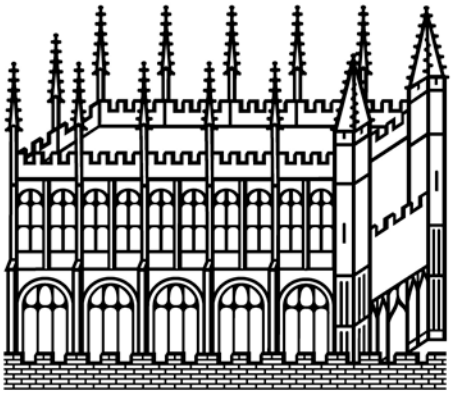

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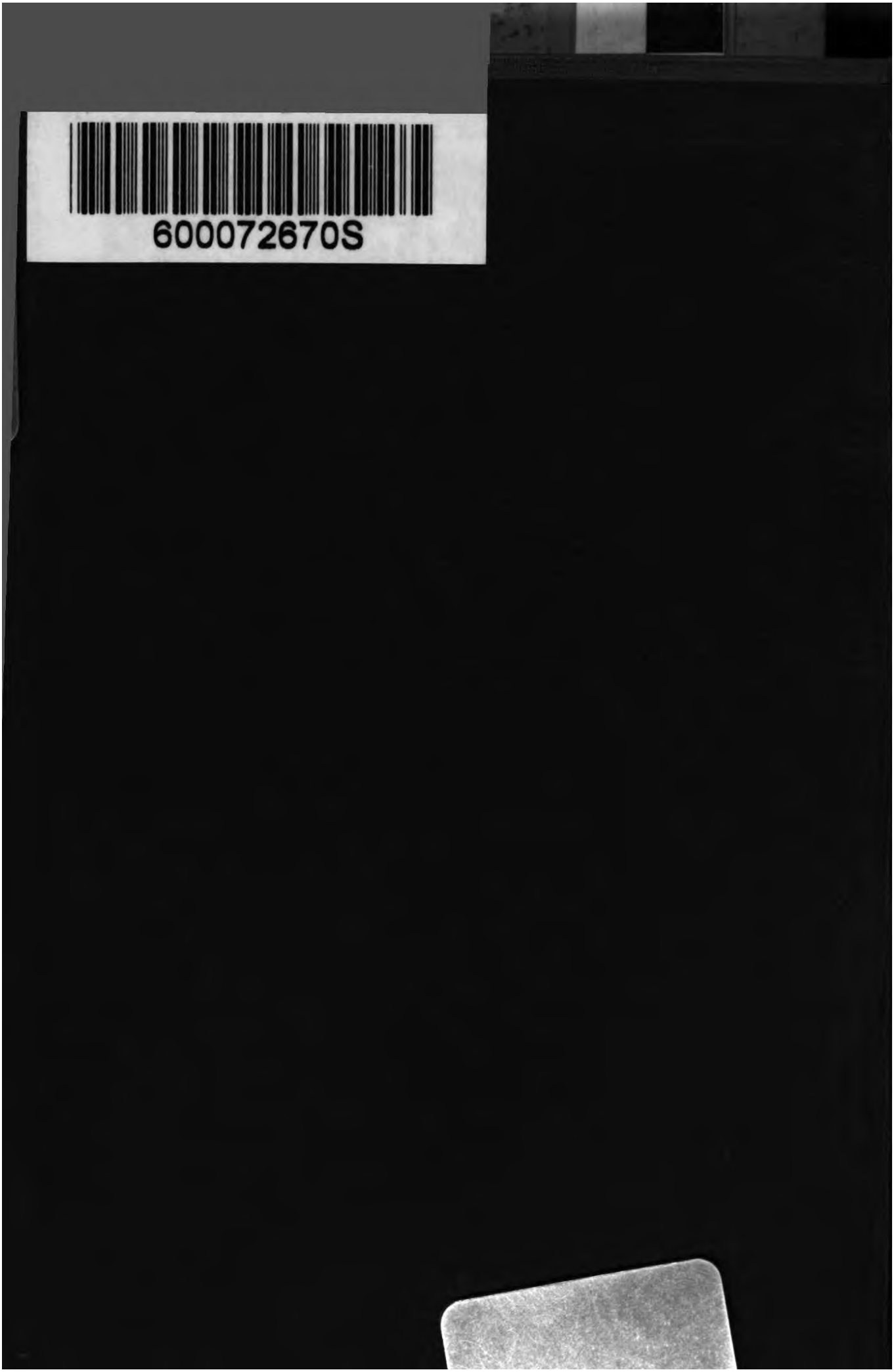
Tempted of the Devil.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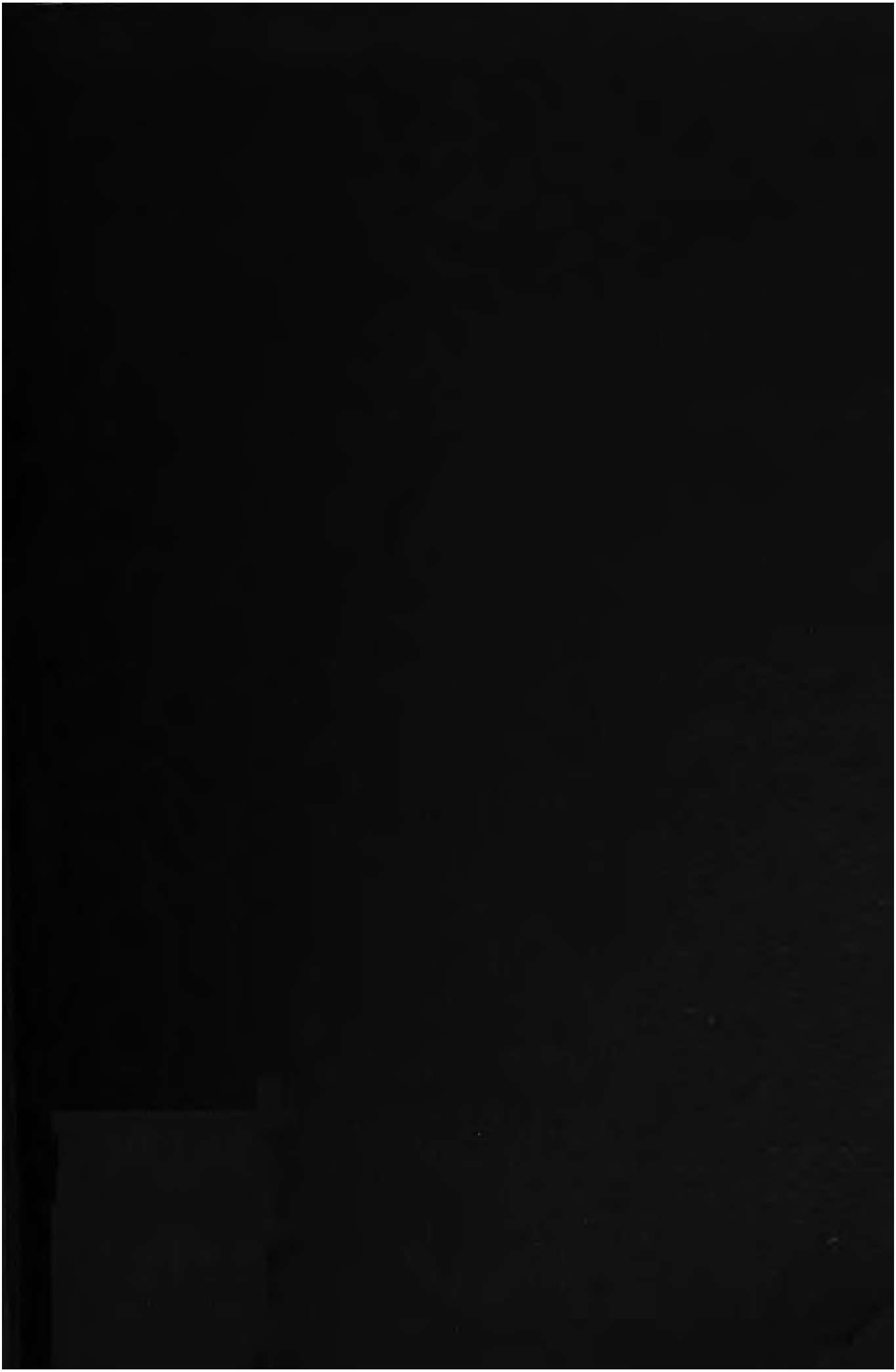

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A Novel.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

By the Author of "A Fallen Angel."

"The ancient saying is no heresy,
Hanging and wiving go by destiny."
SHAKESPEARE.

VOL. I.

London:
REMINGTON AND CO.,
NEW BOND STREET, W.

1882.

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DEDICATED

TO

MY CRITICS,

IN RECOGNITION OF THE APPROBATION

BESTOWED UPON THE WORK

OF A

"'PRENTICE HAN'."

TEMPTED OF THE DEVIL.

CHAPTER I.

To love and to cherish,—
MARRIAGE SERVICE.
The catastrophe is a nuptial.
SHAKESPEARE.

THE scene is one enacted every day ; it is the solemnization of matrimony.

A man and a woman stand together at God's altar. They are not there to profane the vows the Church demands ; they are there to be united in holy matrimony ; loving each other beyond all other earthly things.

So far their history is told.

The man is calm and self-possessed ; and yet it is evident he is conscious of that satisfaction and happiness which admit of no cloud amid their roseate lights. He carries himself as a man does who has had pretty

well his own way in the world, and who has been kindly treated by fate and fortune.

He is still young, of medium height, and of firm, well-moulded figure. He looks uncommonly well now, as he stands quite erect, and glances occasionally around with, perhaps, an unusual degree of assurance, considering the situation.

Judging from the shape of the head and the line of the chin, so far as that can be discovered through a rather thick nut-brown beard, there is strength of intellect. But the forehead has a peculiarity ; and this is the radical defect of the face. In spite of an otherwise intellectual development, the fore part of the head recedes too suddenly, giving indication of deficient moral sense. The eyes, magnificently bright, have, too, a singularity ; they are rather deep-set, and yet the eye-ball is prominent. The movement of the organ itself is rapid, showing activity and natural liveliness of disposition ; but the eyelids, with their thick brown lashes, seem scarcely to move at all. This gives the eyes, what may be described as an unexpected

look. From their depth and brilliancy alone they indicate an arbitrary mind.

One can see at a glance that this man would not be prone to conciliate, but rather to expect all concession to come from another side. He believes in himself. He knows that he is a clever man, and he has all his life found his talent recognised.

Decidedly well-looking, in the freshness of not yet thirty years, there can be no marvel at his power to please and win the woman at his side.

She, too, is young; she came of age only last week. She, too, is self-possessed; and though her face is pale, it is perfectly calm and shows no sign of any painful emotion. Yet this day, this very moment, she is swearing away her liberty for ever; she is leaving a dearly loved and devoted mother and a sister who has been the companion and close friend of her life. She is giving them up willingly for the one man who has touched her heart, and in a few short months has awakened its supreme passion.

She is entering upon a new world, enter-

ing upon another life, being absolutely born again.

She is not a beauty, only a small fragile creature with more energy than her physical strength seems capable of supporting, and yet hers is not a commonplace face ; but so still now, with its downcast eyes so entirely subdued, that its normal condition cannot be read.

Only once did the face wake into life, and give one flash of the meaning of the soul ; it was when the bridegroom, with his remarkable composure and his firm grasp of her hand, uttered the words "to love and to cherish."

Then the dark hazel eyes were to be seen full of the bright intelligence and of the soft tenderness called up by her absorbing love. Then she puts the curb upon her speaking face, and the tremulous movement of the mouth is the only sign of undue emotion.

This is not a fashionable wedding ; there are perhaps a dozen people around the altar. There are two young and pretty girls as bridesmaids ; one is the sister of the bride-

groom and the other the sister of the bride. There are two men, young also; one is of a melancholy aspect, the other is tall, fair, and handsome as Narcissus—dangerously handsome—a man whose beauty seems formed expressly to subdue the heart of woman.

There is the bride's mother, grandly statuesque, a magnificent specimen of womanhood; and beside her the grandmother, in quaker-grey silk and silver hair, and white *crêpe* signs of widowhood about her, which may not even be put aside for this occasion. There are other men; one a middle-aged bachelor, who looks like an important uncle, from whom there may be expectations. There are two more ladies and "Cousin Fred," and the party is complete.

Probably the onlookers only heard a syllable of St. Paul's impressive advice to those about to enter the "holy estate," the chief actors being two deeply involved in self-communion at this critical period of their lives.

The woman, with the plain white folds and soft filmy veil falling about her, is dressed

with the peculiar modesty St. Paul, himself, inculcates, when he symbolizes "a meek and quiet spirit," as an ornament "in the sight of God of great price." She wears no ornament for the sight of man. There are no jewels upon her, and but one single branch of orange blossom in her hair; real, emblematic, and therefore permissible. Neither earrings nor brooch, positively not one atom of jewellery to be seen, but the thin chain of gold from which is suspended a locket; and, even, that is hidden beneath the dress.

Has she studied the inspired teacher and so led herself to this result? Or is it a native modesty which thus adorns her? Certainly, there is something incongruous in the fact that those words are usually read to a concourse of people, whese chief object seems to be the "putting on of apparel."

These are the external signs the bride gives of her humility, and her desire to seem the thing she is.

She has uttered the irrevocable words, has sworn "to honour"—as she does—"and obey"—as she will—to her life's end.

There is much merriment in the vestry, for it is an auspicious wedding altogether; and the officiating clergyman is an old friend of the bride's mother. The marriage seems to be an achievement of which all parties are proud.

The bridegroom bears himself even more grandly here. His handsome second, not being now overshadowed by awe of the altar, is quite brilliant in the short congratulatory speech, he takes the first opportunity of making to his friend.

The mother's eyes are wet, as she kisses her daughter and whispers the words, "God bless you, Alice!" But those are not painful tears, for Alice has made, what may be considered, a perfect match; and there is no dreadful separation to ensue; they may be friends as ever, and as close.

The bridegroom signs his name "Hugh Willoughby" in bold, steady characters; and then "Alice Tennear" appears in rather spasmodic fashion underneath. There are witnesses, and Isabel Tennear signs her name in confirmation of the event. The pen is

quickly taken from her hand by the fair and fascinating groomsman as he whispers, "For good luck, let my name stand beside yours." She blushingly relinquishes the pen, and the name of "Stephen St. Leger" also stands upon the sheet.

Here occurs a slight diversion—the bride is laughing and colouring with embarrassment, while the groom is insisting upon "another marriage."

"This is altogether a failure," he says, "there is no marriage at all," and he takes his wife's hand and appeals to the priest.

"I don't know where *I* have failed," he answers with a smile, surveying the little trembling hand, with its plain ring of gold on the third finger, "I can make the knot no firmer."

And while Willoughby is looking condescendingly superior and amused, she murmurs—

"It is on the wrong hand, Mr Pearson!"

"Bless me! How could I—or we—have been so stupid?"

"Then you are not inclined to accept the

whole blame?" inquires Willoughby. "Who is most in fault, you or I?"

"I think—I must be the only one in the wrong," says Alice, shyly.

"This is her first marital act, and she admits her fault readily," said Mr. Pearson humorously. "I'll hold her blameless if you will! Remove the ring yourself, Mr. Willoughby, and be sure the marriage is not annulled by the accident."

Then, with a strange mixture of jest and gravity, the ring was transferred from the right hand to the left.

"That is said to be a sign of ill luck," whispers St. Leger in Isabel Tennear's ear, "but your sister does not believe in the superstition, I perceive."

"Alice does not let every one read her thoughts," replied Isabel quietly. "She is much better able to control her feelings than most people."

"And do you resemble her in that respect?" he asks curiously.

"Oh, no! We are the antipodes of each other," she answers, as simply as a child,

while a charming blush suffused her face at the decided interest the man was taking in her. And this was only the second time she had seen him, and the first occasion on which they had spoken.

There were a larger party when all the visitors had assembled at the bride's house; and the gaiety became still more marked. There was still half an hour to spare before the guests sat down to breakfast, and the pretty drawing-room, profusely decorated with flowers for the occasion, was quite crowded with the company.

Somehow St. Leger found himself in proximity to Isabel.

"I have lost sight of you since we came in," he said, "and if I had not been fortunate in finding you near the door, I should have had to incur the displeasure of many other ladies, by crumpling and trampling upon, and otherwise disturbing, their finery in pursuit of you."

"Then I'm glad you've been saved the trouble," she replied smilingly, "although there was no occasion for your anxiety. We

are intended to go to breakfast together—we must."

"So we should not have been long parted you would say. But I don't wish to be parted at all—do you?" he asked impressively.

"Not for the rest of the day!" she laughed.

"Why this day? If one day, why not more?" he said emphatically.

"He is just going a step too far," thought Isabel.

So she attempted to look very grave, and failed.

Then he made a like attempt, and did not fail.

"I beg your pardon! I meant that if we can be happy as friends to-day—why not on other days?"

"I cannot give any valid reason, Mr. St. Leger, so we will let the argument rest."

"For the present, as you desire it," added St. Leger, turning his admiring eyes away from his companion, when he saw her drooping eyelids and very rosy blush.

"It is a pity," said an old-fashioned dame in spectacles, richly brocaded silk, and artificial pearls, "it is a pity that all the romance of courtship should vanish with the wedding!"

"It is to be hoped it does not," said a young matron, warmly.

"At all events, that is the point at which all the story-tellers leave off," was the reply.

At which St. Leger and Isabel laughed.

"I should be inclined to think the romance just begun," said the latter, rather seriously.

"Of course you agree with the young lady —so do I," he replied in a low tone. "But when I wear spectacles, and you a flowered gown—for you will never require spectacles I am convinced—we may think otherwise."

"We may. Your spectacles, perhaps, will have assisted to obscure your views of life, and my sumptuous garments have made me vain enough to give up all delight in mankind, in favour of myself."

"You think then with Shakespeare that 'the apparel oft proclaims the man'?"

"And oftener the woman! because man,

in these modern times, is so limited in the matter of dress."

"Yes, ours is mere uniform. But you must remember it takes a woman of exceptional beauty to dress with the classical plainness, which I should assume to be the especial style of your sister and yourself."

"That is gross flattery! We choose to dress so plainly for two reasons—one is we have been rather well trained in an artistic sense, and the other—a more sensible reason you may say—is that we find art infinitely cheaper than fashion."

He ignored the reasons.

"It is hard to be accused of flattery, when one states an unvarnished truth. When your brother-in-law—it sounds strange, doesn't it?—told me he was going to be married I was—thunderstruck! And, of course, having heard the lady's name and family, I put a natural question, smiling as I did so at its inutility—for where is the man who but praises the beauty of the lady of his love?—Willoughby surprised me by saying very decisively 'No; she isn't a pretty

girl by any means.' I assumed that the term 'pretty' was not high enough, but he cut me short by saying that he thought 'beauty was the very worst reason a man could have for falling in love.' And so it may be—if it is the only reason. Now he is a strong-minded fellow, and I am not! but whether other people admired my wife or not, I should be sure to think her beautiful —I could not help it."

Isabel's courage sank when she met his eyes. Whether from their beauty, or their speech, she could not tell. She remarked inadvertently—

"Then are you going to be married, Mr. St. Leger?"

He gave an exaggerated start of alarm.

"How could you have inferred anything of the kind? The gods willing, I hope to be married one day! But I have to find the woman who is to be 'beautiful' to me—to find her first, and woo her afterwards."

"You would make a bold wooer," she said, with some inward trepidation.

"Do you think so? Well, 'faint heart'— you know the proverb?"

"Yes. But it has also been said—'Be bold, but not too bold.' And then follows an awful threat about the heart growing cold in consequence. The poets, you see, place restrictions, even upon bravery."

St. Leger laid his hand upon his heart and bowed low.

"The first lesson from your lips! I shall obey."

His movement attracted the attention of the brocaded lady.

"*You* obey! That is reversing the usual order of things," she observed, with a laugh.

The young matron, throwing back her head with a toss of defiance, cut in with—

"No; you must admit that, before such a ceremony as that we have witnessed to-day, the obedience is on the other side."

"Yes," Isabel said, "George Eliot would agree with that, for she says 'the homage of a man may be delightful until he asks straight for love, by which a woman renders homage.'"

Then she stopped abruptly.

"And do you think it should be so?" inquired St. Leger, in a whisper.

"I do not know; but I quote an excellent authority. You must ask somebody who has had experience. My brother-in-law and Mr. Lorrimore will both be able to tell you."

"Who is Mr. Lorrimore?"

"Don't you know?" she said in surprise, for Philip Lorrimore was engaged to Helen Willoughby, Hugh's sister. "I thought you were Hugh's most intimate friend?"

"Ah! now I remember the name. You see I don't go to Willoughby's house much, although he and I have known each other from boyhood. His house has not been very attractive, even to him. He hasn't spent much time in it."

"Indeed? He has not been here *very* often. I thought, for that reason, he was much attached to home."

St. Leger looked at his companion rather curiously; and then he answered with evasion—

"I thought his home particularly slow. Perhaps that was why he didn't take to it."

"I wonder what Mr. Lorrimore would say to that opinion."

"Judging from the personal appearance of Mr. Lorrimore—if that is he standing like a tailor's dummy beside Miss Willoughby—one would not be inclined to apply the same tests in his case, I should imagine."

Isabel laughed. There was a strong contrast between the men; and she was not greatly impressed in favour of Lorrimore. She had described him to Alice as a "methodistical, goody-goody sort of man," and she took St. Leger's bit of ridicule readily. Certainly Lorrimore's too formal style was very conspicuous here, where every one seemed at once to unbend and be social.

"She is rather a nice sort of girl, I should think," continued he, as if it had just occurred to him; "and, if she's at all like Hugh, one of the right sort. It seems almost a pity that she should be thrown away upon such a pedantic, highly proper—person. I couldn't call him a man."

"You're very hard upon a 'person' you don't know," said Isabel playfully.

"I know enough. By his supercilious smile and stiff-necked demeanour, I know exactly how much that fellow is worth."

"So I think does everybody else—it is just three hundred a year, and that is why the engagement has lasted so long."

"Desperate situation!" exclaimed St. Leger.

"Not if what we have just heard be true."

"Ah! if the courtship period be the happiest time—as our friend with the spectacles insists—then Hugh has hurried ungratefully over this small mercy. Talk of a 'certain personage,' and—and you hear his wings," he added, as Hugh appeared elbowing his way to where St. Leger stood.

"What a hash of old aphorisms!" laughed Isabel.

Then St. Leger addressed Hugh with the most charming candour—

"How dost thou, Benedick, the married man?"

"As usual," said Hugh sententiously, with a quizzical glance at his friend.

Hugh Willoughby's voice is exquisite;

soft, deep, and clear. He can speak low, and yet be distinctly heard in a spacious area. It had been an untold pleasure to Alice to hear him repeat the responses in those mellifluous tones. Unquestionably the bridegroom's greatest charm was in his voice. He speaks slowly, yet there is no affected drawl to offend the ear. There is occasionally a slight hesitation, which seems rather to give weight to his words and make their meaning greater.

He looked from Isabel to St. Leger, and from St. Leger back to her.

"We have no word in the English language that is masculine for coquette, or I, Isabel, should warn you to beware of one."

"You are obscure," she replied, looking up bravely.

With an amused glance from his searching eyes he murmured—"Am I?" and passed on.

Almost immediately the guests are divided off for breakfast; and, among the confused rustling of silks, St. Leger whispers another word—

"That is the sort of thing one has to put up with from an old friend!"

"Our old friends generally know us better than our new ones," said Isabel pointedly.

"An undeniable piece of wisdom, Miss Tennear, and one which goes to show you did not quite misunderstand my dear friend's horrible insinuation. If this were not his wedding day—and if I were not here for the especial purpose of getting him through it"—

"Oh, oh, hush! Let no one hear such an unwarrantable assertion! No man ever required less assistance than Hugh does, I am sure; and, if he hadn't known it, he never would have engaged such a reckless"—

"Oh, hush! Don't let any one hear your private opinion of me. Our conversation is getting too interesting to be overheard by the public."

"Then we must make it more general—if less interesting."

"What a nice promising flirtation has begun under the license of the occasion!"

whispers the young matron, who is going downstairs with her husband.

And he replies with—

"What a thorough woman you are! How you enjoy to see these things spring up!"

"If they are to be flowers. But you can never tell flowers from weeds at such an early stage of existence."

"By their fruits ye shall know them."

"Don't be wicked, Frank!" she answered.

If ever woman resembled a lily in all its pale purity Alice Willoughby did now as she sat in the seat of honour with her white flowers beside her. Still, serene, and composed, yet inwardly overflowing with the emotion of a warm energetic spirit subdued for the hour.

She has spoken cheerful, natural words of greeting to all, quite gaily, and in her accustomed manner; but she had been, herself, aware of repression. She *could* not permit the strange joy that possessed her to be paramount; and she seemed to fear lest her voice might betray her by its happy ring.

"A bride is not expected—fortunately not allowed—to do anything," she thought. "I must not make myself eccentric by striving to do otherwise. I must be an orthodox pattern of womanhood, according to some ideas, for this day at least."

And yet she, who was generally one of the leading spirits in all company, did feel rather out of her element sitting there only to listen. Talking, however, was not practicable in her case. She could not talk to *him* as usual; nor even to Isabel on her other side. Her sister had quite enough to occupy her attention, if one could judge from the unceasing conversation between her and her gay companion.

Mr. Pearson proposed the health of the bride in true old-fashioned style, and made her, even, a shade paler by his allusions to the goodness of her heart and the brightness of her intellect. And then the good, prosy old gentleman sat down, and Hugh Willoughby rose.

He was neither a bashful man with a few hesitating words, nor a conceited one with a

well-prepared speech; but a man who was evidently accustomed to rise with an easy air and meet the eyes of all present without the slightest embarrassment. In steady mellow tones he thanked all present for their good wishes in the name of his wife as well as for himself. He explained that he held it a far more desirable event that her health and happiness should be foremost; he objected to use the trite phrase of "the happiest day of his life" because he hoped to pass hundreds of others with, perhaps, more supreme satisfaction.

