, a criminal!" he went over the words in a loud voice, strained by some inward horror, or pity, or both; and then — he was a plethoric man, and it probably would have happened

some time, for the doctors had cautioned him against undue excitement — the man dropped heavily on the floor in a fit of apoplexy.

At that moment Leander Sullivan burst into the room.

What a scene it was to meet human eyes in the stately, well-ordered home of Ambrose Kittredge! — the pallid, frightened women, in their splendid dresses, the man struck down like the dead, in the midst of his awful passion; and Alick Wentworth, his face sharp and livid with horror, just dropped down on the floor by his uncle's feet.

"I have murdered him! I meant it should be myself, Leander!" he cried out.

The dreadful night had passed away. The sun struggled up through ashy-gray columns of cloud, which fell into broken heaps, and the winds, worn out with a night of clamor and rage, dropped into low, repentant sighs and mutterings.

Throughout that awful time, Leander Sullivan and his mother had alone borne themselves with any calmness or command of circumstances. Indeed, this trouble seemed to bring out some latent strength and manliness in the fellow. He had taken matters into his own hands from the beginning, dispatching the coachman for a physician, and having one there in an incredibly short space of time.

Everybody, in the fright and bewilderment, yielded implicitly to his orders. He persuaded, or rather com-

manded, Mrs. Kittredge and Honora to leave the room. If the place of one at that hour was by her husband, and the other by her brother, we will not be hard on either of the women that they failed it at this time.

Each could be a fine, harmonious figure in the graces and splendors of life; but when it came to fronting some sudden tragedy of sin and grief, these women failed you, — drew back affrighted and helpless.

Leander Sullivan was not long in ascertaining that his brother-in-law was not dead, as they had at first feared.

When Alick Wentworth learned that fact, he had staggered to his feet, with such a look in his sharp, haggard face, that, catching sight of it, Mrs. Sullivan actually burst into tears.

She went up to him, and put her arm around his neck. His own mother could not have done it more tenderly.

"Come with me, Alick," she said; and he looked in her face, and went without a word, groping his way up the stairs, and once or twice the lady had to put out her hand to steady him; with a vague wonder in her heart whether any woman would do as much for Leander if he were in Alexander Wentworth's case, and a sudden swell of wrath against his sister, that she could leave her brother in his awful need, — poor Honora! who, all doubled up on a lounge in Mrs. Kittredge's room, was shivering and sobbing to herself, and fancying nobody needed help so much as she did.

He was obedient as a child when they reached Mrs.

Sullivan's room, the lady making him sit down there in the easy-chair, where it was warmest. He did not speak to her; but he seemed so crushed and utterly broken down, that she put her hand on his hair, — his soft, glowing, chestnut hair, that he had been so proud of a little while ago, and that women had praised and envied. "Poor Alick! I'm very sorry for you," she said.

She had always called him Mr. Wentworth before.

He looked up at her again, with a bewildered, wistful look. How utterly desolate he seemed! One of her tears fell upon his fingers. He stared at that curiously too. She was afraid his reason would utterly break down under this strain.

"Shall I send Honora to you?"

He shook his head: "She can do me no good. Poor Honora!"

Mrs. Sullivan thought he uttered the truth. If Honora Wentworth could have done her brother any good, she would have been with him before this.

Still, the woman made one effort. After she had obtained a promise from young Wentworth that he would not leave the room, she left him alone, and went straight to his sister. "Honora," she said, "you are Alick's sister. I think, of all the world, you are the one to go to him now. I think, in his despair and wretchedness, you might say some words to him that would comfort and help him. He needs you."

"Oh, I can't go to him," said Honora, sobbing and wringing her hands. "He don't seem like my brother



any more. Just think of all the disgrace and misery he has brought upon me. I don't want to see him."

Some words of scorn and indignation rose to Mrs. Sullivan's lips, but she held them back, looking at the poor, sobbing creature there, and went downstairs and took her place by Leander's side at the couch of her son-in-law. In a little while Mrs. Kittredge crawled in also, and sat down in a chair by the bed, but the doctor soon sent her upstairs again.

"My dear madam, you are not fit to be here," he said.

Not long after dawn, the sick man opened his eyes, and began, in a little while, to babble in a touching, half-coherent way, about Elizabeth, and the old home behind the sugar-maple grove, with confused talk about the proud, happy bridal days, and of what the world would say at her marrying a Wentworth.

Elizabeth Kittredge's betrothal must have been, long ago, to her family, very much what Agnes Deering's was to hers. Mrs. Sullivan thought of that more than once, standing by that bedside.

But the talk was most touching when Mr. Kittredge came to speak of Elizabeth's boy. The scenes of the last night had left some bewildered trouble in the man's brain, and, with all his confused chronology, a sense of something that had gone wrong with his nephew clung to Ambrose Kittredge. He called on Alick, "Elizabeth's boy," in heart-rending tones. He insisted that no harm should come near him, — the anxiety, the ten-

derness, the trouble over Alick hovering with touching pathos through all the incoherent, half-raving talk.

At last — but that was long after daylight — the man fell asleep.

"He will probably be conscious and better when he awakes; but he must be spared the least agitation," said the physician, warningly.

Mrs. Sullivan touched her son's arm. "Have you learned about poor Alick, Leander?" she asked.

"No, mother, only I'm satisfied he is in some great trouble, whatever it is. I had rather hear it from his own lips."

"You had better go and ask him now, my son. It is necessary you should know, only" — using Hollis Deering's very words — "be merciful to him, Leander."

## CHAPTER XV.

LEANDER SULLIVAN'S hand shook as he knocked at the door of his mother's chamber. In his whole life he had never shrunk from meeting a human face, as he did now from confronting Alexander Wentworth. Standing at the door, and listening for some sound, a sickness, akin to fright or guilt, such as he had never experienced in his life, not even when he proposed to Agnes Deering; struck all over him. He had spoken truly when he told his mother he did not know Alick's story; but, for all that, he was only too well convinced that the revelation awaiting him held in itself some awful depths of guilt and crime.

The two young men had always been on the very best of terms; had a free-and-easy sort of friendship over cigars, and coffee or claret, as the case might be; discussed politics, and told stories of college life, running sharp tilts of wit against each other, to the infinite merriment of the household. But in the midst of all this hearty, jovial intercourse, what black abyss had yawned suddenly — what earthquake had heaved under the flowery passage of these hours!

Alick Wentworth, in some sense the central figure of the household, happy, luxurious, high-spirited, that fel-

low of infinite jest and mirth, rose up to Leander, as he stood there at his mother's door.

What spectre was coming, he wondered, to take the place of this old Alexander of his liking? His heart yearned towards the vision, full of the pride and strength of young manhood, which rose before him, almost as our memories yearn over the beloved dead, only there was a sharper bitterness in Leander's thought than in those who put away dear faces under the green creasing of the sods

One knock, and then another, and there came no answer. With a sudden fear, Leander opened the door, and went in. There was no need for alarm. Alick had thrown himself down on the lounge, and towards the morning a broken slumber had dropped mercifully upon the wrenched heart and brain; had it not been for that, he must have gone mad before the daylight.

The face crushed up there among the pillows was the face Leander knew so well; and yet how changed it was, — old and sharp, and worn as years would not have worn it, the mouth drawn and leaden. Leander stood still, and watched it, almost as though it lay dead before him. When it woke, he knew the old Alick Wentworth would not be there to greet him; but something else — something else!

Of a sudden, with a spasmodic start, Alick Wentworth's eyes snapped open. A wild, vague stare, in the first place, met the man standing before him, then, in a

breath, the truth flashed its horror across the soul of Alexander Wentworth.

He sat up, shaking all over. "How is Uncle Ambrose?" he said, and there was something so appealing and wretched in the way he asked that question, that Leander forgot everything but his pity.

"He's come out of his fit, Al, and he's better than we feared. His mind wanders a good deal yet, but that's natural, you know. It looked dark enough at first, but I think he'll weather it."

A gleam of joy across the drawn, leaden features, and then Alick asked again, in that same hungry, pleading way as at first, "Has he said anything about me?"

"Yes. You seem to be in his mind more than anybody else;" and then Leander — he was a good-natured fellow, you know, and the sight of young Wentworth's misery moved him greatly — went over with his uncle's childish babble — for, after all, it was little more than that — about his nephew.

