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FORGIVEN AT LAST.

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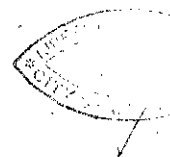
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BY

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*W. H. Worth*

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## FORGIVEN AT LAST.

### CHAPTER I.

#### A "TERRIBLE MISTAKE."

IT was mail-day at the little river-side village known as "Bedford's Landing," which was hardly anything more *than* a landing; and before the smoke of the mail-packet had disappeared from view, the village post-office was besieged by a crowd of eager expectants, all anxiously awaiting the opening of the bags, that contained, for each one individually, documents of such vital importance.

But we have only to do with two of those besiegers. Firstly, a little curly-headed, handsome boy, about ten years old, by name, "Georgie Vaughn," by position, son of the "Widow Vaughn," who lives in the upper part of the little town (the select part), bordering on the rich Mr. Huntingdon's sugar plantation.

After waiting anything but quietly, Georgie's impatience was rewarded by having a single letter passed through the pigeon-hole to him. "Miss Mildred Vaughn, from New York," announced a sepulchral voice from the interior.

"None of your business where it's from," was Mr.

Georgie's saucy rejoinder, as he seized the letter, and pushed his way out through the waiting crowd.

The sable visage of a well-dressed errand-boy from the "Hall" was next thrust into the aperture, and its silent appeal brought forth two letters, and another sepulchral announcement from the invisible occupant of the interior. "Miss Hartley, New York—Mr. Groves, New York."

"All New York must a took to writing to Bedford's Landing," exclaimed an outsider, whose highest ambition on earth was to receive a monthly scrawl from his boy, "in the neighboring town of Camden, who was there shoemakerin." The letters for Miss Hartley and Mr. Groves reached Huntingdon Hall almost as soon as Miss Mildred Vaughn was put in possession of hers. For whereas Mr. Georgie had to walk, the waiting boy from the "Hall" rode the sleekest of ponies.

As a reward for our trouble in tracing these three letters from New York to their final destination we certainly have a right to know all about them, who they were from, what they were about, etc.

As the Hall, and the affairs of the Hall, took precedence over all Bedford, at all times and in all matters, we must needs follow the example of all Bedford, and give it precedence in this matter of the letters.

And furthermore, as from time immemorial—at least, from that noteworthy time in the garden of Eden when Satan directed his attention to Eve first, and left Adam to be tempted by proxy—the ladies have taken precedence, we must needs follow the time-honored rule, and give Miss Hartley's letter precedence.

NEW YORK, Nov. 17, 184—.

"MY DARLING MILDRED," began the letter.

Now, when I let you into the secret that Miss Hartley's first name was Priscilla, you will, to say the least of it, be somewhat puzzled at this opening address. Secondly, when I tell you that she was at least forty, you will wonder how old her correspondent can possibly be, to warrant such affectionate familiarity. And thirdly, when I further inform you that she is a Gorgon in looks, and a Xantippe in temper, you will wonder how on earth she *could* be anybody's "darling."

To the letter, however. Again then,—

"My darling Mildred: I have just finished a regular 'papa, potatoes, prunes, prism' sort of a letter to Dame Hartley, and I assure you I turn from that unpalatable task with infinite satisfaction; in order to write this, the last letter you will receive from me, as we will start in a day or two for the blessed old Hall.

"Now, let me tell you something so funny. Yesterday, while I was in at Madame Dupont's millinery establishment,—and, oh! by-the-way, I did buy you the *sweetest* bonnet there,—we left Frank sitting in a hack at the door. You know we have to ride everywhere, on account of Frank's lameness, and father never will leave him behind for a moment. Well, as I was about to tell you, as we were in the shop buying ribbons and flowers,—father and I,—we left Frank in the hack, and as fast as my boxes would be tied up they would be sent out to the hack by madame's son,—a young gentleman of about eighteen, I guess, by his looks, and the very handsomest creature, Mildred, that you ever laid eyes on. Nothing like a milli-

ner's son *ought* to look,—carries himself like a young prince, is aristocratic-looking, and all that sort of thing. Well, when papa and I got through shopping,—though, to tell the honest truth, poor papa's share was sitting on a stool, with his chin on his cane, heaving sighs, and exclaiming, 'Most done, my daughter?' in tones of piteous inquiry. (Why father *will* persist in dragging around after me, as if I couldn't walk alone yet, is more than I can understand.) Well, as I was about to tell you way back yonder somewhere, when we came out to get into our hack, there was Mr. Courtney Dupont (that sounds like a milliner's-boy, *don't* it?) sitting on the front seat of the hack, talking to Frank as familiarly and sociably as if they had been rocked in the same cradle in infancy, and had never lost sight of each other for a moment since. He jumped out as soon as we made our appearance, and blushed very red. I think his blushing, though, was caused by Frank. You know Frank has been petted and indulged so on account of his affliction, that there is a dash of insolence in his manners. So, before we had hardly got up to the carriage, he called out; 'Father, I'm going to take this boy home with me, and he is going to go to school with me, to Mr. Groves, and be a companion for me out of school.' You know, Mildred, father is opposed, on principle, to ever being surprised; but I think this speech of my Lord Frank's came as near surprising him as anything in this world ever did. He looked first at Frank, and then at the 'boy' whose fate in life had been so summarily disposed of, and then back to Frank, and then he spoke: 'Why, Frank!

—why, my son, I don't know exactly what you mean.'

"Well, Mildred, to make a long story short, it seems that while we had been in the shop Frank had been talking to the boy, and he found out everything about him, from the time his father married his mother up to the present moment. He found out that his father had been one of the F. F. V.'s, in some State or other, and his mother another F. F. V. (aint it strange there never was any *born* shop-people,—they are always ladies and gentlemen in reduced circumstances!). Well, both of them F. F. V.'s, not having too much money to begin with, came to grief; so the father, in utter disgust, died, and the mother took to trimming bonnets. The family consists of this boy and two sisters, younger than himself. This boy, who, it seems, is endowed with the mind and ambition that ought by rights to belong to the descendant of an F. F. V., has scrambled into some sort of an education at the free schools in this place, but is very anxious to fit himself for a lawyer,—so he told all this to Frank (though, in justice to him, I ought to say Frank got all this out of him by pumping), and Frank told it all to father as we rode back to our hotel, and what, between father's inability to refuse Frank anything and his own benevolent heart, it was arranged before we went to bed that night that Mr. Courtney Dupont was to be taken home with us and given the benefit of Mr. Groves's wisdom, and Dame Hartley's elevating society. Of course, there was nothing to be said against it on *his* side of the house; so we are all to come home together.

"Now, Mildred mine, if I did not know that your

heart had gone from you long ago, I declare I would be absolutely afraid to expose you to the fascinations of this dark-eyed hero of the milliner's shop,—don't get mad. If I can't talk nonsense to you, who *can* I talk it to? Whenever I try to be myself at home, Mr. Groves looks at me with those owl-eyes of his, as if I were talking treason, stratagem, and spoil (if one can talk spoil) and that hateful, *hateful* Miss Hartley turns her green eyes on me, with her everlasting, '*Edith*, you forget yourself,' until I feel frozen into a mummy.

"How I do hate that woman! I wonder if it would hurt her any if she knew it? Never, since the day my poor, precious mother invited her to come live with us, because she hadn't a friend in the world, nor a home either, have I seen a smile on her hideous face, or heard a pleasant word from her scraggy lips. Hundreds of miles are rolling between us, Milly dear, but I can hear your gentle, '*Edith* dear, don't talk that way,' just as plainly as if I were right close to you and could see the reproach in your dovey eyes. But I *do* hate her, Milly, and I would be telling a story if I said I didn't. You know what our home was when my blessed mother was alive, and you know what it is now. I do believe, if saints in heaven *can* be unhappy, my precious mother's heart aches for her children, who *might* have everything on earth to make them comfortable, and yet have to live in the wild confusion that reigns in our home under that woman's mismanagement. I do verily believe she thought at one time that she could frighten father into marrying her, but she relinquished that insane hope

years ago. Conscience! how my pen does run away with me when writing to you, with *her* for my theme! There is no use scolding me for it, Mildred; no use telling me that I am unreasonable and unjust and violent and all the rest of it. To avoid argument, I'll grant you I'm all that; but she is an incubus on my soul—a hideous nightmare—a blot in my home—and if ever I turn out a fearfully wicked woman it will be because my angel mother was taken away from me and that fiend put over me. Father won't listen to me now, when I beg him to send her away,—calls me an unreasonable child, etc.; but the day I come of age,—well, never mind; I don't know why I torment you this way, for I know it is a torment to your gentle soul, and I should never have introduced her name into my letter at all.

"Good-by, my very dearest friend. Love to your mother, to Nellie and Georgie, and to *Doctor Tilman*. With a heart full of love,

"Your diabolical friend,

"EDITH HUNTINGDON."

After writing which lengthy epistle, Miss Edith Huntingdon, with the carelessness that characterized that young lady's proceedings generally, slips it into an envelope, seals, and addresses to "*Miss Priscilla Hartley*, Huntingdon Hall, Bedford, St. Bernard's Parish, Louisiana." Of its perusal by "*Dame Hartley*," and her consequent wrath, more anon.

Letter number two, for the Hall, was from the invalid Frank to the possessor of the "owl-eyes" flip-pantly alluded to by Lady Edith, and read as follows:

"MY DEAR TEACHER:

"'Frank has taken another notion into his head,' father and sister would tell you, and as this notion of mine will entail some extra labor on you, it is but fair that I should explain matters to you.

"I have met here, quite accidentally, a young man of most uncommon mind, who is real hungry for an education, and too plaguey poor to be able to get one. I found this out by a deal of impudent questioning, and I have persuaded father to give him a lift in the world; first move in the said lift being to bring him home with us and let you cram him. I verily believe you will find him a much more satisfactory pupil than your cross-grained, but sincerely-attached,

"FRANK H."

Surely, herein is none of the "insolence" hinted at as being one of "Lord Frank's" shortcomings.

In the mean while, down at Widow Vaughn's cottage, Mildred, Mildred of the "gentle soul and dovey eyes," was gazing on her open letter with an anxious, nay, almost alarmed look. And yet it was a very short letter, and a very polite one, addressed to—

"MY DEAR MISS HARTLEY:

"Father requests me to write and inform you that we will start for home the day after to-morrow. We will bring home with us a young man who is to go to school with my brother, under Mr. Groves, and, as he will be a permanent resident of Huntingdon Hall for some time, father requests that you will have the

north room prepared for him. Begging you to remember me very kindly to dear Mr. Groves, I remain,

"Yours respectfully,

"EDITH HUNTINGDON."

Addressed to Miss Mildred Vaughn.

In a moment Mildred had perused this curt epistle to the end; in another moment the terrible mistake her giddy friend had made flashed upon her, and in a third moment she had seized her garden-hat and was hastily tying the strings.

Turning to a side door, she entered a bedroom which, among other articles of furniture, contained a large invalid chair. Going straight up to this, she stooped and kissed its pale-faced occupant, saying, as she did so, "Mother, dearest, I must run up to the Hall for a minute or two. Our giddy Edith has made a terrible mistake. She has directed a letter intended for Miss Hartley to me, and if she has sent mine to her there is no knowing what amount of mischief has been done, for she does write so violently and so unguardedly about Miss Hartley. She may possibly not have received her mail yet, so by going at once I may avert a genuine catastrophe. So good-by again;" and she stooped and kissed her mother once more, adding, in a low voice, almost a whisper, "maybe Doctor Tilman may come while I am gone; make him keep you company."

Stooping so long over the invalid's chair had quite a beautifying effect, for when she went out by the side door again her sweet face was several shades rosier than it had been when she went in.

So Mildred hastened away on her labor of love; and although she reached the Hall in as short a time as her two little feet could possibly carry her, the first sound that reached her ears, and her first glance into the sitting-room at the Hall, told her plainly that she was too late.

In the doorway of the sitting-room stood Mr. Groves, holding Frank's letter in his hand, looking as guilty as if he had just been detected in an attempt at burglary, as dejected as if his very life had depended on the success of that burglary, and as helpless as—as what he actually was—a real gentleman in the presence of an angry virago.

In a stiff arm-chair, near a table in the middle of the room, sat Miss Hartley, rigid and unbending in body as in nature; sour in visage as in disposition; with the ashen hue of intense passion spread like a veil over her countenance.

As Mildred got near enough to take in this pleasing picture she heard Mr. Groves, in his low, slow voice, saying,—

"Miss Hartley, I have just received a letter from New York, and I thought——"

What Mr. Groves "thought" will never be known to the reader of these pages, for here Miss Hartley broke in,—

"A letter from New York! so have I, sir; a nice letter, a long letter, an interesting letter, a dutiful letter, a beautiful letter;" here Miss Hartley stopped for a fresh supply of breath and adjectives, and Mr. Groves put on an amazed aspect.

Having drawn in the needful supply of oxygen, she resumed,—

"But, I really believe, Miss Huntingdon has been a little more truthful and candid this time than she intended to be. It's not enough that I should be abused by that chit, like a pickpocket, but they are to bring home some beggar's brat for me to be slaving, and mending, and darning for, till I am sick of my life. And all this comes of your humoring that boy Frank, till, if he was to say he wanted the moon, you'd be after mounting in a balloon to see if you could but fetch it."

Pause number two, during which Mr. Groves assumes a criminal deportment.

"Furthermore, if Mr. Huntingdon would stop nosing and mousing about among his everlasting roots and his rocks, and give me a little assistance in keeping them two young ones under, maybe I wouldn't be dogged out of my very life by their highfallutinesses."

Pause number three, and Mr. Groves, recognizing "that same old tune," sinks into utter dejection, but gives a little flicker of reviving hope as Mildred's gentle voice is heard during the momentary lull.

"I am afraid, Miss Hartley, some mistake has been made."

"I am afraid so too," was Miss Hartley's sarcastic rejoinder.

"I am afraid," pursued Milly, the peace-maker, "that Edith may, unintentionally, have hurt your feelings."

"Unintentional fiddlesticks!" quoth Miss H.

"You know Edith is very hasty, and expresses herself rather strongly."

"Rather strongly," echoed the victim of Edith's hastiness and expressiveness.

"But I am sure, Miss Hartley, you ought to know her well enough to feel certain that she is the last person in the world to wound purposely."

"The last in the world," put in Mr. Groves, growing brave, now that they were two to one.

"Fol-de-rol," chanted the victim.

"And now, dear Miss Hartley, I'm going to beg a personal favor of you,"—and Milly came very near to the outraged dame, looking her very doveiest, and using her most coaxing voice,—“you know Edith has been away for some time, and they are going to bring a stranger home with them, and it would be so exceedingly unpleasant to have an endless quarrel going on about this foolish letter.”

"Exceedingly," interpolated Mr. Groves, who had grown so bold as to seat himself.

"So," continued Milly, "please don't let us let her know of the mistake she has made,—no good could come of it. If you were to reproach her with it, it would only start endless recrimination."

"I hope I shan't forget that I am a lady," remarked Miss Hartley, frigidly.

Here Mr. Groves ventured to look slightly skeptical,—only slightly.

"You'll promise me, won't you, Miss Hartley?"

Now Mildred Vaughn was one of the few mortals in this world who had the power to move this iron woman. So, when Mildred looked at her with her gentle, pleading eyes, she actually promised that she wouldn't allude to the letter when Edith came home.

Then Milly put her arms around the iron woman and kissed her.

Here Mr. Groves looked as if he would, for once in his life, have liked to be Miss Hartley.

Having done all she could to repair her friend's terrible mistake, Milly hastened to return to her precious invalid, whose side she rarely ever left.

Mr. Groves accompanied her to the front door.

"Good-by, Mr. Groves," and she held out a beautiful little hand.

Mr. Groves held it for a moment, as he said, slowly,—

"Miss Mildred, you are an angel."

"Thank you," she replied, gravely; but she withdrew her hand hastily, and her face did not become rosy, as it had done when she had told her mother to make Dr. Tilman keep her company.

## CHAPTER II.

### BEDFORD'S BEST SOCIETY.

I HAVE read books in my life that seemed to me to contain half a dozen different and totally irrelevant plots. Each with its own private set of heroes and heroines, saints and villains, who, in some occult way, as the story progresses, gradually work their way round, first into acquaintanceship, and then into a co-partnership in the one grand final catastrophe.

Now, in reading these thrilling novels, I am always at a loss which to admire most,—the ingenuity of the mind that can conceive such intricate plots, and drive

such a host of heroes and heroines, saints and villains safely through their labyrinthine mazes, without losing sight of some of them, or getting their several sets of loves, and hates, and villainies into a hopeless muddle; or the patient industry of the mind that can follow in the wake of the said heroes and heroines, saints and villains, and can tell you honestly and truthfully and lucidly (with the book shut) who married who, and what became of the rest of them.

Now I confess, humbly and with the blush of shame dying my cheeks, that I am not yet equal to the task of driving tandem. So, if I can but guide this modest, "one-horse concern," with its limited number of *propria personæ* and slender cargo of incident safely enough of the shards and pitfalls, so terrible to him who ventures for the first time into the field of story telling, to avoid the censure, or worse still, the laugh of the by-standers, I will make my most grateful salaam over the word *finis*, promising greater speed and more villains next time.

I have forewarned you that you will make but few acquaintances in these pages; but as compensation for the unsatisfied cravings of any social Oliver Twist who may cry "more," I promise you that you shall be introduced to none but the "best society of Bedford."

Miss Edith Huntingdon's correspondence will have already made you tolerably familiar with the Hall and its inmates. But, as (to use Mildred's words) "Edith expresses herself rather strongly," it may be necessary for me to correct certain impressions likely to be derived from her letters.

In the first place, then, the *crème de la crème* of Bedford society was to be found at Huntingdon Hall, and although some of that cream was in a chronic state of sourness, it need not necessarily be called a "fiend." To quote Mildred Vaughn again,—in doing which I am only doing what all Bedford was very much in the habit of doing,—“There were many excuses to be found for poor Miss Priscilla's ways.”

To start with: if tradition spoke truly, away back in remote ages, when Priscilla Hartley was young and fresh, she had been very good looking, very well-to-do in the world, and (as she had nothing in the wide world to make her otherwise) very sweet tempered. The story of how all this was changed, converting her into the vinegar-faced virago whom Edith Huntingdon "did hate so," runs thus:

When Priscilla's father had been a rich city merchant, and Priscilla rode in her coach-and-pair, looking very charming in her silks and laces and diamonds, she had found no lack of friends nor of lovers. Among the latter was one of "superior mould," in the girl's eyes (of course), so she loved him and accepted him, and looked forward (as what girl has not done?) to endless years of perfect bliss, etc. Being a fiery nature, she loved with a fiery intensity accordingly. But love's young dream was very soon over for our poor Priscilla.

First she took small-pox. Now Venus herself never could have survived an attack of that loathsome disease, so when Priscilla, who was not Venus herself, arose from her sick-bed, no one could have recognized pretty Priscilla Hartley in the horribly



scarred, attenuated creature, whose beautiful hair had all been sacrificed to save her life.

When Priscilla's lover paid his first visit after she was pronounced ready for visitors, he could hardly repress a start of horror and disgust at her changed aspect.

The sharp eyes of the girl saw his dismay, however, and she told him, as calmly as she could, "that she had sent for him purposely, to release him from his engagement."

But as Mr. Hartley's money-box hadn't had the small-pox, his daughter's disinterested lover magnanimously refused to be released, declaring his affections unchanged, quoted various aphorisms to the effect that beauty was but skin deep, etc., and even mustered the courage to take the poor scarred creature in his arms and kiss her lightly (where there happened to be a smooth spot).

But Priscilla was no fool, and she very soon became aware of the fact that he did not love her as he had once done, so of course it was her money, etc. Thus began the souring process.

So, after struggling very hard against her lover's increasing coldness, Priscilla mustered all her pride, and resolved that on his very next visit she would break the engagement finally.

But before that very next visit, shock number two came. Mr. Hartley failed in business, and came home one day to tell his unfortunate daughter that the coach-and-pair, and the silks and laces and diamonds, were all henceforth to be reckoned among past glories.

"Now," decided Priscilla, mentally, "I must indeed release him."

But he saved her the trouble, for that next visit never was paid; and so, when in the course of time her father ceased from troubling and her mother was at rest, and Priscilla had to keep knocking about from post to pillar until the good Mr. Huntingdon gave her a permanent resting-spot, the souring process was completed.

Let that one among you who could have passed the ordeal blamelessly cast the first stone.

But Edith was too young to know anything about all this. She only knew Miss Hartley as a frightfully ugly and most undeniably cross-grained woman, who seemed to have an especial spite against the young, the beautiful, and the happy.

So now I hope I have fully apologized for Miss Hartley and her "ways."

In behalf of "owl-eyes," as Miss Huntingdon delighted to call Mr. Groves, I beg to assert that, in addition to a pair of eyes which certainly were rather owlish, he was the possessor of as gentle a heart, as loving a disposition, and as modest a demeanor as were ever misplaced by belonging to a man.

Notwithstanding his loving heart and gentle manners, which should by rights have belonged to a woman, Mr. Groves was the owner of plenty of true manliness of soul and clearness of head. As Edith would describe him, "he was ugly and handsome, strong and weak, likeable and unlikeable." To continue that young lady's analysis, "he was ugly because he was so sallow and slouched along so crookedly; he was handsome because he had such great, earnest eyes and such a beautiful mouth. He was

strong in his wisdom and goodness, but weak in asserting himself. He was likeable because he was so patient and good, and unlikeable for the very same reason,—for who *wants* a man to be patient and good? what woman ever fell in love with a man *because* he was patient and good? As for her part, she never would marry a man who was not composed, in equal proportions, of wisdom, strength, and wickedness."

Mr. Groves had a story too,—a sad story, that had something to do with his drooping body and patient goodness. But, as his story has very little to do with mine, and as even the Hall folks have no right to keep the best society of Bedford waiting forever, we will not stop to inquire into particulars. He was a lawyer by profession; but as ill health required a warmer climate than that of his native place, he had given up the practice of his profession to become preceptor to Mr. Huntingdon's crippled son. Hence his fitness in aiding Mr. Courtney Dupont's legal aspirations.

He was very contented in his home at the Hall, although Miss Hartley was not the very best of housekeepers. But then, as he had not known the house during the late Mrs. Huntingdon's reign, he could not bear witness to the decadence that Edith was so bitterly conscious of.

Mr. Groves was entirely alone in the world,—so his affections clustered around the inmates of his present abode. He admired and revered the gray-haired head of the Hall, a quiet, unassuming experimentalist, who cared very little how much money was spent in the establishment, or what the "children" did with themselves, so he was left in peace and quiet, to pursue that

process of "nosing and mousing among roots and rocks" which was so distasteful to Miss Hartley. Though, literally speaking, I don't suppose the poor old gentleman ever took a rock in his hand for scientific purposes in his life: Miss Hartley used the word rocks for the sake of alliteration only,—Mr. Huntingdon simply being a man with a scientific vein running through his mind, and the possessor of sufficient money to warrant him in experimentalism. Enough of the Hall.

Of the Vaughn family you know a good deal already, too.

Next came the Tilmans, who read their title to be considered of the "best" very clearly. The family consisted of Mrs. Tilman, mother of the Doctor Tilman twice or thrice already incidentally alluded to, and the two Misses Tilman, fair samples of delicate, refined, amiable Southern girls, and the aforesaid doctor, of whom you will find out enough for yourself as this story progresses. He was a man to whom no pen-and-paper description could do justice; therefore I will attempt none.

Bedford was not the most thickly populated place in the world, being simply a parish-seat and the center of an agricultural district. Of course, there was the minister's family, and the rival doctors and the lawyers and their families, and the storekeepers, and so on; but I'm not writing the story of Bedford's Landing, so there's no use confusing you, and myself too, for the matter of that, by introducing you to dozens of people whose concerns are no concern of ours.

## CHAPTER III.

## SOMETHING ABOUT THE YOUNG MAN FROM THE MILLINER'S SHOP.

NOW when it is taken into consideration that if Mr. Courtney Dupont, the young man from the milliner's shop, had never taken a box of artificial flowers from the well-filled shelves of Madame D.'s shop to the hackney-coach in which sat Frank Huntingdon (impatiently drumming his fingers on the window, and "wishing to the Lord his sister would make a finish of her tomfoolery"), he never would have made that young gentleman's acquaintance, and never would have been requested by that young gentleman "to stop and keep a fellow from dying of the gapes," so that his story never would have been pumped out of him, and good Mr. Huntingdon never would have offered him a "lift," and he and Edith never would have come in contact, and so he never would have had to,—in short, if that box of flowers hadn't been purchased and sent out just when and how it was purchased and sent out, the sequence of events which I am trying to dignify into a story never would have come about.

So, seeing that the young man from the milliner's shop is at the bottom of it all, it seems to me nothing more than fair that he should have a few words all to himself.

Some twenty-five years before the period at which

my story begins, a young man by the name of Dupont, whose ancestral acres were situated in Florida, was sent on to a certain Northern college of high repute for the completion of his education. Now this youth with the high-sounding name was guilty of the enormous breach of decorum of falling desperately in love with the penniless orphan niece of one of the professors, and, without asking leave or license of a certain irascible old gentleman away off in Florida, who still treated the boy to occasional displays of parental discipline, he married Miss Minnie Ralston, and, in spite of all prophecies to the contrary, he was intensely happy with his pretty little wife, though to his dying day he never could get his father to consent to his bringing her home, or, what was of much more importance, get the implacable old gentleman to grant him more than a bare support.

If the father (as in justice he should have done) had consented to die first, all would have been very well with the young couple. But the old gentleman, surrounded by his usual comforts, and in his mild Southern climate, found living a much easier task than did the young gentleman in a rigorous climate and without his usual comforts. So, after young Mr. Dupont had lived long enough to burden his wife with three children,—one boy and two girls,—he very quietly betook himself to another world, leaving his irascible parent as irascible as ever, and his helpless wife more helpless than ever.

Now, I suppose, having been raised in the bookish atmosphere of a college, and heard books, and seen books, and breathed books, until she fairly hated books,

made Mrs. Dupont recoil with horror from the idea of teaching, by way of supporting herself and children. Besides, where could a widow with three small children find a situation as teacher?

So she lost caste forever in the bookish atmosphere of the college by moving to New York, and investing the "last cent you will ever receive from me, madame," in stocking a small millinery establishment; which, by dint of industry and good taste in trimming, etc., was afterward merged into a large millinery establishment, rendering the good old name of Dupont at once famous and infamous,—famous, as belonging to the maker and vendor of the "sweetest bonnets in all New York," and infamous by being dragged down to grace a sign-board.

The one boy left was the Courtney of our story. His mother used to say, very proudly, "he was all Dupont." In fact, he was so much Dupont that I verily believe if he had been shipped South to his grandfather (who still persisted in living) he might have won the old gentleman to forgive his dead son. But no such idea ever entered Mrs. Dupont's head. She was doing very well in the bonnet business, and had no loftier ambition than to continue to do well in the same.

So time rolled on until old Mr. Dupont almost forgot the existence of these Northern claimants to his affection and his fortune, and the young Duponts waxed older and bigger.

The great grief of young Courtney's life was his inability to acquire the kind of education his soul craved. Although he had been born among bandboxes, and

bred among bandboxes, and had been carrying bandboxes back and forth almost ever since he could remember, still there were earnest hours in the boy's life,—hours when the shop was closed and the hateful bandboxes out of sight,—when he could not help thinking that there surely must be a happier, and pleasanter, and higher way of living than by carrying bandboxes to and fro.

But whenever he would venture to give expression to any such dissatisfied longings, before his mother, she very quickly put an extinguisher upon him.

"If you'd seen as much of books and heard as much of books as *I did* in *my* young days," she would tell him, "you'd thank your stars that you *couldn't* go to college. Besides, who is to help me clothe and feed my helpless girls if my own son can't do it? Learn enough of books to keep my store-books, my young man, and you'll know as much as will be good for you."

So the boy would go off muttering something about "women," and it "didn't matter if *they* didn't know their A B C's," etc., and would shut his longings and cravings up in his heart and go back to his bandboxes.

Now things went on this way until Courtney was a young man of about eighteen; in appearance, fully justifying Edith Huntingdon's description of him (for which *vide* Chapter I., letter first); in disposition, rather sulky than otherwise; in manners, cold and reserved.

But with all his coldness and reserve he had managed to fall desperately in love with one of his mother's as-

sistants,—a pretty girl of sixteen or seventeen,—and, for the merit of some better employment for his leisure moments, had wooed and won her,—and was, at the time Frank Huntingdon made him his offer of a “lift,” actually engaged to be married to her. So much for idleness and propinquity.

Dreading his mother’s wrath at the idea of his burdening himself with a wife “just, when she needed his assistance most,” he had enjoined profound secrecy on his fiancée, promising to marry her as soon as he had a cent he could call his own.

But before that lucky penny had been earned, Mr. Huntingdon made him his very generous offer, an offer which he never hesitated for one moment about accepting. But before he got fairly launched on this unexpected wave of good fortune he had to go through two very trying scenes.

Scene number one was in madame’s drawing-room, back of the shop (which had a big looking-glass in it, where all her fair customers came to see the glories of their last purchase in full), after the store was closed and the family was at supper.

“Mother,” began this aspirant for an education, “do you remember that old, white-haired gentleman and the beautiful young lady, his daughter, who were in here to-day?”

“I should rather think I did,” replied madame, giving the pocket that contained the key to her strong-box a satisfied shake.

By-the-way, it is worthy of comment that Mrs. Dupont considered half her luck in business due to her deceased husband’s possession of a French name.

For, by simply changing the prefix Mrs. into Madame, she had effloresced into a French modiste with the greatest facility.

Excuse the digression.

“Well,” continued Mr. Courtney, with his mouth full of buttered flannel-cake, “their coming here to-day has been the greatest streak of luck that ever fell in my way. In fact, a greater streak of luck than a luckless dog like me ever had any right to expect.”

Mr. Courtney Dupont had gotten into a way of considering himself and talking of himself as a “luckless dog,” until he had quite convinced himself that “misery had stolen him at his birth,” etc.

“Greatest streak of luck to you,” repeated his mother, not understanding.

“Yes, mother, to me. I’m going to tell you about it. You know you sent me out to the hack with a lot of those everlasting paper-boxes, that it does seem as if women never did get tired of buying.”

“Well, what of that?” snapped his mother.

I use the word “snapped” advisedly. For, when it is taken into consideration that the continuation of those very buttered flannel-cakes, of which the young gentleman was partaking at that moment with such seeming relish, depended upon these “charming frivolities so dear to the sex,” as a *great* man calls our whimsies (and it takes your *great* men to judge women fairly), it *does* seem, to say the least of it, very ungrateful to talk as he did, and so I suppose his mother thought when she said, “Well, sir?” in such an exceedingly snappish tone.

"Well, I dumped them down on the front seat——"

"Looking like the savage you are!" interpolated the presiding genius of the bandbox.

"And was turning round to come back, when a boy that was sitting in the carriage asked me to stop and keep him company till his father and sister got through 'tomfooling.'"

Now I suppose their common contempt for the institution of bandboxes and lovers of the contents of bandboxes was the bond of union between these two embryo cynics.

The boy in the carriage struck a sympathetic chord in the breast of the boy from the shop when he called buying of bandboxes tomfooling. So, I suppose, to this coincidence was Mr. Frank Huntingdon indebted for the unusual readiness with which Mr. Courtney Dupont complied with his request to stay and keep him company.

"So I sat down, and he got to asking me questions, like boys will, you know, till he'd found out pretty much all there was to find out, and told me pretty much all he had to tell about himself in return."

"I hope," interrupted Madame Dupont, bridling, "you told him who your father was, and what, by *rights*, his children *ought* to be."

"Indeed, I didn't make any such fool of myself mother, I can promise you."

"What did you tell him then, pray?"

"I told him that I was deuced tired of trotting about with bandboxes."

"And that your mother was an unconscionable old hag who kept you at it!"

"And that I would change places, broken back and all, with him," continued her son, unheeding the interruption, "if I could get his book chances."

"And that that same old hag refused to let you go to school!"

"Indeed, mother, we didn't talk about you at all," said he, accepting her self-bestowed appellation.

"Well?"

"Well, then he went on to tell me about his teacher at home, who was a lawyer by profession, and how his father always let him do just as he wanted to; and then he told me that if I was willing I could go home with them and study under his lawyer teacher, and be his companion out of school, and——"

"And, of course, you said no."

"And, of course, I said yes."

"That I should live to see a son of mine willing to accept the charity of people he never saw in his life before this blessed day!" And Madame Dupont laid back in her chair, overwhelmed by this instance of degeneracy in her son.

"Mother, listen to me." And the boy brought his fist down on the table with a bang that rendered the matter of listening to him purely involuntary. "Ever since I have been a little child I have been begging you to give me a good education, and then to let me choose my own way of living. I *hate* this shop. —I hate its ribbons, and its flowers, and its gowgaws, and I'll *never* be a man as long as I'm compelled to stand behind your counter."

"You don't stand behind my counter, sir,—you stand behind a desk."

The boy gave a sneer of disdain at this feminine quibble, and went on vehemently,—

"You *could* have educated me, you *know* you could. You have plenty of money, you know you have; and you have already spent twice as much on those girls' backs," pointing fiercely at his two unoffending sisters, "as would have given me a tolerably good education at least."

"I've got my girls to marry off, sir."

"Yes, and while you are marrying off your girls your son may go to the devil!"

"Courtney!" from three female voices at once.

"But I didn't start this, mother, to reproach you with what I will always consider very cruel conduct on your part," he continued, in a calmer voice; "I simply want to tell you that the one chance of my life has come to me to-day, and if I let it slip by me I'll never have another. You may call it charity, if you please, but I go with the distinct understanding that I will some day or other pay back every cent loaned me now. I shall keep an account with Mr. Huntingdon as particularly as I have always kept your precious ribbon accounts, and will repay him with interest. So it's all settled, and I start home with them two days from this."

Mr. Courtney pronounced this ultimatum with an independence of air and a decision of voice that was quite new in the experience of his three hearers.

"But, Courtney——" began his mother, who seemed all of a sudden to have changed characters with her son.

"Will you pack my clothes for me, mother?"

"Why, Courtney——"

"Will you, or won't you?"

"Great goodness, boy! can't you——"

"Will you pack my clothes, mother?"

"Yes!" furiously and in despair.

Not another word passed on the subject until Courtney came into the little parlor, the night of his departure, to bid them good-by; a performance which was gotten through without any alarming amount of emotion.

Now, telling his mother of this important change in his affairs was a comparatively easy task to the one still left him to perform; and as he took his hat to start for the home of his fiancée, he indulged in some very unloverlike reflections.

I have said that idleness and propinquity had been the cause of this "entanglement," as he now called it; for, as he had sullenly made up his mind that there was no way out of the bandbox incubus, it would be in keeping with the decree of fate for him to take unto himself a wife within the bandbox precinct. So long as he had had no object in life, and no prospect of ever having any object in life, this decree had not seemed so terrible a one, taking the youth and prettiness of the bandbox goddess into consideration; so he had gone on tolerably contentedly, imagining himself very much in love. But now that he wished to go away, probably to stay for years, he said plainly to himself that it was a "deuced piece of work, this being engaged," and he anathematized himself for a fool with the utmost vim and candor. "If she'll only promise to wait, it will be something," he soliloquized, as he

neared her door; "and if she won't—but then, if she's got a particle of reason in her, she'll certainly see what a chance this is for me; and if she loves me the right way, she'll be willing to wait for me." With such reflections he tried to fortify himself; nevertheless, when he entered the tiny parlor where Miss Bessie Miller was waiting for him, he felt anything but fortified, and looked as ill at ease as he felt.

The usual greetings had been exchanged, and the pair had been seated quite close together for a full five minutes before he spoke.

"Bessie," he began, falteringly, "I have a great piece of news to tell you."

Now Bessie was not one of your demonstrative young ladies, who was always staring and starting and getting violently excited over nothing; so she just raised her head from its resting-place on Courtney's shoulder and said,—

"Well, Courtney."

"It is a very *great* piece of news, Bessie. A piece of news that concerns you and me very closely,—a piece of news which I don't think you will like at all to hear."

"Well, what is it, Courtney?" this time a *little* impatiently.

Then he told her rapidly and confusedly of the great good fortune that had befallen him, and asked her if she would wait for him two or three years, nay, maybe more.

This time Bessie did start—then she turned pale—then she had recourse to woman's most powerful argument—tears.

This was a turn of affairs her lover had not fortified himself against; so he sat silent, never thinking of all the fine arguments he had composed during his walk wherewith he was to bring "Bessie to reason." But how can you reason against tears? What argument can a man bring to bear against dumbness, absolute dumbness? So, instead of "showing Bessie what it was plainly her duty to do," he changed his base unhesitatingly, and fell to coaxing.

"Bessie, darling, listen to me, please."

No answer—cry, cry, cry.

"Bessie, how *can* I talk to you if you won't stop crying and listen to me?"

Sob, sob. Not "dry sobs,"—which seems to be the "latest thing" out in the emotional line, and very much affected by lady novelists,—but, sure enough, old-fashioned, *wet* sobs, such as our grandmothers gave vent to when our grandfathers crossed them just as Courtney was "crossing" Bessie now. Sobs and tears that reduced her fresh starched handkerchief to a very limp state, in a very short space of time indeed.

"Bessie," continued her lover, in despair of ever seeing her face again, but addressing the limp handkerchief instead, "you surely wouldn't be so unreasonable as to ask me to give up this one and only chance of ever making something of myself?"

Now it is a noticeable fact in womanology (there ought to be that ology, if there isn't) that although woman is a perfectly unreasoning animal, never *was* known to reason, never will be known to reason, wouldn't reason if she could, couldn't reason if she would, you can't outrage her more, in her most un-



reasonable mood, than by accusing her of a want of reason, whereby she gives one last, grand proof of unreasonableness.

So Bessie, being a woman, acted a woman's part. She tapered off with a series of gasps and furtive wipes to her nose (by-the-way, how entirely supernumerary noses are in novels!), and emerged from behind the limp handkerchief, looking much less charming for a pair of very red eyes and a very swollen nose.

But to return to the noes and ayes of the question.

Bessie hoped that, "*whatever else* she might be, she *wasn't* unreasonable."

"Then you *don't* want me to stay?" brightening considerably.

"Yes, I do," looking very much injured.

"Then you want me to give up this glorious chance, Bessie?" despondently.

"No, I don't."

"But, Bessie, what *do* you mean? You say I must stay, but I musn't give up going."

"I did *not* say you *must* 'stay.' You asked me if I *wanted* you to stay, and I said yes, of course."

Notwithstanding Bessie's tears and groans, there was at the bottom of her little heart a vein of good, sound sense. She loved Courtney very dearly, and the shock of hearing that he was to leave her for such an indefinite period had been so great that at first she could think of nothing else. But after she had conquered the first burst, she could see, as plainly as he, how very much to the advantage of both his going would be; so she spoke accordingly.

"At first, Courtney dear, I was so distressed at the

idea of your leaving me, that I could see nothing good in this move. But I know it is a great good, and I'll promise you not to put *one* obstacle in your way. I will wait just as many years as you say. If you desire it, I will release you from your engagement, and trust to your love and honor to bring you back to me."

Although, on his way to her house, Courtney had dared to hope for this very thing,—now that she offered it to him so freely and so sweetly, he thought to himself that he would be a villain to accept her generous offer.

So he replied by renewed protestations of affection and fidelity.

The home that Bessie Miller lived in was a very small one, and her mother, her one living relative, was in an adjoining apartment, and had heard everything that passed. I am sorry to record it, but Bessie's mother was a very designing woman, who saw, at a glance, what Bessie had failed to see at all,—the great probability of Courtney's falling out of love with Bessie and into love with "*some of them Southern grandees*," as she mentally pronounced the whole race. Now, as she was poor and in an humble walk of life, she was fully aware that Courtney Dupont, as he was, was a most excellent match for her daughter, and Courtney Dupont, as he might become, from the advantages and associations he was about to enjoy, would be a most brilliant match for her daughter. In fine, so good a thing must not be left to chance; so she laid aside her sewing and entered the room where the young people were, feigning unmitigated surprise at the signs of emotion which Bessie had not yet entirely subdued.

"What's all this about? You and Courtney been quarreling?"

This elicited from Courtney a short account of what was the matter.

"And you're going to be gone several years, you say?"

"Yes, ma'am, two or three at least."

"And you ask my girl to wait *all that* time for you?"

"Bessie is willing, Mrs. Miller."

"Well, all I've got to say is, if Bessie thinks your puppy love will last out *that* time, and bring you back from your Southern palace to marry a poor milliner's girl, she's a bigger fool than I take her for, or got more faith in *men* than *men* deserves."

"Oh, mother!" but nevertheless Bessie looked a shade paler at the horrible possibility just offered for her consideration.

"Mrs. Miller——" began the doomed youth.

"Hold on a bit, and let me have my say." Mrs. Miller pretty generally did manage to have her say. "I say that *I know* men and I know *you*, and I say there aint but *one* satisfactory and honorable way to settle this *muss*. You and Bessie git married before you leave New York, and nobody need be any the wiser for it until you git through down yonder and are ready to claim her before the world."

This bold proposition struck Courtney dumb for a moment, and, looking toward Bessie to hear what she had to say, he saw that, although she was going to say nothing, there was the light of a great hope in her sweet, blue eyes,—a hope that this "way out of the muss" might prove acceptable to her handsome lover.

Bessie had been magnanimous, and offered to release

him a little while back; should he be outdone by a woman in magnanimity?

"I will do it, Bessie."

So the next day, quietly and secretly, it was done.

Reville him for a weak coward, ye who have never fallen into the grasp of a designing and determined woman; pity him, ye who have.

Thus it came about, that instead of entering upon his new life with a mind and heart at ease, and nothing to think of but the books he had so hungered for, my hero entered upon it burdened with a secret and a wife.

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## CHAPTER IV.

### A TALK ABOUT EDITH.

MILDRED left the Hall only half satisfied that the trouble about that unfortunate letter was at an end.

Miss Priscilla had promised her that she would not say anything to Edith on the subject, and she had confidence enough in that hard woman to believe that she would keep her word to her. But she also knew enough of her sex in general, and of Miss Hartley's nature in particular, to know that Edith would be subject to a series of little, stinging annoyances,—vague but malicious innuendoes, too intangible to be openly resented, but constant enough and plain enough to keep the

girl's high temper at boiling point. In short, she felt confident that Edith had made an enemy for life, and as she loved her impetuous, heedless young friend very dearly, this thought was sufficient to furrow Milly's calm brow with unusual signs of vexation.

Flushed from her walk and from the excitement of the scene just gotten through with, she entered her mother's chamber as soon as she got home, and the flush deepened when she saw that her mother had a visitor with her, no other than "the doctor."

She greeted him very quietly, and possessing herself of a large palmetto fan, she took her accustomed seat by her mother's chair, and resumed her wonted occupation of fanning the invalid.

"You look tired and worried, daughter," remarked Mrs. Vaughn, scanning the beloved face as she spoke.

"Worried, mother, I am; but not tired."

"And what has occurred to ruffle our placid Miss Mildred?" asked Doctor Tilman, from the other side of the invalid's chair.

Mildred hesitated a moment before answering.

"You know, Doctor Tilman, how very plain-spoken our Edith is?" she said, finally.

"I do, and I consider it one of the greatest charms in her genuine character."

"Yes, but, doctor, plain-speaking, when one is called upon to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, is a very different matter from throwing the whole truth at one's head when there is no call to speak at all."

"And who has our mad-cap been pelting with unpalatable truths now?"

"Poor Miss Hartley," responded Mildred.

Somewhat to her surprise she saw a smile that savored very much of amusement quivering around Doctor Tilman's mouth. That mouth which, in Milly's eyes, was the most beautiful mouth that had ever adorned the human face divine. "Firm, and so beautifully curved." "Come, Miss Mildred, let us hear all about it."

So Mildred told the tale of Edith's fatal mistake, extenuatingly for her friend, but compassionately for the victim.

To her increased surprise, when she had gotten through, Doctor Tilman indulged in a performance very rare indeed on his part. He actually laughed, laughed aloud, a rich, musical laugh, that gave every indication of genuine merriment.

Mildred looked her surprise.

"My dear, Miss Mildred, indeed you look at it entirely too seriously. Edith has made a heedless mistake, and I laughed to think of the indignant fury of that amiable lady at the Hall, who, to tell you the truth, is almost as distasteful to me as she is to Edith. But you know, as well as I do, that as soon as Edith has discovered her mistake she will make the amende honorable so prettily as almost to make one wish she would offend again."

"Oh! as for that," replied Mildred, "I have Miss Hartley's promise that she will say nothing on the subject to Edith; but——"

"But what, then? What source of anxiety have you still on hand?"

"I know;" here Milly paused again

"You know," pursued the doctor, taking her unfinished sentence and speaking her unspoken thoughts, "you know that Miss Hartley will have ample revenge for all that. You know that our fiery little Edith will be subject to a species of pin-and-needle torture that she will not be apt to endure very meekly. You know that Miss Hartley, having magnanimously promised not to speak to the girl, will have recourse to that purely feminine mode of provocation—talking at her."

"I know," replied Mildred, looking grave, and not exactly liking this broadside fired at her sex, "that Edith has made an enemy for life of a very implacable woman, and one who has both the power and the will to make her very uncomfortable in her home."

"Ah! that home," remarked Mrs. Vaughn, "how changed, how sadly, sadly changed, since dear Mrs. Huntingdon's death!"

"The ways of Providence are undeniably inscrutable," responded Dr. Tilman, musingly. "It seems but a poor arrangement, to our finite judgment, that a wise, judicious mother should have been taken away from an impulsive, fiery creature like Edith Huntingdon, whose nature needs the most skillful culture to bring out its good qualities and suppress the evil ones, and a visionary, like her father, left to guide the girl through her most susceptible years. Edith Huntingdon, in her mother's hands, could have been moulded into a most glorious woman. Edith Huntingdon, under the Hartley domination, *may* turn out a very wicked woman."

"Oh, Dr. Tilman!" exclaimed Mildred, deprecatingly; "not so bad as that."

"Quite. It depends entirely upon the amount and the nature of the temptations that befall her."

"If Edith loves a person, there is nothing on earth he cannot do with her. But through her affections only can she be reached," remarked Mrs. Vaughn. "And then," she continued, "she has such a fearful temper when fully aroused. I remember an incident that occurred before Mrs. Huntingdon's death, that caused the poor, dear lady much grief; for she said she knew her child was going to suffer more in her life than a dozen ordinary women would."

The invalid paused a moment from fatigue, and then went on.

"You know that octagonal room on the roof of the Hall, which was originally an observatory?"

Her hearers both nodded assent.

"Well, ever since the incident I have alluded to occurred, that room has been considered Edith's exclusive property. Frank calls it her 'Growlery.'

"She was about ten years old when Miss Hartley first came to live at the Hall, and Mrs. Huntingdon had already begun to fail in health. Edith seemed to take a dislike to Miss Hartley from the very beginning. I don't know whether it was because poor Miss Hartley was so very homely, or whether, not liking children at all, she did not try to win Edith's affections. Anyhow, they seemed to be at daggers drawn from the very moment she came there to live. But when Edith found out how it distressed her mother to hear her speak harshly about Miss Hartley, she tried to hide her hatred as much as possible, though she never made any pretenses of liking her, in the least.

"Miss Hartley had been there about two months when Mrs. Huntingdon was taken so much worse that she had to keep her bed. Then things began to change sadly. The servants missed their gentle lady, and grew sulky and inefficient, not caring to try to please such a hard task-mistress as Miss Hartley. Edith fumed and fretted to see another put in her mother's place, in a manner; so everything was at sixes and sevens. The only thing in the world that Edith seemed to love very dearly, after her mother, was a miserable little black kitten, which was Miss Hartley's special detestation and horror. In the long hours of the day, when the child was shut out of her mother's room (so she could get plenty of sleep), she would wander around with that wretched little kitten in her arms, stroking its black fur, and calling it all sorts of pet names, to Miss Hartley's infinite disgust, and it did seem as if Edith took especial delight in showering her warmest caresses on it when that lady was near by.

