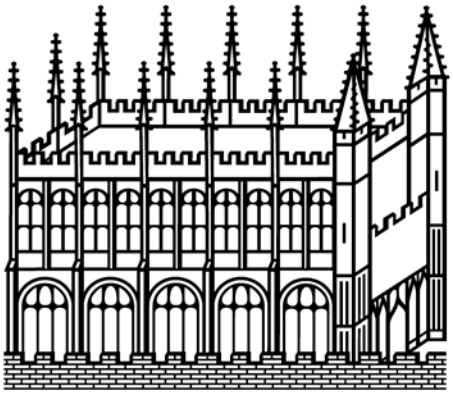
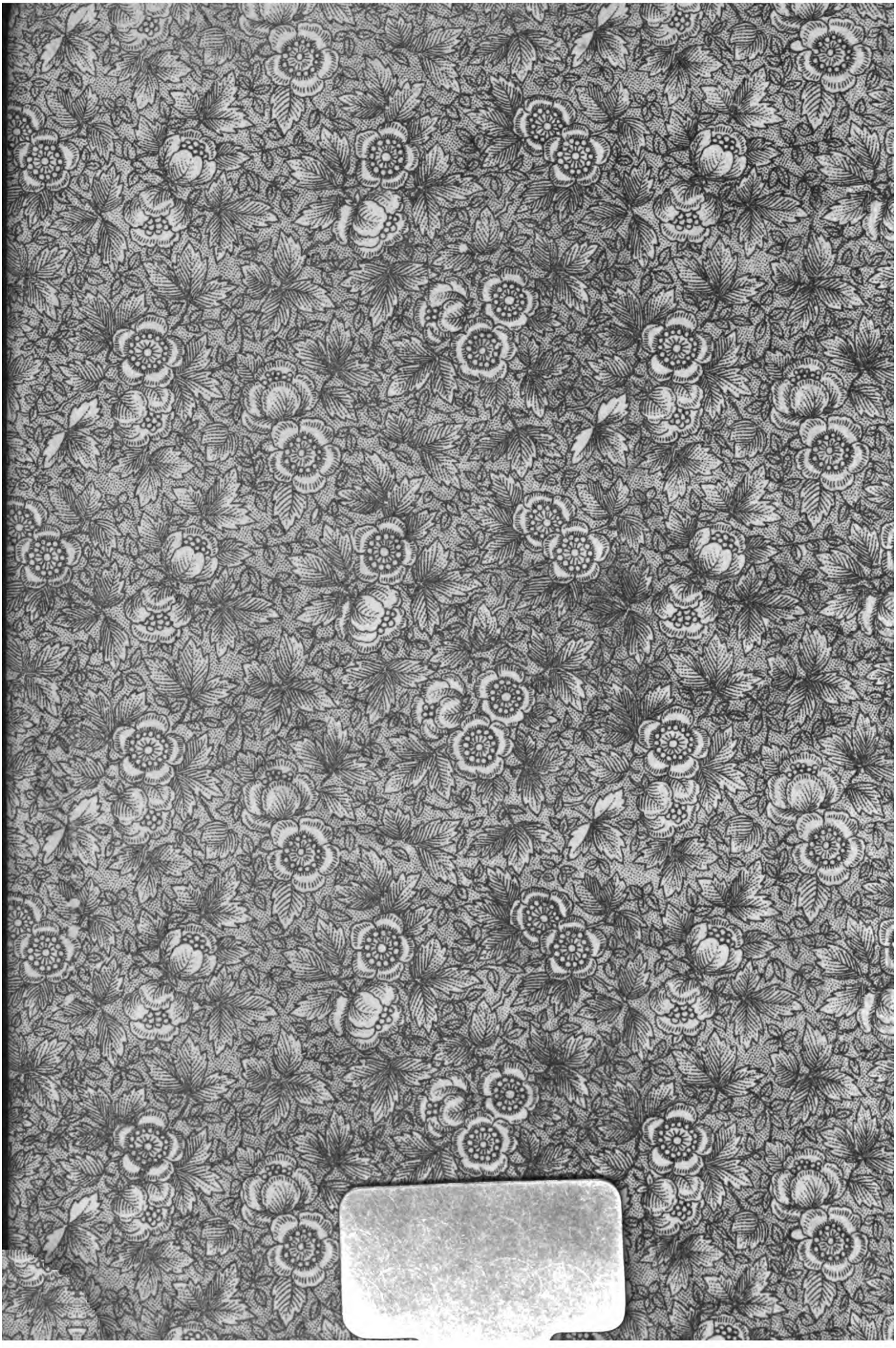
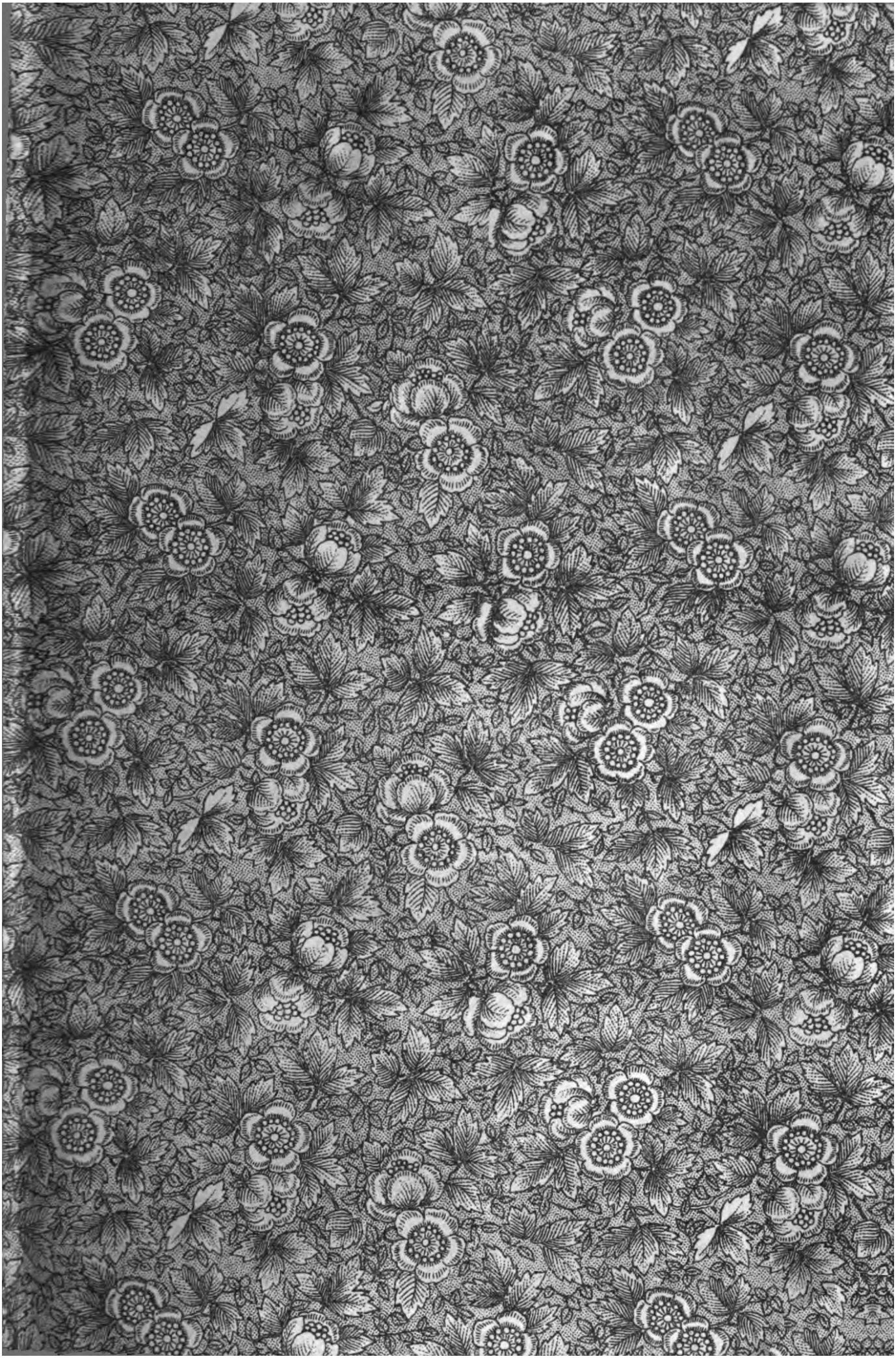


Was Hers The Fault?

By the Author of "Wooing A Sweetbriar"





WAS HERS THE FAULT?

A NOVEL.

BY

LOLO,

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

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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CONTENTS.

WAS HERS THE FAULT?

CHAPTER I.

BRIDE AND BRIDEGROOM.

ONE warm June evening, about a month after the events recorded in the last chapter, a young English couple were seated at one of the little marble-topped tables which crowded the pavement in front of a new café in the Boulevard des Italiens in Paris, eating ices. They were both good-looking, but the lady naturally attracted the most attention, both on account of her sex and because she was fair, while her companion was dark and sunburnt. They seemed in very good spirits, and laughed and chatted to one another in English,

and one would have thought, to look at them, that they did not know the meaning of the word care.

A tall, cadaverous Italian, with bright sunken eyes and rather high shoulders, chancing to pass by, was attracted by the golden shimmer of the lady's hair, and turning to look at her face, recognised her, and held out his hand cordially.

"Madame," he exclaimed, "this is charming!"

"Ah, Count Laurenti, is that you?" exclaimed Kate, smiling brightly. "I knew you were in Paris, but I hardly hoped to have the pleasure of meeting you."