Anything was better than the stark, livid despair of young Wentworth's face a few moments before, Leander thought; but afterwards, when he came to relate the whole interview to his mother and Hester, he just broke down at the point of the nephew's remorse and agony over his uncle's foolish talk, and he never spoke of that again. At last, — it must have been some time afterwards, — young Wentworth said to Leander, "It was kind, Sullivan, to come and see me, after you have learned the scoundrel and monster I've been."

Perhaps he was thinking of Honora at that moment.

At any rate, Leander was, with some thoughts which, I think, even in her present misery, would have startled the young lady had she known them.

"Those are dreadful words, Al. I wouldn't let another man say them of you. But you're mistaken about my knowing. I'm utterly in the dark as to what you've been doing."

"What, haven't they told you?" his face starting out of its wretchedness into broad amazement.

"No; I wouldn't let them. Whatever there was to hear, I said I'd have it from your own lips, Al."

Alexander Wentworth's jaw shook at those words, and something came into his eyes which made Leander go over and sit by his side, forgetting everything at that moment but his friend's trouble.

"Tell me, Al," he said, so softly and tenderly, that if Alick's dead mother could have stood there and heard, she would have held out her hand at that moment with a blessing on Leander Sullivan.

Young Wentworth turned away his face from his friend, and buried it up in the cushions with a dreadful groan.

There was a little silence between the two, and sparkles of sunlight played here and there, like swarms of golden bees, on carpet and wainscoting, — God's dear sunlight, that comes sometimes in its shining joy and gladness like a dreadful mocking satire upon all our misery.

Then Alick Wentworth broke the silence, and in a few minutes he had told his story, making as clean a

breast of it to Leander Sullivan as, the night before, he had made to his uncle in the library.

Leander was prepared for some dreadful revelation. Hollis Deering's talk, in the first place, and the scenes of last night, with his mother's hints, had all filled him with vague, horrible anticipations of crime on Alick's part. Whatever it proved, he meant to be generous and merciful with his friend, carrying upstairs his mother's last words too. But Leander Sullivan had a native honesty, which was awfully shocked at this story of crime.

As Alick went on, the other sprang up, stamping to and fro across the room, his face deadly pale, his fingers at work in his beard. He forgot Alick now. He only stood face to face with the foul wrong done the love and trust of Leander Sullivan's brother-in-law — done himself too. And when Alick had finished his wretched story, young Sullivan turned on him at last in a blaze of scorn and wrath.

"I don't wonder Kittredge went mad when he learned how foully you had dealt with him, — with us all. It was mean — I say it was devilish mean — to serve us that way, Alexander Wentworth."

He was sorry for it the next moment, when he looked at the poor, cowed, broken-down heap lying there on the lounge, and remembered that twenty-four hours before it had been the elegant Alick Wentworth.

You know what those moments are, — if you do not, you have never lived much, — wrath and scorn and pity all wrestling together for mastery in your soul for one

whom you have loved and trusted, and who has basely and cruelly deceived that love and trust. You know how that maddens and stings and tears to the quick.

For a moment Leander stood still, the storm at work in him. The other did not say one word; he writhed once or twice under the words, as a man would whose power of suffering had been well-nigh exhausted by successive blows. The next thing he heard, Leander was speaking close by him, in a swift, choked kind of voice: —

"Wentworth, I'm sorry for all I said just now. I didn't mean to be hard, but your story took me all of a sudden, and though I can always have but one opinion of the thing itself, still I'm sorry for you, if that will do you any good." Then he broke out suddenly: "Who would have believed it of you, Alexander Wentworth, — who would have believed it of you?"

"Nobody but the devil, who possessed me," replied Alick, and he lifted his head up, and dropped his forehead on his hand in the wavering way of an old, broken-down man. And again Leander pitied him; and again there was silence in the room, and the sunshine, like a heap of golden lilies, shook on the ceiling.

Pretty soon Alick murmured to himself the name of Hollis Deering. "It would have been better as I said, better as I said, Hollis."

Leander started at that name, his last interview with the girl coming back to him. How long ago it seemed!

"Does she know? Does Hollis know?" he asked.

"Yes; and she was the only one in the world, too, who would have known."

Young Sullivan penetrated quickly enough through the ambiguity of the words to their dreadful significance.

"Hollis Deering! Hollis Deering!" thinking of the small, shy, brown creature. "Did you go to her with all this?"

"Yes; if you want to know the rest, she must tell you," speaking in a dry, tired, husky voice, which made Leander desist from any further questions at that time.

After the miserable interview was over, Mrs. Sullivan, who had been on the watch, came out, and met her son in the hall.

"Well, Leander, you know all?"

"Yes. I'm going straight over to the Deerings, mother."

"To the Deerings! At such a time as this, Leander?" shocked that her son could think of seeking the side even of the lady of his wooing at this crisis.

"You don't understand me, mother," reading the look in her eyes. "It's about this business I'm going. When I come back I'll tell you the whole. Look out for that poor" — he was about to say scoundrel, but somehow the word stuck in his throat — "fellow upstairs. It wouldn't take much to make him finish himself off. He's gone to wreck anyhow," in a dry, grim sort of voice, feeling that it was his duty to be very angry, and yet a memory of what Alick had been tugging at his heart. "Pity folks can't blow themselves up before they come to worse grief."

It was well that Alick Wentworth did not overhear

those words, for in his mood, at that time, he would probably have acted on them.

An hour later Leander Sullivan stood at the front door of the cottage on Birch Avenue. The rapid drive had braced his nerves, and the cool winds had cleared his brain.

Agnes met her lover in the hall with some doubt and some anxiety in her face. His first question, after their greeting, was for Hollis.

"Something is the matter with the girl," answered the elder sister. "I cannot draw anything out of her; but her face is worn and haggard, and looks as though she had not slept for weeks. I see plainly enough that she is laboring under some dreadful excitement, although she has persuaded mamma that it is a miserable cold."

At that moment Hollis came into the hall, having just learned of young Sullivan's arrival. After all he had passed through during the last twelve hours, he was shocked at the look of her face. She came right up to him, her eyes full of a terrible anxiety.

"You have heard, Leander?" she cried, taking no notice of her amazed sister.

"Yes, I know, Hollis."

"And is he alive yet?"

"Yes; what there is left of him."

"What do you mean — what can you two mean?" broke out Agnes, almost transfixed with amazement, as she looked from her lover to her sister.

But Leander only answered the latter. "I have

something to hear from you, Hollis, and but little time to stay. He said you might tell me all you knew."

"He said so, — Alick Wentworth?" she gasped.

"Yes; he told me this not an hour ago."

They went into the parlor, and Agnes followed them, not knowing what she was about, only with some dreadful prescience of evil.

They both turned and looked at her, then Leander spoke: "Agnes, you will forgive me; but this is a talk that Hollis and I must have alone together."

"Must I go, Leander?" clasping her hands imploringly. "You know I would not force myself upon the confidence of either; but Leander — Hollis, if it concerns you, is it not my right to share this secret?"

Leander and Hollis looked at each other. No doubt there was truth in what Agnes asked.

"She will have to know some time, Hollis," said her lover, doubtfully, to the younger girl.

"Yes, some time. It may be as well now as ever," she answered, and Agnes remained.

For a few minutes Leander had the talking mostly to himself, going over with the scenes of the last night. Both the women listened, pallid, silent, except when once in a while a half-smothered shriek of amazement and horror burst from Agnes Deering's lips, as one dreadful truth after another broke upon her.

Afterwards Hollis told her story, the tears dropping slowly over the white face, that, as her elder sister said, looked as though it had not fallen into the quiet shadows of sleep for weeks; but she held nothing back, feeling

what was her duty now, seeing Alick Wentworth had unsealed her lips, and that it was best to speak for his sake.

She told all that happened that day they rode out together; all that transpired the night before, which had so burned itself into the memory of Hollis Deering, that she could not help living it over while she talked, and making the others live it over too.

Anything human, hearing that story from the girl's lips, seeing the remorse and desperation to which his crime had goaded him, must have been moved with pity for Alick Wentworth. This feeling, with one of utter amazement at the courage and strength which Hollis had displayed during the last night, by turns possessed the soul of Leander Sullivan, by turns that of Agnes Deering.

"I did what I could for him — what I could," said Hollis, at last, much as though somebody else might have done it a great deal better.

"What you could!" repeated Leander Sullivan. "I tell you, Hollis Deering, there isn't man or woman in the world who could have dragged him out of the very jaws of death as you have done. I know him; he'd have been in eternity before midnight if your heart or courage had failed you."