"The next trouble that came upon Edith was having to give up her own little room, opening into her mother's, to Miss Hartley, so that she could be near Mrs. Huntingdon at night. But as it was for her mother's good, the child submitted without a murmur, and moved herself and 'Coaly,' as she called her little black kitten, into another bedroom. But Coaly, like all the rest of her kind, had a greater attachment for places than persons, and although Edith established her at the foot of her bed, as usual, she did not like the change of locations; so, unawares to her little mistress, she stole back to her old place, in Edith's former bedroom.

"In the middle of the night, as Miss Hartley told it the next day, that lady was waked from a sound sleep 'by the nasty little wretch putting its cold nose right on her cheek, and purring right into her face.'

"Frightened and enraged, she sprang from her bed, seized poor Coaly by the neck, opened the window, and dashed it with all her force against the brick pavement. Poor Coaly uttered only one or two faint moans, then died out there in the cold and dark, while her little mistress slept on, unconscious of the cruel fate of her pet, and the murderess returned to bed feeling a little more uncomfortable than there was any necessity to feel about a 'stupid kitten.'

"When Edith opened her eyes the next morning, her first glance was at the foot of her bed for Coaly, but no Coaly was there. Edith laughed softly to herself as she guessed that Coaly had gone back to her old home. 'I know she gave old Miss Hartley a scare,' she said to herself, as she dressed quickly to go in search of the truant.

"Just as she was tying the strings to her little silk apron, preparatory to leaving her room, the door was burst open by her own especial little maid, whose face was blank with horror and amazement. In her hands she held all that was left of poor Coaly.

"Look yer, Missy, look yer; here's poor Coaly stiff, stark, an' dead!"

"Edith stood transfixed with horror. Her face grew whiter and whiter for a few minutes, as she gazed at the petrified body of her pet, the pet she had loved with a human love.

"Who did it? How did she die? Where did you

find her?" she finally burst forth, with her face changing from the deadly hue that had so alarmed poor Darkis, to the fiery crimson of intense passion.

"'I foun' 'em under yo' winder—stiff, an' stark, an' dead,' reiterated Darkis.

"By intuition Edith saw it all. How poor Coaly had crept up to the head of the bed for her usual caresses, and how the cruel woman had dashed her brains out to get rid of her.

"Seizing her dead kitten from the girl's hand, she sat down in a chair and moaned over it in an agony of grief and rage,—rage and hatred of Miss Hartley finally predominating over all other feelings. 'I hate her, oh, *how* I hate her! I hope God won't let her go to heaven, for Coaly's gone there, and I want to go there, and I couldn't be happy in heaven if Miss Hartley came there too. She's a murderer—a murderer—and murderers *oughtn't* to go to heaven. She's murdered my poor Coaly, and I hate her, I hate her, I hate her *so*.'

"'Let's bury 'em, Missy,' suggested Darkis.

"Now, for the benefit of those who are not very well acquainted with the race from which Darkis sprung, I would remark that the pomp and parade of a funeral are to them a source of delight unspeakable, fully compensating for the loss of husband, wife, parent, or child. So when Darkis proposed to 'bury 'em,' she was not proposing to immolate Miss Hartley alive as a punishment for her crime, but merely suggesting the idea of doing full honor to the remains of poor Coaly.

"'Of course I'll bury my poor darling,' sobbed Edith.

"The preparations for Coaly's obsequies were not very long in making. Frank performed the office of grave-digger with alacrity and secret delight. A narrow pasteboard box, with a pall of black cloth covering it, was borne between two sable urchins, whose white ivories gleamed out every now and then despite their earnest efforts to look solemn, while Edith walked in advance, holding a hymn-book in her hand, 'lining' out an appropriate hymn, which was sung in chorus by a score of mourners imported from the quarters. Under the shade of a beautiful myrtle-tree, in one corner of the garden, Coaly was laid to rest.

"Then, after the excitement of the funeral was over, Edith's mind reverted to the author of her bereavement. Having dismissed the mourners, she returned to the house, where she found the family assembled at breakfast.

"The sight of Miss Hartley, sitting there placidly eating her breakfast, utterly indifferent to the fate of poor Coaly, seemed to rouse the child's passion into a perfect frenzy.

"'You murderer!' she exclaimed, 'you killed my poor, precious Coaly for nothing, and there you sit eating your breakfast as if you had never done a wicked thing in all your life. I hate you—oh, *how* I do hate you! and I wish, oh, how I do wish, I had never set eyes on you!'

"Mr. Huntingdon looked at the girl in amazement, perfectly powerless to stop her in her furious tirade against Miss Hartley.

"That lady first paled and then crimsoned, and de-

sired to know if 'she was to be insulted to her face by that chit, and not a word of reproof to be spoken.'

"Mr. Groves looked at the excited child sadly, and uttered a gentle remonstrance, which fell unheeded on her ears.

"Never accustomed to exert any authority over his children, Mr. Huntingdon was completely at a loss what to do. He had, however, a vague idea that when parents got at their wits' ends, and children proved altogether unconquerable, they were sometimes locked up; so turning to the waiter, he ordered him to carry 'Miss Edith to her own room, and carry her breakfast there too; to lock the door and bring him the key.'

"Struggling and screaming in John's strong arms, Edith was carried to her own room, where she was soon followed by a most sumptuous breakfast, starvation not entering into Mr. Huntingdon's plan of punishment.

"As the key turned in the door, Edith ceased her outcries and fell into a sullen brooding fit, in which she resolved to do a great many terrible things. She would drown herself in the lake; she would run away from home and teach for her living; she would die before she would stay in the same house with that wretch. So she resolved and re-resolved for an hour or two, when she heard the lock turn softly, and faithful Darkis put her head into the room.

"'Missy,' she called out, in a half-frightened, half-reassuring voice.

"'Well, Darkis, what is it?' answered Edith from the darkened room.

"'Kin I come in, Missy?'

"'Yes, if you've anything to say.'

"So Darkis advanced into the room where her beloved little mistress was imprisoned.

"'How did you get in, Darkis?'

"'Master in de field, Miss 'Cilla wid missus.'

"'Well, but how did you open the door?'

"'Key to de 'servatory.'

"Edith's face lighted up like a flash. She had renounced the idea of drowning herself in the lake, and she also began to think she was not yet fully prepared to undertake the education of youth. But there was one thing she *could* do, she could frighten everybody to death, and she'd *do* it *too*. But she must have no confidant in her scheme, not one. It was easy work to persuade Darkis to leave the key of the observatory with her, promising that no one should ever know how she came by it.

"When the dinner hour approached, Mr. Huntingdon knocked at his daughter's door and asked her if she was ready to apologize to Miss Hartley for the insults offered her in the morning. A sullen negative was all the reply vouchsafed him.

\* "He turned away with a sigh, wondering what parents *did* do who had such terribly stubborn children as his Edith. So he compromised matters between his heart and his conscience, by sending in another waiter, with provisions enough to have given a comfortable meal to a small family. All of which Edith stowed away in a little basket wherein she had already packed the breakfast sent her in the morning.

"At dark Mr. Huntingdon repeated the formula and Edith repeated the negative.

"So he left her for the night. After what seemed to Edith hours of weary waiting, stillness settled upon the Hall, and she felt confident that the whole household slept. Stealing softly from her room, she took her garden-hat from the rack in the hall, unlocked the large front door noiselessly, sped with lightning speed down to the little bridge which spanned a clear stream of water running through the lawn, dropped her hat over the bridge, sped back to the house, seized the basket already prepared, mounted the steps leading to the observatory, locked the door at the head of the steps, and sat down on a chair in the little room panting from excitement and exhaustion.

"Now as the observatory was a room frequently resorted to by gentlemen visitors as a delightful smoking retreat in warm weather, it had been fitted up very comfortably, containing easy-chairs, a lounge, etc., so that an imprisonment within its precincts, supplied with a large shawl to wrap up in, and a basket of provisions sufficient for a week, required no great amount of heroism or endurance, and implied no vast amount of hardship. But it was so unlikely a place for them to look for her in, that Edith curled herself up on the lounge fully satisfied that she would succeed in 'scaring Miss Hartley and father to death.' Soothed by this promise of sweet revenge, she fell very soon into a sound slumber, and did not wake from it until the sun was high in the heavens.

"The observatory was raised so very far above the ground floor of the Hall that no sound from the lower regions could possibly penetrate to Edith's ears. So we will leave her up there, eating a breakfast from her basket, while we travel downward again.

"She had locked her room after her when leaving it the previous night, and had opened one of the windows, thereby giving the impression that her egress had been made in that way. Deliberately and skillfully had the passionate child planned her mode of revenge, and its success was all that she could have desired.

"At the usual breakfast hour Mr. Huntingdon stood again outside of Edith's door, repeating for the third time the same formula; but this time the tones of authority had melted into persuasive accents, indicative of growing weakness on the poor old gentleman's side. And this time it was more an exhortation than a command.

"'Edith, *won't* you consent to ask Miss Hartley's pardon for your rudeness of yesterday?'

"Instead of the sullen negative, which the despairing father fully expected, dead silence reigned within.

"In anxious alarm Mr. Huntingdon hastily drew the key from his pocket and unbarred his little girl's prison, but no signs of the truant were visible within. Her bed had not been slept in, and nothing was missing from its accustomed place. What could it mean? In an agony of frightened remorse Mr. Huntingdon rushed from the child's room back to the breakfast-room, where Miss Hartley was sitting behind the urn, ready to receive the offender's expected apologies, with her most gorgonic aspect.

"'My child is gone!' wildly exclaimed the excited parent, who was perfectly unrecognizable in his fury. 'Gone! driven to God knows what, by my harsh treatment of her; and you, woman, are the cause of it all.'



"White as the wall, and trembling in every limb, Miss Hartley rose from the table, merely echoing the word 'Gone!'

"'Yes, gone, and God only knows where!'

"Then there was hurrying to and fro, and messengers went, riding wildly, in every probable and improbable direction. But no one thought of the observatory,—save Darkis, who, trembling for fear of her own fate, if her complicity in the matter of the key should be found out, said never a word.

"When one of the messengers returned from the bridge, bearing the little garden-hat all soiled and wet, Mr. Huntingdon's despair knew no bounds. He cursed himself for having tried to force such a child into submission. He cursed Miss Hartley as the cause of all his trouble. He beat his breast and gnashed his teeth at the agony of having to tell his almost dying wife that between them all they had murdered her child. He spent the whole miserable day pacing the floor of his library, and night closed in on him still utterly unable to disclose the fearful tidings to his wife.

"On her knees, praying God to forgive her unpremeditated crime, Miss Hartley spent the day.

"Once more stillness and darkness reigned over the Hall and its troubled inmates.

"As soon as Darkis thought she could do so without detection, she stole up to the 'roof room,' as she was wont to call it, with the forlorn hope that maybe 'Missy wasn't drowned after all.' A hope that she was afraid to give expression to during the day, for fear that it might lead to a cross-examination with herself in the prisoner's box.

"Lying down on the floor, with her ear close to the bottom of the door, she held her breath and listened intently. Her heart gave a great bound as she heard sounds of regular breathing from within.

"'Missy,' she called out, softly.

"No answer.

"'Missy,' and this time she gave the handle of the door a gentle rattle.

"Still she failed to rouse the sleeping girl.

"'Good Lord! do tell me what I muss do?' ejaculated nonplused Darkis.

"She stopped and thought awhile, but no new ideas coming into her usually empty pate, she simply persevered in the old ones.

"By a series of grindings at the door-knob and an unceasing repetition of 'Missy' through the keyhole, she finally succeeded in breaking Edith's slumber.

"'Who's that? and what do you want?' finally rewarded Darkis's efforts.

"'Is that you, Missy?' exclaimed Darkis, not exactly knowing how to begin her errand of peace-making.

"'Of course it is, you ninny! who else could it be?'

"'Missy, Master's done scared to def.'

"'I'm glad of it.'

"'Miss 'Cilla scared to def too.'

"'I'm gladder still.'

"'Miss 'Cilla been prayin' all day.'

"'Old hypocrite.'

"'Master been in yo' room cryin'—thinks you done drowned.'

"No answer.

"Master say he'll have to tell Miss' to-morrow that's you drowned, an' he say it gwine kill 'er."

"Go away!" savagely.

"With the implicit obedience which characterized her individually, and her race collectively, Darkis laid herself placidly down by the door and soon fell into a profound slumber, feeling fully conscious that everything would come right somehow or the other, and having not one source of anxiety left, now that 'Missy warn't drowned.'

"When Edith thought Darkis had had ample time to return to her own sleeping apartment, she quietly opened the door of the observatory, stole down-stairs, slipped into her own room, and, undressing, went to bed, fully avenged on her father and Miss Hartley.

"As her conscience troubled her but little, she slept her usual sound sleep, from which she was aroused the next morning by a shower of warm kisses being pressed on her lips. Opening her eyes, she saw her father bending over her, the picture of bewilderment and joy.

"My child! my child! why did you play me such a trick?"

"Why did you punish me so harshly for that cruel woman's sake, who killed my poor, dear Coaly?"

"But, my child, I only wanted you to treat her with a little more respect."

"Father, you can't make me like Miss Hartley, and there's no use trying. I only came back because I heard that you were going to tell mother I was dead, and I knew that would break her heart, for *she* loves me;" and the child laid a strong emphasis on the pronoun *she*.

"My child, do I not love you?"

"No, father; for you were harsh and scolded me. Mother is *never* harsh, and *never* scolds me, and I would do anything on earth for my *darling* mother."

"In these few words Edith unconsciously gave her father full instructions for her own guidance in the future.

"Nothing was said about Edith's escapade in Mrs. Huntingdon's presence, for some time, but Frank, viewing it in the light of the best joke of the season, finally told it, dwelling with amusement on the fact that Edith had victualled her castle for a seven days' siege.

"He also it was who rechristened the observatory 'Edith's Growlery.'

"Edith never begged Miss Hartley's pardon, and she never forgave her Coaly's murder; but, at the earnest solicitation of the mother whom she idolized, she promised to treat the homeless woman with an outward show of respect that preserved a mockery of peace between them."

This was the story, told in fewer words and with many pauses for breath, which Mrs. Vaughn related to Dr. Tilman and Mildred as they sat on either side of her arm-chair.

Both of her hearers had listened, deeply interested, and both sat silent for a few minutes after she had ceased speaking. Both had but one comment,—

"Poor Edith!"

Strange comment, when it is recollected that the object of this pitying exclamation was young, beautiful, rich, and almost absolutely free from the cares and annoyances that are the daily portion of poor humanity.

## CHAPTER V.

## THE HUNTINGDONS AT HOME.

THE day on which the "Hall-folks" were expected to reach home dawned at last, although Darkis had repeatedly expressed her conviction that it "warn't never comin'."

And very beautiful was that day, in the latter part of October, when each forest-tree that surrounded the stately old Hall was dressed in its own gorgeous autumn robe. The sturdy live-oak, true to its colors, stood side by side with the crimson-robed maple; while the holly and the red-berried haw held up their heads proudly, conscious of the important part they were destined to play in the approaching Christmas festivities.

The perfume of a thousand flowers was wafted across the lawn from the garden that bordered it on the left, where Milly had been busy since early morning ravishing it of sweets to adorn the house for her coming friend.

Overhead, the intense blue of the sky was relieved by soft, white clouds, that chased each other swiftly athwart the heavens, casting fleeting shadows on the beautiful earth beneath.

Every one was on tiptoe with expectation, from Miss Hartley, who *did* sometimes manage to look almost amiable, down to Darkis, now grown to be

almost a woman, and who was in a state of the most intense excitement,—which she relieved every now and then by giving a spasmodic hug to a beautiful greyhound that had succeeded to Coaly's vacant place in Edith's affections.

Darkis had made a very elaborate toilet that morning of new linsey and fresh checked apron, and sat on the lower step of the kitchen-door making her shoes "shine" with a piece of bacon fat, while she discoursed with Edith's canine pet of their mutual friend's perfections.

"Missy's comin', Mingo. 'int you glad?"

Mingo gave an acquiescent wag of his tail, casting longing eyes, at the same time, at the bacon rind, which was doing duty for the blacking-brush.

"An' I 'spec she's beautifuller than ever, Mingo."

"Yes," wagged Mingo.

"An' she's goin' to gin ole Miss Hartley a soddin' down, Mingo."

Mingo's eyes were clearly expressive of pleasurable expectation, as the polishing operation just then came to an end.

"She beats you, an' starves you, *don'* she, Mingo?" resuming the polishing on the other brogan.

Mingo dropped on his haunches, despondently.

"But Missy's comin' this blessed day, Mingo, an' thar's no more starvation for you, ole dog, an' no more hard work for me. Hurra for Missy!" and flourishing the bacon rind loftily over her head, Darkis rose from her stooping posture shining from head to foot.

Mingo expressed his participation in Darkis's bright anticipations by quickly gobbling up the long-awaited-

for morsel and answering her hurras with several satisfied wags of his tail. After which these two faithful adherents of Edith's waited, with a mockery of patience, for the coming of their sovereign.

Mr. Groves had laid aside his studious habits for the nonce, and was really looking forward with a feeling of pleasurable excitement to the return of his gentle pupil Frank and fiery little Edith, who seemed to fill the whole house with noise and life as soon as she put foot in it.

He had arrayed himself in his blackest broadcloth and his stiffest linen for the momentous occasion, and strode up and down the long veranda in front of the house, looking the very picture of mental resignation and personal discomfort.

Miss Hartley moved restlessly about, rustling in her best black silk,—her long, skinny neck rigidly upright in the starchiest of linen collars. Her thin, sandy hair screwed into an uncompromising knot behind, that set at utter defiance the suggestions of grace or the innovations of fashion; while her hands, that seemed utterly out of place without her knitting-needles and ball of worsted, were clasped nervously around a fresh cambric handkerchief.

Dr. Tilman, who was almost as much at home at the Hall as he was in his own house, had ridden over to join the little crowd of expectants, and was making himself useful in an entirely unprofessional way, by helping Mildred in her decoration of the large vases on the parlor mantel.

He and Mildred were alone in the parlor, and as she sat on a low ottoman on the rug, with the large vase

standing on the hearth by her side, he disentangled the branches of evergreen from the huge basket of flowers that stood on a table near by and handed them to her. Outwardly, Mildred was as calm and placid as she always was,—looking her own sweet self in her soft, gray *barège*, with its little lace ruffle around her white throat. Her eyes were cast down on the vase before her, and she had very few words to offer in exchange for the easy flow of talk on the doctor's part.

He, on his side, was in unusually high spirits. His clear, gray eyes shone with a brightness that seemed to Mildred almost to betoken some coming joy. He talked on all sorts of subjects in a rambling, light, entertaining style, which, while it interested and amused Mildred, caused her to wonder what had come over the usually reticent physician to make him almost gay.

"This is the last piece of cedar in the basket," he said, as he handed her a long spray; "and, judging from the looks of your vase, it is about the last piece needed to render your artistic arrangement perfect."

Milly smiled a placid smile as she reached out her hand for the cedar.

"You think my flowers look pretty, then?"

"Beautiful; worthy of the charming little lady whom we are all here to do honor to."

"You admire Edith very much, don't you, Dr. Tilman?"

The words were spoken with studied carelessness, but Mildred's heart stood still for the answer.

"Admire her?" repeated Dr. Tilman, with the airiest

of laughs; "oh, yes! we all admire the little Lady Edith, and I don't know yet but what I may make her my little wife, if she can be prevailed upon to consort with such a graybeard as myself."

"Edith is very beautiful," replied Mildred, abstractedly; then she rose and busied herself with clearing away the litter of discarded roses, broken branches of cedar, crushed berries, etc.

The last touch had been given to the last vase in the house, even to the filling of the violet cups on Edith's toilet stand, long before the welcome sound of the carriage, rolling over the bridge and across the lawn, greeted their ears.

In utter defiance of all decorum, Darkis and Mingo bounded around the corner of the house with leaps of equal agility, and got the first greetings from their adored "Missy."

With a little, chopped off, meaningless kiss bestowed upon Miss Hartley's uninviting lips, Edith turned and clasped Milly in her arms, showering kisses on her lips, her cheeks, and her eyes, all of which Mildred returned with fervor, and then disentangling the girl's arms from her neck, she asked, with a smile, if she did not see that somebody else was waiting to welcome her.

"Certainly I do," cried Edith, turning, with a bright look toward the spot where Dr. Tilman stood. "My dear Dr. Tilman," and putting both hands into his, she stood on tiptoe and fearlessly offered her lips for a kiss.

Without a moment's hesitation, accepting the pure caress in the spirit in which it was offered, Dr. Tilman

stooped and pressed a brotherly kiss on the rosy lips so close to his.

Then Mr. Courtney Dupont was introduced to everybody, and duly stared at by Darkis and the rest of the household cabinet, who returned to their various offices, flatly proclaiming that Missy had brought home a beau, and they were going to be married this Christmas.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE DESCENDANT OF THE DUPONTS.

AS to the manner born seemed Courtney Dupont. While deeply grateful to his benefactor for the unparalleled generosity that had offered him this longed-for opportunity "to make something of himself," he was preserved from an overwhelming sense of obligation by the consciousness that he would some day or other be in a situation to repay Mr. Huntingdon for moneys advanced, though he was fully aware that the liquidation of such a debt as he owed that venerable gentleman would only be partially accomplished by refunding gold expended.

From the moment of his domestication in this refined Southern home the milliner's boy seemed to be dignified into a worthy descendant of the Duponts. His life there was more congenial with his inborn tastes and desires than the hateful existence he had

supported so sullenly within the precincts of his mother's shop.

In speaking of Courtney's ignorance, of course it is not to be presumed that a boy of his intellect and ambition had arrived at his twentieth year without having acquired some sort of an education. Nevertheless, in comparison with the amount of learning which he actually craved to possess himself of, he was most lamentably ignorant.

It was with a feeling of the keenest delight that he gazed upon the well-filled shelves of Mr. Huntingdon's library, and he looked forward joyously to the many hours of blessed leisure before him which he would spend in that room, striving earnestly to compensate himself for the years wasted so ignobly.

Very little he said of all these aspirations. But observant Mr. Groves noticed and approved the ardor with which the boy buckled to his task of self-improvement, and secretly delighted in the fact that at last he had some one to deal with who possessed ambition and zeal as well as intellect.

Poor Frank Huntingdon, intelligent though he undoubtedly was, had done very little to repay his master's indefatigable exertions in his behalf. A cripple from childhood, he had been left entirely to his own devices, said devices consisting, as a usual thing, of the most erratic modes of procedure.

He read a great deal, to be sure; but then he read just when and where and what he chose. If he chose to have his large chair wheeled out on the lawn, under the shade of a venerable oak, and chose to take one of Mayne Reid's boy-entrancing tales with him, instead

of Macaulay or Prescott, who should say him nay? Not the gentle master, who pitied the handsome-faced cripple from the bottom of his tender heart, and was dearly beloved by the afflicted boy in return.

Frank had one love—one passion, I might almost say—to which he was constant through life, and which whiled away for him many an otherwise intolerable hour,—and that was for music. His favorite instrument was the flute. From a passing professor he had learned the elements necessary for a beginner when he was a boy of about fourteen, and his own ear for music had done the rest.

In his angriest moods (and being a Huntingdon, he had his temper) he would fly for solace to his flute, and rarely did it fail of effect.

But I am maundering about Frank Huntingdon, when the caption of this chapter promised you something about the descendant of the Duponts.

As was to have been expected, from the opening of the friendship between the two boys, the tie between them seemed to strengthen every day. Courtney spent two-thirds of his day and half of his night with the beloved books for which he had hungered so long. But when not with Mr. Groves, or in the library, he gave himself up cheerfully and untiringly to the task of entertaining Frank; and before he had been there many months it was a noted fact that the fits of gloom that were almost inseparable from the hardships of Frank's lot, visited him less often, and were of much shorter duration.

Himself endowed with glowing health and bounding ambition, Courtney sympathized deeply with the boy's

hard lot. Young, handsome, and rich, and yet what had he to look forward to but dragging out a lengthened existence of misery, chained to a cripple's chair,—his greatest liberty to take a few steps at a time upon crutches?

He always declared that if he had been born so he wouldn't have minded it, but he had known what it was to leap and bound and jump, as other boys did, so it was doubly hard on him.

Many and earnest were the hopes that Courtney used to hold forth to his friend in his most despondent moods.

"You'll outgrow it, Frank. You are so young yet. I am certain before ten years you can throw away those hateful crutches and manage with a cane. I knew a boy——"

Then Frank would reply, peevishly, "Oh, I know 'your boy;' everybody has a boy to tell me about. But your boy didn't have his leg splintered into a thousand pieces by a vicious colt, and so your boy got well."

Courtney never lost his patience when the boy's misery found vent in these fretful outbreaks, for he knew himself well enough to be fully aware that in Frank's place he would have been just ten times as peevish and unreasonable as Frank was.

\* \* \* \* \*

Everybody about the Hall had a good word for Courtney Dupont.

"*Even* Dame Hartley likes him," Edith told Mildred, opening her brown eyes to their fullest extent, as if wonders could no further go.

Very few, indeed, were the favored mortals who won their way to that fabled spot, Miss Priscilla's heart.

But I hardly know how she would have gone about disliking Courtney. In the first place, owing to early training, he had learned how to take pretty good care of himself, and gave her literally no trouble at all about the house,—failing entirely to put on the airs which she had predicted he would put on, in consequence of having his head turned by his unprecedented good luck. And then, if in any incomprehensible way he managed to incur her displeasure, he would fall gracefully on one knee, look roguishly up into the withered face above him, pour out his contrition with due solemnity, and declare his intention of kneeling until his gracious lady had smiled upon him again.

Whereupon, Miss Priscilla would call him a ridiculous boy, and bestow upon him one of her best substitutes for a smile.

Whereupon, again, the culprit would rise from his knees, give his handsome head a toss, and turn away with a musical laugh and a merry whistle.

Mr. Huntingdon liked the boy, because he was so bright in intellect, so ready to sit and listen deferentially to the discourse of those older and wiser than himself, so eager and so determined to make a mark in the world.

Moreover, Courtney treated his benefactor with a respectful consideration that was in such strong contrast to the hoydenish affection of his misgoverned Edith, and the peevish indifference of his son, that it won upon the dreamy man's affections to an astonishing extent.

Mr. Groves declared, with satisfaction, that Courtney was a student of whom any master would be proud.

Edith's feelings and manners toward him were a curious mixture.

She had a little patronizing way relative to him, which said to outsiders, that *she* had recognized him as worthy to be taken by the hand, therefore he was stamped and labeled "A 1."

But that little air of patronage was only for outsiders, who seemed at first to look askance at the boy who had been picked up out of a milliner's shop.

For Courtney Dupont, scorning to avail himself of the prestige of the Dupont name, had represented himself as having been relieved from a life of intolerable drudgery, by the most unexampled kindness on Mr. Huntingdon's part.

Toward the young man himself, in the family circle, Edith was everything that was sweet and winning. This friendship was a source of great pleasure to her. She found in him the companion that Frank would have been had he not met with that sad accident.

He was always at hand to ride with her, and although at first the city-raised boy would often be distanced by her fearless horsemanship, it was not long before his natural daring and the necessary practice made him first her competitor, then her equal, and finally her superior in that noble exercise,—a fact which no one was more pleased to acknowledge than herself.

Perfectly happy was the emancipated son of Madame Dupont; and although there was a cloud upon his

horizon, he refused steadily to turn his eye toward that threatening point.

It grieved him that he should have a secret from such kind friends; but the necessity for concealment was imperative, and he was wronging them in no way by that concealment.

He was very happy in his new home, but there was no treason to Bessie in his happiness.

Of course he loved Bessie just as well as he ever had done, and he knew this separation was a great trial to the poor girl; but it would all come right in the end. When he went back to her, ready to commence his career at the bar, she would acknowledge that it had all been for the best, for of course he could not have attended to his studies if she had had the declared rights of a wife to interfere with him. So there was no use moping over the thing; he *would* be happy, he mentally exclaimed, as if defying some unseen opposer to that most natural desire on his part,—he would be happy for the few years of his life that were to be spent in this Southern paradise.

Then he would fall to dreaming, and find himself wishing that Bessie had brown eyes instead of blue.



## CHAPTER VII.

## ABOUT NOTHING IN PARTICULAR.

EDITH Huntingdon was about fifteen years old when Courtney Dupont was introduced into the family circle at the Hall.

In appearance, in character, and in manners, she was far in advance of her years. For the first, of course, she was not responsible. It was hardly her fault that at fifteen she towered several inches above Milly's five feet three and a half, already giving promise of commanding height and stately carriage. Though she was at that most trying of all ages to a young girl, familiarly designated the "gosling stage," she seemed to have had an exemption from the universal decree of scragginess and angularity, that make life so hideous from the ages of twelve to sixteen, and though not nearly so beautiful as it was evident she was destined to become, she was never anything less than a remarkably pretty girl.

Lustrous brown eyes, full of fire and of soul; clear, dark complexion; massive suit of soft, dark hair; a tiny mouth, rosy red, and exquisitely curved; charming feet and hands; a springy walk, and a proud look of independence in her brown eyes that was almost defiance, constituted a portion of her claims to general admiration.

I am a miserable hand at portrait painting, and at

landscape painting, too, for the matter of that, and I would be so very much obliged to you all if you would be so kind as to draw your own fancy pictures of my heroes and heroines, and let me get on with what they did and what they left undone and what happened to them all in consequence.

As Edith was only fifteen, it is to be presumed that she had very much yet to learn.

In vain had her father tried to prevail upon her to go to a "finishing school." In vain did he represent to her that a girl with her expectations ought to be prepared to make a mark in the fashionable world whenever she choose to appear in it.

"Father," Edith would reply, and she generally seated herself on his knee, with her arms around his neck before she began her reply, "father, I *don't* want to go to school. Mr. Groves can teach me all on earth that there is any necessity for me to learn. Milly Vaughn is a splendid music-teacher, and she says I will soon excel my teacher in execution. I am happy here with you and the boys (boys! *i.e.* Courtney and Frank!). I'll get rid of all the boisterous ways you complain of, naturally, somehow or other, and will turn out a proper young lady in due course of events. I *don't* want to go away to a hateful boarding-school, father; and so help me goodness, if you do send me to one, I'll behave so outrageously that they'll have to write and request you to come for Miss Huntingdon, whose insubordination and general misconduct are such as to render it necessary, etc."

"Edith; Edith," her gray-haired father would sigh, helplessly; but he would stroke the glossy hair of his

child finally, and gaze into her bright, animated face, with praise and love beaming in his own.

"Besides, father," the wild girl would continue, "I really think it would be dangerous for me to leave home."

"Dangerous?"

"Yes, father, absolutely dangerous."

"What do you mean, Edith? To whom does the danger point?"

"At my precious father."

"At me! You bewilder me more at every word."

"At you."

"From what source?"

"From Miss Hartley."

"Explain yourself, Edith."

"Well, father; I do verily believe, if the restraining influence of your daughter's audacity and fierce temper were removed from this house, Miss Hartley would not only be complete mistress of your purse and house, as she is at present, but would be the legal possessor of your name before I had been gone a month."

"Edith, this is insufferable."

"No, father, it is not I that am insufferable, it is that usurper."

"What new cause of complaint?"

"No *new* cause, father; the old complaint. Miss Hartley's presence is all I have to complain of."

"Would you have me turn a penniless and homeless woman out into the streets, because you do not like her, my daughter,—one whom your mother commended to my kindness?"

This was the argument with which Mr. Huntingdon always silenced his daughter's complaints.

"No, father," Edith would reply, sadly; "but she presumes very much on her position, and seems quite to have forgotten that she is here almost as an object of charity."

"Would my daughter have me remind her of that fact?"

"No, sir," said Edith, quickly, her face crimsoning with shame.

"What has she said or done to-day, my child, to stir up your bitter feelings afresh?"

"Nothing, father, that you will think of a great deal of importance, but it was a good deal to me. You know Mingo is very dainty in his appetite."

"Naturally," asked her father, with a smile, "or by education?"

"By education, I suppose; and when I came home I found Mingo looking very thin, and Darkis tells me that he hasn't had a drop of cream since I went away. Think of that, father."

"Poor Mingo!" replied Mr. Huntingdon, with mock solemnity.

"So of course I gave orders for my dog to have his usual allowance of cream every day, and it seems Miss Hartley has never noticed it until this morning; but as poor Darkis was coming up the steps to where Mingo was waiting for her, Miss Hartley happened to step out on the back gallery, and she asked Darkis what it was for; when Darkis told her, what do you think she did?"

"Can't imagine," said her father, feigning the utmost interest.

"She threw the cream in Darkis's face, pulled her

ears for her, and then beat my precious Mingo until his howls brought me to the rescue."

"And what did my valiant Edith?"

"I told Miss Hartley that I hated her, and I sent back to the dairy for some more cream and set it down for Mingo right before her face."

"What was Miss Hartley's next proceeding?"

"She got fiery red in the face, and told me she had been informed of that fact through the post very recently (though what on earth she meant by that is more than I can imagine), and wound up by saying that she hoped you would marry a Tartar some of these days, who would take the starch out of me, and I told *her* that I expected *she* did hope you would marry a Tartar, and if she could have had *her* way you would have married one long ago."

"Edith, Edith, what did the poor woman say to that?"

"Why, father, strange to say, she used the very words you used a few moments ago; she said, 'This is insufferable,' and then she went away."

"Quite an exchange of civilities!" sighed Mr. Huntingdon, who knew himself to be utterly powerless to mend matters. "What do you think Mildred would say to you, if you were to tell her what you have just told me, Edith?"

"Oh, I can tell you, father, exactly what she would say, word for word. She would say, 'Edith, dear, dear Edith, won't you ever succeed in overcoming your hatred for that unfortunate woman? Won't you ever learn to feel for her the pity that her misfortunes demand? She is so much older than yourself, Edith, so much older, and so friendless,' etc."

"And then——"

"And then I would get ashamed of myself, and make darling Milly a great many promises, meaning all the time to keep them forever."

"And how long would they be kept?"

"Until the next time Miss Hartley enraged me,"

"My child,"—and Mr. Huntingdon would take her face in both his hands and turn it toward his own, so that he could look full into her brown eyes, those lovely eyes that brought back her dead mother so vividly,—*"my child, promise me, for your dear mother's sake, to try and bear with this unfortunate woman. Remember how she pitied her, and do you emulate that pity. If we send her from this home, she will find it almost impossible to get another. Bear with her for the sake of the saint who brought her here."*

"Father, father, I will, indeed, indeed I will!" and, completely subdued by the mention of the mother whom she had so passionately loved, the girl would leave her father's presence, fully determined to be very patient with Miss Hartley, and try not to hate her so intensely.

Sometimes, after these conferences with her father, or after Milly had softened her heart by dwelling on Miss Hartley's forlorn life, Edith would generously make some overture toward reconciliation.

But the bitter, sour woman, who had never forgiven her that fatal letter, could not bring herself to meet these advances half-way, and as Edith had no intention whatever of going *more* than half-way, very little was ever accomplished by her overtures.

Although Miss Hartley's presence at the Hall was

a source of great discomfort to Edith, and the sparring with her caused her many a troubled hour, she was too young and too joyous to allow it to weigh on her at all times.

She was, as she had herself said, "very happy in her home; and," still quoting her own words, "what an ingrate she would be if she were not—so beautiful a home, not a luxury or a comfort wanting,—just as many fine clothes as she wanted,—the dearest love of a pony in all the State, and such hosts of dear, good friends: Dr. Tilman, precious Milly, Courtney, Frank, Mr. Groves, Darkis, Mingo!" Ah, yes, she was perfectly happy, with but one cloud in her sky, and that cloud was—Miss Hartley.

Whenever the sky of her happiness threatened to become entirely obscured by this cloud, she would either have the horses saddled and tell Courtney, with a little, imperious tone of command, that she "wished him to ride with her," or else, starting afoot with her inseparable attendants, Darkis and Mingo, she would take a short cut through the fields toward Mrs. Vaughn's cottage, where she would soon lose sight of her shadowy troubles in Mildred's pleasant companionship, or in a wild romp with the two children who constituted the juvenile members of this little family,—both of whom (Georgie, with whom we already have a slight acquaintance, and his twin-sister Nellie) looked upon Edith as the impersonation of all that was beautiful, lovable, and "nice." "She didn't sit all day long looking glum, like sister Mildred, and she wasn't forever tellin' a fellow what's wrong and what *wasn't* right." And the young traitors concluded

between themselves that they infinitely preferred young ladies who were not walking encyclopedias of moral precepts, thereby doing their lovely sister the rankest injustice. But, as apology for my friend Georgie's heresy, let me here offer you that trite proverb—"Boys will be boys."

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A PACKAGE OF LETTERS.

THE disappearance of that atom, Courtney Dupont, from New York, left scarcely a ripple behind in the great sea of human life that has its restless flow and ebb therein, a tiny ripple, visible to but one or two pairs of eyes among the mighty host of busy voyagers thereon.

Madame Dupont missed her son, for he was an efficient book-keeper, and his defection from his post had compelled her to supply his place with one who was not to be paid by board and lodging only, or with moral reflections on his duty to his mother and sisters, as poor Courtney had too long been.

She was too cold a woman, and too indifferent a mother, to rejoice much at her son's brightening prospects; so, after she had become reconciled to the extra expense of a regularly salaried book-keeper, she declared to her daughters that she "did not know but what it was rather a relief, than otherwise, to have

gotten rid of the boy's cloudy face, and the sound of his never-ending importunities to let him leave her shop."

Bessie Miller had only continued in madame's employment a month after Courtney's departure. To sit there with his family, listening to his amiable sisters' stinging innuendoes on his "desertion of her," as they were pleased to call it,—their often-repeated prophecy that, "as handsome as Court was, he would be sure to marry some Southern heiress,"—drove her almost to madness, so she resigned her situation under madame, and, being skilled at her trade, she found another without the slightest difficulty, so she accepted it, and on the day on which she bade madame and her daughters adieu, she lost sight of them forever.

Bessie and her mother still occupied the humble lodgings that had been her home when Courtney came a wooing, and it was in the "best room" thereof that Bessie sat one night, all alone, about six months after Courtney's departure.

She was pretty much the same Bessie in appearance as when we first saw her, "concealment" not having, as yet, preyed upon her "damask cheek" to any damaging extent.

Her lips were as red, her cheeks as round and full as they were the very first time that her absent lover had pressed his warm kisses upon them, declaring them to be "the fairest cheeks and the sweetest lips" in all Christendom.

But the gentle blue eyes (that were very lovely, albeit they *were* blue instead of brown) were dimmer and sadder than the eyes of a newly-made wife had any right to be.

She had begun of late to entertain doubts as to the wisdom of that hasty marriage, which had to be kept so profoundly secret that it wore the aspect of guilt. She should have let Courtney go untrammelled. It had been her mother's suggestion, and she was so used to following that mother's commands, blindly, that she had not stopped to weigh the matter in all its bearings. She should have trusted to Courtney's honor and to his love for her for the fulfillment of their engagement. If his love could not have stood the test of a few years' separation, why, what a poor, worthless sort of love it would have been! And then, suppose his love should die out *now*! Oh, misery of miseries! supposing, *now* that they were tied tight and fast together, he should pine for freedom, what would become of her then? Oh! what, what, what *should* she do if Courtney ever reproached her for their ill-advised union? But he *could* not do that, he *would* not be so cruel. She had not asked it of him, she had not said *one* word of the great joy that filled her heart when her mother suggested that way of settling the trouble; but when he had acquiesced so readily, only stopping a very few moments to think about it,—ah! *then* she *had* spoken. She had blessed him over and over again for his decision. Nor had she shown him what a bitter trial his leaving her was. She had promised him that she would never harass him by writing to him gloomily or reproachfully; and had she not kept her word right bravely? Had she not often and often thrown a half-finished letter away and started on a fresh sheet of paper because the tears that *would* come had fallen on the first one, and Courtney might think the blot it

made was intended as a reproach? Had she not purposely written of everything under the sun, *except* her own hours of hopeless misery and intense longing, because it might annoy Courtney to know how she wished for him back? Ah! yes, he could not say that she had failed in her promises in any one particular. He knew nothing whatever of the hours of sleepless wretchedness she passed every night, weeping for him, sighing for his presence. Reading over and over again the few letters that had come from him in answer to her many. But she did not reproach him for that either. Not once; for of course she had so much more time to write to him, than he had to answer her in. After her day's work was over, what else had she to do but sit and think of him, or write to him? Whereas, he told her in every letter that he studied far into every night. Ah! he would come home so grand and learned; but Bessie was doubtful whether or no there was any pleasure in that thought. Would he not look down upon his ignorant little wife from the lofty pinnacle of his newly-acquired superiority? How would she compare with the fashionable and elegant women he would have gotten used to by the time he came back? On the whole, Bessie secretly wished the Huntingdons had never crossed Courtney's path and come between them, as it were; but she must never, never let Courtney know she had entertained such a selfish thought, never! But would he love her when he came back just as well as at first? Ceaselessly poor Bessie's heart asked this question, knowing that weary years would have to elapse before she could hope to have it answered. So, to ease the unsatisfied cravings of her

heart, she would bring out the little box in which she kept his "precious, precious" letters, and read them over for the fortieth time.

The first one had been written almost immediately after his arrival at the Hall, and was the longest and altogether the most satisfactory one Bessie had ever received. But then, as his loving apologist would tell you, "he had not commenced his studies then."

It ran—"Dearest Bessie (it had been agreed upon that she should retain her own name until they were ready to solemnize their marriage anew), give me credit for being very eager to send you news of my new home and life, for I am writing on the second day of my stay here. Mr. Huntingdon's house is one of the most beautiful-looking homes imaginable. A great rambling old house, with a delightful veranda running entirely around it, and fitted up inside in the most elegant style. But the grounds around it are the chief beauty of the place. They haven't been cultivated out of all sense and grace, as the premises of most rich men are, but consist of a lawn of several acres in size, dotted thickly with every variety of forest-tree; and now that every one is wearing its own peculiar tint of autumn leaves, it presents a picture of richer coloring and greater variety than anything your or my citified eyes have ever beheld.

"There is a clear stream of water running through this lawn at one side of the house, such a stream as we would call a creek at home, but which is here known as a 'bayou;' and over this bayou is an ornamental bridge, at each end of which is a beautiful weeping-willow, bending so low over the water that

their lowest leaves dip into the stream. The carriage drive from the public road leads across this bridge, and approaches the house through a magnificent avenue of live-oaks. My friends are so kind to me, and my life is so entirely different from what it was in that hateful shop, that I feel sometimes as if I must be in a delicious dream, from which I will be awakened by mother's voice calling to me to 'come down and take down the shop shutters.' Besides my first friends, Frank, Mr. Huntingdon, and Miss Edith, there are two other members of the family, a Miss Hartley, who keeps house, and my tutor, Mr. Groves, who is wiser, and gentler, and better than any man I ever met in my life. You see I am writing to you very minutely about everything down here, for I know it will all possess a deep interest for you, as it concerns me.

"My prospects for acquiring a thorough legal education are flattering in the extreme, Mr. Groves being a first-rate lawyer himself, but having had to relinquish the idea of practicing on account of delicate health.

"I have found a way of making myself useful to Mr. Huntingdon that in some way lessens my indebtedness to him. He is the owner of three or four plantations, and has heretofore tried to keep a general supervision of his various overseers' accounts himself. Hearing him speak of it as being very irksome to him, I gladly offered to relieve him of it, so you see my despised book-keeping knowledge has come into play again.

"You must not fret about me, Bessie; look bravely to the end, dearest, and think how proud and happy you will be when I come back fitted to lift you out of

the drudgery you have endured so long. Nor must you count letters with me, for you must recollect that to make up for lost time I will have to study very, very hard, and will not have a great deal of time in which to weave love stories." Signed "lovingly," etc. etc.

As the letter was mostly descriptive of his new home, and contained nothing that delicacy forbade her showing, she complied with her mother's request that she might read it.

Mrs. Miller's motive in making the request was not purely one of curiosity; she was jealous for her child, and wished to trace the course of decay in Courtney's "puppy love." There was nothing to excite her fears in this first letter; but as she was one of those mortals who seem to walk the earth with no other object than to act as a damper to every species of light, and life, and joy, she threw a damper on Bessie's pleasure in the perusal of this first letter from her lover by a sneering comment, to the effect that "'twas more like a leaf out of a geography than a letter from a husband to a wife—what with his oaks, and his bayers, and verandies."

But Bessie was so used to hearing her mother abuse everything and everybody, and she was such a veritable Griselda in her own person, that she folded her precious letter away, without one thought that it might have been more ardent or fuller of love-tokens than it was.

In return for his letter of "oaks and bayers and verandies" (which latter, by-the-way, Mrs. Miller's imagination represented to her as part of the natural

scenery around Huntingdon Hall), Courtney received, by return of mail, a six-page letter, written in a little cramped hand, a hand that evidently faltered in painful uncertainty as to the correct location of certain capital letters, but traveled rapidly over the paper, blissfully ignorant of such impediments to progress as commas or colons or periods. Written by a hand unpracticed in the elegant art of penmanship, but dictated by a heart overflowing with a superabundance of love, which it seemed so difficult to poor Bessie to give expression to through this untried medium. Nevertheless, love, ardent, pure, and unselfish, breathed from the crooked lines and through the misspelt words; a love that was so full of self-abnegation that it could have existed only in a woman's breast. A love more intense, holier, and stronger than Mr. Courtney Dupont had ever done anything to deserve.

But who can account for the vagaries of a woman's heart? Who, that knows aught of the sex as it really exists, will presume to lay down rules and regulations for the study of that incomprehensible cipher? Who so wise as to institute a species of scientific mining applicable to the topography of that organ, whereby certain effects *must* follow certain causes? Try it, oh most learned ignoramus, and see with what facility the most unpracticed of the sex will overturn your prearranged conclusions, by passing by the most deserving hero of the day with an airy toss of her head, and turning to lavish a soul full of tenderest devotion upon yonder handsome scapegrace, who has naught but his handsome face and dare-devil spirit to recommend him.

I do not say that this is as it should be, oh, most learned causist: I merely say it is—woman; and Bessie Miller was a woman.

For the first few months the ratio of the correspondence between Bessie and her husband was as two to one, then three to one, finally four to one; then Bessie ceased to look for answers to hers, but waited patiently for Courtney to write whenever he pleased, forever pleading for him with her own heart, "he is so busy, you know."

Mrs. Miller's comments were so galling to Bessie that, after the first two or three, she refused to let her mother see her letters at all; and she was heartily glad, as she sat there under the lamplight reading them over, that her mother was out for the evening.

After reading over the letters she knew so well by heart, Bessie rearranged them in the pretty little ebony box that she had bought on purpose to keep them in. She laid them in very precisely, and according to date, her slowness and precision arising not from wonted habits of exactitude, but because she loved to linger over her treasures. But be as slow as you possibly can, you cannot make the arrangement of half a dozen letters in a box last forever. So Bessie turned the key and sat down once more to her sewing.

It was almost eight o'clock before Mrs. Miller returned from her chat with her next-door neighbor, and Bessie was waiting for her very anxiously, for this reason: the husband of this next-door neighbor was an honest, good-natured mechanic, who made it his last duty in the day, after his own work was concluded, to find out if there were any letters for Bessie, thereby



saving her a long walk,—one which was so often fruitless,—and in case he had anything for her he never failed to step over after supper and bring it to her.

Bessie hardly expected a letter this night, but she hoped—as when, indeed, did she not? So she sat very impatiently expecting her mother's return, for of course it would be unnecessary for Mr. Hodge to come over when her mother was right in his house. As the clock struck eight the front door opened with a bang, and Bessie knew that her gentle mother had returned. Her heart gave a great bound as Mrs. Miller entered the room where she was sitting and threw a letter on the table by her side, saying, as she did so, "That's another chapter in geography!"

With a cry of delight, Bessie seized it and tore it open. It contained but a very few lines, but those few were sufficient to light the girl's face up with joy unspeakable.

"Oh, mother, read!"

