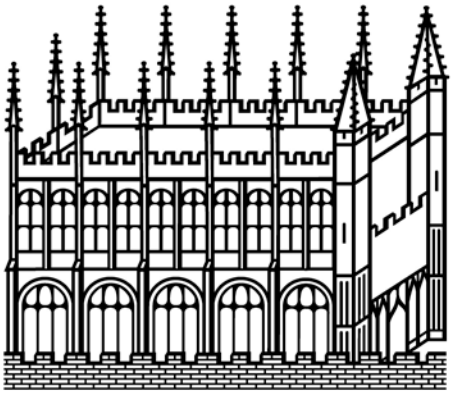
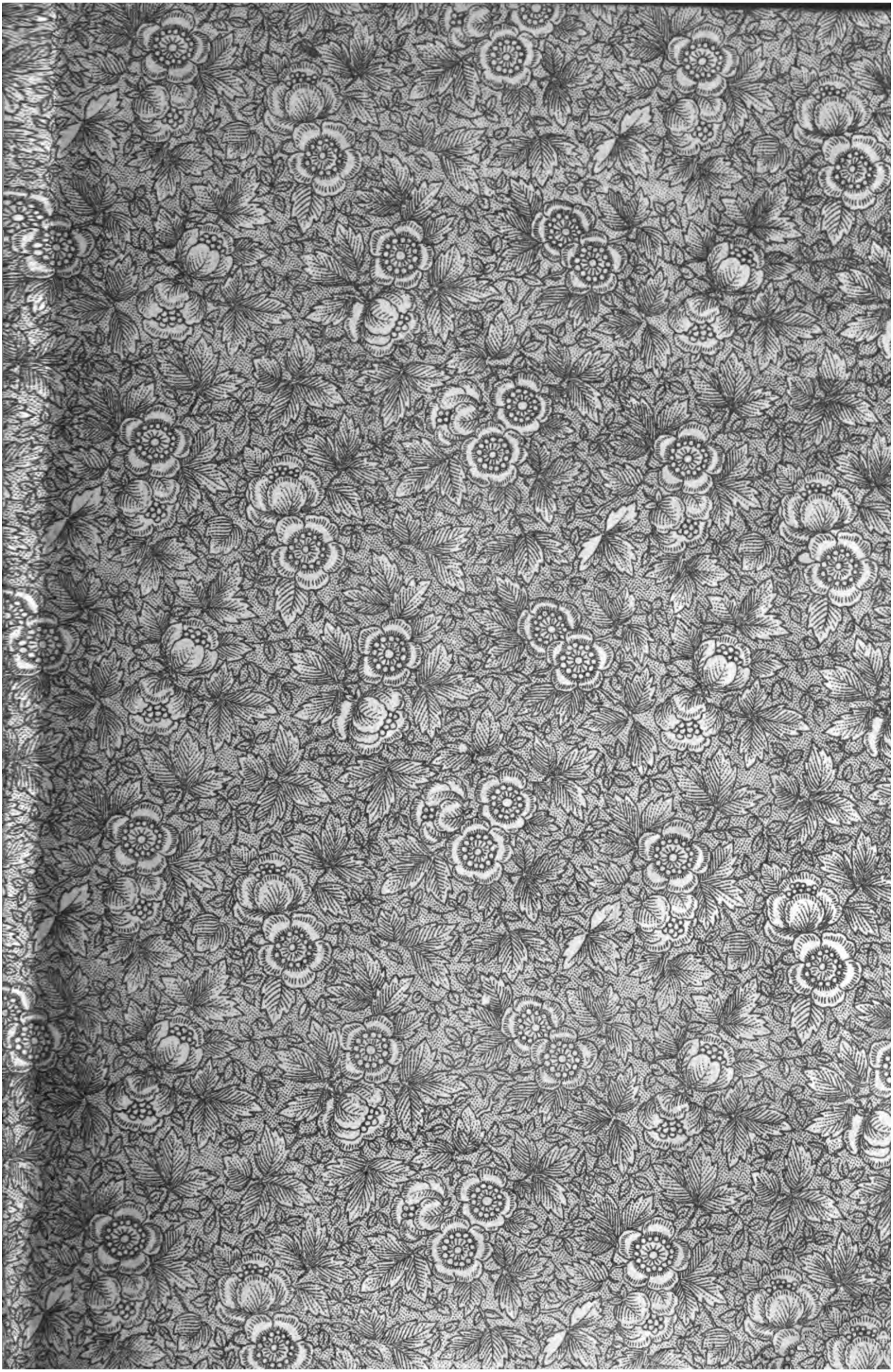


Was Hers The Fault?

By the Author of "Wooing A Sweetbriar"



WAS HERS THE FAULT?

A NOVEL.

BY

L O L O,

AUTHOR OF "A CRUEL SECRET," "WOOING A SWEETBRIAR,"
ETC., ETC.

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WAS HERS THE FAULT?

CHAPTER I.

THE ITALIAN ARTIST.

IT was towards the close of July, about a month after the arrival of the bride and bridegroom in Lynborough, that they received an invitation to spend a week at Lowsworth with Lord and Lady Nashville. It was a great relief to Ida to escape, even for a few days, from the petty worries and the extreme dulness of her new home, and she looked brighter than she usually did (which, however, was not saying much) as she set out, seated by her husband's side in the pretty "Victoria," for Lowsworth. But a parting

glance at her mother-in-law's face sufficed completely to damp her unusual spirits. The old lady was regarding her with an expression which reminded her forcibly that it was hardly good taste for her to show her relief at escaping from her husband's home, so openly; and in an instant the smile faded from her lips, and a rather frightened look stole into her eyes, as she glanced timidly at her husband to see whether he too had noticed her unusual gaiety and been hurt by it. But Ned himself was in higher spirits than usual at the prospect of the change before him, and it never struck him as odd that Ida should feel as he did; on the contrary, he would have thought it odd had she not looked brighter than usual.

"I feel like a schoolboy out for a holiday," he said, throwing himself back beside her, and crossing his knees. "Lowsworth is an awfully jolly house to stay in; I'm sure you'll like it. It seems a shame to be glad to get away from the poor old mother, doesn't it? but I'm afraid we won't find our present arrangement of living with her answer long."

"Why not?" asked Ida quickly.

"I'm afraid the life will be too dull for you, dear.'

"Is that all?" she said, shooting a swift, suspicious glance at him.

"Pretty nearly. It will be easy enough to

avoid giving offence to her friends after the first; the great difficulty is in taking up our proper position to begin with; but my mother is accustomed to lead a quiet life, and does not like to have her house overrun by strangers, and I am afraid you will find it terribly dull with her."

Ida played with the tassel of her parasol in silence, not knowing what to say. She did not want her husband to think she had been anything but happy during the last month spent under his mother's roof; and yet she *did* feel her present life dull, and could not but rejoice at the prospect of removing to a house of her own.

"I should be very glad, for various reasons, if we could manage to get on with my mother," continued Ned presently. "In the first place, it would grieve her dreadfully to part with us; and then we should not be nearly so well off if we set up housekeeping for ourselves. However, that will be for you to decide. We must stay some time with my mother, as we are settled with her now (and also to let your father see that we have given his plan a fair trial); but if, at the end of a twelvemonth or so, you think you would be happier with a small establishment of your own—why, you shall have it. I say this because I have fancied that you looked rather

bored sometimes lately, dear ; and I don't want you to think that you will be bound to live with my mother for ever, unless you are happy with her."

Ida's heart sank at this speech. "Twelve months or so" appears a terribly long time to us when we are only seventeen and a-half, and Ida shivered at the prospect of spending all that time as she had spent the last month ; nor did the knowledge that Ned had noticed her low spirits tend to comfort her. If he began to suspect that she was unhappy, what would the end of it be ?

"Indeed, I am perfectly happy, dear," she protested hastily ; and then she turned the conversation to other things, and laughed and talked in a way that both surprised and delighted her husband.

It was five o'clock when the Huntingdons reached Lowsworth, and were marshalled by a solemn butler, between a couple of canary footmen, through a large hall, hung round with antlers, and with a stuffed tiger and one or two other handsome monsters, shot by Lord Nashville himself, ranged round it ; up a flight of broad, velvet-carpeted stairs to a large drawing-room, where several people were assembled, drinking afternoon tea, and laughing and talking a good deal louder than was quite necessary.

Lady Nashville, a little, fair, delicate-looking woman of five-and-twenty, rose from her chair beside the tea-tray, and advanced to meet her guests. She was dressed in a short lawn-tennis costume, of which the principal colour seemed to be yellow; and she wore her fair hair cut short and curled, and parted on one side like a boy's. Her face was very plain, though her figure was good, and her hands and feet small. But what struck one most at first was her voice, which was loud and harsh, and which one could scarcely credit with belonging to such a small, delicate-looking woman. Her manner was frank, free, and *dégagé*, and utterly wanting in that repose which is supposed to mark the cast of Vere de Vere. On the contrary, she appeared more like a hoydenish school-girl of eighteen than a Viscountess of five-and-twenty; and her greatest amusement was to inform people (often perfect strangers) of her real age, and see the unmistakable surprise which the announcement invariably caused them. Yet if any one presumed to take advantage of her little ladyship's apparent good nature, they found themselves speedily snubbed and put back in their proper place—for who knows how to be insolent to such perfection as your "fine lady"?

"How d'you do?" she inquired, in her

frank, off-hand manner, as she shook Ida's hand. "How do, Ned? You look rather as if you'd been baked. You ought to have borrowed half of your wife's parasol; *she* looks cool enough. Come and have some tea," and she led the way back to the group of tea-drinkers, whom she introduced to Ida (Ned knew most of them already), and amongst whom was Kate L'Estrange, who also happened to be spending a few days with her cousin. Lady Nashville pushed a low chair towards Ida, and then threw herself into one beside it in a negligent attitude.

"Colonel Vernor, pour out a cup of tea for Mrs Huntingdon," she said, addressing a tall, fine-looking man of five-and-thirty or forty, who was lolling against the chimney-piece, doing nothing in particular. "I am tired to death of pouring out tea; this hot weather makes you all so abominably thirsty."

Colonel Vernor hastened to obey, and after handing Ida her tea, lingered near her, and made several agreeable remarks. He knew that he was supposed to be Lady Nashville's sworn cavalier, but he thought that he would like to make friends with this pretty little Italian girl too. She was the prettiest thing he had seen for a long time, he decided, and her style was uncommon. Her manner, too, was charmingly sweet and gracious after the loud, fast

style of many of the ladies present (for Lowsworth was a fast house, and was frequented by rather a fast set), and her pretty foreign accent contrasted favourably with the harsh tones of Lady Nashville, who was sitting next her. Just now they sounded harsher than usual, for Ned had inquired where Nashville was, and her ladyship was replying, with rather a strained laugh, that she did not know; Nashville did not often trouble to tell her where he spent his afternoons—nor did she care to inquire.

If common report said truly, the Nashvilles were not a particularly happy couple. She had been the only child and heiress of a wealthy commoner, and her husband had married her solely for her money, and had never made the smallest pretence of caring for her. They did not quarrel much, but neither did they get on particularly well. He went his way, and she hers, avoiding each other as much as possible by mutual consent, and thus avoiding the cat and dog life which they must otherwise have led.

"Are you a good hand at charades and *tableaux vivants?*" asked her ladyship, wheeling round upon Ida with a suddenness that slightly startled the latter.

"I have never taken part in any," she replied, smiling.

"Because we are getting some up for Wed-

nesday evening. Ned used to be a great dab at acting, I remember; so he must be pressed into service."

"In so short a time?" protested Ned, laughing.

"Nonsense, Ned," said Kate L'Estrange promptly; "don't begin to give yourself airs. This is only Monday; surely two days are sufficient for you to collect your wits. We are short of good actors."

"I am sure *you* act, Mrs Huntingdon," said Colonel Vernor, bending towards Ida, and speaking in low persuasive tones — though *why* he should throw all that amount of persuasion into his voice I cannot really tell— certainly the subject under discussion did not call for it.

"Are you?" replied Ida, with a sweet but rather absent smile. "Why?"

"I don't know; somehow I can't imagine your failing in anything," returned the handsome colonel, gazing admiringly into Ida's beautiful eyes. But she turned them discreetly away, as she replied, with a light laugh, that she feared he was mistaken, for that she was certain she could not act. She saw that he wanted to strike up a sentimental friendship or flirtation with her, but she had not the smallest intention of gratifying him and so risk vexing Ned. It was just one of those

trifling incidents which may lead to everything or nothing.

It was only natural for a girl of seventeen to be gratified by seeing that a handsome man like Colonel Vernor admired her and thought her "awfully pretty;" and how many foolish young things have drawn terrible unhappiness upon themselves, simply through lacking the strength of mind to repel such admiration in the beginning, and to resist the temptation of seeking to win more of it afterwards! But Ida, though she had never been able to indulge in the sweets of flirtation hitherto, and was therefore all the more liable to be intoxicated by them now, knew what it was to have real anxiety to bear, and had no wish to increase her burden by annoying Ned—poor Ned, who was always so good to her! So when Colonel Vernor looked at her in a way that told her deferentially, but plainly, that he thought her charming, she wisely looked in the opposite direction; and the gallant colonel instantly changed his tactics and joined in the general conversation. He generally made a point of fighting shy of newly-married brides—they were so terribly conscious as a rule; and if they happened to be at all in love, they had eyes and ears for no one but their husband, and kept looking across the room at him all the time they were

pretending to listen to you. But little Mrs Huntingdon was so pretty that Vernor had made an exception in her favour. He was half amused and half chagrined to see the quiet way in which she declined his attentions, and he wondered whether she was very much in love with her husband. It was difficult to say; evidently she did not care to flirt with any one else, but she hardly seemed to notice when Miss L'Estrange called Huntingdon by his Christian name, and—surely there was rather a pathetic expression in her dark eyes.

"Your husband says you do not act, Mrs Huntingdon," said Lady Nashville (Ned strongly objected to his wife's acting Juliet to another fellow's Romeo, as Lady Nashville had just been suggesting), "but you *must* help us with the *tableaux.* We are in want of pretty people. We have got an artist here—*so* handsome, isn't he, Kate? He is repainting some of those old portraits that were half burnt, and my husband has him staying in the house. He is the most delightful guest—plays, and sings, and dances, and makes himself awfully agreeable. I am glad his painting will keep him here for some time. He is a compatriot of yours, Mrs Huntingdon; his name is Count Luigi Olivetti, and his father was a political re-

fugee. He is of good family, but is obliged to paint for his living, poor— Why, Mrs Huntingdon, you are ill! Get some water —ring for some, Colonel Vernor; she is going to faint."

Ida was, indeed, leaning back in her seat, looking so terribly white and ill that every one was alarmed. For several minutes she was utterly unable to move or speak, but then, with a great effort, she recovered herself, and after she had swallowed a little cold water, she declared herself to be perfectly recovered.

"But what was it, dear? You never used to faint like that," said Ned, still bending anxiously over her.

"Of course, I faint sometimes—every one does," said Ida, smiling faintly. "I felt the sun on my head driving here—I suppose that was it."

"You had better go to your room, and get a rest before dinner," said Lady Nashville kindly, and Ida thankfully grasped at the suggestion; but when she attempted to rise, she found she was trembling so that she could hardly stand, and Ned had to support her on his arm up to her room, where he left her, after arranging her tenderly on the sofa.

He looked in again on his way to dress for dinner, and was relieved to find that she

was up, and preparing to go down to dinner. She looked very white as she went downstairs leaning on his arm, but she seemed perfectly composed, and declared that she was quite well.

Lord Nashville was in the drawing-room when they entered, and he shook hands cordially with Ida, and said he was sorry to hear she had been "rather knocked up" just now. He was a tall, spare, dark man, with by no means the pleasantest of manners; but he and Ned were old allies, and he was disposed to be civil to his friend's bride; besides which, her good looks predisposed him in her favour.

"It was all those terrible wild beasts of yours downstairs that frightened me," she replied with a little laugh.

"Ha, ha! Shot them all myself, Mrs Huntingdon—fine lot, aren't they?" laughed his lordship. "Do you remember, Ned, that night when we put the tiger just inside old Lady Twaddle's door before she went up to bed; and she took hysterics, and nearly screamed the house down? Ha, ha!"

"I am glad to see you are so much better," said Lady Nashville, sweeping up to Ida, who hardly recognised her, now that she was arrayed in a sweeping train and soft laces. She looked more like a Viscountess than she had done in her short yellow tennis dress,

which scarcely reached her ankles; but her manner was as brusque and off-hand as ever, as she turned round to introduce the young man beside her to the bride.

"You two ought to be friends," she said, waving her fan towards the gentleman and addressing Ida; "you are both Italian. Count Olivetti—Mrs Huntingdon. Mrs Huntingdon is going to help us with our *tableaux*, Count."

The Count, a magnificently handsome young fellow of three or four and twenty, bowed profoundly, but in silence; while the bride just bent her graceful head, and then turned to speak to Kate L'Estrange, who was standing near. But Kate was not fond of wasting her conversation upon ladies, and after replying politely to Ida's remark, she turned deliberately to Count Olivetti, with whom she seemed to be upon the best of terms; whereupon Ida moved away to a sofa at a little distance where she remained till dinner was announced.

Why was it that the bride looked so pale and silent all through dinner? Do what she would, she could not drive that suffering, *haunted* look out of her eyes, and all she could do was to keep them lowered as much as possible, to prevent any one's noticing their expression. Kate L'Estrange was seated just

opposite her, between the handsome artist and Ned Huntingdon, who had handed her in. She was talking to them both, in her liveliest manner; she knew that in evening dress Ida utterly eclipsed her; but she could talk to Ned about horses and sport and similar (to him) interesting topics, about which she supposed Ida would naturally be entirely ignorant. She did not want to make mischief, but she didn't want to let his wife take the shine out of her, and couldn't resist making herself particularly pleasant to him. But when, by-and-by, she noticed the slightly pained expression on the bride's face, she instantly turned from Ned to the artist, with whom she continued to carry on a low-toned *empressé* conversation, till the ladies rose from the table. In the drawing-room she seated herself beside Ida, and was relieved to find that the latter was quite ready to make friends with her, and did not seem disposed to resent her little flirtation (if flirtation it could be called) with Ned Huntingdon. Kate was glad of this, for she was rather inclined to like the young wife, and not being really ill-natured, she would have been sorry to make the latter unhappy. But as soon as the gentlemen reappeared, her manner became *distrait* and restless, and she answered Ida's remarks carelessly and with evident uninterest, till, after

a few minutes, Count Olivetti approached her, and seated himself directly in front of her and Ida. Then she brightened up, and laughed and talked gaily, while Mrs Huntingdon leant back and fanned herself in silence. She and the artist did not seem disposed to fraternise, in spite of their common nationality, and very few words passed between them all that evening; but once or twice Ida's eyes met his fixed upon her with an expression that made her tremble; nor did she feel much happier as she watched his devotion to Kate L'Estrange—a devotion which seemed anything but disagreeable to that young lady.

CHAPTER II.

LOVE OR RICHES?

THE following morning Ida still looked so pale and dark-eyed, that Ned was seriously alarmed, and worried her not a little by his well-meant efforts to find out what ailed her. He suggested sending for a doctor, but to this she resolutely objected, and at last he ceased to question her, though she felt that he was still watching her anxiously. This consciousness, so far from gratifying her, only served to make her nervous and irritable; but she did her best to conceal her feelings, and contrived to appear tolerably cheerful during breakfast. Lady Nashville, who was a great horsewoman, and rode regularly every morning, invited her to accompany her on her ride; but Ida replied that she had never mounted a horse in her life, and also confessed that she

would be terribly afraid to do so. At this there was a universal laugh, and Lord Nashville declared that Ned must teach her to ride.

"It would never do for a Nimrod like Ned to have a wife who couldn't ride," he said loudly. "Why, I consider riding is one of the most important things in a woman's education."

Considering that Ida had just confessed her entire ignorance of the art of horsemanship, this speech was hardly in good taste; but his lordship's tact was not of the nicest. He was fond of making jokes at other people's expense, and Ida's ignorance of many English ways and customs made her a capital butt for his not particularly delicate wit. Accordingly, that same morning, when Ida, standing by the open drawing-room window, happened to admire a lark's singing, he informed her that the *correct* name for that bird was a mud-lark.

"Why they call 'em *mud*-larks, I can't tell, he added, "but they always do, you know."

So at luncheon Ida innocently informed Lady Nashville that she had heard such a lovely little mud-lark singing that morning, and added that it had been so high up in the sky that she had been unable to see it Whereupon Lord Nashville, with the charming disregard for other people's feelings for which his countrymen are celebrated, burst into a loud "ha, ha," in which he was speedily joined by most of his

guests. Lady Nashville, as hostess, restrained her mirth with some difficulty, though she could not prevent herself smiling.

"Never mind, my dear," she said kindly to the bewildered Ida, "that dreadful fellow" (indicating her husband) "has only been playing you one of his tricks; he is always playing tricks on somebody or other, so you mustn't mind him."

Whereupon Ida laughed too; but she coloured somewhat, and did not feel particularly comfortable, especially as, for the remainder of her visit, her host continued to chaff her good-naturedly about her "lovely little mud-lark."

In the afternoon the party dispersed in different directions, Lady Nashville and several others going out driving, while some of the younger guests amused themselves at lawn tennis. Among the latter were Miss L'Estrange and Ned Huntingdon, and Ida elected to sit on a shady seat near the courts, and watch them.

"Come, Mrs Huntingdon, won't you take a hand?" said Kate, coming up to her, after she and Ned had brought their third set to a triumphant conclusion, and their opponents had given up playing in disgust.

"I should only spoil your game," replied Ida, who did not see the fun of taking so much exertion in hot weather.

"Do try, Ida," urged Ned. "Never mind if you play badly; we all played badly when we began."

"Oh, please, I would so much rather watch you," pleaded Ida; and Kate L'Estrange, who had only invited her to play because urged by Ned to do so, and who did not wish to have her own game spoilt by a beginner, told Ned not to tease his wife, since she evidently did not wish to play. "And I should think she'd find it rather hard work playing in that dress," she added, as she and Ned moved back towards their court; and as she spoke she cast a somewhat contemptuous glance at Ida's trailing skirts, which contrasted strongly with her own neat cream-coloured tennis costume, which showed off the perfect lines of her figure as well as any riding-habit could have done.

"I don't think she cares much about any outdoor games," replied Ned.

"So it appears. She can't ride, or play lawn tennis, or billiards; and she can't skate, and doesn't care for walking—what *does* she do?"

"She can sing, for one thing," said Ned quietly.

"Oh, can she?" said Kate indifferently. She neither played nor sang herself; and as Lady Nashville and many of her guests spent

their evenings in the billiard-room, and voted singing a bore, as putting a stop to talking, Ida had not been asked to perform the previous evening. "Yes, that is just what I should imagine her doing. She can sing; and wear a pretty costume gracefully; and sit in graceful attitudes, doing nothing. Now, my accomplishments are of quite a different order. I can go across country as well as you yourself, Mr Ned; and I can often manage to beat you at lawn tennis; and as for my skating and dancing, I think you won't find any better in the country. I'm a conceited young person, am I not? But what *is* the good of talking nonsense, and pretending that you can't do things, when you know perfectly that you can? I call that sort of thing awful affectation, don't you?"

Ned assented, looking rather amused by his companion's frankness, though, at the beginning of her speech, he had been inclined to resent her rather slighting mention of his wife; but he could not continue to be angry with her when she looked at him so pleasantly out of her great, clear grey eyes.

One of the gentlemen against whom they were to play had gone into the house in search of a fresh pair of tennis shoes (the sole of one of his having, according to the disagreeable manner of tennis shoes, suddenly come off), and

while awaiting his return they were standing in the shade, at a little distance from Ida, Kate idly swinging her bat to and fro as she talked.

"There is Colonel Vernor talking to your wife," she continued. "He evidently admires her immensely—and no wonder! But she looks as demure as a nun. Good little thing, I should think it would take a good deal to make her flirt. I always fancied that, as a rule, foreign ladies were such tremendous flirts!"

"So are some English ones," returned Ned drily.

"Oh, some of our fastest girls in England make the best wives, once they are married. But abroad the girls are locked up so strictly, that it's only natural they should make up for it afterwards. Now I don't suppose your wife was allowed to amuse herself with the mildest little flirtation till she met you, consequently she's far more likely to have her head turned by that handsome Colonel's attentions than I should be, who have flirted ever since I was a child in short petticoats."

"I don't quite see the point of your remark," said Ned, in the stiffest tone he could assume.

"Don't you?" asked Kate innocently, with a light laugh, and affecting not to perceive

his annoyance. She hesitated a moment before proceeding. She had a little spite against Ned, but she rather liked Ida. How was she to give the former a stab without sowing any real mischief between him and his wife? "The point of my remark is that your wife is a little treasure," she said lightly. "Of course, this is the first opportunity she has ever had of really amusing herself, but I am certain that nothing will induce her to amuse herself at the risk of vexing you. All the same, if I were a man, I'd rather marry a girl who had had her fling, and was ready to settle down into a quiet wife, than a little thing fresh from the schoolroom, who had had none of the nonsense knocked out of her, and who believed that every silly compliment a man paid her was meant in serious earnest. Your Ida is an exception. I can't conceive where she has got her sense from. But, taking girls as a *rule*, I think the fast ones often make the best wives."

"In fact, she thinks I should have done better to marry her than Ida," thought Ned, with an inward smile; but he returned no answer whatever to Miss L'Estrange's last remark, and she stood swinging her racket rather awkwardly (for her) till Mr Grey rejoined them, and they proceeded with their game.

Later on in the afternoon, Kate slipped her arm through Ida's, and led her into the then deserted drawing-room, saying she wanted to hear her sing. In point of fact, she wished to be in the room when Mr Proctor, who was coming to spend from Tuesday to Friday at Lowsworth, arrived, and she did not care to sit in it alone; so she drew Ida into it, and made her sing her a couple of songs, to which she listened with a certain amount of admiration, though as a rule she was not fond of music; and then she expressed herself too lazy to move, and bid Ida sit down and chat to her.

"I may call you 'Ida,' mayn't I?" she said. "It seems so absurd to call you 'Mrs Huntingdon' when I call your husband 'Ned,' —you see I've known him all my life."

"Yes, please call me Ida; I would much rather you did," returned Ida readily.

"Well then, Ida, what do you think of England and the English, now that you find yourself among them?"

"I have found them very kind to me," returned Ida, smiling. "And I think the English young ladies are very pretty."

"I shouldn't think there were many pretty girls in Lynborough," said Kate contemptuously. "Don't you find it very stupid living there?"

"Oh no; I have been very happy there.

And there are some very pretty girls in Lynborough—some Miss Carrs."

"Oh, the Carrs! Do you like them?"

"Yes, very much. They are cousins of Ned's."

"No, they are not, my dear. I know all about them, though I am not personally acquainted with them; Mrs Carr is old Mrs Huntingdon's cousin certainly, but the girls are only Ned's second cousins, and second cousins count for nothing."

"Ned is very fond of them."

"Now, Ida, may I give you a little bit of advice?"

"Certainly."

"And you won't be offended?"

"Oh no; I am sure I require advice," said poor Ida, with something very like a sigh.

"I am sure you do, and that is why I want to give you some. I don't think Ned is *fond* of those Carrs, as you said just now; but he is ridiculously friendly with them, and if you take my advice you will do all you can to separate him from them."

"But why?"

"Why! Can't you see the sort of people they are? How will you like, when you are Lady Huntingdon and live at Tyndale, to have to invite them to your house, and have

them running in and out all day long, as if they were part of the family?"

Ida confessed to herself that she did *not* admire the prospect, but she maintained a discreet silence, and Kate proceeded,—

"That's what it will come to, I warn you, unless you contrive to draw Ned away from them. However, of course you must please yourself. You aren't vexed with me for speaking as I have, are you?"

"Oh no," returned Ida quietly; but Kate could not make out much from her tone.

"It's a pity those Carr girls don't marry, and go away out of this part of the country. It's a wonder they don't marry, considering how pretty they are."

"It seems to me that a great many young ladies in England don't marry."

"No; you see we are allowed to manage those things for ourselves here, and the consequence is that we very often don't manage to get married at all."

"Still, it is a great thing to be free."

"No doubt; and we get lots of fun while we are young. Do you care for flirting?"

What a question! Ida looked as if she hardly knew whether to resent it as an insult or laugh it off as a joke.

"I am awfully fond of it," continued Kate frankly, clasping her hands behind her head,

and gazing lazily up at the ceiling. "I've had a good deal of it too. I began with my brother's school-friends, when I was a child, and have gone on ever since; it's just one of those amusements that one never gets tired of. Heigho, I don't know that it pays in the end though. Unless I marry before my father dies, I may have to go out as a governess. What do you say to that?"

"I am sure you will marry," said Ida politely, though she felt her breath almost taken away by Miss L'Estrange's words. This was her first encounter with a fast young lady, you see.

"It's just as likely that I shall do nothing of the sort," replied Kate, with a light laugh. "I'm not at all sure that I appreciate the advantages of freedom. I'm sure I would be very glad if my parents could take the trouble of finding a husband off my hands, French fashion."

Still Ida was silent, not knowing what to say; and Kate, bringing her eyes down from the ceiling, was amused by the grave expression of her face.

"I see I have shocked you," she laughed. "No, don't protest; you are quite right to be shocked, I suppose. I daresay, if I *were* locked up like a French demoiselle, I shouldn't like it at all; but, you see, no one is ever contented."

"I think that, on the whole, you have no need to be discontented," said Ida gravely.

Here there was a step in the passage outside, and Kate, who was sitting opposite the half-open door (she had left it open on purpose), called out eagerly to the person who was passing outside, to come in and speak to them.

"So you have done painting at last," she said, as the artist (for it was he) entered the room. "I am sure you work yourself to death over it."

Olivetti seated himself close to Kate, and replied that the charm of her society more than refreshed him after his work. He did not take much notice of Mrs Huntingdon, but addressed himself in an *empressé* manner to Kate ; and Ida, after lingering a few minutes, rose quietly and left the room, thereby causing Miss L'Estrange to vote her "awfully good-natured."