"Yes; I saw that in his eyes," shutting her own a moment, and shuddering. "It was that nerved me to do what I did last night."

"Agnes," — turning to his betrothed now, — "it was



sublime; it was heroic. I never, in my whole life, knew a woman to do so grand and noble a thing."

No doubt it was sweet praise from her lover in the ears of the sister, yet, in a different way, Agnes was hardly less impressed than Leander. She went up to her sister. "You brave, dear, noble Hollis!" she said, kissing her. "And yet it was just like you, after all."

"Nobody could have helped it, seeing the poor fellow," said Hollis, as though she hardly deserved the praise.

After that there was little time for Leander to stay, with the miserable, bewildered household at home needing him so sorely at this juncture.

As for Agnes, she showed what stuff was in her, and came up to the level of the occasion, worthy the sister of Hollis Deering.

"He said his uncle was a hard man, but I did not think he could find it in his heart to deal with him like that," murmured Hollis.

"It was a dreadful shock to Kittredge. He was so proud of Alick, and loved him as though he had been his own son. You see it has almost killed him, Hollis."

"Poor man! I'm very sorry for him too. But, O Mr. Sullivan! you will not drive Alick desperate again; and there is, what I told him last night, a manhood before him, — a future in which to redeem all this dishonor and shame."

Leander looked at his future sister-in-law doubtfully. "If anybody but you said that, I should not believe it,

Hollis. I thought this morning, when I left him, that Alexander Wentworth was wrecked for life."

Agnes pressed in there: "O Leander! there is hope for him; be merciful to him," she sobbed, her heart — it had always been a soft one — stirred with unutterable pity for the man, wretched, dishonored, whom her lover had left an hour before prostrated with remorse and despair; whom yet she could only think of as the gay, elegant, fascinating Alick Wentworth.

Leander looked at her. "You have something to say here," he said; "and I will abide by your decision. Shall I pay the ten thousand dollars which Alick has forged? It's been a hard year for all business men, and it will cut particularly close just now, for I want every dollar for the new house. If the ten thousand goes for Alick's debts, our home will have to wait for us another year."

She did not hesitate one moment, — this girl whose life had been darkened, and hunted, and limited on every side by poverty; she did not hesitate. Although the vision of the fair, stately home had filled her thoughts by day and her dreams by night, she did not hesitate. "Let the home go for another year; pay the money, Leander;" and she put her hand in her lover's, and her voice did not falter, only the tears were in her eyes.

"O Agnes! you would make a good man out of anything less than a fiend," said Leander, drawing the girl suddenly to his side; and I think at that moment he realized, as he had never done before, the real character of

the woman he was to take to wife, — not simply as friend, household companion and love, he had thought often enough of all these before, but something truer and holier, for which he had no name.

## CHAPTER XVI.

LEANDER SULLIVAN learned, on reaching home, that there had been no unfavorable change in his brother-in-law's symptoms; he still kept up, at intervals, his incoherent talk, and confounded the past and the present; and still the dead sister and the living nephew seemed to occupy the foreground of his thought and interest.

After Leander had learned this from his mother and sister, he related to the astonished women what had just transpired in his interview with Agnes and Hollis Deering that morning.

His soul was on fire with all that had passed in that hour, raising it into a mood which was not native to Leander Sullivan. He set the facts before them in a way which would certainly have amazed Hollis Deering, for she had not the faintest notion that she had been a heroine in the matter, — done anything especially deserving of praise even.

Perhaps you can imagine something of the feeling with which Mrs. Kittredge learned that her husband's nephew would, for a dead certainty, have been carried a mangled suicide over their threshold that morning, and the whole story of his crime spread like wildfire over Medbury, and the old, honorable name of the Wentworths brought into lasting dishonor and shame, and the elegant

Honora pointed at among men and women as the sister of a thief and a suicide, if it had not been for the heart and courage of that young girl, who had literally dragged him back from the jaws of death, — that pale, silent girl, whose awkwardness and homeliness Honora had regarded as a proper target against which to spend her fine shafts of wit and satire.

Leander had his triumph, too, when it came to relating the part which Agnes had borne in this matter. We will not blame him if he enjoyed it, remembering how bravely and generously she had come to the help of Alexander Wentworth.

And these were the Deerings, Mrs. Kittredge had scorned and flouted; this was the woman who was to bring shame and disgrace on the Sullivan name and blood! Leander thought of all that, you may be certain, and so did his mother and sister, standing transfixed as statues, in their amazement, taking in his story. And Mrs. Kittredge thought of something else, — the proud woman actually writhing in her humiliation, as she remembered the insult which she had so recently offered to her guest. And now Agnes Deering's revenge had come so quickly on the heels of all that! What a revenge! The gods had not "ground slowly" this time.

"Who will tell Honora all this?" at last broke out Mrs. Sullivan.

"Honora!" echoed her son, with a flash of scorn in his eyes and voice which fairly made his mother and sister quail. "When Hollis Deering lifted her great, hon-

est eyes to me this morning, and asked me how his sister had borne the dreadful tidings, I thought of the poor, frail young thing standing out there in the storm and sleet last evening, risking her life to save his, and was dumb; I could not bring my lips to tell Hollis Deering that Alick Wentworth's sister had not been near him once in all this time!"

Mrs. Kittredge had been fond of Honora. She wanted to come to her defence now, but she hardly had the courage.

"Honora is so utterly broken down with grief and horror," she said, timidly, feeling that a flash of Leander's scorn would bow her to the earth at that time.

Just then the door opened, and Honora dragged herself in. Whatever your private opinion of the young woman may be, I think you would have pitied her at this time. How had that life of hers, gay, self-indulgent, its aim and centre her own pleasure and pomp, fitted her to front any great grief? She was pale, and worn, and haggard enough; and if, thus far, she had thought chiefest of herself at this time — well, being Honora Wentworth, that was natural. She had, however, at last roused herself from paroxysms of lamentation over the misery and disgrace which her brother had brought on her, thinking there might be something expected of her, she did not know what. As for going to Alick, it seemed to her that she never wanted to look him in the face again, after the foul wrong he had done her.

But Honora Wentworth's heart was not a nether mill-

stone. Had it been that, even, it seems it must have melted, listening to the story which Mrs. Sullivan and Mrs. Kittredge had to tell that morning; for Leander left it all with the ladies, being summoned again to his brother-in-law's bedside.

So Honora, too, learned where her brother must have been lying that hour, a stiffened corpse, if Hollis Deering, the "small, brown Hecate," had not stood between him and death the evening before. The awful, disfigured mass rose as in a vision before her. Whatever human love and pity were in her stirred themselves at that thought. She forgot herself, the wrong, the disgrace, that Alick had brought on her head; she only remembered him as her gay, handsome, good-natured brother, that she had always been so proud of. The girl shivered, and sobbed, "Poor, poor Alick!"

Mrs. Sullivan forgot her strong indignation against Honora.

"If he could only hear you say those words, my dear child!"

"Yes, Honora," added Mrs. Kittredge, feeling her words must come now; "if Leander had been where your brother is to-day, I could not have left him to bear all this alone."

Honora lifted her bowed head. She looked from one face to another with some doubt and remorse which had never before struggled up from the heart to the eyes of Honora Wentworth, and her first words accused herself.

"I forgot him in my own misery. Poor Alick! He

must have thought his sister failed him too." And she turned and went out of the room, and for that time the human heart, under all her pride and selfishness, was awake at last within Honora Wentworth.

She went straight to Mrs. Sullivan's room, opened the door, and walked in. Alick sat there, as Leander had left him, in a stupor of misery that seemed to deprive him of all power or inclination to move. He looked up now, and the eyes of the brother and sister met each other, and Honora thought how very near they had come to never looking up at her again, — those handsome eyes of Alick's; she thought of them with the empty, glassy stare of the dead.

"Alick, O Alick!" she cried out, in a voice sharp with pain and pity.

Behind all its transfixed pallor and misery his face shook. "O Honora! have you come to me?"

She put her arms right about her brother, "O Alick! I am so sorry for you!" she sobbed.

After Honora had left the room, Mrs. Kittredge said to her mother, "Had we better go to them, mamma?"

"Not yet, Hester. It is her place first;" and they two remained below, thinking, with a shudder, of the dreadful tragedy which had come so close to them, while pity for Alexander Wentworth's anguish and remorse superseded all their wrath at his crime.

Mrs. Kittredge, too, had her own reflections, bitter as gall, but not unwholesome, I think.