Nothing loth, Mrs. Miller took the letter from Bessie's trembling hands and read as follows:

"DEAR BESSIE,—I have been so very busy for the last month or two that it has been impossible for me to find time for letter-writing. During the heated term that is approaching I think it will be advisable for me to come North, as the first summer here is always so dangerous to one not acclimated. Mr. Huntingdon advises this; and as they always travel in the summer, I will accompany them as far as New York. You may not get another letter from me before I come home; but be patient, and have faith."

"Humph! it's about time," was Mrs. Miller's only comment.

But Bessie neither heard nor heeded her. She was murmuring over in her own heart the last sentence of his letter, "Be patient, and have faith." "Dear, dear Courtney! I will, indeed I will, have faith; and you shall never know that my faith has faltered for one moment; I will never tell you of the bitter tears I have shed—ay, was shedding this very night—while your precious letter was on its way to me."

"Well, are you going to sit there mooning all night long, burning out lamp-oil for nothing?"

Bessie started from her delicious reverie and the contemplation of her coming joy as her mother's harsh voice fell gratingly on her ear. But she never pretended to make any answer to these rude speeches, so she simply got up and escaped to her own room, where she could "moon" to her heart's content.

## CHAPTER IX.

### IN WHICH WE MAKE SMALL PROGRESS.

LIFE at the Hall, life at Mrs. Vaughn's, and life in Bedford generally, flowed along very quietly and very smoothly for the first six months of Courtney's sojourn there; so quietly and so smoothly, in fact, that to one in no way interested in the affairs of Bedford and its neighborhood it would have savored of monotony.

But monotony and ennui were among the things that had been with our emancipated milliner's boy.

Who could complain of monotony, where nature herself was forever changing?

It seemed hardly a month since he had turned his back on that detested milliner's shop, in the noisy, crowded city, and first caught sight of the stately old Hall, rising so proudly above the surrounding forest-trees. Yet, since his coming, he had seen those trees stripped of their gorgeous autumn livery, their bare limbs shivering, and gray beards waving before winter's pitiless blasts, and, lo! already they were again full of tender buds and shoots, that gave generous promise of protection from the scorching rays of an almost tropical sun.

To this boy who had been born and reared in the city, everything around the Hall seemed transcendently beautiful. He never wearied of admiring the beauties that were so new to him, and, as his explorations of the country were made in Edith's company, himself mounted on a fine horse, life seemed very bright to him, and ennui was unknown.

The two households of the Hall and "Midway Cottage," as Mrs. Vaughn's house was denominated, mingled so intimately as to preclude all possibility of any formal visiting between them.

Here Courtney was often to be seen offering the contents of his game-bag to the invalid mother, or sitting awhile chatting with Milly, whom he, with the rest of Bedford, had learned to look up to as something better than ordinary mortals.

The standing between these two young people was

established on a footing that rendered their intercourse perfectly harmless, and consequently all the more enjoyable.

Mildred looked upon Courtney Dupont as predestined in the end to become Edith's husband. She had woven her own romance around those two. Courtney was very handsome, so much handsomer since he had been able to indulge in the manly exercise, so necessary to muscular development, and his intellect and ambition were sufficiently exalted to satisfy any girl. He was frank and open-hearted, and, in fine, exactly the winning sort of somebody who would be likely to take a girl's heart by storm, and then Edith already liked him ever so much. Though, as Milly said to herself, marriage was an idea that she *knew* had never entered Edith's head for one minute. She was only building castles about what *would be*, way yonder ahead, when everybody had learned everything there was to be learned, and there was nothing left for them all but pair off. She thought it more than probable that Edith and Courtney would marry, some of these days; she did not even know herself that this thought was born of Hope.

By the beginning of the May following the October in which Courtney had first made his appearance at Bedford, the Huntingdons began already to look forward to their usual summer migration.

This time it was decided that they would travel no farther than Virginia's celebrated Sulphur Springs, and there remain stationary for the summer.

Courtney pleaded hard to be allowed to remain with his beloved books; but his kind benefactor represented

to him that this first summer would prove so enervating that he could do but little in the way of study, and he would but be husbanding his strength for future exertion by relaxing his studies during the hottest months. So he was compelled to yield to the superior judgment of his friends.

The middle of June was the time fixed upon for the departure of the whole family, with the one exception of Miss Hartley.

Mr. Groves had consented to go this time, for although he disliked most intensely, for some unknown reason, to mingle in the world at all, his health was suffering so from close confinement that he felt it to be his duty to do something toward recovering it.

Miss Hartley refused Mr. Huntingdon's kind invitation to accompany them, declaring "she wasn't one of those dainty souls who couldn't stand a few hot days and half a dozen mosquitoes; and as for her part, she had no desire to pack up bag and baggage once every year and go traiposing everywhere, the Lord only knew where; to be stuck into all sorts of beds, the Lord only knew who had been sleeping in them; and to be fed on food cooked by the Lord only knew who." So of course Mr. Huntingdon wisely refrained from pressing the matter on a lady who entertained such views as these on the doubtful pleasure of traveling for one's health.

It was in the latter part of May, only a few weeks before the family expected to start, that Edith ordered the horses and asked Courtney if he did not want to take a farewell ride toward a little wood-embosomed lake, some six or seven miles from the Hall, "and we

can come back by 'Midway' and take tea with Milly, you know," she added, to all of which Courtney proved acquiescent.

They accomplished their ride before the sun had fairly set, and returned in time for tea at Mrs. Vaughn's.

As they advanced up the little gravel path that led to the cottage door, Edith laid her hand on Courtney's arm and spoke in a low voice, pointing at the same time toward the open window of Mrs. Vaughn's bedroom: "Look, Courtney, is not that a sad, but at the same time a beautiful picture?"

The window of the little room was opened wide, to let the already sultry air escape; Mrs. Vaughn's large chair was drawn exactly in front of it, while at her head, just shaded from her eyes, stood a lamp, which rendered everything in the little room distinctly visible to outsiders. Mildred, dressed in a soft white mull, her rippling brown hair pushed carelessly behind her little ears, was kneeling by her mother's side, clasping one of the sick woman's hands in both of her own, gazing up into the beloved face with a look of mingled pain and love on her own that was inexpressibly touching. Apparently Mrs. Vaughn was talking slowly and earnestly, while with her disengaged hand she fondly stroked the head of the kneeling girl.

"How deathly she looks!" said Courtney, almost in a whisper.

"Not more so than usual, do you think?" asked Edith, in as low a tone.

"Much more so. You know I do not see her as constantly as you do, and I can see the change."

"Poor, dear Mrs. Vaughn, and poor, poor Milly!"

said Edith, while her eyes filled with tears. "Shall we go in or turn back?" she whispered.

"I would like to go in," answered Courtney, "for I may never see her, otherwise, again. I am no physician; but it requires very little skill, I think, to prophesy that dear, gentle Mrs. Vaughn will very soon be at rest."

Edith brushed her fast-coming tears away, so that Mildred should see no sign of them, and then they advanced toward the door, talking in an audible voice, to give warning of their approach.

Milly received them at the door, and she looked so calm, smiling her usual placid smile as she gave a hand to each of them, that Edith threw a little reproachful look at Courtney, in which she accused him of being an alarmist.

But the true state of the case was that Mildred had been so constantly with her mother, watching the changes in her beloved face so unceasingly, that it was impossible for her to perceive the gradual approach of the end. Almost ever since she could remember, ever since the twins, Nellie and Georgie, had been born, her mother had been an invalid and she her untiring little nurse. It had been now almost two years since Mrs. Vaughn had ever left her room, and the last six months of that time she had laid in her large chair all day long, just as she lay on this particular evening, looking languid and pale, just as she looked this warm May day. She had not complained of feeling any worse than usual, so Mildred had no cause for fresh fear.

But Mrs. Vaughn herself was not so blinded as

Milly seemed to be. She felt fully conscious that her life was ebbing rapidly, and at the time that Edith and Courtney first caught a glimpse of her pale face by the lamp-light, she was talking calmly and peacefully to her daughter of the duties and responsibilities that would fall upon her young shoulders when she would be left alone, with the burden of her little brother and sister to raise. She had accustomed Mildred to talk on this subject with her freely and calmly, so that her recurrence to it on this evening gave the young girl no new alarm. Hence, when Mildred gave a hand to each of her two friends, and smiled her gentle welcome, she was utterly unconscious of the fact that she was soon, very soon, to be the recipient of a cruel blow from the hand of Destiny.

Edith Huntingdon was one of Mrs. Vaughn's special favorites; so instead of conducting her visitors to the little drawing-room, Mildred led them into her mother's bedroom. "Mother will be so glad to see you," she said. By this time Mildred's calm demeanor had completely dispelled Edith's momentary anxiety, so she entered the sick-room her own bright self.

Taking the stool by the invalid's chair from which Mildred had just risen, she rattled away in the liveliest strain about everything, from their projected visit to the Springs down to Mingo's last exploit, until she had succeeded in bringing a faint smile to the pallid lips of the invalid.

Dr. Tilman joined the little circle before they had finished tea, and Edith remarked that his usually serious manners were grave, almost to gloom.

As they adjourned to the drawing-room on leaving

the tea-table, she contrived to get close enough to ask him in a whisper if there was anything wrong.

"Wrong?" he repeated, sadly. "I wish you were a few years older, little Edith." And he looked at the childish face that was gazing into his so earnestly with a look of the tenderest interest.

"Why, Dr. Tilman," replied Edith, in genuine bewilderment, "what on earth has my age to do with the question I asked you? I meant was there anything wrong with Mrs. Vaughn. You looked so grave that you frightened me."

"And I meant that I wished you were a few years older, because if you were you could be the friend to our poor Mildred that she will sorely need in a very few days—nay, possibly, hours."

"You don't mean——" Edith shivered, for death was new to her, and very terrible to think of.

"I mean——" but the words were hushed on his lips; a low wail, a wail wrung from a breaking heart, smote upon their ears. Direct from Mrs. Vaughn's room it came, and thither Dr. Tilman hastily bent his steps, followed by Edith, whose face was ghastly white, but whose eyes shone with a determination to be the friend that poor Milly needed.

The sight that met their eyes was one to which the physician was inured, but Edith's girlish form trembled like an aspen leaf, though she followed him resolutely. Mrs. Vaughn lay just as they had left her when they went in to tea. Milly had left the little hand-bell within reach, so that she could ring if any one was needed. She had returned to her mother's side as soon as she had risen from the table—returned

to find that her ministrations as a nurse were at an end forever. So quietly had death come that not a limb was displaced, not a muscle contracted. Gently the hands were folded across her lap, and the head lay back upon her pillow just as Milly had settled it only a few short minutes before; but the eyes that had looked their thanks for the loving service were closed forever, the lips that had bade God bless her darling child were silent forever.

As still and as quiet as the dead form she had clasped in her frantic embrace lay Mildred, who had swooned after giving utterance to that one cry of anguish.

Edith found the necessary womanliness come to her by instinct as she reached her beloved friend, and Dr. Tilman looked at the girl in amazement, as she quietly assumed the command of the frightened household that so soon collected in the chamber of death.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thus it came about that Edith refused positively to take her usual trip from home that year, declaring her intention of never leaving Mildred's side until she had won her back to smiles. But before Mildred smiled again many and anxious were the hours and the days that her self-appointed and devoted attendant was doomed to spend.

Edith in after-years often declared that the ride she took with Courtney on that evening of Mrs. Vaughn's death was the last occasion on which she actually felt and acted like a child.

## CHAPTER X.

## EDITH IN A NEW CHARACTER.

AS I told you in the last chapter, Edith refused to be of the traveling party that left the Hall in the middle of June. She declared it to be her duty to remain by Mildred; asking her father "if he did not *know* that Mildred would have done the same by her if their situations had been reversed?" But she furthermore opposed the idea of her father's remaining at home; for, besides the imperative necessity for the change on Frank's account, she desired Mildred to move temporarily up to the Hall, and she shrank so from seeing any one that it would be impossible to persuade her to leave the cottage unless she were assured of solitude in her new home. All of these pros and cons Edith laid before her father with a little dignified air of superior wisdom that was very quaint but very convincing.

So on the day that had originally been arranged, the "corps of incapables," as Edith jestingly dubbed them, started on their journey, she bidding them each an affectionate farewell, and commending the care of the party to Courtney, whom she declared to be the only able-bodied man in their party.

As soon as the traveling carriage disappeared from view, Edith ordered her own brett, in order to drive

down to Midway Cottage for the removal of its desolate little family.

She found Dr. Tilman's sulky standing before the door, and rejoiced that he was at hand to help her in the difficult task of persuading Mildred to leave the cottage. Georgie and Nellie stood on the door-step, their little faces full of frightened misery. As Edith approached them, they flew down the steps, clinging to her as their only hope.

"Oh, Miss Edith! Miss Edith!" they both exclaimed at once, "sister is doing so strangely; she won't talk to us, she won't eat anything, she won't do anything Aunt Barbary begs her to do. Please, please, come make sister stop looking so."

Gently kissing each little terrified face, Edith pointed to the carriage standing before the gate and told them to run jump into it and tell George "that he was to take them a long ride and then drive back to the cottage for her and sister Mildred."

Children as young as these twin orphans grieve but lightly. They had shed many and bitter tears up to the time that their mother's body was laid in the grave, and the tears still came now every little while; but they eagerly put gloom behind them when they could, and were soon bowling along in Edith's brett, almost happy.

Edith walked on into the now gloomy cottage, looking first into the sitting-room, hoping to find Dr. Tilman there, and to be able to preconcert her plan of operations with his assistance. But the blinds were closed and the curtains down; the room was dark and cold, and Edith shuddered as she glanced toward the

middle of the room, thinking of the shrouded form that had occupied that spot when she had last entered by that door. She turned quickly, and, closing the door behind her, she found herself face to face with Dr. Tilman.

"Oh, Dr. Tilman! I am so glad!" she cried, almost hysterically; and, clasping her hands around his arm, she clung to him a moment for very nervousness.

"What is it, Edith?" he asked, gently. "What has frightened you?"

"Nothing, nothing. I am very foolish. But this house seems so desolate, and that room struck such a chill to my heart,—so cold, so dark and still, I almost imagined I could see again the white sheet and the outlines of that cold, stiff form."

"Edith, my child, I am afraid you have undertaken more than you will be able to accomplish. You were not made for gloom and shadow, and poor Mildred Vaughn's pathway promises very little sunshine."

"Dr. Tilman,"—and Edith unclasped her hands from his arm, standing erect before him,—"you are unkind and unjust to me; you talk as if I were a petted baby, who had nothing to do but cry for sugar-plums in this world and to get them. I am young, I know, but I can't help that; besides, I'm improving in that matter, too; I'll be sixteen next month, and Mildred Vaughn has been nursing her mother, and keeping the house, and taking care of Georgie and Nellie ever since *she* was sixteen. Not," she went on, with a smile of sweet humility, "that I ever expect to make another Mildred Vaughn of myself, for Milly is almost a saint, and there's not the making of a saint in me."

"Not a saint, maybe," answered Dr. Tilman, looking kindly into the earnest brown eyes raised to his face, "but a very, very good little woman."

"Don't flatter me, please; I can't bear flattery. But what I wanted to say to you was, that I am not such an unsuitable companion for Milly in this sad time as you seem to think I am."

"I am afraid her gloom will infect you, and so render you unfitted for the task of cheering."

"I believe it would, too, if I were to stay in this house with her; for here everything speaks so plainly of Mrs. Vaughn that it would be impossible for me to stop thinking about her. But I have come down here on purpose to take Mildred to the Hall and keep her there until she has gotten partially over this blow."

"What sort of a nurse are you, Miss Edith?" asked Dr. Tilman.

"Miss Edith!" repeated the girl. "And another one of your irrelevant questions!"

"The Miss Edith," said the doctor, "was an involuntary tribute to your newly-acquired dignity; but the question was not so irrelevant as may seem at present, so you will be so good as to answer it."

"What sort of a nurse am I? Well, in the first place, I never spent two hours by anybody's sick-bed in my life; but, in the second place, if anybody that I loved were to require my services in that line, I think I could be as vigilant and as careful as the most exacting of doctors could desire, my unfortunate youth to the contrary notwithstanding."

"If anybody you loved," answered the doctor, re-

peating a portion of her words. "How if anybody you hated required those same offices?"

"I would see that they were properly cared for," she replied promptly.

"You are not, then, actuated in what you are doing for Mildred Vaughn by any abstract idea of duty?"

"No, sir," replied Edith, gravely; "I don't think I can lay claim to any such exalted motive in my desire to befriend Milly. I love Milly; she is my *very* dearest friend, and it hurts me to see her suffering. If I could, I would gladly bear her anguish for her," said the child, looking earnestly into Dr. Tilman's face.

"I believe you would, Edith," he replied as earnestly; "from my soul, I believe you would."

"But where is Mildred, while we are standing here so long, talking about nothing? Come, doctor, go with me, for you will have to help me in persuading her to go."

"She is in her mother's room; I found her there on my arrival, pacing the floor in a state of great mental excitement. I administered an opiate, and she is now sleeping very quietly. If you please, we will wait for her waking here in the dining-room."

Edith was glad he had not said drawing-room, for, try as she would to overcome it, she could not think of that darkened room without a nervous tremor. So she followed Dr. Tilman into the dining-room, and sat there with him for about an hour, chatting with him, answering his numerous questions naively and fearlessly, utterly unconscious of the fact that each question was a probe, deliberately and skillfully applied by the hand of one who was curiously anxious to make

himself thoroughly familiar with her mental and moral anatomy.

Their conversation was brought to an abrupt determination by the renewal of those heart-broken wails with which the walls of that little cottage had grown so sadly familiar.

"She is awake," said Edith, quickly, as the sound smote on her ear. "Come, doctor, let us go to her."

When Dr. Tilman and Edith entered the room Mildred was leaning over the back of the vacant arm-chair, her face buried in the cushions. Edith approached her softly, and clasped her arms around the drooping figure.

Mildred looked up drearily, and as she did so the physician's quick glance noticed two facts—the bright flush on the cheek and the vacant look in the eye.

"Milly, darling," cried Edith, "speak to me. It is I—Edith—come to stay with you."

"Oh, yes," answered Mildred, drearily, "I know who it is. Have you heard, Edith,—have you heard? Did you know—did you know that darling, darling mother has left me? Left me, Edith, alone! alone! alone! She's dead, Edith! dead! dead! dead!" And the stricken girl's voice rose into a piercing wail.

Edith glanced toward Dr. Tilman in alarm. He stepped forward and received the swaying form in his arms. "I feared as much. The precursor of brain fever."

Administering another powerful opiate, he once more succeeded in producing a temporary oblivion of her misery for poor Mildred; and, deeming it advisable to remove her from the spot that was so fraught with



bitter memories, while she was powerless to resist, she was conveyed to the Hall while still under the influence of the narcotic.

It was soon known all over Bedford that Mildred Vaughn was lying dangerously ill at the Hall, of brain fever, and many were the kindly offers of assistance from older and more experienced nurses than Edith Huntingdon, all of which Dr. Tilman firmly declined, answering each individual with the formula, "that a change of nurses would be pernicious in the extreme, and that Edith had shown herself so capable of taking charge of the case that he preferred leaving it in her hands."

Miss Hartley smarted considerably under the indignity of "*her* being refused admittance into the sick girl's room, and that chit being made head nurse." But Dr. Tilman was inexorable.

Edith only left her friend's side to take the necessary refreshment and breathe a little fresh air by taking a stated number of turns the full length of the veranda, a proceeding that Dr. Tilman was as peremptory in enforcing as he was in administering Mildred's medicines. The task of nursing devolved entirely on those two, and a most able coadjutor Edith proved herself to be.

It was in the height of her illness that an occurrence took place which made Edith earnestly thankful that herself and none other was permitted to attend Milly.

Dr. Tilman lay in a profound sleep, to all appearance, on a lounge at the farther end of the spacious chamber, and Edith sat by the bed, renewing every once in awhile the iced cloths on her friend's burning brow.

Sometimes for hours the sick girl would lie motionless, uttering never a word; then again the stream of her wild, incoherent rambling would become incessant. This had been one of her quietest days, and Edith's heart was full of hope, although Dr. Tilman had steadily refused, as yet, to give her any encouragement. As she lifted one napkin from the heated brow, and placed a fresh one upon it, Mildred opened her eyes and smiled a sad, sweet smile.

"You are better, darling, are you not?" asked her loving nurse, bending eagerly forward, for she thought that smile betokened returning consciousness.

"I am happy," answered Mildred, smiling again, "happy! ah, so, so happy!"

Edith held her breath, for she knew now that it was but a renewal of Mildred's delirious rambling.

"I thought he loved Edith, and I was wicked, so wicked, for it made my heart ache; but he came to *me*—he loves *me*—ah, joy! joy! joy!"

Knowing not to whom these fatally connected sentences applied, Edith glanced toward the lounge in an agony of apprehension, lest Dr. Tilman should have been awake and heard this unconscious revelation from her poor friend's lips. It was evident that he *had* heard, for he had risen to a sitting posture and looked as pained as Edith felt.

"Poor Milly! poor, dear Milly!" sighed Edith. "If I could only make her conscious of what she is saying. Possibly I can divert her thoughts into another channel." So she bent over, and, gazing into Mildred's dim eyes, she spoke to her once more: "Milly, Dr.

Tilman has come to see you. Would you like to speak to him?"

"Like to speak to him! Like to speak to my own beloved idol, my precious love, that I've loved so long and so dearly. But I can tell you about it now, Edith darling, for he's given me the right to love him. He came to me last night and put this ring on my hand, this very ring, Edith, that binds us together forever, oh, forever. And I was so cruelly jealous of you, poor little Edith, for he said once he was going to make you his little wife. But then I love you so, darling, how *could* I help being miserable? But it's all right now, all right at last."

In an agony of mortification for her poor friend, who was thus baring her pure soul in the very presence of the man who had so unconsciously won her heart, Edith glanced again toward Dr. Tilman. He was pouring some drops into a spoon, and Edith almost hoped that he had not heard *all*, and if he had, possibly he did not understand.

"Give this to her," he said, in a low, husky voice, handing the spoon to Edith; and, casting a look of the deepest commiseration on the sick girl, he turned hastily and left the room.

"He has heard, and he pities her."

The opiate lulled Mildred to sleep, and her babbling ceased. But often and again before reason resumed her throne did the unconscious girl babble of her heart's most sacred secret, sometimes to Edith and sometimes to the object of her unhappy attachment himself, who, surprised and pained, sat by her side,

utterly powerless to prevent this revelation from the girl's pure soul.

It was the night in Mildred's illness which Dr. Tilman had declared would be the crisis. She lay in a deep sleep, from which he declared she would either awake perfectly reasonable or else hopelessly lunatic. He had done all he could; this supreme moment was in the hands of God.

Silently, almost breathlessly, he and Edith sat side by side on the lounge, listening to the measured breathing from the bed. Never once had either alluded to Mildred's revelation by word or look; but this night Dr. Tilman turned abruptly toward Edith with the question:

"Edith, do you think a lie is ever pardonable?"

"Why, Dr. Tilman?"

"I asked you a question, and you have not answered it. Do you think a lie is ever pardonable?"

"It depends upon the need for it, I think," answered Edith, wonderingly.

"Exactly; I agree with you perfectly. Now, supposing Miss Vaughn awakes from that sleep in her right mind, and should ask you plainly if in her delirium she had said anything she should not have said, what would you answer her?"

"Oh, Dr. Tilman," replied Edith, her eyes filling with tears, "I think certainly this is a case where the truth would be cruel and a lie true kindness. If I were to answer her yes, you know as well as I that, pure and modest as Mildred Vaughn is, she would die of mortification at what she had revealed."

"Give me your hand, Edith." She gave it, and that silent pressure was the last allusion they ever made to the subject, and by it they bound themselves to shield Milly.

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Mildred awoke perfectly reasonable. A deep sigh from the bed gave notice to the watchers of that fact. Together they approached the bed.

"Dear Edith," said Mildred, languidly, holding out one of her emaciated hands. When her eye rested on Dr. Tilman's tall figure, a look of confusion, almost amounting to pain, flitted across her wan face.

Dr. Tilman spoke a few words of congratulation on her improvement, and, turning, left the room.

"Edith," cried the sick girl, seizing the hand of her nurse, and gazing earnestly into her face, "tell me, did I say anything wrong in my delirium?" And her pale face crimsoned with shame.

"Not a word, dearest," answered Edith, boldly; and pressed a reassuring kiss on the quivering lips.

"Thank God," murmured Mildred.

"God forgive me," murmured Edith.

## CHAPTER XI.

### HUSBAND AND WIFE.

TO those who may have already settled in their own minds that Mr. Courtney Dupont is a villain of the deepest dye, I respectfully submit this apologetic chapter, reasoning from his own standpoint.

Mr. Huntingdon's offer of assistance had been extended to him without any reference whatever to his private affairs or his family relations. He had presumed him to be of an age when he was entitled to act for himself, and had not mentioned even his mother's name when making his proposals. To have acknowledged the fact of his having left a wife behind him in New York, would, to say the mildest of it, have placed him in rather a ridiculous position, and would have subjected him to merciless bantering on the subject, if nothing worse. On the whole, great awkwardness would be avoided by not mentioning the matter at all.

When he was prepared to leave Mr. Huntingdon, he would thank him for all his goodness, and if it then seemed necessary, would tell him of the matter; but as yet he could see no call for revealing his awkward secret.

Bessie, too, seemed to think it all right; her letters bespoke perfect content and even cheerfulness. She

was a good little thing, and he would reward her some of these days for her amiability and patience.

On the whole, as Mr. Dupont journeyed New-Yorkward alone, after having settled his traveling party in their summer resting-place, he felt at peace with himself and the world generally. As he neared the terminus of his journey, he even began to experience a slight flutter of expectation, for which he gave himself due credit. "I do love my little wife," he said to himself, as if in answer to some doubting questions on that subject addressed him by conscience, and was altogether in a Jack-Hornerish frame of mind by the time he had arrived at that Babel of the New World, New York.

In the mean while Bessie Miller ("Jupont" by right, as Mrs. Miller would have informed you) was waiting for him in the little cottage parlor, in a perfect quiver of expectation. She had purposely avoided telling her mother that she knew exactly the day on which Courtney would arrive, and had manœuvred, with the assistance of a few white lies, to get her mother out of the way for the day. Somehow or other, she shrank from the idea of having her meeting with her beloved Courtney witnessed by that coarse virago.

How gentle, pretty Bessy Miller came to be the child of such a woman had always been a marvel to those who knew them both; but some who had known her father declared it was not such a wonder after all, he being a poor but refined portrait-painter, who had first come to board with one Mrs. Jocelyn, who had petted him and badgered him by turns, until, from very helplessness, he married her, living with her long

enough to burden her with a blue-eyed counterpart of himself, in the person of his little daughter, and then escaping to the blissful quiet of the grave.

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Bessie had prevailed upon her mother to carry her excuse of indisposition to her employer, and had then added several little commissions for returning finished embroidery to various lady patronesses, all of which, as Mrs. Miller was passionately fond of "gadding," she agreed to attend to, with unusual affability. So she had the house all to herself.

Dressed in a pretty new *barége*, made for the occasion, with her glossy brown hair arranged in its most becoming style, Bessie looked very sweet. There was nothing at all stylish about this little bonnet-trimmer of ours; in fact, I think if she had been placed side by side with graceful Mildred Vaughn or haughty Edith Huntingdon, she would have sunk into absolute insignificance, and her loving heart was full of a tremulous fear that Courtney *might* draw some such comparison, mentally, when he came. Hence the numerous and anxious scrutinies of her general appearance which she was constantly running to her glass to make.

No, Bessie could make no pretensions whatever to style, either of manners or appearance; but nevertheless she was the possessor of a face that was undeniably very, very sweet; a childish face, almost babyish in its look of appealing tenderness. Gentle blue eyes, a soft, fair complexion, and a sad, sweet mouth, that quivered and trembled whenever Bessie was grieved.

But there was no quiver about it this particular

morning; it was dimpled with joyous expectation, for "Courtney was coming."

At last—a short, quick knock at the door. Bessie flew to open it. For a moment she stood irresolute, holding the door open in her hand. Was that tall, elegant-looking young man, dressed so faultlessly, gloved so daintily, *her husband*? Was that courteous-looking gentleman, who lifted his hat so gracefully, and whose moustached lips were trembling with a smile of amusement at her amazement, the beardless boy Courtney, to whom she had been married so strangely nearly a year before? She could hardly believe it, and the voice with which she cried "Courtney?" contained almost as much of doubt as of joy.

"Bessie?" he answered, mocking her tone of inquiry. And then she loosed her hold of the door-handle and stood on tiptoe to clasp her arms around her idol's neck.

The door closed behind them, and what took place in the little parlor it is none of our business to inquire. I only know that by the time Mrs. Miller returned, Bessie seemed to have satisfied herself fully as to the identity of the gentleman; and on his part he submitted to be caressed, and petted, and made much of with charming amiability.

For once Mrs. Miller was awed into a semblance of politeness, and, as she looked at the tall, erect form of her son-in-law, whose change of life had converted him from a slender stripling into a robust, elegant-looking young man, she secretly congratulated herself upon the foresight which had led her to secure this prize for her pretty daughter. "Fast bind, fast find," was her

mental observation at the very moment when she was making him her best company obeisance and "sirring" him to a painful degree.

Courtney remained with his wife all that first day, leaving her for but one hour, during which time he went to the old shop, to pay his respects to his mother and sisters.

His reception here was totally devoid of any sentiment or pretensions of extraordinary pleasure. Madame considered that by going with "those Southern grandees" he had lifted himself at once and forever out of her sphere of life. "Her shop had been a very good friend to her, and she wasn't in the least ashamed of it; her shop had stood by her, and she'd stand by her shop. As for them that was ashamed of the Dupont millinery establishment, she had nothing to say to them but to advise them to keep out of its shadow."

So when Courtney entered the little back parlor that had erst been so familiar with his outcries against fate, he was received rather coolly than otherwise. He was honored with a soulless little kiss from his mother and each of his sisters, who gazed at the metamorphosed shop-boy with more resentment than pride, and then they tried to get up a show of conversation; but it was a dead failure. The adherents of the shop resolutely refusing to ask any questions about the new life and new home of the renegade; and he, on his part, having grown unfamiliar with the topics of interest pertaining to that classic spot, did not care to feign an interest now which he never had felt in the days of his closest connection therewith.

So after this visit had been paid, Courtney turned from his mother's door, feeling conscious that the future held nothing in common for himself and family. "It had been their doing, not his; he had never intended making a change toward them, but it was evident that they looked upon him as a deserter, and desired him to know as much. So be it. If ever they were in need of assistance from him, when he should be in a condition to assist anybody, he should certainly not forget that they were his nearest relations."

Returning from this unsatisfactory interview to Bessie's warm embraces was decidedly a pleasant transition.

Courtney established himself at Mrs. Miller's, spending his entire evenings and a goodly portion of his days with his happy wife. Bessie was never weary of asking questions about his friends at the Hall; all of which he answered with a careless frankness that was reassuring in the extreme. When he spoke of Edith Huntingdon, it was as candidly and fearlessly as when Mildred Vaughn was the theme of his conversation. He spoke of the beauty and the goodness of the one with equal warmth as of the spirit and generosity of the other.

Even vigilant Mrs. Miller was compelled to admit to herself that "he warn't in love with either of 'em yet, but that was because he'd been so busy with his book-larnin' yet awhile." Which last conclusion was shrewdly near the truth.

For a month Bessie was, to use her own words, "the happiest, happiest woman in all New York City." Courtney's kind and pleasant manners she, in her

loving humility, pronounced the perfection of conjugal devotion. If he yawned wearily, or gave any other token of ennui (which truth compels me to assert he did too frequently after his first few weeks at home), "he missed his books, and what a poor substitute her ignorant tattle must be for their learned companionship." So, ever loving him, ever pleading for him, with the unselfish excuses which only a woman's doting heart can invent, Bessie spent the days, hardly realizing how happy she had been until she experienced the sharp agony of having to give him up again.

Courtney made the announcement rather abruptly, not seeming to be conscious of the pain it would cause his wife. They were sitting alone, about the latter part of July, he smoking a cigar and gazing out the open window; she standing just behind him, passing her fingers lovingly backward and forward through his wavy black hair.

"Little woman, I leave you day after to-morrow," said Courtney, throwing the stump of his cigar out of the window, and glancing up at her.

"Oh, Courtney!" was all the reply Bessie made him; but her cheeks paled and her lips quivered like a wounded baby's.

Courtney drew her around in front of him, seated her on his lap, and treated her to a second edition of the arguments he had used so effectually when he left for the first time.

"This will be the last time, Bessie," he said in conclusion. "I'm not coming back to you any more until I am ready to stay with you."

Bessie had schooled her heart so thoroughly that

she gave no more outward tokens of her distress, not even shedding a tear when she saw him leave the house on the day of his departure, and knew not when her heart would again be made glad by his coming.

For days after his departure Bessie moped listlessly about the house, without the energy to attend to anything. She was finally aroused from her apathy by some sneering remarks from her mother, to the effect that "if her young lord got much finer than he'd already got, the house wouldn't hold him on his second visit."

"You sha'n't talk of my precious Courtney in that manner," cried Bessie, defying her mother for the first time in her life, standing before her with cheeks and eyes aflame; "you shall *not* talk about him so. He is everything that is good, and noble, and handsome, and I love him, I adore him."

"Nobody's fool enough to doubt that that's seen you together as much as I have in the last sickening month. The only trouble is, the love seems to be purty much all on your side."

"You cruel, cruel woman, how can you talk so? You *know* he don't love anybody but me; you *know* it, and I cannot imagine why you want to torture me so cruelly." And here Bessie subsided into tears.

"We shall see," was Mrs. Miller's croaking rejoinder. Though what was to be seen, and when it was to be seen, and who was to see it, she did not deign to explain.

## CHAPTER XII.

SOME MORE ABOUT MILDRED VAUGHN.

IT was a sultry day in July on which Mildred Vaughn first left her sick-room.

Edith, whose every thought seemed to turn toward comforting and cheering her beloved friend, had so arranged it that Milly should emerge from the gloom of her sick-room just as the sun was sinking below the trees of the lawn, casting long, trailing shadows across the velvet sward. The intense heat of the day had passed away, a gentle breeze from the south was rustling the leaves of the trees, and the odor of a thousand flowers was wafted toward the fragile invalid, as she stood on the low, broad steps of the veranda, leaning somewhat heavily on Edith's supporting arm, looking very sad but very sweet, in her deep mourning robes, her pale face suffused with a slight flush, produced by the exertion of walking, and her calm gray eyes drinking in the beauty of the scene.

"Ah, this beautiful, beautiful world," she said, turning with a quivering lip to Edith, "and to think how brightly the sun can shine, how gayly the birds can still sing, while she lies under the mould, cold, cold, so still!"

"Milly,"—and Edith pressed a warm kiss on the quivering lips,—“you promised me not to. Come, darling, I've got such a feast spread for you in the

summer-house. And see," she added, gayly, "here comes a stronger arm than mine to aid your progress."

As she spoke, the quick roll of wheels was heard approaching by the bridge under the willows. Mildred turned her head, and the flush on her pale face deepened to scarlet. Before she had time to assent or object, Dr. Tilman had drawn rein in front of the door, sprung lightly out, and was offering her his most earnest congratulations on her reappearance in their midst.

"Give Milly your arm, doctor, and follow me, both of you, immediately," cried Edith, in a tone of gay command, while she bounded down the steps toward the little vine-wreathed summer-house that stood in the center of the flower-garden. Mildred and Dr. Tilman followed more slowly.

Edith had indeed prepared a feast for the sick girl which might have tempted the gods. The summer-house of itself was a most charming retreat for a hot day. A little Chinese pagoda, fairly smothered in sweet-smelling creepers, climbing roses, starry jasmines, and all the rest of them. In the center of the interior stood a table covered with the choicest fruits of Mr. Huntingdon's vast orchard. There were luscious melons, their dark-green rinds artistically cut away to display the crimson pulp within; there were downy peaches, and blushing apricots, and great blue figs, and golden apples scattered about in dainty porcelain baskets, in glorious variety and abundance; there were strawberries gleaming through the silver filigree of the baskets where they lay heaped; while to this feast of nature's own giving Edith had contrib-

uted a pyramid of snowy cake (made by her own hands, as she proudly took care to inform them) and a brimming bowl of ice-cream.

Mildred gave her a grateful little smile as she saw how much pains the generous girl had taken to give her pleasure, and resolutely put her grief out of sight, not to seem ungrateful to Edith.

"Oh, sister, aint it nice?" cried Nellie, appealing to Mildred, with her mouth full of silver-cake.

"And don't I wish I was going to live here all my life!" put in Georgie, in an equal state of beatitude.

Edith, deeming rightly that any allusion to their probable return to the cottage would be painful in the extreme to her orphaned friend, hastily turned the current of the conversation. In her endeavors to cheer the mourner she was ably assisted by Dr. Tilman, and even Miss Priscilla lent herself right kindly to the task.

Before returning to the house, Edith placed in Mildred's hands several letters that had arrived for her during her illness. Among them was an invitation from her only living relative beside the two children left in her charge to come and spend a month or two with her. She read this one aloud to her friends.

"I think I had better go, Edith dear. You know your house will be full again so soon, and I cannot bear yet awhile to go back——" She stopped, her voice too full of sobs to admit of her finishing the sentence.

So it was arranged, and for the space of several months Bedford lost sight of sweet Mildred Vaughn entirely. Not until the hyacinths and the violets were



in full bloom, giving fragrant promise of summer's richer gifts, and the weeping-willows were all alive with tender green shoots, did Mildred gain courage to return once more to the little cottage, where Edith's love had preceded her, altering things so, beautifying everything that she touched, scattering bouquets of sweet spring blossoms throughout the whole house, leaving nothing unmoved but the arm-chair so sacred in Mildred's eyes, as having held for long years the weary form of that dear mother whose death had left such an aching void in her heart, such a dreary blank in her life.

But Mildred had come home strengthened in body and soul. Bravely she took up her burden once more; and though it was with trembling and doubt as to her own ability that she looked forward to the task of guiding two young and heedless souls through the world's crooked ways, she solemnly dedicated herself to the task, resolving to apply thereto her utmost patience, wisest judgment, and most unflinching courage. It would be weary work, she knew that full well; and thankless work, she knew that, too; but, saddest of all, it would be work in which she would have no help, not even the aid of loving counsel or encouraging approval.

Mildred was alone in the world, utterly, bitterly alone. Ah! who but one who has experienced in his own person the wretchedness of utter loneliness can tell the fullness of woe contained in that little word, "alone?" It is to rove through gardens fair as Eden's early bloom, where flowers of gorgeous hue woo you with their fragrance, yet know that there is not one

bud of promise, amid all that plenty, blossoming for you. It is to wander, Tantalus-like, by crystal streams, whose rippling waves leap to lave your weary feet, yet not one drop may pass your parched and thirsting lips. It is to see the broad highway of life thick crowded with joyous, merry wayfarers, who climb the steep ascents hand in hand, while you only plod wearily alone, unaided, unpitied, uncheered. And when this doom, this cruellest of destinies, is allotted to poor, weak, trembling woman, ah, woe is her!

Thus was Mildred alone, and with her loving, clinging nature she felt the misery of her lot in its utmost intensity. But little of this was shown to outsiders; to all appearances Mildred was the same sweet Milly she had always been,—a little sadder, a little quieter, that was all.

### CHAPTER XIII.

IS COMPREHENSIVE.

WE will tell of Milly first, as the affairs of the cottage can be disposed of in one paragraph. Finding, on her return to the cottage after her mother's death, that its loneliness was almost unbearable, she made a proposition which was received with almost universal satisfaction, there being but two poor, little weak nays registered against it. Those two, proceeding from poor, little, weak, powerless Georgie and

Nellie, were consequently impotent. The proposition was that Miss Priscilla Hartley should remove from the Hall to the cottage. Having first ascertained that Mr. Huntingdon was perfectly willing to resign her services as a housekeeper, Milly wrote one of her own sweet little notes, conveying her request in a manner calculated to make Miss Priscilla feel that she would be honoring the cottage by her acquiescence.

Miss Priscilla graciously replied that "she would see about it, and return a final answer the succeeding day."

So that night, after the worries, and the scoldings, and the boxings of this turbulent housekeeper were well through with, and the last bang of the day was bestowed upon her own bedroom door, she proceeded to see about it.

The mysteries of the toilet of a blushing maiden of sweet sixteen, "who robes her graceful limbs in a drapery of snowy white, with dainty laces and ruffles encircling the charming throat, and who loosens the filament that binds her clustering curls, letting the rich mass fall in a cascade of golden glory around her white-robed figure, etc. before retiring to her downy pillow," may well detain the pen of the poetically-inclined writer. But there was nothing either charming or poetical about our maiden's (Miss Priscilla) proceeding before she retired to *her* downy pillow. In the first place, being winter, she robed *her* graceful limbs in a fiery red flannel wrapper, the neck and wristbands being relieved by bands of black silk, to prevent scratching; and when she loosened the filament that bound *her* tresses, she was not in any

degree incommoded by falling cascades of golden glory, but only by the slipping out of a mysterious black silk roll, whose defection left the sandy twist of her hair ingloriously diminished; and when Miss Priscilla gave a scientific twist to her very limited supply of "woman's chief glory," to render it perfectly self-sustaining, her preparations for retiring were complete.

So she drew a cushioned arm-chair up close to the fire and ruminated. Miss Priscilla sighed for the flesh-pots of Egypt. "There's no comfort like this chair to be found down yonder," was her first mental exclamation; "and I've got so used to this room and that bed that I don't really believe I could sleep in any other. And then Mildred don't keep no such table as they keep here at the Hall—she can't afford it; and if I move away from here, good-by to all the handsome presents that comes as sure as the family comes back from their summering. But then, on the other hand, there's that girl Edith, getting so lofty that there's no standing of her, anyhow. I'd rather have her cut the dido tantrums she used to cut, and have it all out with her, than to be treated to the fine lady politeness she freezes me with now. Just as sure as two and two makes four, when that girl comes of age, which won't be very long now, she's going to be mistress here; so I may as well go while it looks like I had a choice of homes."

This being the result of her cogitations, Miss Hartley signified her acceptance of Mildred's offer in a style indicative of the fact that she was of the impression that the cottage should be eternally indebted to her.

As I have said before, there was hardly a dissenting

voice. Mr. Huntingdon uttered some vague common-places, that might be construed into regrets or might not; Mr. Dupont and Frank Huntingdon were coolly and politely indifferent; Edith scorned to pretend regret when she felt relief; and I am not sure that even gentle Mr. Groves did not offer up a private *Te Deum* in the seclusion of his own room. Out of doors the satisfaction was undisguised; from Aunt Ailsey, the portly old cook, down to Darkis, now fully grown. This latter individual harangued Mingo in a lengthy congratulatory address, and he expressed his participation in the general joy by a series of lively barks and triumphant wags of that tail which he had so often been forced by the deposed tyrant to carry ignominiously between his legs.

So Miss Hartley left the Hall, where for some time past here rule had been merely nominal, and Edith assumed the reins quietly and naturally, proving herself, at the age of eighteen, a better, more systematic, and quieter mistress than many a matron of twice her years. The truth is, Edith's was one of those strong natures that develop early and rapidly; and though at the period of which we are writing she was but a young girl in years she was in appearance and character a woman. Tall and stately in her person, cold and haughty in her bearing to the world at large, but loving the few whom she chose to take into her heart with all the fire and impetuosity of her earnest nature.

From some unknown cause, a new gravity had settled upon the young mistress of the Hall, which became her wonderfully in point of dignity, but which was too much akin to sadness to be desirable in one so

young. When Milly, ever-watchful, noticed this and rallied Edith on it, she would reply, smiling with her own bright smile, "it behooved her to be more dignified, now that she had such a weight of responsibilities on her shoulders. There was papa, and Mr. Groves, and Mr. Dupont, and Frank, all to be kept in order; for since the reign of terror had been terminated by Miss Priscilla's *begira*, they were inclined to rebel against a renewal of female sovereignty, and would, if she should show the faintest sign of weakness, mutiny, and pass a *Salic law* for her deposition."

Thus she explained her unwonted seriousness, and Milly, seeing that no further elucidation would be vouchsafed, even to her, forbore to press the matter.

Of three of Edith's subjects there is not much to record. "Old Mr. Huntingdon," as he was now called almost universally, in contradistinction to young Mr. Huntingdon, whose head towered far above his father's snow-crowned one, lived on his own placid life; theorizing and experimenting, dimly awake to the busy world around him; gladly leaving the management of his monetary affairs in the hands of his able and faithful assistant, Courtney; hinting delicately to that young man that it would not be disagreeable to him to receive him as a permanent member of his family; hinting, vaguely again, to his daughter that it would be a source of great satisfaction to him to see her well married before he died, which, in the course of natural events, must be before many more years passed; growing day by day more averse to being called upon for any exertion of authority, asking but to be allowed to finish the remnant of his pilgrimage

in his own slow, gentle fashion, till he should reach the bottom of the hill, where he would lay him gently down to rest by the side of the dear helpmate who had gone before so many years ago; lay him down without one regret for the past or one fear for the future.

Mr. Groves still remained, ostensibly as tutor, though his office had long since become a sinecure, Frank declaring "he had been crammed enough for a poor crippled devil, who could never make a figure in the world, anyhow, and that he would take it out in reading anything he wanted to know about and letting the rest go by." But as for his lameness, owing to Courtney's unceasing endeavors to get him to take as much out-of-door exercise as he could stand, it had been so mitigated that his crutch had been discarded for a cane, and the awkward hobble which had been a source of such bitter mortification to the sensitive boy was toned down into a limp, perceptible, of course, but not to a painful degree. Apart from that one physical drawback, Frank Huntingdon was certainly well calculated to attract attention in a crowd. Slender and tall, with a finely-shaped head, fine eyes, and a mouth of almost womanish sweetness, he was just such a looking man as an ardent, generous-hearted girl would fall madly in love with at first sight, and love all the more dearly because of his infirmity; a man destined to be loved far more earnestly than he would ever love in return. So far, he had never felt even a momentary attachment for one of the opposite sex. Accustomed from an early age to think of himself as being set apart by his infirmity, he had

guarded himself against any possible disappointments in the way of love affairs by cultivating a philosophical contempt for the sex in general, and professed to entertain the poorest opinion in the world of their abilities and attractions. How his philosophy will stand the test of a pair of bright eyes and a dimple remains to be seen. The strongest attachment of his life, so far, was that for Courtney Dupont; it was a revision of Damon and Pythias; and whenever Courtney alluded to the probability of his taking his final departure soon, Frank would fly into such a passion of outraged feeling that for the time being the subject would be dropped.

Finally, for Courtney himself. For over two years now had he been an inmate of the Hall, and in that time he had made giant strides in the paths of knowledge which he had panted so long to enter upon. Much can be accomplished in that length of time by a boy with his abilities and his earnest desire to acquire, and now, at the age of twenty-two, he was prepared to fight his own battle in the world.

His situation was by no means that of a dependent, for, after the first few months of his stay, he had made himself invaluable to his benefactor, as a general supervisor of his planting interests; but the time had now certainly come when he must leave. He could not answer Frank's impetuous demands for the reason why he *must* go, truthfully, for he could not tell him that he was a renegade and an impostor. He could not reply to Mr. Huntingdon's earnest entreaties that he would try and make himself contented to settle down at the Hall, by telling that pure-hearted old man, whose whole

life was guiltless of a stain, that he was a husband,—a husband, but recreant to the vows he had made to love and protect. He could not answer the mute appeal in Edith's brown eyes by telling her the truth; he could not, for he had let this brown-eyed, queenly Southern girl entirely displace poor blue-eyed Bessie,—nay, not displace her, for he *loved* now for the first time, and love made a coward of him. He knew that no good could come of his longer stay; he knew that his departure was the one course open to him as a man of honor; he knew that Edith would loathe and scorn him when the truth came out, as come it must, and yet he lingered. Lingered and loved; loved, but guarded his guilty secret jealously, for to have whispered it would have been *actual* guilt; whereas to keep on loving this pure, noble girl, to manifest that love by the thousand-and-one nameless little attentions that wakeful love dictates, to keep on turning a deaf ear to the voice of conscience that was forever whispering to him of his deserted wife, to shut his eyes to the picture of a pale-faced, broken-hearted woman that fancy would hold up for his inspection, all this was not sin, or, if it was, it was not recognizable sin, it was intangible guilt, guilt that might be gotten out of on the plea of misconstructions, misunderstandings, good intentions, etc. And so the days melted into weeks and the weeks into months, and still he *could* not go; but stayed on, dreaming wild dreams, impossible dreams, guilty dreams.