But soon others began to drop in, and then, about five o'clock, Mr Proctor arrived, tall and pompous, and rather inclined to be offended because neither Lord or Lady Nashville were waiting to receive him. But Kate welcomed him very prettily, and assured him that Lady Nashville would be home from her drive almost immediately ; and in the meantime she (Kate) did her best to put the stiff gentleman

into a good temper. She had followed the advice of Lady Huntingdon and Lady Nashville during the last month, and prudently refrained from offending Mr Proctor by flirting with any one else; but during the last week which she had been spending at Lowsworth, a great friendship had sprung up between her and the handsome Italian artist, and now she found the task of making herself agreeable to Mr Proctor more disagreeable and difficult than usual. But she did her work bravely, nevertheless, and took no further notice of Olivetti, though now and then she met his dark eyes fixed on her with what she imagined to be an expression of mournful reproach in them. She felt a strange thrill run through her whenever she encountered this gaze, but she pulled herself sharply together, and told herself that this sort of nonsense must come to an end at once. It was all very well to flirt a little with the handsome Italian, but it would never do for her to fall in love with him when such a chance as Mr Proctor was lying at her feet.

Poor Kate! She acted according to her lights, and only obeyed the teachings she had always received, in thus stifling her natural affections—and, after all, who shall say whether she was right or wrong? Certainly she was *wise* to act as she was just now doing. Lady Nashville was in hopes that Mr Proctor would

be brought to the point of proposing, now that he met Kate among her great relatives (it was with this object that she had invited him to Lowsworth), and it would be the height of folly for the girl to ruin all her chances by letting her rich admirer see her friendship for Olivetti. And Kate felt this, and strove for once in her life to be *prudent*.

At dinner she sat next Mr Proctor, and she made herself doubly agreeable to him, because, on his other hand, sat a Miss Brierly, a young lady who had done her best to win the rich man away from Kate. Even now, though Mr Proctor made no secret of his preference for Miss L'Estrange, Miss Brierly was on the alert, ready to strike into the conversation the instant Kate suffered it to flag; and this rivalry had the effect of making the latter exert herself in a way that nothing else could have done. Yet all the time she was talking to Mr Proctor, she kept furtively watching Count Olivetti, who was seated by Ida (Lady Nashville had taken care to separate him from Kate) on the opposite side of the table. He was talking lightly and pleasantly to his neighbour, who leant back in her seat, looking very pale, and eating nothing, but still holding her head proudly erect, and answering all the artist's remarks with quiet dignity and composure. Kate fancied that she did not care to talk to him

because he was only an artist, and she felt quite touchy on his account, and took an opportunity of telling Ida, later in the evening, that Count Olivetti's family was a very good one, and that it was only his poverty that compelled him to paint. To which Ida replied by a careless "Indeed!" and quietly changed the subject.

All that evening Mr Proctor was pleased to devote himself to Kate. As Lady Nashville had anticipated, he felt more amicably disposed towards that young lady than ever, now that he met her in her cousin's house, and saw the intimate terms she was on with him and his wife; and not once in the whole course of the evening did he quit her side, or give her an opportunity of speaking to Olivetti. Of course she was elated by this conduct on his part; yet she grew very restless as the evening advanced and she saw Olivetti devoting himself to Miss Brierly. Evidently he saw that he was supplanted by Mr Proctor, and evidently he was quite ready to acquiesce in his fate. Of course Kate ought to have been thankful that he did not attempt to approach her in the richer suitor's presence, yet she could not prevent herself feeling very sore at his desertion.

CHAPTER III.

A SUSPICIOUS RECOGNITION.

THE next day—Wednesday—every one was very busy about the play and the *tableaux* which were to take place in the evening; and as Miss L'Estrange took a prominent part in both, she was much occupied all day, and was thus able to escape from Mr Proctor's attentions. She was angry with herself when she found what a relief this was to her, and she was not altogether comfortable when she reflected that Mr Proctor was left to Miss Brierly's companionship. Lady Nashville overheard the latter informing Mr Proctor that Miss L'Estrange was "really quite in love with that Italian artist, about whom Lady Nashville made such a ridiculous fuss;" and it would be hard to say whether her ladyship was most indignant at the part of this speech which referred to

herself or to Kate. She instantly betook herself to the latter's room, and told her what she had heard, and vented some of her indignation by giving Kate a lecture.

"You see what your flirting leads to," she said severely. "Mr Proctor will be sure to watch you now, he is so jealous; so you must be careful not to flirt with Count Olivetti any more."

Kate said nothing, but she sighed so profoundly that Lady Nashville exclaimed laughingly,—

"Why, Kate, surely you have not lost your heart to a man you have only known ten days?"

At which Kate laughed too, but in rather a strained way.

The theatricals went off that evening as well as amateur performances usually do. Kate L'Estrange and Ned Huntingdon were the best actors, and the others did fairly well. The little theatre was very pretty, and the dresses of the actors magnificent, and the audience good-naturedly overlooked any little imperfections there might be in the acting. But the great success of the evening were the four *tableaux* which succeeded the play. Olivetti, being an artist, had been invested by Lady Nashville with full power to arrange them as he pleased, though she had herself suggested many of the subjects, and had interfered not a little with his arrangements.

The first *tableau* was "The Artist's Dream." Olivetti was the artist, and very handsome he looked in his Vandyke costume, stretched, as if in sleep, on a crimson velvet sofa. Above him floated an angel (Kate), with one white hand raised, pointing upwards. She was not in a very angelic frame of mind, poor girl, nor was her position at all comfortable. The back of the stage was hung with two crimson blankets, the lower one being a little in advance of the upper one. Between them was placed a step-ladder, and on the top of this knelt Kate; some of her draperies were arranged so as to fall over the lower blanket, so that, when seen from a distance, she appeared to be floating in mid-air, as the join in the blankets was invisible. She had to bend slightly forward, which was not easy, as very little would have made her lose her balance and come falling forward on to the recumbent artist below—a casualty which would somewhat have spoilt the effect of the *tableau.*

At the foot of the couch were two more angelic beings, *i.e.*, Lady Nashville and Miss Brierly (who was also a blonde); the former bending on one knee, and holding a wreath of laurels extended towards the dreamer, and the latter standing with one arm round her ladyship's neck, and pointing with the other to the wreath.

Against the wall hung a couple of beautifully-carved frames, containing the portraits of a lady and gentleman with powdered hair and patches, while on an easel was a picture of a Spanish lady. In one corner of the room stood Ida on a pedestal, dressed in flowing draperies, to represent a statue. She had beautiful arms, and one was raised to support a gracefully-shaped vase (stolen from Lady Nashville's boudoir) which rested on her shoulder. Her other hung loosely by her side, and her beautiful hair was caught up into a classical knot at the back of her small head. She looked very lovely and statuesque, and her white delicate face looked quite as if it had been carved out of marble.

She and Olivetti were certainly the two best bits of the whole *tableau*, which was greatly admired by the audience, especially when, by the aid of Bengal lights, it turned pink, crimson, and finally green. The *tableau* lasted five minutes, the curtain dropping once to allow the *vivants* time to move their cramped limbs, and then rising again.

The next *tableau* was the meeting between Rebecca and Rowena, and did not attract so much attention; but the third *tableau* of Faith, Hope, and Charity grouped round a cross, was very pretty. The cross was raised on several steps, on the topmost one of which

stood Faith (Ida), with her face raised, and one arm wound round the cross. At her feet sat Hope (Miss Brierly), with one hand raised and clasped in Faith's, and the other arm supporting her anchor; while a little below knelt Charity (Kate), with one hand pressing a dove (it was a stuffed one) to her breast, and the other extended, holding a golden heart, with a flame shooting from it, in the palm. The heart was made of cardboard, covered with gold paper, and having a taper in the centre, and it required the utmost care on Kate's part to prevent the whole thing taking fire. All three girls were robed in white, and all had beautiful hair, which they wore falling down their backs; but again Ida carried off the palm, and, as Count Olivetti remarked, "she was the making of the whole thing."

The last *tableau* was a gipsy scene. In the background hung a small white tent beneath a tree, and the gipsies were grouped about in front of it, all dressed in the brightest costumes. Olivetti looked splendidly handsome, leaning against a sham tree with a guitar in his hand, which he appeared to be playing, and some wicked-looking knives stuck in the red sash which he wore round his waist. In front of him stood a gipsy girl in a dancing attitude, with one dainty little foot pointed in front of her, and her arms raised,

holding castanets. On one side was a cauldron suspended on three cross sticks, and beside it stood Ida, stirring it. Olivetti had insisted on her painting her cheeks a brilliant red, and very handsome she looked in her scarlet skirt and head-dress, and with her magnificent hair falling down her back. There was also a girl standing behind with a distaff in her hand, and several savage-looking men (they had painted and blackened themselves beyond all recognition) were lying or sitting around. Altogether, they looked a remarkably handsome set of gipsies, and their appearance was warmly applauded.

All through this evening Kate saw very little of Mr Proctor, who was seated among the audience; but Olivetti seemed to have accepted his dismissal as final, and devoted himself alternately to Lady Nashville (or rather allowed her to pet him in a patronising sort of way) and Miss Brierly, without making the least attempt to approach Kate. Sooth to say, it was a matter of very small importance to him whom he was with, provided he could make it appear that he was devoting himself to *some one*. Miss L'Estrange was the best-looking girl in the house (always excepting Ida), and during the last ten days he had amused himself by paying court to her *pour passer le temps*. But he was certainly not

in love with her, and had no idea that her feelings were any deeper than his own. Therefore, seeing the state of affairs between her and Mr Proctor, he had readily withdrawn his attentions, which he perceived would now be as unwelcome as they had formerly been agreeable to the young lady. Perhaps he was slightly piqued by the cool manner in which he had been cast on one side for the rich, ugly Englishman, and therefore he took no notice of Miss L'Estrange to-night, beyond posing her in the *tableaux*. But this very indifference affected Kate as the most passionate entreaties could not have done; and after the *tableaux* were over, she went up to the artist, as he was standing alone in one of the wings at the side of the stage, and asked whether she had done anything to offend him.

Olivetti, of course, replied politely in the negative, and Kate then reproached him laughingly for having cut her the whole evening. She was far too perfect mistress of herself to allow her face or voice to betray her, and Olivetti, supposing that she merely wished to make use of him during Mr Proctor's absence, replied haughtily that last night it had been she who had cut him.

"Was it? Well, I won't cut you again, Count Olivetti," she said, holding out her hand with a sweet smile.

The young man raised it gallantly to his lips, while it dawned upon him that he must have made a conquest of this handsome English girl. He was not much surprised, for he was tolerably conceited, and this was by no means the first time that a lady had fallen in love with him. Perhaps it was going rather far to say that Kate was *in love* with him; but she certainly was not very far off it, and Olivetti was not disposed to repel her advances if she chose to make them. In an instant he had adopted his old manner towards her, and escorted her slowly back to the drawing-room, where dancing was going on, the musicians who had performed in the theatre having been detained to play for the dancers. Mr Proctor did not dance, so Kate felt herself at perfect liberty to dance with any one else she pleased, and did not consider it at all incumbent on her to sit out with her wealthy admirer. Miss Brierly did so several times; but Kate's prudence seemed to have deserted her to-night, and she danced again, and yet again, with Olivetti, regardless alike of Mr Proctor's darkening brow, and the comments which she was drawing on herself by thus encouraging the artist "who was working for her cousin."

Olivetti himself at length retired from the field. He was tired of dancing, and thought

it a pity to spoil the poor little English girl's prospects by allowing her to make a fool of herself. This was a wonderful piece of conscientiousness for him, and, had his feelings been at all engaged by Kate, he might not have been so considerate for her welfare; but, to tell the truth, he was sick to death both of dancing and flirting, and leaving the dancing-room he made his way downstairs, and taking his hat went outside, and strolled up and down with a cigar.

By-and-by he returned to the hall-door, where he found Ned Huntingdon standing on the steps, also with a cigar, and stopped to speak to him.

"How well you got those *tableaux* up to-night?" began Ned, seeing that the artist wished to speak to him. He did not particularly like the fellow himself, and thought, with Miss Brierly, that Lady Nashville made a ridiculous fuss about him; but he was good-natured, and did not wish to hurt the artist's feelings, so he spoke pleasantly to him.

"Yes, I think they were pretty good," replied Olivetti. "Your wife was the making of the whole thing—she is so picturesque, and poses so well."

"Yes," returned Ned concisely, for somehow he did not care to hear his wife praised in this cool fashion by an artist.

"I saw her once, before her marriage, in Florence," continued the Italian quietly.

"Indeed?" Ned's tone was one of considerable surprise, for Ida had never mentioned this meeting to him, and had always appeared to avoid the Count as far as she politely could. He turned and stared at Olivetti in the bright midsummer moonlight, and again it occurred to him, as it had done more than once during the last two days, that he had seen his face somewhere before. Where could it have been?

Suddenly it flashed across him that it had been on his road to pay his first visit to Palazzo Laurenti. Yes, Olivetti was the young man who had so discourteously declined to show him the road to the Palazzo, and Ned's heart stood still with fear as it darted across his mind that possibly Olivetti had also been paying a visit to Laurenti. And if so, why had Ida made such a mystery about her former acquaintance with this handsome artist? A sudden, sickly, faint feeling suddenly stole over Ned, and seemed to deprive him of the power of asking any further questions; and Olivetti, who had seen his start of recognition, continued to return his stare coolly, and with a slight smile hovering about the corners of his mouth. He did not speak for a couple of minutes, but amused himself by watching the

silent torture which he knew he was inflicting on the young husband. But presently he proceeded carelessly,—

"It was in a theatre at Florence that I saw your wife. I did not know her name then; but hers is not a face to be easily forgotten."

"Then you were not personally acquainted with her?" asked Ned, his heart giving a sudden bound of relief.

"No, I regret to say. But I recognised her the instant I saw her here, though she has changed greatly since last year."

To this Ned vouchsafed no reply, and after waiting in vain for one, Olivetti continued,—

"I shall never forget her face, as I saw it that first evening I saw her. She looked so young, and happy, and childish—the very impersonification of youth and joy. *Now* she certainly looks anything but happy."

Did the fellow mean to insult him! Ned thought fiercely. There was an indescribable insolence in the artist's tone that made the other's blood boil. For a minute a wild longing possessed Ned to seize the slender Italian by the collar, and kick him ignominiously down the steps on which they stood; but for Ida's sake he restrained himself. It would never do to drag her name into a brawl, he reflected; she had never treated this artist with the same familiarity that Lady Nashville and some of

the other ladies did, and no doubt the fellow resented her *hauteur*, and was trying to avenge himself in this despicable manner. Certainly it would be a satisfaction to give the hound a good thrashing; but, as it was, Ned merely turned his back contemptuously upon him, and walked back to the dancing-room.

Ida happened to be standing near the door as her husband entered, and he went straight up to her and asked her to finish the waltz with him. She readily consented, and Ned passed his arm round her waist, and led her off at once. He might have added dancing to the list of her accomplishments when enumerating them to Kate L'Estrange yesterday, for certainly not even Kate herself could surpass her in the art of waltzing. Ned danced well too, and many people turned to watch the young couple as they moved gracefully in and out among the crowd of dancers. When the music ceased, Ned led his wife to a cool seat, and, seating himself beside her, began to fan her, while she leant back and rested.

"Do you know," he began, "that fellow Olivetti has just been telling me that he saw you in a theatre at Florence the spring before last."

Ida bent her head as she re-clasped a bracelet on her arm, but she made no reply, and Ned was pleased to see how little interest she took in her handsome compatriot.

"It is very odd," he continued carelessly, "but I have seen *him* before too. When I first met him here, I was sure I had seen his face before, but I could not remember where. To-night I remembered that I met him that day I first went to Palazzo Laurenti. It was at that little bridge over the stream in the gully, and I was not quite certain which road to take, and as he happened to be passing just then, I asked him, and he growled at me, like a brute as he is, and said he couldn't direct me. It is odd how one meets people, isn't it?"

"Very odd," replied Ida briefly.

"I can't conceive how Lady Nashville can make such a pet of that fellow," continued Ned hotly. "I suppose it's because he's good-looking; but he's a horrid, conceited brute. I'm glad you don't encourage him, Ida. As for Kate L'Estrange, she must be mad to flirt with him as she is doing, before Mr Proctor."

"I shouldn't like to marry Mr Proctor, if I were she."

"Well, no; but she evidently wants to get him."

"I think it is so horrid of girls to try and get husbands for themselves."

"Well, yes; it isn't nice, certainly. But what else can they do, if they are situated as poor Kate is? Fortunately for her, she's not

the sort of girl to fall in love, or I should really begin to think she'd lost her heart to that prig Olivetti. There's the music again; come and have another turn."

But Ida said she was too tired to dance any more to-night, and thought she would slip quietly away to her own room; so Ned returned to the dancing-room alone, and stood in the doorway, watching the sets slowly forming for a quadrille. Near him sat Mr Proctor, talking to Miss Brierly, and presently Kate L'Estrange approached them, and asked Mr Proctor whether he did not intend to dance the quadrille.

"I think it is very silly of you not to dance round dances," she said, smiling sweetly upon him; "but *surely* you do not object to a square, and they want a couple to complete this set next us."

"Certainly; I shall have much pleasure in completing their set," replied Mr Proctor stiffly. "Miss Brierly, will you help me?"

Of course Miss Brierly was delighted to do so, and moved away on the rich man's arm, shooting a triumphant glance at the discomfited Kate as she passed her.

"Well, Kate, you *have* done for yourself to-night," said Lady Nashville severely, coming into Miss L'Estrange's room, on her road

to bed. "What on earth possessed you to behave as you did?"

"How did I behave?" asked Kate defiantly.

"You know quite well without my telling you."

"Well, Mr Proctor knows I am fond of dancing, and he could not expect me to sit out the whole night to please him."

"Fond of dancing! I am sure you get plenty of it, and might have given it up for to-night, when you knew how much was at stake."

"I have been very good all the last month, and I am beginning to get tired of giving up all my fun to please that pompous old fool."

"Hush, hush, Kate! how can you speak of him like that? Whatever he is, he is no fool, and it is not likely he will care to marry a girl who flirts as you do. However, for the future you may just please yourself. But I warn you that if you don't take care, Miss Brierly will get him in spite of you. However, if you really think him a 'pompous old fool,' perhaps you had better not marry him."

"I am sure I had better not," replied Kate decisively.

But though, in her present frame of mind, it was highly probable that, had Mr Proctor actually proposed to her, she would have refused him, yet she could not bring herself to resign him to that odious Miss Brierly

without a struggle, and she determined to try her best, during the two remaining days of his visit, to reinstate herself in his good graces.

The two following days—Thursday and Friday—were those appointed for the annual races and regatta, and, of course, Lord Nashville drove his party into Seaville on his drag, and Lady Nashville arranged that Kate should sit next to Mr Proctor. Miss Brierly said to herself that this was very unfair, and that she was sure Mr Proctor would much have preferred her for a companion; but however that might be, he had no choice but to sit beside Kate, who expressed herself delighted to find herself by his side, and did her best to win him back into a good humour with her.

"You ought to learn to dance," she said pleasantly. "I am sure you could dance beautifully if you chose. I wish you were going to the balls to-night and to-morrow; I should so like to dance with you."

But, as Lady Nashville had said, Mr Proctor was certainly not a fool, and though Kate succeeded in restoring his good temper, she was unable altogether to repair the effects of her last evening's folly. On Tuesday evening he had made up his mind to ask Miss L'Estrange to be his wife before leaving Lowsworth; but after the dance on Wednesday

he had vowed that nothing should induce him to marry a girl who could condescend to flirt with a poor artist (Mr Proctor could not understand how *any* foreigner could hold as good a position as a plain English gentleman who had made his money in iron, and sneered contemptuously when any one informed him of Olivetti's good birth), and though, now that Kate smiled upon him and flattered him once more, he felt disposed to relent towards her, yet all the concession he made in his own mind was to decide that he would "wait and see." Certainly he would not propose till he was thoroughly convinced that Miss L'Estrange was sincerely penitent for her past folly; and unless she satisfied him on this point, he thought Miss Brierly would suit him very well. She was not pretty certainly, nor was she quite so well connected as Miss L'Estrange; but her father was a baronet, and she would evidently be deeply sensible of the honour done her if he asked her to be his wife, whereas Kate L'Estrange would probably think she did him a favour in accepting him.

Still Kate saw that she had thawed him considerably, and she told herself that she could have him whenever she pleased; and once more the struggle rose in her mind as to whether she should accept him or not, when

the time for deciding came. She thought of herself, and she thought of Olivetti; but not once did she bestow a single thought on Mr Proctor, or pause to consider whether she was treating him fairly in thus encouraging his attentions, when she could feel not the smallest affection for him in her heart. Yet what can a man of over forty expect if he chooses to marry a girl of two-and-twenty!

The first thing Ned Huntingdon saw, as the Nashville drag drew up on the race-course, was the huge waggonette from the Blue Boar at Lynborough, crowded with his Lynborough acquaintances. There were all the Carrs; the mother in neat black, and with a good deal of yellow ribbon in her black bonnet—a pretty contrast, doubtless, but not becoming in the present instance; and the four daughters in grey merino dresses, trimmed with bands of black ribbon velvet. They also wore grey straw hats, trimmed with black velvet, and with a bunch of blue cornflowers posed in exactly the same position on the side of each hat, and they all wore blue ties, all tied in precisely the same manner. A harmless enough costume certainly, but, unfortunately for the general effect, the neckties did not match the colour of the cornflowers; and they all wore different coloured gloves—one a brown pair; and another a dark green, and so on.

There were also Mrs Williamson and her son, the former resplendent in a bright violet silk dress and a pink bonnet; and, to Ned's intense vexation, there was also his mother and Miss Boyd, the latter looking very happy in a black silk dress, and a new over-trimmed lavender bonnet, bought for the occasion. After all, Mrs Williamson's was the only costume that was in glaringly bad taste (though, certainly, the yellow and lavender bonnets looked rather alarming), yet Ned could not help seeing what a very common-place appearance the whole party presented, and it aggravated him sorely to see his own mother among them.

As she was there, however, he had to smile and nod pleasantly as he drove past; but he bit his lip savagely as he saw Mrs Williamson nod familiarly and kiss her hand to Ida.

"Hollo! who is your brilliant friend, Mrs Huntingdon?" asked Lord Nashville, as Ida, who was seated beside him on the box-seat, bowed gravely to the occupants of the waggonette, but without turning her eyes in their direction.

"That? Oh, the mother of our curate at Lynborough," she returned carelessly, wondering whether Ned would think she had done right in bowing so coldly to his mother's friends. But, fortunately for her, he was quite

satisfied with her behaviour. He was as little of a prig as a man could well be, and nothing would have induced him to put a slight on his mother, or the Carrs, whom he had known all his life; but he was bound by no old ties or associations to Mrs Williamson, and it exasperated him sorely to see her taking liberties with his young wife. He went up and spoke to his mother by-and-by, and shook hands with the Carrs; but he only raised his hat stiffly to Mrs Williamson, and appeared to be looking another way when she thrust out her orange-gloved hand towards him.

Sir Pomphry and Lady Huntingdon saw it all from their place in the grand stand, and they shook their heads and declared that Ned was incorrigible. The idea of going up to that waggon full of common-looking people, and shaking hands with them, before the whole race-course! It was an unheard-of proceeding, and a disgrace to the whole family of Huntingdons.

CHAPTER IV.

DISCORD.

ON the following Saturday, Ned and Ida returned home, and the former was somewhat surprised to perceive how little his wife seemed to regret the change. He asked her whether she did not think Lowsworth an awfully jolly place to stay at; and she replied indifferently, "Yes, but that she was glad to be at home again;" and of course he could find no fault with her for saying so, though he was certainly surprised.

In the afternoon he went over to see his uncle at Tyndale, and while he was absent, old Mrs Huntingdon asked Ida to go to Mrs Williamson's "At Home" with her. But to this Ida was obliged to return a firm refusal; for after Mrs Williamson's impertinence in kissing her hand to her at the Thursday

races, Ned had especially warned her to have as little to say to her as she could possibly help, and she knew that he would not approve of her paying her a visit to-day.

"I do not owe Mrs Williamson a visit," she said, "and I am tired, and would rather not go out."

"Then order your carriage, and let us drive there," urged Mrs Huntingdon; and when Ida still objected, she exclaimed angrily,—

"I see how it is; since you have been among all those grand folk at Lowsworth, you are far too grand to mix with us Lynborough people."

"Indeed it is not that, dear Mrs Huntingdon," replied Ida wearily. "But I don't see why I should go to Mrs Williamson's unless I like. I don't owe her a visit."

"Oh, of course not, if you are going to stand on ceremony with her. But you know how it would gratify her, poor woman, if you went to her little gathering to-day."

"But I don't like her, and Ned doesn't. No, indeed it is not because she isn't grand enough for me, as you say; but I don't like her personally, and Ned doesn't wish me to be friends with her."

"Ned never *used* to give himself airs," said the old lady, with an incredulous sniff. "He

used to think nothing of taking a cup of tea with the Joneses, and he always *used* to have a pleasant word for every one ; but something has changed him sadly of late," and here Mrs Huntingdon began to whimper, and Ida felt half distracted, but could think of nothing to say. "It breaks my heart to see him so changed," proceeded Mrs Huntingdon tearfully. " I was not surprised when *you* gave me that stand-off bow from the top of Lord Nashville's drag, nor yet when I saw you cut poor Mrs Jones dead ; but it did grieve me to see my Ned refuse to shake hands with Mrs Williamson. She was quite hurt, poor body, and no wonder. It was the first time I ever felt ashamed for my boy in his life."

What could poor Ida say ? She could only sit still and listen to her mother-in-law's reproaches in helpless silence, till at last the old lady went off to prepare for her visit to Mrs Williamson's alone, and Ida betook herself to her favourite seat in the garden, feeling weary and sick at heart, and almost wishing herself back at Lowsworth again.

There was to be a grand ball at Lowsworth on Wednesday. The Nashvilles were soon going to leave for Scotland, but before they went Lady Nashville had taken it into her head to give a ball, and every one who was any one was going to it. Of course, Ned and

Ida were going; but, though Mrs Huntingdon was invited, she declined to go, saying that balls were not in her line. The truth was that she felt shy about visiting her son's grand friends, and never went among them if she could possibly help it. The L'Estranges were the only people she did not greatly object to visit; she disliked Kate, but Mrs L'Estrange had charming manners, and her poverty had taught her to be courteous to every one, and Mrs Huntingdon always got on with her. Besides which, she had known the L'Estranges before Ned's marriage, and knew that they had not called on her merely because her son's wife had come to live with her.

Kate had returned home on the same day that Ned and Ida left Lowsworth, and she had made Ida promise to come over to The Folly on Monday, when her mother was expecting a few friends, to play lawn tennis, in the afternoon. As a matter of courtesy, old Mrs Huntingdon was invited too, and, as it chanced, she was pleased to accept the invitation. So when Monday came, she and Ida set out alone, Ned being engaged elsewhere and so being unable to accompany them. The first thing Ida saw, as she stepped out of her carriage at The Folly, was Count Olivetti seated by Kate L'Estrange's side, under the bay-tree at the far end of the lawn. Kate appeared very

much occupied with him, else she would have been more offended than she was by Ned Huntingdon's non-appearance; but as it was, though she remarked his absence, she felt far too happy to resent it. This was only her second day at home, and already Olivetti had flown to call on her, and was devoting himself to her, without so much as glancing at any other girl present! It was true that Kate had asked him lightly to come and see her, but of course he need not have come unless he liked — and he had come so quickly too! Poor Mrs L'Estrange would not have looked quite so smiling and gracious could she have understood the true nature of the friendship which had sprung up between her daughter and the penniless artist; but she was too accustomed to see Kate flirt to disturb herself seriously about one affair more or less, though she certainly thought the girl sadly imprudent to waste her time in flirting now, considering how things stood with Mr Proctor. Kate herself knew that she was mad to behave as she was doing: even if Olivetti really loved her, it would be impossible for her to marry him, considering that they were both penniless; but she never breathed the word *love* to herself, and would not admit that her liking for Olivetti had reached this point. She liked talking to him and dancing with him, cer-

tainly ; but what was there to wonder at in that, seeing that he was so charmingly agreeable, and the best waltzer she had ever met ?

She came forward to shake hands quite warmly with Ida. It was seldom she formed any very great friendship for a woman, but she was really inclined to like the young bride—all the more so because she never attempted to flirt, and so did not interfere with her (Kate's) amusements.

Olivetti merely bowed coldly to Ida at first, but afterwards, when Kate was playing lawn tennis (a game in which he never joined), he asked Ida to introduce him to her mother-in-law, and made himself so agreeable to the old lady, that she afterwards declared him to be the most charming young man she had ever met—except Ned. He handed her politely to her carriage when the time came for her departure, and as he was closing the door and shaking hands with her and Ida, he asked if he might be permitted to call next day. He looked at Ida as he spoke ; but as she hesitated how to answer, old Mrs Huntingdon replied readily that they would be delighted to see him any time he chose to call.

" The Nashvilles go to Scotland next Saturday," said Ida, addressing the artist, but without looking at him. " I suppose you will not remain at Lowsworth after they leave ? "

"Yes. I have still some painting to finish; I shall probably remain here for some time," he replied, with a disagreeable smile.

Ida said no more, and leant back in silence; but Mrs Huntingdon hastened to assure the artist that she hoped they would see a good deal of him since he was to remain some time in the neighbourhood; and as they drove away, she remarked to Ida how nice it was for her to meet a fellow-countryman, and such a nice young fellow too!

Ida, however, was strangely unresponsive, but her mother-in-law failed to notice this; and before they had proceeded far, her attention was distracted by meeting Mrs Carr and Mrs Williamson, who were both on foot. Instantly putting her head out of the window, Mrs Huntingdon called to the coachman to stop, and then, utterly oblivious of the fact that she was in Ida's carriage, invited her friends to drive home with her.

They gladly accepted the offer, and Ida was accordingly crushed into the front seat with Mrs Carr, while the two widows, both of whom were tolerably stout, amply filled the back seat.

"We have been at The Folly," said Mrs Huntingdon, as they rolled on again. "They had a lawn-tennis party there to-day."

"Ah, *really*," purred Mrs Williamson.

"Mrs L'Estrange is a *charming* person; so they say. It is a pity her daughter is not more like her. What is *your* opinion of Miss L'Estrange, Contessa?"