At last the two ladies went upstairs. They found Honora seated close to her brother. She had taken his

hand in hers, and was chafing it in a kind of tender, pitiful way, while she talked. There was something very touching in the sight, something that, without seeing it, you could never by any possibility have associated with Honora Wentworth.

It struck Mrs. Sullivan that there was something a little less like utter despair in the young man's attitude, in his face even, than when she had left him a few hours ago.

"I have told him all that Leander said," exclaimed Honora, before anybody else spoke a word.

"O Alick! how could you think of *that*?" cried Mrs. Kittredge.

"Hester, do you say that to me? I thought that you would feel that Hollis made a great mistake, — that it was the only thing left me to do, after I had brought this misery on you all."

He said it in a listless, broken-down tone, as though, after all, it concerned him very little. It was wonderful how the last day had broken him down.

Honora burst into tears: "O Alick! did you think I did not care to have you live? It is cruel to talk in that way."

And then the women, each one of them, after the manner of women, tried to comfort him, the brain half crazed with remorse and despair, the heart half broken.

In the midst of it all, Leander Sullivan came into his mother's room with good tidings. Mr. Kittredge had fallen into a slumber sound and natural as a child's.

That very day the drafts on the house at Paris were

presented at the office of Kittredge & Co. The sudden illness of the head partner prevented, however, any business transactions on the part of the house for that day, and the facts did not transpire.

Late in the evening the sick man awoke. Young Sullivan still held his post by his brother-in-law's bedside. His mother and sister had several times offered to supersede him, but Leander knew how much depended on this slumber for the sick man, and knew also how utterly the exhaustion and excitement of the last night and day had unfitted them for any exertion. It had strained even his young, robust strength as nothing had ever done in his life before.

"Leander."

The voice quavered out low and doubtfully through the silence and dimness of the sick-room, in strange contrast with the swift, prompt tones of Ambrose Kittredge.

"Yes, Kittredge," the heart of the younger man standing still with dread lest the very next words would go groping blindly back into the past, and the tired, shocked brain, which had been so strong and alert a little while ago, keep up its vague, troubled search among mists and phantoms far across the years.

"I'm awake, have been for the last half hour. I understand, Leander."

Young Sullivan's heart gave a leap of joy. These were words clear, incisive, the native ring of Ambrose Kittredge in every one.

"I'm rejoiced from my soul to hear you speak like

that, Kittredge," his voice shaken as a girl's might have been in some sudden tumult of relief and gladness.

The sick man's hand groped for his brother-in-law's. Leander grasped it. "I've been very ill."

"Yes, very, Kittredge, and the doctors say you must be perfectly quiet now, and avoid all exciting topics."

"A fig for the doctors! I remember all that happened until that last moment. How long ago was it?"

Leander told him. Then there was a silence. Overhead the chandelier made a glow soft as summer twilight through the wide room. Leander leaned over the pale face under the grizzled hair. He was certain the question would come. He waited for it: "Is Alick here?"

"Yes."

A longer silence this time—the soft ticking of the French clock through the silence, like the chirrup of crickets in an old-fashioned chimney. At last the question came again: "What is he doing?"

"Nothing. This business seems to have utterly wrecked him. Ah, Kittredge! it's fearful. But I'm transgressing orders. We must stop here."

"No more of that nonsense, Leander. You understand me. I want the facts," — the old flash in his eyes, the old spirit in his voice; a man who, sick or well, one would not find it easy to cross.

Young Sullivan reflected a moment. If he told anything, it had better be the whole. If he refused to speak at all, adhering rigidly to the physicians' orders, the opposition to his brother-in-law's will at this particular juncture might work more mischief by opposing the inva-

lid, than any disclosures could. Neither physicians nor servants, even, had the remotest suspicion of the cause of Mr. Kittredge's illness, so Leander had clearly a right to use his own judgment on this occasion.

His mind once made up, he did not hesitate. Whatever had happened since the brother-in-law of Leander Sullivan had dropped as dead men drop out of life, in the midst of the frightened group in his library that dreadful midnight, the sick man heard the whole story now. Once in a while Leander paused, it is true, fearing lest the strong excitement of the story should work some harm on the invalid.

"I don't know as I am doing the right thing, Kittredge. Let the rest go for to-night," he would say, but the husky, imperative whisper always followed closely, — "Go on, Leander."

And Leander did, — telling, as he had heard it from Hollis Deering's own lips, the suicide on which Alick's maddened brain and heart had set themselves, and from which, at the last moment, the brave girl had barely rescued him; telling, too, whatever had followed in his interview with the sisters that morning, and what had transpired at last between Honora and her brother.

The sick man listened without a word, his breath coming in thick gasps sometimes, that half frightened Leander, and made him half resolve on coming to a dead stop — the hand shaking in his own sometimes; and once, in the dim light, it seemed to him there was a glitter of tears on the gray lashes.

At last he stopped. There was no more to tell, and



again the soft humming of the clock on the mantel filled the room.

At length Mr. Kittredge spoke: "Leander."

"Well, sir?"

"The ten thousand dollars, — what do you intend to do about that?"

"I've made up my mind there. It was tough at first, but I shall do what Agnes said, — give it up."

Again there was silence. Leander was a young man, and ten thousand dollars were more to him than fifty to his rich brother-in-law, and Alexander Wentworth was not his own nephew. Perhaps both of the men thought of that.

Mr. Kittredge lay still a long time, his eyes half shut, and seeming to be dreamily gazing at the light; and it seemed, too, to the young man that the clock on the mantel buzzed away noisily and joyfully, as swarms of bees among thickets of white May blossoms.

At last Kittredge's voice spoke again: "You are a good fellow, Leander."

"I don't know. It was a hard struggle, but there was Alick. When one comes to look at him, and to think of what Hollis Deering did!"

And again there was silence, and the soft whirring of the clock on the mantel.

At last the sick man spoke again: "I'm tired, Leander; I must go to sleep. There's more to be said, but not now — not now."

Young Sullivan arranged the pillows carefully as a woman would have done, and in a few moments the man

sank into slumber again. Then Leander went to seek his mother and his sister with the good tidings, muttering to himself: "I wish I could go upstairs and tell that poor, broken-down fellow to take heart; but it is his uncle's place to do that, and you have no right to take the words out of his mouth, Leander Sullivan."

## CHAPTER XVII.

WHEN Ambrose Kittredge awoke the next morning broad streaks of sunshine lay on the floor, and in the carved ceiling overhead flashes of golden light, like heaps of yellow chrysanthemums, some foolish poet might have thought, tossed there and whisked off again by the winds; but then you may be sure nobody was troubled by any absurd fancies of that sort. There were no poets in the household of Ambrose Kittredge; his nephew, upstairs, possessed the temperament and the tastes oftenest allied with large powers of imagination; but then, Alexander Wentworth had something else to be thinking about these days than quoting Chaucer and Spenser, or weaving poetic fancies of his own.

This morning the physicians removed interdictions from the sick-room, and made confident prophecies of the invalid's recovery. So his family came in to see him, welcoming back the sick man to life once more, instead of following him down, as they had feared, to the Border-Land of Death, — the gray, dim, hushed marshes, where you and I, reader, must stand some time, looking our last on the pleasant earth, and saying the final "Good-night" to our beloved.

The old familiar faces gathered about him, — his wife and her mother, his niece, and his brother-in-law; and

there were sobs and broken sentences, and little, touching attempts at jokes, each trying to do her part bravely, — above all, composedly, as the physicians had enjoined, — but making rather poor work of it at the best. Whatever vital human feeling lay at bottom of these people, it must have come to the surface during these last days, when the sudden thunderbolts had crashed down through all the stately and gracious harmonies to which they fancied their whole lives had been set.

The women were pallid and shaken with joy and fear, with all the awful strain of the last days and nights. Each one had learned some truths which would make her better or worse for all the time to come; not the least of which was, that the man's own wife had found out that her husband was something closer and dearer to her than she had suspected before that dreadful moment when he lay white and stricken at her feet.

The man had a smile and pleasant greeting for each one of his family; afterwards he lay still, while there went on a low, pleasant humming of voices in the sick-room.

There was one absent, however, in the family circle, — one who had forfeited his place and right there. Everybody thought of him now; nobody dared to ask the sick man if *he* did, — not even when his gray, clear eyes wandered over one face and another with some new tenderness in them, and he said, "It's pleasant to see you all here."

After that there was silence, and, like a great, golden bush of blossoms, the sunshine hung still overhead.

"I want to see Alick."