And Edith? She loved this pseudo-milliner's-boy with all the fervor and purity of the first love of an earnest, truthful, strong nature; loved him with a love

that comes but once in a woman's lifetime; loved him the more for the "delicacy that forbade his telling the love that was so apparent in his every action to the heiress of his benefactor;" loved him, and came to a *resolve*.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### EDITH'S RESOLVE.

**T**HE way in which Edith came to the resolve I have alluded to was in this wise:

Day by day Courtney seemed to grow more silent, more reserved in his manners, toward her especially, until, from having been the light and life of the house, he had rapidly become gloomy, almost to moroseness. But with all his reserve there was a tender reverence for her, an eager desire to fulfill the slightest expressed wish of hers, a feverish anxiety to win from her tokens of kindness and good-will in return, which touched her to the heart. With all her inexperience in love affairs, in actual life, she could not be blind to this insensible homage. If it did not mean that Courtney loved her, what did it mean? And if he loved her, why not tell her so? He is too proud, argued the girl, in defense of the ideal Courtney Dupont, whom she loved so dearly, he is too proud; remembering how he came into our family, he fears a rebuff, and he will not risk it. He thinks I am cold and haughty, and would scorn to marry the boy who came here as an object of charity

almost. Ah! if he only knew! if he only knew! if he only knew that I *loved* him! if he only knew *how* I love him, we would be so happy, so very, very, very happy! Courtney, dear, dear Courtney, how can I remove this bar from between us? I *know* he loves me, oh, I know it, I know it, I know it! I wonder—— But what Edith wondered I cannot tell, for she did not even whisper it to the listening breeze, but she hid her blushing face in her little hands and was silent. In that silent moment was born her resolve.

\* \* \* \* \*

The horses were saddled and waiting in front of the house for Mr. Dupont and Miss Huntingdon to take their usual evening ride. Courtney stood on the upper step of the low flight that led from the veranda to the lawn, impatiently tapping his boot with his riding-whip, while his left hand twirled his moustache in a nervous style common with him in moments of abstraction. He gazed over the lawn with a moody expression in his fine eyes, an expression that betokened a heart ill at ease. So abstracted was he that he did not hear Edith's light footfall as she approached him through the hall behind, so that she stood close by his side before he aroused himself.

"I have kept my lord waiting five minutes," said Edith, "and he signifies his royal displeasure by a moody brow and a savage attack on his unoffending moustache."

"You are entirely mistaken, Miss Edith," he replied, his face lighting up as she stood before him. "Thoughts of you are little likely to produce black brows or savage feelings. Edith, you are glorious in

that costume!" he continued, in a burst of involuntary admiration.

"Mr. Dupont knows that I detest flattery, and personal compliments between two persons who have lived together in the close intimacy that we have for years past is not only in bad taste, but is simple nonsense. So help me on my horse and let us be off."

He obeyed, uttering but one protest against her charges. "You know I do *not* flatter, and you also know that you *are* gloriously beautiful."

"Incorrigible!" laughed Edith. "I know that my habit fits me admirably, and that this hat is very becoming, and that if we do not start and get through with our ride very soon, we will certainly be caught in a rain, which will render the said habit and the said hat wonderfully less becoming and the said Edith decidedly less glorious."

The management of two spirited and impatient horses occupied their attention for the next few moments, and they were soon cantering briskly down the road, "as handsome a couple as you'd find in Louisiana," as old Peter exclaimed, after opening the gates for them, staring after their retreating figures in open-mouthed admiration.

"A match, sure," was the comment passed by more than one horseman as they dashed by, buoyant and glowing with the exercise and engaged in animated conversation.

A loud clap of thunder recalled Edith's prediction. "I told you so," she exclaimed, as if she had been predicting that identical clap of thunder. "Now, what are we to do? There is not a house within three miles

of us, and I don't want to get wet. What *shall* we do?"

"There is the church," suggested Mr. Dupont.

"Certainly," replied Edith.

So, without pausing another moment, they turned aside through a grove, and drew rein at a little wooden house, which did double service as church and general public hall on the few occasions when orators or stump speakers from the outside world of politics stumbled into this rural district. As the possessions of this little church were not such as to invite the rapacity of thieves, it was never locked; and Edith, springing lightly from her saddle, entered the building, while Courtney sought shelter for their horses.

When he returned he found her sitting at the melodeon, which did duty for organ, and her rich voice was filling the little church with a flood of melody. Loving music passionately, and loving above all things the music of *her* voice, he entered noiselessly, and seated himself in a pew some distance behind her.

Tune after tune from the pages of the "Carmina Sacra" before her sang Edith, finally selecting that heart-touching melody, "Come ye Disconsolate."

Under the influence of the soul-melting music, Courtney Dupont's heart ached with a conscious load of guilt. Ah! how he longed for the moral courage to rise up from his seat, to go to yonder fair girl, whose feeling rendering of the holy promises had just filled his soul with such a vivid conviction of his own sinfulness, tell her who and what he was; tell her of the great sin of his life; tell her of his mighty love for her; and implore her, by that love, not to loathe and detest

him as an impostor, but to pity and forgive him, as he went hence to see her no more. But moral courage was the one thing lacking in Courtney Dupont's character; so, instead of following the faint whispers of awakening conscience, he bowed his head on the pew in front of him and listened to her singing in utter absorption.

Tired of the sound of her own voice, Edith rose from the melodeon, wondering what could have become of Courtney. As she turned, she saw him, saw him sitting with his arms folded on the back of the pew in front of him and his head bowed on his arms. For a moment she stood gazing at the motionless figure; then she caught her breath quick and hard, as one does during some great mental struggle; then the light of a great determination came into her eyes, and she advanced toward him with a quick, resolute step, as if fearful of losing courage. He was sitting on the end of the pew close to the aisle.

Dropping noiselessly on her knees beside him, Edith Huntingdon spoke: "Courtney Dupont, look at me."

He raised his head suddenly, and Edith saw that the veins on his forehead were corded and his mouth was quivering with uncontrollable emotion. He obeyed her; he looked at her,—looked at her with his eyes full of gloom and of love.

"Courtney Dupont,"—and her voice had an unwonted tremor in it,—"*do you love me?*"

"With all my soul," answered the unhappy man, in a voice husky with emotion.

"Then why not tell me so?" went on the devoted girl, laying one hand on his shoulder, while her face

crimsoned with blushes. "Why not tell me so, *dear Courtney*? Did you fancy that because I was rich and you were poor that that could make any difference? Did you fancy,—oh! Courtney, *did* you think I could be ungenerous enough to scorn your love because my position in the world happens to be a little loftier than yours? If you did, Courtney, and if it is such foolish fears as these that have kept you silent so long, you do not deserve to be loved so dearly, so very entirely, dear Courtney, as I do love you."

"Edith! Edith! for God's sake, not another word, or you will drive me mad!"

Stung to frenzy, Edith sprang to her feet and confronted him. What did it mean? What could it mean? God of mercy! had her mighty sacrifice of pride been made for nothing? Had she stooped to give her love, unasked, to this man, only to have it refused? Oh, that the storm that was raging so wildly without would send some kind thunderbolt to kill her where she stood, so that this moment of supreme shame might be her last upon earth! How could she survive it? How could she ride home by his side? *She*, the haughty Edith Huntingdon, rejected and scorned by *him*, the charity-boy from a milliner's shop! But then—but then—what *did* it mean? He had said that he loved her "with all his soul." Oh, God! if he would only speak!

She fastened her eyes upon his face. Surely, if ever love shone through a man's eyes, it was gleaming in his. But his face was troubled, it was agonized; love and misery seemed struggling for the mastery. When would he speak? What did it mean?

And he? Surely the agony of that supreme moment was expiation enough for his great sin. With lightning rapidity his thoughts flew back to the hour of his almost compulsory marriage, and he almost cursed aloud as he thought of the craven weakness that had made him yield to the wiles of Bessie's designing mother. He knew now that she had foreseen just such a moment as this. Oh, God! if he were but free! Free to open his arms and take into them the noble, generous girl who had just offered him the rich treasures of her heart; offered—voluntarily given herself to him, and he dared not take her to his heart and thank her for the priceless gift. He gasped for breath. He yearned to tell her the whole vile truth. He saw the agony on her face; he knew what it meant. He *would* take her into his arms, he *would* be happy this one little evening, and then to-morrow,—ah, well, to-morrow!

He opened his arms. "Edith, my darling! my brave, brave darling!" His arms were around her, his lips were pressed to hers; pressed to hers with a passionate warmth that had never been bestowed upon poor Bessie's quivering lips; pressed to hers in one long, lingering kiss of intense passion.

"Then you *do* love me, and you do not despise me for my boldness?" It was Edith who spoke first, spoke with her head hidden on his shoulder to conceal the burning blushes that dyed her cheeks.

"Love you? God only knows how dearly! Despise you, my noble, generous darling? God grant that you may not turn from me in scorn and loathing before twenty-four more hours roll over our heads!"



"Courtney, what do you mean? You acted so strangely awhile ago that you frightened me into thinking I had given my love where it was not wanted, and now you are hinting at something terrible by way of frightening me out of your arms again. Tell me, dearest, what is it that weighs so on your mind? Do not be afraid to tell me. Cannot you trust to my love for forgiveness? What would I not forgive you, Courtney? Anything, anything but being false to me. Love me, dearest, truthfully, faithfully, and fondly, and I will say to you, as a true woman has said before me:

"I know not, I ask not if guilt's in that heart;  
I but know that I love thee, whatever thou art."

"Edith, my darling, hush; you do not know what you are talking about."

"Well, if you object to such unquestioning devotion, I will make a few exceptions, and say that I would forgive you anything but incendiarism, larceny, or bigamy."

It was well that she could not see the face of her lover, as she strove thus to lighten his spirits by adopting a bantering strain, for it was white and drawn with agony.

"Come, Courtney, tell me all your troubles, dearest, and here, in God's house, I will grant you absolution, and promise to be your good and loving Edith all the rest of my days." And she raised her face to look into his, with a soul full of generous love shining through her eyes.

"Not this evening, Edith; to-morrow, love; let me have this one evening of perfect happiness."

"Certainly, dear Courtney, if you are really so unwilling. But I cannot imagine why you should hesitate *now* to tell me anything. I think I have set you an example of boldness that ought to be very encouraging. But if you wish it, to-morrow let it be."

And thus Courtney Dupont glided into "actual" sin.

## CHAPTER XV.

### TO-MORROW.

THE sun was sinking to rest, throwing angry gleams of red athwart the skies from his couch of storm-clouds, and the frightened birds were settling themselves for the night in their rain-beaten nests, with twitterings of satisfaction at the departed danger, before Edith and Courtney started homeward,—she rosy with her new-found happiness; he calm and self-possessed outwardly, though paler and sterner than was his wont, while the fires of hell were raging in his bosom.

As he lifted Edith from the saddle at the Hall door, she whispered in his ear: "Tell no one yet; leave that for me."

Nothing could have accorded more entirely with his own views and desires, so he signified his assent merely by a warm pressure of the little gloved hand that lay in his for a moment after she reached the ground.

He left the family circle earlier than usual that night, on the plea of letters to write. Edith left it on no plea at all. She wanted to be alone, alone with her happiness, and she was too habitually independent to think it at all necessary to feign any ostensible object for retiring to her room at the hour which suited her best.

So she sat on until late into the night, recalling every look, every word, every term of endearment, every caress, building a pedestal whereon to enshrine this idol of clay, utterly unconscious, in her unreasoning love, that it was not made of the stuff that gods are made of. Let her love on, let her dream on; it is in these fond delusions, in these baseless dreams, that woman finds her brightest joy; it is in the awakening, in the finding of the truth, that her happiness meets its death.

While Edith mused on her precious secret, weaving bright fancies of the joyous future that she and her lover were to spend together, he was pacing the floor of his own room in a frame of mind anything but enviable. His lips were blue and livid, his brow contracted with the tortured workings of his brain. "To-morrow," he muttered, "to-morrow I must tell her all; tell her all and leave her forever; leave her and go back to that poor, little, namby-pamby baby and her hag of a mother. Damn her! damn my own craven heart, that allowed me to be cajoled into her toils! God of mercy! what a future would be before me if I were but free! Oh, Edith! Edith! why did you speak, my darling? Why not have let me go on loving you, living in your dear presence, basking in the light of your countenance? Why, why did you speak? Why did you force me to

acknowledge the love that was consuming me, for its utterance has made it guilt?"

Could he tell her? must he tell her? might he not leave early in the morning, on the plea of a sudden summons, and never come back, thus leaving her to suppose him dead? But then she had said she "could forgive him anything but being false to her," and that course of conduct would inevitably imply faithlessness, and could be accounted for in no other way. How would she receive a full confession of the truth? Would she not reproach him for having dared to take her to his heart and breathe into her ears words that should have been uttered to his wife alone? Would she pity him for the boyish weakness and folly that had rendered him so powerless in the hands of a strong, designing virago? Would she believe that he loved her as he had never loved his commonplace, weak little wife? Would not those glorious brown eyes, that had only this evening gazed into his own with a look of such unfathomable love, flash with scorn and hatred of him as he told his pitiful tale? Would not the lips that had given him such sweet assurances of deathless devotion open to hurl torrents of indignant reproaches upon him? Could he stand it? Could he endure contumely where he had already learned to look for love? The cold drops of mortal agony stood out on his forehead. He felt suffocated. His brain was on fire. He threw his window open and seated himself where the damp night air could cool his burning forehead. Hour after hour he sat motionless, his arms folded on the window-sill and his head bowed upon them; and the gray of the morning found him still in

the same position, having fallen into a heavy slumber. The dews of the night had fallen on his head and his dark hair lay matted and damp about his forehead. Thus he was found by the boy who came in to get his boots to blacken.

"Good God! Master Court, you ben sittin' thar all this night; yo' bed don't look like it ben slep in. Wake up, Master Court! sun most up." And the boy had to administer several pretty rough shakes to the young man's shoulder before he could rouse him. He succeeded finally, and Courtney roused himself with an effort from the lethargic sleep which had fallen upon him unawares.

"Close the window, Ben, and make me a fire; I am cold." And his teeth were of a verity chattering.

"Cole, Master Court, dis fine mornin'? Den you's sholy got a chill."

"Well, maybe I have," replied the young man, impatiently; "but you do as I bid you." And he rose from his cramped position and moved toward his bed. He soon felt convinced that Ben was right, and that his exposure to the night air was in all probability about to entail on him a series of chills. By the time he had undressed and gotten under cover, it was upon him in full blast.

In the midst of his physical sufferings, his first thought was that he had one more day of grace. He could not tell Edith until he was well enough to leave, and the thought that he might enjoy a few more days of her loved society reconciled him to any amount of suffering, present or prospective.

"Ben," he called, as the boy was making prepara-

tions to leave the room, "you need not tell anybody that you found me sitting up this morning. You hear, sir?"

"Yas, sah, I hears."

"Well, mind that you heed, too."

"Yas, Master Court, I heeds."

So Ben proceeded to the kitchen and informed Darkis that "Master Courtney had been on a big spree and couldn't get to bed; but she wasn't, on no account, to let Missy hear nothin' about it, for she mought give Master Court a rowin' up, which wouldn't be pertic'larly agreeable, all things considerin'."

And Darkis replied: "She should think not, indeed, as Missy's rowin's up warn't things to be sneezed at by nobody, nohow."

Thus Ben heard and heeded.

Ben notified the household that Mr. Dupont was in bed with a severe chill, and Frank and Mr. Groves were soon by his bedside.

"I don't think it will amount to much, Frank," the sick man said, when he saw his friends standing by his side; "but if it should set in for a spell, I want no one but you and Ben to come near me. Will you promise me?" And he grasped Frank's hand and gazed up into his face with an eager, anxious look that seemed entirely disproportioned to the occasion.

"Why, Court, old fellow! what ails you? You are talking as if you were booked for Davy Jones's locker."

"Promise me, Frank," replied the other, impatiently.

"Well, I'll promise, as long as you're so deuced

anxious; but I'll tell you beforehand that the devil a bit of a nurse am I. You'd better swap Ben and myself for Edith and Mr. Groves, and maybe you'll stand a better chance of getting on your legs again."

"Edith!" exclaimed the sick man,—“anybody but her. Promise me, Frank, if I get very sick, if I should become delirious, that you won't let her come near me. You know,” for it seemed to strike him that his request must sound very strangely,” it might not be a common fever; it might be something contagious; keep her from me, Frank. Promise me, if you love her or care for me.”

“Oho! that's the dodge, is it? I am to immolate myself on the altar of brotherly love, and save Ede at the risk of my own precious self. Well, old boy, have it as you will, though I advise you once more to swap. Ben's talents in the sleeping line are of the first order, and I don't think I'm made of the stuff they cut Sisters of Charity out of; but we'll do our level best, and that's all you can ask of any man.”

Courtney was in no mood to reply to banter, so he turned his face to the wall and closed his eyes. He was weary of his life, he was sick at heart; he almost hoped that this sickness might terminate fatally, for then Edith need never know to what a scoundrel she had given herself. He could die in her arms. Her face would be the last one he would see on earth, and she would mourn for him if he died,—mourn for him and love his memory. Would not that be better than living,—living to tell her what he was, and then going from her presence loaded with her contempt and hatred? Yes, better, far better. He hoped he *would* die, and

he almost resolved that he would do nothing to aid in his own recovery.

A raging fever succeeded the chill, and it soon became apparent that he *was* “in for a spell.” Acting on the promise that Courtney had exacted from him, Frank told Edith of the request made by the sick man.

“My noble Courtney!” murmured the girl to herself. “He was afraid of compromising me, as no one knows that we are engaged.”

“Why do you suppose he made that request, brother?” she asked Frank.

“I don't know. He said something about contagion and the devil knows what.”

“I am going to nurse him, Frank.”

“You are going to do nothing of the kind, Edith.”

“How can you prevent me, sir?” And she looked up into his face with a glance of saucy defiance.

“Well, I should think when a young gentleman especially requests that a young lady should be excluded from his bedside, it certainly hardly becomes her to be the one to persist.”

“Frank Huntingdon, hush! I know why he made that request. It was to shield me. I am engaged to be married to Mr. Dupont, and I intend nursing him through his illness. I am to be his wife, sir.”

“The deuce you are!” said Frank, a little surprised, but evidently not at all displeased. “Well, I guess you are right about Court's reasons for not wanting you in there; and, now the cat's out of the bag, I'm sure I am perfectly willing to resign my post as head nurse. Not that I'm unwilling to wait on old Court, day and night; but a man is such a devilish bad hand

in a sick-room that the patient is in a bad fix who has no womankind interested in him."

"He is, indeed," assented Edith, with a smile, as she passed triumphantly through the door of the sick-room.

Now, I know that the knowing ones among my readers expect some startling revelations to be made during the height of Courtney's delirium; but, to tell you the truth, nothing of the kind happened. He was very sick, and for five or six days he was perfectly unconscious of the tender guardianship that Edith exercised over him. But in all his delirium he mentioned no name but hers. Her image seemed ever present with him. Love for her seemed the one idea in his crazed brain, and burning, eager expressions of adoration came incoherently from his parched lips in never-ending succession; but never a hint of the terrible gulf that was yawning between them.

It was on the tenth day of his sickness, about the hour of dusk, when he spoke the first rational words that had crossed his lips. Edith was sitting by the head of his bed, a little ways back, and Frank was sitting near the foot, where the invalid's eyes rested when he first opened them. Both of his nurses looked a little wan and thin from close confinement.

"Frank, what day of the month is this?"

"The seventeenth, old boy, and I'll be dogged if I aint glad to hear you talk sense once more."

"How long since I was taken sick?"

"Ten days, dearest," replied another voice than Frank's; and a loving face bent over his pillow and a soft pair of lips touched his forehead.

"Judging from appearances," said Frank, rising as he spoke, "I think you two can dispense with my services and presence." And he left the room, whistling "Come, haste to the Wedding."

"Edith,"—and a look of uneasiness flitted across the sick man's brow,—“have I been very sick? and have I talked a great deal of nonsense?"

"If calling on your darling and assuring her over and over again that you loved her and nobody but her, and raving in the most delicious manner about that same darling, be nonsense, then, dearest, you *have* talked a great deal of nonsense; but, ah! Courtney, I do love nonsense, and I do not intend that you shall retract one solitary assertion made during your delirium."

Courtney heaved a sigh of infinite relief. It was evident that he had not committed himself. He was too weak just yet to resume the maddening question of whether to speak or not to speak; and gave himself up to the placid happiness of being nursed back into health by the girl who loved him so dearly. So he waited for another to-morrow.

## CHAPTER XVI.

## A NEW ACTOR ON THE STAGE.

IN a darkened room, whose white-draped bed contained a whiter-faced occupant, sat an old, withered crone, doubled up close in the corner of the fireplace, so that the fumes from the short black pipe which she held between her lips might ascend by way of the chimney and not permeate the atmosphere of the sick-room. On the opposite side of the hearth sat a coarse, hard-featured woman who, for once in her life, was quiet and subdued. She held in her lap a bundle of wraps, and shawls, and flannels. She held this bundle very tenderly, and gazed down upon it with a strange look,—a look that seemed compounded of love, and pity, and bitterness, and anger; and of a truth there was a something of each of those various emotions filling the soul of this hard woman, for that bundle contained Bessie's baby; and as the woman swayed her knees gently back and forth, to still the restless movements of the tiny new-comer, she gave full vent to a flood of bitter thoughts touching Bessie's husband. The love and the pity were for baby and baby's mother; the anger and the bitterness were for the unnatural father.

"Whar's your darter's husband?" queried the "sage femme," taking her pipe from between her lips, and laying the slightest possible emphasis on the word "husband."

"He's down South," was the curt rejoinder, not given in the most amiable of voices.

"When's he expected home?"

"Don't know, indeed."

"Humph!"

"Mrs. Wise, I believe I can manage Bessie's case now myself, and if you'll name your charges, I'll pay you without asking you to stay any longer." And Mrs. Miller glared across the fireplace at the sage femme with a ferocious gleam in her hard black eyes. "But before you do go, ma'am, I'd like you to take a look at the ring on my girl's third finger, left hand, and if that don't satisfy you, maybe you'd like to know the name of the preacher as performed the ceremony."

"Lord save my soul and body, woman, you're techous in the extreme." And the old crone resumed her pipe, with a half-muttered apology.

Mrs. Miller glanced toward the bed, in fear lest her raised tones might have aroused the invalid. Bessie was wide awake, her eyes fastened on her mother's face with a startled look in them that could have been produced by but one thing. She had evidently heard every word they had said. She beckoned her mother to her side.

"Send her away, mother! send her away, quick, quick! She has slandered my husband,—my Courtney,—baby's father. Make her go, mother."

To calm her excitement, Mrs. Miller dismissed the old crone at once, and then she seated herself by her child's bedside and tried to talk soothingly to her, soothingly and hopefully. Tried, I say, for gentle-

ness and tenderness, or any womanliness, was something entirely out of Mrs. Miller's line.

"My baby is a girl, mother, isn't it?" asked Bessie, in a low, weak voice.

"Yes, Bessie, a girl, and a beauty it will be, some of these days, I want you."

"I'm sorry it's a girl, mother; it will grow up to be a woman, if it lives; and, oh! mother, women do have so much suffering to endure in this world. It looks as if it was nothing *but* suffering, mother; suffering always and forever, with such tiny little moments of happiness thrown in between that they only make the pain all the greater for the contrast." She paused from weakness. "Mother,"—and Bessie rose on her elbow with difficulty, and threw an arm around her parent's neck,—"*do you love me?*"

"Love you, my child?"—and the hard woman's voice was broken with sobs,—"*of course I love you, Bessie, though God knows I've taken but a poor way of showin' it sometimes. I've been a hard mother to you, Bessie, a hard and a harsh one, child; but I've loved you, my girl, all the way through, and whatever I've done I thought I was doin' for your good, and if it's turned out that I haven't, why, then, may God forgive me, and you too, my poor, deserted girl.*"

"Hush, mother,"—and she laid her emaciated hand over her mother's lips,—"*hush, and listen to me.*"

Mrs. Miller was silent.

"Mother, you remember that Courtney asked me to wait for him, and *you made him marry me, didn't you?*"

Mrs. Miller bowed her head, but gave utterance to no word of assent.

"So we won't blame him for *anything*. It was you and I that did wrong. You see, his love could not stand the test of absence; he has wearied of his wife, and he dreads to come back to her. Mother, I know it all; I feel it all. Do you think, because I defended him when you have spoken so harshly against him, that I have been so foolish as to think he loved me still? I know he does not, mother, but we will not try and force him back to his allegiance. I loved Courtney,—oh! mother, I love him now. I love him, love him, love him,—love him so well that if I could free him and let him go his way unencumbered by baby or me, I would gladly do it. And I want you to promise me something, mother,—promise me, and the keeping of your promise I will take as some atonement to me for all this misery, for you brought it on me, mother. Ah! you, and no one else. He was weak and yielded to you; I was weak and yielded to my heart."

"Bessie, Bessie, my girl, don't reproach me. God knows I thought I was doing the best for you. Don't reproach, but tell me how to atone and I'll do it, if it takes me the rest of my natural life."

"It's nothing very hard to do, mother; it's only to promise me that you will never take one step more in this matter. The harm is done, and cannot be undone. You secured me a husband, but you could not secure me his love. Let me manage for myself, mother. I do not want Courtney to hate my baby. Poor little one! she will never know what it is to have a father's love. Oh, my baby! my baby! why have you come into this world to grieve, and love, and suffer as your

wretched mother has done? Oh! if it were not a sin, I would pray God to take you back right now, baby; take you back before you have learned how to suffer; take you back before your little heart has learned how to ache." And she clasped the tiny form in her arms, wailing over it with a heart-broken wail.

Mrs. Miller promised Bessie to do as she asked, and then earnestly implored her not to excite herself. "You will make yourself worse, Bessie; you are risking your life."

"Well, what if I should die?" And she cast a look of apathetic despair up at her mother.

"For baby's sake, Bessie." Mrs. Miller knew that she was touching the right chord.

"Ah! well, yes, for baby's sake. Baby could not go with me, and *baby* would miss me." There was a world of pathetic meaning in the emphasis laid upon *baby*.

So Bessie and her baby struggled back to health in the little contracted city cottage, unaided, uncheered, save by that one hard woman, who seemed striving to atone to her injured child, by the most assiduous tenderness, for the misery she had been instrumental in bringing upon her; while Mr. Dupont was nursed back to his wonted state of robustness by the never-failing tenderness of a pure-hearted, loving woman, whose shoe-latchet he was not worthy to unloose.

## CHAPTER XVII.

## A WORD OR TWO MORE ABOUT BESSIE.

BESSIE'S confinement to her bed was terminated; but she arose from it in a listless and apathetic frame of mind pitiful to behold.

Queen Baby occupied her attention during the greater portion of the day; but, although she loved the little one with a love intensified by her own unhappiness, she took no pleasure in its existence. There was no joy to be derived from her baby, since Courtney was not there to rejoice with her. Baby had come into the world without being wanted, and, now that it was here, what was there in store for it? If she could hope that it would have won her husband back to her, she would have blessed Heaven for sending her baby. But she had no hope of any such happy result. Courtney had only been to see her twice in the long two years of his absence. The first visit was the one spoken of at length awhile back; the second had been a hurried one, about nine months or so before the period of which we are writing, when business for Mr. Huntingdon had called him to New York. Try as she would, during that second visit, to shut her eyes to the fact, Bessie had been compelled to see that the boyish love which had made her husband yield so readily to her mother's suggestion of an immediate marriage had died out entirely. Courtney was not only coolly



undemonstrative; he was irritable and petulant. He had found continual fault with her for her "dowdy dressing;" he had asked her if it was "utterly impossible to find some more stylish way of dressing her hair;" he had declared she was no more like the Bessie Miller whom he had fallen in love with than she was like the Witch of Endor.

To all of which Bessie replied meekly, heaving a little sigh, that the change was not in her; it was in himself.

At which he would get savage, and declare it was "a deuced shame for her to do him such an injustice. Just because a man asked his wife to try and make herself look a little decent, he was to be accused of thinking himself above her."

And as there is no answering the insanely unreasonable accusations of an entirely unreasonable man, Bessie wisely kept her peace, and wished she could make herself a little more like Courtney's stylish Southern friends. She knew she must present a fearful contrast. But, ah! if he *loved* her, would he be always drawing these contrasts? If he loved her, could the cut of her dress or the set of her hair worry him to such an extent? No, surely. Could *she* ever contrast *him* with others, to his disparagement? If he had continued a poor milliner's-boy, with shabby clothes and no "style," would she have loved him less? Ah, no, no, no! she *knew* she would not. And then she found herself wishing that he had never become anything but the shabbily-clothed milliner's-boy. She wished those people had never, never come across his path, for then he would have gone on loving her just

as she was. He would never have known that her dress was "dowdy" or her hair wanting in "style." But then that was selfish of her; she was wishing only what was for her own happiness, and grudging him what he had so hungered for. And maybe after he came home to live, and she could afford to dress a little better, and got plumper and rosier for being happy (for happiness is the true bloom of youth), she would look prettier and he would get to loving her again. So she would not reproach him; no good could come of that; they were tied tight and fast together, and she would stand a great deal before she would say one word that might possibly widen the breach.

Thus Bessie reasoned, schooling herself to endure in silence her elegant husband's unkind strictures on her general appearance.

As for Mrs. Miller, her son-in-law treated her with a savage acerbity that quelled her completely. He looked upon her as the true cause of his ill-starred marriage, and in proportion as he chafed at his bondage did he anathematize her as the instrument of it, and treat her accordingly. So, altogether, this second visit was not a very satisfactory one, and no one was very sorry when it came to an end.

After his return to the South, he had written but once to Bessie. The letter had reached her about two months before the birth of her baby. She had never even hinted to him that he would soon be a father, telling her mother, when asked if she had written about it, "that she wanted to give Courtney a surprise when he came home for good." But in her heart of hearts she felt that the announcement would not be

graciously received, and she shrank, therefore, from making it.

As I have said, she had received but one letter in answer to her imploring ones to let her hear from him. I give it to the reader as a specimen of conjugal urbanity:

"I have no time to write; my business and studies occupy me, to the exclusion of anything else. If you wish me to throw up all chance of making a good lawyer of myself, write and say so, and I'll come on at once. If it hurts you so to 'look and look for letters and never get them,' we had better drop the correspondence. I will be leaving here forever at the end of this year, and I think, on the whole, we can get along without any more writing up to that time. I'm sorry I have entailed so much trouble and suffering on you. We had better have waited. God knows it would have been better for us both."

That was all. And it was this letter that Bessie held in her hand on the first day that she was able to sit up. She held it up with the left hand, for on the right arm lay baby, who was seldom ever out of her lap.

She read the letter over twice, and then held it over the flame of the fire until it was entirely consumed. She saw it burn with pleasure. It was a cruel, cruel letter, and she had never written a line to him since she had received it.

Mrs. Miller came into the room as she dropped the burning paper from her hand; and offered to relieve her of the child.

"Mother," asked Bessie, as she laid back in her

rocking-chair with a sigh of weariness, "how long will it be before baby can do without me?"

"Do without *you*, Bessie? Why, what on earth, my child?—"

And the mother's face was full of anxious alarm.

"Oh, don't be afraid, mother, that I'm going to commit suicide; I have neither the courage nor the desire to do that. I only want to know how long it will be before you can take charge of baby for me and let me take a journey,—a journey for my health." And the poor girl smiled bitterly.

"Oh, well," exclaimed her mother, much relieved, "if that's all, baby and me can git along first-rate without you, for a little while, when she is six months old."

Bessie vouchsafed no further explanation, and her mother asked none, for the shrewd old woman divined her daughter's intention, in part, and had no desire to gainsay it.

Bessie's intention was this: she had read over every one of her husband's letters since she had recovered from her sickness, read them over carefully,—no great undertaking, since they were few in number, and laconic in the extreme. She had read them over with an object. If she could trace in his letters *only* weariness of the tie that bound them, *only* longings for freedom to enjoy his early manhood untrammelled by any responsibilities, she could endure it. She would suffer and wait,—nay, she would even have a faint hope that after he had seen the world and had sown his wild oats, and was tired of noise and bustle, he might find his way back to her faithful heart, and

they might be happy yet. But if another woman were in the question, if he had not only ceased to love her, but had learned to love another,—ah! then life would be a burden indeed. But no hint of such a thing did his letters convey. Of course, though, he would not tell her; she must answer that question for herself, and answer it she would.

She would disguise herself in some way and go to this Southern home of her husband's; she would see for herself; and then, if she found that Courtney were indeed the book-worm that he represented himself, and was still courting fame, and fame alone, she would come back with a load of misery taken off her heart. She would come back and wait patiently, if it were ten years before he chose to proclaim her his wife. But if, on the other hand, it was some dark-eyed or fair-haired girl who had stolen her Courtney's love, then,—well, then, she would come back, and she would take her baby and go somewhere where she would never hear of him, and where he could never find her. She would live for baby, if live she must; but, oh! she would be so glad if God would only take them both,—take them both out of a world that had no joy in store for them,—nothing but poverty, misery, and loneliness; and then if God would take her and baby out of Courtney's way, it would be better for him, too,—ah, yes, better, far better!

This was why Bessie wanted to know how soon her baby could do without her.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### MILDRED AND HER CARES.

"THERE'S no use talking, sister; my brains are all boiled out of my head now,—and these plaguey mosquitoes keep a fellow slappin' his shins so that he's got no time to work over a diagonal old sum like that." And Master George Vaughn, aged twelve, rose from his chair, in open rebellion against the gentle authority of his sister.

"Oh, Georgie! how can you?" and there was more of pitiful expostulation in the voice than of command. "You *must* learn your lessons, Georgie. You *know* I cannot afford to send you to school; and, oh! Georgie, you know how grieved mamma would be to see you trying me so."

"Mildred Vaughn, I am *astonished* at you!" It was Miss Priscilla who spoke this time. "If you was to take that *boy* and lock him *up* for an hour or two every *day*, and put him on a bread-and-water *diet*, maybe you'd make something of *him*."

"Maybe you'd like to try that experiment," cried the boy, turning on her, with flashing eyes, and all the evil in his nature quickened into action by her harsh interference.

"Maybe I *would*, sirrah," replied Miss Priscilla, without giving Mildred an opportunity to expostulate;

"and I warrant you I'd bring you to your senses before another hour."

"Sister, what did you bring that old scold here for, anyhow? I'm sure nobody wanted her, anyhow." And the infuriated boy gazed into Miss Hartley's flushed face with a look of angry defiance.

"Mildred Vaughn, was I asked to come here and live only to be insulted by that ill-mannered stripling? Are you going to sit there and hear him give me impudence by the wholesale and *never* open your mouth to stop him?"

"Miss Priscilla, if you will leave me alone with Georgie for a little while, please, I think I can make him ashamed of his rudeness."

Mildred's gentle voice sounded like the chime of sweet bells amid the hideous clangor of brazen trumpets, as it broke the momentary silence between the two disputants.

Miss Priscilla flounced out of the room without another word.

"Georgie,"—and the boy knew that his sister was in what he called one of her "determination moods,"—"I will have to keep you confined to your room until you apologize to Miss Priscilla for your rudeness."

"Well, then, sister, you'll have a jolly good time feedin' me in there, for I won't tell her I'm sorry, for I aint; and I'd do it over again if she was to come back into this room right now, and I'll *never* say I'm sorry if you keep me in that room till my head's as gray as old Mr. Huntingdon's, and my back's as crooked as old 'Crooked Peter's,' and my teeth's all gone, like old Miss Hartley's herself."

"Georgie, you *must* be more respectful," and Milly tried to make up in emphasis what she lacked in power. "I hate to punish you, Georgie, oh! you know I do; but you are getting perfectly uncontrollable, and something must be done. Oh, Georgie! what does make you so bad?"

"Sister, was I so very bad before she came here, poking her old nose and her sharp tongue into everybody else's business? Say now, sister, was I?"

"Georgie, Miss Priscilla came here to live with me because I was so lonely after poor mamma died. Oh, Georgie! how *can* you add so to my troubles, when you know I am so unhappy anyhow? how can you, Georgie, how can you?" And Mildred's sweet eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, sister! dog on it, don't cry; I'll do anything you please, sister, indeed I will, *darling* sister, only don't cry. I say, Miss Priscilla," and he raised his voice so that it could reach into the next room, where he felt certain Miss Hartley had carried her injured dignity, "I say, Miss Priscilla, sister Mildred says I'm sorry for my rudeness, and I reckon I am. Come along, Nell, let's go see if there's any birds in our trap." And the only half-subdued boy seized his hat and bounded through the open door to escape any more lecturing, nor was Nellie slow to follow him.

Mildred gazed after them with a weary ache at her heart. This was not the first scene of the kind that she had gone through with lately, and she had not reason to presume it would be the last.

It was a sultry day in August, and the enervating heat of the day, acting on her already high-strung

nerves, made her yield to an unusual weakness. She dropped her sewing in her lap, bowed her head on the lattice work-stand by her side, and burst into a flood of tears.

Was this to be her life forever,—one long, dull, monotonous round of duties? Thankless duties, sordid cares. No rest for heart or brain. No change,—no prospect of change,—no bright hopes for the future to help her bear the dreary present. Was it to be forever, *all* her life long? Would she be doomed to this joyless existence until she was an old, old woman? Was she to go on toiling, wearily, to bring up two turbulent children; to lead them aright, to control their fiery young spirits? She who was so powerless, by reason of her own gentle nature,—oh! how could she ever do it? How could she make them what they ought to be, without even any one to give her good wholesome advice; with no one, literally no one, to help her? Oh! it was so hard, so hard, and life was so dreary! And then Nellie and Georgie would get to hating her, because she was always curbing, and correcting, and reproving them. Oh! what should she do, what should she do?

She heard a heavy footfall on the little gravel pathway that led from the gate to the cottage door, and she barely had time to escape by a back door before a slow, familiar rap on the open door informed her that Mr. Groves had come to pay one of his semi-weekly visits.

"Do, my dear Miss Priscilla, go in to see him," she pleaded. "Excuse me to him; look at my eyes, I cannot go in; and oh! I *don't* want to see him." There

was the slightest possible intonation of petulance in Milly's voice.

Miss Hartley, who was always more willing to accommodate Mildred than any one else in the world, complied immediately. She ushered Mr. Groves into the room from which Mildred had just escaped, and set herself to entertaining him with right good-will.

But Mr. Groves was not very easy to be entertained under the happiest auspices, and this evening he seemed particularly distant. He answered Miss Priscilla's commonplaces at random. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead at intervals of every two or three minutes,—uttering a mild exclamation against the heat at each application of the handkerchief. An acute observer would have pronounced him to be a man laboring under some great internal agitation; but Miss Priscilla, not being an acute observer, simply wondered, "what in the plague had got into the man."

Finally, seeing no prospect of Milly's making her appearance without being especially asked for, Mr. Groves blurted out the hope that "Miss Mildred was perfectly well."

"Not perfectly well," answered Miss Hartley, "but suffering from a bad headache, brought on by worryin' with that torn-down boy, George, who certainly is the most unruly creature in the State of Louisiana, and he'll worry that poor girl into her grave before she's five years older," went on Miss Priscilla, who waxed eloquent as she dilated on the enormity of George's sins.

Her communication seemed to have the remarkable

effect of raising Mr. Groves's spirits two or three degrees. He would see Mildred, see her at once, and offer to relieve her poor, trembling shoulders of this weary burden. He would ask Milly to marry him, and he would be a father to Georgie and Nellie. He would educate the two little ones for her, and she, poor darling, should have rest and happiness all the remainder of her life. Thus to himself. Could he see Miss Vaughn, if only for five minutes? Thus to Miss Priscilla. Did he want to see her particularly? He did; very particularly. Miss Priscilla would see. She conveyed his request to Milly.

Now Mildred had never associated the idea of love or marriage with Mr. Groves's image, nor, indeed, do I suppose any other mortal who ever had known would have done. He was simply a sad-browed, quiet student, whom everybody in the neighborhood liked and treated with respect; but nobody had ever thought of Mr. Groves as at all likely to marry,—so, when Miss Priscilla said, "that he wanted to see her particularly," Milly got up to go in to him, wondering a little at what he could have to say to her, but not in the least prepared for what he did say.

She met him with her usual gentle self-possession, and held out a hand to him as she asked him how he was,—

To which he replied, "Remarkably warm, even for August," and then seated himself in sublime unconsciousness of the irrelevancy of his reply.

Now Heaven pity and aid a bashful man in this the most trying ordeal of his life. Mr. Groves was in love, and Mr. Groves wanted to tell his love. There sat the

unconscious owner of his lost heart, looking like an angel in her soft, white dress, with its black ribbons. A gentle-faced angel who would not for the world answer him harshly, even if her answer was to be a "no;" but to save his life he could not bring the words from his throat, where they had gathered in a huge lump, threatening strangulation to his parched lips.

I would not lower him in your estimation, dear reader, for worlds, therefore I will not attempt to put his declaration into his own words, for your amusement, but to his everlasting confusion.

How he did it he could not have told you himself half an hour afterward,—but, somehow or other, he *did* contrive to convey to his astonished hearer's senses the idea that he loved her very dearly,—had loved her very long, and if she would be his wife he would deal by her very tenderly, and would relieve her of all care or trouble in the future relative to rebellious Georgie. He would try and be a kind husband to her, and supply the place of a father to her little brother and sister.

It did not strike Mildred that there was anything uncouth in his way of tendering himself. She did not spend a thought on the homeliness of the face whose comeliness was certainly not enhanced by its crimson flush and the clammy drops that intense embarrassment had beaded his forehead with. She took no note of the nervous, shifting hands, or the shambling backward and forward of his feet, that seemed to find no resting-spot. She only saw before her a good man who had asked her to be his wife, and had promised her to ease her of the burden that was bearing so

particularly hard upon her shoulders at that very moment.

Of a truth Mr. Groves had made a wise choice in the matter of time. So he sat very patiently waiting for Milly's answer.

But Mildred could not answer so momentous a question without giving it an earnest thinking over. Would Mr. Groves allow her a day or two in which to consider her answer?

How little of hope the poor man had had of being accepted was betrayed by the eagerness with which he promised to wait as long as Mildred should desire.

Mr. Groves would wait.

And Miss Vaughn would think about it.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### MILDRED PROCEEDS TO THINK IT OVER.

**A**FTER Mr. Groves left the cottage, Milly returned to the room where she had left Miss Hartley, resumed her sewing, as if nothing unusual had occurred, and entered unconcernedly into a discussion of some domestic grievance, apparently totally oblivious to the fact that Miss Priscilla was "dying" to know what the "something particular" was that had made Mr. Groves so anxious to see Miss Vaughn.

Now, although in most things Milly was most essen-

tially womanly, and nothing but womanly, she was in two respects decidedly unwomanly,—she was discretion itself and she was reticent in the extreme. So Miss Hartley's laudable endeavors to satisfy the cravings of curiosity were destined to prove unsuccessful.

The long, hot day had drawn to a close. Milly had folded her sewing away and was preparing to light the lamps for the evening before Georgie and Nellie returned from their out-door ramblings. When they did come in, there was not the faintest lingering sign of ill-temper in Georgie's frank face. The boy had a high temper, but by no means a bad one; and although when his passion was aroused it was for the time being perfectly ungovernable, it was like a midsummer thunder-storm, soon exhausted, and leaving the atmosphere all the purer and brighter for having been.

They had gone up to the Hall, and Miss Edith had given one of them a basket of luscious fruits for sister Mildred and the other a beautiful bouquet. And Mr. Courtney was out of his room at last, lying in the hammock on the front gallery; but, oh! he looked so white and bad. And Dr. Tilman was there, too; and Nellie had heard him tell Miss Edith that a new doctor was going to come and stay in Bedford for him, because he was going to start for Europe the last of this month. And so the little gossips ran on, giving the news gathered during their visit to the Hall, finding rather an abstracted listener in Mildred, but a decidedly willing one in Miss Hartley, who was never too scrupulous as to how she obtained local items, be it through a child's mouth or through the lower medium of the servants.

Milly hurried through the twilight tea and managed to get the household off to bed at an earlier hour than usual, on the plea of having a bad headache; which was a true enough plea, for what with the heat of the day, and Georgie's bad behavior, and Mr. Groves's visit, her head did ache most painfully.

When Miss Priscilla and the two children were finally disposed of for the night, Mildred took a low rocking-chair and moved it out on the little vine-covered portico that made such a pretty picture over the front door of the little cottage, as viewed from the public road. Her head ached so that she could not endure the close atmosphere of her bedroom. Besides, she wanted to think,—think calmly and at leisure; and Miss Priscilla had such a worrying way of talking after she got in bed that Milly wanted to stay out of the room until she was assured that Miss Hartley slept the sleep of the just.

It was very still and calm out of doors that quiet summer night. The air was fragrant with the odor of the yellow jasmine vine that clambered over the latticed portico, and a faint breeze stirred the restless leaves of the tall cottonwood-trees that stood, sentinel-like, around the little house. There was no moon; but the stars shone with an intense brilliancy that made the darkness faintly luminous. But Mildred was not star-gazing, nor drinking in the odors of the jasmine; she was holding her poor aching head with both of her little hands, and trying to decide the most momentous question that a woman can ever be called upon to answer.

Alas for the chances of a wooer when a woman

asks for time "to think about it!" If he be the chosen lord of her heart, if she loves him as every true woman desires to love the man to whom she is to promise unquestioning obedience, loves him fondly, earnestly, and solemnly, then what need for thinking over it! Her lips are tremulously eager to sanction the choice of her heart and give utterance to that little word "yes," promptly, unequivocally, nay, almost gratefully, as soon as her conquering hero makes it "proper" for her to do so.

But when a woman asks for time to think it over, it is either because she has not strength of character to give a decided negative at once, and desires time to convey her refusal in delicate terms, or else there are reasons of policy which may dictate "yes" when her heart says "no."

This was exactly the position that Mildred Vaughn found herself in. She did not love Mr. Groves; she did not even try to deceive herself into thinking that she ever could learn to love him; for not only was her heart *not* inclined Grovesward, which of itself would have been obstacle enough in the path of so timorous a wooer, but it *was* inclined in another direction.

I hope, my dear Miss Particularity Prudence, that you won't ostracize my favorite Milly entirely; but the truth must be told,—she had fallen desperately, hopelessly, but *truly* in love with a man who had nothing in the world to give her in return for the unselfish devotion of her pure heart but tender friendship and the profoundest respect.

And Milly saw both sides of the question as clearly as you and I see it. She knew that she loved Dr.



Tilman, and she knew that Dr. Tilman only liked her. She was not in the least ashamed of this unsolicited regard for that good, strong man; not ashamed to nurse it in her heart of hearts; for, though it was a hapless, joyless love, that might never see the light, it was nevertheless very strong and very pure, and found its nourishment in weaving bright fancies for *his* aggrandizement, in wishing loving wishes for *his* happiness, in praying earnest prayers for *his* welfare. All for him, nothing for herself. Loving, as womanly women always do love, with a sublime self-abnegation that is at once pitiful and beautiful. She loved Dr. Tilman as she would never, never love anybody else, *never*. So whether she loved Mr. Groves or not was not the question under consideration. The question was, should she marry Mr. Groves or should she not? She felt very certain that if she were entirely alone in the world, she would have given him a prompt and decided negative for answer, without asking for time to think. But would she be right in throwing away so great a good for Georgie? For a good it undoubtedly was. She was by no means rich, and would never be able to give Georgie's bright mind the advantages in the way of schooling to which it was entitled. Mr. Groves was a thorough scholar, and had expressed himself anxious to give the boy a good education. Georgie, furthermore, was of a decidedly unruly disposition, and, under her weak woman's sway, promised to grow up self-willed and headstrong. Mr. Groves, though not a self-assertive man, was morally strong. He had told her that he would relieve her of all responsibility and anxiety on the boy's account. He had

promised her rest,—yes, rest and perfect peace she would undoubtedly gain by a marriage with Mr. Groves. Should she say “yes” when he came back to-morrow for his final answer? She thought she would.