"I think her very handsome and clever; and she has always been very agreeable to me," said Ida quietly, though she did not particularly care to discuss Kate with Mrs Williamson.

"She's not at all a good companion for you, Ida," said Mrs Carr; and though Ida knew Ned would dislike to hear Mrs Carr calling her by her Christian name, yet she felt powerless to prevent her doing so.

"I am sorry you disapprove of her, Mrs Carr," she replied gently, but with an unmistakable emphasis on the "Mrs."

"Indeed, I'm not surprised she does," struck in Mrs Williamson. "A girl who has been engaged the Lord knows how often, and who flirts with every man she meets!"

"I suppose you know that she did all she could to catch Ned," added Mrs Carr.

"Lady Huntingdon did all she could to bring about the match," chorused Mrs Williamson. "But Ned had better taste—eh, my dear?" with a knowing smile at Ida.

"Indeed, Ida, I've told you already that I don't at all approve of that Kate L'Estrange," sighed Mrs Huntingdon. "She's not at all a

fit companion for you, as Eliza (Mrs Carr) says."

"That she's not," cried Mrs Carr, with a virtuous sniff. "She'll do you no good, mark my words. She'll introduce you to a lot of flirting officers, and that sort of trash, that you'd be a deal better without knowing. Besides, my dear, I shouldn't think you'd care to know a girl who had once set her cap at your husband. If you'll take my advice—and I'm old enough to be your mother, my dear—you'll not allow Ned to remain over-friendly with her."

Annoyed though Ida was, she could hardly forbear smiling as she reflected that Kate had warned her against the Carrs in almost the same words a couple of days ago; but, on the whole, her vexation outweighed her amusement, and she was much relieved when at length they dropped Mrs Carr at her own door.

"You'll come on with us and have a cup of tea, won't you?" said Mrs Huntingdon to Mrs Williamson; for though she did not like her very much personally, yet she was anxious to atone to her for Ned and Ida's coolness.

"I shall be *most* happy," purred the curate's mother; and so they drove on up the High Street to Mrs Huntingdon's house, on the doorsteps of which stood Ned and Lord Nash-

ville. The latter had always been close friends with young Huntingdon from the days when they had been at Eton together, and to-day, knowing that his womenkind were from home, Ned had brought the Viscount to his mother's house, to scribble a hasty note to a man at Seaville. His lordship was now about to sally forth and post his letter, but he paused as he saw Ida's brougham coming up the street.

"Hollo, Huntingdon!" he laughed, as he caught sight of Mrs Williamson's peony face thrust out of the carriage window; "here's the brilliant person who exchanged such affectionate greetings with your wife last Thursday." Then as the brougham stopped, and the ladies got out, he shook hands with the two whom he knew; and on old Mrs Huntingdon's having the bad taste to introduce him to Mrs Williamson, he regarded her for a moment with a half-amused smile, and then inquired abruptly,—

"Coming to us on Wednesday, Mrs Williamson?"

"Oh dear no," murmured Mrs Williamson, holding her head bashfully on one side, and glancing up at the great man with a mixture of embarrassment and eagerness, which highly diverted his lordship.

"Do come," he added laughingly. "I

assure you it will give us the greatest pleasure. Good-bye, Mrs Huntingdon ; good-bye. Get Mrs Huntingdon to bring you with her next Wednesday, Mrs Williamson," and raising his hat, the Viscount strode down the street towards the post-office, in front of which stood his mail phaeton, waiting for him. But Ned followed him hastily, and uttered an eager protest against his invitation to Mrs Williamson.

"I am sure Lady Nashville will be extremely displeased if we bring that woman to her ball," he said in an annoyed tone.

"Nonsense ; she won't mind. If she does, it can't be helped," returned Lord Nashville indifferently. "I never could make out how you put up with these Lynborough people ; but if they're all after the Williamson pattern, they must be uncommonly good fun."

"But just think what offence you will give by asking her to your ball. The county will feel itself insulted."

"Hang the county!" growled his lordship, not at all pleased at being thus reproved. He began to feel that perhaps he had done a wrong thing in inviting Mrs Williamson, but none the less did he object to be told so. Evidently arguing with him was waste of time, and, indeed, it was impossible to withdraw the invitation now that Mrs Williamson had accepted it. But as Ned turned back up

the street, after parting from Lord Nashville, he determined that Lady Nashville should be made to understand that neither he nor Ida had anything to do in procuring Mrs Williamson her invitation to Lowsworth.

"And she will understand readily enough that it was all Nashville's doing," he told himself. "He always was a queer sort of fellow, and fond of doing what he knew would shock people."

On reaching home, Ned found Ida alone in the drawing-room, the others being all at tea in the dining-room.

"What made you drive Mrs Williamson in your carriage to-day, Ida?" he asked, with a touch of irritation in his tone, for he had warned her so very particularly to have nothing to say to the gay widow.

"I could not help it, Ned," she replied, colouring as she saw that he was vexed. "Your mother stopped the carriage, and invited her to drive home with us, and I could not refuse her permission to enter the carriage."

"I don't know what possessed my mother to introduce that awful woman to Nashville," proceeded Ned, after pausing an instant, checked by his wife's last remark,—

"I suppose she saw him staring at her."

"Well, she's enough to make any one

stare. It was an awful shame of Nashville to ask her to Lowsworth, and his wife will be terribly angry. Nashville is always doing that sort of thing; that's the reason he's so unpopular—that and his cross manner."

"I only wish we hadn't to take Mrs Williamson with *us* on Wednesday," sighed Ida.

"Take her with us! Of course we shall not. What an idea!"

"But Lord Nashville said we were to take her, and—and—"

"And what?" asked Ned quietly, but with an ominous look about the eyes.

"And she and your mother settled it all. We are to call for her—"

"My dear Ida," interposed Ned, laughing, because he was too annoyed to speak quietly; "you and my mother evidently don't understand. Lady Nashville would never forgive us if we took Mrs Williamson to her ball; and Nashville is such a moral coward, he'd be sure to let her lay the blame on us, rather than take her anger on himself."

"But you could tell Lady Nashville that her husband had made us bring Mrs Williamson."

"My dear, surely you know that a gentleman's invitation counts for nothing. If Mrs Williamson had an atom of right feeling, she would not think of going to Lowsworth without Lady Nashville's invitation."

"Of course; but you see she has not; and she and your mother both attacked me as soon as we came in, and made me arrange how she was to go with us."

"Surely you might have put her off," said Ned, more vexed than he cared to show.

"You can't tell how difficult it was."

"Well, I daresay it was; but still we all have to do disagreeable things sometimes, and it will be far worse having to tell her now that we can't take her, than if you had done it at once."

"You wish me to tell her that, Ned?"

"Certainly. It is quite out of the question for us to take her."

Ida said no more, and for several minutes there was complete silence in the room; then Ned rose to leave it, and as he passed his wife he stooped and kissed her kindly, afraid that he had shown her his vexation too plainly. After all, she was very young, and her position was a difficult one.

"Don't vex yourself about this, dear," he said. "If you like I will speak to Mrs Williamson for you."

"Thank you," she replied, smiling up at him, "but it would do me no good; your mother would be sure to think I had put it into your head to speak, and I think I can manage Mrs Williamson better than you."

"Yes, women generally are better at that sort of thing," replied Ned, greatly relieved that she had not accepted his offer. "Shall you speak to her to-night?"

"No; I will send her a little note to-morrow. It is impossible to speak before your mother."

"Do as you think best," he said, leaving the room; and soon Ida too quitted it, and shut herself into her boudoir, so as to avoid seeing Mrs Williamson again that evening. Seating herself at her writing-table, she proceeded to concoct a polite little note to the curate's mother, saying that as she and her husband could not be quite certain at what hour they would start for, or return from, Lowsworth, she thought it would be better for Mrs Williamson to order a carriage for herself, as she would not like to keep her waiting upon her. Of course it was only an excuse, and of course Mrs Williamson would see this; but Ida was not sorry to have this opportunity of giving her a polite snub; though, after the letter was closed and directed, she could not resist shedding a few tears, as she reflected bitterly that she was always giving offence to her mother-in-law, or annoying her husband.

That same evening she sent her maid out to post her note, and the next morning Mrs Williamson waylaid old Mrs Huntingdon, as she was walking calmly down the High Street

with Miss Boyd, and informed her, in a voice that quivered with indignation and disappointment, that Mrs Ned had written and declined to take her to Lowsworth with her.

"Of course I'm not going to go among all those grand folk by myself," added Mrs Williamson, nearly weeping with disappointment. "And after Lord Nashville's being so good as to ask me himself, and telling Mrs Ned to bring me!"

To say that Mrs Huntingdon was angry would but faintly express her feelings. She was indignant, hurt, and offended, all in one, and she went straight home, in a "downright bad temper," as Miss Boyd expressed it, and gave Mrs Ned a piece of her mind. Had Ida answered her back again, a regular quarrel must inevitably have taken place; but Ida bore the brunt of her mother-in-law's displeasure with stoical calmness (apparently), and though her quietness only served to aggravate the old lady further in her heart, yet it prevented any serious rupture taking place just then. Neither of the women mentioned the affair to Ned,—Ida, though she knew he would side with her, still feeling that the more he was worried and annoyed, the worse it would be for her in the end; and old Mrs Huntingdon fancying that Ned's displeasure with Ida would be all the greater if he did

not discover till the eleventh moment how she had treated Mrs Williamson—for, in her simplicity, the old lady fully believed that Ned would wish the curate's mother to accompany him and Ida to Lowsworth, since he had heard the invitation given by Lord Nashville, and had appeared to acquiesce in the latter's suggestion that he should bring the gaudy widow with him.

On the afternoon of the day on which this domestic jar occurred between Mrs Huntingdon and her daughter-in-law, Ned came suddenly into the drawing-room, where his mother and Miss Boyd were working, and asked where Ida was. He had been out since the morning, and now he wished to find out what his wife had done about Mrs Williamson, and had looked into the drawing-room to see whether she was there before proceeding to seek her elsewhere.

Instead of answering, Mrs Huntingdon rose from her seat with a solemn air, and walking over to the window, pointed towards the garden, saying tragically,—

"There is your wife."

And there indeed was Ida, seated on a shady bench, laughing and talking to a couple of officers from Seaville, who were seated one on either side of her. There was nothing very terrible in this, especially as the officers in

question were friends of her husband's, to whom he had especially begged her to be agreeable; but old Mrs Huntingdon was inclined to be very jealous for her son, and did not at all like the look of things, thinking it very imprudent (if not absolutely wrong) of Ida to take those two young men out into the garden, instead of sitting and talking quietly to them in the drawing-room, in the presence of herself and Miss Boyd. Ned, however, understood the true state of the case at a glance, and his eyes passed carelessly over the trio on the bench, but rested frowningly on Kate L'Estrange and Count Olivetti, who were seated on two chairs a very little apart from the others.

"How did that Italian fellow come here?" he asked quickly.

"Oh! we met him yesterday at the L'Estranges, and Ida asked him to call here," said the mother, with her usual inaccuracy. "He is a most charming young man, and it must be very pleasant for Ida to meet a fellow-countryman, mustn't it?"

"Hum, I don't know," replied Ned, wondering how Ida could have invited "that fellow" to the house when she knew how he (Ned) disliked him. But he went out and greeted his guests pleasantly all the same, and Mrs Huntingdon returned to her knitting with

a sigh, wondering how Ned could like to see Ida laughing in such a way with those conceited young men. Eliza Carr had warned her against allowing her daughter-in-law to become intimate with Kate L'Estrange, and her predictions seemed likely to be verified. The very first day that Miss L'Estrange came to spend the afternoon with Ida (Kate had overheard Olivetti say that he meant to call on the Huntingdons to-day, hence the cause of her own visit), she brought a lot of men in her train, and taught Ida to receive them alone in the garden! The men, be it observed, had come by themselves, and at different times, to Miss L'Estrange; but when Mrs Huntingdon was "put out," and inclined to find fault with any one, she was apt to be a little bit inconsistent in the charges which she brought against them.

CHAPTER V.

A HORRIBLE REVELATION.

ON Wednesday evening, when Ned came into the drawing-room, dressed for the ball, his mother could not forbear observing that poor Mrs Williamson was not going to the ball at all, since he and Ida declined to take her. It was the first time she had spoken to her son on the subject, and she half expected that it would turn out that Ida had put Mrs Williamson off without his knowledge or sanction; but he merely replied "Indeed," in a coolly indifferent tone, that showed that he was fully aware of Ida's conduct and quite approved of it. Mrs Huntingdon said no more, but her feelings towards Ida grew rather more bitter than before, as she saw how completely she had perverted her husband's mind—for the old lady was convinced that he would

never have slighted a poor friend had he been left to himself.

By-and-by Ida came in, looking lovely in a green silk dress, almost entirely covered with delicate white lace, and with clusters of dark red roses about the skirt and in her hair. She also wore the diamonds that had been her only dowry, and that were already famous in the county; and Ned kissed her fondly as she came up to him, and told her that he had never seen any one half so lovely in his life as she looked at this minute. But old Mrs Huntingdon noticed (or fancied that she noticed) that Ida did not return her husband's caress with sufficient warmth, and the smile which had involuntarily stolen over her lips, as her son's pretty wife entered the room, died away, and her face assumed a look of almost pain. Ida was quick to see the change in her mother-in-law's face and to understand the reason of it; but Ned had eyes for no one but his wife, and, as the carriage was just then announced, he hurried her away to it, without allowing time for any further words.

How proud he was as he entered the ball-room at Lowsworth, with his bride leaning on his arm! People smiled, and whispered to one another that he was evidently as much in love as ever, and that it was no wonder, for that his wife was a sweet, pretty creature. Of

course Kate L'Estrange was there, dancing square dances with Mr Proctor, and sitting out round ones with him. She only allowed herself to dance twice with Count Olivetti, and then she found his manner odd and unsatisfactory. He answered her remarks at random, and once or twice she caught him looking at Ida Huntingdon with a curiously intense expression in his eyes. She could not understand him, and could only suppose that he was vexed and disappointed at her only having given him two waltzes (though surely that was enough, unless she wished to get herself talked about !), when she was openly encouraging Mr Proctor's attentions; but, however that might be, he did not press her for any more dances, else it is not impossible that she might have given them to him.

Ned Huntingdon also chanced to notice the fixed attention with which the Italian artist was regarding his wife whenever he fancied no one was observing him. Of course this must be only an artist's natural admiration for a pretty woman; but, all the same, Ned did not like it, and voted Olivetti an impudent snob, to stare at a lady like that. It was a comfort to him that Ida seemed to dislike the fellow just as much as he did, for not once did she speak to him during the entire evening—nor did he attempt to approach her;

and yet once, when she was dancing with Ned, and, looking round suddenly, caught Olivetti's eyes fixed on her with that strange expression in them, her husband was certain that he felt her start and tremble. He would have liked to kick the Italian jackanapes out of the room there and then, for his insolence in staring at his wife; and yet, why should Ida look so startled and discomposed just because she caught some one looking at her? Try as he would, Ned could not help repeating the question to himself, though he was quite unable to find any satisfactory answer to it.

But he was destined to have the riddle solved for him in a far from agreeable manner before the evening was out. It was a hot night, and, after dancing conscientiously for several hours, Ned made his way out of the house, and took a turn along a terrace which ran along one side of it. At the end was a French window, belonging to a little morning-room much used by the ladies in the house, but into which Ned had not often ventured. The blind was up, and so he could distinctly see all that passed in it.

At this minute his wife was the sole occupant, and she was leaning against the mantelpiece, and gazing into the empty fireplace, in an attitude, and with an expression of such utter weariness and forlornness, that Ned's

heart seemed to stand still and grow cold as he gazed at her. He had been so happy himself, and it was horrible to him to think that his wife was less so. And yet her face told him only too plainly that she was miserable. Miserable—and why? Had he not done all that a man could do to make her happy? And yet there was no mistaking the expression of her pale face, or the wistful look in her dark eyes.

Apparently she had only come here to rest for a few minutes and be alone, for presently she raised her head, with a heaving sigh, and turned as if to leave the room. But as she did so, she and Ned both noticed for the first time that Count Olivetti had stolen into the room softly, and now stood between her and the closed door, regarding her with an expression of malignant triumph on his pale olive face. At sight of him Ida started so violently that involuntarily Ned laid his hand on the window, which, being unsnapped, yielded to his pressure and half opened. But then he paused, for Olivetti was speaking, and some instinct warned him to wait and hear what he said.

The couple inside were too engrossed with each other to perceive that the window (which was half-shaded by a lace curtain) had partly opened, and so Ned was able to hear all that

passed between them, unseen and unsuspected. The position of eavesdropper might not be a very honourable one, and was certainly not to his taste; but he felt that he *must* find out what sort of mysterious understanding existed between his wife and this man at any cost, and so, hardly knowing what he did, he paused and listened.

"No, no, fair lady; you do not run away like that," said Olivetti in Italian; and though Ned only spoke the language indifferently, he understood it easily when spoken by others, and the insolence of the artist's tone roused his indignation so greatly that he pushed the window yet further open, and had half entered the room to expel the man who ventured so to address his wife, when Olivetti continued, "wait till I reproach you with your treachery —your cowardice," and again Ned paused, to discover, if possible, in what way his wife had ever wronged this man. "You have taken very good care to avoid me since we met here ten days ago," proceeded Olivetti, regarding Ida with an expression of the supremest scorn and contempt on his handsome face. "It is evident your own conscience condemns you. And now that, for the first time, we meet alone, face to face, you shall wait till I tell you what I think of your faithlessness."

"Will you let me pass, Count Olivetti?"

said Ida haughtily, but evidently she was trembling, and spoke with difficulty.

"Do you know what you have done?" continued the artist passionately. "You had not the courage or the patience to be true to me, and so you have broken my heart and your own, and sold yourself to a man you do not love—"

"Stop," cried Ida proudly. "You have said enough, and more than enough. Now, will you be so good as to let me pass, or must I ring the bell?"

"Go, then!" cried Olivetti, stepping aside, and waving his hand tragically towards the door. "Go! since your heart is evidently too hard to feel remorse for the part you have played. Go!"

Ida made a few hasty steps towards the door, then hesitated, paused, and turned. Evidently she was longing to escape, but evidently, also, she had something on her mind which she felt compelled to say.

"Count," she began coldly.

"Signora," replied Olivetti with exaggerated courtesy.

"There is one thing I have wished to speak to you about. You pay Miss L'Estrange a great deal too much attention. She believes you to be what you represent yourself—unmarried, and of good family—"

"I *am* unmarried, Signora."

"You are not married!" echoed Ida, turning white, even for her, and clutching at the back of a chair for support.

"No, I am not," replied Olivetti, folding his arms and drawing himself up proudly. "Whoever told you that, told you a lie."

"It does not matter," murmured Ida, recovering herself by an effort, and again turning towards the door.

"Who told you that I was married?" asked the Count, stepping before her and laying his hand hastily on the handle of the door.

"Your uncle, Padre Olivetti."

"When did he tell you?"

"What does that matter now? Let me pass."

"Not till you have told me if that was why you married this great hulking Englishman."

"I cannot let you speak of my husband like that—"

"But that was why you let them marry you to him? Ah, I see it all now! We have been deceived, duped; and I reproached you, my angel, with faithlessness and treachery, when in truth you were but the victim, like myself, of a diabolical plot. Oh, Ida, Ida, how could you believe that I had forgotten you? You knew I loved you—you know I love you now. Yes" (as she tried to silence

him), "only you. Do you think I care for that English miss? No; I flirted to amuse myself and her, at first; then to pain you. I told myself I had forgotten you, but when I saw you, more lovely and adorable than ever—"

But here Ida raised her hands to her ears to shut out the sound of his words. Once as he spoke, he had endeavoured to snatch her hand, but she had drawn quickly back before he could do so; and now, as he continued to pour forth a flood of rapid and impassioned words, as only an Italian can, accompanying them by fierce gesticulations, she grew frightened, and, losing her self-possession, turned hastily towards the window, which she remembered for the first time, hoping to escape by it on to the terrace which led towards the ball-room windows. And as she turned she caught sight of her husband standing in the shadow of the window curtain with a face that was white, and set, and stern, and a look in his eyes that made her shudder.

"Ned," she cried faintly, holding out her hands towards him; and in answer to her appeal he strode towards her, and drew her hand firmly within his arm.

"Now, sir, let us pass!" he said hoarsely but still quietly, for there were other couples a little lower down the terrace, and any loud words would have attracted their attention.

But the sight of Ida clinging to her husband's arm seemed to infuriate Olivetti, and instead of removing his hand from the door handle, he began a frantic tirade, in which he was informing Ned that Ida had never cared for him, and was miserable with him; but in a minute the stream of his eloquence was arrested, and he found himself on his back at the other end of the room, with a perfect rainbow of colours dancing before his eyes.

He appeared at breakfast the next morning with a black eye, and explained the circumstance by saying that he had fallen over a chair in his room in the dark; but several people smiled slyly, and whispered that Olivetti had seemed very strange all last night, and they feared he had imbibed just a little too much champagne.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BITTER TRUTH.

IN perfect silence Ned led his wife to the cloak-room, after dislodging Olivetti from his path in the manner described in the last chapter. Ida clung tremblingly to his arm; but though he felt and understood the mute appeal, he made no sign, but hurried her on to the cloak-room, where he left her while he went to see if their carriage was at the door. Presently he returned and conducted her to it, still in unbroken silence; nor did he utter one word during the whole of their homeward drive.

What a terrible drive that was to Ida! She was painfully conscious that Ned was angry, and that he had good right to be angry; and though she longed to speak to him, she did not dare, and could only lean

back in trembling suspense, waiting for what she knew must come sooner or later. It did not come till they reached home, however, when Ned, having carefully refastened the hall-door (the servants being all in bed), followed his wife into her boudoir, where he found her seated in an arm-chair, with her face buried in her hands.

"Now, Ida, will you tell me the meaning of all this?" he said, and his voice sounded strangely harsh and strained—even to himself.

At the sound she raised her head, and looked pleadingly up at him, as he stood before her, looking so pale and stern.

"Indeed, it is not my fault, Ned," she faltered. "Do not look so dreadful. I have done nothing wrong."

"No; I do not suppose so. Still, I should be glad to know how it is that you come to be so well acquainted with Count Olivetti, when you have always appeared to avoid him so carefully hitherto."

"Where and when did you meet him first?" he continued, after a moment's pause, seeing that she was either unable or unwilling to reply.

"In Florence."

"And how long ago?"

"The spring before last."

"And you have kept your acquaintance with him from my knowledge all this time?"

"Oh Ned, Ned! do not be angry with me," she sobbed, rising, and leaning against the mantelpiece beside him. "Have patience with me, and I—will tell you all."

For several minutes she leant her face on her hands against the cold marble of the mantelshelf, vainly struggling to conquer the sobs which choked her; and Ned watched her with an expression of bitter anguish on his white face. He had loved her so well; and now to see her weeping for another man well-nigh maddened him.

"Don't cry like that, Ida," he said, touched by the sight of her distress, and laying his hand not unkindly on her shoulder. "Tell me the truth, and it will be sooner over. Was this fellow — this Olivetti — ever your lover?"

"Yes," she answered tremulously.

"Before you ever met me?"

"When I was in Florence, with Contessa Rositti."

"But you were engaged to the Marchese Montini then. How did you become acquainted with Olivetti?".

"It was in a theatre," replied Ida, checking her tears by an effort, but still keeping her face buried in her hands. "He looked up at

me the whole time, and—and I know I should not have done so, but I could not help looking at him sometimes."

"Well?" asked Ned, rather contemptuously, as his wife paused, loth to continue her narrative.

"I often saw him after that," she proceeded unsteadily, "at the opera and theatres; and he bribed Signora Rositti's maid to carry notes to me—though I never answered them; and sometimes he met me in a crowd, and whispered to me."

"And you fell in love like that!"

"I was only sixteen."

"Poor child!" muttered Ned half-pityingly. "And he followed you to Laurenti?"

"Ah, that was wrong of me. I used to meet him in the garden, for nearly two months, every day. I should not have done it, but—I had no one to look after me but Teresa, and—and—" She paused, finding her narrative too painful to continue.

"My father found it out at last," she proceeded, with a desperate determination to get the worst over, "and sent me away to a convent in Paris. There was an Italian confessor there, an uncle of Luigi's—of Count Olivetti's—and he told me that his nephew was married, and—and I believed him; I did not think a priest would tell a lie."

"I suppose your aunt and father got him to do so."

"Yes."

"To make you marry me?" bitterly.

"Oh, Ned, do not be angry—it was not my fault," she sobbed piteously, breaking down into tears again.

"Angry with *you*, poor child!" he said sorrowfully. "No, it is not your fault—only it is horrible to think how I have been living in a fool's paradise all this time."

"I did not wish to deceive you, Ned; it was for your own sake I told you nothing. I saw you were happy, and—what was the good of telling you of that past folly?"

"You might have told me before I married you. I would not knowingly have forced myself on you against your will. Why did you not tell me the truth then?"

"You never asked me, and—and I did not think you cared."

It was too true; Ned felt now that he had been too easily satisfied with Count Laurenti's consent, and had not taken sufficient pains to ascertain the girl's own feelings towards him. Well, he was punished sufficiently now, he reflected bitterly, as he turned away and took a couple of turns up and down the little room. But presently he came back to Ida's side, and asked sternly,—

"Then, if this was the case between you and Olivetti, what made you invite him to this house?"

"I did not," she replied, lifting her head, and looking him in the face for the first time.

"My mother said you did."

"Your mother is always putting words into people's mouths that they have never spoken. Count Olivetti asked me if he might call, and while I was hesitating for an excuse, your mother told him he might come. I never asked him—I cannot bear to meet him now," with a fresh sob.

"And you really loved him when you used to meet him at Laurenti?" asked Ned, half hoping that she would deny the charge, and say that she had been prompted to make love to the handsome artist out of mere fun and girlish folly. But she only sobbed in silence, and Ned's heart sank as he read her silence aright.

"Do you care for him still?" he asked hoarsely, after a moment's pause; but though Ida's sobs redoubled, she made no attempt to speak, and Ned's worst fears seemed to be confirmed by her silence.

"Speak to me," he repeated quietly, carefully repressing all emotion in his voice, for fear of distressing her more. "No, do not cry like that; I am not blaming you, my dear;

but I wish to know whether you still love this —Olivetti" (he had nearly said *cur*). "Tell me the truth now, once and for all."

"I do not know," she sobbed wildly. "Oh, why do you ask me such questions? I loved him long ago, and I thought my heart was broken when they told me he had forgotten me and married some one else. But now, when you ask me—I do not know; oh, indeed, I do not know."

"Well, do not distress yourself so much," he said gently, and as he stroked her bowed head softly, he murmured pityingly, "Poor child; poor child."

He felt at that minute as if his own heart was broken, and his pain was all the more cruel because of the fool's paradise in which, as he said, he had lately been living. But, through all his own grief, he was generous enough to pity his wife; *she* had not been to blame, he told himself, though her father had deceived him shamefully; and his heart ached for her as much as for himself, as he watched her slight form convulsed with grief. He loved her too truly still, in spite of all she had just told him, to witness her suffering without pain; and now, seeing that she was rapidly losing all self-control, he did his best to soothe and tranquillise her.

"You must not fret so," he said with grave kindness, though he was unable to hide the

ring of pain in his voice. "You have nothing to reproach yourself with. It is your father's fault and mine. I ought not to have taken you from your father as if you were a doll; I should have found out your feelings for myself, instead of taking them for granted. But you must not make yourself unhappy like that; it is not your fault."

"Oh, Ned, forgive me," she sobbed.

"Yes, yes, poor child, I forgive you," he said rather huskily. "There, do not cry any more. Come, let me take you to your room."

Worn out and exhausted by her late emotion, Ida was glad of the support of her husband's arm down the passage to her bedroom, where he delivered her over to the charge of her sleepy maid, who was, however, sufficiently awake to see that her mistress had been weeping bitterly, and to wonder what she and Mr Huntingdon had been quarrelling about all this while in the boudoir.

As soon as he was free from his wife, poor Ned rushed downstairs, and snatching a hat from its peg in the hall, went out into the garden, and began to pace restlessly up and down. It was a mild night, but even had it been cold he would not have noticed it, so great was the fever in all his veins. Up and down, up and down he went, thinking of all his wife had told him, and tormenting

himself by recalling trifling events which he had hardly noticed at the time when they occurred, but which came back to him now bearing a new and significant aspect. One thing stood out above all others in his mind : his wife did not care for him, and had never been happy with him. He laughed bitterly as he remembered the pains he had taken to make her so, and the complete way in which he had gone on deceiving himself. Why, from the very first he might have seen the truth, had his eyes not been so completely blinded by his insane love. No, not insane ; he would never call it that, though it had proved a cruel misfortune to him, and to his poor little wife too, he reflected bitterly. It seemed so cruel that he should have brought grief upon the very woman whom he loved so fondly, and for whom he felt even now that he would willingly make any sacrifice. And yet his very love had been a source of sorrow to her. He remembered how passive and spiritless she had appeared during those weeks which he had passed in Paris previous to their marriage, and how little interest she had seemed to take in anything. And during their honeymoon, and since their arrival in Lynborough, it had been the same. She had been gentle, and sweet, and lovable ; but happy—never ! She had tried hard to deceive

him, and make him think that she was so, but he saw now that she had been acting a part all the time. Well, she should have her liberty, if that would make her any happier, and after what had passed between them to-night he did not feel as if he could endure to live with her any more. But then he paused, and asked himself whether he had any right to leave her to face the world alone. She was such a child—not quite eighteen !—and as her husband it was his place to care for her and protect her, since she had done nothing really to forfeit his protection. And yet he felt that he must get away from his home, if only for a few weeks. He could not take up his old life just where it had been so roughly broken ; he must have a few weeks' respite at any cost.

The sun rose, and found him still pacing the garden paths with feverish energy ; nor did he re-enter the house till some sounds in the street beyond warned him that the world was beginning to awake, and that his mother's servants would soon be stirring. Then he went up to his dressing-room, and throwing himself on the sofa, all dressed as he was, tried to snatch a few hours' sleep.

It is to be feared, however, that his efforts in this direction were not very successful, for at nine o'clock he presented himself at his mother's breakfast-table, looking pale and hag-

gard, and with deep circles beneath his eyes, which were dull and lustreless, and from which the frank, laughing, half-boyish expression was gone for ever.