He talked as easily as if he spoke to one person in social conversation; and yet so well finished were his sentences, so happily were his points made, that when the fifteen minutes he allowed himself had elapsed every one was impressed with the idea that it would require no effort on his part to continue indefinitely.

"I always knew he was one of the cleverest young men!" exclaimed the old lady who had given decided opinions that morning.

"There won't be a speech worth mentioning after that," whispered the young matron.

And Alice? Her cheeks were glowing now, and her eyes were no longer hidden from view. She thoroughly enjoyed this exhibition of Hugh's natural gifts. That he should be eloquent on this occasion she could well understand; but she had not foreseen the ease and grace with which he would speak on her behalf.

Helen Willoughby was enthusiastic.

"Capital! is it not?" she asked of her betrothed. "Hugh's elocution has served him a good turn this time."

Lorrimore, who was never warm, agreed, and did not wonder that she was proud of her brother.

"I admit that I am—I always have been. Though, after all, it is a curious pride; for his being clever or stupid, good or bad, can only affect me in idea. I can have no part in him."

"I beg your pardon," Lorrimore rejoined didactically; "the virtues, or vices of our near relatives do affect us in a very remark-

able way. We can none of us say we are not affected by the acts of those to whom we are related."

"Yes; I do," replied Helen with good-natured firmness. "I don't think my being proud of, or ashamed of Hugh can affect me personally in the least. For instance (it seems to me that degrees of consanguinity are trivial) your great-grandfather might have done something unutterably dreadful—in all probability some of your ancestors did so commit themselves; there can be no doubt that one of mine may have done so—I don't hold we can be the worse for that."

"The world and ourselves know nothing of that; but if the world knew, and we knew, we should become infected immediately."

"Then let us trust we may never know; for there is something on your side of the argument after all."

There were no more good speeches, but there were very fair ones notwithstanding. St. Leger, whose confidence never forsook him, and who was regarded with envious eyes by "Cousin Fred," rattled away

ardently about nothing in return for the bridesmaids.

He admits, in passing, that he cannot account for the subtle charm about bridesmaids. And then turning pointedly to Helen, and managing to catch her eyes, he asserts as an undoubted fact that Lorrimore can solve the mystery. This he does as a risk, and is rewarded afterwards by Isabel, who takes a delight in seeing "that man, who cannot take a joke look so helplessly blank."

There is a great deal of fun, a great deal of chatter; and when the party breaks up, and the bride retires to change her plain white silk for the sombre grey she has chosen for travelling, the mirth below stairs becomes more boisterous, and the talk of ladies more confidential.

"I'm sure I trust she will be happy," whines the old lady in spectacles.

This is said plaintively, as if there were little hope of it.

Isabel overhears the remark, just as she enters the room to make a private inquiry from Hugh concerning time.

"Is it not odd," she says, in a consolatory tone, and loud enough to be heard by those around, "is it not odd, Hugh, that no one hopes the poor bridegroom may be happy? Now surely the chances for each must be equal!"

"Ah! you would not say so, Miss Isabel, if you know as much of the world as I do," says the old lady emphatically. "A woman's life so entirely depends upon the sort of man her husband is. Of course, being the head, he can have things his own way; and generally when we hope she'll be happy, we hope he *won't.*"

There was, of course, an universal smile at this Hibernian remark, though all knew perfectly well the old lady's meaning.

"Having one's own way does not seem to go very far—certainly not so far as my notions of happiness extend," said Isabel reflectively.

"Ah, you are not a philosopher, my dear!" was the old lady's retort.

And Hugh smiled at Isabel, and told her that was true.

She goes back to Alice with the reassuring words—

"Plenty of time, dear, but Hugh thinks you may as well come down as soon as you are ready."

"And so do I," replies Alice, as she fastens her travelling hat. Then laughing a little unnaturally; "I'm clumsy to-day, Bell, there's no denying it. I've done some mischief here now," putting her hand to her hair, "and Hugh always likes to see my plaits so very smooth."

"And if you had been blessed with curly hair, he would have admired the wanton ripple, just as he does now the sober braids!" Then Isabel kissed her sister, and whispered with impulsive tenderness: "Let *me* say good-bye here. I am like you—I don't like public demonstration. Now mind you come back looking a little brighter!"

"I never had a rosy complexion like yours, Bell: and I know I look paler to-day than usual!" Then she asked rather anxiously, "Do I look ill?"

"No, no, dear!" laughed Isabel. "Not ill—but interesting."

"Is this the solemn farewell of me you're taking?" asked Alice, between smiles and tears.

"It's the fault of human nature, not mine personally, if I can't say what I want to say intelligibly. People never can just at these times," Isabel answers seriously.

"Never mind, keep up your spirits, and help me to keep up mine at the last moment, for I hate public exhibitions of feeling."

Then the sisters embraced each other, and shed a few tears in their excitement, and went downstairs looking sedately composed.

"The happy pair" left amid the warmest congratulations, and the warmest adieux. There was no trivial neglect of the lively superstitions that help to keep up the spirit of these occasions; and all went as merry as the proverbial marriage bells then clashing and ringing in their ears.

Alice leant forward from her seat to have a last look at the group under the portico, and at the glance, she happened to see only Isabel—Isabel's bright face flushed and excited—and St. Leger's tall form close beside her.

Perhaps it was not strange that, at this moment, it should occur to her that Isabel might follow her footsteps one day. But she forgot all external things when that instant her husband's voice—that delicious voice—fell upon her ear.

"Well, I am very glad it is all over!"

They were commonplace words, and quite free from embarrassment. So were hers as she answered—

"And so am I! I have felt all day like something under restraint. Now, Hugh, I am free!"

"Yes, we are both free—now the transition period has passed—of all trammels but our own. Are you tired?"

"Not now. I have been. They sat so long over breakfast. By the way, why did you not introduce your extremely fascinating friend before to-day?"

"Oh, there were reasons!" he answered languidly. "Steve's not quite the sort of man one cares to introduce into a family one is about to enter." Then seeing her astonishment, he went on hastily, "Don't make

any mistake, Alice ; I do not attribute any wrong to my friend. He is only what the age calls 'fast!'"

"I thought he was your most intimate friend," she said hesitatingly.

"And so he is—but that's not very intimate. I have no very 'intimate friend'—but you."

"We are more than friends, Hugh, surely!"

"More than friends *now*. But that is what we shall end in being."

"Not that only!"

He slipped his arm around her waist, and said—

"That is what other people say—*we* can't speak from our own experience yet."

"And when we *do*, we will never speak that way," she replied, turning her love-lit face towards him.

He knew how true and pure was the love she had surrendered to him ; but in his grosser spirit he deemed that this girlish romance would wear away with custom ; and he smiled as he recognised his own superior

wisdom. It was, of course, deliciously fresh to hear such opinions, and, also, amusingly flattering.

"Of course, we are to begin in the usual way. We are to be the happiest couple in existence—in our own estimation at least!"

The equivocal turn of expression pained her half unconsciously.

With an upward glance, which gathered confidence with her thought, she said—

"Must our happiness exist only in idea? Well—there is nothing so real as illusion—let it be!"

"Let it be most certainly! We will cease conjecturing about the future, except in the case of to-morrow. I hope you'll like Ventnor."

"I shall like any place," she said enthusiastically. "I have seen so little of the world, that I must be pleased."

"You have one thing in your favour—you are easily gratified."

"That is by you. I think otherwise. I am somewhat difficult. But it is not of my own pleasure I think—it is principally of

yours. If you are happy, I must be. All my anxiety now is—can I help to make you equally happy? After all, it is a question to be decided. We have not known each other long, but yet it would be too terrible if I began to doubt my qualifications to be your wife, now the union is accomplished."

"I have chosen well," he said, with decision. "There are women created purposely to amuse men, others to be admired, as kittens may be at their play, some to talk and never to listen. One must look for more solid qualities in a wife. When I first saw you I said, 'That is the sort of heart-whole, sweet, devoted girl to make a good wife.' I did not think of you then as mine."

"And yet I have chattered as much, I think, as any woman—I daresay as foolishly." She paused and smiled. "Must there be a limit to that allowance now?"

"Well, I don't want to have any encroachment on your rights, and it is only fair you should have none on mine."

"And yours, sir," she said archly, "are

principally, as a witty American author says, the right of having somebody to find fault with! There will be no difficulty, so long as it is an understood thing."

The answer was a kiss.

CHAPTER II.

There's doubtless something in domestic doings,
Which forms in fact true love's antithesis
Romances paint at full length people's wooings,
But only give a bust of marriages.

BYRON.

"IT is two weeks to-day since we passed through that tremendous ordeal, Hugh, and I feel almost as if I had been married for years."

"Did I not say that you would settle down into matter-of-fact existence soon enough?"

"Matter-of-fact! not by any means! How dare you suggest anything so dreadful? I am living in a dream of delight; and I have come to the conclusion that the ancient sages must be wrong, who say that happy time flies fleetly."

"I never heard the saying."

"Nor I—it isn't one. It is my short way of expressing half a dozen aphorisms, poetical or otherwise, of precisely that meaning."

"Well, little woman, since brevity is the soul of wit, your saying may be as good as

that of any one else. You haven't read me Isabel's letter!"

They are sitting at breakfast in a pretty chintz-covered room; the doors, opening on a balcony, are thrown back, and an expansive view of sea and sky, exquisitely tender in its misty lights, is before them.

Alice looks a different woman now; there is no repression in her face; it is all sprightliness, archness, and glad vivacity. The hazel eyes are brimful of light, and, save in them, there is very little colour, for her complexion is naturally pale. The features are passably even; the mouth is excellent; and the teeth, which are decidedly beautiful, white and regular, show very frequently, she laughs and talks so much. When a woman possesses a good mouth and teeth, she is certainly halfway on the road to beauty.

Though not taciturn, Hugh is not a great talker; although fluent, he never talks unless he has something to say. Alice has declared that she finds it impossible to sit still for half an hour without talking, even though she can look at him.

She put on the prettiest look of insolence in answer to his question.

"You do not imagine that hearing your wife's letters read, is part of your rights!"

He did not appear to observe that she was merely jesting. He replied slowly—

"Certainly not; I think it most unnecessary, and most unadvisable that our letters should be common property."

"Do you?" she asks, not one whit more seriously. "I intend to make mine yours. This is what Bell says, without reservation—'We were quite delighted when we received Hugh's telegram, but we *did* expect to hear from you before a week had passed away. However, mamma says she does not wonder; and that I must not expect you to be as anxious to be back among us, as we are already to have you here. We wept, almost without intermission, the whole day after you left!' Oh, Bell, what a wild exaggeration!" said Alice, shaking her head.

Then she continued to read the trivial details of home news, that were, and she felt must ever be, so interesting to her.

"'Then our party—it was a most perfect success! I am afraid I never missed you once, except from the piano. No one plays dance music with so much spirit as yourself. Now you are a matron I hope you will never dance again, and that I shall have an opportunity of treading a measure more frequently to your music—more especially if my partner be such an exquisite dancer as Mr. St. Leger. I almost offended him by suggesting that he must be a timekeeper by profession, or he never could manage to stop to the very second in the midst of a rapid waltz. He was very entertaining, capital company, and did as much work as any three men present. But alas! there is a flaw in the diamond—he is a desperate flirt, Alice, and I, for one, should not like the task of reforming him.'

"Wouldn't she though! She's no woman if she would not like to feel that she alone had power to reclaim him from his enticing vice. Do you know *I* really thought him very charming—and I was much absorbed in other ways," said Alice, with a strange mixture of archness and tenderness.

"I told you he wasn't the sort of man one could call safe."

"What's the worst you know of him? Is he only too beguiling? and does he extend his powers of fascination to all alike?"

"I never knew much worse than that," he replied cautiously.

"Well," said Alice meditatively, "flirting is a very indefinite term. It may convey a terrible, heartless vice, or it may be the mere amiable weakness of pleasing all alike. Even *I* have been accused of flirtation, because I have felt bound to make myself agreeable, and talk to some melancholy Jaques to prevent him from committing suicide on the spot."

"And did you never exert yourself over a more pleasing object?"

"Yes, over one Hugh Willoughby, many a time and oft! Well, there's no fear for Isabel! He'll call, I suppose, in the course of another week, and there the intimacy will very probably end."

"Isabel is not a fool," said Hugh lazily; "I don't suppose she would surrender at the first broadside of the foe."

"Nor I—in an ordinary case. But your friend is not an ordinary man. Of course I am speaking of appearance only, and that light gallantry which is so becoming in him. Isabel is no fool, but she is—we may say—unfortunately—a woman, and being of a certain temperament, perhaps susceptible. However even the lords of creation themselves, cannot claim immunity from susceptibility."

"Don't use such long words, Alice! I forget the first syllables while you are in the—ilities and—unities."

"Oh! you who know every word in the English language, and I don't know how many other languages besides"—

"It is because I know so many that I have found the simplest best."

All this had carried Alice away from her sister; yet she sat there with the letter in her lap wasting one more hour of her present life in the pleasure of real nothingness.

"It is nice to be idle when one has some one to talk to—and that some one not exactly detestable."

Here she stole a veiled, loving glance at her

lord and master, as he sat calmly surveying her in her youthful freshness, attired with primitive plainness in brown holland.

"It is so odd that such excessively brilliant eyes as yours, Hugh, should require the aid of a glass. You always seem to be able to see through me; and yet you say you can see nothing distinctly, which is not immediately under your nose."

"I have contracted a habit of looking at things with intensity, I suppose; and for that reason, perhaps, I really want artificial assistance to see you."

"And yet you didn't know, just now, that I was joking about Bell's letter."

"No! You may preserve those rights if you please—I shall expect you to respect mine."

"That meaning is not to be mistaken! Depend upon it, dear, there shall be no infringement as far as I am concerned."

There was just the least atom of coolness in her tone; it seemed to be rather uncalled for this insistance on the propriety of private letters.

"That kind of thing is rank folly, Alice," continued Hugh, with languid gravity, "it is a school-girl's notion—that perfect confidence business. It does not follow that marriage, to be a happy state, should imply even a perfect knowledge of each other's character."

"I don't think I quite understand you."

"In other words—you do not agree. I know your over conscientiousness, Alice, and I can guess near enough at the height of your moral character. But we must always try to understand each other, and always admit when we do not. You are, perhaps, a little too exacting because of that moral character; and a little proud, too, in consequence of your own rectitude. But, my dear, intolerance is the fault of the young; and you are really only a girl. Brought up, as you have been, so carefully, so judiciously, you are more ignorant than some girls still in the schoolroom. You cannot understand a cause for concealment of the merest trifle. Perhaps I can make you admit that I may have a reason for deceiving you sometimes!"

He arose, and went and leaned over the

back of her chair, where she sat with drooping eyelids, fingering the chain of her watch.

"Listen, little goose! You put an embarrassing question about St. Leger just now. Perhaps, if I were to tell you all I have known about him, since his boyhood, you might be inclined to think him a deplorable villain. Yes; you might even think that, in your severe morality. But *I* know that he is by no means worse than most men. Yet you see it was difficult to be quite candid with you."

Then he placed his hand upon her head, and smoothed her soft hair gently. She turned round impulsively, only too ready for amendment of this slight discord.

But he would not let her speak. He kissed her parted lips, and said—

"Let me go on, please; I see there must be no half-measures. Assuming now, a man, like St. Leger, wrote one of his rattling, devil-may-care letters, and supposing you, in perfect innocence, opened it; you would probably be dreadfully shocked at—nothing. For, after all, the shockingness might be only

due to a strange choice of terms—a sort of thing men are commonly addicted to. That is the only kind of secret I have to keep from any wife, Alice. And I don't see any necessity for confidence in the mere unpleasant details of business—do you?"

"Not exactly necessity," she replied, with hesitation; "but I think there should be a desire for confidence. Well," she went on, lightly, "I shall not harass you with minute explanations of the servants' quarrels; nor any of my own feminine suspicions concerning our ordinary acquaintances. Those things must bore men—most women have to create such interests, you know, to occupy their spare time."

After this delicate smoothing of the matrimonial path, Hugh and Alice indulged in a boating expedition, which was one of her greatest delights. As she reclines, being gently rocked by the undulating billows, the sail flapping idly in the breeze, and Hugh sitting near her discoursing "most eloquent music" with deep expressive glances so often meeting hers, she is conscious of an all-per-

vading glow of happiness, which is even greater than her anticipations have led her to imagine.

Alice was an exceedingly lively companion, one whom a man would not soon be tired of; but when she happened to be that man's chosen wife—chosen with no other interest than that of pure inclination—then, under this light, she appeared as the most charming combination of the playful girl and the serious woman that it is possible to conceive.

"I suppose now," he said suddenly, after a pause in their talk, "I suppose now you will be having secrets even from Bell?"

"I had them ever since the day we were first engaged. Oh, it is not possible—how could it be?—to repeat your words to me!"

"It is clear, Alice, the honeymoon is not on the wane yet—as far as *you* are concerned."

"How could I tell Bell," she went on impressively, "how could I tell anybody how I feel now? Besides, even if I had the power how could she understand? I know that she

could not, for I read all sorts of love stories in poetry and prose; but nothing taught *me* like my first and only experience."

"And so you are the happier for the tie which gave you me and took away all else?"

"You knew that you could make me so! Happier! there is no measurement by comparison," she exclaimed impulsively. "I rest upon your strength—I trust and rely upon you for all things. You are so much wiser than I am, that I shall be mad if ever I doubt your right to decide anything between us. Remember, Hugh, that this is not only a conviction arrived at by just reasoning, but an instinctive feeling. Even if I do not understand you I shall be sure that you are right."

"But I am not perfect, Alice! Don't set me up as an idol—I shall be sure to fall."

* * * *

Alice had overtired herself the day before. Hugh has been rummaging the libraries for a book to suit her; he has wheeled the sofa near the window for her further pleasure,

and, with lingering, lover-like attentions, has wandered about her until she said—

"Now I know you're dying to be off again, so I won't allow you to weary yourself by watching me. Go out and enjoy yourself in your own way to-day—just as if you were a free man once more! And—oh, I'm going to write to Bell! When shall I say we are going to return?"

"We shall suit our own pleasure."

"Certainly—but I shall not say so, because that is a foregone conclusion. We have stayed over the orthodox time already, and I thought I might be expected to say something—especially as they have charge of our house that is to be."

"Well, I suppose," he answered musingly, "I suppose this can't last for ever. I shall be obliged to turn up at the warehouse sometime before the first of next month. Well, it cannot be always honeymoon!"

"Why not?" exclaimed impetuous Alice. "Let us make a compact in this as in other things. Can't we afford to be unlike other people?"

"Ah! we cannot light the candle after it has once burnt out," said Hugh, laughing at her warmth. "We must go through all the natural phases, my dear."

Then there were more farewells, and Alice sat dozing dreamily over her book. She was only pretending to read; she was far too happy to chain herself down to ideal interest.

Presently she flung aside the book altogether, and sat down and wrote page after page to Isabel. Of course she described where they had been and what they had seen; and almost every sentence contained some allusion to Hugh.

"Hugh manages a boat splendidly, you know," and "Hugh said it was the sort of scenery through which a man could float into heaven and scarcely find the difference when he arrived there. Profanity, wasn't it?" And "Hugh is so careful, he will not let me go out in the night air; he insists that such a little thing as I must be delicate."

Yet when she came to the end of the letter she offered an excuse for her own natural weakness, and added, in a postscript—

"I feel ashamed of quoting Hugh so much; but, remember, he is the only person I have to quote; and remember, too, that you talked a great deal about *somebody else* last time you wrote to me."

This was an allusion half under protest. Since those few words of explanation with her husband concerning St. Leger, she had made up her mind in the strictest conscientiousness not to aid, in any way, the acquaintanceship that might probably spring up between him and her sister.

She judged at once, quickly and rationally, that he had not quite as much virtue as a woman expects to find in a man; but she never for one moment supposed this could be any reason that her Hugh was not the soul of all morality.

There is a homely proverb which says that birds of a feather will flock together. This is true, of course, of the birds generally. But then there are eagles; and Hugh is an eagle to her.

Time passed, she scarcely knew how, when she suddenly discovered it was much later

than she thought. The parlour-maid knocked for admittance, and announced that the dinner was already served.

Alice hesitated. She had made no inquiry as to Hugh's return; she had anticipated that it would be at least some time before dinner; she had no idea what could detain him.

"My husband has not yet come in. I am expecting him every moment. I will wait a little while, if you please."

Alice waited half an hour or more, and Hugh did not come. Then she sat down to dinner in lonely silence, with a dim anxiety she would not admit to herself.

She did not believe that he had intended to remain away so long, and it took all her resolution to set aside the overwhelming thought, which would intrude itself upon her, that an accident had happened.

She struggled through the repast, and then gave it up; holding herself proudly, if only before a waiting-maid.

When she went upstairs again and looked out over the sea, all nature seemed to have a

different meaning to her—there was no light, no life, no joy. The clouds were suddenly dim and grey; the sea was dull and cold. She shivered, and closed the windows. Then she flung them open, and walked impatiently on the balcony. Here, after a while, she sat and watched, and argued herself out of her folly.

"I don't want to be one of those insane women who are all nerves," she said. "When Hugh comes back I will take care that he shall not know that I have been frightened."

* * * * *

But frightened she undeniably was when the hands of the clock stood at eleven that night, and she was still alone. She was now convinced that there had been an accident; it could not have been by design that Hugh had left her until this alarmingly late hour.

When it was two hours later, and the clock struck one, Alice was in a perfect agony of suspense. She had argued herself out of believing that danger had befallen

Hugh; but now her apprehension had fixed itself in certainty, and she was as sure as if she saw a mangled, blood-stained corpse at her feet.

She knelt with clenched hands and tried to pray; then she arose, with tearless eyes, and walked the room with impatient, rapid steps, and wrung her hands in terror.

Half-past one! She felt an agonising relief, so sudden and overwhelming, as to be almost worse than her previous anguish—she heard his footstep on the stairs.

He had opened the door softly to avoid alarming the household; and the next moment he was standing before her, radiant in life and spirits.

And Alice? She turns aside for a moment to hide her face from him that she may have time to gain composure. Even now, she remembers her resolve—not to show her folly.

"Well, little woman, I'm a dreadful truant, am I not?" he asked lightly. "But why did you sit up?"

"Why?" she asked in amazement, sur-

prised out of herself. "When—when I did not know you were safe!"

"Safe!" he exclaimed with a laugh. "Why, how could I be anything but safe in a place like this?"

Alice began to feel unreasonably irritated.

"I really must candidly admit," she said seriously, "that I did anticipate something wrong. If we had been in London I might have conjectured a dozen reasonable things about your absence. There, you have so many friends, and there are so many places of amusement. You have neither here."

There were no traces of tears upon her face now; there was a slight colour in her cheek that told another story.

"Ah! now that would have been the most sensible course to pursue here, if you had only known"—

He still spoke lightly, and caught her hand and drew her towards him, as he sat in the chair in which he had carelessly thrown himself, as if prepared to spend the night there. As he drew her down upon his knee, he said—

"I have a great deal to tell you, Alice. I've had such a jolly night—and such a pleasant surprise! I met Hayes. He's down here with his yacht—two nice fellows with him. Well, I went on board, and somehow or other, the time slipped away; I didn't know it was so late—and I didn't know you'd be so anxious."

"Which is saying you did not know me!"

Alice rose up as she spoke, at war with herself, and the unusual feeling of resentment which had arisen in her breast.

It *was* inconsiderate—it *was* thoughtless! Something told her this, and she was trying to refute the argument. She was longing with one part of her soul to throw herself upon his breast, and weep away the bitter feelings, which oppressed her; and yet she was drawn, by the clear reasoning faculties of her mind, to think that she had been treated with, at least, a want of respect.

In absolute fact, Alice was a sensible woman, not given to exaggerated ideas, nor to impulsive conduct. She generally thought through everything, and weighed it reason-

ably ; and she had hitherto found very little difficulty in doing this. But here she stood irresolute.

Hugh made a concession. To do him justice, it really had not occurred to him that she would express anything but wonder at his absence. But now he saw her disturbance, he was compelled to take the matter in a different light.

"I am very sorry, Alice, that I stayed away to-night! Under the circumstances I certainly ought to have known better. The evil was wrought only from want of thought —forgive me then!"

She came back to him immediately. She sat down beside him caressingly, and said warmly—

"Don't talk like that, Hugh! I've nothing to 'forgive'—now you have explained. Tell me what you have been doing? I shall want to know how you spend the time passed away from me!"

The words were carelessly spoken—almost without any meaning—but she was glad to be able to speak less earnestly.

Hugh, however, again misunderstood the position.

"I really do not think, my dear, you would derive much interest from the details of men's idle talk—and idler actions. You must give up part of your interest in me."

"How can I do that, and not be jealous of your pursuits?"

"It is nonsensical to be jealous of a man's pursuits, Alice! If you knew all mine, you would often be unnecessarily troubled, I fear. Beside you could be of no assistance!"

Her face darkened.

"Could I not? I thought it was especially a woman's province to assist—if only by comforting. . . . Well, never mind! perhaps no real trouble may come—but if it should, dear, don't keep *that* from me."

"You take me too seriously," he went on jestingly. "Will you be better for knowing how we passed the time? Well, we played Napoleon for stakes rather too high for my pocket; but I was fortunate—fortune never does frown upon me—and won. Then we talked all manner of gossip—and a man's

gossip—let it be understood—is totally at variance with a woman's. We did not criticise Jack Staveley's style of waistcoat—nor even his necktie—but we cut him up unmercifully, because he's just taken orders, and we don't consider him fit to be a parson. Then we abused some public men roundly enough—and in no choice language you would say. You would have done the same of your intimate friends, and would have voted them objects of ridicule indisputably—both in themselves and their self-adornment."

"You seem to know too much about my sex! Yet we are not all alike—not quite so malicious as you would have us, although we may sometimes discover something ridiculous in other people. And were you playing Napoleon all that time, Hugh?"