For the space of five minutes Mr. Groves's star was in the ascendant. Well had it been for him if he had been bodily present on that little vine-covered portico as Milly's cogitations reached this point; for I think if he had been, Milly would have put her little white hand into his and she would have said to him: “Yes, I will be your wife, Mr. Groves, and I will do my very best to be a good one.” And she would have kept her word; and he, poor, lonely man, would have been happier than he had ever hoped to be since that time, long, long ago, when a young girl, false as fair, had promised him one week to be his wife, and had sent him a daintily-perfumed note the next, telling him “she had searched her heart,” etc. We've all heard the story a thousand times, where the searching of the heart is generally followed by the transference of the hand to some richer or otherwise better-favored suitor. Well,—but for Milly, and Mr. Groves's chances of winning her hand.

I said “if he had been there;” but he was not. Here, if I inclined to the discursive style in writing, what a bulky chapter I might insert on the subject of that one little word, “if!” How I could descant on the “woes unnumbered” that might have been escaped but for an *if*; the joys unspeakable that would have fallen to the share of some hapless wight but for the intervention of an inexorable *if*; the Croesus-like for-

tunes that would have been amassed by yon tatterdemon *if* he had done so and so, or *if* he had left undone another so and so! And thus on forever. But as this is a story, and not an essay, such a digression would be decidedly misplaced, and might lay me, the newly-fledged authoress, under the crushing imputation of verbosity.

Mr. Groves was not there, but just as Mildred had come to the conclusion that she would give him the right to be there for all time to come, the wheel of fortune gave a turn, carrying Mr. Groves's chance of winning a prize downward in the revolution, to come uppermost never more.

The quick whirr of wheels, a pause before the cottage gate, the sound of the little wicket opening and closing again, a few strong, firm strides up the little gravel path, and Dr. Tilman's lofty figure loomed between Milly and the starlight.

She had been thinking so deeply, and *he* had been so intimately connected with her brain-work, that she was almost startled at his actual presence in so unexpected a manner. Something of this must have influenced her conduct, for she greeted him in a strangely embarrassed manner, a fact his quick eye took in at once.

"It is rather late for an evening call, Miss Mildred," he began, seating himself, unasked, on the upper steps of the low flight that led from the portico, "but as I saw the light still shining through the sitting-room windows, I took it for granted that I would find some of you still up, and concluded to come in and make my adieus this evening, instead of waiting for to-morrow,

as I had originally intended, for I expect to be overwhelmingly busy from this until I leave."

"His adieus, until he left!" Milly repeated the words over in her wildly-beating heart,—then she remembered what the children had said in the evening,—and her heart ached so with its burden of anguished love, and the great sorrow that had come upon it, in hearing that he was going to disappear entirely from her life, that she could have cried aloud. She sat dumb under this new trouble.

"I am going to Europe; in fact I'm going everywhere, including the desert of Sahara, I guess, Miss Milly, going to be gone I can hardly tell how many years; have you no friendly regrets to bestow on me at parting? no kindly wishes for me to carry with me as a souvenir of friendship?"

Friendly regrets, kindly wishes! The words sounded like bitter mockery to the girl whose soul was submerged in a sea of misery at the thought that he was going entirely out of her life. That she might never, never see him again. That he was going to encounter perils by sea and land, from which she, with all her mighty love, was powerless to shield him. He was going to be gone, he said, he knew not how many years. He was going away from her without one regret. He had come to bid her good-by, as he had gone, or would go, to every lady friend in Bedford. He asked her for "friendly regrets," when she would have given him her life; he asked her for "kindly wishes," when she yearned to lavish a soul full of devotion on him. With lightning rapidity these thoughts surged over Milly's aching heart, even while

she was trying to murmur the kindly wishes and friendly regrets that he had asked her for.

"What had brought him to so sudden a conclusion?" she would ask him.

"It was not sudden," he replied to her question. "He had been thinking of it for some months, but he had just now succeeded in getting an old friend and brother in the profession to consent to take charge of his practice during his absence, and his preparations for a departure were now almost complete."

"They would all miss him very much," Milly ventured to say, although her voice would tremble a little in spite of her. "She knew he would be sadly missed at the Hall."

Dr. Tilman gave a short, quick, derisive little laugh. "Miss Vaughn was mistaken,—he did not flatter himself that he would be missed anywhere very much; but at the Hall, undoubtedly, not at all."

"He did the Hall an injustice." Milly was always ready to defend her friends. "He *knew* that they would miss him sadly, and Edith especially, for she had often heard Edith declare that of the many who were always only too anxious to counsel her, and tell her what to do and what not to do, she infinitely preferred her best friend, Dr. Tilman, for he spoke to her as if he had some regard for her as a rational being, and did not treat her as if she were a totally irresponsible machine, that must be everlastingly wound up and regulated, and having its hands set right like a badly-made clock."

Doctor Tilman smiled slightly at the conceit, but was still skeptical on the score of Edith's missing him much.

"She is too happy to miss an old friend much," he went on. "You know she and Dupont make no secret of their engagement, and I presume long before I return she will have settled down as a dignified and charming matron."

"Dear Edith,—I hope she will be happy," said Milly fervently.

"God grant that she may," responded Dr. Tilman, in a very low and very earnest voice.

Then Milly thought that she knew why Dr. Tilman was going to leave Bedford. And her soul was full of wonder at the strange perversity of the human heart. To think that a woman who *could* have married Dr. Tilman should prefer to marry Courtney Dupont! She wondered if Edith Huntingdon loved Courtney Dupont,—unconsciously she had wondered aloud.

Dr. Tilman felt assured that she did, for he was certain that Edith's was one of those fine, true natures that would scorn the loathsome prostitution of a hand without a heart.

That quotation gave the death-blow to Mr. Groves's hopes.

The man whom she secretly adored had, unconsciously, forewarned Milly that she was about to take a step which all "fine, true natures" ought to scorn.

Thus it came about that Mr. Groves got for his answer, the next day, a gently spoken, but a most unequivocal "no."

## CHAPTER XX.

## DARKIS GIVES BEN THE BENEFIT OF HER OBSERVATIONS.

DOCTOR Tilman was gone; gone no one knew where, nor why. Mr. Groves had retired within his shell to emerge never more. Mildred Vaughn plodded wearily along in her beaten path, growing paler and more silent every day; and, in short, to use our old friend Darkis's language, "there warn't but two folks in the whole lot of 'em that looked like they keered whether they was dead or live," which opinion she delivered to Ben as he and she were gathering vegetables for Aunt Ailsey.

"Ben, it do strike me," went on this sable, but none the less shrewd observer of human nature, "that white folks do take things most terrible hard."

"They does, indeed," answered Ben, who rarely ventured on more in a colloquial way than an echo.

"Niggers aint like white folks, Ben, in no 'spees whatsumever."

"No 'spees whatsumever?" answered echo.

"If one nigger falls in love wid anoder nigger, an' dat nigger don' fall in love back wid him agin, you think fas' nigger gwine grieve herself to def? Nary time once."

"Nary time once," responded Ben.

"Well, that's what's de matter wid all our white folks, Ben, sho' as you born."

"How you knows?" asked Ben, prompted by curiosity to venture on a question of his own manufacture.

"I know it by my own obsarvations," replied Darkis, loftily.

"Oh!" exclaimed Ben, completely extinguished by that four-syllabled flight of Darkis. "Let's hear," he suggested.

"Well, thar's Dr. Tilman, he's gone to Hafricky and Urope, whar I'm told they eats folks alive, widout even cooking of 'em."

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Ben, horror-stricken, and rejoicing that Dr. Tilman, and not himself, was to be the victim.

"Well, he's gone into de lion's den," continued Darkis, growing allegorical, "for no oder reason than 'cause Missy fell in love wid Master Court, 'stead of him."

"Who tell you so?" asked Ben, venturing on another interrogatory.

"You obstinit nigger! If you'd been standin' on the gallery a-sweepin' of it, and had heerd ole master say, 'Doctor, as a old friend of the family, I'm goin' to tell you something that of course we don't want spoke of as yit,' and then 'a heerd him tell the doctor how Master Court and Missy was agoin' to be married, and if then you'd seen de doctor take his cigar from 'tween his lips, and git right white 'round de lips, like he was sorter faintish, what would you 'a thought? Say, sir, I axes you, what would you 'a thought?"

"I'd 'a thought he was sick at de stomach," answered unromantic Ben, promptly and truthfully.

"I expec' maybe you would," answered Darkis, in supreme disdain; "bein' a man, thar's nothing more to be expected of you. Well, sir, I knowed he warn't sick at the stomach; he was sick at de heart. For I aint been watchin' white folks all dese years widout learnin' somethin' 'bout dem. Dr. Tilman's been lovin' our Missy ever sence she's a little tinsy, winsy gal; and I's sorry for him, Ben, to tell you de honest truth, I's sorry for him."

"I hope he won't git eat up," replied Ben, who could realize the palpable horror of being masticated alive better than he could comprehend the intangible sorrows of unrequited love.

"Then thar's Mr. Groves; he's had his eyes sot toward Miss Mildred for ever so long, and the oder day he paid her a visit, and he come home all in the fidgets, and his big black eyes looked like dey was afire, and he couldn't eat none, and he couldn't sit still, no more'n ef he had St. Antony's fire or somebody's dance, or somethin' like that. Well, next day he went back again, and when he come home, the fire was all gone out of his eyes, and the fidgets was gone too, and he looked more lanky down than ever. If you seen that, sir, what'd you 'a thought?"

"I'd 'a thought," replied Ben, seeing no symptoms of physical ailment in Mr. Groves's case, "that Miss 'Cilla had been givin' him one of her ole-time rowin's-up, like she used to when he spilt de ink on de carpet and wiped it up wid a damisk towel."

"Well, then, you'd be a dunce, and that's all I've

got to say." Saying which, Darkis placed her pan of vegetables on top of her head and passed from the garden to the kitchen.

Darkis's explanation of cause and effect was so near the truth that there is no necessity for me to enlarge on the subject. Her remarks to the effect that Edith and Courtney were the only two who seemed to have any life in them was true, too, to a certain extent.

Edith was perfectly happy, without one drawback to her happiness. Her father already loved the man she had chosen for his son-in-law; Frank declared "it suited him to a T;" she loved him with her whole heart, and looked forward to being his wife as the consummation of earthly joy. She was in no hurry to get married; they were very happy as they were. And so the days flew by on rosy pinions. She lived in the present,—the happy, care-free, blessed present. Ah! God had been so very good to her; he had surrounded her with blessings from her cradle up, and now, as the crowning blessing of her life, he had given her Courtney. She ought to be very good, very thankful, for if she was not, God might punish her by taking Courtney away from her. So she evinced her thankfulness to Heaven for this precious boon by an increase of all sorts of feminine softnesses. She was quieter, and gentler, and more charitable in her judgments of others; she grew more patient of the "mote in her brother's eye;" she was filled with a tender pity for any one who suffered or grieved; she was so happy that she would fain have blotted suffering and sorrow from the face of this beautiful world, and have bade

every one rejoice as she rejoiced ; she was amiable and good in a human sort of way, *because* she was perfectly happy.

Of Courtney's feelings I cannot speak so freely ; whatever he felt, he kept to himself. He was drifting with the stream. He had ceased, long since, to say that he would tell Edith to-morrow. He knew that this thing could never end in marriage,—he knew that it would end in his final disgrace ; but he was waiting in sullen apathy for the catastrophe to bring itself about. He would stay by her, he *would* enjoy her love, until forced to leave her side. Something might occur to free him, and for that impalpable something he waited. In a guilty, feverish sort of way he, too, was happy. It was no hard task to hide the signs that would sometimes force themselves into notice of a mind ill at ease, from so unsuspecting a mortal as Edith ; and whenever she rallied him on his seriousness he had some bantering reply ready that was perfectly satisfactory to the trusting girl.

Verily, Edith's chosen lord had the due proportion of wickedness that she had once childishly remarked must be one of the component parts of the man she loved. But as for the strength, it was not there ; lack of moral courage was the rock on which Courtney Dupont had split.

Many and many a worse man than he was by nature has gone from the cradle to the grave without ever exciting the breath of slander, or occupied the high places of the world, passing for good and honest men. Ay, my dear Mrs. Grundy, the walls of the penitentiary close round many a purer and truer soul than

fills the body of half the honest men whom you, in your supreme wisdom, deem worthy of your friendship. A heresy and a truism is one.

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## CHAPTER XXI.

### MISS HUNTINGDON EMPLOYS A SEAMSTRESS.

MISS HUNTINGDON and Mr. Dupont had been acknowledged lovers for nearly a year when the event which I am about to record took place. They rode together, they walked together, they visited together, and went to church together,—sometimes to the little wooden building whose sacredness had been so greatly enhanced in Edith's eyes by having witnessed her betrothal, and sometimes to the more pretentious house of worship in Bedford. It was an understood thing that they were to be married some of these days ; and young men, who would fain "have gone in themselves for glorious Edith Huntingdon," called Mr. Dupont the luckiest dog in the world, but certainly *not* the style of man that *they* would have selected as one likely to win the haughty heiress, and they would stroke their own moustached lips as if modesty alone prevented them from describing the sort of man that Edith *should* have fallen in love with. And pretty girls, who had looked upon handsome Courtney Dupont as a legitimate target for their own

charms and graces, rather resented his being mortgaged so soon. But the self-absorbed couple were placidly indifferent to what the outside world thought of them, or their engagement, and went on their way rejoicing.

Mrs. Tilman, mother of our Dr. Tilman, gave a dining; not one of those heavy, ponderous dinings that act as a narcotic on the assembly in general, but a genial, sociable dinner, to which all of Bedford's best society, inclusive of the Hall, were invited and went.

Mr. Huntingdon rarely ever entered a neighbor's house; Frank excused himself on the plea of indisposition; so Edith ordered her own private brett, as being sufficiently large to contain herself and Mr. Dupont, and went to this dining.

The dinner was well through with and the guests had nearly all departed, when Edith, who was standing over some parlor plants, discussing their merits and beauties with the doctor's eldest sister, was somewhat astonished at being informed by Mrs. Tilman's mulatto waiter, that "some one wanted to see her in the back sitting-room."

She asked who the "some one" was, and was informed that it was a young woman who would only say that she had come there to see Miss Huntingdon.

"Some one who knows your benevolent heart, Edith," suggested Miss Tilman, "and is going to make a demand on your purse."

"If the demand be a just one," replied Miss Huntingdon, promptly, "it shall not go unanswered." So she swept out of the room, looking very stately and very elegant in her rich silk robes and her dainty laces.

She opened the door of the back sitting-room and stood a moment on the threshold, for the room was much darker than the hall through which she had just passed, and she hardly knew in which corner to look for the "person."

As she stood thus irresolute, her tall, graceful form outlined admirably by the well-fitting dress, one dainty, jeweled hand resting on the door-knob, her lustrous, brown eyes glancing inquiringly into the room, she presented a picture of refined beauty and aristocratic elegance that was in cruel contrast with the shabby appearance of the person who sat in the gloom of the little sitting-room gazing at this bright, beautiful woman with a look of the most wistful eagerness.

Edith advanced to where the woman sat. "Did you want to see me, my good girl?" she asked in her sweetest voice, for the face of the woman was a young face, but so wan and so miserable in its expression that it caught Edith's pity at the first glance.

The woman rose from her chair as she replied, in a voice that was weak and tremulous, "that she was in search of employment as a seamstress; she had inquired at the Bedford tavern what ladies there were in the neighborhood who might require a girl to help sew for them, and had been directed to Miss Huntingdon as the one most likely to give her work."

Now, though Edith had no actual need of a seamstress, she could not find it in her heart to refuse assistance to one who was evidently so sorely in need of it, for the general appearance of the woman betokened straitened circumstances, if not actual poverty; nor did she deem it necessary to add to the poor creature's sense

of obligation by letting her know that she was being employed out of pure charity. So she told her very kindly "that she would be very glad to engage her services; and, as she was about to start home in a few minutes, would take her home in the carriage with her."

The woman thanked her and resumed her seat.

Edith left the room, telling her she would return for her when they were ready to start. She had not long to wait, for the day was already on the wane; and when Edith returned to the parlor, she found Mr. Dupont the least bit in the world impatient to be gone. Her carriage was waiting at the gate, and so she began her adieus.

"Mr. Dupont, you will be slightly inconvenienced in your ride home," she said to that gentleman, "as I have just engaged a seamstress and am going to take her home in the carriage with me; so you will have to occupy the front seat, as I am sure your chivalry would not permit of your placing even a poor sewing-girl with her back to the horses."

"Certainly not," he replied, while the faintest possible shade of annoyance flitted across his face.

"I hope you don't fear contamination for your broadcloth or my *moire* from her modest black alpaca," asked Edith, a little sarcastically, for her quick eye had detected the fleeting shadow, but she misinterpreted its cause.

"You do him injustice," said amiable Miss Tilman, with a pleasant smile; "he is annoyed at the interruption to your *tête-à-tête* ride home. Am I not right in my guess, Mr. Dupont?"

Mr. Dupont gave a reproachful little look at Edith for having so misjudged him, and told Miss Tilman that she was right and that he himself was ridiculous.

Edith uttered a quick little "forgive me" and walked back toward the sitting-room for her seamstress, telling Courtney that she would join him at the carriage.

He waited for her on the front steps, with his back turned toward the entrance door. Edith returned in a very few minutes, and by her side walked the seamstress, a woman considerably under the medium size, very thin, thin to emaciation, and dressed in a rather worn black alpaca. Very little could be seen of her face, for, as soon as she had emerged from the gloom of the darkened room, she had thrown a thick black veil over her shabby black bonnet, either to hide it or herself. Her step was slow, almost to feebleness, and Edith accommodated her own springy walk to the woman's languid tread.

"You have been sick lately, haven't you?" she asked, as they walked forward, side by side.

"Yes, ma'am, very sick." That was all her answer, and she did not seem at all disposed to venture upon conversation on her own responsibility.

"I am ready," said Miss Huntingdon, as they came close up to the waiting figure on the steps.

The woman started as the gentleman turned quickly around. For a second she stood quite still; then she spoke to Edith, without raising her veil: "I thought you were alone in your carriage, miss. Indeed, you'd better let me walk; they told me it wasn't far, and—and—I'll be in the way, ma'am."

"Not at all, my good woman," replied Mr. Dupont,



reassuringly, "there is plenty of room, and there is no necessity in the world for your walking."

He said more than he would have said had he not wanted to show Edith how entirely free he was of any fear for his broadcloth.

"You are not to mind *that* gentleman's presence," said Edith, with a bright little smile. "You will see a good deal of him as long as you are with me, so you may as well get used to his ferocious looks at once," and she slipped her arm into her lover's and proceeded toward her carriage.

At a respectful distance behind the pair, with her hands locked rigidly together under her shawl, followed the new seamstress. Mr. Dupont handed Edith in, and then, with the grace of a finished gentleman, he held out his hand to perform the same service for her seamstress. But either the woman was, physically, very weak, or she was unused to stepping into carriages, or she was embarrassed by such unlooked-for attention from so fine a gentleman, or something else was the matter,—at all events, she did not touch the gentleman's gloved hand, but stumbled into her seat with an awkwardness that was painful to behold, even in so unimportant a personage as one's seamstress.

Mr. Dupont took possession of the front seat and entered into an animated conversation with Miss Huntingdon, so that they were, both of them, soon utterly oblivious of the dingy, black-robed figure that sat drawn up in one corner of the carriage, motionless and speechless; but under that thick, black veil was a pair of faded blue eyes that were fastened on Mr. Courtney Dupont's handsome person with a keen, hungry gaze

in them that never wavered in fixedness or intensity from the time they left Mrs. Tilman's doors until they drew up in front of the Hall.

Her descent from the carriage was accomplished a degree less awkwardly than her entrance into it.

Edith conducted her at once to a small bedroom, close to her own, and told her that that should be her private apartment as long as she stayed at the Hall.

"And now you must tell me your name," said Miss Huntingdon, "so that we may get along a little less awkwardly."

The woman hesitated for a full moment,—*"My name—is—Esther Jones,"* she then said, in the same low, weak voice.

"Well, Esther," remarked Miss Huntingdon, "I think, now, that you had better go to bed at once. You look very pale, and very delicate, and you must need rest after your journey, and I will send you in a cup of tea, if you would like it."

"Oh, no, miss! indeed you are entirely too kind; I am tired, very tired, but I think a good night's sleep will make me all right. I am so very much obliged to you, but please don't treat me so kindly," and her voice was almost hysterical.

"A queer specimen," thought Edith; but she only smiled kindly on the poor girl and then left her for the night.

After Miss Huntingdon's footsteps had ceased to resound along the empty hall, Esther Jones, the seamstress, commenced to act in the most remarkable manner. She first turned the key in the lock of her door, then she tore the shabby, black straw hat from her

head and flung it on the floor, and then went deliberately toward the large oval glass over her bureau. She stationed herself before it, and gazed into it with an intense look in her eyes. Not the look that a pretty woman has in her face when she gazes intently into her mirror (a bright, contented look), nor yet the anxious regard of the woman who would fain cheat herself into thinking that she is pretty,—it was an eager look, a sad look, a bitter look; and she turned from the glass, finally, with a look of the most intense disappointment in her wan face.

"How could he continue to love *me* after he had got to knowing *her*? Now I know what style is; now I know,—oh, Courtney! Courtney!—now I know how impossible it was for you to leave her and come back to me. Oh, mother! mother! mother! what have you done?" And she threw herself upon the bed in a perfect agony of grief. Until late in the night she lay there, sobbing and moaning in utter brokenness of heart. She saw it all, saw it all at once, and she was ready to go home now and die.

And with it all she loved this handsome traitor with fadeless devotion. She blamed her mother, she blamed herself, she blamed the Huntingdons, but never once did it enter her head that her husband was an object of blame in his own person. He had asked her to wait and she would not do it; he had been forced to marry her, and then he had come down here and been in daily contact with that beautiful, beautiful Miss Huntingdon,—and how could he help falling in love with her? How could he help contrasting her, his

wife, with that splendid-looking woman? And how could he help being disgusted by the contrast?

Bessie said to herself that "she saw it all;" but the "all" which she, poor, miserable girl, found so intolerable, was simply the fear of her husband's having fallen in love with this brown-eyed lady. In the wildest suggestions of her miserable heart she had never thought of him as *engaged* to Miss Huntingdon. She believed that he was in love with her, and that that was the reason why he had not come back to New York; but she could not associate the idea of guilt with that bright, open face, nor yet with her idolized Courtney.

Chance had put her right in the house with them, and she would have ample opportunity to find out if Edith returned her husband's guilty passion.

She had no fear of being recognized, for, besides having put on black as some sort of disguise, she had lost all her hair after her sickness; and in place of the soft brown tresses that Courtney used to like so, a long time ago, she wore a hideous black net cap, lined with black silk, that changed her appearance so completely that her own mother had hardly recognized her when she put it on for the first time. So she felt safe enough in her disguise, and waited eagerly for the morrow.

## CHAPTER XXII.

## A WEARY SOUL AT REST.

POOR BESSIE'S greatest safeguard against discovery lay in the fact that the superb Mr. Dupont seldom ever cast a glance, and much seldomer a thought, toward Miss Huntingdon's shabby sewing-girl.

Probably—nay, almost undoubtedly—if she had been a pretty-faced sewing-girl the fact would have made itself known to his masculine observation; but the few casual looks he had given her when she had happened in his way showed him only a sallow-faced, plain-looking woman, whose lips were as bloodless as her cheeks, and whose eyes were so eternally cast downward that for the life of him he could not have told whether they were blue, black, or gray. Altogether, Esther Jones was not a very attractive-looking female, for, added to her weird, wistful look, she was so oppressively still.

She refused to let the negro housemaid attend to her bedroom, saying she preferred "tidying it herself, for the sake of the exercise." She was generally the first one up, and, after making her room the very picture of neatness, she would take her sewing and work deftly and silently until called to her breakfast. She persistently refused to enter into acquaintanceship with any of the domestics, and was, after the first few days

of her installment at the Hall, pronounced by them, unanimously, to be "a curious white woman, sorter crazy-like." The only cessation to her work, save when she went to her meals, was when daylight began to fade; then she would fold away her work and comply with her kind employer's almost command, that she should take a long walk.

This daily ramble of the lonely woman was a sort of mechanical performance characteristic of herself and her usual style of procedure. She would throw her black veil off her head, and crossing the little bridge under the willows, she would pursue her slow way along the banks of the little bayou that meandered through Mr. Huntingdon's grounds. This little stream ran its course merrily and smoothly, until it reached a little wood-embosomed lake on the confines of the noble estate; its whole length, from its source in one lake to its outlet in the other, being not more than five or six miles. It was spanned, at intervals, by low, rustic bridges, placed for the accommodation of the field-hands and for cattle seeking the pastures. Esther's regular walk extended from the bridge, under the willows, to another bridge distant about a mile and a half, which she would cross and return on the side of the bayou on which the house stood.

This stream of water was a beautiful feature in the natural scenery of the Huntingdon estate, for its banks were thickly overhung with willows, water-oaks, and other indigenous trees, while on the margin of the water waved tall, luxuriant grasses of the most vivid green. Esther, however, paid little heed to its tranquil beauty as she dragged herself weariedly along.

She was looking at the clear, running water, and wondering if it would be an unpardonable sin, in God's sight, if she were to throw herself into it, and drift onward toward the little lake in the woods, where she would be at rest—at rest forever. She wondered if anybody on earth would miss her. Only her mother,—and she, but for a little while. Baby wouldn't miss her, for she was too young yet to care for her any more than she did for the grandmother who had taken almost entire charge of her since she came into this worrying world. Courtney wouldn't miss her,—ah! *he* would be glad, for then he could marry this beautiful Southern girl, who had won him so completely from his poor little commonplace wife.

She did not even know yet the enormity of his treachery. She might have heard at any moment, for the servants of a large establishment are always only too eager to place every new-comer in full possession of the family history, from the time when "ole mars fus' fotch ole miss home," a bride, up to the last tiff between "young Missy and her bo'!" But Esther Jones had so persistently repulsed any overtures of acquaintance from each member of the household cabinet, individually, that her means of information were limited.

She saw that her husband was in almost constant companionship with this beautiful lady. She saw them dash by her open window every day on their prancing horses. She heard their voices mingling in duets every night. She saw him every morning come in from the flower-garden with a most artistically-arranged bouquet of the loveliest flowers in his hand,

which she invariably saw, later in the day, on a little papier-maché stand in Miss Huntingdon's room. She saw all these things with the hungry eyes that followed his every motion, when she herself was hidden; saw it, and felt in her desolate heart that she had no more part nor lot with that handsome renegade than if Bessie Miller, the milliner's apprentice, and Courtney Dupont, the milliner's son, had not only never met, but had never been.

It was true he was her lawful husband, and she could claim him as such before all the world. She could compel him to leave that bright-eyed girl, who had won him from her, and follow her, the despised seamstress, home as her lawful husband. By opening her mouth she could separate these two forever. She could make her faithless Courtney bow his haughty head in humiliation and abasement before the justly-outraged dignity of that proud woman. She could make *her* exchange the bright glances and loving smiles, with which she always greeted her lover, for fury and scorn. She could bring Courtney Dupont down from the lofty height he had climbed to, down to grovel in the earth at her feet, a despised outcast from the house wherein he was now an honored inmate. She could do all this by simply claiming her husband,—“standing up for her rights,” as her indignant mother had more than once implored her to do. But she did not want her “rights,”—she did not want revenge,—she wanted Courtney,—Courtney and Courtney's love.

What would it avail her if she did speak out? What would it avail her if she did cover him with ever-

lasting infamy? What would it avail her if she did bring her rival's queenly head down to the dust in shame and sorrow? Would she be any the happier for their love? Would she be any the happier for having held her husband up to the world as a target for its contumely and its jeers? Would she have gained her object in having forced her husband back to his allegiance in form, while his whole heart and soul would still belong to another? No, no, this was not what she wanted,—this was not what she had come here for. There was not one drop of malice in poor Bessie's soul, and never for one moment did she entertain the idea of proclaiming her own identity, to the confusion of her husband, or as a death-blow to her rival's happiness.

She had not been to blame,—why should she suffer? She was all that was noble, and kind, and good, as Bessie could bear witness to in the person of Esther Jones. Her love was sinless; and, in her unselfish soul, Bessie pitied her, to think that she, too, would have to suffer, for of course Courtney would *have* to leave her some of these days; he could never marry her, for she and baby were in the way. And then the poor, half-demented creature found herself wondering how he would get out of it all,—what he would say to Miss Huntingdon when finally he had to leave her, and what she would say and how she would look. If she wouldn't be very much amazed at the turn things were taking, and if she would be very much grieved. Oh! when her time came, would she suffer as much as she (Bessie) had suffered? *Could* anybody who looked so proudly happy as Edith looked at present, ever come

to look and feel as desolate as she looked and felt now? Then she fell to feeling sorry for all women; then she wished again that her baby had not been a girl. She felt sorry for girl-babies,—so sorry, unless they could die while they were girl-babies; and then her thoughts came back to dying, and she almost wished she had the courage to give that one plunge and end it all.

With these wild thoughts surging through her half-crazed brain, she stood upon the bridge which usually formed the terminus of her walk,—stood upon the edge of it, quite motionless and plunged in a profound reverie.

The bridge was near by a thick wood. A passing huntsman fired a double-volley from his gun at this identical moment. The enfeebled woman, whose whole nervous system was unstrung by illness and unhappiness, started violently at the near report; she turned suddenly, lost her footing, and was precipitated into the water below.

Totally unconscious that he had just hurried a soul, uncalled for, into its Maker's presence, the invisible huntsman blew a merry blast on his bugle, to collect his scattered hounds, and galloped deeper into the forest.

In falling, her head had struck a projecting beam of the bridge, inflicting a deadly blow; so that even if help had been near, the doomed girl could not have called for it.

\* \* \* \* \*

That same evening Mr. Dupont and Miss Huntingdon had done what they had done many an evening before,—ascended into Edith's Growlery (as you will remember Frank had christened the observatory), for

the benefit of the delightful breeze always to be found there,—he, with his inevitable cigar between his lips, she with an entertaining book, that she was to read aloud for the benefit of both.

She read until she was tired, and then, coming a little closer to his arm-chair, she knelt down by his side and rested her head on his shoulder,—a position she often affected when they were alone; and he would put one arm around the slender waist and caress her soft, glossy braids with his other hand, and they would be very happy, as happy as—as lovers.

"See," said Mr. Dupont, throwing the stump of his cigar over the railing of the observatory,—“see, yonder goes your automatic sewing-girl on her regulation-walk;” and he directed Edith's glance to the opposite side of the bayou just as Bessie had crossed the lawn-bridge to commence her evening walk.

"Poor girl!" remarked Edith, pityingly. "I sometimes feel tempted, Courtney dear, to try and win that poor creature's story from her. I am sure she must have one, and a very sad one, too, for her face is as full of misery as any face possibly can be. Don't you think it is, dearest?"

"I don't know, really," replied Mr. Dupont, indifferently. "It strikes me as being rather a bilious-looking face; further than that, I have made no very distressing discoveries."

"Oh, Courtney! she has the saddest eyes I ever saw in my life,—eyes that look as if the color had all been washed out of them by tears."

"If the truth must be told, ma belle," and he raised her bright face until he could look full into the sweet

brown eyes of the girl, "I am conscious of but one pair of eyes, in the world and those are starry brown eyes, and God grant that *they* may never be washed dim by tears."

Edith gave him a little kiss in return for his pretty speech, and nestling her head back in its old position, they sat silent a few moments, watching the black-robed figure of Esther Jones as it wound in and out of the trees, in its progress toward the lower bridge.

The observatory commanded a full view of the Huntingdon estate, inclusive of the lakes before mentioned, so that the gliding figure on the bank of the bayou was distinctly visible to the two in the observatory from the moment it crossed the bridge until it stood upon the other.

They followed her with their eyes, out of very idleness, as they sat there in luxurious leisure. They saw her as she stood still. They saw her give that frightened start. They saw her fall headlong from the bridge.

"God of mercy! she has fallen into the bayou!" exclaimed Edith, springing to her feet in terror. "Oh, Courtney! quick! quick! you may save her."

Her lover was already bounding quickly down the steps, only pausing long enough to tell her to send blankets, brandy, and other restoratives after him immediately. He met no one as he tore through the house and out into the lawn.

A saddled horse was hitched to the rack,—some neighbor was in the library with Mr. Huntingdon,—flinging himself on this animal, Mr. Dupont took the shortest cut for the lake, to which the drowning woman would inevitably be carried by the current.

It took him but a few moments to reach the point at which the bayou emptied into the lake. An overhanging bush had already arrested the progress of the body.

There it was, swaying backward and forward with the current; the blood oozing from a deep gash in the poor crushed head, the face gleaming white and ghastly in death.

"Dead!" exclaimed the young man, as he sprang from the horse and ran toward the spot. "Dead, poor creature, beyond all help."

He stooped, as he reached the brink of the water, and lifted the dripping corpse from the water,—it was no difficult task, for it was but a poor, light body, wasted to a skeleton by love of—him.

He laid the dead form gently down on the bank of the stream, and then tore open her dress, to see if her heart might still be beating. As he took his hand out of the bosom, whence every sign of life had fled, it became entangled in a black ribbon. A small gold locket was attached to the end of it, and came in sight as he strove to disentangle his fingers from the end. His eyes fell upon it,—something in its appearance struck him as fearfully familiar,—he tore it open—and—saw—his own face! his own face as it had looked when he went wooing poor Bessie Miller. He turned and gazed on the corpse with a wild horror in his eyes. Could it be,—great God! could that poor drowned creature be his wife? He seized her left hand,—there was a wedding-ring on it,—he tore it off the poor wife's finger. A name and a date were on the inside of it.

There was no longer room for doubt, and, as the fearful truth flashed upon the wretched man, he uttered one wild cry of mortal agony and fell senseless across the body of his dead wife.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### SEARCHER OF HEARTS.

AND thus he was found some moments later, when Frank Huntingdon reached the spot, accompanied by four stout negro men, who carried a mattress, on which the poor seamstress was to be borne back to the house.

He heaved a long, quivering sigh as Frank stooped and tried to rouse him to consciousness.

"'Spec he had to swim out inter de bayer and got de cramps," suggested one of the men, who stood gazing on the two with horror and surprise.

"Give me the brandy, quick!" cried young Huntingdon, and putting the bottle to the rigid lips of his friend, he forced some of its contents down his throat.

This revived him. He sat up and gazed around upon the group with wild, haggard eyes. Then his glance rested once more upon the stiffening form of his wife. Shiver after shiver convulsed his frame.

"Why, Courtney, my dear friend, you act as if you were getting a congestive chill. Here, take another

pull at this bottle, and then gallop back to the house. I will bring that poor creature,—there's nothing more for you to do here, and you are soaked to the skin. How far did you have to swim out for—it?"

Poor Bessie Miller! she was already but an "it."

But Courtney was still utterly unable to reply in words. He arose to his feet, shook himself as if shaking off some great terror, seized the brandy-bottle, and nearly drained it of its contents. Then he flung himself on the horse which he had ridden down to the lake, and galloped toward the Hall as if pursued by a thousand furies.

The most prominent idea in his head as he tore onward was fear of seeing Edith. He hoped she would not meet him. His soul was full of horror for his wife's untimely death. God, who knew all things, knew that he had intended, finally, to go back to her. Was he a murderer? was he responsible for this fearful catastrophe? was it an accident? or had she done it purposely? Oh, God! if those closed eyes could but open once more on earth,—if the pale lips could but uncloze long enough to tell him that she had not sought her own death! His brain was on fire,—he sprang from the horse and leaped up the stairs, hoping to reach his own room without seeing Edith.

But she stood there waiting for him, in the front door, pale and frightened, for though it *was* but a poor, unknown sewing-girl, her woman's heart was full of the tenderest solicitude as to her fate. She advanced eagerly.

"Did you save her!" she called out, quickly.

"Don't touch me! don't come near me! away!"

cried her lover, who reeled as if he would have fallen, and glared at her with all his frightened soul in his eyes.

"Courtney! my love, what is it?" and forgetting her original source of anxiety, in alarm for the man she loved so well, she came still closer, eagerly, and with outstretched hands.

As she laid her hand upon his arm he dashed it from him, and recoiled from her in horror.

"Hell and fury! touch me not!—let me pass!—Edith! Edith! leave me!"

"Oh, God! what ails him?" and the devoted girl stood still, speechless with amazement, and trembling with fright.

"She is *dead*!" his voice sounded hollow and unnatural; "dead,—they're bringing her here. Let me pass, I am ill,—drenched, cold, ill!" And he passed by the frightened girl, muttering disconnected words that conveyed no meaning whatever to her bewildered senses.

She was still standing motionless, turning over in her mind every possible and impossible way of accounting for Courtney's strange behavior, when the men arrived with the dead woman. This recalled her to herself. She shuddered as they passed by her, bringing the cold, white face of the dead so near her that she could have touched it. She gave them orders to carry it to the room that had been Esther Jones's, and then, before following them, she went close up to her brother and asked him, in a low voice, "if he had noticed anything strange in Mr. Dupont's appearance and conduct?" and she told him how strangely he had



acted on reaching the house,—how he had reeled past her like a man in the last stages of intoxication.

“Which is exactly what is the matter with him,” replied young Huntingdon. “I suppose,” he went on, “that Court must have had to swim out some distance to recover the body, for when we got there he was laying across the dead woman,—himself totally unconscious. I suppose, what with the physical exertion of swimming with a dead weight and the nervous horror of swimming with a dead body in his arms, he gave way as soon as he reached the shore, and I had to pour such an unconscionable quantity of brandy down his throat that I suppose he is dead drunk.”

This explanation was perfectly satisfactory to Edith, the more especially as it had never entered her head that there could be anything in common between her handsome lover and a poor, sallow-faced sewing-girl.

Mr. Dupont was confined to his room for the rest of that day.

“Rendered genuinely ill,” Frank explained, “by his immersion.”

So stranger hands arrayed Bessie Miller for the grave,—and, followed by a serious, but a tearless group, she was laid in the family burial-ground of the Huntingdons on the day after her death.

From his chamber window Courtney Dupont witnessed the little funeral procession winding from the house across the lawn down to the grove of myrtles and willows, where the family grave-yard stood. The pall was borne by four negro men, but close behind it followed Edith Huntingdon,—his Edith,—walking behind *his* wife’s coffin,—going to lay his poor, deserted

Bessie to rest among her haughty ancestors, while he, the craven, the wretch who had caused all this misery, who had brought that poor dead girl to her grave by his cruelty and faithlessness, stood cowering behind the curtains that screened him from their sight,—stood and watched them, wondering if it were not all a hideous nightmare. And then, when the little procession disappeared from his sight, he fell upon his knees and uttered a prayer of mingled agony and remorse. “Searcher of hearts,” he pleaded, “thou who seest the innermost depths of mine, look down and forgive me this unpremeditated crime. Thou who knowest all my sin, and all my weakness, knowest that I dreamed not of such guilt. By the weakness of my soul, by the strength of my temptations, forgive me this thing. Forgive, for thou art mercy,—strengthen me, for thou art strength. Help me, O Lord, for my soul faints within me!”

From his soul Courtney Dupont prayed,—from the depths of a soul burdened with sin and remorse; and as he kneeled there in the solitude of his own room, he firmly resolved that he would see Edith that night, tell her the whole truth, and then go from her presence forever.

He threw himself into an arm-chair, and tried to prepare himself for the coming interview. He would not say one extenuating word for himself. He would not tell her how he had been almost *forced* into this marriage by that wretched shrew. He would tell her, simply, that the woman whom they had just laid to rest with the Huntingdons was his lawful wife, whom he had married and had then deserted in the most heart-

less manner. He would not even tell Edith that he had not known who Esther Jones was up to the hour of her death. He would let her think the very worst of him. He took a grim satisfaction in the idea that to make Edith despise and loathe him now would be some slight compensation to poor Bessie for what she had suffered at his hands. For surely to be scorned by his beautiful Edith would be worse than death.

Thus he reasoned, and resolved, and steeled himself while alone in his room. Will he be strong enough to act up to his resolves with Edith's bright face close to his,—with her dear head resting on his bosom?

It was the evening of the day on which Esther Jones had been buried. He was resolved to see Edith before she retired for the night. He would see her, but he would not even so much as touch her hand; for that would unman him, and he could not tell his fearful tale with her very near him.

He knew that she invariably went to her piano in the gloaming of the day, before the lamps were lighted, and he would take his seat in the drawing-room about the time she would be going there, and when she came in he would commence right off and tell her everything, without giving himself a moment to falter in his purpose.

So he took possession of a low-backed arm-chair, that sat on the rug facing the fireplace, and waited in deathly silence for her coming. In this moment of supreme agony, when he was about to give up at once everything that made his life bright or desirable, and to show himself to the woman whom he adored, as a vile thing, unworthy of her pity even, his mind oc-

cupied itself with the most trivial matters. He looked up at the portrait of Mrs. Huntingdon, which hung directly in front of him over the mantel, and thought how funny those little short waists did look, and wondered how Edith would look dressed just that way. Then he glanced at the vases on the mantel-shelf, and thought to himself that the flowers in them needed renewing—

A pair of soft arms were about his neck and a loving kiss was pressed upon his lips. He threw his arms wildly, passionately around the bright girl who leant over him and drew her close up to his heart. He showered kiss upon kiss upon her blushing cheeks and on her quivering lips; he pressed her to him as if she had been lost and found again. "My darling, my darling, my own!" he murmured

"Why, dearest," she exclaimed, disengaging herself from his ardent clasp, "one would think that it was I who had been drowned, instead of poor Esther, and been miraculously restored to life."

He shuddered at her light words, but never for one second reresolved to tell her his secret. He had intended, fully intended, to make a full confession. For one moment truth and honor had held the scales evenly balanced against love and concealment; but that unexpected kiss had been thrown in on love's side, and truth and honor had kicked the beam.

Ah! verily, verily, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

He shuddered, but he only said, "Poor creature, let her rest in peace!"

"You know, Courtney," continued Edith, seating

herself on a low ottoman close to his side, "I said that I believed she had a story, and a sad one, too."

"Yes," in a low, uncertain voice.

"Well, now I know almost that she had; for when I was helping to dress her for the grave, a small gold locket fell from her bosom, and I opened it, thinking I might find some clue to her friends in it."

"Well?" He spoke quickly, breathing hard.

"Well, I found in it the picture of such a handsome-faced boy."

"Her brother," suggested her lover.

"No, hardly,—it looked so unlike poor Esther; in fact," she added, with a smile, "it was much more like you, Courtney, than like poor plain Esther."

"A chance likeness, if any." He tried to speak indifferently.

"Why, of course it was," went on Edith. "But all I was going to say was, that I feel almost sure that poor Esther's unhappiness had something to do with that handsome face in the locket."

"You don't suppose she committed suicide?" asked Courtney; and he held his breath for her answer.

"I feel almost sure that she *did not*," replied Edith, decidedly, "from this little incident: she was fitting a dress on me, one day last week, and Milly Vaughn was in my room at the time, reading. Her story seemed to be a very interesting one, for every now and then she would read passages of it aloud to me. Finally she read out something about a young girl who committed suicide because her lover proved false and deserted her, etc. Mildred and I exchanged our opinions as to the wisdom of the suicide, and then, as

much to say something pleasant to Esther as from any other motive, I asked her, as she seemed to have been listening very intently, what she thought of the girl's conduct.

"'I think, ma'am,' she replied, very quietly, 'that she was very, very wicked.'"

"I then asked her what she would have done in her place.

"'I would have gone on enduring my life, until God had been so good as to take me.'"

"'Then you think committing suicide is very wicked, do you, Esther?' I asked her.

"'Yes, ma'am,' she replied,—'so very wicked that no amount of sorrow would drive me to it. God knows if I didn't think it so sinful I——' And then she stopped, as if she had said more than she had intended.

"So, you see, I know that her death was purely accidental, for her horror at the idea of suicide was too genuine."

Almost breathlessly Mr. Dupont had listened to Edith as she told this little incident. A weight of a thousand pounds seemed lifted from his bosom. He breathed more freely, he felt happier. If, after all, then, he had not been guilty of his wife's death, there would be no sin in marrying Edith. And now there was nothing to tell; his past could in no way interest her now. He was free,—free at last,—free to marry his beautiful darling, who had given herself to him.

And so, instead of telling Edith the tale he had vowed to tell her, he took her in his arms and passed

from the talk about poor Esther Jones to their own future. This night, for the first time, he said, "when we are married."

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### MR. DUPONT IS SUMMONED TO FLORIDA.

WHEN Courtney Dupont retired to his room that night, he placed his lamp on a small stand, donned his dressing-gown and slippers, and instead of going to bed, seated himself and applied himself to the task of self-communion,—not always a pleasant task, but most generally a very profitable one.

He reviewed his whole life; from the time when he first began to rebel against the hardship of having to carry handboxes up to the present time, when he was engaged to be married to a lovely and a wealthy woman, and was himself an acknowledged member of the "best society." He went back to the time when he had spent his days in one continual, fretful outcry against Fate,—and he declared that he had had ample excuse for feeling just as he had done,—and though he might have pursued a more manly course (as a stronger boy would have done), still, he had not done anything so very reprehensible up to that time. He had only been weak. Then he came to the time when he had fallen in love with pretty Bessie Miller (or had thought he had) and had asked her to be his wife, very foolishly, long years before he could have hoped to be able

to support a wife; he had acted foolishly and weakly there, but nothing worse could be laid to his charge. Then had come the Huntingdons across his path, throwing in his way the one chance of his life; he had accepted it, as any one on earth would have done in his place, and then for the first time the embarrassment of his boyish love affair had become apparent. He had *tried* to effect a compromise, he had been forced into a consummation, and here came in the crowning weakness of his whole life. But it was but *weakness* after all. A strong, designing woman had overpowered him, a foolish, weak boy. He had striven successfully at first against his growing love for the daughter of his benefactor, but he had not been strong enough in the end to resist her manifold charms; he could not *help* loving her, and had been too weak to fly the danger; he had *intended* going away; had fully made up his mind to leave at the close of the year; he had never *intended* to declare his love, but had weakly stayed on enjoying her dangerous society. Then came that evening in the little church, where she had kneeled by his side and voluntarily given herself to him. Ah! what *man could* have been strong then? What *man could* have seen her pleading, loving eyes, raised so tenderly to his own, and *not* have taken her to his heart and blessed her as he *had* done? And he fully *intended* to tell her the truth the very next day, but he was ill,—too ill for many days to tell her anything,—and then, when he had recovered his senses, she had declared their betrothal to the whole family, and for very weakness, physical as well as moral, he had kept silent. He knew, as he had said over and over again to him-

self, that the truth would come out some time or other; but now, that he had kept silent so long, he could *not* speak. What excuse could he give for the very first caress he had allowed himself? No; that was the only proper time for him to have spoken, and since he had been too weak to speak then, he would remain silent until the end of the year; he would enjoy twelve months of guilty happiness, then he would leave on some pretext, and manage it so that Edith should believe him dead. This was the *intention* which held temporary sway of his vacillating mind at the time of Esther Jones's appearance on the scene. Her tragic death, and the discovery consequent thereupon, had, of course, changed the whole aspect of affairs. Of *course* he *would* have carried out that last intention if his release had not been brought about in this terrible way. Now, that he felt sure, from Edith's narrative, that Bessie's death was purely accidental, his temporary sense of actual guilt was done away with. Bessie was dead,—dead through no one's fault at all, and he was free,—free at last to marry the one woman whom he had ever really loved. And in all this, where was his guilt? Weakness then had been in his course, most undoubtedly,—great, *almost* criminal weakness,—and weakness full many times repeated,—but, after all, nothing *but* weakness. But all that was past now,—he would marry Edith,—his precious Edith, and learn of her to be good and strong. No more weakness, no more deception, no more concealment, and he made a final good intention, all his future life should be one long atonement for the past.