"Why, Ned, you are active after your ball," began Mrs Huntingdon, as he entered; but then, as she caught sight of his face, she uttered a cry of dismay, and declared that he must be ill.

"I do feel rather out of sorts," he replied, glad of the excuse; but when his mother suggested sending for a doctor, he forbid her to do so almost sharply.

"I think I want change of air," he explained. "I've been feeling rather seedy lately. I think I shall run up to Scotland for a few weeks at the grouse."

"Has Lord Nashville asked you to go with him?" asked the old lady, with a resigned sigh.

"No; but I got a letter from a fellow yesterday, asking me to take a moor with him."

"And shall you do so?"

"I should like to, if you and Ida don't mind my going off for a few weeks."

"Ida! won't you take her with you?"

"Well, you see, there's a very bad house on this moor—no accommodation for ladies."

"But—but won't Ida think it strange, so

soon after your marriage?" suggested Mrs Huntingdon hesitatingly.

"I don't fancy she'll mind," said Ned, and for the life of him he could not suppress a slight tinge of bitterness in his tone.

"No, I don't suppose she will," replied the old lady dryly. "When do you think of going?" she added after a pause.

"Well, that's the thing; it's so sudden," replied the young man awkwardly. "Fraser wants me to start to-night."

"To-night!" echoed both Mrs Huntingdon and Miss Boyd in a breath.

"I only got the letter yesterday, and didn't make up my mind till this morning, or I'd not have taken you by surprise like this," he explained lamely.

The two old ladies exchanged glances. Evidently something was wrong, if they could only find out where. Ned looked terribly upset and ill, and his anxious mother noticed that he ate nothing at all. She was convinced that he had been quite well yesterday, for he had eaten a capital dinner, and had appeared in excellent spirits before starting for the ball; and now he did not look like the same man. What had wrought the change? she wondered anxiously; and at last she asked him the question point blank. She did not think it necessary to wait till Miss

Boyd left the room before asking the question, for she regarded her companion as quite one of the family; but Ned was painfully conscious that she was not, and, rising abruptly from the table, he replied curtly that nothing was the matter, except that he did not feel quite the thing, and strode out of the room to escape further questioning, while poor old Mrs Huntingdon collapsed into tears, and declared that something must be terribly wrong with her boy when he could speak to her in that cold, hard tone.

"But perhaps Ida will know what it is," she whimpered, "for I am certain it's something that happened at that horrid ball last night."

Ida did not make her appearance till two o'clock, which was her luncheon, and old Mrs Huntingdon's dinner, hour. She looked almost as ill as Ned, though, woman-like, she concealed her feelings better. She was always pale, but to-day there was something unnatural in her pallor, and the dark circles about her eyes (and which ill-natured people ascribed to paint) were too deep to-day to be becoming.

Mrs Huntingdon watched her narrowly as she entered the dining-room and seated herself at the table, and she was struck by her want of appetite, and the listless manner in which she replied to Miss Boyd's inquiries

about the ball, as much as by her pale looks. Certainly something was wrong—and Ida knew what it was, thought the old lady; and then, for the first time, it occurred to her that there might have been a quarrel between the young couple. And if so, Ida must certainly be the one to blame, the mother decided.

"Where is Ned?" asked Ida at last. She had glanced nervously at the door each time it opened to admit the servant, and now she felt that she must find out whether her husband was in the house or not.

"He is upstairs packing," replied Mrs Huntingdon coldly.

"Packing?" echoed Ida faintly.

"Yes; did you not know he was going to Scotland?"

"No," faltered Ida; and then by a supreme effort she added,—"When does he go?"

"To-night," said her mother-in-law sternly.

Ida said no more, but she leant back in her chair, looking so white and wretched that her mother-in-law's kind heart was touched, and rising from her seat she went over to her, and laying her hand on her shoulder, said kindly,—

"Come, Ida, my dear; if you and Ned have had a difference, just go and beg his pardon, and I'm sure he'll give it. I know how good

he is, and you need not be afraid to go to him ; he's too fond of you to be angry with you long, whatever you have done."

"There has been no quarrel between us," said Ida, seeing that Ned had not told his mother anything of what had passed between them last night. "I am only surprised at his leaving home so suddenly," she added rather coldly, for she resented the way in which her mother-in-law seemed to take it for granted that, if there had been a quarrel, she (Ida) must of course be in the wrong.

"Something is wrong," replied the old lady suspiciously. "He looked quite ill this morning—as indeed you do too—and he hardly ate a thing for breakfast, and now he's going without his lunch, poor boy. He says he's not been well for the last two or three days, and wants change of air ; but I'm certain he was quite well yesterday. It's something that's happened since then that has upset him, poor fellow, and I can't help thinking you know what it is, Ida."

"But I do not," returned Ida quietly, as she followed her mother-in-law from the dining-room.

As soon as she could make her escape unobserved, she went upstairs to her husband's dressing-room, and tapped timidly at the door.

"Come in," cried Ned's voice from within,

and, opening the door with a beating heart, she entered and found Ned on his knees beside a portmanteau, which he was filling with a pile of clothes which lay on the ground beside him. "Come in, Ida," he said, rising from his knees, and forcing himself to greet her with a smile, though the sight of her was inexpressibly painful to him just then. "I am glad you have come; I wanted to tell you about this sudden freak of mine. I'm feeling rather seedy, and old Fraser has asked me to join him on his moor—"

"Oh, Ned," she interrupted, with tears in her eyes, "I know why you are going, and I have come to ask you to stay. I shall never forgive myself if I feel that I have driven you away from your home."

"You have not," he replied gravely. "I am going for my own pleasure."

"Are you?" she asked wistfully, and he was unable to meet her eyes and declare that it was so. "Ned," she said, laying her hand on his arm, and speaking softly and entreatingly, "will you not forgive me? I have tried, oh! so hard, to be a good wife to you, and if I could have prevented it, you should never have found out about that girlish folly of mine. It was only a folly, Ned; why should we think any more about it, or let it stand between us—"

"You do not understand," he interrupted, removing her hand gently but firmly from his arm. "Yes, you have tried to do your duty by me; but when a man loves as I love, he cannot be satisfied with mere duty from his wife. I do not wish to blame you—only I feel that I must get away for a little. And you will be happier without me, since you do not care for me," rather bitterly.

"I *do* care for you, Ned—how can I help it, when you are so good to me?"

"My dear, you are one of those good women who always believe they care for what it is their duty to care for," he replied, smiling sadly. "You are too young to live alone, or I would give you your liberty at once; but I think it better for you to remain under my mother's roof yet awhile. She knows nothing, and will be good to you always, and no one can cast a stone at you while you are with her."

"But ought she not to be told, if—if—"

"No," he said decidedly. "She is a good woman, but she loves me blindly, and would never forgive you if she knew the truth—I could never make her understand that you were free from blame."

"I shall never forgive myself," cried Ida, with a gesture of despair. "Oh, Ned, will you not stay—for *my* sake? I shall be miserable if you leave me like this."

"I am not leaving you in anger; and I shall come back by-and-by," he replied quietly. "We are friends still—good friends, I hope, dear," he continued more lightly. "I do not see why you should think so much of my going to Scotland for a few weeks' grouse-shooting. I want a change."

"And—you trust me, Ned?" she whispered hesitatingly.

"Yes, I trust you, Ida," he said, taking her hand, and looking sternly down at her, "else I should not leave you here, near *him*."

"And—you will not warn your mother?"

"No; I trust you," he repeated. "Now, go; I must finish my packing," he added, leading her gently towards the door. He stooped and kissed her gravely on the forehead, and then opening the door, allowed her to pass out, and with one last, wistful glance at his firm, immovable face, she left him, and, shutting herself into her own room, wept long and bitterly.

CHAPTER VII.

PEOPLE ARE SURPRISED.

IT was the afternoon of the following Monday, and Kate L'Estrange was seated in the most comfortable chair of The Folly drawing-room, reading a novel. The day was hot and breathless, but she looked as cool, and fresh, and trim as she always did, in her simple, perfectly-fitting Holland dress, trimmed with dark, navy blue ribbons. People praised Miss L'Estrange for the simplicity with which she dressed, and said she was very sensible to be so economical, seeing how poor her father was; yet these good people would have been considerably surprised could they have seen the length of the bills which Colonel L'Estrange paid without a murmur — for Kate allowed none of her family to find fault with her. Sweet simplicity sounds very well in words, but the

interpretation which Kate put on it proved tolerably costly. If her gowns were plainly made, it was because a plain riding-habit style of dress suited her better than a highly-trimmed one; but the plain gowns had to be made by a good dressmaker to fit her shapely figure perfectly, for plainness is apt to degenerate into dowdiness unless it is perfect of its kind; and when one's dress is simple, one has to be all the more particular about the fit of one's gloves and boots. So, at least, thought Miss L'Estrange, and she was also of opinion that girls require a great variety of dresses; so on the whole, Colonel L'Estrange did not benefit as much as his friends supposed from his daughter's sensible, unpretending style of dress; but he was proud of her, and was well pleased to know that she was always as well dressed, in her own fresh, wholesome style, as any other girl in the county.

To-day she looked the very perfection of fair maidenhood, as she leant comfortably back in her easy-chair. There was not one crease in her fresh, tight-fitting dress; not one hair was ruffled or out of place in the fair coil which crowned her head; the heat had been powerless to bring the faintest additional flush into her cool, soft cheeks; nor were her clear grey eyes troubled or disturbed by the slightest shadow of feeling. She might have passed

for a statue of cold purity and innocence as she sat there so tranquilly—only, one would hardly have expected Innocence to wear so firm an expression about the corners of her mouth. In a few years her face would probably grow hard, but at present it was only firm and rather cold, though it could light up wonderfully when she wished to make herself agreeable to any one.

From time to time she turned a page of the book which rested on her knee with her small, white, firm hand; and once or twice she yawned slightly; but not a word did she address to her mother, who was seated at the opposite side of the room knitting a pair of socks for one of the younger boys. Mrs L'Estrange, however, cast many anxious glances at her daughter's immovable face, for she knew the girl sufficiently well to see that she was angry. It was no uncommon thing for Kate to sit silent like this when in the bosom of her family, for she made a rule of never wasting her fascinations upon them; but there had lately been a dispute between the mother and daughter *à propos* of Count Olivetti, and the former saw that Kate, though silenced, was far from being vanquished.

"It would be the maddest folly to allow Count Olivetti to visit here," she said at last, taking up the argument where it had been

dropped nearly half-an-hour ago. "Mr Proctor is inclined to be so jealous, and Fanny" (Lady Nashville) "says you offended him terribly at Lowsworth by allowing the Count to pay you attention."

"Mr Proctor is going abroad the day after to-morrow," remarked Kate coolly, without turning her head.

"But he would be sure to hear if you flirted with this artist in his absence; and really it is terribly *infra dig.*, to say nothing of the imprudence of the thing, for you to accept attentions from an artist."

"He is of noble family," said Kate more coldly than before.

"So he says; but Ned Huntingdon did not seem to put much faith in his assertion. You know these foreign titles can be bought."

To this Kate returned no answer whatever, but continued to peruse her book in unbroken silence, and poor Mrs L'Estrange was fain to relapse into silence too. But after an uncomfortable silence of ten minutes, the welcome sound of carriage wheels was heard on the gravel outside, and Mrs L'Estrange, from her seat near the window, announced that the Proctors had come to pay them a farewell visit.

Kate said nothing, nor did she move a muscle till the neat maid-servant opened the

door and ushered in Mr Proctor and his sister and daughters, whom he had brought, sorely against their will, to bid the L'Estranges good-bye before starting for the Continent. It was a source of some chagrin to Kate that her rich admirer should leave the country without having made her that offer which she had learnt to expect so confidently; but she understood quite well what had prevented him doing so, and told herself that, when he returned from his trip abroad, she would be more discreet, and would easily win him back. But it was probably only the prospect of losing him that made her fancy she could bring herself to marry him; and had he really made her an offer, it was highly possible that she would have refused him; for under her cool exterior she really had some sort of a heart, and it was not likely that she would really have brought herself to marry a man she detested, when all the time she was in love with another. But now that her vanity was piqued by the way in which Mr Proctor was threatening to throw off her yoke, she was keenly desirous of recapturing him. If Miss Brierly did get him, it must not be until she (Kate) had refused him. So she smiled sweetly upon him as she shook hands with him, though she could not manage to infuse much warmth into her greeting to his sister, a tall, thin, sour-visaged

person, greatly resembled by her two nieces, who were not quite so gaunt or tall, however.

Mrs L'Estrange, who was an excellently trained mother, applied herself to entertaining Miss Proctor, leaving Kate free to make herself charming to Mr Proctor, while his two daughters sat silent and stared at Kate with no friendly expression.

But by-and-by the arrangement of the little group was disturbed by the entrance of fresh visitors, Lady and Miss Brierly, and Mr Brierly. Lady Brierly's face darkened as she recognised Mr Proctor seated by Miss L'Estrange's side; but her daughter, more courageous, collected her energies, in preparation for the fray which she smelt close at hand. She seated herself as near Kate as she could (which was foolish, seeing how well Kate was looking, and how pale and washed-out she herself appeared beside her), as did her brother, a handsome, sunburnt, young fellow of two-and-twenty. This was his first visit to this part of the world, for his father had only come into his baronetcy a few months ago, and young Wilfred had not been able to get away from his regiment in Ireland since then. But now he had come to Brierswood (Sir George Brierly's place) for a few weeks' leave, and his mother and elder sister were introducing him to the friends whom they had already made in the neighbourhood.

Assuredly it was foolish of them to have brought him to the house of the prettiest girl in the county—a girl, too, without a penny in the world, and who was an acknowledged flirt. Lady Brierly felt this when she saw the look of intent admiration with which Wilfred was regarding Miss L'Estrange, though at this minute the young lady was too much engrossed with Mr Proctor and Miss Brierly to pay much attention to the young officer.

Miss Brierly opened fire by cordially embracing the three Misses Proctor; for, unlike Kate, she had had the sense to propitiate the garrison of the citadel which she wished to capture. Then she seated herself near Kate and Mr Proctor, and began to say disagreeable things to the former in the softest way possible.

"Lord and Lady Nashville left Lowsworth last Saturday, didn't they?" she asked.

"They did," replied Kate quietly. She always spoke quietly, even when she said the most shocking things—it was her way.

"You will miss them sadly, won't you?"

"Yes, indeed; Lowsworth and Tyndale are almost like second homes to me."

"Really? How fortunate it is for you that Lady Nashville has taken such a fancy to you. It must make a great difference to you. But so often young wives don't care much about

their husband's relatives, unless, of course, they are in a position to be useful to them."

"I suppose you mean that people don't often take much notice of their poor relatives, and that Lady Nashville is very kind to patronise me," said Kate imperturbably, while Miss Brierly coloured and looked uncomfortable at having her words so literally translated, and her brother thought it shameful of her to say such things to this charming Miss L'Estrange.

"Your friend the Italian artist will be all alone at Lowsworth now," said Miss Brierly.

Mr Proctor frowned, but Kate replied easily:

"Yes; but his painting will keep him busy."

"I expect we shall see a good deal of him, though," laughed Miss Brierly significantly. "He does not seem to confine his attention solely to his painting."

"Doesn't he?" said Kate, with well-assumed indifference.

"Well, certainly, it struck me that he spent very little time over his painting when I was at Lowsworth. But, of course, you ought to know best—he was your friend."

"He was a useful sort of person to have in a house," said Kate coolly. "He waltzed beautifully, and sang splendidly. Did you hear him, Mr Proctor?"

"I had not that pleasure," replied that gentleman stiffly.

"Talking of singing, are you going to take any part in this concert that is being got up for the widows and orphans of those poor sailors who were lost in that dreadful accident outside Seaville harbour?" asked Miss Brierly, who was a good pianist herself, and was perfectly well aware that Miss L'Estrange could do nothing in a musical way.

"No, I am not."

"I am down for two pieces. You really ought to help; they find it difficult to get sufficient people to perform."

"You know that I neither play nor sing. My talents lie in quite another direction."

"Ah, yes; hunting, lawn tennis, and dancing."

"Capital things, too," struck in young Wilfred Brierly, speaking for the first time.

He was little more than a boy as yet, and though he had not been quite able to understand the sparring that had been going on between his sister and Miss L'Estrange, yet he saw that the former was doing her best to be disagreeable to the other, and he greatly admired the calm imperturbability with which Kate received all her rival's thrusts, and now he came to the rescue, flushing with boyish chivalry, and indignation against his sister.

"You are fond of them?" asked Kate, turning towards him with a grateful smile, which finished young Wilfred off completely.

"Awfully," he replied, his handsome brown eyes telling Kate the state of his feelings pretty distinctly.

"You must come over and try our tennis ground some day," she said, smiling again; and then, seeing that Mr Proctor was speaking to her mother and could not hear what she was saying, she added, "We always have some friends to play lawn tennis every Wednesday."

"May I come next Wednesday?" he asked eagerly.

"If you like," she replied graciously.

She was in love with Count Olivetti, and fancied that she intended to marry Mr Proctor, but still she did not feel disposed to spare this handsome boy. Admiration was to her what blood is to a tiger, and the more she got the more she craved; and she would not have been Kate L'Estrange had she declined to accept young Brierly's admiration merely because she knew that she had nothing to give him in return.

"I suppose young Mrs Huntingdon will sing at this concert," said Mr Proctor, suddenly bearing down on Kate. "I never heard a better voice in my life."

"Yes, she is to sing."

"She is a great friend of yours. You seem to see a good deal of her."

"Yes; I like her, and I think she likes me. I have seen nothing either of her or her husband since the ball, though."

"Don't you know?" exclaimed Miss Brierly, turning suddenly round.

"Know what?" asked Kate coldly, not well pleased by having her conversation with Mr Proctor thus interrupted.

"Why, that Mr Huntingdon has left the country."

"Left the country!" echoed the L'Estranges and Proctors in a breath.

"Yes; he left for Scotland last Thursday evening—for the grouse-shooting, he said; but it is wonderfully sudden."

Miss Brierly's tone was significant, and Kate, who liked the Huntingdons and hated Miss Brierly, hastened to defend her absent friends, and said,—

"Oh yes, I knew he was going, but I hardly expected it would be so soon."

"You knew he was going, Kate?" asked her mother, while Miss Brierly looked considerably chagrined at having her mystery so satisfactorily solved.

"Yes; Ida Huntingdon told me he was going soon, but the time was not fixed when she spoke to me about it."

"Why didn't she go with her husband?" asked Lady Brierly severely.

"I don't know. I suppose she thought it wasn't worth while going all the way to Scotland for a few weeks among the hills."

"She is too newly married to be separated from her husband," said my lady in a tone of grave disapprobation, as she rose to take her leave.

The Proctors also made their adieux at the same time, and soon the mother and daughter found themselves alone again.

"Did Ida Huntingdon really tell you that Ned was thinking of going away?" asked Mrs L'Estrange curiously of her daughter.

"Never mind what she did, mother; it is odious the way that those Brierlys gossip and make mischief. One would have thought, to hear Miss Brierly speak, that it was very terrible of Ned to leave his home to go shooting."

"Well, you see, he has been married for such a short time."

Kate shrugged her shoulders inpatiently.

"I think I shall walk down to Lynborough and see Ida," she said, rising.

"My dear, it isn't nice for you to walk about alone; indeed it isn't."

"Very well, give me a maid to walk with me, since you can't walk yourself."

"You know we can't afford a maid, Kate."

"And I know that I shall be ill unless I take a walk now and then," replied Kate, as she left the room to prepare for her walk.

CHAPTER VIII.

KATE'S PLAN.

ON reaching the Huntingdons' house Kate asked for "Mrs Edward," and was shown upstairs to the pretty boudoir which Ned had taken such pains to fit up for his young wife.

She found Ida looking pale and heavy-eyed, and intent upon a piece of fine embroidery which she had snatched up at the sound of approaching footsteps. Things had not been going well with her since Ned's departure last Thursday. Her mother-in-law was certainly kind to her, but she was suspicious and not very cordial, and then Ida was miserable on Ned's account.

She could not forgive herself for having allowed him to discover her secret; and though she told herself that she was not really to blame, she could not help feeling somehow as

if she were. This constant self-reproach, joined to her mother-in-law's half-concealed coldness, had made her really ill, and when Kate came to see her she was suffering from a headache, which would have served her with a good excuse for her ill looks, had her visitor questioned her about them. But Kate was far too discreet to make any allusion to them, and greeted her brightly, as if nothing was amiss with her appearance.

"So I hear Ned is off to have a try at the grouse," she began cheerfully, as she seated herself on a comfortable chair.

"Yes; he went last Thursday," replied Ida, colouring faintly.

"I expected he'd be off to them one of these days. I met him driving back from Tyndale on Thursday morning; I suppose he had been saying good-bye to Sir Pomphry and his aunt?"

"Yes; he went there before he left."

"What made him go so suddenly?"

Kate had hesitated about asking this question, but had then reflected that Ida would certainly be asked it by heaps of other inquisitive people, and that it would be as well for her to grow accustomed to answering it as soon as possible.

"He got a letter from a friend begging him to go at once."

"I see. Well, I hope he will have good sport. I wasn't a bit surprised when I heard he had gone, for I know how wild he is about his beloved sport; but those horrid Brierlys, who told us about it, spoke quite as if he had done something dreadful in going away suddenly like that, without warning any one. I told them that you'd told me several days ago that he meant to go. It was a fib certainly, but it spoilt Miss Brierly's story. I'm sure she wanted to make out that poor Ned had run away and left you lamenting; not that any one would have believed such a thing of him, poor old fellow, whatever Miss Brierly had said," added Kate, laughing heartily. "Why didn't you go with him, Ida?" she continued lightly. "I should think it would have been pleasanter than staying here. But perhaps his friend didn't invite you?" she added, seeing the colour again creep into Ida's face, and wishing to provide her with an excuse, if, as she was beginning to suspect, there had been a "row" between Mr and Mrs Ned.

What the quarrel could have been about, she could not tell; but Ida's evident unwillingness to pursue the subject made her think that something was wrong, and she thought it would be only kind to prepare the bride for the cross-questioning that she would assuredly

have to go through, sooner or later, from her various friends.

"No—that is, Ned has taken the moor with a friend," said Ida lamely.

"Taken it with a friend? Oh, then, I suppose it will be a bachelor party, and of course it would not be pleasant for you."

"No; and there is no accommodation for ladies or servants in the house; it is a mere shooting-lodge," answered Ida gratefully, for she saw the intention of Miss L'Estrange's remarks quite well.

"Well, you must amuse yourself while he is away. How many songs are you going to sing at this concert that they are making such a fuss about?"

"Two. And oh, Kate, I want so much to know whether I could sing at this other concert they are getting up in Lynborough?"

"My dear child, what an idea! Why, it is being got up entirely among the tradesmen and people of that sort."

"But it is for a charity."

"That makes no difference. Go and take tickets—every one in the county will do that; but it would never do for you to sing in company with all the Lynborough nobodies."

"I want to do what Ned would wish me to do if he were here, and I thought you would tell me the truth, Kate. Lady Hunt-

ingdon is so terribly prejudiced, you see, that I cannot quite trust what she says; but do you really think it would vex Ned if I sang? You see it is for a charity, and Mrs Huntingdon tells me they want me to help them so much. She is very anxious to make me oblige them, of course; and it does seem ill-natured to refuse."

"You poor little thing," laughed Kate, as she put her arm round Ida's neck and kissed her. It was seldom she wasted her smiles on women, but something in Ida's gentle, clinging nature appealed to such feelings as she had, and made her feel disposed to give her any help, in the way of advice, that she could. Ida, on her side, returned the caress gratefully, but not very warmly; for, in common with most women, she did not take very kindly to Miss L'Estrange, though, had she been questioned, she could have assigned no reason for not doing so, except that her instinct warned her against her, as something dangerous. "You poor little thing," proceeded Kate, still laughing, "what a pack of troubles you are in; and what a shame of Ned to go and leave you to bear them alone. No, I won't abuse him; I see you are a model wife, and consider it your duty to stand up for your absent tyrant. But seriously, my dear, you must not sing

at this concert, unless you want to make your Ned awfully angry. Will your mother-in-law be awfully offended if you refuse?" she asked, seeing Ida sigh.

"Well, she won't be very pleased. But I am glad I have seen you; I find it so difficult to understand these things for myself sometimes."

"Of course you must. And now that I have done giving you good advice, I want you to do something for me."

"I shall be very happy."

"I suppose you will see a good deal of your poor countryman, who is left all alone at Lowsworth now."

"I don't think so," replied Ida gravely. "My husband does not like Count Olivetti."

"Does that mean that he is jealous of him?"

"Oh dear no," said Ida quickly and with considerable emphasis.

"Then it is absurd of you to shut your door on the poor man, just because your husband doesn't happen to like him personally. Don't *you* like him?"

"He is very agreeable," returned Ida, with a calmness that did credit to her powers of self-command—or deception, whichever you may choose to call it.

"Just think how dull he must be all by

himself at Lowsworth! I am sure it would be only kind of you to ask him here sometimes; and Ned is by no means such a domestic tyrant that you need be afraid to receive a person whom he doesn't happen to like particularly."

To this Ida made no reply. She saw what Kate wanted plainly enough, but she was determined to refuse her request, and thought her both bold and rather impertinent to make it at all.

"What I wanted to ask you was this, Ida," continued Kate, looking rather embarrassed. "I should think it awfully good-natured of you if you would let me know whenever you expect Count Olivetti here. You see, Lady Nashville put some absurd ideas into mother's head, and now she won't allow the Count to come to The Folly; and so—I never get a chance of seeing him, unless I meet him away from home."

Kate certainly blushed as she said this, and looked rather ashamed of herself for saying it; but still she said it, and Ida gazed at her, and marvelled how any girl could be so wanting in dignity and reticence.

"I am very sorry to disoblige you, Kate," she said, and she was surprised at the stiffness of her own voice; "but I cannot help you in this—it would not be right."

"And why not?" asked the other with equal coldness.

"I cannot help you to — to see Count Olivetti against your parents' wishes."

Kate bit her lip.

"You might be more good-natured," she said presently.

"You must see that it would be wrong of me to do as you wish, Kate," replied Ida gently, but still with that tinge of bitterness in her tone.

Kate seemed to be so very confident that Olivetti loved her! Ida would have been horrified if any one had hinted to her that she was jealous of Miss L'Estrange, yet certainly there was a very sore feeling in her heart towards her at that minute.

"Suppose we go downstairs and see Mrs Huntingdon?" suggested Kate, rising, as she saw that it would be useless to urge Ida further.

Ida readily assented, though she could not quite understand her guest's sudden wish to pay attention to old Mrs Huntingdon, and accordingly they descended to the drawing-room, where, by a strange coincidence, they found Count Olivetti talking to the old lady. He had heard of Ned's abrupt departure, and had rightly divined the cause of it, and now he had come to see whether it would be possible for him to effect an entrance into the house

during its master's absence. The worst that could happen to him would be to be turned away, if young Huntingdon had put his mother on her guard against him; but evidently Ida's husband had omitted to take this precaution, for old Mrs Huntingdon received the artist as cordially as ever. He made good use of his time with her, and drew such a melancholy picture of the loneliness of his life at Lowsworth, now that the family had left it, that the kind-hearted old woman begged him to make what use he liked of her house, and just to come in for a chat whenever he felt dull. Of course he thanked her gratefully for her offer, and promised to avail himself freely of it; but then he began to grow impatient, and to wonder why Ida did not make her appearance. Was she afraid to meet him, poor little thing? or did she not know that he was in the house?

It was just then that Ida and Miss L'Estrange entered the room, and both exclaimed in surprise at seeing him there—only, Kate's was an exclamation of pleasure, whereas Ida's savoured rather of dismay. Then they all sat down and talked together; only, Ida was silent and preoccupied, and resolutely refused to be drawn into the conversation by Olivetti.

By-and-by, when Olivetti chanced to re-

mark that he was looking out for pretty bits of the neighbourhood to sketch, Kate exclaimed that there was a lovely view to be had from the bottom of Mrs Huntingdon's garden—should they go and look at it?

"Certainly," replied the old lady, smiling. "Ida will take you, I dare say."

But Ida excused herself, saying that she had not got any hat or shawl with her, and suggested that Kate should take Count Olivetti round the garden alone, as she knew her way about it quite well.

"Shall we go, Count?" asked Miss L'Estrange, rising and moving towards the open French window; and Olivetti was fain to follow her, after casting a reproachful glance at Ida, who, however, was careful not to meet it.

"She is frightened," he told himself, "but she will soon get over that." And then he applied himself to being agreeable to Miss L'Estrange, who was in high good humour, and who was thinking how good-natured Ida had been in sending her out alone with Olivetti.

"Why didn't you go out with them, Ida?" asked Mrs Huntingdon in a slightly displeased tone, as her two guests disappeared. "It is not polite to let them go alone."

"I have a little headache, and the air is

beginning to grow too damp to go out without one's hat."

"No; it would never do for you to catch cold," said the mother-in-law gravely. "Come away from that window, if you feel it chilly, and I will get you a glass of wine; it will be the best thing for your head."

In vain Ida protested. She had to swallow a huge glass of heavy port wine, which made her feel drugged and headachy for the rest of the afternoon, and was dragged ruthlessly away from the open window, and made to sit in an arm-chair in a gloomy corner of the room.

"You must take care of yourself," said the old lady fussily. In her own mind she had a shrewd suspicion that fretting had more to say to Ida's headache than her present delicacy; but, all the same, she was determined to do her duty by her, and so she made her drink the wine, and refused to let her enjoy any more of the soft evening air, for fear she should catch cold.

And meantime the artist and Kate L'Estrange were coming to an understanding in the garden.

"So I am not to see you any more in your own house?" said Olivetti reproachfully, after a few remarks had been exchanged between him and his companion.

In point of fact, he was not sorry that he had been forbidden the *entrée* of The Folly, for he had no wish to pursue his friendship with Miss L'Estrange further than it had already gone. On first coming to Lowsworth, he had been considerably gratified by the favouritism which Lady Nashville had displayed towards him, and, emboldened by her encouragement, he had paid polite court both to her and to her pretty cousin, Miss L'Estrange, who, following the Viscountess's lead, had also given him considerable encouragement. But it had never occurred to him that anything serious could come of their friendship, until that evening when he first discovered that Kate cared for him. Lately he had flirted openly with her, in the hopes of wounding Ida Huntingdon; but now that he knew that Ida had never willingly deserted him, and had been duped into her present marriage by a false story of his (Olivetti's) marriage, all his anger towards her had vanished, and with it, all wish to make love to Miss L'Estrange. But he was sorry for the latter (he could so fully sympathise with her for having fallen in love with himself!), and thought it only kind and polite to express some regret at being banished from her presence.