"Yes, and drinking more whisky than I wanted."

"I should have found it tedious," said Alice, thoughtfully.

"So should I a discourse on the newest fashion in bonnets."

"Women are not always talking about

fashions—at least not the women I have been brought up among."

"I do not blame them, my dear girl," said Hugh, with a yawn; "it is far better than their talking about things they do not comprehend."

Alice was averse to take his meaning too seriously, so she said, carelessly—

"I never knew you had so low an opinion of women."

"Not a low opinion—a true one, as I believe. Bell and you I take to be exceptional."

"Then we must be treated in an exceptional manner," she whispered lovingly.

CHAPTER III.

CHAR. In each thing give him way, cross him in nothing.
CLEO. Thou teachest like a fool; the way to lose him.
ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA.

"I SUPPOSE one honeymoon was not long enough for you, Alice! and how well you look! It is worth getting married if only for the sake of one's personal appearance!"

"It is worth getting married," said Alice sedately, "to check certain animal spirits"—

"Don't assume airs on your position already, Mrs. Willoughby, just because I paid you a compliment"—

"Oh, then it was a compliment! I thought so. Now let me see what you have been boasting about?"

"Oh, the house is charming! It is so much grander than ours that we feel quite in the shade already. I have been wanting to finish everything, but mamma wouldn't listen to it. She said there were some things you would prefer to arrange yourself."

"She was quite right. Now I am really

at home I shall want something to do. I shall have a great deal of time on my hands. Hugh goes away at ten, and is never quite sure of the time he will return. You remember he always used to say he could not promise for certain evenings."

"Oh, he will manage better now!" said Isabel. "Isn't this cabinet lovely? and the console table is really elegant! I never saw a prettier design than the frame of the glass. I am quite in love with your house."

"I shall not be," said Alice, shaking her head sagely.

"No," replied Isabel saucily, "you have something better! Now tell me—you have told all about your excursions and so forth—but oh tell me—have you had your first quarrel yet? Because, until that is over, you do not know what ground you are standing upon."

"Wise girl!" laughed Alice. "We never intend to quarrel—we have too good an understanding with each other."

"That is what you can only arrive at by a quarrel," said Isabel oracularly.

"Who has been teaching you all this?"

Isabel coloured.

"The theory is as old as the hills, I believe."

"Well, that is nothing in its favour. Theory is nowhere in comparison with practice. We do not intend to be tied down by common conventionalities at all, Bell. Seriously, we mean to do exactly what we like, in spite of what the world may say."

Alice's pride forced her to make this announcement in a very matter-of-fact way. She knew now, as a certainty, that her husband would be disposed to take his own course, and she felt disposed to second him to any extent. Not that she loved him less on account of this show of authority, but rather more.

"How pretty all this looks, and how strange! I wonder how long I shall take to get accustomed to my new home. You must spend a great deal of time with me, Bell. Hugh expects it."

"Is Hugh's will law?" said Isabel, with a smile. "You must not spoil him, Alice.

Remember, too much kindness once killed love."

"If it only happened once, it is an argument on my side."

"Well, if you agree to spoil each other, I have no objection. But I don't agree with total surrender on one side."

"Pride must have a fall!" exclaimed Alice, regarding the tall figure of her splendid sister with some amusement. "We shall see what a terrible fall it will be when *you* succumb to the enemy."

"I shall never do that," said Isabel, winding her arm round Alice's waist, and drawing her out of the room into the next apartment. "I shall expect *him* to pay the penalty of his rashness; and his reward shall be my permission to obey."

How merry they were! how they both laughed at nothing! Oh, cruel destiny! there is a cloud already on the horizon.

* * * * *

There were now weeks and months of almost perfect enjoyment. Alice was fully

occupied in the adornment of her home; a little visiting, a little company, plenty of association with her mother and Isabel, and as much as she could obtain of her husband's society.

It was not very much, and *that* was the only drawback to her happiness. But she made no attempt to restrain him; she told herself that a man must live for others, as well as for his wife.

Unfortunately, she had time enough to think—too much time.

"Hugh," she said, one night, "do you think you can possibly promise me an evening with you to-morrow? I have so many things to talk about."

"Why not now?" asked he; "no time like the present!"

"Now! it is half-past twelve! It is nothing very particular, only—I rarely spend an evening with you."

"You should have married a tailor, Alice, so that you could have warmed his goose, and have watched him use it. Well, what is the question?"

"Only—you mentioned last week it was time we had another evening party. I am not in any way anxious myself about it, but you told me you wished to entertain as much as you reasonably could."

"What a conscientious woman! Why, you enjoy the evening, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, of course; but I've not been accustomed to spend so much money. I have, however, told you the expense."

"It is nothing," replied Hugh, carelessly. "You have shown your good management already. Why it cost me ten times as much to entertain a few men once! Is that all?"

"Not all—nor all my reason either, you insolent man! I wish you really were a tailor!"

"You would warm my temper as well as my goose, I am afraid. Two people can't spend their lives side by side without quarrelling. I find that out by my clerks; I have to pitch into those men with almost the regularity of clock work; they seem bound to go wrong at stated intervals."

This was the first time that Hugh had mentioned the simplest incident concerning his business; Alice hailed it with delight.

"Do they? Has anything annoying occurred?"

"Excuse me; I don't want to be doubly victimised over the same business. Once is enough in the day. What is your affair?"

"Only that. If you could tell me what day you would be at liberty, I will arrange the rest."

"I can make any day you please," he replied, entering at once into the subject.

His compliance caused a painful reflection; if he could make any time for this purpose, why could he not spare more time to her? She *was* jealous of his pursuits, though she did not know it.

After a slight hesitation, she put some necessary inquiry; and he said in reply—

"Ask whom you please. I shall see my old friend Staveley to-morrow, and I really think I should like to ask him. You don't know him?"

"No; but I think it preferable that our

friends should be common property. Is there no one else you wish to ask? I have only a few intimate acquaintances, and you know such a host. I have no men, with the exception of Cousin Fred, and Jenny Graham's brother, whom you have often met."

"Cousin Fred, being 'awful spoons' on Bell, of course, must come—though how a man can continue to spoon without reciprocation, I can't tell! You used to get up some nice little dances. You had more men than Fred and young Graham."

"Of course! We had Colonel Macnamara, but I shouldn't ask him."

"No," interrupted Hugh, "we can't have anybody who looks down on trade. Macnamara is too much of a swell for me."

"The pride that apes humility" was so plainly apparent here, that Alice coloured crimson under the assumption.

"Oh, Hugh!" she exclaimed, "he is far your inferior in every way. He is a very stupid man, and a very ugly one, too. And as to his family, it's no better than our own!"

"You descended in the social scale by marrying me, Alice."

"Not at all! It may almost be said that papa was in trade, and *we* never mixed in anything that is called society."

"Nothing is really called society now, but the royal circle, I believe. Nobody will admit of keeping any other. This is all English snobism. Oh, you'd better go to bed, Alice! that word snob reminds me—I want to read up Thackeray on the species."

"To-night?"

"Yes; they've asked me to give a reading at Colchester on Saturday, and I have promised. Staveley will be there; he's lately got a living close by, and I'm going to his home afterwards. Now be off, that's a dear girl, it's just one."

So Alice rose, and lightly kissed him, and obediently departed.

She was unspeakably proud of her husband, but she saw that this very cleverness of his took him away from her.

CHAPTER IV.

In love, if love be love, if love be ours,
Faith and unfaith can ne'er be equal powers;
Unfaith in aught is want of faith in all.

TENNYSON.

HUGH and Alice had had no opportunity of exchanging a word, beyond the mere familiar necessities at table, until the following Sunday evening, and then Alice made one of her usual ineffectual struggles to enter into the interests of her husband's life.

"I want to know how you got on last night—I suppose you were very late?"

"Yes—that's why I'm so idle to-day! I always did like a camp—I should have made a good soldier."

"But I want to hear what you did?"

"Your prevailing sin, Alice, is curiosity."

She was determined not to show the real interest, the absorbing desire, that seemed to grow upon her day by day—to be *more* to him—more in all senses. It was true he was

always affectionate to her when they were together; but that was seldom.

And again, she had been accustomed to hear transactions with the outer world discussed as common subjects in her own family. But she knew no more of her husband's pursuits than if he were a stranger.

"A woman cannot be supposed to be free from all the vices of her kind; but I don't think 'curiosity' is a word to be used between *us*. I think I am really exempt from that vulgar sin. If you were any one else, Hugh, do you imagine, for one moment, that I should interest myself in you?"

"Women are—exigent! Why are they so?"

"Don't talk about 'women' generally!—talk about me."

"It is safer to generalize. I never knew a woman who did not expect, in every case, much more than she got."

Alice felt chilled, and cut to the heart, at these repeated sneers, as they appeared to her; yet she battled bravely with herself, and said, without the faintest show of tem-

per, but with a reflection of his own cynical tone—

"When a man seems to be desperately afraid of letting any of his private business, or pleasure transpire, it can but be suggested there is something in the whole thing he is rather ashamed of. I will ask no more indiscreet questions, Hugh."

He coloured angrily; and then, as suddenly, commenced talking cordially on another subject.

"Ah! that reminds me—Staveley's coming next week, and he asked permission to call before the evening. He wants to see you. He evinced the strongest curiosity."

"Curiosity!—and a man? Was not he at Ventnor that night, when I had my initiatory lesson in wifehood?"

"He was not there," replied Hugh coolly.

"I remember the name perfectly—it was new to me then. Certainly he was there?"

"No—but we talked of him"—

"I have a perfect recollection of what was said. Has he reformed since?"

"You take everything too earnestly! He

isn't fit for his position, I admit. A man, who plays billiards—uncommonly well, be it granted—gambles whenever he gets the chance, and can't resist the temptation of drinking too much, does not seem quite suited to be a preacher of the gospel. Still men of the world may do these things—and worse—with impunity. He was with those last night, who take him in the lay, and not the clerical character."

"Perhaps I *am* rigorous—but somehow it seems wrong to hear you speak so. You cannot help knowing the fact—but you can help associating with the man. He can be no pleasure to *you!*"

"Rigorous! there never was a word invented in any language to describe your feeling! You are just like the people who never do wrong—they have not the least grain of sympathy for any one else."

"Must sympathy necessarily be applied only to wrong-doers? I can—and do feel acutely enough for victims—for sufferers; but I fear I shall never arrive at that height of Christian charity, where I can forget them

and their wrongs, and forget also any indignation for those who have caused their misery."

"I think you mistake me a little! I did not mean to imply that you were insensible to the woes of others—I know that is not so—but you never seem to be able to imagine that a man, who is not absolutely good, is to be pitied. Well, young people are mostly intolerant! I have ruined poor Jack in your eyes for ever. I wonder what he'll think of you?"

"His natural instinct may assist him to dislike me. He will be sure to praise my manners—people always do when I don't like them."

"That is candid at all events!"

"Consider what a woman has to do—she has to be almost over civil, if she feels cold, in order to pass over the difficulty of not being genial. Are you going to church this evening?"

"No; I'm too sleepy. After I've had a doze we'll finish our discussion. You can't go to church alone, it's against the doctor's orders."

An hour later Alice heard Hugh's voice calling to her from the library.

"Come, Alice, now you may come!"

And in another minute she was by his side.

"I knew you would not rest to be in the house, and not with me. I wonder you like the company of such a cantankerous fellow!"

"That's a question for my taste—you ought to be content!"

"Now we've settled all about the party—and as there's one black sheep, we may as well ask St. Leger."

"I've no objection, he is very pleasant. If he were not too black to come to our wedding, surely he can be accepted now. But he is not sable. There are degrees of blackness—but which do you think is worse—he or Jack?"

"Neither Jack nor St. Leger would be guilty of a solecism in good manners where ladies are present."

"How grateful we ought to be for their respect!"

Hugh Willoughby did not know his wife. With all his confidence and belief in himself,

he was at times half doubtful of her. Not of herself personally, not of her great affectionate forgiving heart, but of her pure mind, which combated all things low and gross, as if they never could approach her.

Noticing his silence, Alice glided to his side, and clasping both her hands under his chin, and resting her own upon his curly brown hair, she said, with a sort of tender submission—

"I daresay you are right, Hugh,—try and teach me better. Men have such a wonderful breadth of mind. Women are narrow, and you like to keep them so—if only to laugh at their folly. . . Now you are a philosopher, Hugh! You remind me of one of those ancient sages—who was he?—who could see no evil; and seeing none, extended his mercy to all alike."

"Ah, there would be a great deal more of that philosophy, Alice, if we could read the human heart! I am philosopher enough to know that without evil, we could not recognise good."

"It is too dreadful to look upon wicked-

ness as a necessity. I think that occasionally, a man's mind may be so perverted that he may not be responsible for his sins. But averaging broadly, it seems to me that where a man has wit enough to hide his fault, his conscience tells him that it is one"—

"Not always his conscience, Alice. His fear of punishment causes him to disguise his guilt."

"That is even less charitable than my suggestion! Some people think there's nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so; but in my opinion, a man's sin should be measured by its end or object. That given, one can soon determine the amount of intelligence he possesses, and consequently his responsibility."

"There is a question as to there being any responsibility."

"If there were no law, and no religion, there would be none. But we make a man answerable for his actions, and we find that he *is* able to guide them!"

Hugh gave her a provoking nod of approbation; and then he said—

"If I talked with you more, Alice, and less with some freer thinkers, I should be a better man than I am."

Since the days of their courtship he had never said anything so pleasing to her. Of course, it was sheer nonsense to her mind that he could be "a better man;" but by those few words it seemed that he recognised a certain value in her; and she had been grieved because she appeared to be of no value. She kept the house, it was true; she made a comfortable home, where he was always sure to find a loving greeting, a cheerful smile, and attentions of a nature that could but bestow pleasure, both on the recipient, and on the giver. But this she felt was not enough.

"In olden times, Alice, you would have been a vestal; you do not know, even by name, the temptations to which human nature is subject. You would never stoop to pity a criminal because of his crime, and I should, because I can understand his committing it."

"Oh, Hugh!"

"I can. Under certain pressure, men and

women do things they have never dreamt of. You, dear, may be immaculate—you may, also, never have been tempted. But I? I know when I have failed; and I don't know a man who hasn't."

Alice sighed.

"Ah, your charity is too universal for me! You are trying to put yourself upon a level with me, who commit all sorts of impropriieties; and *I* know you are far too high-minded to enjoy mere sensual pleasures. I have faith in you. There is a faith, as well as a philosophy, which refuses to believe in wrong."

Hugh was silent for a moment; and there appeared to be no provocation for his next remark.

"I don't believe a man could ever reach your moral altitude."

"Now *that* is one of your too charitable observations. I am far from perfect. Perhaps, you mean that I have a stronger faith in you, than you can have in me."

Then she paused; and when she spoke again it was in an altered tone, serious and sad.

"Indeed, for the past few months, Hugh, I have been doubting that I am any good whatever. Forgive me, dear, if I tell you what has been in my heart; because I never can be happy—I never shall—unless I can quite confide in you. Perhaps I am too girlish, too ignorant to be a companion for you; but then I am quite young, and if I were with you more, I might become what I do not think I am now—a true wife."

As usual, when she made an effort to speak upon what had long dwelt upon her mind, she did so with a doubting hesitation, very unlike her general fluent utterance. She kept her eyes down, too, striving to hide her nervousness, for she hated to be betrayed into sentimentality.

If she could have seen his eyes, as they rested upon her—a curious gleam of dissatisfaction mixed with their keen brilliancy—she would have been still more disconcerted.

"My dear," he said, rather severely, "we must come to an understanding, I see. You are too sensitive. There must be no more

nonsense of this sort. There—I can't be harsh with you—you are too good and too proud of me—that is the secret of it. But, still, we *must* understand each other! Now, I cannot see why married people should not make their own laws. Why are we all bound to be as tame and gregarious as a flock of sheep that follow each other over the meadows, and never know where they are going? I want our lives to be consistent. Now listen—I want *you* to form your own interests, your own pleasures; *mine* are already formed. Do not depend upon me wholly for your contentment, or, I fear, you will meet with disappointment. I hope to make you happy—I do all that I can to make you so. I am thoroughly satisfied in my wife; I wish you were in your husband! I have seen the shipwreck of happiness by reason of the very thing you seem to desire —the kind of familiarity which breeds contempt. For this reason we should be jealous to preserve an outward decorum—by which I mean a certain distance, which will only render our intercourse more pleasurable.

Our friends are grateful to us, and we to them, because we enjoy our society incidentally. But tied to one friend—the one alone—we should tire and become weary, however suitable he or she might be. If we will not read this lesson—if we will force ourselves into more confidential and less superficial friendship—we may end like those whose households are a mere den of strife; where all the petty worries, all the trivial nuisances of the day, all the children's misfortunes, all the domestic grievances are paraded before a man, until he hates the place called home. I shall never degenerate into the feminine monster who brings his troubles to his wife. I keep them well under lock, and turn the key upon them when I leave the office. Now, if I assure you, my dear girl—you who are standing there just like a mutinous child, as you are—if I assure you, Alice, that I am perfectly content with things as they are—will you be happy?"

It was seldom that Hugh made so long a speech. Alice did not reply for a few moments; she had been excited by complex

emotions while he had spoken; and she felt now she could give no concise answer to that question.

Her reason laboured; then her heart spoke out impetuously—

"Oh, Hugh! I have longed so much to be able to speak, and now you seem to have supplanted my arguments. When I married you, I meant to devote myself entirely to you and your happiness. I have tried to do so, and I feel that I have failed. Surely my instincts cannot be all wrong? My notion was, that in the simple interests, which affect us both, we should find a higher pleasure than in mere consideration of self. I do not mean to be ungrateful; I know that you are kind and generous to me!— Oh, I have seen the thing I wish for, where a whole family grieves or rejoices unanimously! This one spirit is, in my opinion, the soul of domestic life; and this can never be with us. You may come home with a heart load of trouble, and I, unknowingly, jar upon you by playful remarks and lively songs. *I* may have a bitter trial, wherein

my conscience is concerned, and you, not knowing, may influence me by a word out of season. Hugh," she went on, hurriedly and more excitedly, as she gained confidence, "we shall never be anything to each other but strangers—in spite of all our love for each other, we shall never be but strangers —if you keep me so far away. I do not think we should ever be satisfied by such a course. You say—*you* are. I will try to emulate you there. I do not think we can shake off all the desires of human nature; and however we desire to form an original life, we need not run into extremes. Nature is a law; and if we ignore nature, we may find ourselves the sufferers. I am not as wise as you, so I will try your method. And I will try not to be discontented, even, though I hold no nearer place to you than a chance acquaintance might. I will not annoy you by constant reflections on the same theme; I will do what you desire with my utmost power; and, perhaps, in satisfying you, I shall reach my own contentment."

"That is a model wife! Don't imagine yourself hardly treated. When you reflect upon what I have said, and when you observe the conditions which do occasionally arise in married life, you will see that I am right. We can avoid, as well as create, difficulties."

He laid great emphasis on the last sentence. Alice bowed her head meekly and sadly; she could not speak; she felt as though hysterical sobs would choke her.

There was conflict in her heart still, although she had surrendered. She felt instinctively that things were not as they should be.

Hugh made an attempt to caress the hand which lay within his reach; and the caress gave her courage.

"Before we were married, you never blamed me for telling all that happened to me, and all that was in my heart—heaven knows, it was trivial enough!"

"I was finding you out then, my darling; I had to learn your worth."

"Have we nothing to learn now? I wish

I could convince you that we have," she said, tenderly.

"One of us has, and she has promised to try."

"And then," continued Alice, reverting to her unfinished reminiscence, "then you used to amuse and interest me, beyond everything, by your funny descriptions of people and things. And you used to read to me—Hugh, I cannot give you an idea how you impressed me!—how I enjoyed your reading! And I have never heard a word from your lips since we returned to London."

"All that period of our lives was devoted to pleasure; now we have the commonplace business of life to employ us."

"I thought the end and aim of marriage was a kind of mutual improvement, and was to combine our pleasures and our pain. The last we are almost bound to combine. Are we then to have all the work, and none of the play?"

"Upon my word, that's unanswerable! Of course, we have our play hours! and let us keep them for play, and not for all sorts

of exaggerated arguments, invented in hours of idleness."

"Why you don't really know *how* I spend my days!" said Alice, with a smile; "I am never idle a moment. May I—against orders—describe my occupations?"

"Forbid it, heaven! If you get on that subject you will drive me away!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Alice, in pretended terror. "Give me the list of the party—ten names, vilely pencilled, and all men but one! Well, fortunately, I *do* know some nice girls, and—I trust, Hugh, that all your friends are not of Jack's type!"

CHAPTER V.

Depend upon it no woman is the worse for sense and knowledge. Men know that women are an over-match for them, and therefore they choose the weakest or most ignorant. If they did not think so, they never could be afraid of women knowing so much as themselves.

JOHNSON.

THE Reverend Mr. Staveley profited by his visit to Mrs. Willoughby; he gained her favour, in spite of herself, in several ways. In the first instance, by his extraordinary praise of her husband. This was not gross flattery—Alice was not the woman to be so deceived—it was an outspoken acknowledgment of Hugh's superiority to other men. He spoke of his intellect in the highest terms, and showed her in what light he was held by other men.

Again he insisted that Hugh was "a thoroughly good fellow," and this phrase Alice misinterpreted. Had she known Staveley's meaning, she might not have been so gratified. As it was, she believed that

Hugh's influence over this black sheep was strong enough to wash him white.

"Hugh is right," she thought, "whatever his errors may be he has a just appreciation of what is good."

So it may be presumed, after an hour's conversation, she was much propitiated; still she was glad when Hugh came in, and took the conversation into his hands.

"You must not think of going yet!" he exclaimed, when Staveley excused his already protracted visit. "I ought to have been here before—but one can't answer for delay. I understood you would stay—and so you will. So make yourself as happy as circumstances will permit, and Alice will give us something to eat presently. I don't dine at home regularly; you know—I can't answer for my time."

Staveley glanced at Alice.

"A lady has to pay a penalty when her husband is an extremely popular man. It is strange I have not met you at some of your husband's readings! Do you put him out of countenance?"

"Certainly not that," she answered. "I have never heard Hugh read but twice in public; I have had home readings."

"Ah, yes! I see. I should like to come to a private evening."

"Oh, Hugh does not give private evenings now! he is too much occupied."

Here Hugh interrupted.

"The fact is, people get accustomed to an audience, and I now seem to require one."

"Applause must be very pleasant," said Staveley genially. "It is no use making a point in the pulpit—no exhibition of feeling being allowed. This gives one no zest. I have spent hours in the composition of a sermon, which would have taken the town by storm, had it been a lecture. The only immediate compliment a congregation can convey can but be expressed by a general rustling, and even then the matter is dubious! This vague movement may not be intended as a compliment, but I find it more agreeable to take it as such."

"I think you are right, Mr. Staveley. It

is the cough I have taken to be the signal of disapprobation; it is *that* I should dread, were I in your place. Now, I have always thought, a breach of that time-honoured custom of profound silence would be a relief. I don't," she said with a smile, "go far enough to say that arguments ought to be permitted in church, because they never would be ended; but I do think a token of approbation would not be undignified."

"If we allow cheers, we must also allow hisses; and I should not like to guess which would predominate. Now, as a test, tell me, Mrs. Willoughby, do not you more frequently disapprove of what a clergyman says than not?"

"I should not like to say I disapprove, though I may not be able to agree. I have not sufficient vanity to set up opinions against those who make theology a study."

"It is not all people who are so modest, or who will give any one credit for knowing more than themselves."

"Not I, for one," said Hugh quietly, "I'll hold any argument with you, and hold a per-

fect right to it as well, although I have not studied theology."

"Ah, it wouldn't be fair!" laughed Staveley.

"Certainly not," agreed Alice.

"You mistake, madam," remarked Staveley cordially; "the advantage would be on your husband's side. He is an invincible foe, as I know too well. He has a knack—a most irritating one—of convincing a man against his will."

"But you have the choice of remaining of the same opinion still—or rather, there is no choice—the poet will allow you none."

"There is no satisfaction in merely holding one's own opinions—do you think so? Perhaps you never have been placed in the contemptible position I have mentioned—there's nothing makes a man feel smaller!"

Alice smiled, but her ready tongue was silent. She *had* realized that position several times in her married life.

"I am glad you're so near town, Jack! You'll be able to run up and see us very often," said Hugh heartily.

"If Mrs. Willoughby does not object to the frequent visits of a bachelor friend?"

Hugh elevated his eyebrows. Alice was equal to the occasion.

"We can only esteem it an honour, Mr. Staveley, if you elect to spend any time here."

"He will be sure to admire her manners!" thought Hugh, observing his wife's gracious demeanour.

Staveley bowed.

"I shall accept that invitation; although in an ordinary case, I should hesitate. When my friends marry, I always feel I had better —better marry too, especially if I want to keep their friendship. That's all I can say! Now, of course, you two will agree with me?"

"There is a condition in my agreement," said Alice quietly—"I would have no marrying for marrying sake. What would you chiefly desire in a wife?"

"A congenial companion. I shall certainly never marry for any other reason," exclaimed Staveley boldly. "I have my faults; but

they are light enough to throw over. There's nothing like a woman's influence to aid a man through life. But I'll be sure of the foundation, for my own sake. If I had the weight upon my mind some men must have, I should run away from my wife."

"And, because?"

"Because I could not make her happy. I have my theory of marriage. I think that a woman is entirely dependent on her husband for her happiness, and—do not be startled at what I am going to say—a man is equally dependent on his wife, although he may not think so."

By this time Alice is convinced that Hugh's old friend is more a credit to him than otherwise. But she said no more on the subject.

"Have you read ——?" asks Hugh irrelevantly.

The book mentioned was the talk of the day; the author was yet unknown.

"As a matter of course, yes," said Alice playfully, replying for Staveley, "and, as a matter of course, in raptures as great as the

rest of mankind! Where there can't be two opinions, how can we manage to differ?"