In the hushes of the room the man's voice broke out suddenly, swift, incisive, resolute, as was the habit of Ambrose Kittredge.

The three ladies turned and looked at each other, — a doubtful, frightened look.

In a moment Leander rose up. "I will go for him," he said, as though his brother-in-law's wish had been the most natural thing in the world; and he went out before they could sign him to remain, and then they all sat still, dreading what was to come, yet not daring to oppose Mr. Kittredge, lest the excitement on that side should prove more dangerous than yielding to his wishes.

In a few moments Leander returned, and just behind him came Alick Wentworth.

There he was, something dull, weary, lifeless, in his face, which even a stranger could not have seen without pitying, — such a pallid, hopeless face; the awful strain and anguish of the soul behind had left itself there. His eyes went over the group of women in a dull, bewildered way, and when they all hastened to speak to him tenderly, a strange, vacant smile flickered and was lost upon his lips. After the long, mad struggles, the man's soul seemed utterly crushed. The women's eyes choked with tears, so they could not see him move up to the bedside.

Mr. Kittredge turned and looked silently at his nephew, with his eyes, deep and solemn and gray, under the grizzled lashes, — looked in the still, finely cut, hopeless face that stood over him, and that was Alick's

and yet not Alick's, as dead faces are their own and yet not theirs.

"Alick," said Kittredge, at last, and he put out his hand.

His nephew took it. The young man's long and shapely, but cold and nerveless now. The life seemed sapped out of it, as it seemed sapped out of his soul.

Alick Wentworth had been proud of his white, aristocratic hands; but during these last days he had held them up, once or twice, to his eyes, which strained and stared at them, a flash of loathing across him; their soft whiteness seemed to accuse him, — rise up a witness against him. If they had been dark, hard, wrenched out of shape with daily toil, those white hands of his would have looked fairer in the eyes of Alick Wentworth at that time.

The sick man's gaze shook as he held it to the pale, hopeless face, some remorse or pity struggling up into his own.

"His mother's eyes! Elizabeth's eyes!" he muttered to himself, and there was a kind of sharp sob of tenderness and agony all through the words. Then he went on, keeping his gaze still on his nephew's face, but not speaking to him, it seemed. "Such a brave, merry, handsome little rogue as he was! Then there, too, was his dead mother. I couldn't find the heart to cross him when he looked up at me with the very smile he'd caught from her. I was a fool for not seeing what the end would be of letting him always have his own way, of carrying that high hand with everybody about him;

but it never entered my thoughts that he would come to shame and dishonor, — Alick, with his proud little head, trotting by my side every morning on his gray pony, the wind in his curls, going over with his bright, pretty nonsense. Ah, my boy! that I loved — that I loved so!”

The sick man turned away his head. There was a smothered sobbing throughout the room.

Out of their dull, glazed hopelessness, the eyes of Alexander Wentworth broke suddenly; a dreadful agony wrestled in his face, shook his limp, nerveless figure; he sank down into a seat.

“O Hollis!” he burst out sharply, his thoughts always going straight to her, and to that hour when she had beaten back death for him. “I told you so — I told you so! It would have been better to let me die!”

At that cry the sick man turned again. “No, Alick, no,” he said, with the old, strong resoluteness in his voice. “Whatever I may have said, whatever you may have deserved, Hollis was right there, — it was not better that you should have done that.”

Alick Wentworth’s eyes brightened a moment, and then dulled again slowly.

“To drag on miserably through life, dishonored, disgraced, wrecked, my life a curse to me. It is all true that you said,” he muttered.

“No matter for that. I said it, and you deserved it, Alick. But it is not true, boy, that you have nothing to live for. You have some work to do here yet.”



"What is it?" in his eyes, all over his sharpened face now, a look of hungry, breathless wonder.

"You have your life to make over, — all this past to redeem, to prove yourself yet an honest man!"

A hope, awful in its intensity, leaped suddenly into Alick Wentworth's eyes; then it went down slowly, slowly.

"How can I?" he broke out now with wild, passionate vehemence. "Nobody, knowing the truth, would trust me. Ah! the wreck is for life — for life!"

"No, Alick, I know the truth, and — *I am going to trust you!*" speaking the last words with a deliberate solemnity, from which, you felt, there would be no after appeal of judgment and passion.

"You, Uncle Ambrose — you!" the young man's voice thick and choked with feeling, but to those who held their breaths to listen, it seemed to mount into a shriek.

"Yes, Alick, I've been going over it all on my bed here. I've made up my mind to trust you again."

"O my God — my God!" said young Wentworth, and he dropped on his knees by the bedside.

His uncle's heavy hand groped for his neck, and found it, and dragged there. "Alick!" he said, "Alick!"

But you and I, reader, have no right there.

Whatever Ambrose Kittredge did, he carried into it the thoroughness and downrightness of his character.

When he had once made up his mind to forgive his nephew, to take him back in the old place of his love and

confidence, he did it, as he made a bargain, — entirely, absolutely, no reservations, nor higgings, nor make-shifts of any sort.

In his will he had left his nephew fifty thousand dollars. That sum would cancel the drafts the young man had forged in his uncle's name.

So, with a future clear before him, Alick Wentworth must set himself now to the tug and wrestle of life, earning his place and right in it by struggle of brain and muscle, as other men, his betters, had done. No more luxurious idleness and dilettanteism for him.

Something better and loftier than all his past stirred in his soul now, — something to which Hollis Deering had called on that awful night, and which had roused itself and listened. The better nature of Alick Wentworth turned at last and faced his lower, — showed him how essentially mean and ignoble had been all the ends and ambitions of his life. He made some covenants with his own soul, with his God, that time, but — no matter, that, too, was his own secret. And covenants with God or man amount to very little until they take shape in deeds, — deeds at best incomplete, disproportioned, imperfect, like everything human.

Alick's uncle, with his usual judgment, thought it best at this time to sever, as far as possible, the old influences, companionships, associations, of his nephew's life. Probably the man was wise here; his strong common-sense did not often make mistakes when he brought it to bear on material success. Moral questions, it is true, involved a somewhat deeper insight; but the man's vision had grown

clearer on his sick-bed than it ever would in his counting-room.

Mr. Kittredge had just established a branch house in Buenos Ayres, and he resolved to send his nephew out to take charge of this, — to be, in short, its ostensible head.

It was an experiment, it is true, and would afford the young man very little time for amusement or home-sickness, even; but that was precisely the strongest argument in favor of this plan, according to Ambrose Kittredge's reasoning. Occupation, if it were digging potatoes, or laying stones on the highway, was better than the last years' graceful idling had been.

As for Alick, he was ready and eager to be gone to his work. It would be a new sensation for him to be earning his own bread and butter, his own standing-room in the world. There was Honora's money to be paid back; not a large sum, it is true, but sufficient, if he raised it within the next two years, to involve considerable self-denial on young Wentworth's part, when you considered his former extravagant tastes and habits. And then there was poor Leander's ten thousand dollars; the dark red mounting all over his face, remembering how generously young Sullivan had treated the debt, how nobly Agnes Deering had come to his rescue, — his, Alick Wentworth's. Yet she had her ambitions and a woman's craving for elegance, of which she had been denied all her life.

"I did not suppose there were such women in the



world," said Alick Wentworth to himself, thinking of the gay, butterfly-creatures he had known.

He had a great deal to think of at this time, for he was to sail almost immediately. He would commence life anew, with no old disgraces hanging like millstones around his neck, dragging him down. Nobody suspected his crime. And Alexander Wentworth held still his old, good name, a dark smile writhing across his lip as he thought of that.

"There's many a poor fellow behind the State-Prison walls to-day who doesn't deserve them as much as I do; only I've had a second chance — a second chance."

Thoughts bitter as rue and wormwood to his proud spirit, yet wholesome, for all that.

"I'll make a good fight yet — a good fight — God helping me!" said Alick Wentworth, lifting his face, with something masterful in it which never had been there before; the dulled, hopeless anguish was gone now, yet a face that had grown old, old as with trouble and years during these last days.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

OTHER people in the household beside Alick Wentworth had their thoughts, too, at this time; not very pleasant ones, but wholesome also.

Mrs. Kittredge, for instance, had her reflections, which could not have been agreeable. How she had scorned and ridiculed Leander's engagement, and now to think what they owed to that fact! The woman, proud and haughty, writhed and shuddered as she reflected on what must have followed the consummation of the project on which she had set her heart, — that her brother should woo and wed Honora Wentworth.