"Do you care?" she asked coolly.

"Care! How can you ask me? I wish I could leave the country altogether, since I am not to see you."

Had any one informed Count Olivetti that he was a liar and a scoundrel, he would have been exceedingly surprised and aggrieved, and would have replied indignantly that he was obliged, in common politeness, to answer Kate's question as he had; and, indeed, it would have been difficult for him to have replied to her truthfully.

"Perhaps we may meet elsewhere," she suggested, still in the same calm tone, though her heart was beating tolerably fast.

"Where—where?" cried Olivetti eagerly.

"I suppose you will be coming here pretty often, won't you? You must find it so dull at Lowsworth."

"I shall come here sometimes—next Thursday, perhaps," replied Olivetti after a moment's reflection. It might be rather a bore having to devote himself to Miss L'Estrange before Ida, but his supposed attachment to her would serve as an excuse for his constant presence here. Old Mrs Huntingdon might become suspicious if he called repeatedly to see her and Ida; but if she was romantically inclined (and most old ladies are, unless they are chaperons), she might be inclined to help him to meet Kate. At any rate, there could be no

harm in trying. Of Kate herself he did not think as much as he ought to have done. She was in love with him already, he reflected, with a half-pitying, half-complacent sigh; and he would be doing her no harm if he made her happy by continuing to flirt with her for a little longer. It is not probable that he would have been turned from his course even by the certainty of injuring her, but still it was pleasanter to think that he would not be harming her more than she was already harmed by complying with her suggestion. But we need not discuss his morals or principles, which were certainly not of an exalted nature.

By-and-by he suggested that it was time for them to return to the house, and they accordingly did so, and regained the drawing-room, just as the two Miss Bentleys were ushered into it by the servant. Greatly to Ida's surprise, Kate L'Estrange, instead of beating a hasty retreat, remained to be introduced to the two old ladies, and made herself quite charming to them, and also to Mrs Huntingdon, who began to think that she was not such a disagreeable girl as she had imagined, after all.

"So I hear Mr Ned has gone away and left you," began Miss Bentley, fixing her keen, beady eyes on Ida. But the latter had not

rehearsed her part with Kate for nothing, and the answers she had made to her recurred to her now.

"Yes; he has gone to Scotland for a few weeks' grouse-shooting," she replied quietly, while her mother-in-law drew herself up and looked reproachful, as she always did when Ned's name was mentioned now.

"It was very sudden," proceeded Miss Bentley, with the air of an inquisitor.

"He told me some time ago that he was thinking of going," struck in Kate. "But it was sudden at the end."

"Very sudden!" acquiesced Miss Bentley, junior, severely.

"He never said a word to *me* about his going till the morning he left," said Mrs Huntingdon, bridling.

"And why didn't you go with him, Mrs Ned? It's early days for you to be separated."

"It was a bachelor party, and I should have been in the way," laughed Ida rather constrainedly. "Besides, the house was too small for ladies or many servants."

"And when does he return?"

"It is not certain."

"No; he's said nothing whatever about returning," added Mrs Huntingdon injudi-

ciously, whereupon the two Miss Bentleys exchanged glances, and Kate L'Estrange rose hastily to take her leave, and thereby turned the course of the conversation. Certainly she had acted a friendly part by Ida to-day, but the latter felt very uncomfortable as she reflected that Kate must have guessed the true state of affairs pretty accurately.

"If only I could save her from falling in love with Luigi," she thought anxiously; but in this she was well-nigh powerless.

Count Olivetti remained to tea with Mrs Huntingdon and Miss Boyd, and afterwards confided to the former the secret of his hopeless attachment to Miss L'Estrange. Mrs Huntingdon listened, and shook her head, saying that if Colonel and Mrs L'Estrange disapproved of the affair, of course it must come to an end; but in her heart of hearts she felt disposed to sympathise with the handsome young artist, who listened to her little lecture with such courtly deference, and who sighed and looked so melancholy whenever Kate's name was mentioned.

"He seems to be very fond of her, poor fellow," she said afterwards to Ida and Miss Boyd, when repeating what he had said, to them.

"I don't think he is," ventured Ida boldly.

"What makes you think not? Surely you do not suppose he would tell an untruth?" cried Mrs Huntingdon in horror.

"Somehow I don't fancy he does care for her," repeated Ida, feeling that she must utter some word of warning.

"I don't believe you like him," suggested Miss Boyd, in a tone of astonishment.

"No, indeed," added Mrs Huntingdon; "I think you might be a little kinder to him, Ida, seeing how lonely he is, and that he is your own fellow-countryman."

"Why don't you like him?" asked little Miss Boyd, still in the same tone of wonderment—for in her eyes the Italian was everything that was charming and desirable.

"Don't you like him?" added Mrs Huntingdon, as Ida hesitated how to reply.

"I don't think Ned likes him," replied Ida, turning rather pale.

"I think I know Ned's likes and dislikes pretty well," said Mrs Huntingdon dryly. "And he's not one to be ill-natured to a poor lonely foreigner, just because he doesn't happen to like him particularly. Besides, this is my house, and I suppose I may ask whom I please to it."

After this Ida said no more, but she cried a good deal before she went to sleep that night, and wondered anxiously what Ned would think when he heard of Count Olivetti's visit.

CHAPTER IX.

WILFRED BRIERLY.

ON the morning of the following Wednesday Kate L'Estrange again walked over to the Huntingdons' house, and made Ida drive back to lunch at The Folly.

"We have some friends coming for lawn tennis in the afternoon," she said, "and it will amuse you to meet them. You really must come."

So Ida went, though she felt very shy about going out without her husband; but still she thought it very kind of Kate to ask her. In truth, Kate's motives were in a great measure selfish, however, though no doubt she was glad to do Ida a kind turn too. She intended to make great use of the Huntingdons' house henceforward, and she did not wish people to think that she was always going to Ida, when Ida never came to her;

so to-day she had resolved to have Ida at her party.

She did her best to amuse her guest during the hour which elapsed between the time when luncheon was over and the guests began to assemble for lawn tennis; but they did not seem to have many interests in common, and after a short discussion upon a new fashion in dresses that had just come out, the talk flagged, and Kate began to yawn surreptitiously now and then. At last, as they were seated beneath the great elms on the lawn, the first guest, Mr Brierly, made his appearance, and Kate's face lighted up into instant animation at the sight of him.

"You see I have taken you at your word," he said, laughing gaily as he shook hands with her. "You said I might come to-day, you know, so I have."

It was curious to see the subtle change in Kate's manner, as she turned from Ida to the handsome boy, whose admiration for herself was so very patent, and the sudden lack of interest in her tone when from time to time she felt constrained to turn and address Ida—for politeness' sake. Ida watched her with secret amusement, and even Wilfred Brierly, though not well versed in women's ways, noticed that something was wanting in Miss L'Estrange's charming manner whenever she

chanced to address her pretty, pale friend. The young fellow, in his eagerness to meet Miss L'Estrange again, had come half-an-hour before any of the other guests, and after ten minutes or so Ida rose quietly, and went away into the house to Mrs L'Estrange, feeling her position with Kate and young Brierly rather uncomfortable, and being sufficiently well versed in English ways and customs by this time to be aware that there was no impropriety in leaving the young people alone together.

"I say, you know, she's awfully pretty," said Wilfred Brierly confidentially, as Ida walked away towards the house. "Who is she?"

"Mrs Edward Huntingdon," replied Kate coolly, for she was never very enthusiastic in her praises of her sister women, even when she really liked them.

"Ah, my people were speaking of her the other day. She's Italian, isn't she?"

"Her father is," drawled Miss L'Estrange, as she slowly smoothed a bow of ribbon on her dress.

"I say, you know, I believe I met your brother once, at Southampton. He was in the *Amazon*," said Wilfred abruptly.

"That's his ship," returned Kate carelessly.

"He is awfully like you," proceeded the young man meditatively, and once more Kate

condescended to smile, for Jack L'Estrange was undoubtedly handsome.

But all too soon fresh guests began to arrive, and Mr Brierly found his *tête-à-tête* with Miss L'Estrange at an end. She was very good to him, however, and played several games with him, and he was as much enchanted with her skill and the easy grace of all her movements, as he was with her handsome face and the calm self-possession of her manner. He was not thoroughly in love yet, but he was hovering about the pleasant border-lands, and before that afternoon was over he began to reflect seriously that he might really fall in love with Miss L'Estrange if he saw much more of her. But if so, what a charming wife she would make him! She was so handsome and clever, and had such perfect manners! He might search a long time without finding any one half so charming, he thought as he wended his way slowly homeward later in the evening.

As for Kate, she was simply amused by the lad's admiration, and once or twice she wished Lady or Miss Brierly had been there, that she might have annoyed them by flirting openly with their son and brother; but beyond this her feelings did not go. She did not take much notice of Ida during the rest of that afternoon, for she found her other guests a

good deal more entertaining. Ida was not *fast* enough to suit the taste of young people like Miss L'Estrange ; she got on better with the married ladies than the younger members of the party ; and as she neither played nor understood lawn tennis, she was not of much good at a party of this sort. She felt shy and uncomfortable among the other married women, too, all of whom had their husbands safely at home ; and she began to think she had made a mistake in coming out alone during Ned's absence : at least, she ought to have had her mother-in-law with her.

"I say, Mrs Huntingdon, why don't you play ?" asked young Brierly, coming up to her at a minute when she happened to be sitting quite alone.

"I can't," she replied, smiling. She liked the young man's expression, and frank, pleasant manners, and hoped, for his sake, that he would not really fall in love with Kate.

"Oh, but you should try, you know ; you really should."

"I am sure I could never run about like that."

"Oh yes, you could ; I'm sure you could. Look at Miss L'Estrange : she doesn't throw herself about in the horrible way some girls do, and yet she hardly ever misses her ball. I say, don't you think she's awfully pretty ?"

"Yes, she is certainly handsome," replied Ida, but without any great warmth. She would be so sorry if this nice lad were to waste his heart over Kate.

"I say, Mrs Huntingdon, do you know you're the first Italian person I ever saw in my life?"

Young Brierly announced this fact so solemnly, that Ida could not forbear laughing outright.

"Really?" she said. "What a wonderful sensation for you!"

"Oh, you're laughing at me; but really, do you know, I always thought Italians were awfully dark and brown, you know? and when I first saw you, I thought you must be English."

"That is a compliment," said Ida, laughing, and looking pleased.

"No—is it?" asked Mr Brierly in surprise.

"In France, a lady is extremely flattered if she is told she is like an Englishwoman; and you know I was brought out in Paris—"

"Come, good people, do you want any tea?" said Kate, suddenly breaking in upon the conversation. She did not want Mr Brierly for herself, but she did not like to see him devoting himself to Ida. "Will you come and make yourself useful, Mr Brierly?" she added; and of course the young man rose instantly, and followed her towards the house.

"I say, what do you think Mrs Huntingdon has been telling me?" he began.

"Oh, bother Mrs Huntingdon," said Miss L'Estrange pleasantly. "I think you might find something more interesting to talk to me about, Mr Brierly."

"I'll talk about anything you like," replied the young fellow meekly.

Kate was very good-natured to him all the rest of the afternoon, and when he at last started for his own home, he was more convinced than ever that she was the most charming woman he ever had, or ever would see in his life. On reaching Brierswood, however, his mother and sister did their best to damp his felicity by informing him that Miss L'Estrange was a shocking flirt, and was at that very minute doing her utmost to "catch" Mr Proctor.

"And she must be three-and-twenty if she's a day," added Miss Brierly, who was twenty-four, and looked considerably older.

Wilfred sighed profoundly, and said nothing in reply to this last assertion, which crushed him even more than the hint about Mr Proctor; for he was only twenty-two himself, and Kate had certainly treated him in a very patronising manner to-day, for all her good-nature.

The following afternoon he again met her as he was walking through Lynborough, and

on hearing that she was going to see Mrs Ned Huntingdon, instantly declared that he was on his way to call there too, though until this minute the idea of doing so had never occurred to him.

"Then don't let me detain you," said Kate, considerably annoyed at the prospect of having this young fellow interfering with the *tête-à-tête* which she hoped to get with Olivetti. "I have to go to some shop first."

"Do let me go with you," urged Wilfred. "I am awfully fond of shopping."

"You must be very unlike most men, then. But I don't expect you'll find what I have to buy very interesting; I only want some darning wool. We spend a small fortune in darning materials; and poor mother spends the best part of her life in patching and cobbling for those wretched little boys, who, I am sure, take a special pleasure in destroying their clothes."

"I am sure you must be a great help to her," said Mr Brierly admiringly.

"Indeed I'm afraid I am not. I never do a stitch of work of any sort or kind, except now and then some embroidery for a dress for myself."

"Well, I suppose some people can't sew," said Wilfred, unwilling to admit a flaw in his divinity.

"And I am one of them. Do you know, Mr Brierly, I am very much obliged to you. Whenever I tell any one that I don't help mother with her darning and mending, they always look horrified—you are the first person who hasn't found fault with me for it."

"I should be an awful brute if I did find fault with you," cried Wilfred, looking radiant.

"No, you wouldn't; I daresay I deserve to be found fault with. But we can't all have the same talents, you know. Mother's specialty is doing useful work" (poor Mrs L'Estrange, who had been a fashionable London young lady in her day!), "and mine is to arrange the house prettily, and look neat and tidy. After all, mine is a useful part too, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is. I think nothing is so important as to have a pretty house; and I think it is just as important for the mistress to look pretty too."

"Oh, I haven't got to the end of my list of virtues yet. I'm the only one in the house who can keep the children in order—"

"Ah, you are fond of children!" cried Wilfred in delight. "I always think women ought to be, though I can't say I care much about 'em myself, you know."

"I detest them!" replied Kate calmly.

"Yes, I do; you needn't try to contradict me. Surely I ought to know my own mind best. The boys are afraid of me, and that's why they mind what I say."

"I'm sure you aren't as severe as you try to make out," said Wilfred stoutly.

"What! you won't believe my character of myself? But it is true. I do detest small boys, when they are about my brothers' ages. Little girls are better—they look pretty in a drawing-room, and haven't any special partiality for dirt; but I defy any one to live in the house with our boys and still maintain that they are fond of children."

By this time they had reached the Huntingdons' door, Kate having forgotten all about the darning wool, when she found that Mr Brierly was not to be frightened away by the prospect of the shop. She liked him a good deal better than she had done before; it was so nice of him to stand up for her against herself. But now all her mind was occupied with wondering whether Olivetti would be here before her—for, as he had said he would perhaps come here on Thursday, she never doubted but that he would come really. She found him seated in the drawing-room, talking to Mrs Huntingdon and Miss Boyd, and fuming inwardly because Ida had not yet made her

appearance. The two old ladies smiled significantly as Kate entered, and though old Mrs Huntingdon felt that Kate ought not to come here to meet Count Olivetti against her parents' wishes, she did not like to be ill-natured to the young people. Besides, it was not certain that Miss L'Estrange knew of the Count's presence here, and, in any case, it would be difficult for the hostess to tell them that they must not call here together for the future. Presently Ida did come in. She might remain upstairs when only Count Olivetti was here, but of course she was obliged to come down and see her friend Miss L'Estrange. Kate thought her more good-natured than ever to-day, for she talked perseveringly to young Brierly, and while diverting his attention from Miss L'Estrange, left the latter to an almost uninterrupted *tête-à-tête* with Olivetti, who, for some inexplicable reason, did not make himself quite as agreeable as usual to-day.

By-and-by, when all three visitors had gone, Ida ventured on another protest to her mother-in-law on the subject of Count Olivetti.

"It is very wrong to allow him to come here and meet Kate L'Estrange, when you know that her parents disapprove of it," she said gravely.

"My dear, how am I to tell them so?" asked the old lady, all the more irritably because she was conscious that Ida spoke the truth.

"You can tell Pearson to say 'Not at home' to Count Olivetti when he calls."

"I shall do nothing of the kind, poor young man. If you think he oughtn't to meet Miss L'Estrange — and perhaps he oughtn't to—you can tell her not to come here."

Ida sighed in despair, for well she knew that Kate would pay small attention to any remonstrances from her; and yet, when she thought of Ned her heart sank. Would he ever believe that she was not to blame for Olivetti's visits here?

CHAPTER X.

MRS LESLIE'S TALE.

AUGUST and September passed away, and still Ned did not come home. He wrote constantly to his mother, and also, though less frequently, to his wife; but there was a constrained tone in his letters, for all their affected good spirits, which both the women instantly detected.

Ida had been having rather a bad time of it since he left, one way and another. Her mother-in-law had grown colder and colder towards her as the weeks passed on, and still Ned made no sign of returning, and she let the girl see plainly that she suspected that something was wrong between her and Ned. What that something was, of course she could not tell, but she was certain that Ned was in no ways to blame. She noticed that he did not write to Ida half so often as to

herself; and then Mrs Leslie, the chemist's wife, who was fond of having Ida's maid in to drink tea with her (in a patronising way, of course), came to her one day, and informed her that she had heard from Mademoiselle Julie (the maid) that Mr and Mrs Ned had had a dreadful quarrel after their return from the ball at Lowsworth; that they had sat fighting for hours in Mrs Ned's boudoir; that then Mrs Ned had come into her own room to Julie, crying fit to break her heart; and that Mr Ned had not gone to bed at all, but had spent the rest of the night walking about the garden by himself.

Poor Mrs Huntingdon was horrified beyond all description by this news, and implored Mrs Leslie not to repeat the story to any one; a promise which the chemist's wife readily made, saying that she had only repeated the tale to Mrs Huntingdon because she felt it her duty to do so, since Julie said that she (Mrs Huntingdon) was in complete ignorance of the entire affair.

"That Julie ought to be dismissed," said the old lady severely. "I hate having foreigners about the house." And then she paused, remembering her daughter-in-law's nationality, and fell to whimpering, as she thought how much better it would have been for Ned if he had married an honest English girl.

Her first impulse, after Mrs Leslie left her, was to fly straight to Ida and tax her with the tale. But, before doing so, she confided all Mrs Leslie had said to the faithful Boyd, who counselled her to be cautious about attacking Ida.

"If there had been anything seriously wrong, Ned would certainly have told you, dear Mrs Huntingdon," she argued, for she liked Ida, and did not want her to get into any further trouble. "He has left his wife in your charge, and would be angry if you were not kind to her—"

"I *am* kind to her; but if she's driven my boy away from his home, she's an ungrateful little hussy, and I shall tell her so."

"But ought you to put entire faith in town gossip? Evidently Ned does not wish you to know, if there has been a quarrel."

"*If* there has! Of course there has been a quarrel!" cried the angry mother. "I can't bear to have her in the house, the sly little baggage."

"But think how delicate she is, dear Mrs Huntingdon! You are so angry now that, if you speak to her at all, you will very likely scold her well—and suppose the fuss and worry were to make her ill! Ned would never forgive you if anything happened."

This last argument silenced Mrs Hunting-

don, and for several days she refrained from saying anything openly to Ida, though the latter saw that something fresh was amiss, from the extra coldness of her mother-in-law's manner towards her. But on the third day the old lady lost patience, and asked Ida straight out whether it was true that there had been a quarrel between her and Ned before his departure.

"What makes you think so?" asked Ida quickly, wondering how far she could deceive her mother-in-law, and how far she ought to tell the truth.

"It is reported in the town."

"Just as it is reported that Mrs Williamson is in the habit of boxing her son's ears if he disobeys her," replied Ida, with rather an hysterical laugh.

"I see nothing to laugh at," said the old lady angrily. "You will be a mother yourself some day, and you ought to have more feeling for me."

"Indeed, Mrs Huntingdon, there is no quarrel between Ned and me," said Ida earnestly, telling herself that in truth there was none—they could hardly be said to have *quarrelled*, she thought.

"Do you mean to tell me that you are on good terms with him?"

"Yes, we are friends."

"Friends! A husband ought to be more to his wife than a mere friend."

"Of course. I only used that expression as a figure of speech," said Ida conciliatorily; but, to her intense dismay, Mrs Huntingdon suddenly began to whimper.

"I'm sure you don't care for Ned a bit," she sobbed.

"Indeed I do, Mrs Huntingdon. How can I help it when he is so good to me?"

"Yes, he is good to you. You wouldn't find a better husband if you were to search the world over; and yet, when I ask you if you love him, you say that you regard him as a *friend!* Oh dear, oh dear! my poor, poor boy!"

It was in vain that Ida protested. Mrs Huntingdon continued to reproach her without appearing to hear a word uttered; but at last Miss Boyd appeared upon the scene, and carried the tearful old lady off by sheer force, while Ida remained alone, feeling more utterly wretched than she had done for a long time. It was terrible to her to know that people were talking about her and Ned's disagreement, and certainly his long absence from home must appear strange in the eyes of the world.

She spent most of her days in her own room or the garden now—for it is so uncomfortable

sitting in the room with a person who is offended with you; and she felt shy of going out into society without Ned. Sometimes she went to the L'Estranges, and sometimes to Tyndale, but that was all; and she firmly refused to attend any of the tea parties in Lynborough, whereby she still further offended her mother-in-law.

The old lady could not be said to be absolutely unkind to her, but she treated her stiffly and coldly, and Ida was always uncomfortable when in her presence; so she sat alone in her boudoir all day long, and fretted till she made herself ill. Old Mrs Huntingdon might have been touched by her looks had she not been so indignant with her; but as it was, she only blamed her for presuming to look unhappy when she had one of the best husbands in the world.

And all this time Count Olivetti continued to visit at the house regularly. He came about twice a-week—to meet Kate L'Estrange nominally, but in reality to watch Ida. He never was able to speak to her, at least not in private; as far as she could, she ignored his presence completely, and never addressed a word to him that she could possibly avoid. She did not even condescend to remonstrate with him about coming to the house—the less she had to say to him the better; and she did not choose to seek a private interview with him, even to tell him how mean she thought

him for persecuting her as he was doing. Of course she ought to have put a stop to his coming at once, but it was very hard for her to do so, and her mother-in-law was so cold to her now, that she did not venture to tell her the truth. The longer it went on, the more difficult it became for her to speak up, and after a couple of weeks she began to feel that she could never do so at all. Neither did she mention Olivetti's name in her letters to Ned. She did not write very often to him, and then she found it difficult to prevent her letters appearing cold and formal. What could she write about, and how could she address him as if nothing were amiss, when all the time things were so very much askew? Of course, in such cases honesty is the best policy, and, even at the risk of wounding Ned, she ought to have mentioned Olivetti's constant visits to her husband, and warned him of his mother's infatuation for the artist; but she shrank from writing the latter's name to her husband—and, indeed, shrank from writing to him on any subject whatever. She had not been educated to consider simple, stern, unmitigated truth one of the cardinal virtues, as Ned had, and consequently failed to understand that perfect openness and honesty would serve her better with him than anything. His mother, who wrote to him constantly, would be certain

to mention Olivetti's visits to him, and if he chose to remain passive and allow the artist to come, it would be his own fault, she thought; so she said nothing about Olivetti to him, and contented herself with praying him to forgive her, and come home as soon as possible.

And at last, in the beginning of October, about eight weeks after he first left home, he did return, looking bronzed, and haggard, and hollow-eyed, and altogether unlike his old bright self. He kissed Ida quietly but kindly when they first met, and after that took as little notice of her as he could help. He had been schooling himself to indifference during all these weeks in Scotland, but he loved her far too intensely to become really indifferent. It was pain to him to look at her, or hear her speak, and he avoided her presence as far as possible, at the same time telling himself that his company must only be a burden to her, and that she would be happier without him, though she had been so good in begging him to hasten his return from Scotland.

On the very morning after his return he set out for Tyndale Court, intending to lunch with his uncle and aunt, and not to return till late in the afternoon, by which means he hoped to escape seeing Ida, excepting at breakfast and dinner. It was cowardly of him to run away from his pain like this, he

told himself, but he felt that he had not strength to stay quietly at home and bear it. Every time he looked at his wife's pale face he remembered that she did not love him and was unhappy with him, and he not unnaturally shunned the sight of her.

It was half-past five when he returned home this afternoon. He had met Mr Proctor (who had lately returned from abroad) in the street, and had brought him in to see his mother and Ida, but on entering the drawing-room he found only his mother and Miss Boyd there, and inquired where Ida was.

"She's in the garden, with Miss L'Estrange and Count Olivetti," said Mrs Huntingdon, sighing piteously as she gazed up at her son's altered face, and wishing that Ida had been a great deal farther away than the garden.

"Is Count Olivetti here?" asked Ned sternly.

"Yes; we often see him now. He is so lonely at Lowsworth, poor fellow," said the old lady apologetically.

She had, as Ida supposed, informed her son when Olivetti first began to visit at her house, and he had written back warning her that she must not encourage him to meet Miss L'Estrange in opposition to her parents' wishes; but Mrs Huntingdon, having once given the artist a general invitation, found

it difficult to withdraw it, and had contented herself with blaming Ida for encouraging Miss L'Estrange to come to the house so constantly. She did not quite like acting in opposition to Ned's wishes, though she also was rather disposed to resent his dictating to her whom she was or was not to invite to her house; so she buried the bone of contention in silence, and refrained from alluding too frequently to the Count in her letters to her son. If she had had any idea that Ned would seriously have objected to Olivetti's coming to the house, she certainly would not have encouraged him to come (though, having once admitted him, she might have found it difficult to shake herself altogether free from him); but she never supposed that Ned had any personal objection to the man, and he, seeing that his mother seldom mentioned Olivetti's name, and that his wife never did so, not unnaturally concluded that his remonstrance had had effect with his mother, and that Olivetti was at any rate not more than an occasional visitor at the house. But he felt vexed and disturbed at finding the artist here on the first day of his return home, and his mother, seeing the stern look which suddenly came into his eyes, began to fear that Ida had been right when she asserted that Ned disliked the artist.

"Suppose we go into the garden and look for Mrs Ned?" suggested Mr Proctor, after he had talked a few minutes to old Mrs Huntingdon.

He was anxious to see Kate and Olivetti together again, and judge for himself whether his sister was right in declaring that they were in love with one another. He had now returned home three weeks, and during the whole of that time Kate had behaved in an exemplary manner, and had carefully refrained from giving the slightest encouragement to any of her other admirers. This was not very difficult for her to manage, since young Brierly had rejoined his regiment at the end of August, and she seldom met Olivetti anywhere but at the Huntingdons. Olivetti, who was pretty well acquainted with all her doings, used to salve his conscience (if he could be said to possess one) by reflecting that, as Miss L'Estrange fully intended to marry the rich Englishman, he was doing her no permanent harm in flirting with her. It was her own fault if he did so, he thought; he only followed her lead; and if she chose to amuse herself with making love to him before engaging herself to Mr Proctor, he saw no reason why he should prevent her doing so. But he was sadly mistaken with regard to Kate's real intentions: she certainly

wished to draw a formal offer of marriage from Mr Proctor, just to prevent Miss Brierly being able to boast that she had won him from her; but she had made up her mind long ago to refuse him when he did propose. She was too petty to endure the mortification of allowing her rival to appear to triumph over her, but she was also too true-hearted to marry one man when she was in love with another. Certainly it was not for want of the will that she did not do so; but for once her feelings were thoroughly roused, and proved too powerful for her. But still she was bent upon bringing Mr Proctor to her feet with as little delay as possible, and had almost succeeded in doing so during these three weeks since his return home. Still he was suspicious; his sister was informed by the Brierlys that Miss L'Estrange was in the constant habit of meeting Olivetti at the Huntingdons' house, and now that he had caught them here, as it were, he was desirous of confronting them and seeing how they behaved to one another. So he proposed to go out into the garden and look for Mrs Ned, and his host reluctantly rose and accompanied him from the room.

They soon perceived Ida in the distance, leaning on the back of a garden-chair, gazing fixedly towards a green alley in front

of her. Her face was averted from the two men, and for some time she remained unconscious of their approach over the soft green sward; but, as they drew nearer, Ned caught sight of her face, and was struck by its anxious, miserable expression. What was she looking at that had power to move her so? He followed the direction of her gaze, and saw two figures moving slowly along, side by side, down the alley in front of them; they were half hidden by the trees and shrubs, but still he recognised them as Kate L'Estrange and Olivetti. The latter was holding Kate's hand affectionately in both his own, and Ned easily understood that such a sight must be painful to Ida.

Was it remorse at the thought of how her friend was being deceived, or grief at the sight of her *ci-devant* lover making love to another girl, that brought that sad, wistful look into Ida's dark eyes? Ned certainly ascribed it to the latter cause, and Ida, hearing his steps when he was a few yards off, and turning her eyes suddenly towards him, saw what he was thinking, and could not prevent the hot blood rushing suddenly to her cheek. Fortunately Mr Proctor was too much absorbed in watching the lovers to notice the expression of her face; at this minute Olivetti was in the act of raising Kate's hand tenderly

to his lips before bidding her adieu, and Mr Proctor almost forgot to shake hands with Mrs Ned in his emotion. He flushed a dull, angry red all over his face, and merely bowed stiffly to Kate when by-and-by she came towards him, followed by Olivetti.

Kate glanced quickly towards the path along which she and Olivetti had just come, and saw the whole case at once. Mr Proctor had seen Olivetti kiss her hand, and henceforth she must resign all hopes of winning an offer of marriage from him. For himself, she did not much mind; he was welcome to think what he liked of her, and she had not wished to marry him; but it aggravated her sorely to know that Miss Brierly would get him before she (Kate) had had a chance of refusing him. At any rate, he should see that she gave him up quite readily, and accordingly she treated him with such scant courtesy as must have offended him in any case, and showed her partiality for Olivetti openly before him.

But the artist did not stay long; he was dismayed by Kate's conduct, and did not wish to aid her in offending her rich admirer; and, besides, it was not very pleasant for him to be there with Ned. So he speedily took his departure, and somehow he forgot to shake hands with Mr Huntingdon when he bid the party good-bye.