"I don't intend to try, Mrs. Willoughby. After your warm appreciation of the work, I would not dare to differ—even, if I could. It is, however, a marvellous production for a woman."

"A woman?" exclaimed Alice, whose curiosity was stimulated.

"It is not the work of a woman," said Hugh, in his dictatorial tone.

"I have it on the best authority," said Staveley eagerly. "I assure you that, personally, I am convinced of the fact."

"No woman ever wrote that book," said Hugh, with the same cool decision.

He was leaning back regarding his friend with a half-pitying air, to think he could be so deceived.

"There is power in every line, strength enough for half a dozen men—taking present writers as a standard—and you want to make me believe that *one* woman has startled society by such a great work as this. Why, my dear fellow, the whole sex couldn't do it!"

"I don't want you to believe," said Staveley good-naturedly; "but I can't help believing myself."

With a laudable desire to change the subject, Alice exclaimed—

"My husband has no opinion whatever, you perceive, of the intellectual power of women. He won't vote for female suffrage, I promise you!"

She had changed the subject, but it did not prove to be an advantageous change, as far as the opinions of the two men were concerned. Staveley, she found, was ready to defend, to uphold, to idealize her sex to any extent. Her husband, on the contrary, avowed his belief that women were only fit for the positions they now held, and that perhaps, even now, they had too many advantages.

"They are always—the cleverest women I mean—governed by their hearts and not by their reason," said Hugh; and then he proved his case by numerous quotations.

"Ah! you are a much better read man

than I," said Staveley. "However, I must go with you so far as the matter of heart. But I do *not* think," he added emphatically, "that the fact of having a heart incapacitates either a man or woman from holding any position—unless it should be that of a money-lender—and there are comparatively few of the human race who are suited for such work. Nor do I think that feeling is incompatible with intelligence. As to women, I may remember several authorities on my side, but for the sake of condensation one will do—

> Oh! woman! lovely woman, nature made thee
> To temper man; we had been brutes without you."

"That is very flattering!" said Alice. "A more modern poet has said something of the kind; indeed, he seems to me to have comprehended in one poem all that can be said on those differences of opinion held about the relations of the sexes—I mean Tennyson in the Princess."

"And *she* personally was a failure," said Hugh tersely.

"And *he*, her lover," replied Staveley quickly, "finds the reason most gracefully—

> Being herself
> Three times more noble than three score of men,
> She sees herself in every woman else,
> And so she wears her error like a crown."

"The whole poem is a vivid, exaggerated fancy; very beautiful in conception and all that—but scarcely true. It has never fallen to my share to discover the strength of woman. Sweetness and strength are not a natural combination. We prefer that women should not be strong; strength is rather a disadvantage than otherwise."

"With all submission to your assertions, I think that, even in a man, strength and sweetness may be combined—more often than not, too! For, to the credit of human nature, the strongest intellect usually has the tenderest heart; and in my experience I have found this admirable mixture more often in women than in men. Perhaps it is scarcely fair to say this in an abstract argument!"

"Ah, you have been lucky!" said Hugh carelessly.

"I should feel inclined to say the same to you, if it were not for the presence of Mrs. Willoughby."

"Mrs. Willoughby is woman enough to accept a compliment, when she can get one," said Alice pleasantly.

Almost immediately afterwards she left the friends together, wondering if it were possible that Staveley ever could have been guilty of those enormities in drinking and gambling, of which she had incidentally heard; and feeling now convinced that if Hugh's company were beneficial to Staveley, it was certainly clear that Hugh would not be liable to injury by such intercourse. Alice had been sufficiently mollified by the accidental disclosure of his views on marriage and of her sex; and she thought that, after all, some of *his* sermons might be worth hearing—perhaps worth approving.

CHAPTER VI.

It is the little rift within the lute,
That by-and-by will make the music mute,
And ever widening slowly silence all.

TENNYSON.

"I AM very vexed you cannot go to-night, Alice!"

"And so am I," she replied in a whisper. "You hear my voice? I cannot speak—my cold is very bad. The reason for my absence can be easily explained. You know, dear, I am only too glad to be with you. I'm sure I dread the lonely evening I shall have to pass!"

"Well, I can't offer to remain at home," said Hugh, "so I'll go and dress. If I had known you would have been so ill, when I left this morning, I need not have come home at all."

"And that means," thought Alice, as she sat alone, "that he would have spent his evening somewhere else; for he could not

have gone to the party without coming home to dress."

There was a feeling of rife disappointment within her heart. It was seldom she allowed a hint to pass her lips; but she had a faint sickening feeling when she remembered how often he left her for the society of those who were comparative strangers.

She knew that this engagement was not an important one; he could have put it off easily had he chosen.

"Do you want me particularly to-night?" he had said one day last week; and the words came back to her now, for they had roused her latent pride.

Want him particularly *one* night! when she sat night after night in utter loneliness and desolation, trying to believe she was not a discontented woman, trying to blame herself for want of understanding her husband, and oppressed with a thousand nervous fancies that the condition of her health imposed.

Ah, this was not the life she had dreamed

of! Not the happy communion of two beings, joined together heart and soul for ever and aye. This, she was persuaded, was not what married life should be; and, with her usual lack of self-conceit, she attributed the want to herself. Her genuine modesty gave her little inclination to believe in her own instincts. She always had a feminine leaning—a reliance upon those she loved; and she loved her husband dearly. She was uniformly attentive and obedient, kind and forbearing, keeping both the letter and the spirit of the law, and believing in her husband above all things.

So jealous was she of his reputation, that she struggled to prevent her mother and sister from discovering the true state of affairs. When they called casually by day, as they often did, they could not expect to find Hugh. And when they came by invitation, there were mostly others invited, and he, of course, was present.

Isabel would have relieved her evenings considerably; but, even this comfort Alice was bound to forego. But unfortunately

there were not only evenings—there were nights to be spent alone. Alice had made it an invariable custom to sit up for her husband; but when she saw how thoroughly displeased he looked when he found her waiting, pale and tired at three o'clock in the morning, she abandoned the habit.

On the last occasion he had said, with a touch of impatience—

"How often am I to say I wish you would go to bed? What is the use of wearing yourself out to no purpose?"

"I cannot sleep, Hugh," she had replied, "until I know you are at home."

"You must get over that ridiculous feeling, because, my dear little wife"— and Hugh was very cheerful this night—"I am not the man to sit on a footstool at my wife's feet. You know, I think, some women expect that. I have told you that if a woman wants to retain her husband's love she must not be exacting."

"I don't think I am, Hugh," she had answered sadly.

When all this came back to her, words

seemed to rise to her lips, arguments that must have weight with him.

"Am I never to be with you? Am I to spend all my life alone?"

She would have spoken the words bitterly —and she knew it.

Hugh came downstairs briskly. He looked as fresh and energetic—notwithstanding his late hours—as a schoolboy.

"Wrap yourself up well! I wish I could stay and take care of you!" said he airily.

When she spoke, her words were slowly uttered, and as distinct as her failing voice could make them.

"Be assured Hugh, that I have no wish to interfere with you. While it is not your pleasure to be with me, I do not desire you to deny yourself any other pleasure."

"There is a saying," rejoined Hugh, in the same easy, bantering tone, "which it would be as well all wives should lay to heart —if we want to tie people to us, we should take care not to tie them to anything else."

"I do not see the application of that remark," she answered.

"Men object to be held—they are free agents—

> Love's wing moults when caged and captured
> Only free he soars enraptured,

and if men cannot command their freedom"—

"I see—they may be slaves elsewhere."

After this random shot there was a pause.

Alice was afraid to look up because she felt she had spoken against her own principles, and she feared he might resent the satire.

"Upon my word! that's a very clever retort, Alice—I did not think you capable of it!"

Emboldened by his easy reply, she went on in a pacifying tone—

"Of course, dear, I did not mean that you could be a slave to anything; only it was a thing to be readily inferred. Oh, Hugh!" she continued, in her broken voice, and with the sudden impulsive passion she was continually repressing, "I do not think they were unhappy days we once spent together—the memory of them is the only bliss of my life! I knew those days could not last for ever, but—I did hope to have

some gleams of that brighter life, however accustomed we might get to the prosaic round of every-day work. Can you tell me, Hugh, that *you* were not happy then?"

"Certainly! I was learning you then; and the lesson so satisfied me, and was so perfectly learnt, that I have had no reason to study it since. We have no occasion to prove each other's characters."

"I thought they were only learnt to give us the capacity of further enjoyment. Good-night. I don't want to delay you, and it really hurts my throat to talk."

He was gone.

And now Alice commenced to reproach herself for the slight reproof she had given him. Had he not surrounded her with all the comfort, and even luxury, his position would justify him in giving? Was he not affectionate, kind, and generous to her?

She disposed of these questions promptly, and ended with a convincing argument against herself—that women were prone to ruin their happiness by expecting too much; and that she ought to be grateful to the

Providence which had allotted to her so good, so clever, so prudent a husband.

These two people were acting conscientiously. Alice was trying with all her might to reason upon her position clearly. She had that faculty, that full sensation of instinct, which women generally have in excess of men; and that fulness of sensation was teaching her momentarily that their life was false.

Hugh desired that marriage should not be to him, what he deemed it to most men—a tie, a restriction upon all free action, and indeed more a burden than anything else. And, in fact, he was right; because the troubles are palpable things—the trials and cares of a married life cannot be wholly hidden—and his eyes, keen as they were, were not discerning enough to discover that all the pure and enjoyable delights *are* hidden, and that those in their full measure compensate abundantly for the greater difficulties, the higher responsibilities nature has ordained for the state.

Hugh had found it worth while to make his wife's character, both before and after mar-

riage, a study. He had found out her value, and knew that he was secure, knew that her faith in him was strong enough to remove mountains; knew that, notwithstanding the cleverness of her judgment, he had more than ordinary power over her. But he did not give her half her due. He started on the false ground that woman is an inferior animal; and although neither of them dreamed of such condition, it was nevertheless true that his wife was in every sense his superior—even in intellect, where in the eyes of the world he shone.

It is strange indeed—as has been said by one of the greatest thinkers of our time, in speaking of the relations of lovers—"that we think a reverent and tender duty is due to one whose affection we still doubt, and whose character, we as yet do but partially and distantly discern; and that this reverence and duty are to be withdrawn, when the affection has become wholly and limitlessly our own, and the character has been so sifted and tried that we fear not to entrust to it the happiness of our lives."

But, strange as it may appear, it is almost invariably true. When a man has so discovered, when he has once so satisfied himself, he will take no further pains to please the woman whom he has won as his wife. He will cease all those delicate, perhaps trivial, attentions which are always so delightful to a woman, although she may so often have to do without them ; he may become careless even of a show of his regard ; because he is so sure of hers.

With women of a certain temperament this will occasion a distance, a gradual parting of the two which may—nay does—result in misconception, distrust, and, not unfrequently, in a feeling worse than either—that of sheer indifference. And although two people may live together in this cold deadness, and thorough lack of sensation, yet in the truest sense are their lives divided.

It was such a termination as this that Alice instinctively dreaded ; and Hugh, with all his depth of thought, with all the unprejudiced reasoning power he thought he possessed, never once imagined such a result.

He regarded women as weak things, fragile in mind as in body; things to be kept as one keeps one's dogs and horses—in order.

And yet, according to his light, he had loved Alice. But his love was of the nature that can have a past tense. It was in fact not far removed from animal passion, the duration of which may be only that of weeks; but, however long its existence may last, it is sure to die a natural death, because it has none of the ennobling influence, the pure refinement of the love which has no dross—the gold without alloy—of which there is so little in this world.

Hugh Willoughby had cause to be proud of his wife; but it was a natural instinct with him to place the highest woman in the universe below himself.

Yet, now and then, an uncomfortable reflection would cross his mind—perhaps it seemed as if she were too pure, too good to hold this selfish passion of his. He had believed—this cautious, deep-thinking man—that his marriage would be an ideal one. He resolved that he would be free from the difficulties

that beset other men. Women promised obedience to their lords, and he took care not to abate one jot of his authority for fear of its loss—or the loss of a grain of it.

Hugh and Alice were like two beings groping in the dark—but so differently! Her every thought resulting only in his happiness; and his bearing no consideration for hers.

CHAPTER VII.

When a man hath taken a new wife, he shall not go out to war, neither shall he be charged with any business; but he shall be free at home one year, and shall cheer up his wife which he hath taken.

DEUTERONOMY.

ALICE is seated in her pretty drawing-room alone. She does not go out much now, because she is not well, and her spirits are extremely low. She struggles very hard against this depression, but her doctor tells her that it was not an unusual condition of mind; and she is urgently anxious to assure him that there is no actual cause for her uneasiness.

He is a kind-hearted man, and he comforts her by saying it will be all right by-and-bye, and that she will soon enjoy such spirits as she has never known before.

She is very melancholy now; as she sits there with great tears dropping slowly from her half-closed eyes, and falling upon her

hands—idle unoccupied hands, listless as their owner.

A ring at the door-bell sounds through the house. Alice is beginning to hate her visitors; indeed everything appears to be uninteresting to her now.

She is relieved by the entrance of her mother and sister, and immediately has resort to a fit of coughing to account for her slightly red eyelids, and to give her an opportunity of burying her face in her handkerchief, to get rid of the traces of tears.

Isabel was the very essence of tact. She knew perfectly well that Alice had been crying; and while she immediately opened a conversation on the first subject that occurred to her, the mother, with the rashness which is a characteristic of her sex, exclaimed—

"You've been crying, child! Why what's the matter?—You're looking very bad!"

"You take alarm too quickly," replied Alice, resorting to a woman's common weapon—evasion. She kissed her mother hurriedly. "I think I miss my usual walks. Hugh has been persuading me to take drives

—but somehow it seems too much trouble to have to think, and to take care of oneself."

"Ah, that is what you must learn to do! Girls don't think of all these things when they get married. You will have to consider your health, my dear. Ah!—I remember well how your father used to fuss about me. If I had taken his advice I should have been a dead woman years ago! Bless me! men don't know. They think they know a great deal—but I'll tell you what you want—more life—more occupation. There's no necessity to shut yourself up so much; if you don't care to go into society, you might come home to us sometimes. It is not right to be so much alone! it is very bad for you."

Then she waited for a reply, and getting none, bethought herself of a certain matter on her mind.

"What is this I have heard about Hugh? I have the information through Fred, but it's all well known, it appears. There was a disgraceful fracas at some theatre yesterday; and although Hugh does not appear to be a principal, he was in it—and another man—a

sporting clergyman, I believe he is. I'm sure, I hope it isn't true! Very awkward for Hugh to be mixed up in it!"

"I've heard nothing about it, so, of course, it cannot be true," said Alice decisively.

She wished she could feel as certain as she spoke.

"I think there must be something in it," said Mrs. Tennear, "because the name of St. Leger *does* appear—and it is not a very common one."

"But," put in Isabel promptly, "he only gave evidence which was calculated to get the others out of the—disgraceful row—it was nothing else."

"Oh, he could have been no better than the rest, Bell!—whoever they were!" said her mother designedly. "Men have no business to be among disreputable people at all! it's very damaging to them, and serves them right—that's all I can say!"

"I don't believe that Hugh was implicated in the affair," said Alice firmly; "but I'm certain that if he was, it could only have been in defence of his friends."

"That's what Mr. St. Leger was doing!" cried Isabel.

"Oh, that's what they were all doing, of course!" said Mrs. Tennear, ironically; "though Alice, as your husband is so steady, you need not alarm yourself about *his* coming to any harm."

"What was it all about?" asked Alice, quietly; stimulated, nevertheless by a very natural curiosity.

"Oh, there's no occasion to go into details, especially before Bell; but they had been—a party of men—behind the scenes of some low theatre. It is said they had been drinking, and somehow—through some concern of those ballet girls, I believe—they got into a fight. Disgraceful! I don't wonder Hugh hasn't admitted it!"

Alice flashed angrily.

"We don't know there is anything to admit yet, mamma. Hugh has far too many things to claim his attention—he cannot tell me every trivial incident."

"Well it's a pity he can't! You'd better tell him of it—and give him a word of warn-

ing too. He ought to know you know it. He, of all people—and a married man!"

"Mamma!" expostulated Alice.

"Oh, my dear, it's my duty not to deceive you—you may be sure he was there. Ah, there are few men like your dear father! But I've heard a little about his sex in my time!"

"Of course," said Isabel, kindly, yet with some hesitation, "Alice knows more about Hugh's doings than any one else; and I don't know how you can expect her, mamma, to accuse him before she knows the truth."

Alice looked at her sister gratefully.

"Bell was always a brick," she thought.

"Well, well, there's enough!" said Mrs. Tennear, resignedly; and she spoke about the weather.

This topic did not answer, no one could get away from the incident of the day, though Isabel and Alice both had their turn, and failed to change the subject.

"Can you stay, Bell?" asked Alice, as they were going. "Do stay!"

"Shall I, mamma?"

"I think it will be better for Alice, if you do," said Mrs. Tennear, significantly.

When they were alone, Isabel gave her sister a compassionate kiss. She could well imagine what an annoyance this must be; and there was a fellow-feeling too in the matter, though she did not recognise it.

"Perhaps, if Hugh should come home while I am here, we had better not mention the subject—because he couldn't tell me what he could tell you—and it might be awkward."

"You were always thoughtful, and considerate for others, Bell! But I should not have spoken before you, depend upon it."

Hugh, however, did not return while Isabel was there.

He was much later, and, on this occasion, Alice had sat up for him. She was nervously irritated because of this story, which was common town-talk, and of which she knew nothing.

She had anticipated expostulation from her husband, but none came. He was in exceptionally high spirits. Alice discovered some-

thing strange in his manner, she knew not what. Was he assuming this gaiety to deceive her, to make her believe that all was well, when he was in reality troubled?

"I couldn't go to bed, to-night," she began; "I felt anxious about you."

"I'll forgive you this time, but don't be naughty any more—as we were told when we were children. What time is it? Oh, quite early—only eleven! I thought it was later. By the bye, I've not had a morsel to eat since lunch—couldn't get time."

Here was something very unusual, but upon this she made no comment.

"You must be starving!" said Alice, briskly. "There's some splendid cold beef downstairs. Let me get it, I shan't be five minutes."

"Oh, I can't trouble you at this hour," he said, with some compunction, "of course, the servants have gone to bed!"

"Well *you* shan't go to bed without it!" she exclaimed, gaily; and taking up her candlestick from the sideboard, she went hastily out of the room.

Hugh stood before the fire absorbed in reflection, the nature of which could not be judged from his aspect. He wore an habitual mask, which never seemed to desert him in the strictest privacy. The expression was invariably calm, the mouth compressed, the brows lowered. The eyes now are fixed absently on the open doorway—and out beyond.

Alice came back carrying a tray with tempting snowy cloth, and more tempting viands. While she actively spread the repast, she talked.

"I've brought a bottle of ale, would you like that?"

"No, I've had enough to drink, I think—perhaps, too much. Have you discovered that? I suppose not—as *I have*."

He laughed and took his seat.

"Now you can go to bed and sleep; it's a great shame you should have been here at all!"

"No," said Alice, gently, as she sat down at the table. "It is well worth waiting up a few hours to have a meal with you. Let

us suppose it is a cold dinner. Besides, I am not sleepy, and I want to talk. I've—heard something to-day, that—well—troubled me a little. I daresay it's all nonsense. Of course, you know all about the fray at the—theatre?"

Hugh gave a perceptible start. It was only just perceptible, and Alice did not see it, because she was trembling, and fidgeting with a biscuit, and looking down.

Hugh very deliberately helped himself to mustard, then he rose and said—

"Pass the bottle, dear; I'll have some ale. Ah, here's the corkscrew! What have you heard?"

"Oh, dear," said Alice, deprecatingly, "I heard that you were there!"

"Well?"

"And I disbelieved it."

"Why should you? A man can't help what he gets mixed up in sometimes."

He took a long draught of ale, and sat down calmly to his supper.

"Since you seem curious about it, I'll tell you what happened—women are so curious!

Now it never would have occurred to me to tell you a word about this kind of thing "—

"But then I ought to know everything which concerns you—I have no other interest."

"You soon will have fortunately!" he replied. "This is capital beef! Why should I disturb your equilibrium, by telling you of things you cannot understand? In the first place, I suppose it will be difficult to make you see how I got behind the scenes of the"—

"You can tell me," she said, innocently.

"Well, that's true! You see I know a great many people, and my friend Staveley —who is very seldom in town—does not. Well, he called on me, and we dined together. He wants to see as much life as he can in this great city—it assists him, you know, in his clerical duties—and he is such an out-and-out good fellow, that I couldn't refuse. So we sent a note in time to catch St. Leger, and, after he arrived, we met two men we knew, and joined company. Men who haven't seen much of the world are apt

to get into mischief—and it was all Staveley's fault! He took the part of a girl there—some one had insulted her, she said; and very likely it was only a ruse on her part to attract him. He didn't see it, and went straight in at the man."

"Stop, Hugh, I don't understand it at all so far."

"I said you wouldn't," he observed, triumphantly.

"Be serious, dear! I am—very. Was it—could it be a necessary thing for Mr. Staveley, a clergyman of the Church of England, to put himself in the way of—of such people? Surely he might go to a theatre, and know enough of what is intended for public amusement—without going behind the scenes."

"That's a narrow view! A man cannot be the worse for knowing or seeing anything; there is a great deal behind the scenes in a theatre, as in life. I shall never be able to explain that more thoroughly. *I* don't think that Staveley was wrong; it was only his want of knowledge that brought him into

trouble. These girls don't want a man to fight for them; they want a bottle of champagne and a good supper."

"Do they know the men who go there? Are they regular visitors?" she asked, with a puzzled air.

"That all depends—they talk to everybody in the hope of getting a shilling or two. Poor wretches! they haven't much money."

"How dreadful!"

"I don't know that—it's quite legitimate. If a man is occupied in his business—a poor man—you give him something for his loss of time. True, they don't lose their time, these girls; but it is an understood thing. Now Jack has that kind of heroic sentimentality about him, that reverences all womanhood; he puts you all on the same level—though that's what he says I do. At any rate, I am a better judge of the sex, whatever he may think. You see, when he was in for a mess we were bound to get him out of it; so I—I, of course, put the affair straight as soon as I could—interfere. But the man he attacked was injured—so unluckily the affair must

get into the papers, and heaven knows what exaggerated records we shall find! However, it's all over now; I've arranged that to-day. That's how it is I have not had one moment to satisfy my hunger. Well, Alice?"

"I suppose," she said thoughtfully, when he challenged her to speak, "I suppose you were right to do something in defence of your friend; but I should assume he was right in defending the woman."

"Psha! the days of chivalry are past. If one had nothing more to do than redress every woman's wrongs, there would be no such thing as peace; we should be fighting all day long—in fact it would be an internecine war. Some men might presume to think that you—living outside the chance of injury or insult—are wronged somehow. Men have given up the Paladin business long ago."

"One may wrap up one's meaning in various ways. Do you mean that you are of opinion a man has no right to interfere, if he sees another man assaulting, even without savage brutality, a being of the weaker sex?

I suppose this is irrational—but weak as I am, I should feel called upon to defend the injured. You seem to take it as half a joke, notwithstanding the annoyance it must have occasioned you. What was the insult Mr. Staveley resented?"

"H—m," said Hugh, hesitating in some displeasure, "I hardly know—I didn't see it."

"But you heard?"

"Oh, men swear to anything!"

"What, a clergyman!"

"Oh, he thought it was right!" said Hugh impatiently. "I don't blame him as much as I do Steve; he backed Staveley with such injudicious and extraordinary vigour, that he actually was the man arrested—fortunately, perhaps, because he had to explain that he was assisting his friend. That helped to get him off. However, I don't hesitate to take the credit to myself; for if it had not been for a bold bit of diplomacy, they would have been in a precious mess by this time—two such hot-brained, impulsive fellows as they are!"

"I cannot take it lightly, Hugh! Suppose any serious damage had been done—what a terrible reflection! In the first place"—

"Just what I told Jack! I said to him, 'You have nearly killed the man, as it is; if you had actually done so, you would have had the crime on your conscience for nothing—nothing but a worthless wench whom you would never recognise again!'"

Alice shuddered.

"I shall *never* understand it!" she said in hopeless bewilderment.

Poor Alice! She had to understand that, and a great deal more, before many years were added to her girlish life.

CHAPTER VIII.

The happiness of life is made up of minute fractions—the little, soon-forgotten charities of a kiss, a smile, a kind look, a heartfelt compliment in the disguise of playful raillery, and the countless infinitessimals of pleasurable thought and genial feeling.

COLERIDGE.

TIME wore away, and new influences were at work in what Staveley had called "the ideal household."

Alice was not so lonely as hitherto; she had a child to engage her care and attention. She had hoped that this would be a bond of pure sympathy between herself and her husband. He said he "was rejoiced for her sake;" but alas! there was no outward difference in his treatment of her.

There was a great—a wonderful difference in her life. Her motherhood was a kind of new world to her; all the warm, extravagant love she could have lavished upon Hugh—the love which had been so constantly thrown back like an unrequited burden upon her—all this love she poured in abundance

at the feet of her infant. Sometimes she even forgot her sorrow in her love for the baby.

With a strange, yet consistent, persistence, she shrank from inducing a closer intercourse with her own family. She would not admit herself a neglected wife; and she knew, whatever other people might do, *they* would so regard her. No intimation had ever crossed Isabel's lips, and yet Alice knew that the girl had forcible ideas, though she might not think it expedient to express them. Her relations with all the world, and even with herself, appeared to be altered. She did not dream of looking for her husband's companionship now; she felt that this was hopeless.

"I suppose Hugh will be at home a great deal more as baby gets on?" Mrs. Tennear had said experimentally. "I expect he's very proud of her."

"Hugh is so peculiarly partial to the society of men—on account of his intellectual tastes—that I do not think there will ever be much alteration. Why should there be?

He gives us all we can desire—doesn't he, baby?—and a little more. Mamma, he gave me the ridiculous sum of one hundred pounds to get things for her! *that* will tell you what he thinks of his baby daughter!"