Over the flowery precipice of that engagement they must all have gone down into depths of dishonor and misery; the unsullied family name would have been fatally smirched by this time, — her husband's favorite nephew known among men and women for a forger, and a suicide.

She thought of herself, the theme of all the vulgar Medbury gossip; pointed at on the street; the jealous and the envious, all those whom her wealth and pride had stung, rejoicing, more or less, in the shadow which had dropped suddenly among the broad, sunny reaches of the life where she carried herself so fair and stately. Mrs. Kittredge thought of all this, and thought, too, of the

slight, brave, young girl, who had stood in the storm one night, and beat back the shadow of death and the blackness of dishonor from the thresholds of "Kittredge and Sullivan."

Behind all the rest stood another memory, a black phantom that would not be laid, the memory of the mean insult which Mrs. Kittredge had dealt to Agnes Deering on the evening when that young lady had last been her guest.

Mrs. Kittredge saw her conduct now in its true features, and it looked hateful enough in her eyes; she would gladly have swept it out of her consciousness forever, but there it stood, a black spectre, invisible to most eyes, but clear enough to herself and her future sister-in-law, — the sister-in-law to whom she owed it that all the strong foundations of the family respectability and honor had not been shaken to the centre, for Alick Wentworth had been one of their pillars of pride and strength.

At the very hour, too, that Mrs. Kittredge had made that cruel speech to Agnes Deering, her younger sister had stood out there in the awful storm, her face upturned to the beating of the snow, her cold hands dragging at young Wentworth's shoulder. Mrs. Kittredge's thoughts stung so sharply, she tried to shake them off; yet they were forever coming back, and whispering to her how they had expected to receive Leander's wife into their midst with cold reluctance and chilling ceremonies, and now, with what warm and eager welcomes it became them to bring her to her place in that household which owed her so vast a debt.

No doubt all these thoughts did Hester Kittredge more

good than any had ever done in her whole life before; beyond that she saw that she had something to do herself, — something which she tried to put away, — something which came out of sleepless hours of the night, and confronted her and said, "What are you going to do with me?"

— At the beginning of my story I showed you the worst side of this woman's nature, — the side of her pride, selfishness, prejudices; when all these, too, had been evoked into strong life by her brother's engagement. There was another, a better side to Hester Kittredge, and Hollis Deering's brave courage and Agnes' generous sacrifice reached, at last, the heart and the conscience of the woman.

One morning his sister came to young Sullivan after breakfast, and said to him, "Leander, I have a favor to ask of you. It must be a secret between us two."

"Well, Hester?"

"I want you should drive me over to the Deerings this morning. I have something to say to the lady who is to be your wife."

Leander stared at his sister in amazement; but then, so many strange things had happened of late, one bolt after another thundering into the long summer day of his life, that he was not so easily startled as he would have been a little while ago.

"I shall be ready to drive you over, Hester, any time you desire it."

"Then let it be at once. I will meet you at the door in fifteen minutes;" and she went away without another word.

A little later, the brother and sister were on their drive to the Deerings. It was not the kind of morning on which Mrs. Kittredge usually showed her fair face out-of-doors, for the air was stung through with damp, cutting winds; the thick, gray clouds overhead, like piles of jagged granite hurled there in some vast fury and desolation of Titans.

Leander felt Mrs. Kittredge shiver every little while under all her furs and wrappings, but he had an impression that she preferred to be silent, and he scarcely spoke to her on the drive, only he kept wondering uneasily what was coming.

So did Agnes Deering, a little while later, going down into the parlor to meet her lover and that dreaded sister of his.

Yet Agnes had spoken some words three days before, which Hollis only of her family had heard, and, thereafter, the elder sister had been calmer and braver than she had ever been in her life before.

The words she had spoken then, unconsciously braced Agnes Deering to go down quietly and face Mrs. Kittredge with a manner as cool and self-contained as that lady's own.

So Leander's love came in. That

"Weak, white girl,  
Held all his heartstrings in her small white hand."

Mrs. Kittredge had read those words not long ago, and now they drifted into the agitation of her thoughts.

Leander broke the ice. You know what work men usually make of anything of that sort; but, perhaps,

the fellow's bluntness and bungling served better this time than the most delicate tact.

"Hester has something to say to you this morning, Agnes, and I've driven her over here without the faintest idea what it all means. If you want to have your women's talk together, I'll leave you for the next half hour."

"No, stay, Leander. You shall hear it also."

The eyes of Agnes Deering grew wide and dark with wonder. She made some commonplace answer about "being honored by anything Mrs. Kittredge might have to say to her."

Whatever that lady did, be sure she did it gracefully. She rose up now, and went over to Agnes Deering, and said to her, "I have come to ask your pardon for the speech which I made to you the other evening, Miss Deering. It was unkind—it was cruel. I do not think it can look to you, now, meaner and more shameful than it does to me. But I have been living a good deal these last days, and learning something about you, too,—something which has brought my own conduct before me, and set it there in a way that I could bear the hateful features no longer, and so I have come over here to get rid of the spectre; yet, if I were in your place, I should hardly have the grace to do what I ask of you—forgive me!"—and she held out her hand, and there were tears in her eyes.

Think of Hester Kittredge saying that to Agnes Deering! In that shabby little parlor too—think of it!

Agnes gave her hand to the lady, her face trembling all over. "We will never speak of it again," she said.

"What does all this mean?" broke in Leander, who, while his sister had been talking, had been rubbing his eyes and fancying the whole must be a dream.

"It is nothing now, and nothing you are ever to know, Leander," replied Agnes, and he had to be content there.

Mrs. Kittredge had something to say to the younger sister also, but Hollis was in too exhausted a condition of mind and body to meet strangers that morning, especially any of Leander's formidable relatives; and Mrs. Kittredge had only a few words to add of all that she, and those dearest to her, owed to that young girl's heart and brain; a few words, but at that time they were better than many.

The two women parted with some new feeling of regard and cordiality, which, a few days ago, neither would have supposed possible one could have felt for the other.

On her return home, Mrs. Kittredge went straight to Honora's room. The young lady, alone of her family, had heard the covert insult of which Agnes Deering had been the object on the night of the party. Whatever secret enjoyment Miss Wentworth had experienced in the mortification of Leander Sullivan's betrothed, her triumph was of very short duration.

Honora listened without interruption to her friend's story. Not a few of her own speeches regarding those same Deerings must have risen up and confronted her memory like accusing spectres at this time.

When Mrs. Kittredge had finished, Honora drew a long, long sigh. "Ah, Hester, if you and I could

have looked forward to this day, and seen what we should owe these people — "

"We should have felt differently about Leander's engagement, you mean to say. Think of all it has saved you and me, Honora."

"I shall never cease to remember it. You and I have learned some bitter lessons these last days, Hester."

"Very bitter. I hope they will make us both wiser and better."

"I hope so."

Mrs. Kittredge was summoned away at this juncture. After all, it was a great deal that each of these women had admitted to the other.

Four or five days had gone by, and one morning Mr. Kittredge sat among his household once more. The family head was greatly softened and happy over his convalescence, — shaken, too, by all which had happened during the last fortnight.

Ambrose Kittredge had grown old a good deal in these days. He would probably never be quite the strong, stalwart man he had been before this blow; still, his fine constitution had tided him over the worst dangers, and his physicians were confident of his ultimate recovery.

Mrs. Kittredge, her mother, Leander, and Alick were all there. The latter was to sail for Buenos Ayres tomorrow, and his uncle was priming him with last advices for the new, unfamiliar life of work and heavy responsibility on which he was to enter.

As for Alick, he seemed a totally changed man. No

young soldier ever panted to throw himself into the awful joy of the battle, where he was to win his laurels or his honorable grave, as young Wentworth panted for the heat and the burden of that day, which would win him no laurels of fame or honor, but which was to bring out of its slow toil and care some honest manhood, if that lay at bottom of him.

Yet his enthusiasm for the new work and place was not of that eager, impetuous kind which one who had known the old Alick Wentworth would have expected of him. If his haste was at white heat, it did not flash and blaze, but burned with a steady glow.

It seemed, as the time drew near for his nephew's departure, that Alick's uncle could not bear him out of his sight one moment. He never alluded to what had gone; neither did Alick; but there was something very touching in the care which the former manifested regarding his nephew's health and comfort. And Alick listened with some new tenderness and gratitude for his uncle which he had never felt before; but he did not tell his thoughts to any one these days.