"How can I ever be sufficiently grateful to Heaven for directing my steps hither to-night!" said Laurenti, holding his hat deferentially in one hand, while with the other he raised Kate's delicately-gloved fingers to his lips. "When I left England I feared I should see mademoiselle no more, and now, behold, I have the happiness to meet her again."

Laurenti had not appeared to glance once at Wilfred all the time he was speaking, but he had been examining him attentively nevertheless, and marvelling inwardly over the peculiarity of English custom, which permitted a young lady of good family to come out alone with a young man, and sit with him at a café eating ices.

"Let me introduce you to my husband, Mr Brierly. I do not think you know him," said Kate calmly; and Laurenti bowed profoundly to Wilfred, and expressed himself delighted to make his acquaintance.

"I was not aware that madame was married," he said, as he seated himself at the next round table and called for *café noir*. "Shall we have the pleasure of seeing you much longer in Paris?"

"I think we shall remain three weeks longer," said Kate. "Your daughter and son-in-law are with you, are they not?" she added.

"My daughter stays with my sister, Madame de Clinville, but Mr Huntingdon left us a short time ago. As for me, I am here by self *en garçon*. May I be permitted to call on madame?"

Kate graciously gave him her address; and as he bid her good evening, he said that he hoped his sister and Ida would do themselves the honour of calling on her in a few days.

Kate did not respond very eagerly to this suggestion, though she begged the Count politely to come and see her himself. She had not met Ida since the night of the tea party at old Mrs Huntingdon's, and she had no wish to do so. Since her marriage to Wilfred, the feeling of intense humiliation and mortifica-

tion which Count Olivetti's desertion and Mr Proctor's marriage had caused her had worn off in a great measure. She no longer occupied the painful position of a deceived and deserted maiden, and she had shown people that she was not heart-broken; but still she had not forgiven those who had helped to humiliate her, and she disliked the idea of meeting Ida intensely. But then there was Madame de Clinville: it might be very agreeable to know the Marquise while she remained here; and as she could not prevent Ida's calling on her, she reflected that she might as well make the best of her coming.

"If all those people are coming to call on us, we must have a little salon, for we cannot possibly receive them in our bedroom," she said, as she and her husband strolled slowly homeward. "It is very odd of Ned to have left his wife, isn't it?" she added maliciously.

"He may only have gone away for a few days," suggested young Brierly carelessly. "I don't see anything odd."

"My dear, you never see anything," laughed Kate. "You're as stupid as a bat in broad daylight."

"Well, it's not very civil of you to tell me so, at any rate," replied Brierly rather sulkily. He had been vexed by the cool manner in which he had been ignored during his wife's

conversation with Laurenti, and, consequently, was more disposed to take offence at her playfully contemptuous tone than usual.

"Dear me, how touchy we are all of a sudden!" laughed Kate lightly. "But seriously, you know, I shouldn't at all wonder if Ned has left his wife *for good.* They never got on together. He was devoted to her; but she let him see from the first that she didn't care for him; and lately—well, he found she had been corresponding with some old admirer—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Wilfred, with more decision than politeness. "Ned's too good a fellow for his wife not to like him; and as for Mrs Huntingdon, she's far too nice to do anything of that sort."

"It's very rude of you to interrupt and contradict me like that," retorted Mrs Brierly sharply. "I was a friend of the Huntingdons, so—"

"So ought not to abuse them behind their backs."

"I am not abusing *him.* He's one of the best creatures in the world, poor fellow," said Kate coldly; and then, as Wilfred made no reply, they finished their walk in silence.

On entering their room in the hotel, they found their first week's bill lying on the table, and Wilfred made a wry face as he saw what it amounted to. Kate had insisted on coming

to a good hotel in a central position, saying that the charge for one room and their few meals could not come to much; but Wilfred found that it had come to a good deal more than he had expected, and he was irritated to see the cool way in which Kate laughed at his discomfort.

"Well," she said lightly, "we are only to be here three more weeks, and you came with four hundred pounds in your pocket."

"But, my dear girl, that four hundred has to last us till the end of August, and we've spent more than half of one hundred in one week here."

"Oh, we will go back to England when all our money is finished, and I will make your father relent towards us. It was an unfortunate season for me to marry, as I have all my new summer things to get. But now that our week is out, we really must get a salon to receive our friends in."

Wilfred groaned and demurred, but in vain; Kate rang the bell and sent for the manager, who informed her that he had a little suite of apartments that would just suit her—a salon and two bedrooms.

"But, my dear, we don't want three rooms," put in Wilfred; but Kate went off to inspect the apartments without stopping to hear her husband's objections, and by-and-by she

returned and informed him that she had engaged them, as they were really quite charming.

"The salon is so prettily furnished," she said, "and the second bedroom can be your dressing-room. Come and see them, and don't be stupid and cross," she added, kissing the creases from his brow, and dragging him off by the arm to inspect their new rooms.

A couple of days after this, Madame de Clinville and her niece called on Mrs Brierly, and were received by her in her pretty little salon. Ida had hesitated long before she had finally decided to call on Kate. She could not forget how the latter had insulted her in the garden at Mrs Huntingdon's, and she found it hard to forgive her for having made Ned angry with her; but, at the same time, she acknowledged that Kate had been cruelly used, and she recalled several instances where her old friend had really been very good-natured to her; so on the whole she decided to offer her the right hand of friendship again, for she told herself that poor Kate had been too excited to know what she said that night in the garden. Besides, Ned would be sure to blame her severely if he heard that she had omitted to call on his old friend, and she did not wish him to have any further cause to complain of her conduct towards Kate. Mrs

Brierly might accept her proffered friendship or not as she pleased, but Ida was determined not to put herself in the wrong any more. So when her father informed her of his meeting with that charming Miss L'Estrange—now married, by the way, to a Mr Brierly—she agreed to go and see her; and Madame de Clinville also complied with her brother's request that she would call on the charming Englishwoman. Kate and the little Marquise took to one another at first sight; but Mrs Brierly did not make herself so agreeable to Ida, and persisted in asking questions that the latter found very difficult to answer.

"So your husband is not with you at present?" she said blandly, after she had touched her hand coldly and motioned her to a chair.

"No; he left Paris about three weeks ago," said Ida, thinking to herself that Kate had recovered from her broken heart very quickly, and that she was looking quite like her old self again; while Kate remarked that Ida was looking ill and in bad spirits, and felt more convinced than ever that things were wrong between her and Ned.

"Then he must have left you immediately after your arrival here," proceeded Mrs Brierly in feigned surprise, "for your father said you had been here just three weeks—and

I remember hearing from my mother when you left Lynborough."

"Yes," said Ida quietly. "I hope Mrs L'Estrange is quite well?"

"Quite, thanks—at least she was when I heard of her last. Do you expect Ned back soon? We are here for three weeks more, so I suppose we are sure to see him before we leave."

"I do not think so," said Ida coldly.

"Ah, then you are going to rejoin him elsewhere, are you?"

"Not at present."

"Come, we have discussed my interesting nephew-in-law—*cielo!* how old the word makes me feel—long enough," cried the lively Marquise. "Mrs Brierly, have you often been in Paris before? and are you well acquainted with the shops?"

Then followed a lively discussion between the two ladies upon the merits of various shops, and the Marquise, who was charmed by Kate's style and general air, promised to call for her in her carriage the following day and cicerone her to some of the best shops. She might not have done this, perhaps, had she not imagined that Mrs Brierly was a great friend of her niece's: Ida had frequently mentioned Miss L'Estrange's name in her letters to her aunt, and the easy familiarity

with which Kate called Ned by his Christian name further convinced the Marquise that she was a friend of the Huntingdon family; so Madame, being good-natured, and liking Kate's appearance and manner, offered to call for her the following afternoon at three o'clock, and Kate gladly accepted the offer, though she knew that by so doing she would have to submit to Ida's company for an hour or two. But she had not finished tormenting the latter yet, and after talking exclusively to the Marquise for some time, she turned back to Ida and said,—

"You have left your little girl with her grandmother at Lynborough, haven't you, Mrs Huntingdon?" She had quite dropped the familiar "Ida."

"No; she is here with me," said Ida, colouring, for this was a sore point with her.

Her mother-in-law had insisted loudly that, as Ida did not care for little Elsie, the child should be left with her; but Ned had insisted that his wife should not be separated from her child (for he still hoped that she might grow to love it), and Ida herself had been sorely wounded by old Mrs Huntingdon's suggestion, and by the accusation of not caring for the child. She had not taken much notice of it at first certainly, for she had been miserably, and

doubtless wickedly, disappointed that both she and it had not died; but though she was apathetic, she was not really cold-hearted or indifferent, and the prospect of losing the child startled her into caring for it suddenly, as she would otherwise have grown to do more gradually, though no less certainly. She coloured with annoyance at Kate's question therefore, and wondered uneasily how she came to know anything about the child.

"Oh, indeed?" smiled Mrs Brierly amiably. "I fancied you had left it in England. Mrs Huntingdon told my mother she wished to keep it—she spoke as if she did not think you would care for the trouble of travelling with it, you know. I suppose you will be going home soon?"

"I do not think we shall return to Lynborough, at any rate."

"No? Well, you must have found it very dull. And where is Ned just now?"

"I had a letter from him the other day, from London," said Ida, thankful to show that she and her husband did correspond.

"Can you give me his address? I wish to write to him."

"I do not know whether he will be in London still; he spoke of leaving in a few days."

"Then I had better address to his club; I

suppose he will be sure to get my letter that way, sooner or later."

"Probably," said Ida coldly, thinking Kate supremely impertinent to think of writing to Ned.