"I will tell you what he thinks of her when she's a little older, and he can take her in his arms and show a fatherly interest in her pretty ways. Love, and sympathy, and consideration are all worth more than money!"

"We have all we can desire—I'm sure Hugh thinks so."

Isabel came to the rescue, as usual. She fell into admiration of the child, and Alice, who was getting keenly suspicious, saw that she did so with a motive.

Of all things, this desertion of her husband was the cruelest to her mind. She knew that occasionally married people quarrelled, although she had never anticipated this contingency; and she had certainly never dreamed of the cruel coldness that seemed incontrovertible.

They never quarrelled. There could have

been no open misunderstanding between them; it was an occult misunderstanding—a misunderstanding rather between the minds of the persons. If they had understood each other better things might have been still worse; if they had understood each other perfectly—Destiny held an awful moment when they did.

* * * * *

Soon after this an arrangement was made —the proposal came from Hugh himself— that Alice and her child should accompany Mrs. Tennear and Isabel to some health-giving watering place. He went to Eastbourne, and sought for a good house for them. This unusual attention on his part elated Alice. She was ready to go, and went so far as actually to demand a further sacrifice of his time.

"You will come to us on Sundays, Hugh? You can give that day to me now; it will not be so dull for you, as when we are in town alone."

"Sunday is a dreadful day—in or out of town," he had answered.

But then he had promised; and this was all that Alice desired.

Consequently, on the first Sunday after they had been established at Eastbourne, he arrived. Notwithstanding the promise, Alice was joyfully surprised. She, with Isabel and her mother, had just returned from church, when Hugh, accompanied by St. Leger, came upon the scene.

"I've been obliged to bring Steve down with me! He declares he wants to be introduced to my daughter," said Hugh explanatorily. "But I believe that he wanted an excuse"—

"He is going to say what is not true, Mrs. Willoughby; I did come to see your daughter, and I hope the introduction will not be delayed."

But he looked straight at Isabel after he had spoken, and Alice noticed the look.

"She is there on the green," said Alice, taking him to the window.

"I do not see her! I see a pretty girl,

carrying a mass of white—white—tarleton I think you ladies call it."

The ladies laughed.

"That shows where you have gained your experience!" said Alice, "more in ball-rooms than in nurseries, Mr. St. Leger. Tarleton is only meant to be torn into ribbons by violent dancers, and not for infants' robes. You will see enough of her when she comes in"—

"Yes, and hear her too, if you are lucky!" said Hugh.

"I am not to be sneered out of my interest in the little lady," said St. Leger.

And then he crossed to Isabel, and seemed to require a great deal of information respecting the attractions of the place.

"You must expect to be charmed at every fresh aspect," she said, after he had expressed his surprise at the brightness and beauty of the town which was new to him. "It is all so pretty that I have quite fallen in love with the place."

"You must not do that! Such a sacrifice of human passion is too awful to contemplate."

"Well, on the whole, I am of opinion," said Isabel, "that it is very much safer, and certainly not so disappointing, to fix one's affections upon inanimate objects."

It was a very enjoyable Sunday—quite a red-letter day for Alice. They had a happy little rambling walk—she and Hugh—beside the water; then she had insisted on exhibiting the baby in all its charms, when they went in; and he had made a great deal of fun of it; and all that pleased her.

St. Leger and Isabel, not satisfied with such close proximity to the house, had extended their ramble to some distance.

"These views are so fascinating," said Isabel, "that I always go farther than I intend."

"It's uncommonly nice to be out of London just now. I suppose you didn't expect me?"

"Expect you! how could I? *I* did not even expect Hugh."

"That appears so strange to me. I think a man's wife should be like a magnet to him. I feel as if I should be drawn to Patagonia

or Japan, as a matter of necessity, if *she* were there."

"It is as well that *she* is a myth—or you would cease to be a free agent."

"I don't know," said St. Leger, with hesitation, and with a very tender glance at the girl by his side, "I don't know whether I am quite a free agent—now; and I don't even know whether she *is* a myth. How can I tell?"

"If you know so little about yourself, I cannot be expected to assist you," said Isabel, quite seriously.

But she had not met his glance of unveiled import, or she could not have played her part so well.

"But you could assist me if you pleased."

"What, assist a man to know his own mind! Indeed, it is a difficult thing to know one's own—as you find, it seems."

"Did I imply that I did not know my own mind?" he asked eagerly. "It is another's mind I am anxious about."

"Well, all I can do is to hope you will succeed in discovering," said Isabel, making

a serious effort to distract him from this turn of the conversation. "What an exquisite bit of colour there is across that hill!" she said looking towards the Downs. "I think the setting sunlight throws the most bewitching of all shadows."

He was not looking over the Downs, but at her shadow, and its noiseless glide over the soft turf.

"I could not bear to think," said he impressively, "that I have only a shadow to lead me. It is very well for you to laugh, Miss Tennear, but you do not consider my condition. *She* can never come to me; I must be drawn to her, and as you say—or rather as you sing—

> But whenever she comes she will find me ready
> To do her homage—my queen!"

"Is not the homage over, generally speaking, when your queen is your wife?" asked Isabel.

"You did not think so once, as I remember well," he said. "You have had a rather—unfortunate experience, Miss Tennear."

Then St. Leger paused, and looked directly at his companion. He got, however, no word—no sign of encouragement.

"I may offend you by what I am going to say—but I shall say it, because I want you to understand *me*. I went to Hugh's house by invitation one night in the week, and—there was a card party. I must say it surprised me. I am the last man to question other people's doings—and please remember, I should not dream of mentioning this to any one but yourself. I expected whist and supper—it was a regular card party."

He hesitated, and then went on again rapidly.

"Hugh has asked me again for one day next week. I have the reputation of being a graceless fellow, I am afraid—I think that is a general mistake I have permitted people to make. I may not be particularly prudent, I grant; but I think that, under the circumstances, I would rather be absent. Do you agree with me?"

Isabel appeared to be lost in the contemplation of her shadow now. When she spoke,

it was in a subdued tone, very different from her light bantering speech of a minute before.

"They played cards—for how long?"

"All night," replied St. Leger abruptly.

"And for money, of course?"

"Yes," said he slowly.

"For high stakes?"

St. Leger paused, then went on hastily, and evasively.

"There's no absolute harm, of course—it's a mere sentiment on my part. Perhaps, I don't like it, because I have a very high respect for your sister."

"Hugh's respect ought to be greater than yours!"

To this he made no reply, and they walked along in silence for a few dozen yards. This circumstance had its meaning for those two who eternally chattered on like brooks or birds.

"Have I your permission to mention this to Alice? It is not as a secret you have told me."

"I have told you my reason," said he, impressively. "It is because I want you to

know it—and to know that *I* disapprove of it."

This was said so emphatically, that Isabel could but look up, and so suggestively, that she could but blush.

"I think," she said, gravely, "that you are quite right; and I think I ought to tell Alice."

"She will be sure to know," said he, quickly.

"I am not certain," was Isabel's quiet reply.

And this observation was to St. Leger worth many words on the subject.

"At all events, *you* will know. If men want certain pleasures they always seek them away from home. When I have a home, I shall hope to find all my pleasures in it."

He took the utmost pains to convince the girl indirectly that he meant to make a better husband than Hugh. And yet immediately on this remark, his conscience pricked him. Although he did disapprove his friend's conduct, yet this very conscience had insisted

upon his making the admission as though it were a duty.

"You know," he continued, with some incoherence, "Hugh goes upon a different principle. One has no right to object to what a man and his wife choose to do—but unfortunately, a man's friends are often accused of misleading him. He made no alteration from his bachelor life to his married one. Now there is a radical difference, to my mind, that a man cannot afford to ignore."

"To be plain, Mr. St. Leger, this is a subject upon which my sister and I have differed. She holds, what seems to me, an exaggerated idea of a husband's authority. And although I hold—as a woman—that a man should have superior power, still I think a wife should be of value to a man—if she can be. I think there are times that even her advice—her assistance might be invaluable. I am as certain in my *theory*, as Alice in her *experience;* and I believe the happiest marriages are to be found under the conditions of mutual reliance."

"I am happy at least in knowing that we

do not disagree on the point," he replied, seriously.

This was the first time that Isabel had seen him in a really serious mood; and this new phase of his character was even more pleasing to her than his usual superficial attractiveness. She would, if she had dared, have said a great deal more, for she was really anxious for, and doubtful of, her sister's happiness. She felt sure it was not gained; and she questioned that it ever would be.

To all appearance, they were a very happy party that evening. To a discriminating observer there was a subtle change in the habitual manners in the men, for which it might not be easy to account—Hugh seemed to have adopted St. Leger's vivacity; and his friend appeared to partake of his type of character, without the sarcastic vein which was so pronounced in Hugh's case.

Alice was excited to an unusual degree, and, in the midst of all their gay talk, was constantly meditating on some means by which such evenings as these could be organized. She thought them infinitely more

agreeable than their stylish parties; and, under her present circumstances, more consistent. She determined to make the attempt. St. Leger was fond of music—so was her husband. She had only to practise for a month, and she would regain all that she had lost; for, from mere lack of interest, she had, for weeks together, never put a finger on the beautiful instrument which had been Hugh's wedding gift.

"He liked my music well enough once," she thought. "Ah! I fear I have gone the wrong way to work—perhaps, my conscientiousness has misled me—but I have tried—heaven knows I have tried to keep him with me!"

It was always the same—she always imagined herself to be in the wrong.

St. Leger and Hugh left next morning with a positive promise to come at the end of the week.

"Not on Sunday this time—but on Saturday," proposed St. Leger; "and we can arrange a drive in the afternoon. I know you can get away, Hugh—Saturday is always your own."

Hugh's keen eyes darted a distrustful glance at his friend at this indiscretion; but no one noticed it. Alice was full of her designs for a musical evening. She made no mention of it, but intended to inaugurate her notion then and there.

"Couldn't we drive them to Pevensey—there would be plenty of time, I think," said St. Leger.

"That depends entirely upon which train you come by. There are many shorter drives we can take," said Alice, cheerfully.

CHAPTER IX.

Nought under heaven so strongly doth allure
The sense of man, and all his mind possess,
As beauty's lovely bait, that doth procure
Great warriors oft their rigour to repress,
And mighty hands forget their manliness;
Drawn with the power of an heart-robbing eye,
And wrapt in fetters of a golden tress.

SPENSER.

Say not "a small event!" Why small?

* * * * *

Untwine me from the mass
Of deeds which make up life, one deed
Power shall fall short in or exceed.

BROWNING.

"IT is a heavenly day!" said Isabel.

The longed-for Saturday had come round, and certainly the glorious effects of sunshine, and fresh invigorating air, and wide shady streets, and verdant trees, and exquisitely azure sky, and bright pellucid sea, and undulating soft-coloured hills, quite justified Isabel's exclamation.

She stood by the window in a reverie; and Alice laughed and said—

"Your reflections, or your anticipations must be pleasant, Bell, to judge from your face."

Isabel's face grew a shade brighter.

"Well, dear, I was turning over in my mind the advisability of putting on my blue dress—or rather the unadvisability. If we drive, the dust will damage it, so I think my old grey will be just the thing."

The most suspicious mind could make nothing out of this simple explanation; yet Alice managed to do so, because it was a rare thing for Isabel to mention her dress at all.

The married sister smiled as she inquired—

"Do you want to wear the most becoming dress—or the reverse?"

She was beginning to look with more favourable eyes upon St. Leger, and more inclined to tolerate his suit—if suit it was.

"That is an impertinent, and unnecessary question," said Isabel, setting her lips together, and turning up her beautiful nose a little higher into the air.

"Then seriously, my dear, put on which

you like—*he* will be sure to admire *you* more than the dress," said Alice, in an undertone, glancing cautiously towards the door as Mrs. Tennear entered.

"I am glad to see you are ashamed of yourself," said Isabel, with pretended austerity, but her colour deepened all the same till it matched the crimson rose in her dress.

How often are one's anticipations ruined in this world! Here were these two young women—one ardently loving, ardently wishing for the man who was all the world to her; and the other vaguely dreaming of one who was to her an ideal form of humanity—how far will their anticipations be realized? Will the sister, whose heart has never experienced any fulness of emotion, ever reach the height of self-sacrificing devotion that is in Alice?

"What is the joke?" asked Mrs. Tennear, as Alice laughed defiantly.

"Something you *will* have to know, mamma, but not now."

By the mid-day train, St. Leger arrived—alone. Alice turned pale as he entered. So

acute was her disappointment that she experienced a difficulty in greeting him with becoming warmth.

"I suppose Hugh will come later," she thought; and then blamed St. Leger mentally for his anxiety to be there.

Poor girl! she shrank from the evidences of this incipient love. Love was absorbing her whole life, and causing all her distress.

"I'm so sorry to have come alone! We agreed to meet, you know, at the station; and, although time, tide, and the express wait for no man—I waited for your husband, and lost a couple of hours, which I spent in dingy sulphurous smoke. I could not be expected to do more, so I came on by the next train. Hugh will, no doubt, be down to-night, because he knows of the express."

"But we shall be obliged to take our excursion without him," said Alice, with a half-suppressed sigh; "that is, if you think it—worth while."

This little desponding speech spoke volumes to the ears of the unmarried people, who creditably avoided a glance at each other.

"Some engagement he cannot postpone, of course," resumed Alice, in a sprightlier tone, but a nervous and unnatural one notwithstanding. "He is so much in request that it—it is really flattering—is it not?"

"Much more flattering than pleasant!" said Mrs. Tennear, sententiously.

She ought not to have heard, for she was ostensibly and busily engaged at her work table. And she certainly ought not to have said this in the presence of a stranger.

Alice coloured under the infliction; but she answered lightly—

"It is pleasant to me, mamma."

St. Leger bent his head close to Isabel; she had gone close to the window, and was leaning thoughtfully with her arms upon the back of a chair.

"That remark would have been better administered in another quarter," he whispered.

"Mamma is indiscreet," said Isabel, briefly.

The brilliant weather was all lost, the charming scenery a wild waste, so far as one

member of the party was concerned. Everything appeared tedious to poor Alice, although she suppressed the complaints that rose to her lips. She had not refused to go for the drive, because she knew that her mother and Isabel and St. Leger would all enjoy it. Still there was a kind of oppression over them all, for in spite of Alice's efforts to appear pleased there was an intuitive feeling that she was not so. She felt annoyed with herself because she could not help taking to heart one of these disappointments, to which she was so much accustomed. Probably this excessive vexation arose from the fact that Hugh's promise had been a decisive one; that he could have kept his word had he chosen; and that one, not of her own family, was made aware of his neglect. But from whatever cause, it is certain Alice suffered in quite an unusual degree. She was glad to get home and escape into the nursery, where she remained the greater part of the evening.

When she came back, as she was bound to do sooner or later, it appeared she had not

been missed. The shaded lamp showed her only one person in the room—her mother, and she was dozing. Alice did not speak, she crept softly over to the open window and looked out; and there, in the soft dusky twilight, under a poetic sky of one clear tint, a slim new moon reclining on its pure depths, with only one great brilliant star a little way off to reflect her radiance—there she saw two slowly moving figures. She looked and sighed; then snatched her eyes away from them back to the sky.

It so happened at that very moment the two loiterers were also lost in contemplation of the glory of the night.

"Even the moon, you see, must have company."

This St. Leger said, as he looked down upon Isabel. True his words did not mean much, but his voice was full of meaning. There was a soft romance about the scene that tended to augment the latent feelings in his breast.

"We do not know that she cares for it," said Isabel, idly. "She is bound to endure

whatever companionship is provided for her —even if it be Lucifer himself! What nonsense one does drift into! The star is not her satellite—it is she who is ours. Perhaps, you didn't know that, Mr. St. Leger? But it is strange to think that the star is so much farther away from the exquisite moon than we are."

"Well, wherever they are," replied her companion, "we can be certain that the arrangements of nature must be perfect. Whether the earth, or the star, be ordained as company to the bright lady above, be sure there can be no mistake in the matter. I verily believe, Miss Tennear, if we left everything to nature in this puzzling world of ours we should do much better."

"I believe so too—if we were all good people," said she, in a more thoughtful strain.

"Your wisdom always corrects mine."

"Ah, but you give me the ideas!" Isabel answered quickly; so determined was she not to accept the most trivial compliment without protest.

After a pause, she added—

"Such as they are!"

"Such as they are!" he echoed. "Thank you! I am grateful for the recognition. The fact is, I am only just beginning to know what ideas are."

She was looking up at him then with laughing lips, and with such a happy face, that he felt as if he were prospering. If it could always be a crescent moon and solitude, he might be able to reduce her to reason. Here she would jest with him, and keep him back in the most provoking way; but under the gaslight she would gibe at him, and disturb his remarks without remorse. That might be because there were other ears. But from whatever cause, he could never manage to keep her serious for more than a few minutes together.

They do not hear Alice sigh, although the regretful breath is borne on the breeze beside them. Both are enjoying an exquisite vague sensation of pleasure—the mere pleasure of being together, and wasting time as they pleased. Isabel never attempted to

analyze her feeling; indeed it was impossible she should understand it.

* * * * *

Hugh is under the moon too—but he does not sigh. He too is miles away from London; but he is in the midst of a merry company. There are two or three men in uniform, there are many empty bottles, and there is great laughter; there are coarse jests which cause the laughter—but these are from the lips of a woman.

The fair chaste moon looks down upon this scene as upon the other—without smile, and without sigh.

There are several women present; and they are all flauntingly attired, not with straight folds of subdued colour, and classically arranged hair, not as Hugh is in the habit of seeing every day, nor such as St. Leger is gazing upon now, with exhilarating delight—but forms of quite another character. Women, who wear tawdry trailing garments, bedizened and trimmed all over, and who wear jewellery to a significant extent; it im-

plies all they possess. Women who are densely perfumed, and who arrange their hair in an indescribable manner; who curl, and friz, and distort it in the wildest way; who drag it down in unkempt luxuriance to meet their eyebrows; and whose eyes have a habit of looking out sideways, while there is a smile upon the lip—such a smile as one could never see in years of companionship with Alice and Isabel.

With all the laughter, there is not, it seems, content. The soft moonlight has no charms for the revellers. They seem to have had enough of this sort of entertainment, for one man proposes a game of billiards; and there is a general movement to the distant camp.

"Don't *you* go."

This is a whisper in Hugh's ear, from a pretty fair girl with bright cheeks, and a more luxuriant mass of intoxicated hair than either of her companions.

* * * * *

"Where's Willoughby?"

"Don't know—shouldn't like to guess. Begin without him. He hasn't strength of mind to keep himself out of that girl's clutches."

"He likes the clutches—or I'll back Willoughby against anybody to get out of them."

"Not easy work when you're once in."

"Ah, you don't know him as well as some of us do. Willoughby is the coolest hand I ever knew."

"Cool as the proverbial cucumber," broke in a third man, swinging his supple young figure over the billiard table in so graceful an attitude, that it was almost a pity the pose should be so soon disturbed.

He hesitated while he made his stroke, and then went on.

"With a fist like steel! You heard of his feat in that nice little scrimmage at the —— theatre? My cousin Staveley was there—he saw the thing done. Now I've always known that Jack was too hair-brained, and couldn't hold himself in; but St. Leger you know *can* fight—though he isn't very fond of it. But

when Willoughby went in, he scattered them all like ninepins. Fought all round—friend or foe—with awful coolness. One doesn't see such pluck as his every day—he doesn't know fear, that man."

"That's a pity!" was the dry retort. "A man ought always to know when he's in danger. You're in danger now, Grey!"

"I see," replies the other, as his antagonist takes up his cue.

"Where's St. Leger to-night—does either of you know?"

"I can't tell you where—but—but I hear there's metal more attractive."

"Ho! ho! so the sweet youth's in love! By Jove, how well he sang that drinking song the other night at Willoughby's house!"

"*Con amore* one would think, if one didn't know him," said a man, settling his long legs in the most uncomfortable of attitudes, on the highest bench in the room.

"No. His

Oh, damn it! There's nothing like grog,

was splendid."

"Grog isn't one of his favourite vices," said some one, "it's women."

"The most intractable—the most unconquerable of all man's foibles!"

"Your experience, Grey?"

"Not exactly! a combination of theory, observation, and experience."

"Well, I don't think," said the youth of the picturesque attitudes, preparing to make his next stroke, "I don't even think that can be accounted a vice in him—for what can a fellow do if he happens to be as irresistible as St. Leger?"

"Irresistible!" laughed Grey. "Lotty Gardner didn't seem to find him so."

"Oh, that's an exceptional case! She saw she was wasting her time over him"—

"And gave up the chase. That's a cannon to me."

"Willoughby the bewitched—splendid title—I'll address him by it."

"You won't have the pluck," returned Grey, drily.

"Willoughby is not an easy man to manage. I would rather meet twenty St.

Legers, and an army of your kind, old man, than another like him—if there be one."

"That's showing the white feather! I'm not afraid of having a joke with Willoughby."

"Then be on your guard all the same, my boy," said the gentleman of the long legs, descending from his eminence. "His general principle is to give no quarter, and to take none."

* * * * *

Meanwhile Hugh is slowly wending his way in pursuit of the men, who are talking of him; and the girl is still by his side.

"I don't stand persuasion," he said, "when I make up my mind to a thing, I usually do it. *You* may do as you like—I'm going to play."

"You're very hard—that's all I can say. Half an hour ago, you promised to come and see me in town, and I was fool enough to believe you meant it."

She said this in a jesting strain, and with many little laughs between her words—

nervous laughs, as if she were half afraid of him.

"I'm sure I don't know why I like you better than the other men—I'm sure you're not half so kind to me as they are."

"Then it would be safer for you to transfer your affections. I'm not a very tender adorer, you know."

"Oh, but I like something better than the rest, if it is a little more trouble to get."

Then she cast her bold laughing eyes—her inviting eyes—into the scale with her flattering words; she was not the one to let "I dare not" wait upon "I would." With a coaxing touch of her hand, she said—

"If I go back now—will you keep your promise?"

"Do you care very much whether I keep it or not?" he whispered.

The answer was a swift expressive glance, that seem to gleam very brightly in the subdued light of the summer's night.

And his reply was also a silent one—he lightly touched her chin with his forefinger,

with just the sort of caress which is bestowed upon a playful child.

"So you really like me better than even my handsome friend? or is it because he isn't here to-night, that you are bestowing your favours upon me?"

"Oh, you will pretend to believe I thought something of him," she said, with an injured air, "when you ought to know it was all the other way."

"Oh, was it?" said Hugh, with a laugh. "I ought to have known *your* attractions could not fail, Lotty!"

She did not catch the implied satire.

He stood still, and this she knew was a signal for her to depart.

"I don't ever want to see him again," she said, with some affectation of anger; "and I'm sure I wish I could say the same of you!"

"You will not say that when I *do* come and see you in London," said Hugh, slowly, watching her little airs and graces all the time with a gratified amusement.

"Now is that saying—is that promising you'll come?" she inquired eagerly.

But Hugh was in a tantalizing mood.

"How do I know that I shall remember anything about you next week?"

Here, however, she did seem to see a joke, for she laughed somewhat immoderately.

* * * * *

"Ah, here you are, Willoughby! gained your freedom?"

"I have never lost it—yet," said Hugh, coolly taking up a cue and chalking it methodically.

"We shall have to admit before witnesses that you can cut us all out when you like, Willoughby. I suppose St. Leger couldn't stand your triumph. Upon my soul! I feel *my* vanity cooled," exclaimed young Seymour.

"I assume Steve cares just as much as I do in that matter," remarked Hugh, in his deliberate way.

"Ah, well, that girl's eyes were made to bewitch! now a toast gentlemen—The Ladies' Eyes.

You can't refuse—you can't refuse!"

carolled Seymour, in his fresh baritone voice, and a pair of impudent eyes met Grey's, plainly saying, "I challenge you!"

"We are waiting for you, Willoughby," said Grey; and then with an almost imperceptible sneer, "or—are you still under the spell of beauty's beguiling influence?"

"I never allow *anything* to influence me," rejoined Hugh, coolly; "I am as likely to be influenced by a change in the weather, as by 'beauty's spells;' but, I have heard men admit themselves to be affected even by an idle wind."

"Ah, I haven't arrived at the time of life when an east wind turns my temper and brings on rheumatism! But women's wiles are more dangerous in their effects than all the changeable weather this interesting climate can introduce."

"Yes," said Seymour, exaggerating a sigh until it became a groan, "even the wisest of us have to beware of—

The light that lies
In woman's eyes,"

and again his clear young voice warbled, with perfect articulation—

Some looks there are so holy
  They seem but giv'n, they seem but giv'n
As splendid beacons, solely,
  To light to heav'n, to light to heav'n,
While some—oh! ne'er believe them—
  With tempting ray, with tempting ray
Would lead us (God forgive them!)
  The other way, the other way.

"Well, boys will be boys," said Hugh kindly, waving his hand as a condescending dismissal of the subject. "What *I* propose is—sherry—

Let us have wine and women, mirth and laughter,
Sermons and soda-water the day after."

CHAPTER X.

The delight of happy laughter
The delight of low replies.

TENNYSON.

THIS Sunday there was another disappointment to Alice. While Hugh was dozing away the hours, and recovering his lost energies, she was anticipating.

Anticipating! If she could have anticipated, could she have laid her head upon her pillow with that baby girl—his child—upon her breast, and slept the quiet rest of an untroubled conscience?

Isabel had disturbing recollections of last week's card party. Her mind was peculiarly irritated towards the brother-in-law she had been taught to look upon as a very pattern of his sex. Hugh's prudence, Hugh's propriety, had been facts established without doubt; yet thrice within the past month he had given cause for severe censure. A night of gambling—such as a careless single man

like St. Leger could not approve—was indeed curious propriety. And even worse was the scandalous affray in which he had been implicated. Not for worlds would she have imparted her vague floating suspicions to her sister; and she was still less inclined to disclose St. Leger's confidences to her mother. It grieved her to hear a hint thrown at Alice, for she knew intuitively that the poor girl must suffer, and that she must suffer in silence. So she had not found it in her heart to allude even casually to that card party. She was all tenderness, delicacy, and tact, this girl; and yet she carried such a gay simplicity with all she did, or said, that few would divine the profound discernment which lay latent in her character.