The others soon followed his example, and before long the husband and wife found themselves alone with the two old ladies. Ned went to the door with Kate, and then, as it still wanted twenty minutes to the time for dressing for dinner, he accompanied her as far as the outskirts of the town.

"It seems like old times, doesn't it?" she said, as they walked along side by side.

"Yes," answered Ned with a sigh, as he reflected how much happier he had been in those days than he was now. "By-the-bye," he added abruptly, "you seem great friends with that artist fellow."

"Yes," said Kate, reddening at the contemptuous mention of her lover's name.

"He's not a particularly nice fellow. I've heard some queer things about him."

"Yes, from Ida. I know she detests him, though I can't tell why she should."

"But do you know anything about his family?"

"Oh yes. Ida wrote to her father, asking him to make inquiries about him; and Count Laurenti wrote back a dreadful account of *a* Count Olivetti, whose father was a shopman, I think, or something of that sort, and had purchased the title. But it does not follow it is the man we know. He says he is of noble family, and I do not believe he would tell a

lie. At any rate, the Nashvilles believed in him."

"It did not make much difference to them who he was, provided he did his work well," said Ned coldly; and then he bid Kate good-bye, and turned back. She had been warned, he reflected, and if she chose to neglect the warning, she must take the consequences. He could interfere no further, especially as he had no proof that Olivetti was really playing her false. The fact of the artist's having been in love with Ida eighteen months ago did not prevent its being possible for him to fall in love with Kate now.

"I shouldn't wonder if it ended in a run-away match," he thought. "She's just the girl to do that sort of thing—only that she's so bent upon marrying money. It must have been terrible for Ida to see them so constantly together" (grinding his teeth); "and yet, who knows, it may have been good for her—poor child, poor child."

He reached home, and rushed straight up-stairs to dress for dinner, and when he returned to the drawing-room he found his mother there alone, knitting by the fire. This was an opportunity not to be lost, and he began in an unconsciously stern tone, standing before the fire with his hands behind him, and looking severely down at his mother,—

"Mother, has Olivetti been in the habit of coming here often?"

"About twice a-week; certainly not more."

"Twice a-week!" cried Ned, startled. This was a great deal worse than he had ever imagined, and he began to think that Ida had not behaved well in leaving him in ignorance of the artist's repeated visits.

"He was so lonely, poor fellow," pleaded the old lady, frightened by her son's tone. "And he begged me so not to turn against him and Kate. Really, she is a very nice young woman when you come to know her, and her parents are so strict with her, poor thing. She and Count Olivetti never get a chance of meeting each other except here, and I had not the heart to forbid them to come. Besides, I don't see how I could have done so."

"You might have said 'Not at home,' when they called."

"I don't approve of telling lies about *anything*," said the old lady severely. "That's just what Ida suggested to me, and I was not surprised at the suggestion coming from *her*."

"But it is very wrong to encourage a girl to rebel against her parents."

"Well, I don't know; I rather think, Ned, that if my parents had set their faces against

your poor dear father, I'd have run away with him."

"Mother, mother, I had no idea you were so romantic still."

"I'm not romantic; but I don't approve of a girl being separated from the man she loves and forced into a grand marriage against her will."

"Well, mother, I ask you as a special favour not to have this Italian fellow to the house again. Didn't Ida tell you that I disliked him?" This he asked to discover how far Ida had endeavoured to stop the Count's coming.

"Yes, she did; she was always at me about him, and the way she treated him was most uncivil and unkind, to my thinking."

"And yet my wishes counted for nothing with you?" said Ned reproachfully, but feeling considerably relieved to find that Ida had opposed Olivetti's visits. She ought to have warned him (Ned) of the true state of the case, but her not having done so must have been owing to cowardice, rather than a wish to deceive him.

"You know how I love you, Ned," half whimpered Mrs Huntingdon. "I am sure no mother could consider her son's wishes more than I do yours. If you had had any real objection to the Count's coming here—"

"But I have—a very real objection. I know some things about him which make me unwilling to see him admitted here as your and Ida's friend."

"Dear me, and he seemed such a nice young man," sighed Mrs Huntingdon. "But why didn't you tell me so at once? It isn't like you to shut your door on a poor foreigner, merely because you don't like him very much; and so I never thought you'd mind his being here, even though you didn't like him. As for his meeting Miss L'Estrange, I quite take their part there; and if Ida thought it wrong, it was for her to discourage Miss L'Estrange's coming—though I don't see how a young thing like Ida should pretend to know better than me."

Here the entrance of Ida herself put an end to the conversation; and just then the dinner-bell rang, and she and Ned went into the dining-room, to their *tête-à-tête* dinner.

It was a trying meal to both of them, and it is to be feared that neither of them ate very much. But they had to sit through the regulation number of courses all the same, and make pretence to talk a little while the servant was in the room. Ned saw his wife glance appealingly at him now and then, as

though to discover whether he was very angry at having met Count Olivetti there that afternoon, and he did his best to reassure her on this point by speaking kindly to her upon one or two indifferent subjects. But conversation was very uphill work between them, and as soon as the servant left the room complete silence fell upon the pair. Ida was longing to tell Ned that she was not to blame for Olivetti's visits here, and to explain to him that she had done all she could, short of telling her whole personal history, to discourage Kate L'Estrange from having anything to do with him; but it was such a delicate subject to touch upon, and Ned was evidently so sore about it, that her courage failed her, and, after a few minutes, she rose silently and left the room, leaving Ned to his anything but pleasant reflections.

CHAPTER XI.

WEARY DAYS.

FROM that day forth a wall of icy reserve grew up between the young Huntingdons; each was too considerate of the feelings of the other ever to broach the subject that lay nearest their hearts, and consequently each felt stiff and constrained when with the other. Somehow Ned seemed hardly ever to be at home now; he spent his days shooting pheasants or rabbits at Tyndale, or else in hunting, and people remarked that he looked terribly ill, and rode in a most reckless manner—"almost as if he wished to break his neck," they said.

Sometimes he would run up to London for a day or two, or accept a couple of days' shooting with some friend at a distance; but as he was nominally living in his mother's house with his wife, no one could say that they were

separated. He was determined that no one should have it in their power to breathe a word against Ida; but both she and he had given a good deal of unintentional offence in Lynborough, and people were not slow to avenge themselves by catching hold of any story they could against Mr and Mrs Edward. There had arisen an idea, when the bride and bridegroom first came to Lynborough, that Ida did not care for her husband, and now gossip was not slow to assert that Mr Ned had discovered his wife's indifference and was not happy in his home. Fortunately this gossip was principally confined to the Lynboroughites, but several of the county people began to think that something must be wrong somewhere, when they perceived the change that had taken place in Ned, and remarked how seldom he was to be found at his own home.

Fortunately for Ned, he remained in perfect ignorance of the current of public speculation and opinion, but Ida was keenly alive to it, and shrank with morbid sensitiveness from mixing among her friends, though no doubt it would have been much better for her to do so than to brood alone at home over her troubles. But Ned was too much occupied with his shooting, and afterwards with his hunting, to have much time to spare for taking

her about, and as she refused to go without him she spent most of her time at home—at home, shut up alone in her boudoir! for she could not endure to be with her mother-in-law in the drawing-room now.

The old lady grew more and more unhappy about her son as the days advanced, and he grew graver and hollower-eyed than ever. She declared he was killing himself with hunting so constantly, and complained that when he came home he never seemed hungry, as a hunter ought to be, but ate absolutely nothing. Of course she laid the entire blame of the change on Ida, and did not scruple to tell her that she was breaking her husband's heart. It was only the fact of Ida's not being strong that prevented her quarrelling openly and fiercely with her; but even as it was, she contrived to make herself so disagreeable to her daughter-in-law, that the poor girl preferred to spend her days in the solitude of her own rooms, to facing the irate old lady in the drawing-room.

Sometimes kind Miss Boyd would come and sit with her, if she could get away from Mrs Huntingdon for half-an-hour or so; and the Carr girls were very good-natured in coming in for a chat with her now and then; but the greater part of her time was spent alone, and now that the weather had turned cold and

rainy, she was deprived of the luxury of her favourite garden.

Lady Huntingdon, who came over pretty often to see her, was highly displeased when at last she discovered the true state of things. She did not do so for a considerable time, for Ida always came into the drawing-room to receive her, and Mrs Huntingdon stood too much in awe of her to speak tartly to her daughter-in-law before her; but at last, towards the end of January, she did find out how Ida passed her days, and her indignation was great. It was shameful to treat the poor girl so, she said, when so much depended upon her being kept bright and well. She was looking terribly ill, and no wonder; it was enough to kill her, being left alone all day long. She said this both to Ned and his mother, and the latter wept profusely, and would have it that her ladyship had accused her of trying to kill her daughter-in-law.

"I never had such a thing said to me in all my life," she sobbed bitterly, clinging to Ned, and watering his coat-sleeve with her tears. "To be called a murderess—"

"I never called you that—"

"To have it said that I am trying to kill Ida!"

"Indeed, Mrs Huntingdon, you are mistaken—"

"And I who am so good to her, and see that she takes her soup and wine and jelly regularly, though I have sad work to make her take them—and then to be told that I am trying to kill her! Oh dear! oh dear! you're a wicked woman who can say such a thing!"

"Speak to her, Ned, and make her hear reason," cried her ladyship in despair, and speaking with more animation than was her wont.

"Indeed, mother, you mistake; Lady Huntingdon never said that you *wanted* to hurt Ida—"

"Oh, it's just like you to defend her, Ned; you are so good, my poor boy. But she's done her best to break your heart, the little wicked thing." (Here Ned perceived that his mother had suddenly begun to talk of Ida.) "I am sure she doesn't care for you, though you are so good to her. I asked her outright once, whether she did or not, and she said she regarded you as a *friend.* A friend, indeed! and you the best husband that ever stepped! And yet I never thought of harming her, and always tried to do my duty by her; and in return I am called a murderess!"

It was useless trying to explain matters to the aggrieved old lady; and Lady Huntingdon, seeing that Ned was in an agony lest his mother should abuse Ida any further, dis-

creetly rose to take her leave, muttering to herself that she had always known how it would be if Ned brought his wife to live with his mother.

The result of all this was, that Lady Huntingdon called frequently, and carried Ida off to lunch with her at the Court; and old Mrs Huntingdon bothered her more than ever with port wine and beef-tea, and no longer left her in peace in her boudoir, but grumbled and found fault with her if she did not come and sit in the drawing-room with her.

On the whole, Ida had been better off before Lady Huntingdon's interference, for Mrs Huntingdon was stiffer than ever towards her, and as she liked neither Sir Pomphry nor Lady Huntingdon, she found lunching at the Court, and spending a long afternoon alone with her ladyship, rather a penance. Still she would have been grateful for all the trouble taken about her if she had felt it to be prompted by affection or kindness, but she saw that it was not. It was as the mother of Ned's child, and the future heir of Tyndale, that they all took such care of her; for herself, neither Sir Pomphry nor Lady Huntingdon cared very much what happened to her, and to old Mrs Huntingdon, her death would probably be a relief.

Ida felt terribly lonely at this time, and longed, as she had never longed before, that

she had a mother of her own. Strangely enough she struck up a friendship with Mrs Elton, the clergyman's wife, and used sometimes to go with her work and spend the afternoon at the vicarage, while Mrs Elton was also very good in coming to her.

The Eltons were really very nice people, and Ned had no objection to Ida's being intimate with Mrs Elton, though he was surprised that she should care to be so. The clergyman's wife was a very good woman no doubt, but she appeared rather cold and reserved at first sight, and her manners were stiff. Besides, she was so much older than Ida. But she had been attracted towards the bride from the first day when she had met her in the High Street with old Mrs Huntingdon and Miss Boyd, and somehow from that first meeting she had been disposed to fancy that the young wife was not quite happy. She had heard all the various reports about her, and as time went on she became very sorry for her, and used often to go in and sit with her while Ned was away in Scotland. We all know that a friend in need is a friend indeed, and though Ida had not liked the clergyman's wife much at first sight, she soon grew grateful to her for her kindness, and ended by liking her for her own sake.

Of all the companions she could have

chosen, Mrs Elton was the best, for she was not only a good, but a sensible woman, and though she carefully refrained from talking openly to Ida about her family affairs, she still contrived to give her a good deal of useful general advice, without appearing officious or meddlesome. But she had a great deal to do in her position of clergyman's wife, and though she was very good to Ida, she could not spare her very much of her precious time. She was the only person in the neighbourhood whom Ida really liked, for though people said that she and Miss L'Estrange were great friends, she did not really like Kate much, and somehow they never seemed to know what to talk about to one another.

Next to Mrs Elton, she liked little Miss Boyd the best, and certainly the good little woman did what she could to shield her from Mrs Huntingdon's wrath, which seemed to increase day by day, as Ned continued to spend his time from home and to look ill and harassed.

No doubt it was a bitter sight for the mother, and perhaps it was natural for her to almost hate Ida as the cause of the change which had come over him; for though she had never been able to learn the true nature of their trouble, she felt morally certain that

there had been some terrible quarrel, which Ned had generously forgiven, though he had never been happy since its occurrence.

Ida also watched him with bitter self-reproach, and felt terribly guilty as she contrasted the happy, light-hearted young fellow she had married, with the grave, hollow-eyed man who was miserable in his own home, and seemed to be wearing himself out with constant hard riding, and walks whose length would have been a strain on the powers even of a professional athlete.

"He is killing himself," sobbed old Mrs Huntingdon, and Ida wondered miserably if it were all her fault. Once or twice she ventured to remonstrate timidly with him, and begged him gently not to exert himself so much; but he only laughed, and replied that he was all right, and that she and his mother need not make such a fuss about nothing. What right had she to interfere, when it was she who had made his home so miserable to him that he could not bear to remain in it? she asked herself bitterly; and yet there were times when she called Ned unkind and unforgiving in thus refusing to forget that she had ever cared for some one else. If only she could die! if only she could die! she cried to herself during those long sleepless nights; and at last she began to think that

she really would die, and free Ned from his present unhappiness.

Ned, on his side, saw his wife drooping and pining, with bitter pain in his heart. Manlike, he failed to appreciate the painful nature of her position in his mother's house, and told himself that she was miserable simply because she was his wife. If it had not been for that terrible reserve between him and her, he might have come to understand what it really was that was making her so unhappy; but he never questioned her, and only begged her kindly, now and then, to take care of herself for his sake; and she had not the nerve or courage to tell him what ailed her of her own accord. It would have looked like complaining, she felt; and really his mother was not unkind to her, though she was so cold.

Kate L'Estrange's friendship for Ida seemed suddenly to have diminished, and though she still came occasionally to see her, her visits were of much less frequent occurrence than during those two months when Ned had been in Scotland. For Count Olivetti had left the country shortly after the return of Ida's husband, and so there was no longer anything to attract Kate to the Huntingdons' house. Then, too, the hunting season had commenced, and Lord Nashville, who returned to Lowsworth for it, was very good-natured in giving

her mounts; and then Wilfred Brierly came down to Brierswood for Christmas (which was an open one), and occupied a good deal of Kate's time.

It was just before his arrival that the engagement between Mr Proctor and Miss Brierly was publicly announced, and Kate, partly to annoy the Brierlys (mother and daughter), and partly to let Mr Proctor and the world in general see that she was not destitute of other admirers, led the young fellow on in an unjustifiable way, considering that she had not the remotest intention of marrying him. She was very miserable and reckless about this time, which may perhaps be pleaded as some excuse for her conduct; for since his departure in October she had not heard a word from Olivetti. He had left the country, vowing within himself never to return; but he had taken a kind and tender leave of Kate, and promised to write to her, and to return as soon as possible.

He would have thought himself a brute if he had left her without a word of farewell, but once gone, he had carefully abstained from writing to her. Better she should learn that he did not really love her at once, he thought, and then she would probably marry some rich man. But Kate had not yet acknowledged to herself that he had forsaken her, though

his prolonged silence made her profoundly wretched, and neither hunting, nor dancing, nor flirting served to banish her anxiety. And not one of the least of Ida's sources of unhappiness arose from the consciousness that she had stood quietly by and allowed her friend to be so cruelly deceived.

Ned and Kate—to which of them had she brought the most sorrow ?

CHAPTER XII.

THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

FOR four months Ned remained nominally at home, though in reality most of his time was spent abroad; but towards the beginning of March he went off to Ireland with a friend, for some salmon-fishing. He had no idea how greatly his presence shielded Ida from his mother's displeasure, or he would assuredly never have left her; but when she ventured timidly to ask him not to remain away long, he only smiled and made some evasive answer, thinking that his wife was only saying what she did from a sense of duty. And she did not like to ask him to give up such consolation as he was able to find in sport, for her sake, and so let him go without further remonstrance.

It was quite the beginning of March when he left, and he did not intend to return till

the end of April. The stream which he and his friend had taken was in a wild part of Ireland, up among the hills, and surrounded by nothing but moor and bogs for miles around, so that he had a good excuse for writing seldom to his people at home in the scarcity of news to be had where he was. The country postman only brought him and his friend their letters once every two days, and any one but an enthusiastic fisherman would have found the place insufferably dull. Ned's friend happened to be devoted to fishing, but Ned himself was not so fond of the amusement, and at times felt the quiet life he was leading rather wearying; but he determined to stay out his two months, thinking that his absence from home must be a relief to Ida, and not being particularly anxious to return to her himself. So he remained on where he was till the end of March, when one night, about ten o'clock, just as he was about to retire to bed, the house was alarmed by a furious ringing at the door bell. Early though it was, the two servants were already in bed; so Ned took a candle in his hand, and went out to answer the summons.

"Take care it isn't some patriotic Paddy come to shoot you for spending your money in his native country," laughed Major Grey, as Ned left the room.

"It won't matter much if it is," muttered Ned to himself, thinking that, on the whole, an Irish bullet would not be unwelcome. On unfastening the door, he perceived a boy, who inquired if Mr Edward Huntingdon lived here.

"I'm Mr Huntingdon; what do you want?" asked Ned.

"Here's a telegram for you, sir; and three-and-six to pay, please, for bringing it."

"Come in and wait a minute," said Ned, leading the boy into the hall, and bidding him sit down on a chair. "How far have you come?"

"Seven miles, your honour; from D——. "I lost my way, that's how I'm so late. I'm afraid I'll not get back to-night."

"I daresay he can stay here, can't he, Grey?" said Ned, as Major Grey appeared, to inquire what was the matter. "Just see about him while I read this," and entering the sitting-room, Ned approached the lamp and tore open the yellow envelope. He was not in the smallest degree alarmed at receiving it, and supposed that it must merely be from his groom in England, about a horse which he was trying to sell. But his face suddenly changed as he glanced at the paper and saw that it was from Sir Pomphry—and something about Ida.

"Ida taken suddenly ill. Come at once."

Ned read the brief message through twice,

and then rushed out into the hall as if he had been a madman.

"What's the matter?" asked Major Grey, who was just returning to the room, after paying and dismissing the boy to a neighbouring house which called itself an inn.

"My wife's ill; I must go at once. Order the car, while I pack my bag."

No more could Grey get out of him, but he saw that the poor fellow was in sad trouble, and hastened to knock up the sleepy man who acted as their mountain coachman, and ordered him to get the car ready in next to no time. So in about an hour's time Ned was jolting down the rough mountain road towards the little town of D——, where was the nearest railway station. He reached it about one o'clock in the morning, and found the station-master and porters all asleep; but at last he got hold of a man who told him that the next train for Dublin left at eight in the morning, so until that hour arrived Ned spent his time pacing restlessly about the little station, being far too miserable and excited to go to an hotel and rest. Ida ill, and perhaps dying! and he not able to see her or be with her! It was horrible, and he felt half mad with impatience.

As he paced to and fro, all his short married life passed in review before him, and he

acknowledged sadly that it had been a mistake from beginning to end. If Ida were to die, he would always feel that he had spoiled her life and blighted her happiness—perhaps even been the cause of her death. He did not blame her in the least for his own unhappiness. It was not her fault, poor child, if he had married her without taking the trouble of discovering what her real sentiments were towards him; and she had always striven loyally to do her duty by him. Her duty! And he loved her more than his life! It was hard, bitterly hard for him, but he thought that the cruellest part of all was the knowledge that he had made her miserable. Yes, if she recovered, she should have her liberty and leave him; it was probably unhappiness that had brought on her sudden illness, and he vowed that, if she got better, he would not keep her any longer as an unwilling slave.

Such were the thoughts which tormented him during the whole of his journey home; and when at last, late in the evening, he reached Lynborough, he felt and looked so ill, that Sir Pomphry, who had come to meet him with the brougham (he had telegraphed to say what train he was coming by), exclaimed in dismay on seeing him,—

"Why, you look quite ill yourself," said the baronet, as he took him by the hand.

"How is she?" asked Ned hoarsely, griping his uncle's hand fiercely.

"Better—much better."

"Thank God!" muttered Ned, with a kind of sobbing breath. "Is she out of danger?" he added presently, as his uncle led him towards the carriage.

"Well, hardly yet, but she is decidedly better; she may pull through yet," replied the baronet, following Ned into the brougham, and slamming the door. "It is a great disappointment to all of us its being a girl," he continued.

"What girl?" asked Ned absently.

"The child. It is a girl after all. It is really most disappointing and — and most provoking."

"Oh," said Ned slowly. He had not thought of the child before, and it was quite a new idea to him. He, too, would have preferred its being a boy, but he felt disgusted with his uncle for making such a fuss about the child, when the mother was lying at death's door.

"Has Ida asked for me?" he said, hoping, yet scarcely daring hope, that she had expressed a wish for his presence.

"No; you see she is unconscious, poor thing—"

"Unconscious!"

"Yes—at least she has been. She knew us this morning, and the doctor seemed to think her much better," said Sir Pomphry, anxious to soothe Ned, and omitting to mention that Ida had relapsed into unconsciousness towards the evening.

They were close to home now, and the baronet felt that he had better say what he had to say to Ned at once, before the latter saw his mother; so after an instant's pause he said,—

"She had a shock, which made her so ill—"

"A shock! How?"

"Did you know much about that fellow Olivetti, who was painting at Lowsworth last summer?"

"Yes," said Ned, his heart standing still. "He left the country, though, last October."

"He has returned."

"Well?" fiercely.

"He came soon after you went to Ireland, and bribed Ida's maid to take her mistress some sort of note, and the girl took it to your mother instead, and — in short, there were words between her and your wife—"

"My God!" muttered Ned to himself, clenching his fist. "They will have killed Ida between them!"

Sir Pomphry was somewhat surprised by

the nature of his nephew's words; but he hastened to add,—

"You must not quite believe all your mother may tell you—"

"I will never believe anything that is not perfectly good of Ida. I would stake my life on her truth!"

"Certainly, certainly," acquiesced Sir Pomphry. In his innermost heart he was rather inclined to suspect his nephew's wife, for he knew well that she and Ned had not been on good terms for a long time; and the intercepted note looked terribly suspicious. But though he felt indignant on his nephew's account, he was anxious to keep him cool, and to make him see things in the best light possible. He cared for Ned about as much as he was capable of caring for any one; or, in other words, he was proud of him, and took an interest in him as his future successor and head of his house. But the glory of the Huntingdon family was dearer to him than even his nephew, and his great object at present was to assuage Ned's wrath and prevent a scandal in the family. "I am glad you are so reasonable," he added. "Your poor wife is ill, and cannot defend herself, and your mother is—well, you know that she is apt to be unreasonable. You must remember how she exaggerates, and not take all she says for granted.

It was to prepare you for what she would tell you that I have spoken to you so—I may say, abruptly."

Ned made no response, and fortunately the darkness hid his face; but he began to fear that something very bad had happened, from his uncle's tone. Just as Sir Pomphry finished speaking, they drew up before Mrs Huntingdon's door, and Ned sprang to the ground and hurried into the house in front of his uncle, though his knees shook so that he could hardly walk straight. The hall was dark, and there seemed a strange hush and stillness about the whole house to his excited imagination. Without a moment's pause, he staggered on down the passage to the drawing-room door, through which a light was shining; but on entering the room, he found it empty and deserted.

"No one here?" asked Sir Pomphry, following him; but at that instant there was a rustle in the hall, and old Mrs Huntingdon rushed in, and flung her arms round her son.

"Ned, Ned! my boy, my boy!" she cried, clinging to him; while Sir Pomphry pulled up his shirt-collar, and muttered that the old woman was a fool, and was evidently bent upon making her son see that he had been cruelly wronged.

Ned felt his strength more sorely tried by his mother's tearful caresses than it had even been by his uncle's previous "preparation," but he suffered her to weep herself quiet (or comparatively quiet), and kissed and soothed her kindly, before he asked the question that was burning on his lips.

"How is Ida?" he inquired, after allowing his mother to caress him in silence for a few minutes.

"Ida! oh, she's very bad, poor thing—"

"My uncle said she was better."

"Yes, she knew us this morning; but she seems in a kind of stupor now. Oh, my poor boy, you look half dead yourself!—and how am I to tell you? It breaks my heart, when I think of you."

"Uncle Pomphry has told me—"

"Then you know all? No wonder you look so bad! Oh, my boy, what can I do for you?"

"Listen to me a minute. My uncle says that fellow has written to Ida—"

"Ay, and she's answered him; the little—"

"Hush, hush, mother; remember she may be dying," said poor Ned huskily. "I do not believe she answered him," he added firmly.

"Tell him all, Sir Pomphry. Perhaps he

will believe you, though he does not me, who am his own mother," cried the excited old lady.

"The case is simply this," said the baronet. "Your wife's maid came to Mrs Huntingdon the other day—"

"Wednesday," interrupted Mrs Huntingdon.

"With a note, from Olivetti to her mistress, and—"

"She was in tears," cried the old lady. "She said she'd been taking notes between them for some time, and at last her conscience reproached her, and she felt she could not do it any longer; so she told me all. Tell him the rest, Sir Pomphry."

"The note referred to a past intimacy between this Italian and—and Ida—"

"And she never telling us a word!" sobbed Mrs Huntingdon.

"And—hem—where was I?—oh, the note seemed to imply that this Olivetti had at one time been Ida's lover—"

"And just fancy her allowing him to come *here*, and make love to poor Miss L'Estrange all the summer!" again interrupted the old lady.

This time the baronet grew very red, and remarked rather testily,—

"My dear madam, I really think you had better finish this painful story yourself. The

sooner this poor fellow hears it the better. But it seems to me you are making too much fuss about the whole thing. This maid may have lied."

"There is no need to tell me more," said Ned sternly. "Of course this maid has lied foully and shamefully. Olivetti may have sent notes to Ida, but I know she would never have answered them—"

"You are too good for her, Ned!" cried his mother indignantly. "You surely cannot attempt to excuse her conduct in hiding from us that she had known Count Olivetti before, and that he had been her lover!"

"She did not; she told me all about him long ago."

This unexpected announcement had the effect of completely silencing Mrs Huntingdon for a minute, while Sir Pomphry exclaimed in a tone of intense relief that he had always been sure it would turn out all right.

"I had better tell you both all about it now, since you know so much already," proceeded Ned rather gruffly. "Olivetti was Ida's lover before she married me, but her father separated her from him, shut her up in a convent, and at last made her marry me—"

"She had no business to do so unless she loved you," cried Mrs Huntingdon angrily.

"Ah, mother, it is easy for you to talk like that; but you do not know what power parents have in Italy—and then Ida was so young, and was easily cowed—"

"She should not have married you and spoilt your life," insisted the indignant mother, angry with her son for defending his wife.

"She probably would not have done so if her father and aunt had not made her believe that Olivetti had deserted her and married some one else," said Ned, clenching and unclenching his hand quickly. "She never found out the truth till she came here, and met Olivetti, and found that he had always been true to her—"

Ned broke off abruptly, unable to proceed, and Sir Pomphry, pitying him, suggested that they had discussed the subject quite sufficiently, since it was evident that Ida was entirely free from blame—poor thing.

"I don't see that at all," said Mrs Huntingdon. "To my thinking, she has behaved shamefully."

"She has not!" almost shouted Ned; and his mother almost jumped at the sound of his voice. "She has behaved beautifully. She told me all about Olivetti—"

"Then that was what your quarrel was about?"

"We did not quarrel."

"Julie says you and Ida quarrelled half the night after your return from that ball at Lowsworth last summer, and that you spent the rest of the night walking about the garden."

"That was when she told me all. There was no quarrel, but I—I—well, I didn't feel as if I could stay with her just then."

"No; and I've seen how you have changed since," said Mrs Huntingdon, melting into tears again. "Oh, my poor boy! I wish you had never seen her."

"That Julie ought to be dismissed—she should decidedly," observed Sir Pomphry.

"So she is," sobbed his sister-in-law. "Ida dismissed her last week."

"Why?" asked both the men in a breath.

"I don't know, I'm sure. Ida has such fancies."

"Probably she dismissed her for bringing her notes from Olivetti," said Ned sternly. "I did not think you could have been so cruel and unjust, mother, as you have been to Ida. She has behaved well throughout. It was through no fault of *hers* that Olivetti came here so much last summer, and I am certain that she has not encouraged him to write to her now; yet you chose to believe a spiteful servant who made a cruel accusation against her, and instead of taking means to discover

the truth of the woman's story, you flew to poor Ida and abused her, till—God forgive you! I do not know what mischief you may have done."

"Ned, Ned, don't!" sobbed the mother piteously. "It was for your sake, Ned; I was broken-hearted for you, my boy."

"Well, you were mistaken, mother—that was all," said Ned, softened by her distress, and stooping to kiss her. "You see, don't you, that poor Ida is to be pitied, not blamed?"

Mrs Huntingdon sobbed, but made no reply. It was expecting too much of her to ask her to acknowledge the woman, who did not love Ned, to be free from blame; and perhaps she hated Ida all the more because Ned had rebuked her, his mother, for her sake.

"Can I see her now?" asked Ned, after they had all stood silent a few moments.

"You must have something to eat first," said his mother, looking anxiously at his white, drawn face. "She will not know you, and you look as if you were quite exhausted."

"No, no; take me to her," persisted Ned impatiently.

And his mother, sighing, led the way upstairs, while Sir Pomphry departed, promising to return the following morning, if possible.

"But that neuralgia in my foot is so bad,

that sometimes I am unable to leave the house," he explained. "But Lady Huntingdon will come if I cannot."

"Ah, indeed, your gout has been bad lately, I know—" began Mrs Huntingdon.