Then the Marquise rose, saying it was time for them to go; and Kate remained alone, being now quite convinced that Ida was separated from her husband.

"I wish I'd known he was going to leave her before I left The Folly," she thought viciously. "I should not have feared to speak out if I had. But I can speak more effectually now as a married woman, and people will be all the more ready to believe me when they see for themselves that she is really separated from her husband."

By-and-by, when her husband came in from taking tickets for the theatre for the following evening, Mrs Brierly fulfilled her intention of "speaking out" concerning Ida Huntingdon's shortcomings there and then.

"Ida Huntingdon and her aunt have been here," she began as her husband closed the door. "The Marquise is such a charming person, and so kind. She has promised to take me out driving" (she was too wise to say *shopping*) "to-morrow afternoon, and she has invited us to dine with her the day after. And, Wilfred, I am *certain* that Mrs Hunting-

don is separated from Ned now. I asked her about him, and she seemed to know nothing about him, and could not tell me when she was to rejoin him. She only admitted that she was never going back to Lynborough. She must have done something very bad to make Ned part with her, for a better-hearted or kinder man never lived. He is ten times too good for her."

"Well, I shall be very much disappointed in Mrs Huntingdon if what you say—or rather *imply*—is true; for she always seemed to me such a nice sort of person, you know. But certainly, if Ned's left her, it looks queer. Now come and see what tickets I've taken."

CHAPTER II.

KATE MEETS THE PROCTORS.

MADAME DE CLINVILLE called for Kate, as she had promised to do, the following afternoon; and after taking her to various shops, and tempting her to spend a good deal more money than she had at first intended, drove her round the Bois, and finally deposited her at her hotel, after bidding her an affectionate adieu.

She used to take her out driving very often after this, for she found her fresh and amusing —for a little while. Madame was a good-natured little woman to whom a bosom friend was a necessity; but unfortunately variety was also a necessity with her, and so she was continually changing these dear friends. She had grown rather weary of her last friend just before she made Mrs Brierly's acquaintance,

and as many of her friends were beginning to leave Paris about this season, she was delighted to find such a charming new one in the bride.

Ida had heard nothing about Kate's elopement, and though she was considerably surprised to find her "wooed and married an' a'," yet she did not suppose that anything was wrong.

But after the bride had known Madame de Clinville about a week or so, she confided her whole story to her; and the Marquise, who loved nothing so much as a romance, when it did not interfere with the settlement in life of any young friend of her own (as in her niece's case, for instance), was charmed by the recital, and embraced her new friend with tears of sympathy as she concluded her tale.

She immediately became interested in the future affairs of the young Brierlys, and good-naturedly showed Kate the shops where she could best purchase ornaments for her future home. Wilfred said they must live in barracks, but Kate saw no reason why her rooms should not be pretty; so, with the Marquise's advice and assistance in choosing, she purchased a variety of rugs, *bric-a-brac*, curtains and table-covers, etc., etc., till Wilfred grew seriously alarmed, and began to wonder where the money to pay for them was to come from. He was young and generous, and inclined to

be extravagant himself, and at first he had spent some money in buying presents for his wife; but when he saw how very well she knew how to take care of herself, and as his money sank lower and lower, his gifts to his bride ceased, and he began to grumble openly at her extravagance.

"Well, I must dress properly when I go about with Madame de Clinville and Ida," retorted Kate coolly. "I wonder what sort of allowance Ned makes his wife. It must be a very generous one, for she seems to have plenty of money to spend on her dress."

"Of course I wish you to be as well dressed as other women, dear; but you must remember that I am not as rich as Ned Huntingdon."

To which Kate replied carelessly that it would be all right when they got back to England and made friends with his father, and went away to dress for driving with Madame de Clinville. The good-natured little Marquise had taken her English *protégée* determinately by the hand, asked her to many of her own parties and got her invitations to the houses of her friends; so altogether Kate and Wilfred had quite a gay time of it during the last three weeks of their stay in Paris.

Kate was quite in her element, and accepted

the admiration which she received wherever she went with calm complacency; but Wilfred was not nearly so happy or contented as he had been during their first lonely week, when Kate used sometimes to complain that she felt dull. He liked to see his wife happy and amused, and felt proud when he saw how the Parisians admired her; but there were many long hours, when she was occupied with Madame de Clinville, that he was left entirely to his own devices.

He frequently accompanied Kate to Madame de Clinville's hotel, and he became great friends with young Mrs Huntingdon, who, like himself, was rather thrown out of the interesting conversations which took place between her aunt and Mrs Brierly. She could not talk freely in Kate's presence, for though outwardly they were good friends enough, Ida felt and saw that Kate had never forgiven her, and never would; so she turned to Mr Brierly when her aunt was occupied with Kate, and soon became great friends with him. The more he saw of her the more he liked her, and the more he wondered what his wife could see to dislike so in her.

As the days went on, he too began to agree with Kate in thinking that Ned must have left his wife altogether, for Ida seemed strangely ignorant of her husband's movements, and

used to colour and look uncomfortable when Kate persisted in questioning her about him.

"I had a letter from Ned this morning," said Kate one day, when she and Wilfred were calling at the De Clinvilles' hotel.

"Indeed," said Ida coldly, for she could not endure the idea of Kate's corresponding with her husband.

"Yes; he writes from Southampton, where he is staying before starting for America."

"America!" gasped Ida, growing suddenly white about the lips.

"Yes; surely you know? Do you mean to say that he has not told you he was going?"

"I was not certain; I did not know it would be so soon," faltered Ida; and Wilfred Brierly, pitying her visible distress, jumped suddenly up, and told Kate they must go home at once, if they wished to be in time for the *table-d'hôte* at their hotel.

"What made you rush off like that?" asked the bride crossly as they were driving home.

"Why did you try to torture that poor woman so?"

"Ah, do you believe *now* that she and Ned are separated?"

"Yes, I am afraid they are; it's a thousand pities, for they're both awfully nice, you know. But I can't conceive how you could

go on harping on the subject of Huntingdon's journey when you saw that his wife knew nothing about it. It must have been deucedly awkward for her."

"Well, she deserves to be punished. The way she has treated poor Ned is shameful. Do you know that Count Olivetti was her lover."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Wilfred, much shocked.

"He was, though. He was her lover before she married, and he followed her to England. I never found out till this spring; but my maid saw her maid giving notes to Count Olivetti. Now, what do you think of your paragon?"

What could he think? He was shocked and surprised, but it never occurred to him that his wife could be telling him an untruth.

"You do not know all the circumstances of the case, do you?" he asked.

"No; but the bare facts are enough to condemn her of themselves. Ned is not a man to leave her for nothing."

"You had better take care how you talk to people though, or you'll be getting yourself into hot water. Evidently neither Ned nor Sir Pomphry and Lady Huntingdon wish any public blame to fall on her. Ned brought her here himself, and the Huntingdons were on

apparently good terms with her to the very last. No; there can't be anything seriously wrong, you know, and the less you talk the better."

Kate bit her lip, and relapsed into silence, and so did her husband. But suddenly she caught him by the arm, and, pointing to a carriage that was passing theirs, whispered hurriedly,—

"Look, look, Wilfred! your sister!"

It was indeed Mr and Mrs Proctor, and Wilfred gazed eagerly at Augusta as he passed within a few yards of her, and Kate also prepared to smile and bow graciously to her rich brother and sister-in-law, should they deign to notice her; but the Proctors gazed resolutely the other way, and Wilfred's heart sank at this cut.

"No go," he remarked, with rather an uneasy laugh, after they had passed on. "I hope that isn't the sort of reception I shall receive at home."

"What does it matter what your sister does or thinks? It is with your father that we have to make friends," retorted Kate coolly. "Wilfred, my dear, how glad I am that you are not like your sister. Positively she looked *green* to-day; green, with black freckles! Fancy wearing a white bonnet with that complexion! You showed better taste in the

choice of your wife than Mr Proctor did in the choice of his, eh ?"

"Yes, dear, I think I did. But poor old Gussie isn't bad when you come to know her, you know."

That same evening, by a strange chance, they met the Proctors again, at a ball for which Madame de Clinville had procured them cards. Kate, who already knew lots of partners, danced every dance, and looked more than usually handsome; whereas Mrs Proctor, who was a comparative stranger, and whose complexion (never very good) had been completely spoilt and sunburnt during her honeymoon along the Riviera, hardly moved from her seat among the wallflowers once the entire evening. Kate swept past her very often, in a bewitching costume of blue and pink, and cast saucy and contemptuous glances at her, which irritated Mrs Proctor more than any spoken insults could have done; and when, by-and-by, Wilfred summoned courage to approach his sister, she received him with a chilling haughtiness which both surprised and distressed him. He knew that Augusta hated Kate, but she had always been good friends with him, and her sudden coldness hurt him, and also alarmed him, as showing the intense displeasure which his marriage had caused his family.

Kate also was not without her vexations that evening. It irritated her sorely to see the cordiality with which both the Proctors greeted Ida Huntingdon, for she knew that they only represented the general feeling towards Ida at home, and it vexed her to know that the woman who had helped to deceive her had escaped public censure.