"I am afraid, Mr. St. Leger," Alice said, smiling, when he came in looking fresh and exhilarated from a long draught of the morning breeze, "I am afraid you will have sacrificed yourself in vain. We can scarcely hope for my husband to-day, since he is not here by this train."

There was no reason why she should give

up hope, because there were later trains, and it would have been more reasonable to expect him at noon.

"It is because she wishes *us* to give up all hope," thought Isabel.

St. Leger protested that, as far as he was concerned, Hugh's absence would not be insupportable; and, strange to say, all three women believed him. Still he was bound to say something that would look as if he had an interest in his friend.

"In all probability he will come down by the train we took last Sunday. I know he is not so fond of early rising as I am. He has often refused to get up at sunrise, in the old days, and have a good morning walk to—to neutralize the effects of late hours. After dancing all night I delight in a breath of fresh air—with the dew on it. It puts tone into me for the day."

"But you have such tremendous physical energy, Mr. St. Leger," said Mrs. Tennear; "and I must say you know how to keep it. But if Hugh does not take to a more healthy life, than he leads at present, he will certainly

ruin his constitution, however strong it may be. It's bad enough to be confined all day in the City; but then to sit up more than half the night constantly, and doze away the wholesomest hours of the morning"—

"Ah, you'll see he'll just have time, after his usual breakfast hour, to get down here at two."

Mrs. Tennear gave a short negative sigh; but she shut up her lips, as if with a determination of saying no more.

Then St. Leger pulled his moustache a little, and looked around for help. Alice came to his assistance with a graceful hospitality, which was quite unnecessary, for she knew he had already breakfasted. But anything would do to divert the subject.

"I must beg a thousand pardons, Mr. St. Leger, but I didn't know your usual breakfast hour. We have but just finished, and I shall be delighted to make some more coffee."

"I breakfasted more than two hours ago, and have been to Beachy Head since—there ladies!"

Oh, he was certainly very charming, this

incipient lover of Isabel! She had a desperate longing that he should prove as perfect as he looked, and sometimes she could not help refuting the whole insinuation that had been made against him.

They all walked out together in the afternoon; but when Mrs. Tennear was tired, and proposed that it was time Alice should go home, St. Leger cleverly managed a *tête-à-tête.*

"You surely will not admit that you are tired, Miss Tennear?"

"No," she replied, frankly; "I have not had what I call a walk."

"Of course not! Then we will take these ladies home and then take ourselves off."

"But you must not be tempted to go too far, Bell," said Mrs. Tennear, in a tone of admonition.

During the day, neither had alluded in any direct way to Hugh. St. Leger avoided mentioning the gambling party, to which he had refused to go, and Isabel, believing that he had not taken so much trouble to show his respect and admiration for herself without some deeper cause, was shy of resuming the sub-

ject. In her present change of mind, she felt inclined to throw all her doubts to the winds—indeed they were just as fickle. In her estimation, he was a better man intrinsically than Hugh, himself. True he *must* have faults, but they were all the more visible, because they were upon the surface where any one might discover them. After all, if his amiable vice were only this one—that of making himself too agreeable under all circumstances—then, after all, the fault was venial. No, she could not regard him as a culprit in any way. As it regarded herself, she could not believe, for one instant, that he could have sought other women as he now sought her. She knew how possible it was for outsiders to be mistaken in one's actions; and she could not attribute insincerity to him. In a way Isabel was a physiognomist, although she scarcely knew it. It was not possible to her to look into St. Leger's frank, candid eyes—just as truthful when they smiled or frowned, or looked at her with a very different expression, one she was learning to read and delighted in reading—with

suspicion. As if by tacit consent both kept off the subject of Hugh's absence, although it was on the mind of each.

"What excellent spirits your sister has!" he observed in the course of conversation.

"But we think her very different from what she once was," said Isabel cautiously.

"I wonder if she would be well enough to go to a theatre, when you go back," he said, "I should like to see 'Macbeth' with you. —— plays in it, and it is really altogether one of the finest things of the time. Not that I admire the play—oh, don't look upon me as a Goth, or a Vandal, Miss Tennear, because I don't pretend to like the play—or rather the tone of it. It is morbid, and unhappy. I would rather see 'Much Ado about Nothing'—I can understand it."

"You don't like tragedies?"

"Not even in fiction! There is more ghastly horror in 'Macbeth' than in some plays with a dozen or more murders interspersed."

"I have never seen 'Macbeth;' and, like you, I suppose I can have little taste for the

terrible, because I have never given any particular study to plays of that kind."

But she scarcely thought of what she said, for she was assailed by a temptation. She was reminded of the incident in which St. Leger and Hugh had lately figured. If he would only tell her! She had heard no explanation from Alice—not one syllable—and she even doubted that one had been given.

It was more for her sister's sake than her own that she wanted to dive into the depths of this mystery; but she could not make up her mind to speak one word. She hesitated, and then made a bold rush.

"I have an intense admiration for the theatrical profession. Actors and actresses seem all to be surrounded with a glamour of their art—I can't disassociate the man from the hero."

"I fear you would be disenchanted if you could," said St. Leger quietly; "indeed I may safely say that in the majority of cases. For myself, I am better pleased with one native charm than all the gloss of art. It is seldom, I believe, that women fall in love

with an actor; but it is very common to hear men rave about some lady who has made herself popular on the stage. I did it myself when I was a boy, and could not distinguish what was gloss."

"Then you don't care for the society of actresses now?"

St. Leger turned and looked curiously at her, but she was not looking at him; she was regarding the handle of her sunshade intently.

"I know nothing about them—I've never been in their society," he replied, with some amusement.

Now was her time! Why could she not say something—anything—that would lead up to the matter which was on her mind?

"That, I suppose, must have been quite a matter of choice. I should imagine it is comparatively easy to get into their society. Is not that why gentlemen go—why *do* gentlemen go behind the scenes?"

St. Leger was mute. It was a very innocent question, but somehow he found it very difficult to make a reply. It was beyond

conjecture that the question was prompted by the affair at the —— theatre.

"It is quite usual—is it not?" she continued. "I ask for information, because mamma questioned the propriety of Hugh's doing so. Perhaps her ideas, on some subjects, are obsolete—Mr. Staveley was there!"

St. Leger struck in quickly, with a determined impetuosity to speak what was on his mind.

"I know that! I was there too—and I regret it more than anything else in my life; although I did nothing that personally I need regret. Of course, *you* know the history as it was given—of course, everybody knows it! *Punch* extended our popularity with a freedom I cannot help resenting. In plain English, Miss Tennear, notwithstanding your brother-in-law's presence on that occasion, I am bound to admit seriously I don't think that such visits are common with men generally. Perhaps in certain professions—that of the dramatic critic for instance—they may be necessary; otherwise—speaking without scruple—I object to them."

"Then why did you go?"

He coloured.

"Unfortunately I am weak enough to be occasionally led—whatever some people may think; and—again unfortunately—I am not married."

"But what difference can that make?" inquired Isabel.

"That I can hardly explain. You must not think I cast an imputation on any one; I only want to impress *you* with my personal feeling."

To this Isabel made no reply. She had certainly derived great satisfaction from the explanation just given. She had not led up to the matter from mere curiosity, but from an especial interest, and one that was not altogether selfish. It was clear to her now that there was a possibility of even Hugh's being blameless; he too might have been there, not exactly in accordance with his will. Far from requiring details, she was more than satisfied by the general remarks St. Leger had made.

If men only knew how anxiously ready—

how longingly desirous—women generally are to cling to the simplest words of excuse for a chance imperfection in the idols they make for themselves, there would be much less misapprehension than at present exists. One word of concession, one admission of a fault on *his* side, is enough to make *her* forgive past, present, and future offences with quite a reckless prodigality, and to cherish a determined belief that he can never offend again. Woman's credulity on this point is traditional.

"Would you not like to rest a while now?" asked St. Leger.

They were getting near home—and much too fast, he thought.

They sat down; and Isabel bade him admire the grassy slopes, so trimly kept.

"Is there any history connected with this tower, or is it only an ornament?"

"We are on the summit of what people here call the Wish," she said, "and I suppose the tower has something to do with it."

"What is the summit of a wish?" asked St. Leger irrelevantly. "Is it when you

reach the height of longing for a thing?—or when you possess it?"

"When you possess it, it ceases to be a wish."

"Now you have decided, I know that *I* am on the summit of a wish. I wonder if there is a particular charm about the place, by which I could discover if I shall gain mine?"

"It must be very simple magic if there be any," said Isabel, looking around. "The word 'charm' associates itself, in my mind, with all kinds of supernatural horrors—boiled serpents, scorpions' tails, and a bit of a murderer's skin"—

"Oh, hush! I cannot even imagine anything so dreadful in connection with the word. I have not studied the old-time lore as you have. Now my notion of 'charm' consists in—dark blue eyes that I can very seldom see, and an enchanting expression in a face I must ever fail to describe—and a voice that could persuade a man into perdition itself. There is more danger now in my charm than in yours."

"Then you should abandon yours for mine," said Isabel, softly.

But the colour rose to her cheek, and she turned her face away, so that not the least gleam of the dark blue eyes could be visible to the man beside her.

"There is one thing I would gladly abandon in exchange for yours—but I would not steal a charm."

Isabel was beginning to feel nervous.

"I think it is time to go home," she said.

"Oh, not yet! Your mother will forgive us, I am sure. It is not often I can indulge in a quiet talk with you."

"Then you will promise—not to be so abstruse. I like to have my share in the conversation."

"I did not attempt to cut you out," said St. Leger, eagerly; "I wanted to interest you in my wish."

"Well, then you must leave *me* out of it."

"You are the principal thing in it—so I cannot do that."

Isabel looked at her watch, and, although she sighed as she spoke, again insisted on

the necessity of going home. It was not pleasant to break the charm of the hour, and the sigh was occasioned by a vague regret—was it a presentiment?

When would they meet again? Would it be ever?—or never?

It was a strange idea to enter her head just then. It was unprovoked. And as she recognised this she turned cold, and hurried into light hasty talk, and seemed almost to fear both herself and St. Leger; for she never gave him an opportunity of relapsing into the personalities which had disturbed her.

Where was Hugh now? He ought to have been walking here with Alice, making her somewhat more like the bright vivacious girl she had been a week ago, when he was by her side.

It was well for Hugh that neither of these women could see behind the veil.

St. Leger returned to London that night. He lingered in the hope of an invitation for the ensuing Sunday; but he was disappointed.

Oddly enough Isabel's high spirits suddenly deserted her at this moment. She stood unaccountably pale and passive. It pleased St. Leger to see her thus subdued; this phase of feeling accorded better with his own sensations, and was decidedly more gratifying to the serious turn of his mind. However, he was obliged to start without the invitation; but he comforted himself with the belief that if he managed cleverly he might secure Hugh for next Sunday, and by that means make sure of his welcome.

So he tried to get a responsive look from Isabel, but failed. The dark eyelashes were pertinaciously lowered.

"You are sure not to remain more than another week, Mrs. Willoughby?" asked St. Leger, experimentally.

"I may say I am sure—sure as one can be of anything—our arrangements are all made. And I can only say, we are very much obliged to you for enduring our dull society for a whole day."

It was no use! Isabel would *not* look at him. He fully believed that she was school-

ing herself to the occasion, for she surely must know that he only waited and lingered for a sign from her. Her "good-bye" was scarcely audible.

"I hate that word," he said, in a cheerful tone; "don't please say it, Miss Tennear—say good-night!"

"Then—good-night!" she said with a soft laugh, and a half-veiled glance which sent him home comforted.

"I'll keep Hugh up to the mark," he thought. "There's no earthly reason why he shouldn't go to Eastbourne, and every reason why he should. I'm gaining ground—that's clear—and I won't lose a step if I can help it."

CHAPTER XI.

He loves and he rides away.

ALICE never found it possible to overcome her pride completely. She wrote a sweet dissembling letter to her husband, but she did not ask him to come on their last Sunday. She left the subject untouched.

"Of course I was disappointed when Mr. St. Leger came alone," she wrote, "but I really believe no one else cared in the least. Mamma is getting rather fidgety about Mr. St. Leger's marked attention to Bell. She evidently does not give him credit for sincerity—and I do. Now I wonder which will prove to have the most perspicacity in this judgment of *man*kind—she or I?"

During the whole week there were but few remarks made concerning either Hugh or St. Leger; the women seemed to be spell-bound on the matter. Isabel scarcely allowed herself to anticipate anything about this next Sunday; she made herself believe that there

was something unmaidenly in even hoping again to see the man who was so pleasing a companion to her.

Well, Sunday morning had come at last, and this time *Hugh* arrived alone.

Isabel's heart beat quickly, and yet she had not expected—she was sure she had not done that. But she told herself over and over again that it was "very silly—foolish in fact," and yet she could not help her heart beating; she could not help the warm blood flying up into her face; she could not help straining her ears unconsciously in listening to catch the sound of St. Leger's name.

Alice was another woman on the instant of Hugh's arrival.

"How kind and good of you to come!" she cried. "I know you have had a week of hard work, and after that a journey is tedious. I really think you give too close an application to business! You ought to allow yourself a holiday to smell the sea."

She talked on, and regained her cheerful manner almost magically.

"The weather seems to be always magnificent here! It was so delicious last Sunday —the weather I mean. I hope we shall have such another evening, that you may enjoy it."

Isabel had no such hope; it would indeed have been a vain delusion that she should find a like enjoyment in this day.

"Mr. St. Leger proved himself to be quite artistic in his tastes—he delighted in what he called 'the poetry of the night.'"

Alice brought in St. Leger's name with a kindly desire, of which she was but half conscious.

"I did not give him credit for so much appreciation of the beautiful in nature. Hugh, I don't think he is quite a butterfly after all! You might—have brought him down with you to-day."

"Indeed I might not," replied Hugh. "Let me see—where is he now? Perhaps at Brindisi. Oh he *was* coming—he told me plainly he intended to come. I thought you had invited him. I am to convey regrets of a nature that are too passionate to be repeated."

Isabel was diligently turning over the leaves of a book, purposely occupying herself to avoid being brought into the conversation. She had maintained her serenity up to the time when the words "passionate regrets" reached her ears, and she saw Hugh's keen eyes reading her face, and then she unreasonably blushed a furious crimson.

So Hugh discovered that his shot had told.

"Oh, indeed!" observed Alice with interest. "Where has he gone? will he be long away?"

"Well he was offered a chance that is an immense advantage to a man in his line. It was far too good to throw over, and yet, upon my word, I do believe the fellow contemplated that act of folly. He told me he hated to think of the distance"—

"You haven't said where he is going," interrupted Alice.

"Ceylon's the station. He hopes to be away but a few months. But there is so much delay in these Indian affairs that I

shouldn't wonder if Steve's months turned out to be years. One may estimate one's time in making arrangements in England—but things are so different there."

An unaccountable and ridiculous sinking sensation possessed Isabel at this announcement. She could not stop to analyze it, nor even to wonder what it meant. She felt that her silence was not to be trusted, and rushed bravely into the field with the first subject that presented itself.

"The climate of Ceylon is very like the rest of India, I suppose?" she said.

"If you consider the size of 'India,'" laughed Hugh, "you will discover there is a great difference in the climates of various places. I believe, Bell, that on the whole, Ceylon is not the most murderous spot. However, you had better not think too much about that beguiling Steve. Remember the old song of the fair young knight, who loves and rides away."

Isabel, with a laudable desire to turn away suspicion, flew to her natural weapon—banter, and so managed to keep herself up to concert

pitch during the day. But she lay awake the whole night restless from undue excitement.

Alice was on her mettle; she felt stronger, better, and resolved to resuscitate her husband's interest in her. That it was declining she knew intuitively. But then she believed love to be co-existent with life; and *that* he had not lost. He had fallen into an indifference which arose only from habit. It was no trouble to exert herself to please him, for she talked well and fluently by nature; and so she made the most of the time he had so willingly accorded to her.

"Steve's made way, I see," said Hugh, carelessly, when Alice and he were alone. "I thought she'd have been more difficult."

"I don't know," said Alice, reflectively. "She *has* been difficult. But your friend is so exceptionably agreeable—and he certainly is exceedingly handsome!"

"You make those admissions almost as if you would deny them if you could."

"No, I admit them, because I can but see that if Bell's heart is touched there is an

excuse. Perhaps I do wish I could deny his advantages, because it is but rational to suppose he owes his faults to them."

"Psha! you women are too critical."

"Well, you know, I should not have suspected him if it had not been for what you have told me."

"Ah, well—he's altogether reformed in that respect."

"Reformed, dear? Do explain; I'm really anxious about Bell."

"She's right enough! A slight sentimental touch I should say—nothing more. And it's as well, considering this contingency. It can hardly be expected that a man's rising fancy for a girl will last through indefinite absence."

Alice sighed.

"I hope it is as you say. But—I know Bell so well, that I am convinced she would do all in her power to prevent the exhibition of a feeling she has no right to admit."

"No wrong that I can see," said Hugh, bluntly.

"That is not what women think," replied

his wife, with a little laugh. "It is the strictest point of honour with them to hide the faintest show of preference for a man before he has given them the right to do so."

"False pride," said Hugh, sententiously.

"It's one of woman's social laws, however; and I think its tendency is in the right direction. You said just now that you thought she'd have been more difficult"—

"Yes," interrupted Hugh. "From all I've seen and heard, I mentally classed her among a certain class of splendid old maids one sees—women who haven't seen anything half good enough for them in this world, and expect to pick up Gabriel in the next."

"Oh, Hugh!"

"Now I am fully convinced that Steve could have won the obstinate fair one if he had had fair play. It is a hard thing to be dragged away in the middle of one's interesting experiments"—

"Interesting experiments!" cried Alice, indignantly.

"It's quite an experiment at first," said Hugh, coolly.

"The fact is," said Alice, "with all Bell's admirers there has not been one, with the exception of your friend, whom I should consider a valid excuse for falling in love."

"Now would be Fred's time—if he only knew how to take advantage of it—which I doubt. Hearts are said to be easily caught in the rebound."

"Men's hearts," said Alice, impudently. "I beg you to note the correction."

"Oh, there's not the ghost of a chance for Fred!—he has no pluck. Plenty of perseverance, if you like; but that doesn't go half so far with women as a scrap of Steve's audacity."

"I don't think that women weigh such attributes as those."

"They don't weigh anything," remarked Hugh, oracularly; "they only feel the effects of things. I don't see much in Steve myself—except his beauty and his honesty."

"Now to me there is something incompatible in your judgment of him. Honesty pervades every action of a man's life—just as dishonesty does. If he was honest in his

attentions to Bell, I think it highly probable that he will not forget her. If he was only amusing himself, at a risk of her pain, then I hope he will get his reward; and I, for one, should not hold him to be an honest man."

"What an intolerant, opinionated little woman it is!" said Hugh, with a faint tinge of sarcasm in his playful words.

"Oh! but I'm quite ready to believe anything in his favour;" said Alice, quickly, "on condition that he has not paid court to other women with quite the same fervour. One could forgive any girl for being misled by it. I hope you have not seen any such direct evidence of flirtation?"

"I've never seen any at all that will bear comparison with this—or that *you* would understand. When I said he was reformed in one respect, I meant he seems to have shown quite a dislike to female society generally since he has known Bell."

Interested as Alice was in her sister, she was instantly sensible of the implication in Hugh's words. They conveyed to her some-

thing new. Female society! then what female society? St. Leger had shown no dislike to her, nor to the ladies he had met incidentally at her house; indeed he was more pointedly attentive to ladies than any man she knew. But Alice was silent. The question which had occurred to her mind bore no reflection on St. Leger—it was this: How could he, her husband, assert this as a fact, unless he too sought and mixed with a society of which she knew nothing?

Her idea of his pursuits was that they were strictly confined to the amusements preferred by his own sex exclusively. She thought his intellectual tastes demanded something like equality in social intercourse, and that this equality could not be reached by women. It was as if she had drifted away from her anchor. She was lost in the contemplation of this inadvertent disclosure—for disclosure it was. She remembered her mother's hints —half-words; rather unkind allusions they had seemed to be. But now they appeared in another light. For the first time she saw that her mother could have no motive for

prejudice against her husband; but rather the reverse. She remembered how proudly Mrs. Tennear had welcomed her son-in-law, how ready she was to accept him as a model of all excellence. If she, Alice, had struggled against the faintest aspersion thrown upon him, if indeed her life had been one prolonged struggle to defend him against himself, she still believed in the virtue, the honesty and the supreme intelligence of her husband—up to this moment.

Here in an instant, by one chance word, her faith was shaken at its foundation. That sentence was a revelation to her. All that others might have insinuated, or to which they might have adverted incidentally, was as nothing to her. She was ready to believe in him as long as he would permit her to do so.

For how long?

Hugh continued talking, and Alice replied half unconsciously, her whole mind dwelling on those few words, the meaning of which she had not successfully grappled with. They had conveyed an impression—nothing more

—an ill-defined, painful suspicion, the mere surface of which caused her to shrink with a repulsion and disgust from deeper consideration.

She answered Hugh calmly, and, it is to be supposed, rationally, for he made no comment to the contrary. But she knew not one syllable that either had uttered.

Unknown to herself, she was concentrating the inexhaustible power there is within a woman who strongly loves, to find any excuse that shall reasonably answer in defence of the holy object of her regard. She had been reluctantly compelled to relinquish the blissful belief that she was the guiding star, the life-stay, the heaven-sent helpmeet of the man she loved, yet she was wholly incapable of believing that she was indifferent to him. Had he not this very day shown her by several proofs, however undemonstrative, that he still found a pleasure in her society, although perhaps of a different nature from that he had once professed.

This man, of cool exterior and strong determined will, would not, she knew, listen to

the outcry of her heart—full well she knew it. Her reason told her that, by acting simply and wholly to please him, she would best succeed in securing his real interest. The responsive sympathy—instinct, and part of all who truly love—was denied to her.

On the several occasions when she had spoken out with all the warm impulse of her girlish heart, when one tender word, one caressing movement would have won her over from every difficulty, she had been met with a cold, crushing reproof, not unkind, but simply reasonable; not taken with earnest offence, but passed off as a childish ebullition which demanded reproof.

If she could only have made him perceive that she was capable of understanding a great deal of what did interest him, what a different life theirs would have been! That he was fond of society she knew, she therefore made opportunities to meet this desire as though it were a demand from him.

Often when a disinclination on her part would lead her to withdraw from some planned amusement in which she was ex-

pected to join, she put aside her own pleasure as a temptation. But do as she would, nothing brought her nearer to Hugh, and she often desponded when she thought of a new trial.

And yet it could not be said that her husband neglected her in a certain sense, although when they were in company together he seemed to avoid her especially.

Now Alice was not a silly, ill-bred woman who wished to parade her husband's tenderness towards her in public. She would have resented any action that would have rendered either him or her ridiculous in the least degree. She did expect sometimes a responsive glance from him, when a turn of events might occasion a common memory, but if she met his eye there was no gleam in it where she might read a message to herself alone. Perhaps it was but habit this perfect self-possession which seemed to shut out the nearest and dearest from his sympathy.

If Alice had desired to explain to him the want she felt it would have been difficult to do so. And yet she remembered how, in the

first month or two of their joined lives, a casual glance had sometimes a history, and how the inflexion of his voice on one common word would awake its echo in her heart.

It is in all this mutual understanding that women delight; it is not in being well fed, well cared for, and well dressed.

All accepted luxuries Alice had, but if she could have chosen she would have preferred the lack of all these to the real unity she longed for instead.

Before the next day had waned, however, she had invented quite a feasible reason for that disturbing speech—of course Hugh was occasionally compelled to be in places where other men might attract him, and where women might be. But that he could be attracted by any other woman never once entered her head. These considerations almost completely usurped her mind until she had invented the means to quell her own doubts.

She had unreal, dreamy thoughts about Isabel. She could not hope to discover whether her sister had an excessive regard

for St. Leger or not, and yet she seemed convinced that his removal had occasioned pain to the girl.

"But after all, what is pain?" she thought. "What is all life but suppressed, enduring pain?"

Alice has dreamt of happiness, and she has tasted it from a fleeting cup she fears she can never taste again. No shams can deceive her, no hollow mockery, no superficial kindness mislead.

Hugh Willoughby has no idea of his wife's mind; he has not the remotest conception of the deep and tender truth of that mind. He is fully satisfied that he does his duty, that his wife has all she can require, and that she ought to be a happy woman.

CHAPTER XII.

The lass is alone to be pitied
Who ne'er has been courted at all.
CAMPBELL.

ISABEL TENNEAR was not of a disposition to welcome sorrow and hold it to her heart. On the contrary, she possessed a sanguine and happy temperament. She determined that no living soul should know that when Stephen St. Leger left England, he had taken every particle of her heart with him. She did not wear the willow because she was forsaken; so externally she was the same as ever.

About a month after their return from Eastbourne Mrs. Tennear, noticing Isabel wrapped in a reverie, had said—

"Bell, you pay more frequent visits to the moon than usual."

"Do I, mamma? I was not aware of it."

She roused herself nevertheless, and shook off the enthralling meditation that was not common to her.

"When is Alice's dinner party—is it for Wednesday or Thursday?"

"Thursday, mamma. You will want me to arrange your lace."

"Oh, what does it matter what a grandmother wears? I would rather that you showed some interest in yourself."

"Oh, what can it matter what I wear?" said Isabel, with the charming insolence she could so well assume. "According to the best authorities I look well in anything. There is the black tulle, and"—

"Alice will not feel complimented. You've worn it there three times, you remember."

"Alice never knows anything about these things," said Isabel saucily. "It will save me trouble. I don't feel any interest in getting a new dress."

"Ah! when you are a wife you will not consider trouble in any way. Look at the inconvenience Alice endures for the sake of her husband's pleasure."