Atonement to whom, oh! most specious reasoner?

Atonement to the poor broken heart that lies under the sod beneath the willows? Atonement to the still, cold inmate of that newly-made grave for your years of cruel faithlessness, for your broken plight,—her broken life? Or atonement to the noble, high-souled woman-whose heart you have won by one living lie, whose pure lips you have sullied with your adulterous kisses?

But Courtney Dupont did not judge himself from your stand-point, reader; he judged from his own, and took great credit to himself for having pronounced with such candor on his own weakness.

He had called himself before the bar of justice on the indictment of moral cowardice. He had judged himself fearlessly, nay, vigorously, and had brought in a verdict of guilty with recommendations to mercy.

Verily, what more could you ask of a man?

That recommendation for mercy should certainly not pass unheeded. So he granted himself absolution, because of his mighty temptations.

But one thing remained for him to do before he could let his dead past bury its dead. He must go to New York, and inform Mrs. Miller of her daughter's death. He would tell her that the last tie between him and herself, as connections, was, of course, severed by her daughter's death, and then he would pass entirely out of the old life and enter on the new, untrammelled by a single fear.

He said to himself that he desired to pay this visit as a token of respect to his dead wife, and placed this good intention on the credit side,—in reality, it was necessary to pay it to prevent any awkward contre-

temps arising from the natural desire of a mother to find out what had become of her missing daughter.

What excuse to invent for so sudden a call to New York was the one worry now oppressing Mr. Dupont's brain. He would go to bed and sleep on it. So he extinguished his lamp and laid him down to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

It seemed as if Fortune, having finally deigned to take notice of this obscure milliner's-boy, was determined to befriend him to the last.

On his plate, at the breakfast-table, the next day, he found a communication in his mother's unfamiliar handwriting, whereby he was informed that that most unreasonable old man, away down in Florida, who had so maliciously persisted in living up to the present date, had at last been called upon to relinquish at once his hold upon life and upon the broad acres which he had so long kept our hero out of. Courtney being the one male representative of the name, must appear in person on the scene of action as soon as possible.

Strange as it may seem, his first thought was,—“This gives me the desired excuse for a sudden departure.” I suppose the idea of his having suddenly come into a large fortune in his own proper person was so stupendous that his mind could not grasp it at all.

It was only necessary for him to lay his mother's letter before Edith to gain her cheerful consent to his immediate departure. She would miss him, of course, sadly, but she could not murmur when so great a piece of good fortune had befallen her lover.

Amid the hearty congratulations of his friends, and followed by their best wishes, he started for Florida.

He held Edith in a long embrace before he could tear himself from her finally.

“Be ready, ma belle, against my return, for I will claim my wife just as soon as I can settle this business. The more eagerly now, that I can dower her as a man should dower the bride he wins.”

“Oh, Courtney!” and the sweet face was full of unspoken reproach.

“Once more, my darling, my precious one, good-by! it will not be very long; and then when I return——” He gazed down into her upturned face in passionate love.

“Ah, well,” she murmured, “when you return——” And she smiled through her tears.

When he returns!

## CHAPTER XXV.

### A FRUITLESS SEARCH.

“MOTHER,” Bessie Miller had said on the day when she was ready to start on her pilgrimage (unknowingly addressing her parent for the last time on earth), “wait patiently for three months after I am gone, and then if I am not back you will have to let baby's father know of her existence, for you are old and poor, and she will need his care. Write to

him gently, mother; don't reproach him, and beg him, for my sake, for the sake of the love he used to feel for me, to be kind to my baby. Tell him I am sorry to encumber him with her, and would never have done so if I had lived."

"Bessie! Bessie!" cried the contrite mother, through her tears, "don't talk that way. Oh, my child! what do you mean? You can't mean to——" and dreading to finish the sentence, she scanned her daughter's face in anxious suspense.

"No, mother," Bessie replied, answering her unfinished sentence. "I do not intend to make way with myself. I have too great cause to fear God's wrath to rush unbidden into his presence, mother, for I've forgotten Him entirely in my great love for one of his creatures, and, oh! mother, He has forgotten me and forsaken me in return. He has punished me for my idolatry by sending me all this woe to bear. I don't want to live. Oh! God *knows* how gladly I would leave this miserable world; but I am not going to leave it of my accord, mother; so put that fear from you now and forever."

"Then, Bessie, why shouldn't you come back to me and baby, daughter? What is it you're going to do?"

"I am going to do nothing, mother, but go down there and see for myself; and I am coming back to you and baby, if God is willing. But you know it is a long way off, and many things might happen to me; and I just wanted to tell you what you must do in case I did not come back."

"Bessie,"—and the cold, hard, harsh woman, who knew in her heart that she had brought this great

trouble on her child, spoke with a tremulous voice,—  
"Bessie, before you go, daughter, will you just say these words for me: 'Mother, I know you thought you was doing the best for me, and I forgive you for all the trouble you've brought upon me'? Will you say them, my girl? It will lift a load from my heart, and comfort me if the worst comes to the worst." And she who had been wont to command and tyrannize over her gentle daughter now pleaded to her,—pleaded for forgiveness before she left.

Bessie repeated the formula, gravely and earnestly; then she put her arms around the weeping woman's neck and kissed her once or twice, repeating, "I forgive you, mother; I forgive you from my heart." And then she took her little one-year-old girl into her arms and showered kiss after kiss upon its rosy lips. But baby was so used to being smothered in kisses by her poor mother, to whom she had become very dear, that this demonstration excited no surprise at all; she only clapped her tiny hands and lisped her one word, "mamma."

Bessie was gone, and Mrs. Miller was left alone with her baby granddaughter. Now that Bessie had promised her so solemnly to return if she could, she felt no great anxiety about never seeing her girl again, and she resolved that when she did come back she would be very patient and good to her. "She'd try and help her girl to bear the cross she'd put upon her, though God knew she thought she was acting for the best. They would both live for baby; and maybe, after Bessie had settled it in her mind that her miserable husband wasn't a comin' back to her, she'd grow

quieter, and finally come to know *peace*, at least, for folks couldn't go on grievin' forever." Thus she reasoned and answered herself.

They had long since removed from the little cottage that had witnessed so much of Bessie's trouble to a house in an entirely different part of the city, for the reason that, after Bessie's baby had come, the neighbors, somehow or other, seemed to look askance at her; they could not believe in the reality of a husband who was never visible. The only man who had ever seemed at all at home there was such a stylish, elegant-looking chap that it was out of all reason to ask them to believe that he was a poor milliner's *husband*. So, although they had always thought Bessie Miller a very nice girl, they supposed she was no better than she should be. So they gradually stopped going to the little cottage; and although Bessie cared very little for their society, she could not endure the accusation conveyed by their averted glances. So they moved entirely out of the neighborhood, and left no clue to their new residence.

Mrs. Miller waited, with a mind comparatively at rest, until the three months had fully expired. Then she grew wildly anxious; she wished she had not let her poor, lonely girl undertake such a journey; she wished she had gone with her; she wished a thousand things in a moment. Then, as the days dragged on for two whole weeks after the appointed time for her return, she settled it in her despairing heart that her unhappy child was dead, and the time for her to write to baby's unnatural father had come.

But writing this letter was easier to talk about than

to do. She had been told to write "gently and kindly." How could she do that when her soul was boiling over with indignant fury against the destroyer of her child's happiness? She had been told "not to reproach him." How could she address him at all without heaping reproaches on his treacherous head,—ay, without cursing him? And, besides, after the letter was written, how could she send it? She knew that this traitor lived in Louisiana, lived with a family called Huntingdon,—but what more did she know? Poor Bessie had guarded her treasured letters so jealously that her mother had hardly even discovered their post-mark; and when she went away she had either destroyed them or had taken them with her, for, though the little ebony casket still remained on the mantel-piece, it was unlocked and empty.

There was but one thing to do, and that was to take the child and carry it herself to its father. Bessie had not told her she should not reproach him in person, and she would charge him with his sin to his face. She would bring him to shame right in the presence of his fine friends. She would call down God's wrath upon his head. She would curse him,—ay, she would curse him until her own aching heart was satisfied by the sight of his shame and suffering. Grief for her lost child took the form of fierce wrath in this coarse woman's soul. She had been silent for Bessie's sake, because Bessie had *made* her be silent. But now that her girl's tender heart could no longer be wounded by hearing him reviled, she would proclaim him to the world for what he was.

So she resolved, and so she prepared to act. With



very little preparation,—only waiting to convert all her personal possessions into ready money; with one small trunk, containing hers and baby's slender wardrobe,—she left New York quietly one day, without being missed by one human being.

\* \* \* \* \*

A week later Mr. Dupont knocked at the door of the little cottage where Mrs. Miller and her daughter had formerly resided. A stranger opened it to him.

Was Mrs. Miller at home?

The stranger knew no one of the name of Miller. She had occupied that house now for nigh on to six months, and had never heard tell of any Millers in that neighborhood. Had he any more questions to ask? for if he hadn't, she'd like to git back to her wash-tub.

He had no more to ask. He thanked her. The door closed in his face.

He tried the neighboring houses on each side. "Nobody either knew or cared to know anything about the Millers.

By dint of untiring perseverance, he finally discovered Mrs. Miller's last local habitation. He applied for entrance. Another strange face answered his knock.

Was Mrs. Miller at home?

A Mrs. Miller had lived there, but she and the child had both left the previous week.

Ah! Mr. Dupont thanked his informant for the trouble he had given, so unnecessarily; that was not the Mrs. Miller he was seeking; there was no child in the question. He bowed himself away in the most graceful manner.

He traced out and confronted more than a dozen Mrs. Millers, all of whom proved to be entire strangers to him and to the Mrs. Miller he was in search of.

Maybe she too was dead. He almost hoped that she was, for dead women tell no tales; he thought it more than probable that she was, for she was quite an old woman at the time he had married her daughter, and if she had been alive, was it likely that she would have let poor Bessie go on that long journey alone? Further, would she have left *him* so long in peace? Would she not have found some way of conveying to him her sense of the outrageous treatment he had inflicted upon her daughter? Everything tended to make him think that Mrs. Miller was dead. He had no way of deciding the question,—for if Bessie and her mother had any relatives in the world he was totally ignorant of their names or whereabouts. New York was a large place, and Miller was a common name; he had done all he could to find her, and his efforts had ended in failure. If she was not dead in reality, she was dead to him, so he would turn his back on New York, and on his old life, and away to Florida as fast as rail and steam would carry him. He would enter into possession of his estates there, and then,—ah! well, and then?

But he found, on his arrival in Florida, that there was a great deal to be done before he could return for his beautiful bride. His identity, and his title to the property, and various other stupid legalities, had to be gone through with before he could enter into possession.

So he wrote a loving, rueful letter to his darling,

telling her that his absence would be prolonged much beyond the limits he had first allowed for it. Begging her to keep up her spirits, to continue her daily rides, for he wanted to see her cheeks blooming on his return; and he described to her, in glowing terms, his beautiful home in that land of flowers, declaring it to be almost worthy of his darling, etc. Any of you, my dear young ladies, who want his love-letter in full, can go to your own writing-desks and read it. They're all alike.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### LITTLE RACHEL.

MISS HUNTINGDON was not one of your lackadaisical damsels who, simply because she is in love, thinks it necessary to make herself a domestic nuisance. She missed her handsome lover sadly. Her rides were lonely, her evenings dull; but, nevertheless, she managed to exist, and to pay her wonted attention to the comfort of her father and her brother, these two constituting the only other members of the household now. A short time after Mildred Vaughn's rejection of his offer, Mr. Groves had quietly disappeared from the Hall on the pretext of visiting some distant relatives, and was lost sight of for some time by his Louisiana friends.

So Frank, and Edith, and their venerable father were the sole occupants of the rambling old house.

Mr. Huntingdon was failing perceptibly; his eyesight was almost entirely gone, and for nearly a year past Courtney had spent several hours of each day in reading to him. This task now devolved on his son and daughter. Edith read to him an hour or two every morning, and Frank read him to sleep every night.

Her evenings Edith spent entirely alone. She loved to shut the outside world entirely out of her thoughts, to draw close up to her bright wood fire and give fancy full swing. She would sit for hours, after she had gone to her own room and slipped on a cashmere dressing-gown, curled up in a huge cushioned chair on the rug, gazing into the dancing flames and dream of Courtney, weaving bright fancy of the glorious ~~times~~ they were to spend together.

It was about two months after her lover had left the Hall that the event which constitutes this chapter took place.

It was a raw, chilly, October evening. A sad, penetrating rain had been falling all day, and it was with a sense of extreme satisfaction that Edith drew the curtains over her windows and turned her lamp a little higher before she seated herself for her "antisleep-dreams," as she called the luxurious reveries she indulged in every evening. Frank was in her father's bedroom, and she knew that she was free for the night.

She had just slipped her wrapper on, and unloosed her massive braids for the night, when she was somewhat astonished by hearing a knock at the front door.

Now, if she had been a more dainty young lady, or

a harder-hearted one, she would have acted very differently from what she did.

Her father's and Frank's apartments were in a wing of the house so remote from the main hall that there was no possible chance of the knock reaching their ears. The servants had all been dismissed for the night and were in their own rooms,—rooms which were some distance back from the house,—so why should she ring for them to come back through the rain, when it was so easy for her to open her door and run across the Hall to see who it was and what was wanted? "It was some one from the cottage, most likely. Mildred or the children were sick, and they wanted something from the Hall." She had so fully settled it in her mind that she was to see the familiar face of Mildred's little waiting-boy, that when she opened the door and saw a perfectly strange one,—the homely face of a coarse Irish woman,—she started back involuntarily, with an audible expression of surprise.

"Shure an' ye're not goin' to shoot the door in my face sich a night as this!" she exclaimed, as Edith started back and gave her no encouragement to enter.

"Certainly not," replied the young lady, recovering herself as the woman spoke, and she smiled at the momentary alarm she had displayed. "Do you want shelter for the night?" she asked, supposing it some traveler who had failed to reach Bedford before dark, or had lost her way.

"Is your name Hoontingden?" asked the woman, returning question for question.

"It certainly is," replied Edith in increasing surprise.

"Well, miss, if ye'll be so gude as to let me git to the fire, I've a gude dale to say to ye, and I could hardly say it all standin' here in the dark, an' wid this weight upon me arms."

Miss Huntingdon now noticed, for the first time, that the woman held a large bundle in her arms. She gave a glance at this motionless heap, and wondering what it could all mean, she bade the woman enter, and closing the front door after her, she led the way to her own comfortable chamber.

"Mither of Jasus!" exclaimed her strange visitor, "but this *is* comfort, and this *is* ilegance;" and she gazed around the luxurious bedroom in open-mouthed admiration.

Edith placed a chair close by the fire and bade her be seated.

"And thank ye, too, miss," said the woman, falling heavily into the chair and heaving a sigh of relief.

Edith resumed her own arm-chair, and awaited, in silent wonder, the promised explanation.

But the woman was very deliberate in her actions. She lay the heavy bundle across her lap; she threw the ends of the large shawl which enveloped her own ungainly form back over her shoulders, and then she began to unpin the mysterious bundle, putting the long pins in one corner of her mouth as she drew them out. The process of unpinning complete, she threw back the woolen cloak that had constituted the outside covering of the bundle, and displayed to Edith's astonished eyes a sleeping baby, not more than eighteen months

old. It lay there wrapped in the sweetest sleep, its long, dark lashes lying motionless on the alabaster cheek, its rosebed of a mouth slightly parted, and one little dimpled hand folded over its breast, a perfect picture of peace and innocence.

"What a lovely babe!" exclaimed Edith. "It is not yours?" And she glanced up at the coarse face above it.

"Mine, indade!" laughed the woman. "No, I niver set eyes on the darlint before yester fortnight, and after this night I niver expect' to set eyes on it agin."

"Why, what are you going to do with it?"

"Give it to them as it belongs to."

"Explain yourself."

"I will, mum; but it's a good piece of a story, and ye'll have to practice patience."

"Go on," exclaimed Edith, in a voice that certainly gave no indication of compliance with the woman's recommendation.

"Ye sed your name was Hoontingden?"

"It is."

"An' does there a young man of the name of Dupont lave here?"

"There does."

"Faith, and, Bridget Feeny, ye're a smart woman, to have tracked him on so slight a scint." She spoke murmuringly, apparently in self-laudation.

"Well," exclaimed Edith, "go on." She spoke impatiently, but with nothing more than wonder in her voice.

"Well, mum, now I'm goin' to tell ye iverythin',

without botherin' ye with any more questions. Ye see, my name is Bridget Feeny, and I lives in the town of St. Louis. I'm a lone woman, but I manages to hold me own agin the world. I kapes a lodgin'-house,—a dacent lodgin'-house for the poorer class of folk, an' I niver have more'n enough room to spare, naither, honey. Well, one day, gone a month now, a stameboat put ashore at St. Louis a puir lone woman, a-sayin' that she had the small-pox. Now, honey, she niver had the small-pox, no more than you or me's got it now, honey,—and, bless yer purty face, 'twould be a pity if ye should iver git it. She foun' her way to me house, an' I tuk her in. She wor an old woman and a aillin' woman, but it wor pleurisy, and nothin' more that ailed her. They'd put her ashore because they didn' want to be worriet with her. So I tuk her and I nussed her, and the Blessed Vargin knows I tried me best to git her upon her legs agin; but her day had come. When I told her she had to die, she axed me if I had a Christian's soul in me, and I told here I trusted I had. Then she pintoed to this very darlint that lies now on me lap, and sez she: 'Take it to its faither; 'twere what I were tryin' to do. Ye may have some trouble to find him. He lives in Louiseny; he lives with some Hoontingdens; his name is Dupont; tell him I cursed him with my last breath.' And with them dreadful words on her lips, honey, she went before her God." And the woman paused for a full second before she finished.

Edith neither stirred nor spoke.

"I buried the puir sinner," went on the woman, "and thin I started to hunt the faither. I cam' to

New Orleans, and 'twere no hard matter there to find out the rich Mr. Hoontingden. I cam' to the house, and ye tell me that this man Dupont doos live here. So I've done what I've promised to do, and now, ef ye'll tak' the leetle one off me hands, I would be glad to git back to me own business."

"You say that is Mr. Dupont's child?"

"I sez that the woman said so."

"Mr. Dupont is not here; he is in Florida." Edith spoke as composedly as if it were the veriest trifle under consideration.

"And that I canna help. The house looks as if it had plenty of room for sich a wee thing, and ye can kape it till he cooms."

Edith sat paralyzed, allowing the woman to settle everything her own way. She paid no heed to her when she laid the still sleeping child on her sofa, nor when she stood up and said: "And I'll be goin'. The young man wid the cart is waitin' for me at the gate, and the stamer passes up the night that'll tak' me back to St. Louis. I'll lave the little box wid ye that was all the puir crethur brought off the boat wid her;" and she laid Bessie's letter-casket on the mantel. "She said it belonged to little Rachel's dead mither, and little Rachel would prize it some of the days to come."

She left the room and found her way back to the front door. The heavy bang that she unintentionally gave it aroused the stupefied girl. She started,—her glance fell on the child on the sofa.

There lay Courtney Dupont's child,—the child of another love,—on her sofa, dependent on her for help

and shelter. It never once entered her head to doubt the woman's story, for she was too unfamiliar with guilt in any form to believe that any one could fabricate so monstrous a lie. It was so terrible that it must be true.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### ST. ELIZABETH'S ASYLUM.

EDITH sat gazing on this living proof of perfidy, in the man she had so trusted and loved, with growing horror and disgust.

"Yes, it was so terrible that it *must* be true."

He could never be her husband now, never; she had settled that with her heart, even before the woman had finished her fearful revelation. He had gone completely out of her heart and out of her life. The man she loved, she must respect. She had respected the ideal Courtney Dupont; but this man, this dishonorable wretch, whose treachery had been so unexpectedly brought to light, she would none of him. He was even below her regret. Her whole soul was absorbed in the one desire to hide this proof of lowness in the man who was to have been her husband. The finger of scorn must not be pointed at her as having been duped by this dependent on her father's charity. Let the world call her a jilt, let it regard him as a martyr to woman's unreasoning caprices for failing to marry him, let it think anything it chose,—but the

truth. No one must know of this child's presence in the house,—not even her father, not even Frank. The father could not possibly be expected home for months,—it could not stay under her roof one day. There were institutions in New Orleans where such *things* were properly taken care of; she would carry it there, and when *he* came back, she would simply tell him where to find the child of his treachery, and then never look upon his face again. She was astonished at herself for not feeling more miserable. She was sure that she had loved this man,—loved him earnestly and truly, with a love that would have borne her through fire and water for him, had he continued worthy,—with a love that could have forgiven him much, nay, anything but being *low*. And the haughty aristocrat turned with infinite loathing from the contemplation of her broken idol; she would not so waste time as to grieve for him. Then her thoughts reverted to the disposal of the child. She could not leave the house that night, and she could not leave it in broad daylight with a living child and yet keep its existence a profound secret. She paced her floor in violent agitation for more than an hour, at the expiration of which time she proceeded to carry out a plan that had matured itself in her bewildered brain during her walk.

She carried the child, still sleeping profoundly, up to the observatory that had once proved so secure a hiding-place for herself when a little child. It would not be cold up there, for she could smother it in blankets, and if it cried (which, poor little one, its age entitled her to expect it to do), no one could possibly hear

it. She could feed it up there, and before daybreak the day succeeding the coming one, she would leave in the closed carriage, ostensibly to pay a visit to some friends in a neighboring parish, which she had been promising for some time. She would, in reality, travel to the next river-town below Bedford, where she was entirely unknown, and would there take the first boat for New Orleans. This was her plan, the first part of which she put in operation that night. She first took a lamp up to the observatory and placed it, lighted, on a table in the room. Then she noticed if the Venetian blinds, which inclosed the little octagonal apartment, were all closed, so that no gleam from the lamp could betray the occupancy of the room. Then she returned for the child. She laid it on a pallet in the middle of the floor, and covered it warmly with shawls and blankets. Then she placed a large slice of light bread right where the child would be compelled to see it as soon as it opened its eyes. She then stood up and looked at the sleeping baby with her own eyes full of gloom and bitterness. "Lie there!" she said, bitterly; "you will neither freeze nor starve; I have returned good for evil; you have given the death-blow to my happiness forever; I have warmed and fed you!" Then she turned and left the room, locking the door after her.

Daylight was struggling through the slats of her window-blinds before she threw herself on her bed and fell into a troubled sleep. It was quite late when she awoke, and found Darkie standing by her bedside with a cup of coffee in her hand that her young mistress always drank before breakfast.

"Well, Missy, you 's been sleepin' hard, fo' sho,' I'se been tryin' to wake you dis half hour."

Edith started up in bed with a dim consciousness of something terrible having happened. It all came back to her with a rush. Her disgrace, his degradation, and the secret task still before her. For the first time in her life Edith Huntingdon had something to conceal, and the girl's open nature revolted at the idea. But concealment was preferable,—far preferable,—ay, even the appearance of wrong would be preferable to the disclosure of the disgraceful truth.

She drank her coffee eagerly, for her head ached wretchedly; then she made a hasty toilet, and supplying herself with a bowl of milk and some crackers, she started for the observatory to give her baby prisoner its breakfast.

As she approached the room she heard issuing from within a series of little heart-broken sobs, as if its desolate little inmate was weeping its very soul away.

"Poor little wretch!" said Edith, as she turned the key in the lock. "You are but exemplifying the Bible mandate,—suffering for the sins of your father."

She entered, and as the forsaken baby caught sight of a human face once more, it exchanged its moans for bright smiles and a series of happy "crows." "Mamma! mamma!" it lisped, in joyous accents. Then it looked up in the strange, cold face that bent over it with a look of puzzled wonder in its large hazel eyes—his eyes—as if to say, "You're not mamma? Who, then, are you?"

No, it was not mamma, for instead of folding the tiny thing in a loving clasp, and showering the caresses

on it that it had already learned to look for—and to miss—the stately lady stooped and raised the child to her lap; then, in rigid silence, she gave it its breakfast of bread and milk, of which it partook eagerly, but in dumb silence, turning after every spoonful to gaze up into the face of its strange attendant, with all its little puzzled soul shining through its lovely eyes. "Who are you?" said that look, as plainly as if baby Rachel had uttered the words through the tiny mouth that was filled so satisfactorily with soaked cracker. She was puzzled, evidently; but infancy is fearless, and after her babyship had had *quantum sufficit* of milk and crackers, she twined her chubby fingers in Miss Huntingdon's chatelaine and essayed to pronounce it "pitty," looking up into Edith's face the while for the smiles of approval which had always rewarded her former attempts in the conversational line.

It had finished its breakfast, and Edith put it back upon the pallet. What should she do with it for the twenty-four hours which must still elapse before she could start from the Hall with it?

She looked at little Rachel as if expecting her to help solve the difficulty. Baby Rachel extended her hands toward the glistening chain, and repeated, "pitty."

Edith detached the bauble from her belt. "Take it, poor little fool, and pray that you may die before your happiness comes to depend on anything less genuine than its gold." And she flung the chatelaine, with its diamond-studded watch appended, into the child's lap. "That will keep her quiet for some time, and then she will fall asleep again."

Extinguishing the lamp, which had burned all night, and glancing round to see that there was no possible way for the child to hurt itself, Edith placed the remaining crackers within its reach, and left it once more alone.

She seated herself at the head of the breakfast-table, that morning, looking so still and pale that it even attracted the attention of her usually inattentive father.

"Are you unwell, my daughter?" he asked. "It seems to me that you are looking exceedingly languid and pale."

"I am not well, father,"—and for a moment the proud lip of the girl quivered with her efforts to speak calmly. "I passed a sleepless night, and have a wretched headache. I think," she went on, "that change for a few weeks would do me good, and if you and Frank can spare me for a little while, I will pay the Newtons the visit I have been promising them so long."

"Certainly, my child, go. I know the house must be insufferably dull to you without Courtney; even Frank and I miss him. Don't we, son?"

"Ay," assented Frank, with his mouth full of toast.

"And I will take the carriage very early in the morning," went on Edith, without paying the slightest attention to this allusion, "so that Uncle Toby can get back home again before night with the horses."

So it was arranged.

To Edith it seemed as if the day would never wear away. She paid half a dozen visits to the observatory; she gave orders enough to the house-servants to have kept them busy for months; she packed a small

valise for her own use; she moved restlessly from place to place, trying to keep in constant motion; for so long as she did so she could not feel, in its full intensity, the crushing weight of this monstrous discovery.

Night did finally come; and, having bidden her father and brother good-by, so that she need not disturb them in the morning, she sent for Uncle Toby, the carriage-driver, so that by giving him her orders personally there could be no chance of his mistaking them.

He answered her summons promptly, and soon stood before her, the very impersonation of a "highly respectable colored pusson." Dressed in genteel black, his huge feet incased in shining black shoes, his uncovered head crowned with a thick coat of grizzly-gray wool. "Yer's me, Missy."

"Uncle Toby, I am going to pay the Misses Newton a visit of eight or ten days, and I want you to be at the door, with the closed carriage, before the first bell rings in the morning."

"That's fo' day, Missy."

"I don't care if it's three o'clock in the morning," answered Edith, impatiently. "You are to be at the door before daylight, with the closed carriage, rain or shine."

"Sartainly, Missy." And, making a soldierly salute, Uncle Toby retired from his young mistress's presence.

Without being discovered, Edith finally succeeded in getting off the next morning, having refused to let Uncle Toby have the handling of a certain large bundle



which she brought out of the house in her own arms and laid across the front seat of the carriage.

The Newton plantation was fifteen miles from Huntingdon Hall, and this was exactly the distance to Camden, the river-side village from which she had determined to take the boat. When the cross-road came in sight, which was the point at which she would have to leave the road that led to the Newtons, she pulled the check-string, and old Toby reined up his horses.

"Get down and come to the door, Uncle Toby, I have something to say to you." Edith drew in her breath between closed teeth. "To think," she murmured, "that I am compelled to make a slave my partner in this lie."

The old man stood holding the carriage-door open in his hand.

"Uncle Toby, I am not going to Mrs. Newton's; I am going to Camden, and you are to come back to that place for me ten days from this."

"Hi, Missy, what dis mean? You tole ole master you gwine to Miss Newton, din' you?"

"Yes, Uncle Toby, I did, and I told him the first lie I ever told him in my life,"—and the girl spoke in bitter wrath. "But I am compelled to act as I am acting, Uncle Toby, indeed I am; and if father knew everything, Uncle Toby, he would forgive me that lie."

"What for' no tell him, den?" replied old Toby, speaking with the freedom of an old and privileged family servant.

"I cannot, oh! I cannot. Uncle Toby, get back into your seat and drive me on to Camden."

Uncle Toby did not believe that Missy was capable of doing anything very far wrong, and although sorely puzzled at being ordered to drive her to a place where he knew the Huntingdons had not a single acquaintance, he merely entered a final protest in the shape of an emphatic grunt and remounted his box.

The town of Camden had just fully awaked to the business of a new day when Uncle Toby drew rein before the dingy little tavern of that place. "That was a *beautiful* place for the Huntingdon carriage to draw up at," was his disgusted comment, "and that was a *nice* place for Missy to sot her foot in. 'Fore de Lord, he'd find out what it all meant 'fore he started back home; and ef 'twarn't as it should be, he'd pack dat chile (Edith) straight back to whar she belonged. Hadn't he toled her on his back many an' many a time, 'fore she could walk by herself? Hadn't he taught her how to ride her own little pony? Hadn't he ben savin' of his biggest taters for her to eat ever since she had teef to eat 'em wid? And now was he gwine to be afeerd to talk straight up an' down to de chile? Ef his skin wor black, couldn't he see right from wrong? Couldn't he see dat somethin' was up? No, no! 'fore God, he warn't gwine to leave ole master's darter in no sech hole (as he contemptuously dubbed the 'Camden House') widout fus' havin' some mighty good reason for it."

He helped Edith out in silence, and then, calling a gaping negro boy to come stand at his horses' heads, he followed his young mistress into the parlor of the little tavern, whose doors had been eagerly thrown open by the obsequious landlady. Uncle Toby followed

her into the parlor, carrying her valise, having vainly striven to prevent her demeaning herself by being seen carrying a bundle!

She seated herself on the little horsehair sofa and deposited the mysterious bundle on the other end. She turned to give Uncle Toby her parting injunctions, when she was annoyed and he was struck absolutely dumb by a loud wail issuing from the bundle, followed by a series of kicks and struggles on the part of its occupant to free itself from the encumbering wraps. Toby stood gazing in speechless wonder.

"Wait awhile, Uncle Toby," was all Miss Huntingdon said to him. Then she rang the bell, and when it was answered by the smiling landlady, Edith pointed to the child and asked her if she could take it and feed it, and keep it for her until she called her; she would pay her well to relieve her of it for an hour or two.

"Certainly she could, the beautiful darling." And the woman left the room with the child in her arms,—wondering but obedient; for carriage customers came seldom, but found ready obedience when they did.

"Now, Uncle Toby,"—and Edith confronted the old man with a half-defiant and almost reckless look in her usually soft eyes,—“what do you think of all this?”

"Missy," began the faithful old slave, in a voice trembling with earnestness, "Missy, my blessed, dear young mistress, come, go back home wid ole Toby. I don't know what it all means, Missy,—I don't know what none of it means, my chile, and my po' ole head done mos' turned tryin' to study of it out. But somethin's wrong, Missy, somethin's up, my *blessed* little mistress, an' ole Toby ain' gwine to turn his back an'

go back to ole master wid a lie on his lips, and tell him he left you wid frens wen he done no such thing. Come back home wid de ole nigger, my blessed chile, come back home wid de ole man what's ben lovin' you, and takin' keer of you, and totin' of you 'round ever sence you was no higher than that t'other one. Who is it, Missy? Whar it come from, my honey? What you gwine to do wid it? Tell ole Toby, my chile? Can't you trust de ole man what would die 'fore he'd see a har of yer head hurt? Can't you find no oder way out of dis trouble, my blessed mistress? Come back to ole master wid ole Toby; he'll forgive you, chile,—he'll forgive you anything."

Springing toward him, with lightning flashing from her eyes, as his suspicions forced themselves upon her mind, she cried out, in a voice of mingled incredulity and indignation: "Uncle Toby, you don't *dare* to think that child is *mine*?"

"I don't know *what* to think, mistress," he replied, humbly.

Then Edith's soul swelled with fierce wrath, to think that his deeds should have been visited on her in this wise. But what else could the old slave think? She did not blame him, and he should know the truth.

"Uncle Toby, if I tell you the whole truth, and you find that only by keeping it a profound secret can you prevent me from being very miserable, do you think you can keep it?"

"Wile horses sha'n't drag it from me, Missy."

Then she told him the whole truth,—told it rapidly but clearly; and told him that it was to save herself

the sneers and gibes of the whole neighborhood that she was doing this thing so secretly.

"Now, Uncle Toby, will you help me keep this secret?"

And the old slave swore, by the love he bore his darling young mistress and by the love he had borne her mother before her, that nothing on earth would ever induce him to open his lips.

So he drove back to the Hall, promising faithfully to be back in Camden ten days from that day.

Without farther stay or hinderance, Edith reached New Orleans and deposited little Rachel with the good Sisters of St. Elizabeth, whose noble institution is devoted to the reception of tiny orphans, and outcasts, and strays, from the age of a month only to that of five or six years.

"What name, ma'am?" had God's handmaiden asked of the stern-looking lady who had declared her mission so curtly and seemed so anxious to hurry away.

The young lady paused. "Rachel Courtney," she had said, finally.

So, as "Rachel Courtney, aged 2," was Bessie's child entered upon the books in the Asylum of St. Elizabeth.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### BROKEN IDOLS.

EDITH HUNTINGDON had accomplished her object very cleverly. No one knew anything of the child's existence; it was well out of the way, and she was back at home, without her strange errand ever having been suspected in the remotest degree.

Her father expressed himself much disappointed at the failure of her visit in restoring her roses, and Frank wrung her soul by jocularly intimating that "nothing could do that but Court's return." She never flinched under these allusions to her false lover; she merely answered, gravely, "that it was only a little debility, and she would be herself very soon,—only please don't keep worrying her about her looks."

But in her heart she knew that she would *never* be herself again,—never again be the light-hearted, care-free, unsuspecting Edith Huntingdon that she had been before this man had crossed her path, any more than would poor, scarred, bitter Miss Priscilla Hartley ever again be the pretty, cheerful, light-hearted Priscilla Hartley that she had been before her awakening.

Her idol was broken; and as she cleared that sacred chamber in her heart wherein it had been so long enthroned, on so lofty a pedestal, she wept woman's bitterest tears over the broken fragments; wept to find what a poor idol it had been, after all; wept to

find it clay, instead of pure, bright gold, wept for her own awakening. She had learned woman's saddest lesson—distrust; and being a woman, she learned it most thoroughly.

One mortal had come to her in the guise of a demi-god, bright, winning, glorious; to her dazzled eyes he had seemed worthy of woman's fondest adoration; she had enshrined him in her holy of holies and had adored him. Her demi-god had turned out to be but mortal; of the earth, earthy; a base thing, made in commonest mould: ergo, all men were treacherous and base; of the earth, earthy; and worthy of woman's supremest contempt, instead of her foolish idolatry. And the final verdict of her indignant heart was, that any woman who loved any man as she had loved this man was not only deserving of her own contempt, but should be held up before the world as a target for its arrows of contumely and scorn.

Her love was as unlike the love of poor, humble-hearted Bessie Miller as was her own haughty, elegant self unlike that little baby-faced milliner. Bessie loved like—herself. "Courtney certainly was everything that was noble, and handsome, and lovable; so if they failed of being happy, hers must be the fault." And, in her humility, she pitied this glorious hero for having been tied to her own unattractive self. So, without ever uttering one reproach, she went on bearing her burden until it pleased God to relieve her of it. Edith had loved this man because she had thought him worthy of herself. She found that he was not, and her heart was full of indignant wrath at her own blind folly. Her idol was broken, and, when she had re-

moved every trace of its having been from her throbbing heart, she closed that chamber, to be opened nevermore, nevermore.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### MR. DUPONT HEARS HIS DOOM.

THE day on which Mr. Dupont was expected back to the Hall dawned at last.

He had continued to write the most fervent love-letters by every mail, and although he wondered at never having received any in return, after the first month of his absence, visited it all upon the unoffending postmaster at Bedford's Landing. "For of course Edith *has* written, and written frequently." So, in blissful unconsciousness of what was in store for him, he set out on his return for Louisiana; leaving a perfect army of carpenters and upholsterers and gardeners at work at the "Glade," with directions for everything to be in a state of perfect repair by the end of May, for at that time he should return "with his wife."

Edith knew of the exact day of his expected arrival only through Frank's eager excitement; for of the many letters that had reached her since her discovery of his treachery, she had never broken the seal of one, —only taking them from the mail-bag to cast them into the fire.

It was a bleak, gusty morning in December on which

Courtney once again caught sight of the old Hall. It stood out white and bare amid the leafless trees; but if the garden of Eden had been in full flower around it, he would not have cast one glance upon its beauties. For he *did* love the beautiful young mistress of this stately old house with all his heart, and as he rode swiftly up the avenue, his heart throbbed and the life-current ran joyously through his veins, as he anticipated the delight of once more clasping her in his arms.

Frank and Mr. Huntingdon met him on the front steps,—hearty welcome beamed in their eyes, and was expressed in their cordial grasp of his hands.

"Where was Edith?"

"Waiting to receive him in her own sitting-room."

He flung his hat and riding-whip at the hat-rack in his eager haste, and strode quickly toward the little room where his "darling" was awaiting him.

She heard him coming, and as the sound of his footsteps fell on her ear, her face grew convulsed with the agony of a fierce struggle in her heart,—the death-agony of the mighty love with which she had loved this advancing traitor. But before he placed his hand upon her door-latch, Love was dead,—cold and still,—and Scorn was regnant.

She sprang from her seat as the door opened to grant him entrance. She stood with one hand clinched on the back of her chair and the other tightly clasping her wildly-beating heart, in the vain endeavor to still its tumultuous throbs.

His face glowed with the love that filled his soul, and he advanced with joyous expectation beaming from every feature.

"Back!" was the one word of greeting that fell on his bewildered ears.

"Edith! my darling!" and he took another step forward, with the unmistakable sign of a great fear dawning in his handsome face.

"Back!" she exclaimed once more, while her hands were extended with a gesture of repulsion.

He stood rooted to the spot, speechless with terror and amazement. *What* had she heard? *How could* she have heard? *Who could* have been there? *What* did it all mean—Frank and his father so unchanged, so cordial, and Edith standing before him thus towering, majestic in her wrath?

"Edith,—*speak* to me!" and his voice was full of the genuine agony of his soul.

"Courtney Dupont, I *despise* you! I loathe the sound of your voice! I loathe the sight of your face"—(she had drawn herself up to her full height and fastened her flashing eyes upon his features). "That face in which I once thought I read manliness, truthfulness, and honor, I now *know* to be the face of a traitor, who knows not and *never* knew the meaning of the words manhood, truth, or honor! The Courtney Dupont to whom I *gave* myself" (and as she uttered the word "gave" her lip curled with ineffable contempt) "has nothing more in common with the trembling wretch who stands there, unmasked before me, than the angels in heaven have in common with the fiends in hell. I have spoken,—would you hear me speak again?"

Her glance never wavered, her burning eyes never once loosed their hold of his blanching features. He had often imagined to himself, or *tried* to imagine, how

she would look and act under a discovery of the truth; but never in his most tortured imaginings had he fancied anything equal to *this* reality. She stood before him the embodiment of scorn. There was scorn in the erectness of her stately form; there was scorn in the haughty poise of her queenly head; there was scorn in the curl of her scarlet lip; scorn flashed from her eyes and darted from her quivering nostrils.

He had dreamed of this moment, and had dared fancy he could win her to forgiveness. His one hope had been grounded on the strength of her love. Women forgive much where they love strongly, and he had thought to gain her pardon by the fullness of his contrition.

But could he ever even win one word of parting kindness from that flashing creature? Never,—never. She had loved, and loved him strongly; but the love was all gone, while the strength remained. Hope was dead within him.

"Edith! is all lost?" and the voice in which he asked the question was hoarse and broken.

"Is all lost?" she repeated after him, while for a moment her own voice was lowered to a tone of dreary sadness. "Yes, *my* all is lost. My Courtney, whom I loved so dearly, so passionately, so trustingly, is dead. I lost him,—just two months ago,—and my heart shed tears of blood when his image was torn from it. My love, my faith, my peace, my happiness, my self-respect, are all, *all* lost!"

"Edith! *who* has been here?" He attempted no explanation; he offered no plea. He felt how utterly futile it would be.

As he asked that question her momentary sadness gave place to the returning tide of contempt.

"Who has *been* here? Your *child*!"

And the expression of her contempt reached its climax in her utterance of that one word "*child*."

She had read guilt in his whitening face, in the tortured workings of his mouth, in the beads of mortal agony that stood out upon his forehead; but she was not prepared for the look of undisguised amazement that came in his face as she uttered the last word.

"*Child*? Edith, I *have* no child!"

Her whole frame quivered with indignation at this last sign of duplicity on his part.

"Courtney Dupont, you—have—*LIED*!"

Her words stung all the manhood within him into active life. He folded his arms and stood erect with the bearing of one who knows his doom is sealed, and would fain meet death without flinching.

"Great God!" he murmured, "this is hard, but just." Then he spoke aloud to Edith:

"There has been much deceit, much concealment, much error in my course since you came into my life; but I do *not* lie when I tell you that I have no *child*."

Oh! to see him so hardened! Edith did not answer him directly. She merely pointed to a little stand that stood by the chair on which she was leaning. She had placed on it the little ebony box (Bessie's old letter-box), to have it in readiness to give him. "Does *that* lie, then?" she asked.

He turned and saw it. It was unlocked,—he opened it. In the place in the top which had originally been occupied by a little mirror was pasted a piece of white

paper, on which poor Bessie, out of very loneliness, had dotted down a memorandum. There it was, in the little, familiar, cramped writing,—a fearfully succinct revelation. It read:

"March 30th. My last letter from Courtney. May 1st. My baby born. June 30th. My baby baptized,—named her Rachel. June 30th (one year later). I am deserted,—he has forgotten me."

He read it, and replaced the box on the table, still never uttering a word. What *could* he say? She would not believe him if he swore that he had never been informed of this child's birth; and if she *did* believe that, what did it matter? The *fact* of his sin still remained. She was lost to him forever; why, then, try and mitigate her contempt? No, it had come at last, and he would simply go away. What availed it now that his position in the world was as lofty as her own and his wealth even greater? *She* could never share it with him, and it had lost its value. In the moment in which he had placed his foot upon the topmost round, Bessie had been avenged. His cup of life was embittered forever. He was conscious of but one desire, and that was a torturing impatience to get from under those flashing eyes. He would not try to explain matters, for she would never do less than despise him; and he could not face the scorn in her eyes long enough to make his drear disclosures.

He brushed his hair back from his forehead with a gesture of absolute weariness, while he fastened his dark eyes on Edith's face with a look of such mournful tenderness that, in spite of herself, her eyes softened and fell.

"Edith, my lost darling, I have loved you so well that I have perjured my soul for you. But I will not weary you with explanations that could only mitigate your contempt but could not remove it. One thing only I ask you to believe. I do *not* lie when I tell you that of the existence of my child I have heard the first from *your* lips. Nor do I lie when I tell you that my child is *not* the child of shame. My life has been full of criminal weakness, but not of baseness. It is a long story, and one that you would not believe, so I will not even touch upon it now; but if the time should ever come when your heart is sufficiently softened toward me to allow of pity entering therein, send for me then, oh! my lost treasure! and I will come to you from the uttermost corner of the earth,—come gladly for the chance of winning one word of kindness or forgiveness. I will relieve you of my presence at once and forever, and God, who made me the weak creature that I am, knows that my punishment is more than adequate to my sins. Edith, Edith, to have known you,—to have loved you and to have lost you, is surely misery enough to make a man curse the day on which he first saw the light!"

Edith had retained her standing posture while she listened to him, and, as he went on, she beat one little foot upon the carpet, in evident impatience.

"Excuse me, Mr. Dupont, for interrupting you," she said, in a voice whose icy formality was even harder to bear than her hot wrath,—"*I do not propose entering upon explanations, nor do I desire any sentimental reflections on our mutual losses. I will only detain you awhile longer, to let you know how I desire this*

thing to be represented to the world. I do not choose that any one—not even my father and brother—should know the truth; this is for my sake, not yours. I prefer that they should think me a perfectly irrational jilt, who has used her feminine prerogatives in the most capricious manner; you will retain their friendship and their sympathies, which is all as it should be,—occupying a false position having become quite a familiar feeling with you, I presume, by this time. In return for your compliance with this final request of mine, I promise you that, if the time should ever come when I experience the slightest desire to hear this interesting romance of yours, you shall be notified thereof!”

He bit his lip as she continued to lash him, but his despairing love spoke out once more: “My God! is there no hope? Is our love,—our beautiful, bright love, that was to aid me in doing such mighty things,—is it dead forever, dead entirely? Is there no life left in it? Cannot my passionate adoration warm it back into life, my beautiful, queenly Edith?”

“Courtney Dupont, do you remember Esther Jones, my poor, unknown sewing-girl, whose dead body you rescued from the bayou?”

“I do.” His eyes were full of horrified expectation.

“Well, if you can restore life to those stiffened limbs of hers, warmth to that pulseless heart of hers, and implant peace and happiness in those sad, sad eyes that haunt me still, then, but not until then, can you ever hope to revivify our dead love. For Esther Jones, all dripping and cold as you drew her from the water, was not deadlier than is my heart within me.”

And, utterly unconscious of the fearful aptness of her comparison, she turned and left the room before he could recover himself.

He left again that night, to the utter bewilderment of his two indignant friends, Edith's father and brother, who received his announcement that “Miss Huntingdon had exercised a lady's acknowledged right to change her mind, and had given him a dismissal,” with a perfect burst of indignation and incredulity.

Frank implored him to stay a week longer. “Ede had some fool notion in her head that would certainly blow away before the expiration of that time.” And, finding him inexorable, he vowed his intention of leaving the house with his injured friend, showing his sister thereby exactly what he thought of her conduct.

“But, Frank,” replied Mr. Dupont, who was debarred by Edith from trying to exonerate her in any way, “I have already made up my mind to leave for Europe. I could not bear to settle down alone in the house that I have so beautified for her reception.”

Frank was determined. Europe or Africa, it mattered not to him; Courtney was all the world to him, and with Courtney he went, after a very cool parting with his sister.



## CHAPTER XXX.

## MR. DUPONT PERFORMS A DUTY.

AS the carriage which was to convey the two young men to the landing, rolled around to the door, Darkis made her appearance with a slip of folded paper in her hand. This she handed to Mr. Dupont, as he was about stepping into the vehicle.

He clutched it eagerly. Perhaps it was a recall,—a reprieve,—a token of softening. It contained but these words:

"Your child is at St. Elizabeth's Asylum, New Orleans,—under the name of Rachel Courtney."

He flung himself into the carriage, and savagely tore the slip of paper into bits.

Frank emerged from the house, at this moment, and they were soon on their way.

She had reminded him that he had a duty to perform, by that piece of information. Strange to say, he had not thought to ask her what *had* become of this poor little marplot,—this innocent babe, who had appeared so unexpectedly on the scene of action, to dash his cup of joy from his lips just as it was full to the brim. He took very little interest in it,—he loved it not,—it had come between him and Edith, and separated them forever,—how *could* he love it? But it was his child, and it was his duty to remove it from its present abode. The heiress of the "Glade" must

not be left to learn its first lessons within the walls of an orphan's asylum.

So, to New Orleans first, and to the house of the good Sisters of St. Elizabeth.

"Had they a child there, by the name of Rachel Courtney?"

"They had had," the gentle-browed matron informed him; "but two ladies had paid the asylum a visit only a week after little Rachel's arrival, and had been so struck with the child's beauty, that one of them had adopted it."

"Could she give him the name and residence of the lady?"

"She could by reference to her book."

The book informed her that little Rachel had been forwarded to the address of Madame Latude, No. —, Esplanade Street.