Ida, on her side, was gratified by Mrs Proctor's warm manner, for it showed her that the gossip about herself had not spread beyond the little town of Lynborough. She was able to tell Mrs Proctor all about her husband's movements, for a few days ago she had received a farewell letter from him, written just before he sailed for America. It had been a very kind letter, but to Ida it had seemed cruel. When he left her with her aunt in Paris, he had not told her that he was leaving her for ever, and she had hoped that her protestations and assurances that she would be quite happy with him, though miserable without him, had prevailed, and that he was only leaving her for a short while. But she had so often deceived him before (it had been with a good object, but still it had been deception), that he could not bring himself to believe her now. He remembered how she had striven to make him believe that she loved him at first; how she had assured him repeatedly, with the

sweetest appearance of truthfulness, of her affection; and now he told himself that she was trying to deceive him again—from a sense of duty. It certainly was her duty to deceive him in the present instance, and he told himself that she was a good child to try and do so, but none the less was he resolved to set her free. She looked ill and unhappy, and he fancied that it was because she was with him, and did not understand that it was the fear of losing him, and her painful position in his mother's house, that was preying on her mind; so he had brought her to Paris and left her with her aunt, and now he wrote to her that he was setting out for America, and might not return for a year, or perhaps two.

As it happened, Ida *had* been sincere when she begged him to stay with her; but she began to understand now that she had forfeited his confidence, and that he did not believe her. She felt very indignant with him when she first received his letter of adieu, and told herself that he did not deserve to be happy if he flung his happiness from him like this; but then the kind tone of his letter softened her towards him, though she still told herself that she was very miserable at being separated from him. He seemed to think so much of her, and so little of himself! It was all for her—all for her and the child; for himself he

hardly seemed to care at all. As he was to be away so long, he said he would allow her seven hundred a-year; there was to be no formal separation, but Ida understood that when it came to her having a separate allowance, she was virtually separated from Ned, and the idea filled her with shame and humiliation, while at the same time Ned's generosity touched her deeply. She knew that if he gave her seven hundred a-year, he would only have three hundred left for himself, and what was that for a man who had been accustomed to spend a thousand a-year on his own amusements? Ida felt angry with Ned for leaving her, but she felt grateful to him too, in a way, and altogether she considered herself very unhappy just now, and would not admit that she took any pleasure in the numerous parties and places of amusement to which her lively little aunt dragged her.

It was about five weeks after Ned had left her that she met Mrs Proctor at the ball, and by this time she was beginning to get accustomed to answer inquiries about her husband; so she answered the bride composedly enough, and Mrs Proctor only thought it a little bit odd of Mr Huntingdon to go off to America by himself, and then forgot all about it. Indeed, the sight of her sister-in-law leaning gracefully on her husband's arm soon

drove all remembrance of the Huntingdons out of her head. Kate had contrived to entrap Mr Proctor into conversation, and was now imploring him prettily to use his immense influence with Sir George and Lady Brierly to reconcile them to their son.

"I have not spoken to your wife yet," she said, "but the truth is, I was afraid to do so, she looks so severe."

"My dear lady, I am sure—" hesitated Mr Proctor, who in truth was disposed to be deeply offended with Kate.

"Oh, I knew that *you* would be good and generous to us. But then you are a man, and men are so much larger-minded than women, and can see two sides of a case at the same time. Augusta and her mother are so terribly prejudiced against me, though I'm sure I can't tell why. But if you would only use your influence with them, I am sure we should all be friends again, and that would be so nice, wouldn't it?" smiling sweetly up at him.

Mr Proctor admitted that it would be pleasant, and Kate continued,—

"It is not Augusta's mediation with her parents that I care for; it is *yours*, dear Mr Proctor. Of course the Brierlys would listen to Augusta, as she is their daughter; but your *opinion* would have so much more weight with

them. Now, seriously, do you think that I am an unfit wife for Wilfred?"

"Not personally; but—but, you see, there are other things to be considered."

"Money, you mean? But surely Sir George is rich enough."

"His position requires money."

"And he has got it," laughed Kate saucily. "Now you are going to be my friend, I see, and help me to reconcile Wilfred to his parents. Just fancy what my feelings would be if I knew that I had caused a life-long quarrel between him and them!"

Kate's object in saying all this was not so much to secure Mr Proctor's aid in obtaining the old Brierlys' forgiveness (she considered herself quite competent to soften Sir George's heart without any help), as to win his friendship back towards herself, for she was well aware what an intense vexation it would be to Augusta Proctor if she succeeded. On the whole, she succeeded better than she had expected this first evening; and Mr Proctor, after taking her into supper, led her up to his wife, who was still sitting among the wallflowers, and who had *not* been into supper yet. She was naturally indignant that her husband should have attended to Kate before herself, and the reception she awarded to her new sister-in-law was so haughty and insolent, that her

husband's indignation was roused, and, on her declining to shake hands with Kate, he led the latter away without another word, and paced up and down with her for some time before leading her back to her seat, to atone in some measure for his wife's rudeness. Kate felt that Mrs Proctor had played into her hands by thus openly slighting her while she happened to be under Mr Proctor's protection, and she felt more amused than annoyed by the occurrence. She smiled yet more sweetly upon Mr Proctor, who, poor man, felt very uncomfortable. He did not quite like to be seen with a woman whom his wife refused to speak to; yet since it was he who had taken Kate up to his wife, he felt in a measure bound to protect her, even at the risk of mortally offending his Augusta. Then, too, he admired Kate, and he had never been very deeply in love with poor Augusta; and Kate, being clever, even contrived to win a promise from him that he would come and see her before she left Paris, which she was to do in a few days now.

It was a couple of days after this that he called on his brother and sister-in-law, and Kate was delighted, and laughed with secret glee as she pictured Mrs Proctor's impotent wrath when she heard of the visit—though, as it happened, she never did hear, as her husband was careful not to inform her of it. But

Wilfred was far from satisfied, and persisted that something must be very wrong when Augusta did not accompany her husband to see them. He was hurt by his sister's unkindness, and puzzled by it too; but he would have been far more hurt, poor fellow, could he have known what good cause his sister had to dislike Kate. Certainly her disappointment about Count Olivetti had not improved Mrs Kate; indeed, those sort of disappointments seldom do improve people. With Kate it had hardened and embittered her, and though she told herself that she no longer loved Olivetti, she could not so soon get over her pain. It is hard to be deceived, especially by a person we love; and though Kate hated Olivetti now, the pain which she had suffered on his account had left her hard and bitter, and with a vow of deadly vengeance against two people in her heart.

CHAPTER III.

KATE'S ATTEMPTS AT PEACEMAKING.

THOUGH Mr Proctor did not tell his wife about that visit of his to Kate, he informed her incidentally (in hopes of quelling her wrath) that her brother and his wife were just on the point of starting for England, and Mrs Proctor was instantly seized with an intense desire to return home too. She divined at once that her sister-in-law meant to seek a reconciliation with her father and mother, and she felt that it would never do to allow the odious young woman to get a footing at Brierswood; so she no sooner heard of Wilfred and Kate's intended departure from Paris than she begged her husband to take her home to his place, Langley, which was only a few miles from Brierswood. He was only too glad to comply with her request, for he was tired of his

lengthened stay abroad; and so it happened that he had no further opportunity of calling on Kate and Wilfred.

Kate, who did not know of his departure, was much piqued by his sudden desertion, which she ascribed to his wife's influence, and revenged herself upon Ida Huntingdon by saying more disagreeable things than usual to her.

As the last days of their stay in Paris drew to an end, bills came pouring in from all sides upon the young Brierlys, and Wilfred's face grew longer and longer as his money dwindled away with alarming rapidity.

"I can't tell how you could buy so many things when you knew we weren't rich," he said gloomily to his wife.

"Well, I won't want any more dress or things till next winter," she replied soothingly. "And, you see, we have had to buy all the ornaments for our rooms. You can't expect me to live in a barrack without anything to make my rooms look pretty."

Wilfred sighed, and hoped sincerely that Kate would *not* want anything else for a long time to come. "But we shall want food, at any rate," he said, "and I've got precious little money left to buy any with."

"Oh, once we are settled at B——" (a fashionable bathing-place on the east coast, where Wilfred's regiment was stationed) "we

won't have to pay ready money for everything, as we have to here," said Kate carelessly; and Wilfred, who hated running into debt, groaned as he heard her.

Unfortunately, he had been a little extravagant himself during the first two weeks of his visit in Paris, and spent more money than was wise on several little expensive trifles both for himself and Kate; but during the latter half of his visit he had grown unnaturally stingy — as Kate called it — with his money, and grumbled whenever he had to pay for a *fiacre*. But he had good reason to complain. When the day came for them to leave Paris, he found that he had exactly fifty pounds left to take them back to England and keep them till the end of August—it being then early in July. It was a good thing they were leaving Paris now, he reflected, for if they had remained another week there, they would not have had another penny left.

Kate, too, was not sorry to return home, for Madame de Clinville was leaving Paris on the same day, and she felt that Paris would be very dull for her after her kind friend had left. She had written a very pretty letter to her mother after her marriage, and Colonel and Mrs L'Estrange had offered to receive her on her return to England, for they had the

sense to see that, since she was married beyond all hope of recall, the best thing they could do was to receive her back and forgive her. So she and Wilfred were going to The Folly for three days before going down to B——, and during these three days Kate intended to make her peace with Sir George and Lady Brierly.

The meeting between her and her parents was calm and unexciting to a degree. Mrs L'Estrange was sewing in the drawing-room when the young Brierlys arrived, and after she had kissed Kate, she sat down and went on quietly with her work, as though nothing had happened. If she had followed her impulse, she would have preached Kate a short sermon upon her folly in making a runaway marriage, but she was too much afraid of her daughter to do this, so confined herself to making the ordinary inquiries about the journey, etc.

Presently Colonel L'Estrange came in from the garden, where he had been working among his flowers, and after kissing his daughter's forehead, and exchanging a few remarks with Wilfred, he ensconced himself in an arm-chair with a newspaper, and presently fell asleep. Such was Kate's welcome home.