"Alice never admitted," said Isabel, with slow, emphatic nods, "Alice never once ad-

mitted the slightest degree of inconvenience, as far as I know."

"Ah! but *I* know. When she came home from Mrs. Forrester's party the other night she never went to bed at all, but sat up and watched the baby. The child was not ill either, but only restless. Alice was anxious I could see, although she left her baby for so many hours, and I believe her heart was aching until she got home."

"Well, I can't understand the necessity of such self-abnegation as that!"

"Perhaps you will some day."

"That's very doubtful! I think a woman ought to be able to say just what she pleases to her husband, with perfect freedom, and be as perfectly understood. I don't know that I have what may be called an aversion to matrimony, but I do think men, and women too, should be very careful before they enter the bondage."

Mrs. Tennear looked at her daughter—her beautiful Isabel, who was so much admired. She reviewed her quite gravely until Isabel laughed, and coloured a little with amusement.

"What is it you are weighing so accurately, mamma? Is it my dreadful decision of character, or my general appearance?"

"If you really want to make sure of a trustworthy husband," said her mother, quite seriously, and ignoring Isabel's questions, "if you would be certain of not making a mistake, why not accept Frederick?"

A shade of annoyance crossed the girl's face.

"Simply because I don't like him! It is not absolutely imperative that I should marry at all. I never could have sufficient regard for Fred to accept him as a husband," she said positively.

"Could you have found sufficient interest in anybody else, do you think?" asked the mother, quietly, and with palpable meaning.

"Oh, mamma, that's a very unfair question!" said Isabel, blushing a "celestial rosy red," that quite paled the pink ribbon at her throat. "How can *I* tell? Nobody but Fred ever asked me."

"Because you have taken care they should not. I am afraid that women often find

sufficient interest before they are asked, or they would not so readily accept. Unless a man is very persistent you don't give him a chance of proposing. Now, Colonel Macnamara plainly hinted to me that he only wanted a sign of encouragement, but he was too thorough a gentleman to approach you without it."

Isabel burst into a fit of most enjoyable laughter.

"When did this happen, mamma? I am dying to know! And why didn't you tell me? Why, it might have been only maiden modesty that prevented my encouraging him. Oh, the dear old Colonel!"

"Old! My dear, he may be fifteen years older than yourself—that difference is accounted nothing in the world."

"But with his portly presence he looks—well, just fit for you—only not handsome enough."

"You think too much of mere beauty I am afraid, Bell."

"Nay, you mistake!" cried Isabel, theatrically, "I honour beauty only as the set-

ting of a gem. I look only to intrinsic value, and afterwards to embellishment."

"Nevertheless, you seemed to bestow some favour upon *one* very handsome man." The words were uttered in a quiet, commonplace manner, but Mrs. Tennear gave a side glance at her daughter as she spoke. "And I don't know that you had much chance of discovering anything in his favour beyond his beauty."

"That is sarcastic, mamma," replied Isabel, with a precise imitation of her mother's tone, and she turned a shade paler as she went on. "He was excellent company—that is the reason he was favoured. That he *was* favoured there can be no doubt, if you found it out."

Isabel flattered herself that she had been very brave in making this assertion.

"That will certainly disarm mamma," she thought. She was quite collected, and raised her prettily curved eyebrows as she spoke, as if the matter were quite a trivial one, as far as she was concerned. And in this she was no hypocrite, for although she knew her

mother had put forward that simple observation for the sake of eliciting some feeling, yet she also knew well that she could not afford to be sincere, even to herself.

But when she was alone, she fell again into one of the reveries which were more comforting than her gayest moments. There could be no possible harm in indulging in the remembrance of one who had been so enchanting a friend. Had *she* not known anything to his credit beyond his beauty? She thought she had, for it was not of St. Leger's handsome face and form that her reminiscences consisted. He had placed confidence in her that had, of course, been sacred—who was to know of this? She was perfectly satisfied that she knew more of him —and more to his credit—than either her mother, or Alice, or even Hugh himself.

* * * * *

More than once Alice had tried experiments upon Isabel for the purpose of discovering the state of her sister's heart. She had succeeded in extracting an admission

that he was "quite the pleasantest man" she had met; but that was all.

Isabel kept the severest guard over her expressive features; for her tongue she had no fear.

On one occasion, when Hugh and Alice were visiting Mrs. Tennear, and the former had been watching with some amusement Frederick's effusive attempts to ingratiate himself with Isabel, and the quiet persistency with which he was put aside, her brother-in-law was tempted into whispering—

"When are you going to take pity on that desolate youth?"

"I really wish you wouldn't tease, Hugh!" she replied, raising her eyes appealingly. "I really have a little too much of it—he is so perpetually thrust under my nose."

"Just what some women would like, Bell."

"Granted—if they liked the man! Now, just fancy my having this sort of thing to encounter—and pity me!"

She spoke with real annoyance, but Hugh replied in an amused tone—

"You don't know what some girls would give for it, Bell."

"I don't—but I only wish 'some girls' had it instead of me."

"Then why don't you marry somebody else, and have done with it?"

"Is that to be my only resource—to choose another evil?"

"Come, come, men are not always evils!"

"But there are all sorts of evils connected with them!"

"Ah! you will never say anything in favour of our sex."

"Nor you of ours!" retorted Isabel.

"Well, you make more mischief in the world than any other known agent."

"And are you going to attribute mischief that occurs by us—to us? That is illogical. Half the time we are in ignorance of the harm we do. Now men, you know—and I'm sure you will admit this—men are *never* ignorant of either good or evil."

"Never!" exclaimed Alice, advancing from another part of the room, where she had been chatting confidentially with her mother.

"Two against one isn't fair! Alice, your sister is trying to convince me that she is impenetrable to Fred's devotion, and I have been vainly attempting to prove to her that it would be advisable to bow to the inevitable gracefully."

"Oh, you have been trying to irritate Bell's angelic temper again!" said his wife, with a reproving shake of the head.

"She must marry somebody—the world will insist upon it. And remember—

> Who listens once will listen twice;
> Her heart, be sure, is not of ice,
> And one refusal no rebuff.

Now, she may never have another chance of marrying a genius!"

"Don't be so absurd!" said Isabel, contemptuously.

"A clever Frenchman once said that 'genius is patience.' I leave the application to you, who have tested the patience, if not"—

"Who was the goose who said it?"

"Buffon."

"Well, I don't even care for that—for all

the patience in the world never produced genius!"

"Genius never does much without it, though. Ah! you are no philosopher, Bell. Now," said he, turning to his wife confidentially, "I'll tell her something that will bring me into favour again." And then he bent his keen eyes full on Isabel's face. "Here is a message—h'm I've lost the letter, or left it at the office. But never mind—the sense of a rather complicated sentence lies in the fact that Steve wishes you not to forget him. When I reply—if ever I do—I shall tell him that I do not think it would be wise on your part to remember him. However, he is accustomed to my penetrating remarks—though not to my letters. I've only written to him once, and here are epistles from him by every mail. Capital letters, too—quite original in their way, without any pretensions to style, unless it be the 'slap-dash.' Steve has the happiest knack of giving really graphic pictures in his own wild fashion. He never tells one facts, but yet I seem to know the fellow's life as well as if I were with him."

"What is he doing?" asked Alice, seeing that Isabel made no attempt to reply, though Hugh positively addressed her.

"Oh, the same business! These affairs take a long time to put into shape. There's a good deal of energetic action required, and he's always fully occupied. I should like a trip of that kind myself above everything just now."

"He would like," thought Isabel. "How can men like to leave, for an indefinite period, all they love best?"

But she did not speak, except to turn the conversation on travel. She was very peculiar in that matter of St. Leger; she never, by any chance, mentioned his name, unless upon, what really may be described as, compulsion.

If she anticipated his return, it was in silence; she could not acknowledge it, even, to herself. Perhaps, the most perfect haven for love exists in isolation. The fact of the tender secret being unrecognised, even by Isabel, caused it to expand and increase to a degree that is wholly inexplicable. St.

Leger was not by to feed the flame, and yet it grew.

Many pretty things have been said concerning the absence of lovers; and although these two had not arrived at the point of acknowledgment, yet virtually they were certainly lovers. Some have said that love absolutely ebbs away with time itself, that if you part two people long enough, they must forget each other. But there is a much more elevated idea, and a much truer one—that feeble passions are utterly extinguished by a short absence, just as the flame of a candle is blown out by a puff of one's breath, but that the strong and true emotion is increased by this absence, as a great fire blazes into fury by a fierce wind.

Isabel was aware of a subtle change in her own character, but she did not discover its true cause.

"I am getting older," she thought; "I am beginning to lose the trivial interests of the world."

But she would not permit herself to give up any of the pleasures for which she felt in-

disposed. She was every whit as cheerful as she had ever been, quite as delightful a companion, and quite as vivacious in society.

Of course, Hugh's words occurred to her, again and again. Hugh's words were always so well weighed. She knew that he seldom, if ever, spoke carelessly. She knew that his eyes had been trying to read her passive face, when he had said—"I shall tell him that I do not think it would be wise, on your part to remember him." Now Isabel could not help feeling some resentment at this.

"I hope he will not say so! The chances are he will forget all about me, even, if he should write. I don't know why I should care; but I do hope Hugh will not amuse himself by joking at my expense. I have always thought that people are much too thoughtless in their allusions to those whose names they can in any way connect, and, of course, Mr. St. Leger did show a preference —and perhaps I was foolish in accepting it graciously."

She was too sensible a woman to object to a joke from Hugh, or Alice, or her mother,

but she literally detested, what she called, "the insolence" of comparative strangers who adverted to the palpable position between herself and Frederick.

"Why, one would think," she had said to Alice, "that it was a matter of vital importance to them! And the worst is, that one cannot dare reply, but with a conventional simper which is almost consent, or a false protestation of ignorance; for if one spoke out plainly there would not only be a breach of confidence, but rumour would spread and gather strength till—one would never recognise one's own admission when it came round again. What a wonderful thing that people should take so much interest in what is emphatically *not* their own business!"

CHAPTER XIII.

For, nothing e'er can change my heart's low tone
Love—joy—delight can come with one alone!

"DID I not hear Hugh say that his friend was coming home soon?" asked Mrs. Tennear of her daughter, one day when they were sitting alone together.

The twelve months were at an end, but St. Leger had not returned. Only rare and occasional glimpses of his present life had been conveyed to Isabel. It seemed now that she was absolutely longing—hungering—thirsting for a word of him. The sensation was really unaccountable to her; it was a sort of marvel to her why, after all this long year—the longest she had ever known—the memory of him was fresher—greener than ever.

"Oh, no!" said Isabel, replying to her mother's question; "quite the reverse!"

"But Hugh was talking about him a great deal—was he not?"

"No; it was principally Mrs. Forrester, who is always so funny in the intense admiration she expresses for Mr. St. Leger."

"But what was it they said?"

"He told her she would not have a chance of gratifying her eyes for some considerable period. He was saying how unlikely it was his friend would return at all," said Isabel, shortly.

"What did you think of Mrs. Forrester's brother-in-law?"

"What the gallant captain? I really did not think of him at all."

Mrs. Tennear gave a quick searching look at her daughter, as she noted the somewhat apathetic reply.

"He is a mark of great interest to other young ladies, I assure you!"

"No doubt. I do not like to say uncharitable things, but upon my word I did blush for my sex when I saw Miss Vallance intriguing so shamefully for his notice."

"Ah, then you were not so unobservant, after all! Well, my dear, we may forgive a woman for the amiable desire of making her-

self irresistible, although we cannot if she strives to be offensive. Certainly," added Mrs. Tennear, with a laugh, "the excess of one thing may run into the other."

"Yes, indeed, mamma," said Isabel, joining the laugh, "there is offence to our sex, if not to the other, in making oneself oppressively captivating!"

* * * * *

Just at this time Isabel received another severe attack, as she graphically described it to Alice, from Frederick. Things had been running on very smoothly for some time, and Isabel was in hope that her cousin had abandoned the pursuit in despair. But it was not so, and she was at her wits' ends to find further discouragement.

"Nothing," said Alice emphatically, "nothing, as Hugh says, will discourage Fred, but your marriage, my dear."

At this Isabel laughed, as much in vexation as amusement.

"I told mamma that *she* had better dis-

suade him. I should like," she added reflectively, "to propose that he should take rooms in some other part of London, and visit us occasionally—instead of almost living with us as he does. You have no idea how impatient I feel when I hear his knock! I think, you know, that if he is as far involved as he professes to be, the very best cure would be absence."

"Have you really considered that matter, Bell?" asked Alice, significantly. "Now, I am of opinion that your *presence* and *indifference* ought to cure him much better than absence. Depend upon it, he will never abandon the pursuit while there is hope."

"But there is no hope!" exclaimed Isabel, hotly.

"While there's life there's hope!" replied Alice, with a smile. "While you are single, you will have to put up with every adorer who presents himself. Well, never mind that disagreeable subject now, Bell—I've an invitation for you."

"Indeed! Why was it not sent to me?"

"Mrs. Forrester did not know your

address, so she included your invitation with mine."

"I wonder what made her ask me?"

"Possibly, because she wants to make a more brilliant display than usual, as Captain Forrester is about to leave England."

To this explanation Isabel made no reply.

"Are *you* going, Alice?"

"Not if I can get out of it! Hugh will like to take you—and you don't know how I detest those very late parties. In fact my doctor tells me that I must keep early hours —I'm sure they are early enough sometimes! I'm not so strong as I was; and since I have been prohibited from dancing, balls and dancing parties are by no means so pleasurable as they were once. But for Hugh's sake, I certainly should never go to any entertainment but a dinner party just now."

"But," said Isabel in surprise, "does Hugh know this, and desire—and permit you to go?"

"Why, you don't suppose I tell him that!" said Alice, with a smile of superiority. "Of course, he would not let me go! I

avoid all I can consistently ; but I know it pleases Hugh that I should go out a great deal. I cannot say but that I really like entertaining in my own house. But," she added, with a sigh, "it is impossible to regard all one's duties equally—and, of course, my husband stands first!"

"Isn't it a disputed point as to where a husband should stand? A mother's duties are at least as sacred as a wife's."

"Quite so!" said Alice warmly. "And if a question of necessity arose—as it did when baby was ill the other day—I should recognise the first claim without knowing it. I never dreamt of leaving her—I should not have done so under any pressure."

"Did Hugh know that, I wonder?" asked Isabel, with some acumen. "I'll tell you candidly, dear, mamma has been much concerned about you. You know she has told you that it is impossible to attend to the requirements of society and the demands of a family at the same time. You may do it with one baby—but you never can with two. It is your health she is anxious about ; and she

wonders that Hugh does not see the importance so well as she does. But men know so little about such matters! *I* think you ought to tell him everything the doctor says," she concluded didactically.

"One cannot expect a man to devote himself to the care of young children—and few, I suppose, could be made to see any necessity for a woman's doing so. Men are so different!"

"There are certain inconsistencies that must arise in attempting to perform the impossible."

"Many people must make the attempt," said Alice, a little proudly. "In a certain sphere of life women have duties that do not always admit of consistency."

"That is an unfortunate sphere, where a woman cannot perform the most holy of a woman's duties! In a certain fashionable class, not even an attempt may be made. But no woman's position can justify her in neglecting nature's first laws—nor need it prevent her from following them. Look at our Royal Family! What 'votary of fashion'

can have such special duties as they are bound to perform? I point a moral."

"And you've done it no doubt to your own satisfaction," said Alice laughing. "I can't dispute the point of the moral, because I go with you. Descending to me—you must admit I have not been out so much since baby was born. But I'm very glad that Hugh puts no restraint upon his own pleasure on any account—it would grieve me if he did."

Isabel was silent. How would it have been if he could have found pleasure in spending, at least, some time with his wife? Isabel could not see the imperative necessity of incessant society for the prevention of dulness.

"I suppose you'll go," said Alice.

"I suppose so—mamma shall decide the matter."

"Have you not sufficient interest to decide for yourself?" asked Alice, playfully.

"I don't care," said Isabel, with placid indifference. "One party is very like another."

"But you always seem to enjoy yourself thoroughly."

"There's nothing else to do, when one is out! If I felt distractingly dull, I should never sit in a corner and mope. The pleasure is in—exertion."

"Bravo!" said Alice. "A most excellent excuse for enjoying yourself—I must tell Hugh that."

"Ah! he'll agree with me," said Isabel calmly.

CHAPTER XIV.

The uncertain glory of an April day,
Which now shows all the beauty of the sun,
And by-and-bye a cloud takes all away.

SHAKESPEARE.

"WELL, Alice!" said Hugh, when he came down to breakfast the morning after Mrs. Forrester's party, and found his wife, looking bright and cheerful, presiding over the table where she had breakfasted an hour ago; "do you feel any better for moping alone all last night?"

"I never mope, dear," she replied cheerfully, "however lonely I may feel. To tell the truth, I am beginning to find out the value of a long, undisturbed night's rest. I don't wish my health to fail, and Dr. Thompson says I ought to be careful."

"Oh, doctors are always croakers! Don't allow yourself to be frightened by them. You look as well as ever when you are dressed, and out in the world; but you will not look

so much longer, if you pine and get melancholy—it isn't natural to be so much alone."

"I don't think it is," said Alice, quietly, "but the pleasures of society are very wearing in some states of health. I admit I am fond of company, but I can't quite manage to get through the trouble it incurs. But never mind me—tell me how the party went off."

"First-rate! Yes, I'll have some toast. Bell's in luck—made a conquest of Captain Forrester. They made a tremendous fuss over her last night."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. Now I suppose you regret not going? To punish your idleness, I've a great mind not to tell you anything that happened—I'll take some more coffee."

"Well, about Bell," said Alice, pouring out the fragrant beverage, "do you think she suspects?"

"H'm—I think she ought. But she's like you—a queer specimen of her race. She hasn't a tithe of the vanity I have found in

many an ugly, uninteresting woman. Now I can understand modesty"—

"Can you really? You surprise me, Hugh—you do indeed!" laughed Alice.

"What I don't understand," pursued Hugh, "is being almost unaware of one's own gifts. That girl would not have sung last night, but for my interference. She was afraid of two brawling women, who were there singing the highest class of music in an inferior professional style."

"And did she sing as well as usual?" asked Alice eagerly.

"I knew she would, or I should not have urged her. Besides I wanted to place the last straw on Forrester's back—I could see there was only one wanted!"

"How cruel, Hugh!"

"Not at all—the climax of everything must be reached sooner or later. Do you think he has a chance?"

"I think it's hardly possible," was Alice's hesitating reply.

"By the bye, it's a pity that Steve's return is so uncertain! His constancy, in merely

remembering her, is a marvel to me—he seems to get more spoony as time moves on. His letters work up—like a woman's—to a postscript, which is all-important; and the subject so clumsily disguised—is Bell."

"I always thought he was sincere," said Alice, triumphantly.

"Well, if so, I suppose his reward will be that the young lady may condescend—to laugh at him! I would not give a hint of this if I were you, Alice, because there is a possibility that it may affect her treatment of Forrester. He is a capital match in every sense—too good a one to be lightly treated."

"Ah, I see! You would not like to feel that your friend had in any way interfered"—

"Indeed, no; I thought over the matter for Bell's sake personally. I am not so over-conscientious as to imagine that I am in error, if two people manage to fall in love."

"What did Mr. St. Leger say?"

Hugh glanced at his wife, raised his eyebrows, and laughed.

"You'll promise not to tell?"

"Most certainly! But all the same, I

know Bell too well to think she could be influenced to accept, or refuse, any man, solely on account of his worldly station."

"What unnatural high-mindedness!"

"You may laugh! Pray are not men high-minded sometimes? I know one case where a man lost his chance with the girl he adored, because his pride informed him that his position was scarcely equal to hers. So after playing the moth-and-candle business, till her wings were singed, and his flame was ready to scorch and devour her at a minute's notice, he discovered that honour forbade him to lower her one step in the social rank. And she, who was just as insanely in love with him, immediately married an old admirer, for what is unreasonably called 'spite.' So there terminated one of the most promising romances I remember."

"Quite a poetic story of—a pair of fools! What's the time? Past ten! I shall be late to-day."

And, without a word of farewell, without a smile or nod, or the simplest sign of affection, he departed.

Alice looked rather gloomy, when he had gone. These familiar chats between them were getting rarer and rarer. She always made a point of being present when he breakfasted—no matter at what hour that might be. He, however, absorbed every stray minute in close study of the morning paper; so the wife, who was always longing for closer friendship, might as well have been absent.

"I am sure," she thought, sometimes in the bitterness of her spirit, "one of the servants would be of quite as much use as I."

She never asked now, "Shall I see you to-night?" No promises of return were made; they had been too frequently broken to be respected.

There was a surprising change in the young wife's face, immediately her husband left, all the light seemed to vanish out of it; all the bright smiles and gay talk ceased. It was true, she could not laugh and talk at vacancy; but there was a dreary troubled expression, that was not caused by loneliness,

but was indicative of heart-ache. She was very proud of her powers of self-control, this gentle woman. She had made up her mind that he should not know of her weak clinging to his companionship, her still fervent desire for his love and approbation.

"*He* may be happy—if we both cannot be," she meditated, with a sad smile. "Oh, dear! I wonder if all women retain their first love as I do, and long for its reciprocation? I wonder how Bell will end? She is not, what may be called, a tractable disposition; *she* will find the matrimonial path rough ground I fear."

It never occurred to her, even now, that men could be tenderer, more considerate, more loving than Hugh; she still held the idea that the weakness of women caused their dissatisfaction. She was so young in years, that it was really terrible to her to contemplate the loss of all her pure absorbing love—the glory of her woman's life; and to know she received no more in return for her great gift, than any acquaintance of to-day whom her husband may choose. It was

no compliment to her, that he was proud of his well-ordered house and its unexceptionable mistress. She knew this, although she never abated one item of her duty in consequence. She had never dreamt of this indifference and constant desertion; they seemed the harder to bear, because it seemed so wonderfully easy to please Hugh when she was with him.

After one of these bright hours, it was hard indeed to abandon the hope that was so dear to her. She always had been so keen in discovering "married people's little manœuvres," as she called them. "They think no one else can see through their plots—the geese!"

Alas! the time had come, when she would have given anything to have had a plot, or understanding, with *her* husband, however sharp outsiders might be to discover it.

CHAPTER XV.

Tell me, daughter
How stands your disposition to be married?
SHAKESPEARE.

IT was the day after Mrs. Forrester's party.

Isabel was sitting silent and absorbed. She had appeared tired during the day, and now the evening had come, she was called upon to be sociable. Mrs. Tennear had been out, and when she returned she naturally expected some account of the party. Isabel usually came home laden with vivacious reports of the proceedings. She usually found much to amuse—if not to interest her; for there was a fund of humour in her character, although it was not ill-humour.

"You do not seem to have enjoyed the party, Bell—you have nothing to tell me!"

"Perhaps, for that reason, I enjoyed it more," said Isabel, in her own sprightly way. "I suppose it was a capital party, on the whole—but I think I was not in the right mood."

"Come, you're not whimsical! What put you out?"

"A mistake of my own—that's all!"

"Did you expect to be 'first in the throng' and find yourself mistaken?"

"Don't be impertinent, mamma! I'm not such a goose. But seriously, it was quite the other way. Of course, I knew Mrs. Forrester well enough through meeting her so often at Alice's; but going among a set of strange people, I did not like being made of so much importance. If I had been a woman of influence, or rank, it would have been all very well. It may be a morbid idea on my part, but I thought there was a conspiracy."

"What *are* you talking about, my dear?" exclaimed Mrs. Tennear, conscious at once that her daughter's natural advantages had been fully recognised.

"I've not been unaccustomed to produce, what is called, a sensation, occasionally—when I have been new to the company. But now, I suppose, I am getting past the novelty. I did not like being made conspicuous, and

paraded about by Mrs. Forrester's 'lions,' as she calls her best people; though I very much doubt that she ever had one of the genuine animals in her domain. Eccentricities, I grant, by the score—I daresay that *I* was taken for one! Now that really may explain my discomfiture. Perhaps, she gave it out that I had said something—or seen something—or possessed something—that nobody knew anything about! Well, mamma, there was a man who 'played the fiddle like an angel'— but he didn't look like one."

"My dear! I really think that young people, in these times, take too much liberty with sacred subjects."

"It was an innocent quotation—that's all! Now men never think any harm of saying a girl looks like an angel, and I don't know if the other comparison is more profane. Angels were men and women once—and although it's perfectly certain that every spirit of the blest cannot have been particularly gifted on the violin—we'll let that argument stand over. I was introduced

especially to the Professor, and he almost frightened me by the way he started the conversation. I am sure he thought me a musical genius—I knew it by his allusions. And after this, I was asked to sing! Of course I refused point-blank, and Mrs. Forrester was in despair—but surely she could not have depended on me for her music. When I am at home, or among people I know intimately, I do not object to do anything that will give pleasure. But I was out of my element. There were two or three ladies who sang splendidly—in real professional style I mean—a little too much display to suit me. There is a certain style of singing that seems only suitable to the concert room—*florid bravura*."

"Did you sing?"

"Several times. I could not help it. Hugh came and told me that Mrs. Forrester had quite set her heart upon showing off my little talent. And Hugh has such authoritative action, that he coolly led me over to the piano before I had answered him, whispering positively as we went along, that I could do

better than anybody there if I chose. I felt as if I would have given the world to have an extinguisher popped over me the moment I sat down; but fortunately I never do lack confidence when I have once well begun my song. I forgot the Professor in no time. I sang Mendelssohn's romance 'Expectation.' It was a success. 'It must be your own composition,' said Hugh. "Mayst thou come soon!" was splendid.' Well, they made such a fuss over that song, that I was obliged to sing two more during the evening. I shall steer clear of Mrs. Forrester's parties for the future!"

"I suppose Hugh was delighted?"

"Oh, he said all sorts of nonsensical things! The most foolish being—that *he* would come sooner than I expected if he could hear my request!"

She stopped at an unusually startling postman's knock; and in another moment a common-place missive was delivered into her mother's hands.