"Not gout, madam," interposed the baronet hastily, for he had a horror of being thought gouty.

"Yes, yes; I know it's been very bad," persisted the old lady, as usual paying no heed to what was said to her. "And you've been very good in exerting yourself so to fetch Ned, for the gout's an awful painful thing."

The baronet suddenly dashed out of the house, muttering something about "wasting words over an old beldame;" and Mrs Huntingdon proceeded to conduct her son to Ida's room, remarking that really Sir Pomphry's manners grew more strange and startling every time she saw him.

Poor Ida was lying quite still and unconscious when they entered her room. She might have been asleep as she lay there, with her eyes closed and her long lashes resting on her cheeks, which were so terribly white and wan that Ned started and uttered a suppressed exclamation of pain as he caught sight of her.

"The doctor says that if she is conscious when she comes out of this stupor, she will do all right,' whispered his mother, noting

jealously the intensity with which he was regarding his wife.

"And if she is not conscious?" he muttered.

"Ah, then, he fears the fever will return."

Ned said nothing further, but seating himself by the bed, he leant his face on his arm and sobbed like a child.

Presently he felt his mother touch him, and, half raising his head, saw that she was holding what looked like a bundle of white clothes towards him.

"What is it?" he asked huskily.

"Your child; won't you look at it?"

Ned did look, and saw a tiny pink face, all dimples and puckers, and with no particular shape or form that he could perceive.

"Isn't she pretty?" whispered the grandmother fondly. "That cold-hearted Sir Pomphry won't look at her because she's a girl, and he wanted an heir. See—hasn't she lovely little hands?"

Ned put his finger into the small fist, which clutched it vigorously.

"She's very like you, Ned; you were the living image of her when you were a baby."

"Was I?" said Ned dubiously, and not quite seeing the force of the compliment. He would much rather the child had re-

sembled Ida, but he comforted himself by the sage reflection that "children change."

"Kiss it, Ned," urged the mother.

"I would rather not," hesitated Ned, looking apprehensively at the soft pink face. "I'm afraid I might hurt it."

"Nonsense, how can you hurt it?"

So Ned stooped and imprinted a kiss on the small, limp face, and the effect was truly alarming. The baby's whole face became transformed; the eyes gradually disappeared from sight, as almost did the nose, while the mouth expanded, and the puckers and wrinkles multiplied everywhere.

"Good gracious! what's the matter?" said Ned aghast, as he watched the horrible contortions.

"Hush, it's going to cry; your moustache must have hurt it," said his mother; and truly, in another minute, there arose a piteous howl, which brought the nurse from the adjoining room, whither she speedily transported the infant.

Ned was glad when it was gone; but it had roused him, and put fresh ideas into his head. He could not see much to admire in the child as yet, though in the abstract he was already fond of it; but women always seem to admire and love babies, however ugly and noisy they may be; and if, as his mother averred, this

child resembled him, and Ida were to grow fond of it, might it not in time teach her to care for him?

But he was not allowed to comfort himself with this hope for long, for as he sat watching his wife's white face, and wondering whether he could ever win her love through their child, his tactless old mother again approached him, and began,—

"You must be very good to that poor child, Ned, for I sadly fear you will have to fill both a father's and a mother's place to her."

"How do you mean?" asked Ned sharply, for he fancied his mother must mean to express her belief that Ida would die.

"*She'll* never care for it," said the old lady, waving her hand angrily towards the bed where Ida lay. "She was conscious this morning, but when I held the poor lamb for her to see, she just turned away her head and would not so much as look at it."

Poor Ned! he made no reply, but left the room abruptly. Was it possible that Ida would not care for the child because it was *his?*

CHAPTER XIII.

"WE HAD BETTER PART."

FOR many hours Ida's stupor continued; the doctor said that if she was conscious when it passed, she would probably do well, but he feared that otherwise fever might set in. And so, alas! it proved. When at length her heavy lids opened, there was no gleam of consciousness in her eyes, and she soon began to talk wanderingly to herself in Italian. Sometimes, though her mind wandered, she was quiet enough; but at others she grew quite delirious, and at times almost wild.

Poor Ned used to sit day after day by her side, listening to the murmured words which he alone understood. Fortunately for him, her mind seemed to wander back to the time when she was a child, and her talk was principally of her mother, her nurse Teresa, and

her French governess. Sometimes she fancied herself in Paris with Madame de Clinville, and then she spoke in French, and sometimes a stray word would wound Ned, by showing that she had been unhappy during that time.

"Ah, is it time to dress?" she would murmur. "Leave me yet a little; I am weary—weary. What dress did you say? I do not care; any you like. Why must I always go to parties—parties? No, Aunt Nina, you shall not put any rouge on my cheeks; I will not have it. I am pale, say you? Well, what matter? I do not care who admires me, since *he* has forgotten me."

Ned understood only too well to whom she referred by "he," and he groaned and bit his lip; and his mother, who was watching him, saw that Ida had said something to hurt him, though she could not understand what, and she hated her yet more. Once Ida spoke of her *fiancé* in England, but her tone was dreamy and unemotional, and displayed nothing but quiet indifference towards Ned. Once, and once only, did she mention Olivetti by name, and then she mistook poor Ned for him, and seemed to fancy herself back in the garden at Laurenti, where she used to meet her lover. Fortunately for Ned, she did not say much to him, whom she mistook for Olivetti

and her principal idea seemed to be to get back to the Palazzo before any one missed her.

But all this was when she was in a comparatively quiet mood, and often she would grow wild and excited, and assure Ned and his mother that she had never answered *his* notes; that Julie had told a wicked lie, and it was cruel of them to believe her, etc. She never mentioned Olivetti by name, but sometimes referred to him as "*he*" or "*him;*" and as she always spoke of this subject in English, Mrs Huntingdon was able to understand her, and there were many times when her daughter-in-law's words made her feel uneasy and self-reproachful.

It was difficult to listen to Ida repeating over and over again, with passionate energy, that she had never written to *him*, or even spoken to *him*, when she could avoid it, and yet continue to disbelieve her; yet as the fever gradually passed, and Ida began slowly to creep back to life again, her mother-in-law hardened her heart once more against her, and almost felt as if she hated her when she looked at Ned's worn face. The old lady's prejudices were strong and her judgment weak, and to dislike any one once, as she had disliked Ida, was to dislike them always, more or less, with her.

As Ida became convalescent, Mrs Hunting-

don was almost entirely banished from the sick-room by the nurse and doctor, as her stiff, unfriendly manner distressed the invalid and made her worse. Ida noticed that her mother-in-law seldom came to see her now, and she understood the reason quite well, and fretted herself by thinking that the old lady still believed Julie's tale. She tried to speak to Ned on the subject, but he refused to listen to her, saying she must wait till she was stronger; and when she saw how ill and harassed he looked, she began to fancy that perhaps he too thought ill of her. It was terrible having to lie there passive, unable to defend herself, while all the while old Mrs Huntingdon was doing her utmost to injure her in Ned's opinion.

He was far too good to condemn her unheard, but what could he be thinking of her all this while? He certainly looked ill enough, poor fellow, and there was a patient, sorrowful look in his eyes that made Ida miserable every time she met them. One of the poor fellow's chief griefs was the persistent indifference which Ida displayed towards her child. If they brought it to her, she would hold it listlessly in her arms for a while; but she only did so to avoid horrifying them, and she was evidently glad to get rid of it again. She never kissed it or took any notice of it,

and Ned told himself bitterly that it was because she disliked its father.

At last, however, Ida was able to get up and lie on a sofa, or sit in an easy-chair, and then she insisted on coming to an understanding with Ned. Sending the nurse out of the room when Ned came as usual to see her, she told him that she must speak to him now about those notes which had made his mother so angry.

"You need not, dear," he said, reddening; "I understand all about them. I never believed for a minute that you were in the smallest degree to blame."

"How good you are!" she exclaimed, the tears springing to her eyes. "I don't suppose any one else believed in me."

"I don't know what others did," he replied doggedly. "I did."

"Still, I should like to tell you how it was."

"If it will make you easier in your mind," he said—wishing, however, that she would drop the subject.

"Julie brought me the first note some time after you had gone to Ireland," began Ida, speaking fast and tremulously, and twining and untwining her fingers nervously, while her colour came and went. "I burnt it without reading it, and forbid her ever to bring me another; but I suppose she was bribed, for

by-and-by she brought me another. I ought to have dismissed her at once, but—but I was afraid ; she would have told your mother and made a fuss, so I only told her that I should be obliged to dismiss her if she disobeyed me again. But I suppose she saw I was timid, for soon she brought me a third note, and then I did dismiss her, and she, in revenge, took the next note to your mother, and—and told her—"

"A pack of abominable lies," interposed Ned indignantly.

For several minutes they were both silent, and then Ned began in a hard, firm tone that startled and surprised Ida,—

"Of course after this it will be impossible for you to go on living with my mother. She is very prejudiced against you, and it would always be disagreeable for you."

"Yes," acquiesced Ida in a tone of relief, for she too had been looking forward with dread to having to continue beneath her mother-in-law's roof.

"Should you like to go abroad a little after you grow stronger ?"

"Should you ?" she asked indifferently, for at present she was not capable of taking much interest in any plans for the future.

"I think, Ida, we had better part," he said quietly.

"Part! Ned, what do you mean?" she cried, starting up on her sofa, and looking at him with eyes full of terror. But his were fixed resolutely on the carpet and did not see the look in hers.

"I mean what I say," he replied firmly. "You are miserable with me—"

"Not with *you*, Ned; only with your mother."

"And I am miserable when I see you so," he proceeded, not heeding her interruption; "and so I think we had better part."

She threw herself back on the sofa and burst into a flood of bitter tears.

"You are cruel and unforgiving," she sobbed. "What have I done to deserve this?"

"You have done nothing," he said gently, taking her hand and stroking it kindly, to soothe her. "Now, if you cry like that, I will not talk any more, or you will make yourself ill. Must I go?"

"No—no; stay, and I will—be quiet," she gasped, checking her tears with difficulty.

He waited a few minutes till she grew calmer, and then continued quietly, and, Ida thought, almost coldly,—

"We cannot go on living as we have been doing during the last eight or nine months. We are both anxious to do our duty to one

another, but the struggle has half killed you, child, and I think it had better end."

Here there was a slight tremor in his voice for a moment, but it grew firm again as he proceeded,—

"I was anxious for you to remain with my mother as long as possible, because you are too young to live without some one to take care of you; but you cannot go on living with her now, and so—would you like to go and see Madame de Clinville again?"

No answer but a low sob, and Ned sat quite silent, waiting for her to speak; at last she said, taking her hands from her face, and looking at him wistfully,—

"Let me stay with you, Ned. I will be happy with you, I promise you, if you will only take me away from your mother."

"You can hardly make yourself happy at will," he said rather coldly. "But you are a good child to offer to stay with me, though, for both our sakes, I think we had better part. But here comes your nurse to say you have talked long enough."

He rose as he spoke, and left the room without kissing her as usual, for his spirit was bitter within him. He paused, as he passed the nurse, to put his finger into the hand of the baby, which she carried in her arms, and to kiss the tiny fist.

"Poor little soul," he muttered as he left the room; "I wonder if Ida will ever take to it."

He went downstairs to the drawing-room, where he found his mother and Kate L'Estrange, who had called to ask after Ida. He thought Kate looking very ill and worn; but when he asked whether she was ill, she laughed loudly and declared that she had never been better in her life.

"I've been too dissipated lately, and that's why I look seedy," she explained. "I'm going to London for the season with Mrs Worboise next month, you know. I'm afraid I shall be a regular scarecrow by the time all my gaiety is over."

Then she rose to say good-bye, and Ned accompanied her to the hall door. As they were crossing the hall, she asked suddenly,—

"Is it true that Count Olivetti has left this part of the country again?"

"I saw him getting into the train yesterday," replied Ned stiffly. "Why?"

"Curiosity," she replied, with a laugh. "He has been sketching about the country for some time, but he does not seem to have visited any of his old friends. Has he been here?"

"No, he has not," returned Ned briefly.

"What! not to inquire for Ida?"

" He would hear how she was from day to day in the town. Now he is gone."

" Yes, now he is gone," replied Kate, with a strange laugh, as she shook hands with Ned and left the house.

CHAPTER XIV.

GOSSIP.

AS Kate walked slowly away from the Huntingdons' house, she realised for the first time that Luigi Olivetti had deserted her. She had felt the fear gradually growing on her for some time, but had refused resolutely to listen to it. Olivetti was busy, working hard to make money for her, she tried to persuade herself, and he was sure to return to see her soon. But in her heart of hearts she knew all along that their love-making could never come to anything in the end. Olivetti was so poor, and she had not the courage to marry into poverty, nor would her parents allow her to do so.

All through the winter she had been uneasy and anxious, and people began to remark that she was changing, and rather losing her looks. As

the spring drew near, and still no word came from her absent lover, her unhappiness increased, though she would not admit to herself that he had played her false; but at last, in March, she heard he had again appeared in the country, and was making sketches of the coast scenery.

He had taken up his abode in a little village about a mile from Lynborough, and he resolutely refused to visit any of his old friends. He had come to work, not to play, he said, and he had no time to waste on visits; but still Kate fondly believed that he had come for the express purpose of seeing her, and day by day she had waited for him to come or write to her. But days passed, and he made no sign, and at last in desperation she wrote to him, and received a polite reply, full of regrets and apologies, but saying that she must see for herself how impossible it was for their attachment ever to come to a happy end, and that, for both their sakes, the less they saw of one another for the future, the better.

But still she could not believe that he meant to give her up, and wrote again to him, saying that he must come and see her as a friend, if nothing else. Once in his presence, she could assure him that she was not afraid to wait while he worked for her, she thought; but he never came, nor did he make any response to this second note.

And now he had left the country, and Kate acknowledged to herself that she had been jilted. It was a hard confession to make, for she was a proud girl, and she bitterly repented having written those two appealing notes to him. Probably he had laughed over them, and lighted his cigars with them, she thought, lashing herself into a passion. Surely Ida Huntingdon had been right when she said he was not really a gentleman, for no gentleman could have behaved as he had. But why had he returned to the neighbourhood if he did not mean to have anything more to say to her? She did not believe he had come solely for the purpose of sketching, for this was not a part of the country that attracted artists much, though parts of it, especially about Tyndale, were rather pretty. But Olivetti had never been seen in the direction of Tyndale. But if he had not come to sketch, why had he come? Perhaps it was to sketch, after all; yes, surely it must be.

Arguing thus with herself, Kate walked absently along, till suddenly a voice behind her made her start, and, turning quickly, she saw Wilfred Brierly limping after her, with the aid of a stout staff, for he had lately hurt his ankle, and ought not to have been walking at all by rights. He looked very handsome and bright, as he stood there smiling down at

her, but Kate was in no mood to be gracious, and began to tease him at once.

"I do believe you have grown since last Christmas," she said, much as if she had been speaking to a schoolboy, as they walked on side by side; for, as he was going in her direction, she had no excuse for dismissing him, but had to accept his escort, though somewhat against her will. "Yes, you have certainly grown," she continued patronisingly. "I daresay you haven't done growing yet. What a giant you will be if you go on much more!"

"Yes, I'm five foot ten already, you know," said young Brierly, with unruffled good temper.

"Ned Huntingdon's six foot in his stockings. He's just the height I like in a man."

"And you are just the height I think perfect for a woman," returned Wilfred boldly, smiling to show that he had no intention of losing his temper, yet with a certain boyish earnestness in his voice which showed that he meant what he said.

"It is impossible to make you cross, Mr Brierly," said Kate, relaxing into a smile.

"Yes, it is," he replied. "But I could never be cross with you, Miss L'Estrange—"

"Don't make any rash promises; you don't know how aggravating I can be at times."

"If you would only try me—" he was beginning earnestly, but Kate interrupted him hastily.

"So I have; I have often tried to tease you, and never succeeded in making you lose your temper, except that once when I pretended to believe that you were in love with Miss Lily Proctor. You certainly were savage then; but you kept your temper like a hero just now, when I told you you had grown, just as if you were a little boy."

"You are out of sorts to-day," he replied gently, "and I should have been a brute if I had resented a few words which you spoke when you were tired and hurried."

"What makes you think I am out of sorts?" she asked defiantly.

"You were not quite yourself when I was here last Christmas, and I think you are looking quite ill now—"

"How complimentary you are!"

"You do not look as strong as you used to; that was all I meant."

"I am quite well," she said shortly; and then she said hastily, "When did you arrive at Brierswood?"

"Yesterday," he said, adopting her light tone, though he was glad she had asked, for her want of curiosity respecting his movements had hurt him rather. "I am down

on leave for ten weeks—you see I sprained my ankle and couldn't drill."

"Are you? I go to London in a fortnight."

Wilfred's face fell so terribly at this announcement, that Kate, who had just reached her own door, was moved with compassion to invite him in. He eagerly availed himself of her offer, and sat talking to her and her mother so long, that she heartily repented her of having allowed him to enter. But at last he took his departure, and then Mrs L'Estrange began nervously to administer a lecture to her daughter upon propriety.

"You know I do not like you to walk alone," she said; "but as we cannot keep a maid for you, I suppose you must go about by yourself sometimes; but you should really be more careful about walking where you will be seen with young men—especially that young Mr Brierly."

"Why he more than any one else?" asked Kate listlessly.

"Because he has made his admiration for you so very public, and if you are seen much with him, people will say you are encouraging him."

"Well?" carelessly.

"Well, you know nothing can come of it."

"Why not? I would rather marry him than any one else I know."

"Don't fall in love with him, Kate. Remember he can only marry with his father's consent—"

"And why should the Brierlys object to us?" asked Kate haughtily. "Our family is better than theirs."

"You see, they dislike you so much—"

"The women do; but I could twist the old fellow round my finger to-morrow if I liked. Besides, Wilfred has money of his own."

"Only eight hundred a-year and his lieutenant's pay. It would never do for you."

Kate shrugged her shoulders and left the room without further response. She was weary and heart-sore, and longed to be alone to indulge in her passion against Olivetti; but on entering her room she found the neat parlour-maid laying out her evening dress on the bed, and was reminded by her that it was time to dress for a party she was going to that evening. Kate sighed impatiently. She had almost forgotten this party, which was a heavy dinner given by one of the county magnates. The Brierlys and Mr Proctor and his sister were to be there, Kate knew, and she shrank from meeting them in public. But it had to be done, so she submitted herself to the hands

of her Abigail, who lamented loudly over her pale looks.

"You have grown quite thin, miss," sighed the girl. "You'll have to have this dress taken in soon, I'm afraid. And if only you had a little more colour in your cheeks you would look lovely; but perhaps you'll flush in the evening."

"Perhaps," said Kate absently. She sighed dissatisfiedly as she looked at herself in the glass, and told herself that she had grown quite old and jaded looking. "And yet I am only twenty-three," she thought. But she smiled faintly when she finally surveyed herself on the completion of her toilette, and acknowledged to herself that she was still very handsome.

She was dressed in a pale blue silk, with blue forget-me-nots in her fair hair, and pearls on her white neck, which was still fair and plump, in spite of what Jane, the maid, said about her having grown thin. Blue always became her excellently, and to-night her slight pallor and delicacy of appearance only made her appear softer and sweeter than usual, and the evening lights and becoming dress hid the worn look which had lately spoilt her beauty.

"Lor', miss, you look better than I ever saw you look before!" cried the delighted Jane.

"And you are really growing quite a clever lady's maid," smiled Kate. "I would not change you for Mrs Huntingdon's French maid."

"You're very kind to say so, ma'am," smiled the gratified Jane; who, not being a cockney, and having been well educated for a servant, neither dropped her h's nor made any very glaring faults of speech in ordinary conversation. "I hear Jiuly has left Mrs Huntingdon," she added.

"Indeed? Mrs Huntingdon seemed so pleased with her a short time ago," said Kate carelessly.

"Well, I'm afraid, miss, she got into bad ways," said Jane mysteriously. "They say she used to meet Count Olivetti; the artist who was at Lowsworth, you know, miss—"

"Count Olivetti?" said Miss L'Estrange, with sudden interest.

"Yes, miss. Me and another young lady were coming out of church one Sunday evening, and we saw Jiuly talking with the Count in a quiet corner behind Mrs Huntingdon's garden wall. The Count seemed to be giving Jiuly a note, or something like that, but we were not near enough to see distinctly."

Jane spoke confidentially, and without any idea how she was wounding her mistress; for Olivetti had been a rare visitor at The

Folly, and the maid consequently had no idea that he had been an admirer of Miss L'Estrange's.

"But it is absurd," said Kate coldly. "Julie was a frightful little wretch. Count Olivetti could not have cared to speak to her."

"Well, I only know what I saw, Miss Kate; and Jiuly was turned out of the house just after poor Mrs Ned Huntingdon was taken ill.

"So long ago as that? And where did she go?"

"Straight to London, I believe. No one knows for certain, for she went off quite sudden one morning; but I know a young man who said he saw her getting into the train at Tyndale station."

"Ah, well, it doesn't matter to us," said Kate coldly, turning to leave the room, and carrying herself with more than usual pride, because she was conscious that she had been undignified in thus discussing the affairs of one of the Huntingdons' servants with her own maid. But she had been unable to resist the news which concerned Olivetti, and now she tormented herself with trying to solve the mystery which enveloped his acquaintance with Julie. The girl was truly hideous, besides being well on towards thirty,

and it seemed impossible that Olivetti could have been making love to her; yet why had he given her that note? People do not generally give notes to people just after they have been talking to them. Of course, it might have been a present of money, but Kate knew how poor Olivetti was, and did not believe he would give any away—especially to such a plain woman. No; far more likely he was asking Julie to deliver his note to some one; and to whom could that some one be but—but—? Kate could not follow out her train of thought—it was too hideous. Ida Huntingdon was too nice to be suspected. She had been so good-natured to her (Kate) in allowing her to meet Olivetti at her house; and she had never seemed to like him much herself. Yet, looking back, it seemed to Kate that Ida's reserve towards her compatriot had been rather strained and unnatural. Kate was disgusted with herself for harbouring such base thoughts about her friend, but there was something in their very horror which seemed to fascinate her, and she could not turn away from them, though she told herself that disappointment in love must assuredly have softened her brain, when she could imagine Ida Huntingdon capable of such gross treachery, both towards her and Ned.

All the evening she kept wondering what Olivetti could have had to say to Julie, even while she was laughing and talking to Wilfred Brierly. She made herself unusually pleasant to him to-night, because she knew how the sight of his attentions would irritate his mother and sister; and also because she wished Mr Proctor to see that she was not wearing the willow for him. His marriage with Miss Brierly was to take place in about three weeks' time, and Kate thanked Heaven that she would be in London then, and thus escape attending the ceremony. She watched the warm embrace which passed between Miss Brierly and Miss Proctor at meeting and parting with supreme disdain, and remarked calmly to her neighbour (not Mr Brierly, by the way) that they were birds of a feather, and so like one another that they might easily have been mistaken for real sisters. Miss Brierly, on her part, observed to her intended that Kate L'Estrange seemed to grow a more confirmed flirt every day; and Mr Proctor looked cross, and said that it looked very much as if Augusta (Miss Brierly) was to have Miss L'Estrange for a sister-in-law after all.

"I trust not," laughed the fair Augusta. "It certainly looks a case; but somehow poor Kate's flirtations seem fated never to end

in anything serious. She's been at it seven years (it was only six really), you know, and has never managed to catch any one yet, so I have good hopes that poor Wilfred may escape as others have."

"Humph," muttered Mr Proctor, in a tone that might have meant anything.

He did not find his Augusta nearly such an amusing companion as Miss L'Estrange had been; neither was she so good-looking. Kate was looking very well to-night, and Miss Brierly more than usually ill; and Mr Proctor was obliged to confess that his *fiancée's* remarks about Kate were terribly ill-natured. But he remembered that scene between Miss L'Estrange and Olivetti in the Huntingdons' garden, and consoled himself.

"Come and see us to-morrow," said Kate, as she bid Mr Brierly good-night.

She would not have made the request had she not known that Lady Brierly was sufficiently near to overhear both it and Wilfred's rapturous acceptance. She wished to annoy her ladyship, and she certainly succeeded; and, as that matron was driving home, she administered a lecture to her son upon his friendship with Miss L'Estrange, and bid him beware. But her words, as usual, had little effect with the young man, who went to see his divinity the following day, in spite

of the reproaches and warnings of his mother and sister. He found Kate looking wan and fagged after her last evening's excitement, and he pitied her, feeling sure she was in trouble of some sort, and wished he had the right to comfort her. She received him languidly and indifferently, but he chose to think that she was softer and gentler than usual, and shut his eyes to the fact of her indifference.

After this he came nearly every day to see her; and when she went to spend a week at Tyndale Court before going to London, he followed her there. As for her, she was sometimes in a hard, bitter mood, and would do all she could to aggravate and hurt him; but at other times she would encourage him, and be quite gentle and kind to him. Altogether she kept the poor fellow in a state of uncertainty and suspense that was very hard to bear; and at last he determined to end it one way or other, and find out, once and for all, whether she could ever care for him. So one day, when he called and found that Lady Huntingdon was out, he asked boldly for Miss L'Estrange, and was shown into the morning-room, where she was pretending to work, but was in reality puzzling her brain over Olivetti's acquaintance with Ida Huntingdon's maid. She knew what he

had come for the instant she looked at his face, and she decided that she would accept him, though only the previous day she had made up her mind to refuse him. He saw that she was in one of her passive, listless moods, which he was pleased to regard as *softness*, and this gave him courage to tell his tale. She did not help him out with it; but still she sat quite still and listened to him, while he poured forth his prayers and protestations. Why should she not take him? she asked herself listlessly; she must marry some one, and why not he as well as another? He would be a baronet with an unencumbered estate of eight thousand a-year when his father died; and he was so fond of her that he would let her have her own way in absolutely everything. And then how it would annoy that horrid Lady Brierly; and it would show Mr Proctor that she had not broken her heart at his loss. So she held out her hand silently to Wilfred in token of acceptance; but when she saw the honest love shining in his eyes, she drew it hastily away again, exclaiming,—

"No, no, Mr Brierly; it would not be fair of me to accept your love when I can give you none in return."

"Never mind," he said eagerly. "I do not ask you to love me if only you will marry me."

"You are very foolish," she said gravely.

"Perhaps so; but I think I could soon teach you to love me, dear."

"Look here, I will tell you my story, and then you shall judge for yourself," said Kate abruptly, after a moment's thought. "It is the fairest thing I can do to you, after the way I have deceived you. What will you think of me, Mr Brierly, if I tell you that all this time that I have been encouraging you, I have been in love with some one else?"

"With some one else!" repeated young Brierly, turning pale.

"Yes, and I am well punished, for he has jilted me."

"The scoundrel!" cried Wilfred. "But you cannot care for him after the way he has treated you," he added, brightening.

"Well, love is near akin to hate, you know," said Kate, with a hard laugh.

"Then you will take me?" said the love-blinded youth eagerly.

"If you care to have me."

"You know I care," he said; and then added more slowly, "You will not tell me the fellow's name?"

"What is the good? I don't suppose I shall ever see him again; and if I do, he won't have the face to speak to me after the way he has treated me. Now tell me, what

do you suppose your parents will say when they hear of our engagement?"

"I'm afraid my mother won't like it."

"And your father?"

"Oh, he doesn't count for much in our *ménage*, poor old boy. But I must speak to your father at once. I think I will go now, as I see Lady Huntingdon's carriage coming across the park. I will come this evening and tell you the result of my interview."

"You had better come to-morrow, for we are going to a grand tea at the Huntingdons' to-night."

"I shouldn't have thought that was in Sir Pomphry and Lady Huntingdon's line."

"No; Lady Huntingdon isn't going, because she is afraid of meeting some of the townspeople. She will plead a headache; but I am going with Sir Pomphry. I can't very well help it, as I'm staying with them, and am included in the invitation. No, you had really better go, unless you wish to be detained by Lady Huntingdon, and then you won't have time to see my father before his dinner."

CHAPTER XV.

KATE LEARNS THE TRUTH.

AS has been already said, Ned had dismissed Mademoiselle Julie *sur le champ* as soon as the history of the notes had been explained to him, and had taken the precaution of seeing her into the train at Lynborough station.

As far as he could tell, she had had no opportunity of gossiping about these notes in the town; but still she might have told strange tales to the other servants, and through them they might spread. Ned began to regret now that he had given such offence in the town (though he had certainly done so unintentionally), as it made people all the more ready to listen to ill-natured tales about Ida, and Ned's great object was to shield her from the slightest breath of blame.

So he organised the tea party, of which

mention has already been made in the last chapter, and persuaded Sir Pomphry to attend it. The baronet certainly would not have done so had family reasons not demanded it of him; but he quite agreed with his nephew that the greatest care must be taken to prevent the breath of scandal from breathing on any member of his illustrious family (for illustrious he considered it), and so he agreed to attend Mrs Huntingdon's tea party.

To suit his convenience, it was to be at five o'clock, and the baronet proposed to leave at half-past seven, and dine at home at eight, which would only be half-an-hour after his usual time. So Mrs Huntingdon sent out her invitations for five o'clock, though the usual hour for tea in Lynborough was six. She was too elated at the prospect of having Sir Pomphry and Lady Huntingdon and Miss L'Estrange at her party, to grumble at the hour which the baronet dictated, and made out her list of invitations with the utmost care. The Eltons were asked, and Mr and Mrs Dixon, who, with the party from Tyndale and at home, made a party of eleven at table.

There was still room for one more, so Mrs Huntingdon asked Mrs Williamson, greatly to Ned's annoyance. Mr Williamson was leaving Lynborough for a curacy in the north of England in a couple of weeks, therefore there

was no need to conciliate his mother especially, since she was to accompany him, and she was the last person who ought to have been invited to meet Lady Huntingdon and Miss L'Estrange. There was nothing specially objectionable about the Dixons, and the Eltons were unexceptionable, but it seemed rather a shame to force a woman like Mrs Williamson on Lady Huntingdon. Besides, Mrs Williamson was at daggers drawn with the Eltons (it was owing to her mischief-making that Mr Elton had advised her son to seek a curacy elsewhere), and did not get on well with the Dixons; so on all accounts it was a great mistake to invite her. However, Mrs Huntingdon insisted on inviting her, and as she had the impudence to request permission to bring her son, Dick Carr was also asked, to make up fourteen. Others were to come in after tea, and for once Ned raised no objection to his mother's asking any number of her friends.