"It seems good to be in the midst of you once more," said Kittredge, looking around his family circle with some sense of home-comfort and happiness such as he had never felt in the days of his pride and strength.

"And it seems good to have you amongst us once more, Ambrose," said his wife, with some softness of voice and smile which had hardly belonged to the brilliant Hester Kittredge.

She spoke a truth here which even the servants felt.

Ambrose Kittredge was one of those powers in his household, in his business, whose loss affects others a good deal like some great change in the forces of nature. Among practical, material things this man was masterful. Whatever edifice had at its foundations his judgment and sagacity fronted the world successfully, and the withdrawing of such men suddenly from the spheres of their activity brings always with it tumult and disaster.

"If the fine weather continues, I shall like to drive down with you to the depot and see you off, Alick," said his uncle, glancing wistfully out of the window, where the sun was shining brightly upon white wind-clouds, like vast, truncated statues, standing out against the blue sky.

"It will be a happy day for me, Kittredge, when I give you the next drive behind your favorite grays," says the young brother-in-law, who has caught the last words, looking up from his paper.

"We will write you all about it, Alick," says Mrs. Sullivan, who of late has treated young Wentworth much as if he were her own son.

At that moment Honora enters the room. She looks flushed, excited, and happier than she has done for a fortnight. She comes right over to her uncle's chair and stands there.

"Where have you been all this morning, Honora?" he asks, looking at her flushed face.

"In the parlor with Tom Rushmore, Uncle Ambrose, and—I may as well tell you now as ever—he has

asked me to be his wife, and I have promised him I would;" her voice shaking a good deal at the last words.

"Why, Honora Wentworth!" a good many voices cried out; and then there was silence, and they all looked at her as she stood there by her uncle's chair.

He spoke first. "Are you satisfied, my child?" he said, very tenderly.

"Tom is a grand fellow," she answered. "And, on the whole, I believe I like him as well or better than any other man who has ever asked me the same question. Then a woman must get married some time, and Tom is generous to a fault, and will have a fortune one of these days, and his family are unobjectionable, and he is in love with me. What more can I ask? Don't you all congratulate me?"

She put her face down to her uncle and kissed him. He fancied, perhaps they all did, that the light words covered some depths of feeling.

"May you be very happy with him, my child!" He could not have spoken more tenderly had she been his own daughter.

Then Honora went over and put her arms around her brother. "Dear old fellow, tell me you are glad!" she said; and there was no acting in that movement.

He held her to him closely a moment. "If you are happy, that is enough," he said.

I cannot precisely tell why, but I have always felt the thought struck Honora Wentworth precisely at that moment that she had not been all as a sister she might have been to Alick Wentworth.

Afterwards, the others came about her with kisses and congratulations, and for the next half hour a current of jest and merry talk set strongly around the convalescent, all of which Honora seemed to enjoy; and so did Alick as he listened, although sharing very little in it himself.

At last Honora turned to him and said with a seriousness which checked all the gayety, "Alick, there is one woman to whom, at this time, I desire to make ample reparation for all my foolish talk, which has cost me a great deal of remorse since I learned what we both owed her. If you want to make Hollis Deering your wife, I shall not stand in your way."

You ought to have seen Alick Wentworth spring to his feet on hearing those words; you ought to have seen the eyes that blazed their wrathful scorn on his sister.

"Make Hollis Deering my wife!" he fairly shouted. "Do you think I would insult and outrage that girl so foully as to ask her to take me for her husband,—*me*?" his voice seeming to blaze the withering scorn of his face along the words.

"Outrage! Insult! I do not understand you, Alick," faltered Honora.

"I have fallen low enough, Honora Wentworth,—God knows that,—but to go to Hollis Deering and look in her honest eyes, and dare to offer her that thing she knows I am,—that thing she dragged the other night out of crime and death,—ask her to share my sin and shame—why, if I had fallen so low, if I were so base and craven, one glance at the honest scorn of her face would smite me dumb! Ask Hollis Deering to be my wife!" with a



laugh of rattling scorn and dreadful sadness across his words.

Honora Wentworth had never doubted for a moment that Hollis Deering must be in love with her brother; otherwise it was not in the nature of women to do what that girl had done one night for the sake of Alexander Wentworth.

Now that her brother's good name had been rescued from the dreadful disgrace which had menaced it, it seemed to Honora that she was making a most generous sacrifice of herself, of the old family pride and blood, to consent voluntarily to take Hollis Deering for her sister-in-law. It had cost her a struggle to speak the words. A Wentworth and a Deering was a dreadful *mésalliance*. There were so many chances, too, for Alick to make an ambitious marriage. Still, his sister had resolved to be generous, and, to tell the honest truth, the heart of the girl, under all its pride and selfishness, had been deeply touched at Hollis' conduct. No doubt Honora owed the girl something, but the latter felt that she was paying her debt with unparalleled generosity, and doing Hollis Deering an immense honor in consenting that Alick should take her to wife.

Honora fancied, too, the whole family would regard her in the light of a heroine, and secretly pity her for the sacrifice she was making.

You can imagine, then, with what amazement Honora had beheld the spirit in which her brother had received what she regarded as an offer of unexampled generosity on her part.

She had anticipated something so wholly the antithesis of his reply, that she was shocked and exasperated, and her former feeling towards the Deerings, which had been greatly softened of late, came back in its old force.

Alick's condemnation of his own conduct, however salutary it might be for himself, seemed to reflect sorely upon his sister, and to place her in some sense beneath Hollis Deering. At that thought her pride bridled, even after all it had passed through these days.

"Whatever you may think of your own acts, Alick, you might, remembering that you are my brother, spare yourself, for my sake, any unnecessary humiliation in speaking of the past. You seem to forget, too, that you still have to offer Hollis Deering something she might reasonably be proud of,—your old, honorable family name and position, and a character unblemished in all men's eyes."

"My old, honorable family name, my unblemished character!" repeated Alick Wentworth, and his scorn seemed a crackling flame across the words. "Shall I take these to Hollis Deering, as the best pay I can offer her for all she did for me that night, and tell her that the world doesn't know, as she does, that the old, honorable family name which I offer her deserves a felon's cell, nor that the unblemished character which I ask her to share is blackened with crime?"

Alick paused a moment, then his passion of feeling hurried out again into words; "Honora Wentworth, how pitiful it seems to me that you cannot so much as conceive of a nature like Hollis Deering! What do you

suppose the opinion of the world would weigh with that girl so long as she knew it was a false one? If a crowned king were to offer her his sceptre and kingdom to-day, she would refuse him with scorn and loathing, if she took him for the rascal she knows I have been!"

A heavy hand struck the speaker's shoulder. "Ah! Alick, my boy, you've slipped once, but you would never talk like that if you hadn't sound stuff at bottom of you," cried Ambrose Kittredge, with real exultation in his voice. "But no more calling yourself hard names — mind what I say now."

The truth was, everybody present had shared more or less Honora's opinion regarding the secret spring of Hollis Deering's conduct. Her uncle felt called upon now to come to the defence of his niece, and so he added: "If that little girl over there did us all such a good turn one night that we shall never be able to repay her, you must nevertheless admit, Alick, that your sister has offered the best she had to give."

Alick's sentiments were very novel ones in the atmosphere of his audience. Whatever the others felt, whatever influence the talk might subsequently exert upon Honora herself, she only felt now aggrieved and indignant.

Alick had set her speech in such an opposite light from the one in which she had regarded it.

She burst into tears. "I think, Alick, you should have remembered all the pain and sorrow you have caused me of late before you talk to me like that."

Honora's weapon was a powerful one now. Whatever

share of her fortune had been at her brother's command, it had gone down in those two years' vortex of gayety and dissipation. Alick himself believed, as he told Hollis Deering, that half his sister's fortune had been swallowed up at that time; but he was mistaken. Honora herself had been recklessly extravagant; and when Mr. Kittredge had fully investigated his nephew's and niece's expenses during their tour abroad, as of late he had been doing, he discovered that Alick's appropriation of his sister's funds amounted only to about five thousand dollars, less than half the young man had fancied, owing to the loose way in which both brother and sister had managed their affairs.

But Alick had not yet learned this fact, and Honora's words struck home. He had robbed his sister. What right had he to be indignant with her when she could lay this crime to his charge? He writhed beneath the thought. He forgot his wrath in remembrance of the wrong he had done Honora, in pity for her.