On the following afternoon she set out by herself on foot (for she was a good walker) for Brierswood, which was only four miles from

The Folly, by a short cut across the fields. She would not allow Wilfred to accompany her, for she wished to have the glory and honour of subjugating the baronet by the single power of her own fascinations; so she dispensed with her husband's services, and set out alone. But on reaching Brierswood, she was informed that Sir George, for whom she asked, was not at home, and, as she knew it would be worse than useless for her to seek an interview with her mother-in-law, she was obliged to beat a somewhat ignominious retreat. But she was not to be so easily daunted, and the following day again took her way to Brierswood, to be again refused admittance by the stern footman.

"Not at home," was all she could extract from him, and when she inquired when Sir George would be at home, the man replied that he really could not tell.

"I do not believe he is out," said Kate angrily. "Let me in, and I will wait till I can see either Sir George or Lady Brierly."

In vain the servant protested, and endeavoured to block up the door with his large person; Kate pushed resolutely past him, and made her way to the drawing-room, where she suddenly found herself confronted by—Mrs Proctor. Mrs Proctor was standing in the middle of the room as Kate entered,

and she continued to stand perfectly still and stare insolently at her sister-in-law as the latter advanced towards her.

"Can I see Sir George or Lady Brierly?" began Kate, in an aggravatingly sweet and easy tone, as if she saw nothing remarkable in Mrs Proctor's manner.

"No, you cannot," returned the other icily.

"Excuse me, but I intend to remain here till I do," said Kate quietly, and seating herself as she spoke.

"I am afraid you will have to wait a long time," said Mrs Proctor, "for my father and mother are both resolved not to see you."

"That is hardly a civil way of treating their son's wife, is it?" asked Kate plaintively.

"It is so very impudent of their son's wife to come here without her husband," said Mrs Proctor, exasperated beyond endurance by the other's coolness.

"I have not come to offer any explanation to *you*. When I see your parents, I shall soon make them understand my motives."

"They might have consented to see Wilfred by *himself*, but I am certain they will not receive you. The best thing you can do is to return home quietly, without offending them by further intrusion."

"Your manner of treating your father's

guest is certainly a leetle barbarous," laughed Kate, settling herself yet more firmly in her chair; whereupon Mrs Proctor, seeing that further words would be wasted, left the room, and contented herself with seeing that neither of her parents entered it.

Kate had quite understood, the instant she encountered her old rival, that her game was lost; but she would not give Augusta the gratification of seeing this, but waited quietly till she had left the room, and then stepped out of the open window on to the lawn, and took her discomfited way back to The Folly.

As she approached her father's gates, she met Mr Proctor, who was walking over to Brierswood, intending to drive home with his wife. He stopped somewhat unwillingly to shake hands with his sister-in-law, who began to inform him tearfully of the unkind treatment which she had received at the hands of his wife.

"Fancy refusing to let me see Wilfred's father or mother!" she said, looking up at Mr Proctor, with real tears in her clear grey eyes, for she was deeply annoyed, if not absolutely hurt as she pretended.

"I do not think Augusta prevented them seeing you."

"Yes, she did. And she told me to leave the house as if I had been a common servant

—only I never heard any lady speak so insolently to any servant."

"Hum," said Mr Proctor stiffly, but looking contemplatively down on the fair face turned so confidingly up to his. "That was certainly wrong of Augusta."

"Yes; it is hardly a kind or Christian-like act to prevent a reconciliation between her only brother and his parents."

"Well, no," admitted Mr Proctor slowly.

"But you will help us, dear Mr Proctor—I know you will. Your opinion must naturally have such weight with Sir George and Lady Brierly."

"I will see; it certainly seems a pity for parents to quarrel lastingly with an only son."

"Thanks, thanks, dear friend," murmured Kate effusively, and she clasped Mr Proctor's rough hand in both her little ones, and raised it gratefully to her lips. As she did so, the Proctors' carriage appeared in sight, and Mrs Proctor's face frowned upon her husband and his companion as it whirled past. Had Kate seen it coming when she was seized with that sudden fit of gratitude towards Mr Proctor? Whether she had or no, she was highly delighted to have this opportunity of repaying Mrs Proctor's late rudeness to herself, and not a little amused by Mr Proctor's expression of solemn dismay.

"You will explain to her, won't you?" she said plaintively; and then, when he had taken himself somewhat hurriedly off, she went into the house (they had been standing at The Folly gates all this while) and related all that had happened to her husband, indulging in a hearty laugh at "old Proctor's" and Augusta's expense at the same time. But Wilfred looked grave, and did not seem to see the force of the joke.

"I hope you haven't made mischief between Augusta and Proctor?" he said in an annoyed tone.

"I can't help it if I have," retorted Kate. "All I want is to get old Proctor to say a friendly word for us to your parents." All she *really* wanted was to punish Mrs Proctor.

"I don't think you'll find my parents any the readier to forgive us, if you cause a quarrel between Augusta and her husband," said Wilfred; and certainly, whether Mr Proctor interceded with the old Brierlys or not, they refused to take any notice of Wilfred or his wife during their stay at The Folly; and on the third day the young couple departed for B—— in very low spirits, and with barely thirty pounds to set up housekeeping upon. Certainly, for two young people, who are both inclined to be extravagant, to set up housekeeping on thirty pounds may well be

termed the height of folly. Kate had hinted to her father before she left The Folly, that a hundred pounds would be very acceptable to her and Wilfred; but Colonel L'Estrange, though he had received his daughter back into his house, had no intention of spending any more money upon her, and replied blandly that the boys' education was becoming so expensive, that really he had no money to spare.

So it was in a very melancholy frame of mind that young Mrs Brierly arrived in the little, bare barrack rooms that were to be her home for the present. She grumbled incessantly all the first day about the smallness and inconvenience of the three rooms—drawing-room, dining-room, and bedroom—which composed her husband's quarters, and poor Wilfred was driven half distracted by her ceaseless plaints. But on the second day she brightened up, and applied herself to arranging the rooms so as to make them appear as pretty as possible; and with the things she had brought from Paris, she certainly succeeded in completely metamorphosing them, and when Wilfred came in to dinner that evening, he found her standing triumphantly in the midst of her newly ornamented drawing-room, and was forced to confess that her purchases in Paris were an immense improvement to their rooms.

"But it would have been better if, instead of spending so much money on trifles, you had kept a little to buy a few comfortable chairs with. Those two little gimcrack things you bought in Paris are no better than footstools."

"To be sure we can get a couple of little arm-chairs. I saw some very pretty ones in a shop to-day. Oh, never mind about the money yet; you will soon be having more money, and then you can pay for them, you know."

So the chairs were ordered, and then Kate pronounced her little rooms perfect, and was highly delighted by the admiration which they excited among the ladies of the regiment.

Things went very pleasantly, if not very well, with the young Brierlys for several months after this. Mrs Brierly was at once acknowledged the belle of the regiment, and though Wilfred did not quite like to see her perpetually surrounded by a bevy of admirers, he was yet well pleased that she should be generally admired. He was still very much in love with her, and could not bring himself to find fault with anything that amused her or made her happy; so he followed her about faithfully wherever she went, and allowed her to give dainty little dinners, which he could very ill afford to pay for. He had an uncomfortable consciousness that he was

running fast into debt, but he was young and inclined to be extravagant, and he could not bring himself to deny Kate anything. Still, being an honourable young fellow, the idea of incurring debts that he could never pay was anything but agreeable to him, and once or twice he warned Kate gravely of the state of his affairs ; but she always laughed the subject off carelessly, and declared that his father was certain to forgive and help him in the end.

"I hope he will," said Wilfred seriously, "or, by George ! I shall find myself up a nice tree some of these days."

CHAPTER IV.

RETURN OF THE WANDERER.

MORE than a year passed away, and still Sir George Brierly had not forgiven his son for his rash marriage, and still the young Brierlys continued to run deeper and deeper into debt. Though their income was something under a thousand a-year, they lived at a rate of nearly two thousand, and as the first year passed away, and Wilfred began to feel the pressure of want of money grow daily heavier, his usually easy temper commenced to give way, and he began to grow grave, and at times irritable. If only Kate had continued to soothe his uneasy feelings whenever a fresh bill dropped in upon him, and to keep him in a good-humour between whiles, things would have gone on smoothly enough between them until the final crash came, or Sir George

released them from their difficulties; but, unfortunately, after the first few months of her married life, Mrs Kate began to find her husband's constant companionship rather a bore. She could not go out on a shopping expedition, or to pay a morning call, without her faithful Wilfred being in close attendance, and at last she began to invent excuses for getting rid of him for an hour or two, and when he came home he would find that she had gone out with a friend, or else was in her pretty little drawing-room surrounded by two or three of his brother officers, who all looked up at him as he entered very much as if they considered his presence in his own rooms an unwarrantable intrusion. Wilfred did not like to see his wife flirting with these other fellows, but, as long as she was pleasant to himself as well as to others, he was too indolent to find open fault with her, though he chafed secretly at times over her extravagant love of admiration; but gradually, as Kate became more confident of her power over her husband, and more inclined to despise him for his weakness, she began to take less and less pains to conciliate him, flirted more openly, and laughed coolly or grew impatient if he remonstrated with her about her extravagance.

"You are just as extravagant yourself," she

would say sharply; and by-and-by Wilfred began to answer her sharply back, and declare that she spent twice as much money as he did. So by degrees a coldness sprang up between them, which Kate, in her folly, never took the trouble to dispel. It was such a bore always trying to amuse and please Wilfred, she thought; it was one thing to exert one's self to charm strangers, and quite another thing to rack one's brains morning, noon, and night to amuse the members of one's own family. And yet surely a woman's happiness is more dependent upon the goodwill of her husband than that of all the other men in creation.