He wished them all to see for themselves that Ida was on good terms with himself and the heads of his family, so that when it leaked out (as it was sure to do sooner or later) that she had left him, no one should have a right to think that it was through any fault of her own. At present his own mother did not know of the proposed separation; but she

informed her friends that as soon as Ida was strong enough to travel, she and Ned were going abroad—together.

The Tyndale party were the last to arrive on the eventful evening, and then every one beheld with dismay that Lady Huntingdon had not come. But she had sent a very gracious note of apology to Mrs Huntingdon, explaining how ill she was, and Miss L'Estrange hastened to inform every one that she had left her ladyship in bed. This was not true, but it satisfied the company, and prevented them feeling themselves slighted; and Sir Pomphry, to show the friendly feeling with which his wife regarded Ida, presented her with a lovely bunch of early roses, which, he said, her ladyship desired him to present with her love.

Then there was a move, as every one rose to go to the dining-room; Mrs Huntingdon insisted that they should go in in pairs, as if it were a dinner, and Ned in vain protested.

"Dear me, we shall be thirteen after all," sighed the hostess uneasily, when suddenly the door opened, and the tall buttons announced in a mumbling voice, — "Count Laurenti."

A tall, dark, thin man, with sunken, twinkling eyes looking out from under his bushy eyebrows, and dressed in a dark-blue frock-

coat, entered, and saluted the company gravely.

"Count Laurenti!" exclaimed Ned.

"My father!" said Ida, advancing with both hands prettily extended, though it cannot be said that her father's unexpected appearance caused her any particular joy.

"My daughter, behold me!" cried Laurenti, embracing her warmly; then turning to Ned, he flung his arms round him, and saluted him effusively on both cheeks.

"Well, I never!" whispered Mrs Williamson to Miss Dixon, who had come instead of the solicitor, her papa, and who giggled loudly.

"Let me present you to my mother — Count Laurenti," said Ned hastily, to cover the momentary confusion which his father-in-law's embrace had caused him.

"Dear lady," said Laurenti, kissing Mrs Huntingdon's hand with a courtly grace which completely bewildered her, while it excited the admiration of her friends, "pardon me if I intrude thus suddenly upon you. I was in London on business, and could not resist the desire to see my children" (waving his hand towards Ned and Ida). "So I came—and you behold me. I stay at the hotel for a day or two."

"I am sure I am very glad to see you,"

stammered Mrs Huntingdon, trying to withdraw her hand from the Count's, who dropped it instantly.

"I have long desired to make your acquaintance, dear madam," he said. "This is the happiest moment of my life."

"That's a lie," thought the old lady to herself. "I believe Ned was right when he said that no foreigners speak the truth. The Count has just got Ida's way of saying pretty things he doesn't mean."

"You know my uncle, Sir Pomphry Huntingdon, I think," said Ned to the Count.

"How do you do?" said Sir Pomphry, extending his hand in token that he forgave the Count's past wickedness in marrying his sister.

"My brother," murmured Laurenti, "are we then reunited?" and, opening his arms, he made a rush at Sir Pomphry, who retreated so hastily before him that he backed into an arm-chair, and sat down abruptly in it.

The movement was so absurd, and the horror on the baronet's face was so intense, that no one could help smiling; and when Laurenti placed his hands on his brother-in-law's shoulders, and, pinning him back in his chair, proceeded to kiss him loudly on both cheeks, there was a universal burst of suppressed merriment. But it died away into

alarmed silence as the great man rose on being released from his brother-in-law's embrace, and glared angrily round on those who had presumed to laugh at his discomfiture.

"Really, you know, this sort of thing is intolerable—quite intolerable!" he remarked *sotto voce* to Ned, as he pulled up his collar and tried to regain his usual stiff pomposity of manner.

"Suppose we proceed to business," said Ned, trying to speak as if nothing were amiss. "Mrs Elton, may I have the pleasure of handing you in?"

The others filed after him, and Count Laurenti, whom Mrs Huntingdon pressed to remain and fill Lady Huntingdon's absent place, had the (to him) supreme amusement of handing in Mrs Williamson. Ned bit his lip when he saw the gay widow seated between his uncle and father-in-law, and wished devoutly that the Count had chosen any other day for his visit. What could he think of the society in which his daughter was mixing, if he took Mrs Williamson and the Dixons as specimens of it? Miss Dixon, who was seated on his other hand, was informing him volubly that her "pa" was a solicitor, and that her "ma" was on visiting terms with some of the county people. Ned knew that the Count was sufficiently well acquainted

with the ways of good English society to perceive that Miss Dixon, for all her fashionably-made dress, and talk of places she had visited on the Continent with her "pa" and "ma," did not belong to it; and also to understand what sort of position solicitors hold in England; and he (Ned) groaned in spirit as he watched the quiet, sarcastic twinkle of the eyes with which his father-in-law listened to his fair neighbour's confidences. But the worst of all was Mrs Williamson. She was arrayed in a gorgeous mauve silk (the same which she had worn at the last Seaville races), with a profusion of coarse white lace about the neck and sleeves, and a large mauve cap on her white hair. She also wore white kid gloves, which she did not take off; and she ate her bread and butter with a knife and fork.

Dick Carr, who was sitting opposite her, watched her uneasily. He cut his bread into minute morsels, and conveyed them to his mouth between his white finger and thumb, and with his little finger, on which flashed a ruby ring, elegantly cocked out; and hitherto he had seen no one whose manner of eating seemed to him as graceful and gentlemanly as his own: but now Mrs Williamson had outstripped him—she ate her bread and butter with a knife and fork! and Dick felt crushed and humbled as he watched her.

So did Ned, though in a different way; and so did Sir Pomphry, who was furious at the thought that Laurenti might take this as a sample of the society in which the Huntingdons mixed.

The ill-humour of the great man of the evening threw a slight constraint over the party, and all were glad when at length the time came for them to return to the drawing-room. Here they had music and talking for a little while, and Laurenti made himself so agreeable to Mrs Williamson that she began to think she had made a conquest of him, and simpered and giggled to his huge amusement and poor Ned's dismay. Other guests now began to drop in, and Sir Pomphry, who enjoyed nothing so much as a chance of patronising any one, allowed himself to be introduced to every one, and exchanged a few formal words with each. Then he took up his post beside Kate and Ida, and devoted himself stiffly to the latter, for it was his object to show Lynborough the esteem in which he, as head of the Huntingdon family, held her. Then there were cards, at which the elders of the party played, while the younger talked and flirted. Laurenti declined to play when he saw that they only played for shilling or sixpenny points, but he leant behind Mrs Williamson's chair for some time,

studying her with quiet amusement. She contrived to make a good many appeals to him as she played, greatly to the annoyance of her partner; and, as at tea, she did not remove her white gloves, though she certainly found it no easy task to gather up the cards with them on. But "elegance or death," she breathed valiantly to herself, as she struggled with a refractory card.

"Come into the garden, figlia mia," said Laurenti at last, sauntering up to Ida, who happened to be sitting alone for a minute. "Come; it looks enchanting outside, and it is hot in here."

Ida saw that her father wished to talk to her, so rose and suffered him to lead her out into the garden, where one or two others were already amusing themselves with lawn tennis and croquet.

"This seems to be a mixed sort of affair," said the Count dryly, as he paced slowly away from the players, with his daughter. "Tea, with meats at it; cards, music, white kid gloves, lawn tennis, and croquet! Truly one would be hard to please if one were not satisfied."

Ida said nothing; she had never been taught to confide in her father, and she did not care to discuss her family affairs with him.

"You are silent, carina; have you nothing to say? I know something of England and the English, and I appreciate the manners of those I see here. Miss L'Estelle—what is her name?—is charming. I know an English lady when I see one. But they are all stiff alike. Peste, what a punishment I gave to that wooden Sir Pomphry! All Englishmen fear to be kissed more than they fear to die; therefore I make a point always to embrace them on every opportunity."

"They have been very kind to me," said Ida, feeling she must say something.

"Is this a specimen of the society in which you mix?"

"Oh, no; this is a party given for a purpose. I cannot quite explain, but my husband wishes to make himself popular among them."

"I see; they are not really your friends?"

"Not Ned's and mine. But his mother likes them."

"Ah, I was going to inquire who madame, your mother-in-law, was by birth. She has hardly got an air distingué—*distingy*, as your fair friend Mrs Williamson said."

"Her father was a wood merchant."

"A wood merchant? I make it my business to find out exactly what a wood merchant is in England."

"You need not trouble about me, father;

my position in the world is good enough, and I am rich."

"Why that bitter tone, my daughter? Are you not happy, with such a husband, such an uncle, such a mother-in-law, and such friends?"

Ida bit her lip, but remained silent; what did it matter to her father whether she was happy or miserable?

"Ah, we intrude; we had better retire," said Laurenti, as they suddenly came in sight of Mr Williamson, holding Emily Carr's hand in a very devoted fashion, at the end of the path down which they were walking. "That is the son of la belle Williamson, isn't it? The young lady is undoubtedly pretty, but her dressmaker merits to be guillotined. Do you know if they are engaged?"

"Yes, I believe they are. They have been making love for two years now—"

"Two years! Per Bacco, they are constant!"

"Yes, they are really very fond of each other; but they cannot marry until Mr Williamson gets a living, and even then I am afraid Mrs Williamson will object."

"See how they manage these things here, my daughter; it is disgraceful! These young people have been making love secretly for two years, and in the end they may be separated!

Take better care of your daughter when she grows up. If she is half as charming as her mother, she will require looking after."

"I shall always value your advice, my father."

"By-the-bye, I met an old friend the other day in London," said Laurenti, with a sudden change of voice.

"Indeed?" said Ida indifferently. "I should not have thought many of our friends would have been in London."

"Shouldn't you? Would it surprise you greatly to hear that I met Count Olivetti?"

He gazed sharply at Ida as he spoke, and saw her start slightly, though she recovered her composure instantly.

"You understand now why I came down here, Ida," he continued gravely, and dropping his light, semi-sarcastic tone. "You think I do not care for you—that your happiness is a matter of indifference to me; but you mistake. I loved your mother, and she left you to my care; and I did what I judged best for your welfare when I married you to Ned Huntingdon. I am sure you have always found him a good husband."

"No one could be better," murmured Ida.

"I was sure of it. It is so seldom one meets a good young man; that was why I was so firm with you—cruel, you called me at the

time. As for that Olivetti, it was an impossibility. He paints for his living, and gambles away his money as fast as he makes it; and he is of no family. He is a bad character, my daughter, and would have broken your heart in two months, if he had been in a position to marry you. Now I hear at my hotel that he was down here last summer, and again lately before your illness."

Laurenti spoke sternly, and regarded his daughter fixedly, and her voice quivered slightly as she replied,—

"I could not help meeting him, of course, but I treated him always as a stranger."

"Yet I heard at my hotel that he came here constantly last summer."

"This is not my house, and I could not prevent his coming. Mrs Huntingdon liked him, and she is mistress here."

"She must be warned. You had better tell me the truth, my daughter, unless you want me to go to your husband."

"I am telling you the truth," said Ida coldly, for her father's mistrust hurt her, after the perfect faith which Ned had always seemed to place in her slightest word.

They were walking down a grassy alley, with rose bushes and tall shrubs on either side, and as they came to the end of it they turned to retrace their steps, and found

themselves face to face with Miss L'Estrange. They had not heard her footsteps on the soft turf path, and Ida started as she saw her, and wondered how much she had overheard. She was not left long in doubt, for Kate instantly began in an artificially calm tone,—

"I have been looking for you, Mrs Huntingdon. I want to speak to you, unless you are particularly engaged with Count Laurenti."

"Not at all; I retire, and leave you to your confidences," said the Count, while his daughter's heart began to beat fast with fear.

"I am tired; I have not walked so much for a long time," she began.

"There are seats down there," said Kate, taking her arm, and dragging her forcibly back down the alley. "You are a coward, and are afraid to hear what I have to say," she continued contemptuously, dropping her companion's arm, as Count Laurenti disappeared from sight and they remained alone.

"What have you to say?" asked Ida faintly.

"You will understand when I tell you that I followed you all down the alley, and heard all that passed between you and your father. You should have taken the precaution of looking behind you before you discussed such delicate matters."

For a minute Kate was silent, watching how Ida, who was still far from strong, trembled, and how the faint flush went and came in her pale cheek; then she suddenly burst out, with a fierceness that terrified her companion still more.

"So Count Olivetti came here to see *you*, did he? He was *your* lover all the time he was making love to me; and I was fool enough to be grateful to you for helping me to see him!"

"If you remember, I did all I could to persuade you to give him up, Kate."

"Why did you not tell me the truth at once? But why do I ask? Of course you could not have met him unless you had made a cat's-paw of me."

"You have no right to speak in that tone, Miss L'Estrange," said Ida proudly, though she still trembled violently. "Count Olivetti was my lover *before* I married—he is nothing to me now."

"And are you nothing to him?" cried Kate contemptuously.

"I cannot tell—"

"You can! You know perfectly well that you are a great deal to him, and that I—I am *nothing*. And yet, knowing this, you allowed me to fall in love with him. Had you no pity? Do you call yourself a woman, and yet

stand by calmly and see another woman's heart broken before your eyes—"

"Not calmly—not calmly, Kate. If you could tell how wretched the thought of you has made me, you would not judge me so hardly."

"I do not believe it. I do not believe you have an atom of womanly feeling in you. You have done your best to break both my heart and your husband's. But he shall know all this! "I will tell him—"

"He knows already."

"He knows! And he does not turn you out into the street!"

"Miss L'Estrange, you are too insulting. I think you forget you are a lady, when you speak like that. Ned knows I have done nothing wilfully wrong—"

"Then, pray, may I ask what term you apply to your own conduct?"

"I have been guilty of moral cowardice, but nothing more. If I had known how things would really end, I might have told you all, but—"

"But! there was no '*but*' about it. In common humanity, you ought to have told me the truth from the very first."

"Perhaps I ought; but it was very hard. I did not think you would care for him like this. You did not look the sort of person to

fall in love. And it would have been very hard for me to tell you my whole history."

"The whole world shall know it now. I will not sit down calmly under my injury, if Ned does. I will have my revenge—I will publish everything to the world."

"What will you publish, Miss L'Estrange?" said Ida, drawing herself up and speaking haughtily.

"Everything. My wrongs and your treachery—the way you have deceived both your husband and friend. I shall tell how you received your lover here in your husband's absence, and exchanged notes with him through your maid. I know quite well why Julie was sent away, and so shall every one else. It is right that the world should know what sort of woman you are."

"I will not stay here to be so grossly insulted," said Ida coldly, indignation restoring her self-command. "You have no right to speak of me in that way, and you know perfectly well that you have not."

She turned as she spoke, to retrace her steps to the house; and as she did so she perceived Ned coming towards them. Kate caught sight of him too at the same minute, and exclaimed loudly,—

"Here is Ned; we will see whether he indeed knows all."

"Whether I know all what?" asked Ned.

"The shameful way in which your wife has allowed me to be deceived. She knew Luigi Olivetti to be her lover—"

"Hush! No one shall speak so of my wife before me," said Ned sternly; but he gave Ida no look to reassure her, and show that he did not in truth blame her.

"Ah, you take her part; and yet she has deceived you as much as she has deceived me. Do you know that her late maid carried notes between her and—"

"I know all, and I maintain that she is entirely free from blame."

"And it is nothing that she has stood by and watched that villain breaking my heart, when one word from her might have saved me! Oh, Ned! it was cruel and unwomanly of her, and you must feel it in your heart;" and, overcome by excitement, Kate burst into a passionate fit of tears and sobs.

"Do not cry so, Kate," said Ned, laying his hand soothingly on her shoulder, while his heart ached with pity for her, and he was nearer being angry with his wife than he had ever been before.

"Oh, Kate, forgive me!" said Ida, feeling that Ned would think her heartless if she continued to stand by in silence.

"I will not!" cried Kate fiercely. "I will

have my revenge, and tell all I know to the whole world. I wonder how many people will continue to visit you when they hear all I have to say?"

"Hush, Kate; you must not speak like that," said Ned gravely. His wife required defence, and so he would defend her; but his chivalrous pity was roused by Kate's tears, and he wished to comfort her.

"You do not know how difficult my position was," said Ida, half to her husband, half to Kate. "I—I never thought it would come to this."

"You had better go in," said Ned, turning coldly to her, as Kate made an impatient gesture. "Your presence only irritates her."

With flushed cheeks and a heavy heart, the young wife turned slowly away, and made her way into the house, and to her own room, where she indulged in a passionate fit of weeping. Ned had been so loyal to her hitherto, and it was very bitter to see him angry with her on Kate's account. She could well understand that he would find it harder to forgive the wrong she had done (or permitted to be done) to his old friend, than the pain and disappointment she had caused himself, and she made herself wretched by speculating on all the cruel things Kate might be saying to him of her at that very

minute, and which—who knew—he might half believe.

But she need not have feared that Ned would allow any one to speak ill of her in her absence. As soon as she had left him he turned to his companion, and began gently but firmly,—

"I am sure you know that I feel for you deeply, Kate. We are old friends, and I take a brother's interest in you. You are overwrought and excited now, and do not quite know what you are saying, or I am sure you would not have insulted my wife as you did just now." (Oh, if he could but have heard what Kate had said before he came up!). "I think you judge her hardly. She never meant to hurt you, I am sure, though no doubt her conduct was mistaken. As for what you said about telling your tale to the world" (here his voice grew rather sterner), "you will injure yourself more than her if you do so. I will allow no one to speak ill of her, and no one will credit your tale while I continue to support her. They will only call you ill-natured, and—and I think it would be painful for you to publish your own part of the story. Now, come; you are calmer now, and Sir Pomphry will be wanting to return home."

Kate's anger had died away when Ida's hateful presence was withdrawn, and as Ned

spoke her sobs had grown fainter and fainter, till now she was almost entirely quiet. She suffered him to lead her gently towards the house, but when they came in sight of the drawing-room windows she stood still, remembering her tear-stained face, and begged Ned to go and tell his uncle that she was ready to go, while she slipped quietly to the cloak-room by another way.

As Ned approached the drawing-room window, he heard a loud voice uplifted in angry vituperations, and on entering perceived Mrs Williamson standing in the middle of the room, with her red face redder than usual, pouring forth the vials of her wrath upon unlucky Mrs Carr, who sat before her looking awkward and uncomfortable. The lawn-tennis and croquet players had come indoors to partake of wine and cake, which was being handed about. So the whole party was now assembled in the drawing-room, and Mrs Williamson was announcing, amidst a breathless silence, that she had just discovered her son kissing Emily Carr in the garden, and had been informed by the young people that they had been secretly engaged for some time.

"And you've allowed this to go on in your house, Mrs Huntingdon," shouted the angry mother at the top of her voice, turning upon poor Mrs Huntingdon, who began to whimper.

"I call it downright mean and dishonest, and I don't mind who hears me say so, Mrs Carr. I wonder you aren't ashamed to look me in the face after the way you and that girl of yours have inveigled my poor boy. But she sha'n't get him, I tell you; that she sha'n't. I've got all the money, mind you that, and not one penny does he get from me unless he obeys me. So now you understand."

"I'd have you to know that my girl's as good as your boy any day," said Mrs Carr with some spirit.

"Fiddle-de-dee!" cried the widow contemptuously. "A girl without a penny! But she won't get him, so you needn't think it. Your low machinations won't succeed. Honesty's the best policy, you'll find in the end. I'm glad I'm going out of the town, for I couldn't endure to go on living where I could see your ugly, deceitful face. So now I'll wish you all good evening, ladies and gentlemen; and Mrs Huntingdon, I give you your *conegy*" (congé), and with a flourish of the hand, Mrs Williamson swept from the room, where a loud buzz of talk instantly sprang up.

Ned then contrived to make his way up to Sir Pomphry, and whispered to him that Kate was waiting to go home; whereupon the baronet got up, and hurried into the hall, where Kate was waiting for him in a doorway.

"Really, most disgraceful!" he muttered angrily. "I don't know what Laurenti can think of our friends. And I wish, Ned, that you could impress on your mother that I suffer from neuralgia in my foot—not *gout*. She has been telling all those people that I am a martyr to gout, and I'm sure I'm not half such a likely subject for gout as she is herself. It is most annoying, really," and the baronet strutted testily off to his carriage, followed more slowly by Ned and Kate.

CHAPTER XVI.

KATE ARRANGES HER MARRIAGE.

KATE remained in her own room all the next morning on the plea of a bad headache, and indeed her head was aching sufficiently to justify the excuse. But she did not lie quietly in bed and rest it, but passed the hours in pacing restlessly up and down her room, raging inwardly against Ida Huntingdon and Count Olivetti. She had spoken of her heart being broken last night, but anger had had as much to do with her emotion as pain. She had certainly loved Olivetti as much as she was capable of loving any one ; but she was selfish, and selfish people seldom have the power of loving any one much better than their own dear selves. Certain it is that, if Kate had ever cared for the handsome artist, she hated him now She had been very miserable about

him all the winter, while she was uncertain as to his intentions; but now that she saw what a dupe he had made of her, she hated him more than she had ever loved him. No doubt she suffered cruelly; but whereas she mistook her pain for the aching of a broken heart, it was in reality nothing but the agony of a proud spirit which has been humbled and humiliated. She longed for revenge, but she felt that Ned had been right when he said that she would injure herself more than Ida if she proclaimed the story of her wrongs to the world. No one would blame Ida openly, while her husband continued to support her; and her manner was so gentle and quiet that people would be slow to believe ill of her. But Kate knew that she herself had many enemies who would be only too ready to turn upon her if she were to spread cruel stories of her "own familiar friend;" and every one would laugh at her, rather than pity her, for having lost her heart to Olivetti. It was so *infra dig.* in the face of it for a Miss L'Estrange to love an artist (especially as Kate now knew him to be of humble birth); and as she had met him secretly, against her parents' wishes, she must not expect much sympathy from the world. Besides, what would Wilfred Brierly say if she showed him that she was half mad at being deserted

by another man? She was bent upon marrying him, because she wanted to get away from her old home and associations, and she thought his easy temper would suit her better than most men's. She remembered that he was coming to-day to tell her the result of his interviews with their respective parents. If he had been successful, he would probably come straight off to her that morning; but if not, he would not come till the afternoon, or possibly to lunch. So about one o'clock she donned her most becoming dress, twisted up her fair, dishevelled tresses, and, after remarking discontentedly how pale and ill she was looking, she went downstairs to Lady Huntingdon's morning-room, where she found her godmother alone.

"My dear, how ill you look! I am afraid your head is still very bad," said Lady Huntingdon kindly; and Kate confessed that it did ache a little, and then sat down with a book and waited for Wilfred Brierly.

He came just as the gong sounded for luncheon, and was of course invited to stay for it. Lady Huntingdon understood that he was in love with Kate, though she had no idea that Kate contemplated marrying him, and she was sorry for him, and thought Kate was not treating him well. To-day something unusual in his manner warned her that he had

something on his mind, and she instantly concluded that he wished to propose. She thought it was the best thing he could do, as, if Kate were trifling with him, he would find out, before the mischief went any further; so, after luncheon, she told Kate to take him down to the garden and show him the new conservatories that Sir Pomphry was building, and thereby won the inward blessings of both the young people.

"Well, what did my father say to your news?" asked Kate, as they strolled slowly through the garden. "Was he much surprised by it?"

"No, I don't think he was. But he said he could not give his consent unless my father gave his."

"That is so like papa! he is so absurdly conscientious. Have you told Sir George?"

"Yes," said Wilfred gloomily.

"I see. He won't consent."

"He'd like you, I'm sure, Kate, if he was left to himself. But you see my mother objects, and he's mortally afraid of her."

Lady Brierly's opposition had only the effect of putting Kate's back up, and she determined not to be beaten by her.

"And are you afraid of Lady Brierly too?" she asked coolly.

"No, certainly not; and I think she is very unreasonable to object to you."

"Then you do not intend to submit to her decree?"

"Not if I can help it. Do you think you could persuade your father to let us be married quietly, without my parents' consent? I am of age, and my own master; and I have eight hundred a-year, besides my pay. And then, you know, Brierswood is entailed. Don't you think that you could get over your father? He seemed to think we could not do without an extra allowance from my governor. But don't you think we could?"

"Certainly we could; or, at any rate, what you have will do us till your father comes round. He's sure to do so in the end, you know; he would hardly like to cut you all his life, since you're his only son."

"I hope not," said Wilfred, but his tone was not quite so hopeful as Kate's. "Then you think your father will consent?" he added.

"I don't know. You see he's that most obstinate and unmanageable of things, a poor, proud gentleman. I'm afraid he may prove difficult to move; but I'll do my best."

"When will you go to him? You see you go to London the day after to-morrow, so there won't be much time to spare."

"I'll ask Lady Huntingdon to take me now, this very afternoon."

"But, my darling, won't it make your head worse?" asked Wilfred, looking anxiously at her pale face.

"Nonsense; my headache is gone already," said Kate, turning back towards the house. "The air has done me all the good in the world. Now, if you will say good-bye to me here, I will go in and tell our romantic tale to my godmother, and perhaps she will prove a Cinderella's godmother to us, and help us."

"Mayn't I come in?" pleaded Wilfred.

"No, you mayn't; I shall explain things much better to her ladyship by myself."

"Good-bye, then, my dearest," said the young fellow, as he stooped and kissed her for the first time.

Then he hurried away, and Kate took her way slowly back to the Court, her headache completely banished by her excitement.

Her engagement to Wilfred Brierly would have had no power to excite her under ordinary circumstances; but just now she was possessed by a wild longing to escape from this neighbourhood, and she was determined to beat Lady Brierly. It would never do to let her have a second victory over her, she thought; the mortification was not to be endured.

"Well, Kate, what did Mr Brierly say to you?" asked Lady Huntingdon, as the girl entered her room.

Kate proceeded to explain how things stood, interrupted by many exclamations of surprise from Lady Huntingdon, and when she finished the latter said, shaking her head,—

"Of course you may go to your father and see what you can do with him,—ring the bell and I will order the carriage,—but I do not think you will gain his permission, for he is a sensible man; and indeed it would be folly for you, with your extravagant tastes, to marry on something under a thousand a-year."

"Oh, Sir George will forgive us soon," laughed Kate carelessly. Certainly, if her heart were really broken, she bore her pain very well.

She found her father obdurate; but as she had entertained very small hopes of moving him from the beginning, she was not greatly disappointed, though she was certainly annoyed.

When Wilfred Brierly called at Tyndale the following morning, he found her with her fair sea-shell bloom restored, and looking altogether more like her old self than she had done for a long time, and he asked eagerly whether her father had given his consent to their union, since she looked so bright.

"No; I found him hard as a nether mill-

stone," laughed Kate. "But I think we can manage very well without his consent."

"How do you mean?"

"Have you no imagination?" asked Kate, colouring with impatience.

"Do you mean a runaway marriage?"

"Oh, not if you are frightened of your mamma!"

"It is for you I am afraid, Kate. I would rather marry you openly from your father's house."

"But since that is impossible?"

"But how could we manage it?"

"We have both to reside for three weeks in a parish before we can be married, haven't we?"

"Yes, and have our banns published. It would never do in the country."

"Well, I am going up to London to-morrow."

"Yes," said Wilfred slowly, rather alarmed by the rapidity of Kate's arrangements.

"My aunt, Mrs Worboise, whom I am going to stay with, is old, and does not go about much. I am only going to her on the speck of a few gaieties" (she was going to avoid Miss Brierly's marriage really), "and I shall be glad of any extra excitement while I am with her. She never goes to her parish church, which is old and unfashionable. What do you say to coming to London, and having our

banns read there? The chances are that no one will recognise our names, or if they do, they won't take the trouble to inform our friends."

"You're awfully clever, Kate," said young Brierly; but still he did not quite like the cool way in which Kate was dispensing with her parents' consent.

"Your sister's marriage takes place in a couple of days; but you can be up in London before next Sunday."

"Of course I could. But are you sure you won't repent what you are doing, Kate?"

"Quite. Are you?"

"I ask for nothing but to call you my wife, dear."

"Then that is settled. I shall expect to see you in London on Saturday."

"Yes, dear. Let me see—I have ten weeks' leave; two are gone, three more in town make five, and then five for our honeymoon."

"Splendid," laughed Kate, clapping her hands. "Where shall we go?"

Her cheeks, usually so pale, were flushed a self bright pink; and her rather cold, clear grey eyes shone with excitement. Wilfred thought he had never seen her look so handsome, yet the carelessness with which she seemed to regard their contemplated marriage jarred upon him painfully. But he was still

very much in love, and so answered with a fond smile,—

"What do you say to Switzerland, dearest?"

"Bah! I have no taste for the beauties of nature. Let us go to Paris; I have never been in it, and I long to so much."

"Very well; Paris let it be," acquiesced Wilfred, and Kate congratulated herself as she saw how easily he yielded to her, and told herself that once they were married she would rule him completely.

"And then we will come home and become reconciled to our respected fathers," she continued.

"I'm afraid my mother won't let mine forgive me in a hurry," said Wilfred, laughing, though his inward feelings were anything but bright.

"I will make him forgive you. I will make my way into his presence, and then the thing is done."

"He would certainly find it hard to withstand you, my darling," said Wilfred fondly.

"And he will not; you will see. Really and truly, you know, I do not see why he should object to me. I have no money; but you do not need it particularly. There is only one point on which he could reasonably object to me: I am older than you are."

"Are you? You don't look it."

"Don't I? My kind friends have been diligently informing me lately that I am growing quite old and worn looking—"

"You have not been well all this winter; that is all, dear. You look more like your old self to-day."

"Ah, you see the effects of happiness," cried Kate, but in a mocking tone which prevented her lover from taking the compliment to himself. "But," she added mischievously, "seriously speaking, I am two months older than you are. I was twenty-three in April, and you will only reach that mature age next month—June."

"Two months are nothing."

"Aren't they? I'm afraid your mother and sister will think a great deal of them — I shouldn't wonder if they accused me of *boy-stealing!*"

"How can you talk like that, Kate!" exclaimed the young man indignantly. "You know you have made me the happiest fellow in England by promising to marry me."

"I wonder how long you will continue so," said Kate sceptically.

END OF VOL. II.

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