Then again Mr. Kittredge, knowing what was passing in Alick's mind, came to the rescue. "Come, children, don't let's have any more of this. Honora, my dear, wipe your eyes. It is the day of your betrothal, and I always meant to make you a present when that time came; so you shall have a check this very morning for the five thousand dollars Alick helped himself to out of your funds when you were abroad. On his own showing, it was double that amount; but I have put your affairs through an investigation, and I find they're not as bad for you as he fancied. You made the money fly

too. You were an extravagant little jade always. You must have inherited that from the Wentworths."

Alick could not say much at this fresh proof of his uncle's generosity, and there was no need, — Mr. Kittredge comprehended all that his nephew felt; but there were kisses and congratulations among the women, and Honora hung upon her uncle's neck, and, at last, upon her brother's.

A little later, Mr. Kittredge said to his brother-in-law: "There is a slice for you in my will, Leander; but you may as well take it now, and put it into your house, and have all things in readiness to marry that pretty young woman at once. Tut, my boy, no thanks. I shan't miss ten thousand dollars, and we will talk about the interest some other time. What is the use of a man's waiting for his death-bed before he does any good with his money?"

Two weeks before, Ambrose Kittredge would not have talked in precisely that fashion.

There remained but one thing for Alick Wentworth to do before he left Medbury, and that was to see Hollis Deering once more.

On the evening preceding his departure, the young man went over to Birch Avenue. It was a dreadfully trying moment for both of them, when Hollis came into the parlor, and these two looked in each other's faces.

There she stood, the frail, young girl, whose hands had dragged him out from the clutch of death, and given him back, at last, to honor and manhood, — there she stood,

in her quaint, quiet fashion, with her honest, childlike face.

He spoke first: "O Hollis! my preserver!"

"You are glad, then?" such an eager light astir in her whole face.

"Glad!" he repeated, as though that was no fitting word to use now.

She caught his meaning. "It is enough;" and her smile came out, and settled its sweetness upon the trembling of her lips. "I have felt, all the time, if I could hear you say that, it would be enough. I thank God I have heard it, Mr. Wentworth."

He was too much agitated to reply at once, but he seated her by the fire. "My little friend," speaking after a while, "you told the truth!"

Happy tears choked in her eyes and throat. "I knew I should hear you say that, if you would only wait long enough to find it out," she answered.

As for him, the sitting there by her side in that little parlor brought back upon his soul, with all its awful vividness, that other night when he had last sat there with her; when the agony was upon his soul, and the death stood waiting a little way off. He seemed to live the horror of that time over again.

She divined what was in his thoughts. "Don't let us ever speak of that night, or of what followed," she said.

"You know it all?" he asked.

"Yes; Leander told me. There is a future for you to talk about, Mr. Wentworth."

His face brightened at that. "Yes, thank God! — thank you! — a future, Hollis Deering."

"Don't ever thank me. I hate all that," with her old, downright way of speaking, that had so often made him smile.

But she soon drew him on to talking of his future, and in a short time he was eagerly confiding to her sympathy his cherished hopes and plans, as he had to nobody else, not even to the uncle to whom he owed so much.

She looked at him with a touched wonder, sometimes, seeing how changed he was from the man Hollis had known a little while ago.

How eager he was now to throw himself into the race, to be at work that he would once have scorned as slow drudgery, fit only for coarse and sluggish souls of men, not for fine and lofty natures like his — like his! But all that was gone now. Perhaps he read her thoughts, for he paused suddenly in the midst of his talk, looked at her gravely, and said, "It will be a new thing to earn the bread I eat, the roof that shelters me. I shall be worth more doing that, than I have ever been in the world before; and then, there is a debt to Leander, and another to Honora. I shall never feel myself a man until I have earned and paid the last dollar of that."

When all this, and much more had been said, they went to the window together, just as he was about to leave. The clouds had all gone, and the stars possessed the sky once more, and filled it with their shining pomp, like trains of conquerors.

Alexander Wentworth looked at them, and then his gaze came back to the girl's face doubtfully.

"Do you believe I will do this work? Have you faith in me?" he asked.

Her eyes shone on him. "Yes, I had faith in you," she answered softly; "faith from the beginning."

Those words were sweeter than all the flattery he had received in his life.

"There is nobody else to do it, Hollis. I wish you would bless me to the work," he said, much as he would have asked it of his better angel.

"I do bless you to the work, Alexander Wentworth, — to the daily drudgery, to the self-denial, to the wrestling, to honest toil, whether of hand or brain, to the nobler life, to the truer manhood, — I bless you to it all."

He took her hands and kissed them before he went away, as the rescued to the rescuer, but not at all like lovers you see, — not at all.

Leander Sullivan accompanied his friend to the ship when the latter sailed, and, on his return, he came at once to see his betrothed. Agnes learned then, for the first time, that her generous renunciation would not be accepted, — that Leander's brother-in-law had come to her lover's rescue also.

"We shall have the house after all just as we had planned, my darling," said the happy fellow. "I wish it was ready for you to-morrow. This money's a good thing, but I begin to think it isn't all I once thought it, Agnes."

"No, Leander, it isn't all," her eyes shining upon him with some thought that he did not quite understand, but he did the sweetness through which the thought shone.

After her lover had gone, Agnes sat still a long time, reflecting on all that had happened, happy thoughts of her future hovering and shining among all the others.

At last Hollis came in, and the elder sister said to the younger, "Come and sit down, Hollis, I've something to tell you."

Hollis came and sat down on an ottoman at her sister's feet.

"I think I know it all, Aggie, beforehand," she said, smiling up into the other's face.

"All what, Hollis?"

"What you are to tell me,— what Mr. Kittredge has been doing for you and Leander. I learned it when Alick Wentworth came here the last time."

"And you never told me?"

"No; I left Leander to do all that. It was his place, you know."

Agnes did not reply. She sat still awhile, looking at her younger sister, and at last, with a sudden movement, she threw her arms around Hollis.

"Dear old puss!" she said. "Who would have believed it all of you?"

"I couldn't help it," answered Hollis. "I saw it was life or death with him; and when one comes to face that fact, it puts some new power into you that you never thought was there before. All the world could not

have frightened me, held me back that night. But I pray God I may never have such a thing to go over again. Oh! I pray God!" and she grew white and shuddered.

"Poor dear! What will papa and mamma and Marcia say when they come to hear it all?" added the elder sister.

Hollis drew a long sigh. "I wish there was no need of their hearing; but I suppose they will have to know."

"Yes, there is no help for that. If you or I did not tell them, I am certain Leander or some of Wentworth's relatives would."

Another long sigh. "You must do it, then, Agnes; I can't. Only be as merciful to him as you can, and be just, you know."

That last remark put a new thought into Agnes' head; not that she was really in earnest about it, but she was so happy this afternoon, it was not possible for her to maintain a grave key long.

"You had the material for a grand romance out of all this, Hollis, if you and young Wentworth had taken a fancy to follow in Leander's steps and mine."

Hollis understood in a moment, and answered with her little, breathless, deprecating gesture: "O Agnes! you are too wise for any of that absurd talk."

"However that may be, I think you liked Alick Wentworth better than you ever did any other young man."

"Why, yes, so I did," with a frankness that would have amused anybody not thoroughly used to her. "But through all the charm and magnetism of his presence

and manner, I always felt something lacking; it must have been the want of moral force, integrity; and, Agnes," — speaking with solemn fervor, — "the man I could love and marry must not fail me here. I must have no lurking doubt of his power to stand, without me, under any possible pressure of temptation."

"This knight of your heart and fancy, this Sydney and Bayard combined, without fear and without reproach, do you ever expect to find him, Hollis?" asked Agnes, half curiously, half in jest.

"Not much," speaking half to herself. "I rather expect to be an old maid."

Very likely she will; such women as Hollis Deering are apt to be.

Yet, off there in South America, young Wentworth, shaping his life to new issues, putting his heart and soul into work and daily details of business, into new habits of industry, which have nothing that seems heroic about them, will think of Hollis Deering as he will think of no other woman in the world. Whether he loves her in that sense, which will make him come back and ask her one day to be his wife, I cannot tell; but if he should, with a manhood redeemed and honorable to offer her, I wonder whether Hollis Deering would have no love nor honor to give him in return, despite what she said to Agnes that day, — I wonder!

As the sisters sit there together, with the last sunbeams growing fainter and fainter about them, I ask myself once more the question I have been doing all through

my story, "Which of these women is my heroine?" And I find no better reply now than at the beginning.

Dear reader, will you answer for me, — "Is it Agnes or Hollis?"

THE END.



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