So things went on till the second August after their marriage came round. There were seldom any open quarrels between them, but Wilfred no longer followed his wife's footsteps as he had done at first, and he seldom made any open demonstration of his affection for her. Kate did not mind his not kissing her—indeed, she regarded it as a very tiresome habit—but she was vexed when he began to drop going into society with her. It looked so much better for a married woman to go about with her husband, she felt; but Wilfred did not care to go out and see her dancing and flirting with other fellows, while she hardly vouchsafed him a look or word the whole evening.

"She likes to walk into the room on my arm, because it prevents people talking; but I'm not going to act footman to her, unless she takes the trouble to be civil to me," he reflected sullenly. He had been a malleable boy when he first met Kate, but he was fast developing into a man; and his temper, which had been easy and scarcely formed when he married, was growing daily harder and firmer. And gradually it began to dawn on Kate that he was slipping out of her grasp, and that he no longer obeyed her as he had done at first; but she only resented this, instead of trying to remedy it, and confided to her bosom friend, Mrs Major Newman, that really Mr Brierly's temper was growing too disagreeable for anything.

One hot afternoon on this second August since her arrival in B——, Mrs Brierly went down to the Cliff Gardens, where the band was playing, with this Mrs Newman, whose rooms happened to be near hers, and with whom she was the greatest of friends—at present. They were accompanied by Major Newman, a fine, handsome man of fifty, who kept his wife in tolerably good order, and had no objection to flirting in a quiet way with her handsome friend. Mrs Newman was a passably good-looking woman of thirty-five, who danced beautifully, rode beautifully, and skated beau-

tifully, and who was tolerably popular with men without being much of a flirt. Kate found her a very useful chaperon, and used frequently to go about with her when Wilfred's company was undesired or unattainable.

The Cliff at B—— was a long, exposed walk, overlooking the sea, where people promenaded on foot or in carriages, and where the band played every afternoon. To-day the crowd was greater than usual, and Kate soon encountered several friends, while Wilfred watched her from a distant part of the cliff with lowering brows, and thought of the days when she used to smile and talk like that to him. Perhaps it was partly his own fault that she had ceased to do so. He had been weak and yielding to her at first, and had allowed her to look upon him as her humble slave and subject, to be treated exactly as she pleased; but, like most people, he refused to acknowledge himself at all to blame, and slowly and painfully he confessed to himself that he had been mistaken in his estimate of Kate.

Suddenly, as Kate was pacing slowly along, with Mrs Newman on one side, and a couple of officers on the other, she caught sight of a lady dressed in a short blue yachting costume, and a round sailor's hat, whom she instantly recognised as Lady Nashville, and her heart

beat somewhat faster than usual as she wondered what sort of greeting her ladyship would accord her. She had seen nothing of her cousin or his wife since her marriage, but she knew that they both disapproved of it, for she had not heard from them since it had taken place, and if they had not been vexed with her, they would certainly have written to congratulate her.

It was with no small nervousness, therefore, that she slowly approached Lady Nashville, who was chatting to a couple of other ladies, and did not at first perceive her. As soon as she did so, however, she jumped up from her seat, and shook Mrs Brierly's hand in her usual boyish, off-hand way.

"So here you are at last, Kate," she said rapidly. "I thought I should meet you here this afternoon; every one seems to come here, don't they? And so you're married? And I suppose you've hardly got over your first rapture of bliss yet, eh? Well, you look very well, at any rate. Come, sit down here; it's quite too hot to stand."

"Is Nashville here?" asked Kate, relieved by her ladyship's good-natured reception.

"No; he's up in Scotland, shooting. I've got rooms at the hotel here. You must come and see me, you know; and bring your husband. I don't know him. Ah, we are all

very angry with you for marrying him in opposition to his family; though, of course, if they had only behaved properly, it would have done very nicely for you. Brierswood is entailed, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"That's lucky for you. Has the old gentleman not relented yet?"

"No; you see the ladies don't like me."

"Ah, they've not forgiven you for nearly catching Mr Proctor! You might easily have had him, Kate, if you had not been so foolish with that Count Olivetti."

"I've found out something about our Count," said Kate with a disagreeable laugh. "He is not quite of such noble family as he represented; his father kept some sort of shop, and bought his title."

"Well, it doesn't matter to us; I don't suppose we shall ever meet him again," said Lady Nashville carelessly; but she reddened as she spoke, for she was vexed that people should think she had treated a shopman's son as almost an equal. "You used to be rather smitten by him all the same, Kate," she added rather sharply.

"Used I?" replied Kate carelessly.

"Usen't you?" laughed my lady. "You ought to remember best. He was acknowledged to be a great admirer of yours."

"No, indeed; he was Mrs Ned Huntingdon's adorer."

"My dear Kate, what *are* you talking about?" exclaimed Lady Nashville reprovingly. "I'm sure no one could call Mrs Huntingdon a flirt. By-the-bye, I saw her walking past my hotel this morning. Did you know she was here?"

"No, indeed."

"Well, I saw her this morning, walking with a French *bonne* who was carrying a child —her little girl, I suppose."

"She can't have been here long, or I should have seen her."

"Perhaps we may meet her here to-day. I used to like her, though she hadn't much *go* in her."

"I hope *I* sha'n't come across her," said Kate, tossing her head.

"Why, you used to be such friends with her!"

"I can never like her again, after the shameful way she treated poor Ned."

"What do you mean?"

"You know they are separated?"

"Well, it certainly looks like it. But I didn't know she was to blame. Sir Pomphry spoke very kindly of her when I saw him last."

"Well, you know I used to go and see her pretty often when she lived at Lynborough,

and I saw her and Count Olivetti together a good deal. He was her lover before she married, you know, and—well, I don't suppose he followed her on purpose to Lynborough, but he was always going to the house while Ned was in Scotland, and I know for a fact that her maid used to carry notes between them. Ned found it out at last, and I don't suppose he will ever forgive her."

"Good gracious, how very shocking!" said Lady Nashville, looking really serious for once. "Are you quite sure, Kate?"

"Quite; Ned admitted so much to me himself. But the Huntingdons have been very careful to hush it up, so I suppose it wouldn't do to talk about it. Fancy old Sir Pompous's horror if there were a public scandal in the family!"

"And she looked so quiet, and pretended to be horrified by our fast ways! Poor Ned Huntingdon! I always liked him so much, you know. And he always seemed so sweet-tempered to me; his wife must have done something very wrong if *he* can't overlook it."

"He has been awfully good to her," said Kate. "He has done all he could to shield her from blame. Don't say *I* told you this, you know; for the Huntingdons would be so angry with me if it reached their ears. But I

thought it only right to warn you, in case you might be too friendly with her."

"Yes, indeed; I shall have nothing to say to her," cried Lady Nashville. "By-the-bye, is Mr Brierly here to-day? I want to see him so much."

"If you will wait here, I will go and ask Mrs Newman if she has seen him. He was here a short time ago," replied Kate, rising and approaching Mrs Newman, who was talking to some friends at a little distance.

"Yes; there is Mr Brierly, devoting himself to a very pretty foreign lady, with a French nurse and a small child," said Mrs Newman in answer to Kate's inquiry. "They make quite a picturesque group, don't they?"

"Very," replied Kate absently, while she wondered whether she should go up and address Ida Huntingdon or not. She would dearly have liked to cut her, and to make every one else cut her too; but this last was beyond her power to do, and as she was very anxious to introduce Wilfred to Lady Nashville, and felt that it would be very nice to say one or two disagreeable things to Mrs Huntingdon, she finally approached her, and held out the tips of her fingers patronisingly towards her.

"How do?" she drawled superciliously.

"So you have come back to England. To rejoin Ned, I suppose?"

Kate's temper rose as she looked at Ida and saw how bright and pretty she was looking. She looked quite happy now, Kate thought viciously. And so, in truth, she was. At first, when Ned had left her, she had been resolutely unhappy, and Madame de Clinville had been in despair at the apathetic indifference which she exhibited about everything. She found no amusement in society, took no interest in her dress, and did not take much notice of little Elsie—though, when she did, she was uniformly kind and gentle to her. But by degrees this state of things passed away. She was so young, that it was not natural for her to continue long unhappy, and soon her natural spirits reasserted themselves, and she found herself happier than she had been for years; her life with Madame de Clinville was so pleasant and bright, and, above all, so free from care. Since her marriage she had never admitted to herself that she cared, even remotely, for Olivetti; but any lingering feeling for him that might have lain buried deep down in her heart, had been completely crushed out by the contempt with which his dishonourable treatment of Kate L'Estrange and selfish persecution of herself had inspired

her. It had been his handsome face with which both she and Kate had fallen in love —not the man himself; and when he displayed himself in his true colours, they each turned from him, the one in trembling contempt, and the other in revengeful hatred.