He sought and found No. —, Esplanade.

"Was Madame Latude at home?"

"Madame was,—and would see monsieur in a few moments."

Monsieur sat in the darkened room, gazing listlessly around at its elegant appurtenances and at the various articles of vertu scattered about, until he was weary of waiting, and his watch informed him that madame's "minute" had been succeeded by twenty others.

A rustle of silk, a cloud of perfume, a vision of curls and bright eyes, and a city humming-bird floated into the room.

"Madame Latude?" inquired monsieur.

"Madame Latude," assented the humming-bird.

"Monsieur believed that madame had adopted a

little girl from the orphan's asylum of St. Elizabeth, and he was in search of the said child."

"Me adopt a leetle shild!" exclaimed madame, with a small screech of horror, "No, no! Me detest the very nom de shile!"

"Was not madame at the asylum, on such-and-such a day, in company with another lady?"

"Ah! yes. She had been," she told him in her broken English, "in company with a silly friend of hers, who was so remarkable a woman that she longed for a little child. And she had thought this little Rachel, for whom he was seeking, so very beautiful, that she had taken it for her own."

"Could she give him that lady's name and address?"

That lady was a country lady who had been on a visit to madame during the winter.

"Her husband was one beeg coton plantair in de norf of Meessissippi, and her name was Mandeville."

So his child was in the northern part of Mississippi, as the adopted child of a planter's wife.

"Was Mrs. Mandeville childless?"

"Not now, for de leetle Rachel was her child."

"Were they wealthy?"

"Dey was reesh."

"Would she be kind to the child?"

"As kin' as ze angels in heaven."

Mr. Dupont wrote his name in full on a card, with an address for the "Glade" and one for New Orleans, from which two points letters could always be forwarded to him.

"Would madame be so kind as to forward that card to her friend Mrs. Mandeville, with the request that, if

at any time she should desire to relinquish her charge, she would write to the individual thereon named?"

"Madame would do so; but she knew her friend Nannee would never want to give up the little Rachel."

Mr. Dupont had performed his duty. The child was in better hands than he could possibly put it in, and when he returned from Europe he would see to it again.

So the waves of ocean were soon dashing between him and Edith, his lost treasure; but when he put foot on shore in merry England the distance between them was no greater in reality than it had been when he stepped into the carriage at the Hall door.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

### A RENCONTRE IN FOREIGN LANDS.

DOCTOR TILMAN had "done" Europe after the most approved style; he had seen those things which he ought to have seen, and done those things which he ought to have done; and I would be doing him an injustice if I represented him, after the expiration of more than a year's busy sight-seeing, as a puling sentimentalist, still wearing the willow for his dead hopes.

He was pretty well wearied of his roving life, and, by contrast, the pictures fancy painted of a quiet home of his own grew all the more attractive.

Bright Edith Huntingdon had been his first and

truest love. With her for his wife he would have had very little left to wish for. But she was already, no doubt, another's wife now, and so it was not only senseless, but worse, to cherish her image any longer. Edith was not for him,—so fate had decreed; but was it right or sensible, therefore, that he should relinquish all hope of a home of his own? Should he continue living the aimless roving life of the past two years? should he go home and shut himself up from the world that had dealt him this one hard blow? or should he go home and ask some good, sweet girl to take what was left of his heart, marry him, and jog along with him in that sort of negative happiness that is the portion of two-thirds of married kind, at least? Of the three courses, common sense approved the last; and, as he came to the conclusion that he would ask some "good, sweet girl" to be his wife, Milly Vaughn's pale, sad face rose before his mind's eye. "Poor Milly!" he ejaculated, mentally; and his mind reverted to the revelation of her sick couch. He was not a very vain man,—at least, not vainer than the rest of you, my dear sirs,—but he felt fully satisfied that to gain Mildred's consent would be no difficult matter.

But then would it be pleasant, that being so near Mrs. Dupont? Could he stand the sight of that man's triumphant happiness without wincing? Could he make himself contented with his substituted happiness so long as the might have been was actually staring him in the face? Had he really conquered his love for Edith, or was the flame only smothered, to burst out afresh as soon as she should stand before him once more in all her queenly beauty? He could not answer.

He did not know himself. All that he did know was that he longed for the rest and quiet of a home. He would go back, go right back to where she was; and if he found her proximity too painful, he would settle in some other neighborhood, take unto himself a wife, and have done forever with the feverish anxieties and worries of this vexed heart question. Life was too short to be spent in never-ceasing regrets. He would put the past behind him, marry some one who was not Edith, be as happy as he could be with a woman who was not Edith Huntingdon, loving her as well as he could love one who was not his heart's first choice; and then—and a feeling of genuine satisfaction pervaded him at this juncture—would it not be something to make poor, sad Mildred Vaughn happy? If the burden of hopeless love had been so hard for him, a strong, hard man, to bear, what had it been for her, poor, weak soul? She loved him,—he could not doubt that; for not only had she revealed it in the ravings of delirium, but her uncontrollable agitation had betrayed her again when she strove in vain to tell him farewell calmly.

So the sum total of the cogitations of this unheroic hero was, that he would go home and tell Mildred Vaughn exactly how it had been with him; would tell her that if she would marry him, he would do his utmost to prevent her from ever regretting it; and if she said "yes," so help him God, he would endeavor to make the latter portion of her life happier than the first part had ever been, finding in her happiness his—contentment.

While Dr. Tilman was thinking these thoughts and

resolving these resolves, he was sitting on the balcony of a little roadside inn, in a picturesque little village that overlooked some of Switzerland's most magnificent mountain scenery. The place was full of tourists, but among them he was the one American. Not being by nature particularly gregarious, he had made no acquaintances, and was looked upon by his fellow-travelers as rather a disagreeable personage, by reason of his reticence and taciturnity.

He had been smoking his after-dinner cigar, on the little balcony, in absolute solitude, listening to the ripple of the water as it gurgled over its rocky bed close by the doors of the hostelry, watching the sun slowly sinking to rest in a gorgeous couch of crimson and gold, listening to the merry voices of groups of tourists as they collected around the lower doors and exchanged notes on their day's explorations,—listening absently to all those things that told him he was a stranger in a strange land, while heart and soul were busy with the dear ones in his far-away American home.

Fresh visitors were arriving every day, but so little was he interested in any one on this side of the water, that he did not even glance at the list of new arrivals. He was therefore somewhat surprised, on the evening in question, by having his reverie abruptly broken in upon by his landlord, with the information that among the arrivals of that day were two American gentlemen; that one of the American gentlemen had sprained an ankle badly in climbing the mountains; that the American gentleman had "damned" all the foreign doctors, and wanted to know if an American physician was anywhere on earth within reach of that hole (the

American gentleman seemed to be a very savage gentleman, mine host explained parenthetically); that he had informed monsieur that luckily there was an American doctor right in the same house, and Mr. American had sent him to fetch him in a very great hurry.

Feeling somewhat pleased at the prospect of clasping a fellow-countryman's hand in that out-of-the-way spot, Dr. Tilman arose with alacrity, threw the stump of his cigar over the balcony, and followed mine host straightway to the savage gentleman's apartment.

He entered the room, and to his unspeakable amazement found himself in the presence of Frank Huntingdon, who was the savage gentleman with the sprained ankle, and Mr. Courtney Dupont, who looked equally savage without a sprained ankle.

"Dr. Tilman! by George!" exclaimed Frank from the lounge, where he lay stretched, suffering great pain from the swollen member. And he held out his hand with every appearance of extraordinary pleasure, at what he called his "good luck" in meeting his old friend at this juncture.

Mr. Dupont advanced and shook hands listlessly. To him all persons and all places were alike. Edith was lost to him, and his soul was dark.

Even while their hands were locked in greeting, Dr. Tilman's brain was busy with conjectures as to what possible cause *her* husband could have for so moody a brow and so gloomy a bearing.

"And Mrs. Dupont?" he asked, after expressing his pleasure at the rencontre. "I suppose she is with you?" He tried to speak perfectly indifferently, and was surprised at his own success.

"Oh! damn it!" cried Frank from his lounge, watching the contraction of his friend's brow, and saving him the necessity of answering, "there is no Mrs. Dupont,—at least, no Mrs. Courtney Dupont; and if Court was like me he'd thank his stars that he'd escaped being tied tight and fast to any such totally whimsical and unreasonable a piece of femininity as Miss Edith Huntingdon. Come, doctor, and see what you can do for this ankle of mine, for it hurts like the devil!"

This was all the information vouchsafed, and with his heart beating wildly with new-born hopes, Dr. Tilman turned his attention to the swollen ankle.

Edith was free,—he cared not how or why. She might still be his,—his first bright dream of happiness might still be realized. Joy! joy! He would go back to his darling, and tell her how long and how dearly he had loved her. These wild hopes and plans were surging in his heart even while he bent with professional gravity and perfect composure over the wounded ankle. He examined it, pronounced it a mere nothing, prescribed lotions and salves, and perfect rest; regretted that his friends had come on the very day on which he was compelled to depart; signified his intention of returning at once to America; offered to carry any letters they might desire sending to their friends; and before night, had lost sight of the little Swiss hamlet forever, and was whirling rapidly forward on his homeward trip.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

### O DEATH! WHERE IS THY STING?

THE wind was howling dismally around the stately old Hall; the bare limbs of the grand old forest-trees swayed and bowed before the restless might of the storm-king; large snow-flakes were falling swiftly and silently, powdering trees, roofs, and lawn; while the pale gleam of a wintry moon, emerging now and again from the fast-driven clouds, only served to make the outer darkness more apparent.

Within the house all was hushed and awe-stricken, for the master of the Hall lay dying. The good man's summons had come, and had found him ready and willing. O death! where is thy sting? O grave! where is thy victory?

Around the hearth in the sitting-room was collected a sad and hushed group of the neighbors who had been hastily summoned by the frightened servants. Mournfully and in low voices they spoke of him who was about to pass through the gates into the land of mystery beyond. They told of his pure life, of his great soul, of his countless virtues; sorrow was depicted on every countenance, for they were about to lose one of the *men* of their neighborhood, one whose place could never be filled. They could do nothing for him,—he himself had told them so, and had asked them to leave him alone with his daughter. So they

had come out, one by one, from bidding him a final farewell, and seated themselves around the large fireplace in the sitting-room, where a bright wood-fire crackled and blazed merrily, as if striving to win them from their gloom.

In the servants' offices in the yard scared and sorrow-stricken slaves were crowded thickly, for the news had spread rapidly throughout the quarters that "master was dying." The good, the gentle, the beneficent master, who had cared for them in health, who had tended them in sickness, who had been a providence to these "chattels," not holding with those who would vainly strive to prove that their race have no souls.

In the chamber of death, on her knees by the bedside, knelt Edith. Her father's hand was clasped in hers; she was gazing into his face with tearless eyes. For more than an hour he had been talking to her, slowly and feebly, but so calmly and cheerfully that she felt calmed and comforted herself. Besides, what was there so very terrible in leaving a world so full of misery? Her father had not one fear for the future, and he was going to meet that precious mother whose memory was still so sacred to her child.

"Oh, father! take me with you,—take me with you,—let me go with you to mother! Oh! would to God that I too could die and be at rest, as you will be so soon!"

Her wretchedness had found vent in words at last, and she knelt there writhing in uncontrollable agony.

For the first time an expression of pain flitted across the dying man's brow. He was willing to go,—nay, he had longed for this hour for years; but now that

his summons had come, it embittered his last moments to think of leaving his child lonely and unhappy behind him.

"My child, my child, would to God I could have seen you happily married before I died!"—and he laid his hands on her bowed head. "My precious child, are you, then, so wretched as to be willing to leave the world at your time of life?"

"Oh, father! father! take me with you!" was the one answer of the prostrate girl.

He lay silent, his breast heaving slowly, the death-damp gathering on his brow, his almost sightless eyes turned upon the kneeling figure of his desolate child with a look of infinite love and pity.

A low, hesitating knock was heard at the door. Edith rose to open it, and started back as she found herself face to face with Dr. Tilman.

He held out his hand eagerly.

She grasped it firmly.

"May I see him?" he asked, in a low voice.

"*May* you? Oh! Dr. Tilman, if you had but been here you might have done something."

She drew him within the room, and closed the door after him.

Mr. Huntingdon was in complete possession of his senses, and bade the young man kneel by his side, so that he could speak to him.

One on each side of him—knelt Edith and Dr. Tilman.

As calmly as he had spoken to all the rest of his friends about his approaching dissolution, he now spoke to Dr. Tilman. He bade him not to utter

such unavailing regrets at his own absence, for no mortal could have stayed death's hand; his time had come, and he would obey the summons joyfully, were it not for one thing,—his daughter, his poor, desolate child! What was to become of her? Her brother in Europe, and no friend, no relative near to aid or comfort her; and his feeble voice grew wistful as it dwelt on the dreary prospect before his beloved daughter.

Dr. Tilman's heart gave a great bound. He took the dying man's hand between both of his great strong ones, and spoke to him in a voice thrilling with solemn earnestness.

"Mr. Huntingdon, I have loved your daughter ever since she was a little child. I have loved her with a love that comes but once in a man's lifetime. It was only after she had given herself to another that I relinquished the hope of winning her for my own,—a hope that I had cherished for years. This is no time or place for love-making; but if you think you could be satisfied to leave her with me as my wife, and if she will give me the blessed privilege of shielding her from life's storms, God is my witness that your dying trust will be sacred to my life's end, and I will be to her a true and loving husband so long as we both shall live."

As he spoke, Edith's head had sunk lower and lower upon her clasped hands until it was entirely hidden. She held her breath for her father's answer. Oh, God! if he should bind her by a death-bed promise! She could not marry. Her whole soul revolted at the idea of marrying any one. Her heart had turned to stone. Courtney Dupont had petrified it; and if she married

this man, it would be to his everlasting unhappiness. She would speak,—she would tell her father so. She raised her head for the purpose, and started to her feet with a cry of horror.

Even while listening to the young man's words,—words that took away from him his last regret in dying,—Mr. Huntingdon was seized with the death-spasm. His face was distorted with mortal agony; and, with a wild cry, Edith turned and fled from the room.

When the first paroxysm of grief had exhausted itself, she grew perfectly calm.

"Why should I weep?" she exclaimed. "Father is twice as happy as I shall ever be. Oh! if I could only have gone with him, and been at rest, too! Dear, dear father! thank God, I was spared the misery of refusing your last request! I could not,—oh! no,—I could not do a good man such an injustice as to give him my cold, hard, dead self for a wife,—a helpmate!" And the wretched girl actually uttered a hard, hysterical, bitter laugh of mockery.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

## THE VEXED QUESTION ANSWERED.

IT was not until Mr. Huntingdon had been dead for a full month that Dr. Tilman ventured to broach the subject of marriage to Edith again. He had been everything to her in this wretched time; had taken all care and trouble off her mind; had written the sad intelligence of their father's death to her brother for her, and had acted toward her personally with the truest delicacy and forbearance, never once hinting at the great hopes that kept seething in his own loving heart.

But the time had come at last when, he thought, with perfect propriety he might ask her to be his wife, more especially as his suit had almost been sanctioned by her father at the last moment.

So, with a heart full of mingled love and anxiety, he proceeded to the Hall and asked for its mistress.

She came in very soon, looking very sad but very lovely in her deep black, with her heavy brown braids curled tightly around the well-shaped head,—severe, but classical and graceful in its severity.

He was pacing the floor, in evident agitation, when she entered the room, and she knew instinctively what he had come for.

So she walked straight up to him, and placing both of her own little hands in the one he extended to her

in greeting, she raised her eyes to his face,—those beautiful brown eyes, once so full of joyous light, now so mournfully dark,—and spoke before he had time to say one word.

“Dr. Tilman, my dear, dear friend, I think I know what you have come here to say; but please let me tell you at once, that it will be perfectly useless to say one word on that subject. I shall never marry,—never. And if I were to be so cruel as to accept your offer, you would repent it bitterly before we had been married a year. I am not the Edith Huntingdon you used to love, Dr. Tilman. She is dead,—dead and gone,—and there is nothing of her left in the hard, unlovable woman that now stands before you. Don't hate me, my best friend,—don't turn from me; for you and Milly Vaughn are the two people on this side of the grave for whom I have any human feeling left. But you don't know what you are talking about, Dr. Tilman, when you ask me to be your wife. If I was entirely selfish I would marry you, and let you bear the consequences; for I am very lonely, doctor,—very lonely indeed. But I like you too well to let you chain yourself to a corpse.

“Look in my face,” she went on, pushing her hair impatiently back from her brow, “and see if you can find the old Edith there. I cannot. I look into my mirror, and I see a still, cold, hard face,—a face with no life in it, eyes with no light in them, a mouth with no smiles in it; and looking into my heart, I see nothing but cold, dead ashes; looking into my soul, I find it full of bitterness and hatred and all uncharitableness. Nowhere, nowhere can I find a trace of the



Edith Huntingdon whom I once knew, and whom you were so good as once to have loved."

"Edith, my poor darling, what has wrought this change?" and prisoning both of her hands, he drew her toward him in spite of herself.

"Tell me, dear one. Talk to me as you would have talked to a brother,—if I may not be a husband; let me be your guardian friend,—let me take care of you, Edith, until your brother comes——"

"My brother!"—she interrupted him bitterly,—"*I have no brother!*"

Dr. Tilman drew her toward a sofa, and seating her beside him, he asked her to listen to him, for a few moments.

Then he told how long he had loved her; how patiently he had waited for her to come of an age when he could ask her to be his wife; how keenly he had suffered when her father had told him of her engagement; how he had gone away to try and overcome it all; what conclusions he had come to on the balcony of the Swiss inn; how hope had budded anew when he found that her engagement had been broken; how he had sped home, hoping to win her for his own. And then he touched lightly and delicately on her father's anxiety to see her married; and then he plead with her, by the strength and great patience of his love, to try and think of him in the light of a husband.

"Dr. Tilman, what would you require in your wife?" She asked the question abruptly, after having pondered over his confession for several minutes.

"I would require as much love as she could give

me; patience and sweetness of temper, and the promise to bear and forbear," he answered.

"In getting me," she replied promptly, "you would get no love at all; you would get a soured and impatient woman, and one who has lost all power or desire either to bear or to forbear."

"Edith, I have no right to ask you for more confidence than you may voluntarily offer; but cannot you tell me all?—may not I, as an old and trusted friend, have some power to lighten this trouble?—may there not be some strange mistake, that I might be instrumental in clearing up? Try me; tell me what your trouble is. I go away, leaving you with every prospect of a bright future, a cloudless life before you. I return to find you a changed, cold woman,—your future clouded, and yourself embittered against the world. What has done it, my beautiful Edith? Who has done it?"

"What has done it is a question I have never answered, and never will. Who has done it?—one false traitor, by name Courtney Dupont!" and the old scorn gleamed in her eyes as she mentioned his name.

"Courtney Dupont!—false to *you!*" and Dr. Tilman's voice was full of indignant wrath.

"Yes, false to me; false to honor; false to every instinct of manhood and virtue. There, don't speak to me any more!"—and she shook herself with a gesture of impatient abhorrence. "I have let you say more to me on this subject than any one has ever yet said. But you have been so good to me, Dr. Tilman," and her voice and face softened again, "that I could

not refuse to marry you without showing you that I had good reason for it."

"Is there, then, no hope that I may warm your heart back to life and love?" And he gazed down into the sad face beside him with an infinite tenderness in his own.

Edith's brow contracted impatiently; she reached her hand out to an *étagère* that stood close by the sofa, and, taking from one of its shelves a small specimen of petrified wood, she laid it carelessly in the palm of his hand. "There, Dr. Tilman, if you can bid that stone turn again to wood, if you can bid that wood rejoin its original tree, if you can send the sap again coursing through its lifeless stem, if you can clothe those branches with the verdure of spring again, then, but not otherwise, may you hope to warm me back to life and love again. My heart is dead, I tell you; cold, and hard, and dead as that stony piece of wood. There, now, for pity's sake, change the subject. I have talked more sentiment this evening than I've talked since——" She left the sentence unfinished. "Come, doctor,"—and her voice was as unlike her own voice as voice could be,—“tell me something of your tour; it's dreadfully tiresome and stupid here, and Milly and myself are growing as old and musty as Miss Priscilla herself."

There was a hard recklessness about her manner that was more painful to Dr. Tilman than would have been the liveliest bursts of emotion.

"My poor Edith!"

Her eyes suddenly filled with tears, but she brushed them angrily away. "Why do you pity me?" she

exclaimed, impatiently. "If you have any pity in your soul, expend it on my precious Milly, who is nearer a saint than anything in this world, and who is just gently and quietly fading off the face of the earth because she has no one to love her, no one to pity her."

Dr. Tilman's face flushed crimson. They sat silent for a few moments. Edith was the first to break the silence.

"Dr. Tilman, this world is full of miserable people, isn't it?" Her voice had got back its cynical intonation. "I don't know of any happy people but fools, and children, and dead people. I wish I was one of the three, though, to tell you the truth, I would have to draw straws for the preference."

"Edith, for God's sake, drop that reckless manner. Be yourself; do not act a part with me, and such a part."

"I am myself," she replied, recklessly,—“my new self. I told you you did not know me, and you see I was right."

"Curse him!" muttered the physician, in a low voice.

"Curse who?"

"Curse the wretch who has wrought this change in you."

"Nay, rather curse the foolish weakness of my silly girl's heart, that made me try to make a god out of such base, base clay. Oh! I've been so very foolish, doctor, so very, very foolish; but I've grown wise now, so wise that never, never, never will I put my trust in man again. I've been trying to instill some of my new-found wisdom into poor Milly's silly heart; but

she only weeps when I talk to her in this way, and tells me 'that I ought not to let the baseness of one man make shipwreck of my faith in human nature,' and goes on loving, and suffering, and being so wretched,—wretched as only women can be; while I, in my superior strength and wisdom, am, like Tam O'Shanter, 'o'er all the ills of life victorious.' But then you know Milly always was half a saint, and I always was more than half a devil."

As Dr. Tilman sat by the excited girl, who hardly paused in her reckless flow of talk long enough to catch breath, his soul swelled with the bitterest indignation against the man who had wrought this cruel change in her pure, trusting nature. What had he done? What could the mystery be? He had not jilted her, for Frank had said plainly that it was his sister's own doings; and by his adherence to Mr. Dupont's side would leave the inference that that gentleman was entirely blameless,—nay, even to be pitied. Whatever it was, he felt sure that Frank was ignorant of it; and if Frank had not been informed, of course he would not be.

How he longed to take her in his arms and comfort her! How he longed to lay that queenly head on his own true heart, and bid it find there oblivion of all deceit, and treachery, and woe! If he had found her plunged in grief, he could have done this; he could have soothed her and caressed her, and won her love while winning her gratitude; but this icy, repellent, cynical creature, what could he do with her? How offer pity to one who scorned the idea of needing pity? How go about soothing one who pronounced herself

o'er all the ills of life triumphant? He could make no headway against such cynicism.

Twice disappointed in his dearest hope, he resolved to put it away from him at once and forever; to make it impossible to hope a third time by making that hope a sin. He would carry out the resolution formed in Switzerland. If he could have only detected some slight indication that she was insincere in her bitterness, was talking as women sometimes do for effect, he would have been willing to wait for years in the hope of arousing her old and better self within her. But she had declared it dead, she had declared that she would never marry, and she had declared that she was not acting a part. If this was indeed her new self, as she said it was, she was right in saying that they could not be happy together. Anything but reckless cynicism in woman! He could forgive a woman for being a fool, for she might be that by nature; but for being a cynic, never,—for that she had to cultivate, and cultivate with care, for it was a growth entirely foreign in her nature.

So he rose to leave her, sadder than he had been on that first parting; for now he felt sure that the Edith whom he had loved so fondly was dead to him forever.

"Edith, you will let me be your true friend, will you not?" And he stood up before her, holding out both hands in farewell.

To his surprise, the impulsive girl seized them both, pressed her quivering lips to each one alternately, then burst into a passion of tears and buried her face in the sofa-cushions.

A bright light, almost of triumph, broke over Dr.

Tilman's strong face. "My poor darling,"—and he laid his hand tenderly on the bowed head,—“is this your vaunted strength? Edith, my love, my precious love, you need me. Come to me, come rest in my love——”

But he could not finish the sentence. With lightning-like rapidity, her moods seemed to change. She raised her head with a gesture of defiance; her eyes, that a moment before had been full of passionate tears, were now dry and burning; she rose to her feet with a haughty gesture. “Dr. Tilman, I *command* you to drop this subject, at once and forever.”

He bowed in acquiescence and left her presence.

When he was gone, Edith once more threw herself upon the sofa, and gave free vent to the fast-coming tears.

“Oh, Milly!” she murmured through her sobs, “he is very good and very noble, and if it had not been for you, poor darling, I would have tried the rest he offered me. But now he hates me, he despises me, and he'll turn to you, poor Milly, at last, and you will be happy, if no one else is. Oh, this miserable world! this miserable world!” And the wealthy, beautiful, envied Miss Huntingdon lay upon her yielding sofa-cushions the very picture of dreary wretchedness.

## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### A LACONIC WOOING.

“MISS MILDRED, I am tired of a roving, aimless life. I want a home of my own, and a wife who will love me and make that home happy. Will you be that wife?”

They were sitting alone in Milly's little parlor,—she and Dr. Tilman,—when he asked her that momentous question, so abruptly, so curtly, that for the space of a second all Milly's carefully-nurtured self-control deserted her, and left her as confused and stammering as a girl of sixteen would have been under the same circumstances. And he? He asked the question with the air of a man who was in earnest, but who was so certain of the result that he could afford to be calmly in earnest. He waited composedly for her answer.

This great desire of her life had come to her so suddenly, and her heart was beating so wildly with its unexpected bliss, that for awhile she *could* not speak.

“Well, Milly,” and a smile *almost* of love hovered around the doctor's bearded lip, “is it yes or no?”

She raised her soft, dovelike eyes to the face of the man she had loved in secret for so many years, and answered in a tone of voice that said plainly that there *could* be but one answer:

“Oh! sir,—it is yes!”

Then he took her, all trembling as she was, into his

arms, and pressed the kiss of betrothal on her pure, sweet lips.

And Milly was at rest.

"Before I marry you, Mildred, I think it is but just that I should make you acquainted with some former passages in my heart's history. Will you hear them now?"

"Let me tell them to you," answered Mildred, with a look up into his face which was so loving, so holy, so trusting, that he involuntarily stooped and pressed another kiss upon her lips.

"I am not your heart's first choice. You loved Edith Huntingdon before she ever met Mr. Dupont. If he had never come here you and Edith would inevitably have been married. You feel convinced that she will never recover from that disappointment. You have come of an age when the quiet of a home becomes of paramount importance, and you believe that I will make you a good wife. But if I had done such violence to my own heart as to have said 'No,' instead of 'Yes,' you would have gone away from me a little disappointed, it is true, but you would simply have looked around until you did find the good wife you wanted, and then——" she paused.

"And then?" he asked, smiling an amused smile at her common-sense rendering of the case.

"And then," she went on, "I should have shown myself to be vastly spirited, and should have made myself vastly miserable; for, oh! I do love you so very, very dearly, and I will try so very hard to prevent you from ever regretting this day."

He did not tell her that he knew she loved him, and

had known it for years; but he did tell her that it would be impossible for him ever to repent of what he had done.

As there was no reason under the sun that they should dilly-dally about it, the day for their marriage was fixed before he left the house.

Edith was informed at once, and she pressed a dozen kisses on Milly's blushing face, in token of her hearty sympathy and pleasure.

\* \* \* \* \*

The wedding-day had come. It was to be quite a private affair,—only the doctor's family,—for Mildred would not listen to a large wedding so soon after Mr. Huntingdon's death.

Early in the afternoon of the day Edith came down from the Hall, followed by Darkis bearing a huge, square morocco-case.

Miss Huntingdon went straightway to Milly's chamber-door, and then taking the box from Darkis, she dismissed her, and entered her friend's presence.

Milly was sitting alone, over her fire, dressed in a loose cashmere dressing-gown, her head buried in her hands, while she gave herself up to a blissful reverie. She had waited for happiness so long, and it had come to her at last so unexpectedly, that she hardly knew how to greet her heart's unwonted guest. Was it pain or pleasure that pervaded her being? She hardly knew. She was in a state of tremulous joy that certainly was too intense to be called pleasure, while it sprang from a source that forbade its being called pain.

Edith kneeled down by her low chair, and while she put one arm around Milly's neck, she held the other

one, with the hand that held the box, hidden in the folds of her dress.

"Milly darling," she began, "such an ungrateful proceeding as a person's objecting to her bridal presents was never yet heard of, was it?"

"I should hope not," answered Milly, looking at her, a little puzzled.

"Because," went on Edith, "I have brought you a present which I'm so afraid you won't like."

"Oh, Edith! you *know* I would like anything on earth you might choose to bring me, for your own dear sake, not its."

"You promise, then, that you will accept without a demur?"

"I promise," replied Milly, promptly.

"There, then," said Edith, laying the case on her lap, pressing an impulsive little kiss on her lips, and rising to her feet before Mildred had time even to open it.

She touched a spring and the case flew open, revealing to sight a set of diamonds that must have cost thousands of dollars. It was a magnificent collection, a complete set, including necklace and even a little diamond-studded watch.

"Oh, Edith! your diamonds!" And her voice was deprecatory.

"Oh, Milly! your promise!" replied Edith, mockingly.

"But, Edith——"

"But, Milly!"

"Oh, dearest! indeed I cannot."

"Mildred Vaughn, I never knew you to break your

word before; and it is hard if you should commence by breaking it to me, your truest friend, on this occasion of all others. Oh, Milly!"—and her voice took on a tone of dreary impatience—"what are diamonds to me? When will I ever again wear those baubles? There is nothing in common with those bright, flashing gems and my gloomy, somber self."

Mildred's eyes filled with tears that fell on the glistening stones in her lap.

"How *could* I be so cruel!"—and Edith was again on her knees, with her arms around her friend's neck. "How could I sadden you so, on this, your wedding-day! But indeed, darling Milly, you provoked me to it by your opposition. Come," she added, in a lighter tone. "I want my little watch to point the hours that are bringing your happiness to you; I want it to tell you when to commence arraying your charming self for your bridal; I want it to tell you just when the moment has come when you must leave this room and go out to put your hand into his, to be made happy for evermore, for evermore." And she raised the little jeweled time-piece from its satin bed.

It had never been out of its case since the night on which she had flung it into *his* child's hands to still its tell-tale cries. She had thrust it back into her diamond-case when she had finally taken it from the child, and had never used it since. As she now turned it over to touch the spring, she noticed for the first time that a large diamond had fallen out of the center of the cluster. She uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"To think, that I should bring my friend a dilapidated wedding-present! Look in the case, Milly; it

must certainly be in there, for I am very certain that it was not out when I wore the watch last."

But the most diligent search proved unavailing; the diamond was not there.

At last a crimson flush mounted to Edith's forehead. In flinging it into the child's lap she must have loosened the diamond; undoubtedly it was still glimmering in the obscurity of the observatory.

"I think I recollect where I must have lost it," she said, quietly, to Mildred; "but it is too late to attend to that now. See, it is almost time for you to begin dressing. We will remedy this to-morrow."

So the diamonds were locked away in Milly's bureau, as being too flashing for so modest a wedding; and the two friends were soon deep in the mysteries of the bridal toilet.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was several days after Mildred's wedding before Edith thought again of the missing diamond.

She searched the observatory thoroughly, herself; it was not to be found, and she gave up the search, finally, completely at a loss to know what could have become of it.

Her diamond came back to her strangely.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

### BROTHER AND SISTER.

MR. FRANK HUNTINGDON and Mr. Dupont were far, far away from home when the letter containing the news of Mr. Huntingdon's death reached them. It was covered with foreign postmarks, having followed them over the tourists' beaten track, and at last found them while they were standing where thousands have stood before them,—wondering, as thousands have wondered before them, at the mysterious majesty of Egypt's Pyramids.

Of the two, the news seemed to affect Mr. Dupont the more deeply.

Frank was by nature rather cold and selfish. His father had been so careless and indulgent a parent, that his children's love for him had been rather a negative sort of love, after all. And of late years the young man had so accustomed himself to look forward to the snapping of this feeble thread of life, that the news was received with sorrow, but hardly with surprise.

"We must go home at once,—Edith is alone."

"You must go home at once," corrected Mr. Dupont. "Oh! Edith, Edith, my lost darling! would to God mine was the right to go to you; to comfort you in your loneliness; to protect you, now that he is gone!"

And the bronzed and bearded man shook with uncontrollable agitation.

"Courtney," said his friend, laying his hand on the other's bowed head, "I have never yet tried to pry into this business. I have stood by you, thinking that it was some woman's caprice to give you up. Is there no way of settling this thing? Cannot you make a clean breast of it to a friend who has shown himself as faithful as I have? I know my sister *did* love you once,—loved you most passionately; and though she has often been known to act impulsively, I've never yet known her hold out in an injustice as she has done this time."

"She has done me no injustice," interrupted Mr. Dupont, hastily.

"Then what in the devil *has* come between you?" asked the other, losing all patience at the baffling answer.

"It is her wish that I should not explain matters," replied Courtney; "and until she releases me from the obligation to silence, which she herself has laid upon me, you will never know. For her own sake, I would to Heaven that she *would* command me to speak!"

"Well," answered Frank, impatiently, "I hate mysteries, and I hate romantic mysteries above all mysteries; yet here we all are, acting like a parcel of fools in a novel,—who go on misunderstanding each other through three everlasting volumes, and after everybody is worn to skin and bones trying to find out what everybody else means, the cat jumps out of the bag of its own accord, and turns out to be nothing after all but a poor little stuffy kitten, that ought to have been

strangled ages ago,—and would have been if there'd been a grain of common sense to be found among the whole lot of 'em."

"Hush! you don't know what you are talking about."

These were the last words that were ever spoken on the subject between the two.

They journeyed homeward together as far as New Orleans, where they separated,—Frank to return to his own home, and Mr. Dupont to his.

"You will visit me sometimes at the 'Glade,' will you not, Frank?" were his parting words.

"I will, by George!" was the hearty response; "and I hope, on my first visit, to find you have taken unto yourself a wife, who will console you for Miss Huntingdon's heartless coquetry."

"Never!" was the emphatic reply, and they separated.

Before leaving the city, Mr. Dupont called again on Madame Latude, to inquire if she had heard anything from her friend Mrs. Mandeville, the adopted mother of little Rachel. He had some slight difficulty in bringing himself to the recollection of this frivolous little city lady, for besides having seen him but once, this sun-burned, broad-shouldered, handsome man, with so stern and sad a look in his black eyes, was very unlike the slender, elegant gentleman who had called on her once before about this pauper baby. But when she did remember him, she gave a little musical laugh as she replied: "Yes, she had heard from Nannee just one time since monsieur's departure. She would bring him her friend's reply." So she darted from the room,



and returned presently with a letter, which she placed in his hand.

As he took it from the already unsealed envelope, the fragments of a torn card fell from the folded sheet. He stooped, and picking the pieces up, found them to be the disjointed parts of his own card,—the card he had left with Madame Latude to be forwarded to Mrs. Mandeville. He turned to the letter for explanation, and read:

"My dear Julie,—Say to the cruel man who would take my darling from me that baby and I have no use whatever for him. What his claim on her is I neither know nor care; but why couldn't he have taken her from the asylum before I found her there? Why should he just think of claiming her after I have taken her for my own, and love her just like my own? If he is rich, and has anything to give her, tell him for me that she has no need of it, as she will have all that John and I have. We are rich. And we certainly love her better than he ever could have done, or she would never have been where I found her. To prevent the possibility of my ever communicating with him, if I should ever entertain so insane a desire, I have torn his address into atoms, and herewith return it to him."

The letter was full of love for the child and of reproach for himself.

She was right: they certainly loved it better than he did, and with them it should remain.

He was about taking out another card to leave with Madame Latude, when she raised her hands with a little deprecating gesture.

"Monsieur must really excuse her,—she was tired

of playing go-between. If he had any legal claim on the child, and wished to enforce it, he knew Mrs. Mandeville's address, and could carry on the business himself. She positively refused to be instrumental in torturing Nannee any further." So she politely bowed him out of her house and out of her acquaintance.

His final resolve was to go to his home in Florida, make a will at once in favor of the child, so that at his death she would receive all that he had, but to take no more steps toward recovering her in person. Bessie's child would be a wealthy heiress after all. As for himself he had no hopes, no plans. He would live the idle, luxurious life of a Southern gentleman, and he supposed, after awhile, things would look stupidly comfortable enough to him, and all this present heart-burning and worry would be looked back upon as a romantic episode in his life. His sisters were all married off, and before his departure for Europe he had installed his mother as temporary mistress of his handsome house. He would go back there now, and gladden her heart by investing her with a life-lease of the position.

All of which he accordingly did.

\* \* \* \* \*

Edith received her brother without any effusions. She had felt as if he tacitly condemned her by his adherence to his friend; and although she was fully aware that he labored under the error that she had wantonly jilted her lover, she had just enough of woman's unreasonableness about her to feel that as he was for him, he was against her.

As for him he was grieved to find her looking so

sadly changed, and his heart smote him for never having shown her any sympathy in her trouble.

They were sitting by the fire in the library, the evening after his return. Edith had been telling him the sad particulars of their father's last illness and death, and after she had finished the mournful recital she leaned her head back against the cushioned chair and gazed into the fire with such a hopeless, dreary look in her sad eyes, that Frank's soul swelled with the tenderest pity.

He drew his chair close to hers, and taking her face between both his hands, he kissed her gently. Then he laid the beautiful head on his shoulder, and spoke to her:

"Edith, my poor sister, we are entirely alone in the world now, and we must try and be more to each other than we have been heretofore. You have never been particularly loving toward me anyhow, sister mine, so maybe I've stood rather aloof. But I want you to love me very dearly, Edith, and try to lean on me,—if as strong a woman as you are can learn to lean on so weak a man as I am."

"Oh, Frank!" was all her answer in words; but this unexpected offer of affection from her careless brother affected her deeply, and she wept silently on his shoulder.

"She's in a gentle mood now," thought Frank to himself, "so I'll risk probing the wound. Edith, I want you to answer me a question,—will you?"

"I cannot tell before I hear it, Frank," she replied, raising her head from his shoulder, for she felt instinctively what was coming.

"Tell me, sister mine, what is it that has come between you and Courtney?"

"Never!" exclaimed Edith, excitedly. "If you want to live here in peace with me, Frank, never mention his name. If you cannot believe that I had good and sufficient reasons for acting as I did, go back to your friend, and continue to look on me as a capricious coquette; but do not ask me to explain anything to you, for the tortures of the Inquisition could not make me speak one word!" So saying, she left the room, with burning cheeks and flashing eyes. When she returned, an hour later, she was perfectly calm, cold, and stately, as she always was now, and reopened her conversation with her brother in the most collected of voices.

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### EDITH ALONE AGAIN.

THUS stood matters in the year 1861. 1861—figures that should be stamped in characters of flame on history's bloodiest page.

A letter came to Mr. Huntingdon in August of that year, a letter from his friend Dupont.

"Join me in Virginia," he wrote, "and we will fight side by side, unto the death. I may be anathematized as a renegade by Northern friends; but this is the home of my ancestors and it is *her* home. Perhaps if I die fighting for her rights, she may forgive

me at last. Give her the sealed letter inclosed in this, and tell her when she hears that I am dead to read it and pity me."

Frank was already deep in preparations for joining the army when this letter reached him. He was by no means a stout man, but the lameness which had so afflicted him in boyhood had gradually worn itself away to a scarcely perceptible limp. Of course it would be cavalry service that he would enter upon,—and show me the Southern-raised boy who started out with the intention of fighting in any other way. Besides, it was hardly more than a frolic that they were all preparing for; and the preparations which were made by this delicately-nurtured young man would have excited the amusement of his foes and the wrath of a farther-seeing comrade.

He was ready at last, with his fine horses, and his servants, and his silver-mounted dressing-case, and his smoking-cap, and his cashmere dressing-gown, all very Sybaritish in appearance; but woe be unto him who should take all these outward and visible frivolities as an indication of a nerveless arm or a coward soul.

He joined his friend Dupont in Virginia, where they clasped hands and swore to stand by each other to the death. So Edith was left alone again.

As Dr. Tilman and his wife had concluded to remain at the little cottage, Edith proposed to Miss Priscilla to move back again to her old home at the Hall.

"I think we can get along better, Miss Priscilla, than we used to when I was a willful, spoiled girl. I was very unreasonable toward you then, but I think I understand a good many things now that I could not

forgive then. I was happy then, and petulant; I am unhappy now, and reasonable."

So Miss Priscilla moved back again; and either her asperity had been softened by time and by association with sweet Mildred Vaughn, or else she stood somewhat in awe of the cold, repellant young mistress of the Hall.

However that may be, things went on very stupidly, and very quietly, and very monotonously with those two lonely women in the rambling old house.

I am not going to bore your satiated ears with a war-chapter, reader mine, for I could tell you nothing new if I would. The tale of widowed wives, and orphaned babes, and burning homesteads, and wasted fields is too sadly familiar to you and too fearfully real to me to be rendered into paragraphs and chapters, with flowing sentences and carefully-rounded periods, for your perusal. So I will leave you to draw, not on your imagination, but on your memory, for pictures of the loneliness, and the desolation, and the heart-sickness that went to make up the lives of all those who have figured in these pages for the next few weary years.

"What boots the oft-repeated tale of strife,  
The feast of vultures and the waste of life,  
The varying fortune of each separate field,  
The fierce that vanquish and the weak that yield,  
The smoking ruin and the crumbled wall?—  
In this the struggle was the same with all."

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

## A STRANGE ADVENTURE.

IT was toward the close of the spring, in the year 1864, that Mr. Huntingdon, now Major Huntingdon, found himself traveling alone through the northern portion of Mississippi. He had been to the closely-blockaded river, making a vain attempt to cross and find out something about the lonely girl whom he had left in the old Hall, with no protection but such as friendly neighbors might afford her.

It is true, Dr. Tilman had written to him, begging him to feel no uneasiness on his sister's account, as she would be his own especial charge until her natural protector should return to her. But no letters had come to him for a long time, and his heart was full of anxious love. He had vainly essayed to run the blockade; but though he had failed in crossing, himself, he had succeeded in hearing news of the old Hall, and was now returning to his command, relieved of his load of anxiety.

He had been traveling alone all day, making very slow progress at that, for his steed was nothing better than a jaded mule. As he turned a bend in the road, he saw before him a wayfarer whose route seemed to be the same as his own; so, glad of the opportunity of breaking his long silence, he urged his long-eared Pegasus to its utmost speed, and was rewarded by gaining upon the horseman at every step. As his

back was toward Frank, the latter had full opportunity to study him. From externals, one would have taken him to be a Catholic priest,—the long black coat, the closely-shaven head, the stooping shoulders, were all indicative of the brotherhood; but so many disguises were resorted to in those troubled times that it was very unsafe to judge by appearances. With a few more vigorous applications of his spurs, Frank succeeded in coming alongside of the ecclesiastical-looking stranger. He raised his hat in greeting, and, to the undisguised astonishment of both, found himself face to face with his old tutor, Mr. Groves.

"Mr. Groves!"

"My dear Frank!"

And their hands were clasped in a cordial greeting. After the first exclamations of surprise were gotten through with, Frank remarked, laughingly,—

"Do you know what I took you for, Mr. Groves, before I caught a glimpse of your face?"

"What?" asked the other, with his own slow smile.

"Nothing more nor less than a Catholic priest."

"Which, my dear boy, is exactly what I am; and since the war I have been acting as chaplain to the — Regiment, of Louisiana, and am at present returning from the melancholy office of carrying a widow's only boy to her, fatally wounded. Oh, God! this cruel war! How long, O Lord! how long?"

Then Frank asked him many wondering questions, as to why, and how, and when he had turned Catholic.

To all of which his quondam teacher returned the simple answer, that this world had had so few attractions for him that he had retired from it to become a

"brother" in a religious institution on the coast; that there he had remained, leading a life of quiet monotony, preparing himself for the priesthood, into which he had been admitted only a very short time before the breaking out of the war; that he had then thought a field of great usefulness would be open to him as army chaplain, and hence his presence. That was all he said about himself, but he asked many and earnest questions about the old neighborhood and the dear friends he had left there; and when he asked of Milly Vaughn's welfare, a faint red rose to his sallow forehead and there was just the slightest tremor in his low, sad voice.

So they rode on, side by side, along the dusty roadway, till the sun grew hot overhead and themselves and their beasts were weary and thirsty.

"Is there no human habitation in this dreary neighborhood?" sighed Frank. "I have been in the saddle since early dawn, and am wearied to death. I passed plenty of houses and plenty of people while I was fresh and comfortable; but I verily believe I've ridden ten miles through this interminable pine forest without catching a glimpse of a human face."

"Patience, Frank! I am as ignorant as you of this locality; but I feel sure we cannot go on much farther without coming to a plantation."

Frank, in his petulance and weariness, fancied the forest stretched leagues, and was hopeless of ever feeling any more comfortable than he did at that present comfortless moment, when all of a sudden they emerged from the woods, and saw, about a mile ahead of them, a spot that promised the longed-for rest.

They urged their tired animals forward, and soon drew rein in front of a low, white cottage, almost buried in shrubbery. To the right of it was a large peach-orchard in full flower, while to the left was a carefully-tended garden, where, to the delight of the tired soldiers, they espied a huge watermelon bed, where the dark-green melons peeped out temptingly from the sheltering leaves. They opened the gate and advanced toward the house without having seen a human face. The drowsy hum of bees greeted their ears as the busy little honey-makers buzzed around the yellow jasmine-vine covering the little latticed portico; a huge gray cat lay dozing in the sun on the front-step, and a sleepy-looking dog, stretched at full length on the door-mat, blinked his eyes lazily at them, as much as to say that the exertion of barking at them, on so warm a day, was too much for him.

"What a perfect picture of homelike quiet!" said Mr. Groves, as they took in all these various objects.

"Yes," answered Frank, "one can hardly realize here that the thunders of war are reverberating at no great distance. I wonder if the inmates of this vine-clad cottage have heard of Lincoln's election yet? I feel sure not. Let's rouse them to that fact, and to the fact of our own gnawing hunger," went on Frank, in a light tone.

They passed by the sleeping cat and the lazy dog, and stood within the open door.

Mr. Groves gave a gentle little apologetic knock, as if he deprecated the necessity that compelled two dusty wayfarers from the outside world of worry to intrude into this paradise of peace and quiet.

No answer came to his knock.

Then Frank knocked, still more impatiently.

Still no answer.

"Look here, Groves, suppose it's an enchanted palace, that some kind fairy has plumped down here on the roadside, for the accommodation of just such poor tired devils as you and I; and suppose we should turn the handle of that closed door yonder, and should find inside a banquet already spread for our consumption,—wouldn't you call that jolly?"

"Suppose you stop talking nonsense," said Mr. Groves, with a smile, "and try the efficacy of a third knock."

So they knocked a third time.

No answer.

Then they stood quite still, wondering.

"Could they have mistaken you and me for Yankees," laughed Frank, looking down on his priestly companion, "and have run to the woods?"

"Hush!" said Mr. Groves, in a low voice. "Listen!" and he raised his hand to command Frank's silence.

They stood motionless, almost breathless; then from the interior of the closed room there floated out to them distinctly the sound of low, smothered moans,—moans as of some one in the last agony of physical suffering or crushing sorrow.

Without a word the two men advanced to the closed door, bent on investigating the mystery. Frank was in advance, and as he turned the handle he found himself in the presence of a scene so full of sorrowful interest, that his heart smote him for the jesting words he had just uttered in his ignorance.

In the middle of the prettily-furnished apartment, placed on two chairs, was an uncovered coffin, formed of rude, unplanned plank, and lined inside with what had evidently been a black silk dress. The occupant of the coffin was a woman of about forty years,—one who, to judge by the statuesque beauty of her features in death, had been remarkably handsome. The pale, folded hands were small and exquisitely moulded, while the wavy black hair was combed smoothly over a high, intellectual forehead. The rich, heavy silk in which the dead form was clad seemed strangely in contrast with the rude deal coffin.