"Hugh is so oracular. I told him he ought to have been a wizard—oh, I beg your

pardon, mamma! I see it is *not* a tradesman's circular you are reading."

Mrs. Tennear quietly perused the letter; and when she had finished she made no comment, but commenced it again.

"Is it a puzzle?" asked Isabel.

"It may be to you—it is none to me."

Mrs. Tennear passed the letter over, and Isabel read it also in silence, and certainly in amazement. But before she had finished, her colour rose considerably, and at last she threw down the letter with some approach to anger.

"That is a piece of downright insolence!" she said with temper.

"Captain Forrester did not mean anything like that, I am sure!" said Mrs. Tennear, reprovingly. "An offer of marriage from an honourable man is a sincere compliment, however unadvisably paid."

"I wonder what a man of any reflection would think of me, if I accepted him under such circumstances," replied Isabel, argumentatively. "To me it *is* an insult to be regarded as a mere husband-hunter! A man

can scarcely be vain enough to expect a woman to surrender the deepest feelings of her nature at a first interview; and if she should accept him for any ulterior reason—well!" and she shrugged her shoulders as if the action and the suggestive "well" were quite a satisfactory termination of her speech.

"My dear," expostulated the mother, "you have met Captain Forrester several times"—

"Three times!" said Isabel, quickly. "First, at Alice's dinner party, when he made me very uncomfortable, and showed himself both foolish and ill-bred by staring at me, whenever he could do so without attracting any notice but my own."

"In your own words, my dear, you defend him from being unmannerly."

"Not so far as *I* was concerned!—he intended *me* to observe him."

"Well, well, I'm not pleading the Captain's cause," laughed the mother. "It seems I should have a hard case—he should have tried it himself!"

"He would not have dared!" said Isabel

contemptuously. "And I look upon it as a very mean thing to have addressed you upon the matter, before I had the slightest suspicion."

"You were not so shrewd as usual. It is clear that others had suspicions, if you had not. Why you actually put them into my head just before this letter came, when you told me of Hugh's joke."

"I—I," stammered Isabel, growing very red, "I took it quite another way."

"So it seems," said Mrs. Tennear, not noticing the inference in her daughter's unguarded remark. "No, you must not be too hard on the Captain. He has done what seems right to him. Now I thought his appeal quite touching, especially where he says" —and she referred to the letter— "I am unfortunately called upon to leave England almost immediately, and consequently to abandon all the plans I had formed to win your daughter's regard. And although I feel that I am not justified in approaching her, I cannot tear myself away without letting my real feelings be known to one near and dear

to her. A mother's tender hints and persuasion are of enormous influence, and if I can rely on your assistance I may leave my native land with a lighter heart than I can now anticipate.' Now there seems to me something staightforward, and extremely honourable, in that admission. If you would only pass your word, he would go away quite satisfied, and with the firmest faith for the future."

"But a more honourable man," said Isabel warmly, "would shrink from putting me to such a test—would not wish to hold me by a promised word that I might repent, and not have courage to break. It is not all people who are blessed with the spirit of constancy."

"I think," said Mrs. Tennear, "that idea of honour is overstrained. It is precisely the same thing when a man strives with all his power to win a girl's affections—precisely the same thing, to my mind, as if he were to gain her consent openly. If he has won her heart, he cannot harm her by declaring his intentions—and if he has not, he surely cannot injure her by doing so."

"That is very true," said Isabel thoughtfully. "But at the same time a man may possess a conscientious feeling, which would prevent his asking a woman to share an uncertain future at some indefinite time."

"In that case his conscience has been behindhand. It should have prompted him before, and kept him out of the girl's way, instead of tempting her into the difficulty."

"Again," pursued Isabel, ignoring the last clause, "a man may feel he has no right to hold a woman bound to him. If she should be fickle, *she may* change her mind—if she be free. And again, if her attachment should be slight, her freedom would give her power to overcome it for a more advantageous object."

"Do you think so?" asked Mrs. Tennear curiously.

"My dear mother," said Isabel, with affectionate earnestness, "I think you understand what I mean. It appears to me to be an act of sheer immodesty—to use the mildest phrase—for a woman to accept as a husband one who is literally a stranger to her. You

know the unanimous conclusion we came to over Fanny Protheroe's marriage—as disgraceful a piece of impropriety as was ever committed."

"The argument is quite just, Bell. But I will protest still, that there is something on the Captain's side—he is not an unequal match in either age or position. He may not expect you to be ready to marry him—he evidently does not—but he wishes to convince you of his sincerity."

"Then he takes a very wrong way to do it," said Isabel, impetuously. "Now all this extravagant flattery," she went on, waving her hand towards the letter, "is to me utterly contemptible. Of course, if a man is in love with a girl, we may assume that he admires her—if his imagination only lends her charm. She *is* 'wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best,' in his eyes. And I think that a woman is even more apt to idealise," pursued Isabel, falling into a reflective mood. "Of course, she will think that no human creature can bear a momentary comparison with the kingshe has chosen."

"Does she?" asked her mother, with a laugh and an expression of surprise. "I'm not so sure, Bell. You seem to have more knowledge of the matter now than I have. Men praise girls because they think the girls like it, and indeed they are right, for girls generally do. Now you must really give the Captain his due—you would if you knew as much of the world as I. Nothing is more common than for unscrupulous men to take pleasure in gaining women's regards, at the same time taking care not to compromise themselves. And, as soon as their vanity is gratified, they ignobly withdraw, never caring what may be the result of their villainy."

The mother paused, but Isabel did not speak. Then she went on with some pathos in her tone—

"I do not for one moment wish you to marry, my child; I only want to aid your decision with my experience. Speaking selfishly, I would rather you did not marry—I should be a lonely old woman without you."

"Then that settles the matter!" cried

Isabel warmly. "You shall never be a 'poor lone critter.' We will never part!"

"We will part whenever it is to your advantage, Bell," said her mother firmly, but with tears springing into her eyes nevertheless. She had lost one daughter by marriage, and she could not rejoice for her sake.

The two women, after this burst of affection, sat down to the composition of a mild and comprehensive reply to Captain Forrester's fervent love-letter.

"It would be insincere on my part to mislead you in any way," prompted Isabel.

"There is positively no hope as far as my daughter is concerned. And for myself," said Mrs. Tennear, "I shall add that personally I should have raised no objection."

"No, don't say that, mamma. Let him think what he pleases, but do be decisive. I could not stand a repetition of Fred's"—

"Poor Fred! Perhaps, he will not be so foolish again. You wished for a comprehensive answer, my dear. How about this sentence: 'In whatever light Miss Tennear may regard me now, I cannot give up hope

of eventually winning her, if her heart be not already preoccupied.'"

There was silence for just a moment.

Isabel kept her eyes down as she replied very quietly—

"No one should assume the right to ask that question. It is a kind of inquisition one cannot submit to."

She finished her little speech more lightly than she began it.

Mrs. Tennear hesitated, but eventually concluded the letter without reference to the forbidden subject.

She was certainly mystified with regard to her daughter. She thought it strange that the girl should have advanced to the age of twenty-six without having had some attack of the universal fever. She had once had strong suspicions that Stephen St. Leger had touched the secret spring of her daughter's heart, but Isabel's extreme caution had almost disarmed them. And if there existed a doubt, it was too slight to occasion anxiety.

"Pray let that letter be destroyed immediately. I cannot bear to run the risk of

any one reading that description of my eyes! I cannot help thinking that such personalities are in bad taste."

"And that is the end of Captain Forrester!" said Mrs. Tennear pathetically, as the closely written page perished in the flames.

"I sincerely hope not!" exclaimed Isabel, with a little awkward laugh. "I haven't a doubt, that when Captain Forrester returns, he will bring a wife 'whose star-like eyes shall eclipse every other woman's beauty, and make him forget even the laws of politeness.' Oh! oh!"

"Don't laugh Bell. He is quite in earnest."

"Oh, I believe he *thinks* he is! I am not unfeeling—I should be sorry to think he was not going to recover. But how much will he care after he has been away a few weeks? I don't believe in three interviews," she continued emphatically. "I don't believe in three interviews—even spoiling a man's appetite. Now Susan may as well post that letter at once. What a comfort it is to be alone! This is the *only* evening for the week Fred hasn't been here."

CHAPTER XVI.

For England—Home—and Beauty!

The autumn has waned, and winter has set in with unusual rigour. Just at Christmas time the cold was severe; the frost had prevailed with unmitigated force for weeks; England was a paradise for skaters. People said to each other cheerily "We have got a regular old-fashioned winter!"—but they did not look as if they enjoyed it!

On one such day, close upon the festive season, Stephen St. Leger arrived in London, looking magnificent; his handsome face sunbrowned—his whole aspect instinct with buoyant life; one could look in his face, and read there a fulness of hope, and a promise of prosperity. Whether it was because he had just touched English ground, and was hastening at express speed to the very centre of the great globe itself; or whether because he had been successful in his under-

taking, to an extent that augured well for the perfection of his plans, may not be known. But certain it is, that if ever man thrilled with delight at a smoky, grimy, crowded railway station, while the thermometer was at five degrees below freezing point, and an east wind whistled through the great portals like a merciless foe, St. Leger rejoiced now to his heart's core. But he looked quite unnatural here amid frozen snow and white faces—those which were not white tinged with an unbecoming purple, or rendered most melancholy by the desertion of the blood from the cheeks and lips to the narrowed compass of the nose. Certainly people were looking horribly ugly—how indeed could they help it! And St. Leger's stalwart form, and bronzed face, and tawny, untrimmed beard attracted many a glance of admiration. He had no relations in London; they resided in a far-distant county, to which he paid periodical visits. Therefore, when the necessary business of the day had been concluded, and that was merely a matter of form—to put in an appearance at head-

quarters—he hurriedly dressed, dined, and put himself into a hansom cab.

"I don't suppose I can catch Hugh," thought he; "but I may as well call, and propose going home with him. I shan't feel that I have gained anything by my own resolution, or that I am rewarded for my self-restraint—I shan't feel that I have reached English ground again, until I have seen *her* face once more."

It is said that nothing succeeds like success, and the recollection of this aphorism inspirited him now.

"I shall, of course, be too tired to go anywhere else, if Hugh should have an engagement—and that's as true as the gospel; for I could not spend such a night as he is in the habit of passing, just now."

He had almost forgotten that it was Christmas time, until he found himself whirling through the gaily lighted streets; for, in the dull grey twilight, he had not observed the decorations of the shop windows. Now he saw it all, and it had a new charm for him.

"I feel just like a boy again," he said. "Good heavens! how *can* men sneer at Christmas pudding? If any ordinary quantity can produce indigestion in a stomach like that of an ostrich, I'll have it this year —by all that's glorious! Only a week, and then I must be off to the north. The mother would be sadly disappointed if I should not turn up this Christmas. Dear old soul! I wonder what she'll think of me now?"

It would be but a short holiday after all. Before Twelfth Day he would have to be in London again, and installed in his new office. He reminded himself that his week now was just a day short; that he had to unpack luggage, and rearrange his wardrobe, and get new and fashionable clothes, and pack his portmanteau for the home trip. There were all the dainty presents for his mother and sisters to be remembered. And there was one especial gift too, about which he hesitated. It was a tortoise-shell ornament of exquisite design, but of small intrinsic value; a gift which he associated in his mind's eye with Isabel's round, white arm.

He could not get her out of his mind for five minutes together.

Willoughby's office was closed. This, however, was a slight misfortune; St. Leger threw himself back upon the seat, and told the cabman to drive to —— Place. The cab had been going hitherto at a reasonable pace, but now commenced a difficulty—the horse stumbled, slipped, and nearly fell. After a few minutes the driver descended and began to lead the animal.

"Directly you get out of the traffic, sir, it's precious hard lines for the horses. Mine's a regular brick! and I can't bear to see him burst into a sweat of fear at every fresh slip. He'll go double as quick now he feels my hand."

"That I can quite believe," said St. Leger, in his good-natured jovial way. "I think you fellows ought to have double fare while this weather lasts."

The man touched his hat and laughed.

"I never went this way before," said St. Leger. "Are they cutting up London again with alterations? I am a stranger."

"No, sir; but this is a short cut, and we avoid a block at the market. Then we shall just cut out again behind the hospital."

"Ah! I see where you are now; we may save half an hour."

Certainly the scene was dreary enough, in these quiet streets, with meanly respectable houses all built in a straight line, and as much alike as the paving stones. The flickering gaslights, here only seen at rare intervals, helped to make the aspect of things more ghostly, for the mass of snow, which had not been cleared away, seemed to reflect the light without its yellow glow. There were great piles of snow on either side of the road; irregular heaps that lay in soiled purity, just as they had been roughly swept from the door steps. It was hard work to labour through this, but both man and horse took the task cheerfully.

"Is it any use my getting out?" asked St. Leger.

"Not in the least!" answered the cabman.

Here the traveller's eye was attracted by

the figure of a man on the footpath, a few yards in advance. The attitude was singularly familiar—could it be? There was no one else in the dingy street, and the figure appeared to be waiting at a door for admission. But no. The cab was now just opposite: the door of the house was open, and a woman was standing there—a pretty woman with light yellowish tangled hair, and a mass of tumbled curls falling down her back.

Going at this tardy pace, it was not difficult to see the face thoroughly; and, strangely enough, *this* was familiar too! The man's back was towards St. Leger; but, in the girl, he unmistakably recognised the face of one of the women he had seen several times at Colchester. Even the name came back to him readily, although the remembrance of the woman may never once have crossed his mind since he had seen her some eighteen months ago.

"Lottie Gardner!" he ejaculated.

He eagerly strained his eyes as the hansom slowly moved on. If he could only get one

glance at *his* face! The man half turned, and displayed his half-profile.

"It *is* Hugh Willoughby!"

St. Leger made a spasmodic attempt to stop the cab; then desisted, for he could now see Hugh's face; and it was clouded gloomily, and the eyes under their frowning brows were looking into the distance, and away from the girl.

St. Leger threw himself back, and drew a long breath. The suggestion of this being a chance meeting was forbidden; it was forbidden by his common-sense; although he repeatedly asked himself whether it could be possible that Willoughby was there on an errand of charity. But there was no appearance of destitution in this gaily dressed girl, whose dishevelled hair, bright ribbons, and glittering beads had aided St. Leger's recognition of Charlotte Gardner.

He was mystified—puzzled. It did not occur to him to change his course; Hugh's house was in existence, and there he intended to go. He drove the rest of the way in a trance, and was surprised when he

awoke to find that Mrs. Willoughby was at home.

He seemed even more unreal when he was shown into the bright, cheerful drawing-room, now decked with its warmest crimson reps, and lighted by a brilliantly sparkling lustre, and such a real English fire as he had not seen for many a day, with all the bright, glittering steel appendages which never seem to be required, but which nevertheless lend their charm to the enchantment and life like movement of a brilliantly blazing fire. And when he looked around at the pictured walls, and the homely English luxuries spread about; and when he saw the daintily attired lady, who rose to meet him with her pleasantest smile; and when he saw, too, that the work upon which she was employed—the braiding of a little child's dress—he absolutely shuddered at the contrasting remembrance of that dismal street, and that flaunting woman.

"I am *so* glad to see you!" said Alice heartily, and observing his shudder. "Ah! you're cold. And no wonder, coming as you

do from genial climes into this severe climate."

She drew him to the fire, and made him take a seat close by it.

"How well you are looking! Was it a little arrangement to take us by surprise? Hugh never told me you were expected. He said your return was quite uncertain."

"And so it was, Mrs. Willoughby. It wholly depended upon how quickly I could make other people do the work; and you'll admit that, under the circumstances, time was uncertain."

"I should think so!" she replied, with a smile.

There was a pink colour in her cheeks now from the surprise, and she was altogether a pleasant picture to look upon.

In this atmosphere St. Leger's spirits soon regained their tone. He liked Alice very much, and he was interested in her. And this was not wholly on account of Isabel; although he now commenced to glean some news of her.

In this case Alice appeared reticent; but

perhaps she only appeared so to him. She was only called upon to reply to commonplace allusions that politeness prevented from being direct questions. But he was so fervent, and so sanguine, that nothing any one could have said upon the subject of his hope would have seemed sufficient for him.

He, too, was reticent upon another point. He could not be brought to talk about Hugh; he felt that to be utterly impossible. He answered her casual remarks concerning her husband with brevity. But they found much to say notwithstanding.

When he had stayed an hour or more, it became almost hopeless to his mind that Hugh would arrive before he left.

"If she expects him, she will probably ask me to remain," he thought.

But she did not; and after a few minutes he arose, and asked her to give a short message to her husband on his arrival.

"You may give him notice, please, that he must prepare for an hour's interruption tomorrow morning—or bolt the office door."

Alice reflected for a moment—it might be

expected that she should ask him to stop and see her husband.

"It is just possible that Hugh may be home in a little while—but I can scarcely ask you to wait, he is so very uncertain."

St. Leger was watching her closely, as she hesitatingly framed the sentence. He seemed to know the words she ought to have been able to speak—the words that Isabel should be able to say of him one day he hoped.

"Thank you! no, I will not stay now. And you promise to show me the young lady I take so much interest in next time I come?"

This was an allusion to the baby he had remembered seeing at Eastbourne.

"If she were not in bed and asleep, she should answer for herself," replied the mother with a smile. "We shall see you very soon again, I hope?"

"I am going home just before Christmas Eve, and shall be here again in a fortnight from that time. You may rely upon seeing me then. I look to the renewal of our friendship, Mrs. Willoughby, with extreme plea-

sure. Believe me, there is no place in London where I feel so perfectly welcome, and at home, as in your house. May I be candid?" he said, with a kind of bluff ingenuousness, holding his fine figure erect to aid his boldness. "I have much to do within the next few days—but if you could mention any time —when you think it probable your sister may be here, I shall make a point of coming to see her before—before I leave."

She met this very broad hint with gracious kindness. She felt a real sympathy in both.

"I cannot be certain," she replied with perfect freedom, and perfect gravity. "We have a musical party on Thursday, and of course Isabel is expected, so it is more than probable she will be here. If you should find you have that evening to spare, then I may see you once more before the New Year. Then, good-bye," she said, as he extended his hand, and she gave him hers.

In another minute St. Leger was walking rapidly over the icy pavement, forgetting all necessary care in the proceeding.

"By Jove, this is a night one could skate

through the streets with pleasure! Oh! if I had a sweet wife like—like a woman I do know, and a comfortable chair, and a good fire—I'm hanged if I should be where Hugh is now!—no matter where that may be! She is looking a great deal older. She is a woman now, and not the girl she used to be. I should not like to see quite so much care in my wife's face."

He was not very discerning, but this critical remark was true. When in repose, Alice's face did betray a harassing care; though when she spoke or smiled the whole effect vanished. There was something inexpressively painful to him in the suggestions that were lurking in his mind. And he would fain have dismissed the whole recollection as an oppressive nightmare, but it would not be thus shaken off.

Before he had reached the hotel, where he was temporarily staying, that subject seemed to have taken possession of his mind; and though he retired to seek the rest he stood in need of quite early, and though he slept the sound peaceful sleep of wearied youth, he

awoke with an incongruous vision of Hugh and his wife standing apart, with the shadow of Charlotte Gardner hovering, like a bird of prey, between them. While he dressed, he wondered what was the fascination in the subject he could not banish.

He called, however, at Willoughby's office when the day was half spent—with a fixed resolution in his mind.

The two men met with the most genial pleasure ; Hugh was cordiality itself.

"Come in here, old fellow," he said, leading the way into a private apartment—cosy and warm with a capital fire, and a heap of newspapers beside an easy chair, which looked as if it had just lost its occupant. A cheerful, comfortable room, notwithstanding the imposing writing table, with its important drawers and desk. "This is where I take my matitudinal doze, you know, after I have disposed of the hardest work. There's as much play as work in this room—sometimes. There are occasions when I must be here, although there's nothing to do ; and then I read."

"You are true to your taste then. Do you still gratify the public with the results of your study?"

"I read more than ever—I can't get out of it somehow. But it takes a deal of time. Still you know I'm fond of going about; I can't stand much of the chimney corner. Now then, what shall it be? Had lunch? Of course! I should recommend a glass of my old brown sherry on such a day as this. What a night it was!"

"What a night! I slept because I was compelled. Nature insisted on her rights, but I swear it took a good hour to thaw me after I woke. Breakfast did it; coffee saved my life, or I should have been frozen stiff by this time. I was in bed by ten, and I neither moved nor stirred till eleven this morning"—

"Ah! you're prepared to stop up for a week straight off. I'll bet anything you were never in bed so early before."

"Perhaps not since I was under my mother's charge. But I found it a good remedy for a tired man, I can tell you. Well,

here's to everybody—from the Queen downwards."

"A true Christmas spirit," said Hugh, emptying his glass. "It's too late to wish you prosperity—you've as much as you can desire."

"There's a prosperity I haven't reached yet, with which the little god Cupid has to do. You may wish me luck there if you like."

"You must be a safe winner in that field."

"Thanks for your augury."

They roved from subject to subject, related news of each other and news of old friends, in fact recommenced their friendship most thoroughly.

It is a feeling of exquisite pleasure to find oneself, after a long absence, back among the scenes that, sometimes from habit only, are rendered dear to us. It is pleasant to see a well-known, familiar face; and St. Leger experienced every pleasure to its climax. But now, like a heavy shadow upon him was the recollection of that gloomy parting he

had witnessed in the bye-street. It was a fascination to him. He wheeled round and round all other subjects, and always came back to that irritating centre.

"I can't get off our old chums. Where's Staveley now? Got a rise, or still at ——shire?"

"Still there; but changed a bit, I think, by the rolling tide of time—getting rubbed down to the uniform pebble level. He will end in being the orthodox parson after all. He is devoted to the women of his family, and they will keep him in hand."

"It's all as well, considering his cloth. He was inclined to go the pace a little too rashly, although he was such a deucedly good fellow at heart. Do you ever see Grey now? I rather liked that man."

"Can't say I did," returned Hugh. "He was ordered off to Malta about six months ago. He took out a wife with him, so I suppose he's settled for a time."

"And reverting to Colchester brings me to young Seymour—what a rollicking young brick he was!"

"Well, there's news in that quarter. He came into his fortune and his title, and of course he's a tremendous swell now—quite outside my sphere."

"He was a downright honest youth. I hope he did not get into any entanglement with that pretty little girl—one of those women who were there, you may remember. She had her eye to business, I could see."

"Ah! you were afraid, my boy," said Hugh, with a slight satirical laugh. "You feared your own strength of resistance."

"Perhaps I did," said St. Leger simply.

He was thinking of somebody beside himself.

"Then you know who I mean. Let's see—what was her name? Lottie—something—wasn't it?"

St. Leger managed it very well, although he felt excessively awkward.

"Yes," replied Hugh evasively.

"You've seen her since I have, I suppose?"

St. Leger could not scrutinize his friend's

face as he spoke, or he would have seen a sudden, keen gleam from those penetrating eyes, and a compression of the lips that plainly bespoke suspicion.

"How do I know that? God knows where she may be!"

St. Leger was sensible of a sickening sensation at his heart. One does not like to give up one's own ideas—to falsify one's own beliefs. It is an unpleasant, and rather degrading, conviction that forces itself upon a man, when he discovers the friend he has deemed so honourable does not hesitate to tell a flagrant falsehood. He was hardly conscious of his next words.

"So you don't know anything about her?"

"No."

Very slowly, and very firmly, the word was uttered.

"Do you want information?" Hugh added, with an elevation of the eyebrows, and a half-smile with just a shade of sarcasm in it.

At this St. Leger laughed rather boiste-

rously, and made a joking reply, because it was the easiest thing to do. And then he hastily rattled off into another topic.

"But," thought he, "that is a direct lie, and no man would lower himself to it without a strong motive. So there *is* something wrong!"

Hugh's inimitable coolness, his acknowledged cleverness, his general assumption of superiority, had been generally admitted; and this very fact now aroused a spirit of curiosity in St. Leger which he never stayed to analyse. Indeed he was not addicted to casuistry, or self-analysis, at any time; he was governed mostly by feeling. Perhaps it was not an incapacity of reasoning power produced this, but rather that his natural inclinations were governed by an unconscious conscientiousness. When he discovered, even in a moment of action, that he was wrong, he invariably withdrew from the matter with the utmost haste and made every necessary retraction, with a degree of modesty and actual shame which was positively childlike in its simplicity.

With all his charming exterior, and all his fascinations of manner, he was not a vain man. He was rather inclined to depreciate than to overrate his own value. And it was more this modesty, than anything else, which had caused him to doubt his acceptability to Isabel.

"I am no diplomatist," said he, colouring violently through his brown skin, as he remembered how near he had been to playing the part of one; "but I want to—see your wife. At least I have seen her—I mean her sister."

Of course both men laughed.

"Upon my word, Steve, you are as confused as a schoolboy—with his first sweetheart!"

"Say what you like," said St. Leger boldly; "I am proud of my modesty—and proud of my choice too. I don't want to deny the position."

"Well, you have a fair field, and no rivals —as far as I know."

"As far as you know?" echoed St. Leger thoughtfully.

He did not know that he infused a strong meaning in this trivial remark. The involuntary suggestion had been concerning Hugh, and the rival his wife had.

"I hope," he went on earnestly, "that I shall always know if I have a rival. There's no earthly chance of Isabel having one, thank God!"

Hugh's eyebrows ascended to an alarming extent, and a colour rarely seen there came into his face. He laughed, and his laugh was harsh and grating, as he replied—

"A real authentic lover's speech! Of course every man, and woman too, thinks that. But few men, I think, have the gift of thorough, undeviating devotion."

"Do you think so—really?" St. Leger asked curiously. "I don't want to fancy myself an exceptional being. You were always a cynic, you know."

"I never had your hot-brained impulsiveness, nor your ingenuous candour, nor your belief in the general goodness of humanity, Steve. We are dissimilar characters—and

perhaps you have the best of me. I'll give you a chance with your fair one—and all I can say is, if *you* don't win—I'd like to see the man who could!"

END OF VOL. I.

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