So Ida's new life with her aunt was unshadowed by the old disappointed love; and after Ned's departure for America, a new, strange feeling of peace and repose began to creep over her, at which she was greatly shocked at first. But how could it be otherwise? She was young, fresh, pretty, and in the enjoyment of good health; she was surrounded by every comfort, had plenty of amusement, was admired and flattered wherever she went; and last, but far from least, she had her child to love and care for—and as her spirits recovered their natural tone, she discovered that she really loved the little creature fondly. It would hardly have been natural, therefore, if she had not been happy, as happiness is counted in this world. This new life was such a relief after all the little daily worries and greater anxieties of the past year; and though there were times when her heart smote her sorely on Ned's account, yet on the whole she was happy with her good-natured aunt and little Elsie. She did not understand even yet that her separation from

her husband was to be lasting. She still received letters from him two or three times a-year—kind letters, if somewhat grave and constrained—asking how she and little Elsie were, but giving very short accounts of himself; and she fully believed that when he returned from America he would come back to her. If once she had him safely back, she determined that she would never lose him again; she would make him happy, poor fellow; and though she was not in love with him at present, she would not admit this to herself, but believed that she would be very fond of him—when he came back. In the meantime she sometimes felt indignant with him for leaving her so long, but then she remembered that it was only love for her that had driven him away from his home and his country; for she understood that, had his feelings for her not been so intense, he could easily have overlooked the past, exonerating her, as he did, from all blame. So she pitied him, and looked forward to the time when they would be reunited—for she never doubted that such a time was coming; and in the meantime she was not unhappy without him. She had been staying with Madame de Clinville at Trouville before she came to B——; but, unfortunately, the Marquise had come across Count Olivetti at Trouville (she had

never seen him before), and had been as much fascinated by him as ladies usually were, and had insisted on having her portrait painted by him, in spite of Ida's prayers and remonstrances. Madame knew of the old love affair between him and her niece, but she refused to relinquish his acquaintance on that account.

"You assure me that all is over between you—that you no longer care for him; so there can be no harm in your meeting him now," she said pettishly, when Ida begged her to leave Trouville. "And certainly I am not going to leave Trouville till the end of August, or perhaps September."

So Ida had come to B—— with her nurse and child, intending to rejoin her aunt as soon as her portrait was finished. She was not afraid to meet Olivetti, as far as she was personally concerned—indeed, the more she saw and heard of him, the more she learnt to despise him; but she knew that Ned would not understand her conduct if he heard that she had allowed herself to meet her old lover again. So she fled, and had been established at B—— for a couple of days when she met the Brierlys. When she saw Kate coming towards her, she rose and held out her hand, with a bright smile; for she hoped that now they would be friends again. But the instant she met Kate's eyes she knew that the old

enmity had not died out, and nerved herself to reply calmly to whatever disagreeable thing Mrs Brierly might say to her; for she had learnt to expect disagreeable speeches from her in Paris when they last met. She was not surprised, therefore, when Kate attacked her about Ned, and only coloured slightly as she replied, still with a smile,—

"No, indeed; I had a letter from Ned a short time ago, but he said nothing in it about returning home."

"That depends what you call a 'short time ago,'" sneered Kate coldly. "Ned is in England now."

Ida was too well trained to display her feelings at this startling announcement; but she turned rather pale, and reseated herself rather hastily, to hide how she was trembling. Ned in England! and to have the fact announced to her by Kate Brierly! It was bitterly mortifying, certainly, and though she held her tongue and said nothing, she understood that the Brierlys must see that she had been entirely ignorant of her husband's presence in England.

"Yes, he has been in England a fortnight now, proceeded Mrs Brierly carelessly. "I got a letter from him yesterday, dated from his mother's.—Come, Wilfred, I came to fetch you; Lady Nashville is here, and wishes to be

introduced to you," and with a supercilious nod of her head to Ida, she turned and walked away, followed by her husband, who had paused a minute to shake poor Ida warmly by the hand before leaving her.

"What made you so deuced vicious to her?" he asked angrily, as he caught up his wife.

"I don't understand you," drawled Kate slowly.

"You do, perfectly well. Why did you bully that poor woman so unmercifully about her husband?"

"I am not aware that I bullied her. I merely informed her of his arrival in England, of which she did not seem previously aware."

"People don't generally talk to a lady about her husband when they know she is separated from him."

"See, there is Lady Nashville," said Kate impatiently. "Do put on a more amiable expression, unless you wish her to think you a regular surly bear."

So Wilfred pulled himself together, and made himself as agreeable to Lady Nashville as he usually did to most people.

"He is very handsome, my dear," said her ladyship when speaking to Kate afterwards about her husband, "and his manners are very nice and pleasant; but, do you know, I

thought there was a terribly severe expression in his eyes, as if he could be very dreadful if anything made him angry. I'm sure I should be quite afraid of him if I were his wife."

And, though Kate would not acknowledge it to herself, she was beginning to grow rather afraid of her husband, and knew that stern look in his eyes only too well. To-day, however, he hid his bad temper very well before Lady Nashville, and by-and-by he and Kate escorted her to her carriage, which was waiting for her at a little distance. As they approached it, they again passed Mrs Huntingdon, who was still seated where the Brierlys had left her. Lady Nashville glanced at her, hesitated an instant, and then bent her head coldly and haughtily to her, as she passed her without a word; and Ida understood at once that this was Kate's doing, for at Lynborough Lady Nashville had always been so peculiarly friendly to her. What stories had Kate told her ladyship? and what stories might she not tell other people? She flushed and bit her lip as she thought of all the cruel things Kate could say about her if she were so minded. She knew herself to be blameless, but other people might not put the generous interpretation on her actions that Ned had done, and Kate would be sure to make the worst of all she knew—and she knew such a great deal!

Suddenly the intense loneliness of her position rushed across Ida with painful force. The French *bonne* was sitting on the bench beside her, knitting; and little Elsie, now more than sixteen months old, was sprawling about at her feet; but still she felt alone and lonely, as she had never done all the time she had lived with the De Clinvilles. She did not like to sit there where she knew no one among all the crowd who kept passing and repassing her, and presently she got up, and telling Marie, the *bonne*, to take Elsie down to the beach, she made her own way slowly back to her quiet lodgings, in a somewhat less fashionable part of the town; for though seven hundred a-year was an ample allowance for dressing herself and little Elsie, and paying Marie's wages and their occasional travelling expenses, she did not find herself quite so rich now that she had to support herself entirely.

Somehow her lodgings looked more dreary and unhomelike than usual when she reached them to-day, and when she had shut herself safely into her own room, she indulged in a fit of bitter weeping. It was a long time since she had had any occasion to shed tears; but while the Atlantic rolled between her and Ned, it had not seemed so bad to be separated from him as it did now that she knew him to be in England. Why had he never informed

her of his intended return? and why had he remained a whole fortnight in England without writing to her, or taking any steps to see her? Was it that he did not wish ever to see her again? The thought frightened Ida, and again the feeling of intense loneliness and forlornness came over her. She had been happy enough with her Aunt Nina so far, but she could hardly be said to love her; and the Marquise was capricious, and might very possibly quarrel with her some day, and then Ida felt that she would be quite alone.

"Was there ever any one so miserable as I am?" she sobbed. "I have no one to love in all the world—no one but Elsie, and she is a baby."

She was terribly hurt, too, by her husband's conduct, and resented bitterly his having written to Kate Brierly when he had not done so to herself. It irritated her almost beyond endurance to think that Ned and Kate had been corresponding regularly since he left her; for she remembered that during Kate's honeymoon in Paris, she had spoken of a letter which she had received there from Ned.

"And she hates me, and will lose no opportunity of saying everything bad she can of me to him," she reflected bitterly. And then she wondered what Kate would say, and whether Ned would believe her, till she made herself

more thoroughly unhappy than she had been for months. Once she took up her pen with a sudden determination to write to her husband, and beg him to make her happy by coming back to her; but then pride conquered her momentary impulse, and she flung down the pen, telling herself that she had already begged Ned to return to her quite often enough, and that she was not going to humble herself by making another appeal, when he had not the courtesy to inform her of his return to England.

CHAPTER V.

A STARTLING VISIT.

THAT same evening, as Ida was sitting rather disconsolately by the open window of her little parlour, after little Elsie had been sent to bed, she was surprised to hear a double knock at the house-door, and presently her landlady ushered in Mr Brierly. She rose to receive him with a bright smile, for she had been feeling dull, and the sight of Wilfred's friendly face was very welcome to her at that moment.

"How well you are looking; ever so much better than when I saw you in Paris last," he said frankly, smiling back at her. "I say, aren't you awfully dull here?" he added, glancing round the room where Ida spent so much of her time in solitude.

"I am rather, sometimes," replied Ida with

a half-sigh. "But I shall soon rejoin my aunt," she added, again smiling.

"You don't know many people here?"

"No one except you."

"Ah, you must come to the Cliff Gardens again to-morrow, and I'll introduce you to some people. The Newmans are awfully nice people, you know, and great friends of Kate's."

It occurred to Ida that she was not likely to be very warmly received by any one with whom Mrs Brierly was great friends; but she thanked Mr Brierly, and promised to be in the Cliff Gardens again the following afternoon. She did not much like going, for she did not consider Marie and Elsie's companionship sufficient chaperonage for her to venture again into the crowded gardens with; but when Mr Brierly continued to press her, she finally said, laughingly, that very likely she would go to the gardens again the following day.

Accordingly she did betake herself to them the following afternoon, not knowing exactly where else to go, and by-and-by Wilfred Brierly came up to her, and seated himself on the bench by her side.

"Is your wife here to-day?" she asked.

"No," he replied, while a sudden shadow passed over his face.

Evidently there had been some disagreement in the Brierly *ménage* to-day, so Ida discreetly changed the subject, and talked upon indifferent subjects for some time, when her companion suddenly jumped up, exclaiming,—

"By Jove! there's Mrs Newman. I'll go and get her, and introduce her to you."

He rushed off as he spoke, and presently overtook Mrs Newman, who was talking to Kate.

"So you *are* here," he said to his wife. "I've just been with Mrs Huntingdon; won't you come and speak to her?"