By the side of this coffin knelt a young girl, apparently about seventeen years old. Her arms were thrown across the form of the dead woman, in utter abandonment of woe. Her long black hair fell like a veil around her slender form, completely hiding her face from the two intruders upon her sorrow.

It was she who was uttering the despairing moans that had so startled Mr. Groves.

"Oh! mother, mother, come back for me!" was all her cry. "Mother, mother, I'm all alone!"

"Talk to her, Groves, you're a preacher." And with his own eyes full of unwonted tears and his voice choked with pity, Frank left the room, closing the door on Mr. Groves.

Was this young creature entirely alone with her dead? Was there no one near her at all? Frank left the room wondering, and determined to find out. He passed through the quiet house until he stood upon the back door-step, and then glancing toward the little garden, he espied the head of an old negro, apparently

hard at work. Frank went hastily to the spot, and found him to be quite an old man,—so old and so feeble that his melancholy task of digging a grave for the waiting corpse was progressing but slowly.

He looked up from his position in the open grave in unmitigated astonishment as Mr. Huntingdon's tall figure loomed above him, but at the same time he uttered an exclamation of relief.

"Thank de good Lord, master, fo' senin' you here dis day!"

"What does all this mean, old man?" asked Frank, kindly. "Your household seems to be in sad fix."

"Please de good Lord, master, could'n be no sadder; but ef you'll 'low an ole nigger to res' hisself while he tells you 'bout it, I'll sot me down, for God knows my no 'count ole back done mos' give out."

"Get out and rest," cried Frank, eagerly; "and give me your spade, for this grave will be needed long before you can accomplish it." And the young soldier sprang into the yawning grave and commenced work in earnest. "Now, old man, tell me all about it while I work."

So the faithful old negro told him how that he was the solitary servant who had remained by his mistress,—that mistress who now lay stiff and dead in her own parlor; how his mistress had refused to follow the example of her neighbors, who had every one of them deserted their homes, through fear of the approaching enemy, because she had wanted to stay where she could hear from her husband, who was fighting at Vicksburg; how news had come, about a month before, of that husband's death; how his mistress had

"fallen like dead" when she had heard it, and how she had just pined away and died of a broken heart.

"And the young girl in the house?" asked Frank, as the old man paused.

"My po' miss Nanny, po' honey! what's to become ob her dis ole nigger can't say."

"Had your mistress no other children?—no sons?"

"No other chilren,—no sons, master," was the reply.

"Are there no white families at all left in the neighborhood?"

"Nary one, master."

"And *you* are the only soul she has had near her in this terrible time?"

"De only soul, master; but God knows de ole nigger's done his bes'." And he looked at Frank half-reproachfully.

"Not for a minute do I doubt that, old man," answered Frank, promptly. "I was only wondering how, in God's name, you would have managed to have gotten her out to this grave, if we hadn't been sent by God."

"I could 'a managed, master. I made de coffin by myself, and I've laid my dear blessed missus into it by myself, and I could 'a managed de rest somehow or odder; but what I'se studyin' about is Miss Nanny,—what's to become of de chile, master? Dis ole nigger 'd lay down his life for de chile, but she can't stay here widout a white soul near her."

"I will take care of her, uncle," said Frank, earnestly. And he looked at the wrinkled, black face in genuine admiration of the faithful honesty depicted therein.

The united exertions of the soldier and the old negro were at an end, and they returned to the house.

When Frank re-entered the room, he found Mr. Groves watching alone with the dead.

"Where is the young girl?" he asked.

"Poor child!" replied Mr. Groves, "she swooned away almost immediately after you left the room, and I conveyed her to the adjoining bedroom. When she came to herself she seemed surprised and alarmed to find a stranger sitting by her bedside, but when I explained my sacred office to her, she seemed relieved and grateful. 'Thank God!' she exclaimed, 'my precious mother will now have Christian burial.' Then I told her that I and a friend had happened here most accidentally, but that we should certainly remain with her until her friends came to her. 'I have no friends,' was her pitiful reply; 'not even a white acquaintance within fifty miles. Mother was my all,—my all,—and she is gone!' I found her a gentle, docile little creature; and when I insisted upon her taking an anodyne, which I had prepared for her, she obeyed like a little child, and is now sleeping heavily."

"Let us have this out of her sight before she awakes," said Mr. Huntingdon, glancing down on the placid face of the dead woman.

So they deemed best; and while Nanny Mandeville slumbered heavily in her own little chamber, stranger hands bore her mother's coffin out through the little vine-covered portico on into the little garden, and laid her reverently to rest in the grave prepared by the faithful old slave's feeble hands.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

NANNY MANDEVILLE.

OWING to the combined effects of exhaustion, grief, and the anodyne, the orphaned girl slumbered heavily until the next day. When she awoke, the sun was high overhead. All her sorrow, all her loneliness rushed back upon her at the moment of awakening. The house was so deathly still that a feeling akin to terror seized upon her, and with a startled cry, she sprang from the bed, and, flinging open the intervening door, found herself in the presence of two strange gentlemen.

As she stood irresolute on the threshold of the open door, Frank Huntingdon thought that he had never before seen so beautiful a face.

It was a sad, sweet face, with a tiny, quivering mouth and a pair of lustrous dark eyes,—eyes that had a childlike, pleading look in them that went straight to the young soldier's heart and stirred up a commotion in the placid depths thereof that no eyes had ever yet been able to stir.

Finding herself in the presence of two strangers, Nanny forced back the tears that started to her eyes when she missed the beloved form of her mother, and advanced toward them with a self-possession for which they were entirely unprepared.

She addressed herself to Mr. Groves; for, besides



his having informed her of his being a priest, she felt less afraid of his plain, kind face than she did of the bearded soldier, whose piercing blue eyes were fastened on her face in so intense a gaze.

"You gentlemen have been very, very kind to me," she said, in a low, trembling voice, holding out her hand to Mr. Groves. "I do not know what I should have done without you, nor how I can ever thank you." And, as she placed her hand in the priest's, she cast a little grateful look of thanks toward the handsome young officer, that threatened instant demolition to the outer works of his carefully-guarded heart.

Mr. Groves drew her to a seat on the sofa beside him. "My child," he began, "is there any particular place you would like us to conduct you to before we leave you? You know it is impossible for you to remain here alone."

"There is no one on earth that I have any claim on," answered Nanny, her eyes filling with tears, "and no place where I would be welcome."

"Had your mother no relations to whom we could carry you?"

"None, sir, that I have ever heard of. Oh, sir," she exclaimed, agitatedly, "I have no right to burden you thus. Let me go with you to some city, and you can put me somewhere where they will let me pay for a home. Oh, mother! mother! to think that your child should have no home!" Then she fell to weeping so violently that Frank found himself compelled to leave the room.

He went out to the little gravel path in front of the

house and paced up and down it, cursing the war that had wrought this desolation, cursing the blockade that prevented his offering his own house as a refuge for this forlorn girl, and cursing his own powerlessness generally. Mr. Groves joined him there, after a few minutes, and they consulted together as to what should be done. To leave her there was an impossibility; so there was but one thing that they could do, and that was to take her with them to Richmond and find boarding for her in some respectable family until the war closed, and then—— It was Frank who had been speaking, and he did not tell Mr. Groves that that "and then" meant that there was already a half-formed conclusion in his heart that pointed to the likelihood of his making this dark-eyed orphan his own little beloved wife.

"Uncle Jake" was consulted, and pronounced it the only feasible plan. He would remain and guard the house and its contents till "Miss Nanny might fin' her way back."

So Mr. Groves went back and informed her that she must prepare to leave the little cottage in their company.

Docilely, and without questioning, she did as they required her. Uncle Jake brought her little pony round to the door when they were ready to start; and, taking both of his withered hands between her soft palms, she called down God's blessing on his faithful old head.

\* \* \* \* \*

Arrived at Richmond, they conveyed her temporarily

to a public boarding-house, and left her to go in search of more suitable quarters for her reception.

"I am acquainted with no one in the city, Frank," Mr. Groves had said, "so the task of finding her a suitable home will devolve on you."

One after one of his lady acquaintances Frank applied to, telling them the whole sad tale, honestly and truthfully; one by one, they politely but coldly refused to receive the young lady as an inmate. They all regretted very much their inability to accommodate Major Huntingdon; but—ah, etc.

With a heart full of burning indignation and of contempt for the base suspicions conveyed by their refusals, Major Huntingdon returned to Mr. Groves.

"Groves, I want you to come back to the hotel with me, to see Miss Mandeville." His eyes were gleaming with passion and he was biting his lips with suppressed fury.

"Have you found a good home for her?" asked Mr. Groves.

"No, damn it! the good ladies of Richmond seem to think I have invented some foul lie for their deception. Their doors are all closed against Miss Mandeville, but they will fly open readily enough to Mrs. Frank Huntingdon."

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Groves. "You mean to——"

"I mean to do now what I had almost made up my mind to do some time or other as soon as I caught the first glimpse of her lovely face; only I would have preferred waiting a little, for her sake."

"Has it ever struck you," said Mr. Groves, de-

murely, "that it is just possible that the young lady may have a will of her own in this matter?"

"By George!" exclaimed Frank, laughing and looking foolish; "there is a possibility of that kind; so you can stay here, old fellow, until I am sure you're needed."

So back to the hotel he went alone. He found Nanny reading a letter,—a letter which she informed him her mother had put into her hand when she had told her that she was going to die, and had bade her read when she felt calm enough to comprehend its meaning.

"I thrust it into my dress pocket," added the weeping girl, and had almost forgotten that I had it."

"Never mind the letter just now, Miss Mandeville,"—and Major Huntingdon took it from her hand and seated himself beside her. "I have come here to ask you some questions which, for your own sake, you must answer very promptly."

Nanny fixed her large dark eyes on his handsome face, wonderingly.

"How old are you, Miss Mandeville?"

"Seventeen, sir," answered Nanny, as promptly as if he had been the duly-appointed census-taker.

"Quite old enough to think of getting married."

"I don't know, sir." And a rosy flush suffused the girl's pale face.

"Now, Miss Mandeville, look at me well and tell me if you think it would be very hard for you to think of me in the light of your husband?"

Instead of "looking at him well," Nanny failed to look at him at all, but let her white eyelids droop until the jetty fringes rested on her cheeks.

"Nanny, don't you think you could love me?"

She raised her eyes to his for a moment as she murmured, "I am afraid I already do;" then let them fall again, while the hot, burning blushes crimsoned cheeks and forehead.

He took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly, as he asked, "Why *afraid*, little one?"

"Oh! sir, I feel as if it was such treachery to darling mother to let such a feeling come into my heart so soon after she is gone. I feel as if it ought not to be possible for me *ever* to be happy again. But you've been so very, very good to me, that indeed I could not help it."

Frank laughed a little low laugh at the idea of her apologizing, as it were, for having given him the heart he so longed to possess himself of.

"Then you'll be my little wife, Nanny?"

"Yes, sir, if you wish it."

"I not only wish it, my darling child, but I wish it at once. Mr. Groves and a friend of mine will come back here with me this evening, and we will be married to-night."

"To-night!" exclaimed Nanny, almost aghast. "Oh! why this haste? I married!—before my poor mother has been a fortnight in her grave!"

He had his arm still around her, and turning her face upward toward his own, he replied: "Nanny, my darling, I ask you to believe me when I say that it is for your own dear sake that I am hurrying things so."

Her eyes fell beneath his earnest gaze, for as she was neither a baby nor a ninny, she fully understood his meaning.

As he arose to leave her, she held out her hand for the letter he had taken from her.

"Finish reading it before I come back, my own, and let me find smiles instead of tears on my little wife's face." So with a farewell kiss he left her.

He returned to Mr. Groves, and informed him that he would be wanted.

Then he hunted up a fellow-officer, who stood next to Courtney Dupont in his esteem, told him the strange story, and requested his presence as witness of the ceremony.

That night about dusk the three repaired to the hotel, and while Mr. Groves and Frank's brother-officer waited in the parlor, he repaired to the young girl's door to summon her.

She answered his knock immediately, and stood before him pale and trembling.

Frank tried to reassure her with a smile. "Come, darling, 'tis not so very terrible; it will soon be over."

"It is not that," answered the young girl, in a strange, cold voice; then she motioned him to enter.

"Major Huntingdon," she said, as soon as he had entered the room, "we can never be married!"

"Never be married! Why, Nanny, did you not tell me that you loved me?"

"Yes, I did; and God knows that I do!"

"Then, what on earth can prevent our marriage?" he asked.

"Read that!" and throwing a letter into his lap, she turned from him, and flinging herself upon a lounge in the farther corner of the room, she gave herself up to a wild burst of weeping.

## CHAPTER XXXIX.

## THE LETTER.

AND while "Father Groves," as we should now be calling him, and the officer waited below, wondering at his delay, and Nanny lay weeping violently on the lounge, Major Huntingdon read the following letter:

"My precious child,—my darling, who has been my solace and delight for fourteen long years,—I am about to try, by this letter, to repair a great injustice I have done you.

"You are not my child, Nanny; and now that your adopted father is gone, and I, your loving adopted mother, feel so sure that I am about to follow him very soon, it becomes necessary for me to tell you this, in order that, if possible, you may find another protector in your true father.

"If, after reading this letter, my precious one, you feel as if I have not acted for the best, forgive me for the sake of the love with which I have surrounded you from the moment that I took you for my own.

"It was when you were a wee thing, not more than three years old, Nanny, that I paid a visit to a friend of mine, in New Orleans, and together we visited the Asylum of St. Elizabeth,—an asylum where young orphans are taken care of. I found you there, a pretty,

dark-eyed baby, whom the good Sisters told us had been left there by a very elegant-looking woman.

"She gave them no information regarding you, except to assure them that you were not her child, nor had you any claim on her,—you had been left in her hands in a very extraordinary manner, which she did not deem necessary to explain, and she had brought you to them to be taken care of until your natural protector should claim you. The matron of the establishment assured me that the lady's manner left no doubt upon her mind that she spoke the truth.

"The Sister who had had special charge of you ever since you had been in the asylum gave me a small paste-board box, when she brought you to me at my friend's house, and told me that in that box I would find a large, loose diamond, which she had discovered inside your little sock, on undressing you the first night of your arrival. That diamond I had set into a ring, and you have been wearing it for the last two or three years. I tell you this about the diamond, for it may, in some way, help you to find your relatives,—though I can hardly see how.

"I had had you with me for over a year, my darling, when I received a letter from this friend who had been with me when I adopted you, and she informed me that a gentleman had been searching for you who seemed to have some claim on you, though he did not impress her as being very anxious to enforce it. He gave her his card and address, with the request that she would forward it to me, so that, if I should ever desire to relinquish you, I might notify him of my wish.

"I had learned to love you as my own by that time, my darling, and I felt angered to think that just as I had taken you for my own, some one else should step in and claim you. So I tore his card into fragments, and sent it back with the message, 'that neither you nor I had any use for this meddling stranger.' Nor would we have had, my own, if this cruel war had not come on. In all probability your father—at least he who has been a true father to you, Nanny—and I would have lived to see you happily married, and you would have been well endowed by us; but now, with our fortune gone, with him gone, and with my own end inevitably approaching, I feel how unwisely I acted in placing it out of my power to communicate with your natural protectors.

"I can do but one thing to help you in your search, my child, and that is to bid you seek Madame Latude, in New Orleans, and tell her for my sake to help you find the gentleman who came for you soon after I had taken you. I know that he paid her a second visit, for she wrote me to that effect, and in her letter she repeated a message of his to me,—which is the only crumb of comfort I can leave you, my poor darling,—it convinces me that you are *not* the child of shame. His message was: 'Tell Mrs. Mandeville that the child has a legal protector, who is ready and willing to claim her before the whole world; but that if she has any *love* to bestow upon the poor little one, it had best remain where it is.' So I kept you, my darling, and loved you.

"Now if I have done you a wrong, unwittingly, may God forgive me, and may he raise up to you other

friends to supply my place,—which will soon, very soon be vacant."

Major Huntingdon had finished the letter, and sat for a few moments plunged in deep thought.

He could not forsake the now doubly-forlorn girl; besides, he loved her,—loved her own sweet self,—and this revelation had in no way altered Nanny's self. Moreover, was it likely that, after fourteen years of silence, relatives who had been so coldly indifferent about her when a babe, should awaken to any troublesome interest in her now? No; it was highly improbable. No one but himself and Nanny knew that she was not really Mrs. Mandeville's child, and no one need ever know it.

So he rose up from his chair, and going up to the lounge, he raised the prostrate girl.

"Come, darling; Father Groves has been waiting a long time for us."

"You really mean, then——" And she looked up at him, her dark eyes swimming in grateful tears.

"I really mean, then," he replied, with a tender smile, "to marry the girl I love, without stopping to find out who her father or her grandfather or any of the rest of her neglectful relatives may chance to be. As my wife no one will dare question who you may have been, my love."

"Oh! may God forever bless you!" and flinging her arms around his neck, she pressed a kiss of mingled love and gratitude on his cheek.

In another hour Nanny Mandeville was Mrs. Major Huntingdon.

## CHAPTER XL.

## MAJOR HUNTINGDON WRITES TWO LETTERS.

THE morning after his strange marriage, Major Huntingdon wrote two letters,—one to his sister, the other to his old friend Dupont.

"Dear Edith," ran the first, "I am writing to you with the slim hope that this may reach you some time before the surrender (which, between you and me, sister mine, seems to me inevitable). But it is not to tell you of army movements that I am writing, for I have nothing to tell that would please you to hear; it is to give you a piece of news for which I know you have never dreamed of preparing yourself. Your bachelor brother has succumbed to a pair of liquid dark eyes, Ede, possessed by a charming little female, of only seventeen years, who is refined enough and dainty enough to suit even you, my Lady Stately. Now, as a soldier has but very little time for wooing, and as I verily believe I never would have gotten over it if I had lost sight of my treasure and never found her again, I asked her to marry me within two weeks of the first time I laid eyes on her. She was an orphan, with no cruel papas and mammas to say her 'nay;' so we got married at once, and your brother is one of the happiest dogs in the whole of this unfortunate seedy Confederate army.

"Prepare yourself to love my little wife, sister, for, by George! you can't help yourself, if you would."

Edith did receive this communication eventually, and wrote him in reply a letter of congratulation, hearty enough and cordial enough to suit the most exacting.

The major's second letter was to Mr. Dupont.

"DEAR COURTNEY,—I'm going to tell you something that will surprise you exceedingly. I am married, old fellow,—married to as sweet a piece of femininity as you ever saw. It was this little private campaign of my own that prevented me joining you before. Will be on in a day or two. Yours, F. H."

That was all he deemed it necessary to say to any one relative to his marriage.

He settled his young wife comfortably, under the guardianship of an old lady residing in Richmond, whose three sons were doing battle for their country, and who expressed herself as overjoyed at the prospect of having Nanny for a companion. Then, with many tender embraces on his part, and a copious flow of tears on hers, they separated, and he rejoined his regiment.

Hasty falling in love and hasty marriages were so common in those tumultuous times that it excited very little comment.

Mr. Dupont rallied Major Huntingdon a little on having succumbed so readily to the charms of a little country maiden, after having passed unscathed from the trying ordeal of city charmers and European syrens; and expressed himself most anxious to see the woman who could so impress the phlegmatic major. But, save these few jesting remarks, very little

passed between the two men. Besides knowing that Frank had married a pretty girl, whom he called "Nanny," Mr. Dupont's information on the subject was very limited, and his interest still more so.

When Major Huntingdon had settled his wife in Richmond, he had fully expected that a long time would elapse before he could take her to his own beautiful home in Louisiana; but, after all the weary alternations of hope and disappointment attendant upon the fluctuating fortunes of our struggling heroes, the end came,—to most of them most unexpectedly.

Like the sudden crash of thunder, that startles, though the ear has long become accustomed to its mutterings in the distance, came the news of Lee's surrender.

\* \* \* \*

There was nothing left for the vanquished but to seek their desolate homes, and strive there to forget the wounds and disappointments of the long and fruitless struggle.

\* \* \* \*

Major Huntingdon and Mr. Dupont were to part company at Richmond, to which place they had returned as paroled officers, Major Huntingdon insisting that his friend must make "Nanny's acquaintance before they separated."

For a few moments only Mr. Dupont remained in Mrs. Huntingdon's presence. He bent over the little white hand which she extended to him with the most courteous deference, while he murmured some commonplace about his friend's good fortune, etc., and then he left.

"What a sad, stern-looking man your friend is, Frank!" the young wife said; "he looks as if he might have seen a world of trouble."

"He has seen trouble, poor fellow," answered Frank; "and now that the excitement of the war is over, I don't know what he will do with the rest of his life."

"Why doesn't he marry?"

"He will never do that."

"Why? what is to prevent? He's not so terribly old; and I'm sure he's next to the handsomest man I ever saw."

"Obstinacy is to prevent," replied Frank, pinching her little pink ear to punish her for her gross flattery.

So Mr. Dupont returned to the solitary grandeur of his Florida home, and Major Huntingdon hastened to present Nanny to her sister-in-law.

\* \* \* \*

"How do you like my little wife, Edith?" asked Major Huntingdon, with just a little anxiety in his voice.

"She is very beautiful and very lovable, Frank, and seems to have brought new life into the old house. I hope she will make you very happy, brother, and I like her as much as I am capable of liking anything new; but you know all feeling died out of my heart so long ago, Frank, that even Nanny cannot quicken its dead pulses."

"How do you like your new sister, Nanny?" asked the same individual, in the privacy of their own room.

"Oh, Frank! if she would only let me I could love her dearly; but she is so cold, so stately, so repellant, that I feel chilled whenever I make any advances to—"

ward her. There is Mrs. Tilman,—I feel already as if I had known her all my life ; but I am afraid of sister Edith,—as afraid as death." And Nanny looked up into her husband's face with a little deprecating look. "She is very beautiful, Frank; why doesn't she marry?" asked Nanny, repeating the question she had asked relative to Mr. Dupont.

"She will never do that," replied her husband, repeating the answer made on that occasion.

"Why ? what is to prevent ?"

"Obstinacy is to prevent."

"Why, Frank," said Nanny, laughingly, "you remind me of some old oracle, that has but one monotonous answer for all inquirers, and gives that in the same monotonous words, till they are compelled to believe it. So I am compelled to believe that all your friends are very handsome, and very much opposed to matrimony, and very obstinate. Oh ! I wish sister Edith was as happy as we are,—don't *you*, husband ?" And she nestled in his arms, a perfect picture of innocent beauty and happiness.

## CHAPTER XLI.

### TWICE LOST.

INTO the quiet monotony of plantation life things soon settled back again.

It is true, demoralized freedmen now filled the places of well-disciplined slaves ; but Major Huntingdon wisely ordered it so that under the new régime the mansion and the quarters had no intercourse whatever. Edith's house-servants had remained true as steel, and as Nanny positively refused to be considered the lady of the house, Miss Huntingdon still remained mistress of the Hall.

In spite of herself Nanny won upon Edith's affections day by day, so that by the time she had been an inmate of the Hall about a year, Edith was compelled to acknowledge herself the happier for her coming.

Finding that her stately sister's manners were growing less repellant, Nanny grew more unreserved in her own demeanor, and spent much more of her time in Edith's company than she had at first dared to do.

She had often noticed her sister-in-law performing a solemn duty in the family grave-yard, every evening, which she had longed to ask permission to share, but had never been able to muster the courage necessary for preferring her request.

This duty was the filling with fresh flowers of two large Parian marble vases that stood at the foot of the



two newest grave-stones in the inclosure. Nanny knew that these graves were the graves of Edith's father and mother. But were they not Frank's father and mother too? And she should so like to assist at the filling of the vases, if her sister would only let her.

It was toward the latter end of a beautiful September day that she stood on the veranda and saw Edith coming out of the flower-garden, with her basket of flowers on her arm, and making her way toward the grave-yard. Without stopping to give herself time to lose courage, Nanny sprang lightly down the steps, and soon joined Edith.

"May I not help you, sister?" and she looked up so pleadingly, that a heart of stone could not have said her no.

"Certainly, my dear,—I shall be glad of your company," replied Edith; so Nanny obtained her wish.

They had filled the vases, and, locking her arm within Edith's, Mrs. Huntingdon said to her, "Come, sister, make me acquainted with all these silent kinfolk of mine; they are Frank's ancestors, and an interest attaches to every monument here, for me, on that account."

So Edith humored her whim, and, passing slowly in and out the graveled paths, she told her of each silent inmate. At last, under a low-bending willow, they came to a little grass-grown heap; it was the grave of poor drowned Esther Jones. No marble slab covered her remains, no black-lettered inscription handed down her name and her virtues to posterity. Flowers had been planted there, it was true; but no loving hand had weeded and tended them, and tall, rank weeds

flourished in insolent triumph over them, choking and smothering the struggling life out of them.

"And whose humble grave is this," asked Nanny, pausing before the grassy mound, "that is in such sad contrast to the stately monuments around it?"

"It does look sadly neglected," said Miss Huntingdon; "and if the war had not come just when it did, or rather if my mind had not been so distracted by other and fast-coming troubles, I should have placed a tombstone above her long ago."

"Her?" repeated Nanny. "Who was it, sister?—not a Huntingdon?"

"No, Nanny, not a Huntingdon; but it is so long a story that I can hardly tell it to you standing." So saying, Miss Huntingdon seated herself on the little wooden bench, under the willow, and made room for Nanny by her side.

"No, sister, I've taken a fancy to pluck the weeds for those poor hyacinths that are struggling so hard to beautify this forlorn grave, so you can tell me her story while I work." And down on her knees, with her rich silk dress rustling about her, went Bessie Miller's daughter, and with her white, jeweled fingers began plucking the weeds from her mother's grass-grown grave; while under the willow sat Bessie Miller's unconscious rival, telling the story of the poor drowned sewing-girl to her brother's pretty wife.

Edith's tale was finished, and as soft-hearted Nanny rose from her knees at the expiration of it, she let a daughter's unconscious tears fall upon poor Bessie's grave.

They turned to go back to the house. As Mrs. Huntingdon raised her hand to open the gate, she started back, with an exclamation of alarm.

"Oh, my diamond! my diamond! I've lost my ring!" And she turned and retraced her steps hastily. Down on her knees again, near the grassy grave, she went searching with frantic haste. Edith joined her, and together they searched for a full half hour, without any success.

"You must have thrown it away with some of the weeds that you flung over the fence. Come, Nanny, let us return to the house, and I will make the gardener give a thorough weeding, and sift the dirt. In that way we will be sure to find it."

But Nanny was sobbing like a child. "Oh, my ring! my ring!" was all her cry.

"Why, Nanny," exclaimed Miss Huntingdon, a little impatiently, "I had no idea you were such a child, to mourn so over a lost trinket. If it is never found, Frank can replace it, you baby."

"Oh, sister, it's not the diamond I'm grieving for," sobbed Nanny, reproachfully. "Frank *can't* replace—the whole world can't replace it."

Now, although Frank had told Nanny that nobody need ever know her secret, still the young girl had a most natural longing to discover her true position; she lived in the hope that some day or other the mystery would clear itself up, and she had adopted the vague hint thrown out by Mrs. Mandeville that in some way this diamond might lead to the elucidation,—hence her distress at its loss.

"If it is not the diamond, then, Nanny, what is it?"

asked Miss Huntingdon, as her sister-in-law continued her sobs.

Without stopping to think whether it was wise or unwise, Nanny buried her wet face in her sister's lap and repeated, almost word for word, what was in Mrs. Mandeville's letter.

And as the narrative progressed and she told how the loose diamond was found between the little sock and shoe of the baby at St. Elizabeth's Asylum, Edith's face grew whiter and whiter. So, then, the diamond she had been helping her brother's wife search for was the diamond missing from her own watch; so, then, her brother had married *his* child; so, then, she had been petting and loving the same child who had so unconsciously frozen the warm current of love in her heart so many years before. As these thoughts surged through her brain, she laid her hand heavily on the shoulder of the weeping girl.

"Get up, Nanny, I want to go to the house."

Her voice was cold and harsh, and Nanny obeyed without a word.

"She thinks I am a silly child," she cried, following her sister-in-law's rapidly retreating form, "and despises me as such." Then she wiped her eyes and followed her sister into the house.

She told Frank of her mishap, and he remarked, lightly, that he was glad it was gone; it was the last link between her and the past, and he was very willing that it should be lost.

As Miss Huntingdon passed through the yard, she gave orders for the gardener to be sent to her room. When he came, she told him a diamond ring had been

lost in the cemetery, which he was to find and bring to her. Then she locked herself in her room, and was seen no more that day.

It was impossible for her to decide at once on what course to pursue. It was evident from Nanny's narrative that she was in total ignorance as to her true parentage, and it was equally evident that Frank had married her in as total ignorance. Was it her duty to tell him who his wife was? What good could come of it? She was his wife now, and any information which she could give him could only tend toward disturbing their happiness. But could she go on living in the same house with *his* child, and treat her as she had been treating her? She felt that it would be impossible. One crumb of comfort she had,—she remembered that he had said solemnly that his child was not the child of shame. Why, then, had he not claimed it? He had tried to do so,—Nanny's adopted mother had said so in her letter, and she had prevented him from doing so. And now what it was her duty to do began to emerge clearly from the mass of chaotic ideas that were pressing on her brain.

This discovery affected her personally in no way; but it was her duty to let him know that his child and her brother's wife were one and the same person. She would forward that piece of information to him by letter, and then leave him to act as he should judge best.

Early the next morning the missing ring was brought to her room.

She placed it in her own pocket until after breakfast; then, returning to her room, she loosened the diamond

from its setting, and, putting her garden-hat on, she made her way rapidly toward Mrs. Tilman's cottage.

Milly was sitting in her morning-room, sewing, a perfect picture of placid happiness.

"Milly, I want your watch a few moments," said Miss Huntingdon. "Give me your keys; you need not get up." So, with the familiarity of their usual intercourse, Miss Huntingdon found her way alone to the case of diamonds.

She lifted the watch and dropped the loose diamond into the vacancy. It fitted exactly, thereby removing from her mind the last vestige of a doubt as to the identity of the baby Rachel with her sister-in-law. Then she put the diamond back in her pocket, and, after sitting a few moments with Mrs. Tilman, she returned to the Hall.

Nanny was in her own room when Miss Huntingdon got back; so she took the ring, with the loose diamond, in there to her.

"Here, Nanny, your ring has been found, but it needs some repairs." And, laying it on a table by her sister, she returned once more to her room,—returned and seated herself to write a letter to Courtney Dupont.

## CHAPTER XLII.

## MISS HUNTINGDON'S LETTER.

COURTNEY DUPONT, up to the close of the war, had kept singularly free from that indulgence in the wine-cup which is so common in our Southern States, and, alas ! so leniently regarded. All through the protracted struggle,—while fighting for her rights and her people,—he had fancied he was winning his longed-for pardon. But he had fought bravely, nay recklessly, from the beginning to the end, and not one token of softening had he been able to win. Now that the excitement of a soldier's life was withdrawn from him, his leisure hung heavily upon his hands. He never once thought of marrying any other woman, for this love for Edith Huntingdon was the one true passion of his life ; failing to obtain her, he turned bitterly from the idea of substituting another in her place. What should he do with himself ? was the one question now. Should he hunt up his child, and bring her home, to solace his loneliness ? Would she thank him for tearing her from those who had sheltered her in her forsaken babyhood,—who had loved her in her loveless youth ? No ; that would hardly do. She did not and she would not love him. What, then, was there left but for him to get through life as rapidly as possible. So, acting on this reckless resolve, Mr. Dupont's house soon became noted for its luxurious dinners, its

unrivalled liquors, its gay bachelor assemblies, in which cards and wine and cigars and high voices seemed the order of the night.

He was sitting at the head of his table, surrounded by a more than usually noisy group, whose flashing eyes and rather free jests bore witness that Mr. Dupont's wine had been fully appreciated, when Edith's letter was placed in his hand.

The hand that held his wineglass, raised in the act of proposing a toast, shook with such violence that the crystal fell from his grasp, and, striking the floor, was shattered into a thousand atoms.

"At last !" he murmured between his closed teeth ; and apologizing hastily to his guests, he rose and left the room.

He could not read *her* letter in their presence.

He locked himself in his library, and broke the seal with tremulous eagerness. For unless it was to call him back to her side, why had she written at all ?

The opening address slightly chilled his newly-budded hopes :

"Mr. Dupont,—Necessity compels me to communicate with you on a subject that *should* be of vital importance to you.

"Circumstances, which it would be too tedious for me to give here in full, have brought to light the fact that my brother has married your daughter. I alone am in possession of this knowledge, and have as yet been utterly unable to decide whether to make it known to my brother or not. I have deemed it right to inform you of this fact, and if you desire to take any steps toward acknowledging her you will please come on

and do so in person. As my brother's friend and the father of his wife, you will always find the doors of Huntingdon Hall open to you."

That was the whole letter.

He sat gazing on the open sheet, stupefied with amazement. How had things worked themselves round to this strange pass? Frank had told him so little about his wife that he had felt little or no interest in her. He had held his child's hand in his, and addressed to her the words he would have addressed to any strange woman. What, then, had become of her adopted parents? His brain was in a whirl of conjecture and wonderment, but through it all gleamed the bright hope that this marriage might bring himself and Edith together again.

She had never let him tell his whole story,—now she would be obliged to hear it. So, with a heart fuller of hope than it had been since the day on which he had entered her presence buoyant with expectant happiness, only to be expelled it in utter disgrace, he made his preparations for starting at once for the Hall.

Surely he had expiated the sin of his youth, and Heaven was about to smile on him once more.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was early in the morning of a bright October day that he again caught sight of the old house under whose roof the greatest happiness as well as the greatest wretchedness of his life had come to him.

"Major Huntingdon was away from home," the servant who answered his knock informed him,—“gone to New Orleans to be gone a week; but Miss Huntingdon was at home, and he would let her know.”

So he threw open the door of the darkened drawing-room, and going back to the sitting-room, he informed Edith that a strange gentleman was in the parlor.

Utterly unprepared for so speedy a reply to her communication, Edith proceeded at once to the drawing-room.

Calmly and gracefully she advanced into the darkened room. She saw a bronzed and bearded man there whom she was utterly unconscious of ever having seen before.

He waited until she had come quite close to him, and then the pent-up anguish of years found vent in his passionate utterance of her name.

“Edith!” And his hands were extended longingly toward her, while a world of yearning tenderness shone from his dark eyes.

“You!” she exclaimed, receding a step, and then she stood there quivering and trembling in every limb.

“Oh! you have not sent for me only to cast me from you again!” he cried, passionately. “Surely, if love *ever* existed in your heart, my patient endurance of your contumely ought by this time to have quickened it into fresh existence. Edith, my one love, tell me that my past sin is forgiven. Tell me that you have sent for me to say so.”

She had had time to recover herself while he was pouring out these eager words, and the voice with which she next spoke was so icy, her manner was so frigid, that it froze the burning stream of passion on his lips.

“I have sent for you to say nothing as regards our—

selves personally, Mr. Dupont, and I had hoped that my letter would have explained itself."

Mr. Dupont folded his arms, and fixed his eyes upon her face.

"Edith Huntingdon, you *shall* listen to me. Years ago, in this room, I besought you to let me tell you everything, and you refused to listen to me. And now I swear by Heaven that you *shall* listen to it all. It is a tale of weakness,—of pitiful, cowardly weakness,—but not of the baseness which you persist in imputing to me. Are you ready to hear me?" His voice took on a more commanding tone than it had ever had in addressing her, and in that moment she came nearer softening toward him than she ever came.

"Go on!"

Then he commenced,—away back from the day of her visit to his mother's shop,—and told the whole story; not leaving out one item, not striving to extenuate his own conduct, not striving to excite her pity for his boyish weakness. And I think that the half hour which Courtney Dupont spent thus, standing before the woman he so dearly loved, laying bare before her all the weakness of his life, was the honestest and truest half hour of the man's whole life.

He had closed his recital, and stood as one awaiting his doom.

"Edith, can you forgive me?"

There was a mighty struggle in her bosom between her heart and her pride. But pride had had the upper hand so long, that it easily gained the mastery.

"You know not what you ask," she replied. "You have destroyed my faith in goodness, truth, and honor;

you have wasted the best years of my life; you have converted me from a loving, trusting girl, into a callous, bitter woman; you have done all this, and then you calmly ask forgiveness!" And she raised her eyes to his with a look of flashing reproach.

"How *can* a woman be so utterly merciless?" he exclaimed, fixing his eyes on her gloomily.

"Where was the mercy you showed me," she answered, bitterly, "when you won my unconscious heart, and let me go on loving you and loving you, even until I flung myself and my love into your arms all unasked? Where was your mercy when you made me a participator in your guilt? Oh, God! why does not the remembrance of that moment drive me mad?"

"Edith! Edith! I conjure you not to speak so. Mine, and mine alone, was the guilt. But am I to be eternally damned, in this world and the next, for the sin of my boyhood? Is there no mercy in God, or man? Is not the bitter remorse of years to be taken as some expiation? Oh! why do I plead thus? Why do I plead to a woman who can turn so deaf an ear when she *knows* that my whole being is consumed with hopeless love for her?"

A scarcely perceptible quiver convulsed Edith's firmly-set mouth, but his eager glance caught it.

"Once more,"—and his voice was thrillingly earnest,—"Edith, forgive me, and we may be happy yet!"

The obstinate pride of the Huntingdons would not let her yield.

She went a little closer to him, and bending her head slightly before him, she gave him his final answer in a

clear, cold voice, that gave no indication of the fierce conflict that was even then raging in her breast.

"Courtney Dupont, look. Do you see the silvery hairs that are mingling with the black? I am an old woman, and do you think that I can pick up the old love and the old happiness just where I dropped them, as I would an unfinished love-story, and take the same delight in them as at first? No, my youth is dead and my love is dead. Eternal winter reigns in my heart. You killed the flowers of affection that once blossomed there, and new ones could not flourish in the barren soil, even though your hand should plant them there."

There was silence in the room for the space of five minutes. Edith was the first to break it,—

"You came here to claim your daughter. My brother will not return before to-morrow. I would prefer your making your explanation to him before speaking to his wife. You will remain here, of course, until he comes. There need be no awkwardness attending our intercourse, as we are simply acquaintances. If you will excuse me, I will send Mrs. Huntingdon in to you. I believe you and she have already met." And Edith swept from the room, leaving Mr. Dupont more utterly crushed by her self-possessed indifference than he would have been by the bitterest reproaches.

## CHAPTER XLIII.

### FORGIVEN AT LAST.

IT was the twenty-fifth day of October on which Mr. Dupont had arrived at Huntingdon Hall, a day never to be forgotten in the annals of St. Bernard's Parish.

The long, bright day had worn away at last, to the infinite relief of all the inmates of the Hall. Wearied and disappointed, Mr. Dupont longed for the morrow which would bring Major Huntingdon back, so that he could tell him his strange story, acknowledge his child, and then go back once more to his lonely home in Florida.

Cold and constrained outwardly, but with the fires of a fierce contest burning within her breast, Edith dragged through the day, she, too, longing for the morrow that would end this wearing strife and relieve her forever of the proximity of this man, which, to her own humiliation, she found so dangerous.

While poor little Nanny, ignorant of the cause of all this constraint, and chilling dignity, and icy formality, longed for the morrow that would bring back Frank, and warmth, and life.

So, nothing loth, the trio separated for the night at an early hour.

By ten o'clock, the stillness of death reigned through-

out the house. Edith alone was still up; she could not sleep; she had thrown a soft cashmere dressing-gown around her, and, with her little slippered feet resting on the fender, sat plunged in deepest thought. The day had brought a revelation to her. She loved Courtney Dupont still. Right or wrong, she loved him. But could she bring herself to tell him so? Could she go back and unsay all she had said to him? Was this new love mighty enough to bridge over the gulf that had yawned so long between them? She doubted it, she pondered it, she tried in vain to answer her own questioning heart; but the clock on the mantel struck eleven and found her no nearer the answer than at first. It struck twelve, and still she sat pondering, doubting.

As the last silvery stroke died away on the still night air, Edith became aware of other sounds than the ticking of her clock,—a sound as of the tramp of many approaching feet.

Rising hastily and throwing open a window that looked out upon the lawn, she beheld a sight that froze the blood in her veins. The moon was shining with the brilliancy of day, and by its light she could see distinctly an approaching procession of what seemed to her excited fancy hundreds of blacks. They were armed with hoes, pickaxes, spades, and every species of implement, that glistened brightly in the rays of the moon.

They were winding their way across the little bridge under the willows, slowly and stealthily approaching the old Hall, like the cowardly assassins that they were. With instinctive presence of mind, Edith bolted her window very softly; then, with the speed of an

antelope, she flew to awaken the sleeping inmates of the house.

In a few agitated words she informed Mr. Dupont that an attack was about to be made upon the house; and then, in succession, she roused Nannie and Miss Hartley, exhorting them to self-possession and calmness.

Mr. Dupont hastily joined her in the lower hall. Looking through the glass on either side of the large entrance-door, they silently and breathlessly watched the approach of the assailants.

The main body had halted at some distance from the house, while four of their number approached the door, behind which Mr. Dupont and Miss Huntingdon were stationed.

As Courtney's eye ranged over the dense mass he uttered a groan of despair.

Then turning to Edith, he spoke to her in a tone of imperative command:

"You must fly,—fly, and take those two trembling creatures with you," pointing to his daughter and Miss Hartley, who had joined them, and stood trembling in mute terror. "You can gain egress by the back way," he went on rapidly, "while I engage their attention in front." He spoke with the calmness that had always been so characteristic of him as a soldier, but this time it was the calmness of absolute despair.

"Resistance is useless," Edith answered him. "Fly with us."

"What! and turn my back on those black devils! Never!" And he folded his arms with a gesture of defiant resolution.

"Then I remain with you!" And the look of de-



termination in Edith's brown eyes was as firm as his own.

For a moment Courtney's eyes flashed with triumphant joy. Did she, then, care enough for him to stay and share his deadly peril? But this was no time for love dalliance, so he only repeated his command in a more imperative manner.

"Stay you cannot. If you remain, it is certain death for us all,—it is worse than death for you and them!"

While he spoke, the battering of the doors and windows commenced.

"For God's sake," he cried, hoarsely, "fly,—fly! If not for your own sake, for my child's,—for Frank's! Think of his anguish,—go!" And he dragged her toward the rear of the house.

"Once more,—come with us!" She would not say with *me*, for even at that supreme moment the woman's obstinate pride was dominant.

"God! what obstinacy!"

He opened the door that led to the rear of the premises, thrust the trembling forms of the three women forcibly through it, and then relocked it, and returned to his stand in front, muttering between his clinched teeth, "If life had been sweeter, I might have fled with her; but what boots it now?"

Deliberately cocking his pistols, he sprang up the steps, and flinging open a door that led upon an upper balcony, he began firing down upon the crowd.

Hidden by the pillars of the balcony, he sent his bullets flying among them with such rapidity that the cowardly fiends fancied a dozen weapons were dealing the murderous fire.

Courtney had no hope of escape, but he resolved to sell his life as dearly as possible; and in the midst of the awful thoughts that thronged through his mind at that terrible moment, his one solace was, that if he died there, *she* would believe in the truth of his love.

As Edith wound circuitously around the hedging, striving to gain the cemetery unobserved, she glanced upward toward the balcony, from whence the shots were flying with such telling precision, and although his form was invisible to her, she knew that he stood there,—stood alone,—battling against hundreds, and in that moment Love regained its dominion in her stubborn heart.

"Courtney, my love, my love!" And her voice rang out on the still air, unheard amid the din that was making the beautiful night hideous.

Wildly she fled toward the grave-yard, followed as wildly by the two terror-stricken women. She reached the gate, and thrust them through. "There, go in and hide. You are safe,—they will never think of this place."

"And you!" exclaimed Nanny, in a voice of terror, as she saw her sister was not following them into the inclosure.

"I have a duty to perform," was all Edith's answer, and in a moment she had disappeared from their sight in the thick shadows of the hedge.

She had been absent from the house but fifteen minutes, it seemed; but, alas! in that time——

The solitary but dauntless defender of the besieged house had fired his last shot. Death was staring him in the face. He would try the effect of moral suasion.

He stepped forward from behind his sheltering pillar; as he did so, a dozen shots were fired at him, one taking effect in his side.

"God!" he cried, wildly throwing up his arms, "it is hard to die thus, butchered by these black fiends." And he reeled against the door behind him.

As he fell, a bright flame darted heavenward. They had fired the house. Maddened with the terror of being burned alive, the wounded man essayed to drag himself from the burning building, crawled as far as the top of the stairs, and then lost consciousness.

Frightened at the success of their own demoniacal schemes, the cowardly wretches fled wildly, escaping to the woods in various directions, while a few of the bolder spirits, determined to secure the booty, which had been the principal object of the attack, sprang up the steps of the veranda and passed through the battered door. As they leapt up the steps leading to the upper story, a touch of human feeling entered their guilty breasts at sight of the dying hero. They lifted him, and, bearing him out upon the lawn, laid him down upon the wet, cold leaves. Then, panic-stricken in their turn, they, too, followed their fleeing companions.

Lighted by the glare of the burning homestead, Edith found her dying lover.

"Too late! too late! Oh, God!" And, with a wild cry of agony, she flung herself on the grass by his side, taking the unconscious head in her lap and raining her tears and caresses on the closed lids. "Oh, God! my obstinate pride is punished at last!" And she forgot all his weakness, all her own sorrow,

all her own suffering, all their long estrangement; and saw before her only the man whom she had loved so dearly, so long,—the man to whom she had plighted her girlish troth in the little wooden church, long, long ago.

His life-blood was welling from an ugly hole in his side; welling in a slow stream over the white cashmere of her robe; over the wet autumn leaves that formed his death-bed; settling in a little pool at the roots of the great old oak; while the flames that leapt and danced around the burning house lighted up his pallid face, so that the stricken girl could see the quivering of every agonized muscle.

"Oh, God! for one word, for one look of recognition. Courtney! O Courtney!" And she uttered his name in accents of such immeasurable woe that it seemed to call back the fleeting soul for a moment to its shattered tenement.

He opened his dim eyes, and raised them to her face with a look of loving recognition. Then the cold lips parted, and, bending her ear to catch the words that fluttered over them in a faint whisper, Edith received his last words, "Forgiven—at—last!" And, as she pressed her own warm lips to his in passionate grief, a smile of perfect peace flitted for a moment over the face of the dying man. Then, with one long shudder, with one quivering sigh, Courtney Dupont's eyes closed, to open again on earth nevermore.

And when the alarmed inhabitants of Bedford hastened to the relief of the Hall, they saw, by the light of the flames that still licked their forked tongues high heavenward, Edith Huntingdon, sitting motionless,

with the dead man's head in her lap; her white robes crimsoned with his rich life-blood, her little jeweled hands smoothing the damp black locks away from the marble forehead with a tenderly caressing motion, while her own hair, that had fallen about her like a veil, was as white as the cashmere of her gown.

They spoke to her, but she heeded them not. Then one, laying his hand upon her shoulder, compelled her attention. She looked up at him, with eyes from which the light of reason had fled forever, and murmured, in a low, solemn voice,—

"Shall mortal man be more just than God? Shall a man be more pure than his Maker?"

God was very merciful, and called this stricken soul home a few short months after her lover's tragic death.

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#### CONCLUSION.

On investigation of this diabolical outrage, it transpired that the plan of the blacks had been to fire the Hall, after having secured what booty they wished; and when the citizens of Bedford should desert the village to succor the Hall, the town was to be plundered in its turn. The determined resistance of the heroic Dupont produced a delay in the consummation of that plan which was fatal to their courage, and, panic-stricken, they fled to their homes, secured from detection by the sheltering darkness of night.

The old Hall will never be rebuilt. When examina-

tion of Mr. Dupont's letters and will brought to light the astonishing piece of information that his all was left to a daughter, and when Miss Huntingdon's last letter to him gave the further information that Mrs. Huntingdon was that daughter, they gladly turned their backs on their desolated Louisiana home and went to Florida to live.

May they find in that land of flowers oblivion of the cruel sufferings they endured in their own land,—endured at the hands of their "*brothers and equals!*"

THE END.

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