"No, I had rather not," replied Kate coldly.

"Well, Mrs Newman, it was in search of you I came," said Wilfred, turning coldly from his wife to her friend. "*You* are good-natured, and so I want to introduce you to Mrs Huntingdon. I'm sure you'll like her; she's awfully pretty and nice, you know; but she knows no one here, poor thing."

"She is separated from her husband, you know," remarked Kate calmly.

"What on earth makes you so spiteful towards that poor girl?" exclaimed Wilfred angrily; but the instant the words were out of his mouth he would have given a good deal to recall them.

A man seldom assists a pretty woman's

cause by espousing it too warmly, and indeed is more likely to damage than advance it with other women. So it was now. Mrs Newman felt instinctively prejudiced against the stranger for whose sake Mr Brierly seemed ready to quarrel with his wife, and made a polite excuse to avoid being introduced to her. Kate was her friend, and evidently disliked this Mrs Huntingdon, and Mrs Newman felt that, out of respect to her friend, she could not allow Mr Brierly to introduce her to the fair unknown. So she made a polite but firm excuse, and Wilfred returned after awhile to the place where he had left Ida, looking very crestfallen, and hoping devoutly that she had not waited for him all this time.

But he found her seated just where he had left her, and had to make some lame excuse about not having been able to find Mrs Newman. But presently Mrs Newman came in sight walking with Kate, and Ida comprehended the whole affair at once, and bit her lip with vexation. The two other ladies also cast anything but amiable glances at her, and Kate did not stop to speak to her, but merely bent her head in the stiffest of salutes as she passed close to her, for she was anything but pleased at the way Wilfred seemed to be devoting himself to her. She was not

jealous, for she saw at a glance that there was no sort of flirtation between the two; but she was angry with her husband for daring to take notice of any one whom she openly disliked, as she did Ida. She understood that he merely wished to be kind to Mrs Huntingdon, being sorry for her lonely position here; but she considered that married men have no right to be kind to people whom their wives dislike—and indeed they are extremely foolish if they are so.

Presently Ida rose and announced her intention of going home, and Wilfred was not sorry when she refused to allow him to accompany her part of the way, for he had no wish to annoy Kate by allowing it to appear that he paid too much attention to pretty Mrs Huntingdon. So Ida went home alone, feeling angry and mortified, and wondering how long Ned meant to expose her to the sort of slights which she had had to endure to-day, by remaining away from her. She began to understand, as she had never hitherto done, the painful position of a married woman who does not live with her husband, and she wished more earnestly than ever that Ned would return to her. But no word or sign came from him, and as the days passed on she grew more and more anxious and uneasy. She was very dull too, and now

that she had taken a dislike to going alone to the Cliff Gardens, she found her daily walks stupid and insipid; nor could she afford to leave B—— now that she was settled there. Mr Brierly seemed to have deserted her too, for he did not come near her for almost a week, the truth being that he was afraid to come and see her again until his wife had called on her; and as Kate showed herself very unwilling to take any notice of her old friend, there seemed very little likelihood of Wilfred's seeing much more of Ida during the remainder of her stay at B——.

So the days dragged on one after the other, and Ida grew more and more impatient for the time to come when she could rejoin her aunt. At last one day, when she returned home from a stroll along the beach with the *bonne* and child, her landlady informed her, as she opened the door to her, that a gentleman was waiting to see her in the drawing-room.

"What is he like?" she asked quickly, while her heart gave an expectant throb as she wondered whether it could be Ned come to her at last.

"Dark, ma'am, and middle height," was the reply; and Ida's heart sank again, and a chill of disappointment passed over her. Of course it was Mr Brierly come to see her

again—without his wife. No doubt he meant to be kind, but Ida was vexed that he should pay her so much attention when Kate had all but cut her, and she went towards the drawing-room determined to tell him that he must not come to see her again unless his wife chose to come too. It would be a difficult and disagreeable thing to say, but Ida resolved that she must say it.

A gentleman was standing in the window with his back turned to the door when she entered, but as she closed the door and advanced into the middle of the room he turned suddenly round and disclosed the features of Count Olivetti. Ida could not prevent herself starting slightly as she recognised him; but she recovered herself instantly, and drawing herself up haughtily, stood confronting him in perfect silence for a minute—for so great was her inward emotion and indignation that she feared to speak at once, lest some quiver in her voice should betray that her proud indifference was only assumed.

"Ida!" he began, advancing towards her, though her look rather disconcerted him.

"May I inquire the reason of this visit, Count?" asked Ida coldly, stepping back as he advanced.

"Still so cold—so hard!" he exclaimed reproachfully. "When you were so cruel to

me at Lynborough, I said to myself, 'She is afraid, that is all.' But now you are your own mistress, why do you treat me like this? Have you altogether forgotten the past?"

"I have. I do not see what good this interview can do, and the sooner it is ended the better."

"You think so! Heartless! Inconstant! Love does not live long with you."

"Perhaps not. But you must see how unwelcome this visit is, Count; it is hardly a very gentlemanly proceeding to force your company upon me like this."

"You shall not have further cause to taunt me," he exclaimed, stung by her disdainful tone and words. "Yet remember, if I have been guilty of ungentlemanly behaviour, it is because I love you so. Yes" (fiercely), "you may look proud and virtuous if you like, but I have loved you better than *you* can ever love any one in your life. I have been the more constant of the two."

He spoke the truth — he had been more constant to Ida than she to him; but his desperate earnestness frightened her now, and she drew nervously away from him towards the bell, but he caught her hand forcibly and detained her, exclaiming passionately,—

"No, do not ring for the servant to turn

me out! I shall intrude no longer. I return to Trouville, and believe no more in the faith of a woman. Farewell, beautiful traitress!" and he pressed her hand passionately to his lips for a minute, then flung it as passionately from him, and was turning to leave the room, when he found himself suddenly face to face with Mrs Brierly, who had been ushered in by the servant just as Olivetti was in the act of kissing Ida's hand. She raised her eyebrows slightly, and seemed to hesitate whether to enter or not; but as Olivetti rushed madly past her, without appearing to recognise her, she shrugged her shoulders slightly and advanced to shake Ida coolly by the hand. She had hesitated a long time about coming to see her; but had finally done so, partly because she thought it might some day be inconvenient for her to have quarrelled with her quondam friend *à outrance*, and partly because Wilfred had insisted, as he seldom insisted about anything, that she should call on Mrs Huntingdon. Now, she was extremely thankful she *had* come; it was worth anything to have caught Olivetti kissing Ida's hand, and as the latter saw the triumphant glitter in Kate's fine eyes she grew sick and faint with dismay and fear. But she struggled hard to hide her nervousness from her guest, and to receive her with apparent composure,

though Kate's manner made this peculiarly difficult.

"I had some difficulty in finding your house," began Kate patronisingly. "I am not very well acquainted with this part of the town."

"It is not very fashionable among the visitors, perhaps, but it is not so ruinously expensive as down near the Esplanade, and the situation is high and airy."

"I suppose my husband has told you that we are going to stay at Tyndale Court?"

"No; I have not seen Mr Brierly for more than a week," replied Ida quietly, though her heart sank as it flashed across her that Kate would be sure to meet Ned at Tyndale.

"Ah, we only received Lady Huntingdon's letter a few days ago, and my husband did not know whether he could get leave at first. Of course I shall see Ned, and I shall be able to give him very good accounts of you, and tell him how bright and well you are looking. Evidently continental air suits you better than English."

Then Mrs Brierly rose and took her leave, having sat barely five minutes, and been as rude as she dared to Ida. As soon as she was gone, Ida sank down trembling on a sofa, and clasped her hands despairingly to her head.

"I am ruined," she cried wildly; "ruined!

Kate will tell Ned that she met Luigi here, and—oh! Heaven—saw him kiss my hand; and will Ned ever believe in me after that? And she will tell him that I seem bright and happy without him! What will he think of me? oh! what will he think of me?"

It was true that she had been happy enough during Ned's absence in America—very happy even, compared to what she had been at Lynborough; but now that she had been frightened by Olivetti's visit and insulted by Mrs Brierly, she felt the need of her husband's protection keenly. Yet she was beginning to fear that that protection had been withdrawn from her for ever, and at this thought a terrible feeling of helplessness and desolation swept over her. To live alone and unloved all her life—oh! it was terrible even to think of. Madame de Clinville was very kind to her, but she could hardly be said to love her, and was besides too young and flighty herself to afford her niece much protection, while Count Laurenti was almost like a stranger to his daughter, and at the present minute Ida felt herself literally alone in the world.

The entrance of the servant with a note roused her, and sitting hastily upright, she dashed away her tears, and took the note which the girl handed to her, and which was evidently from some gentleman. On opening

it she found that it was from Wilfred Brierly, enclosing a couple of tickets for a flower-show which was shortly to take place in the town. He had got them for himself and Kate originally, he wrote, but as they were going to Tyndale they could not use them, so he sent them to Mrs Huntingdon, thinking that perhaps she might like to have them. Wilfred had not known of Kate's intended visit to-day, or he would have sent the tickets by her; and he had felt rather at a loss how to explain his wife's remissness, in calling on her, to Mrs Huntingdon. He had written in a kind, friendly tone, and had said that Kate was coming to call in a day or two; but Ida saw that he knew nothing really about his wife's intentions, and she wished that he had not sent her the tickets. It was foolish of him to take any notice of her since his wife disliked her so much, and she did not like having to write and thank him for them. But she had to do so, though the tickets would be of little use to her, since she had no one to go with, and the fact of her not being able to use them only served to strengthen the sense of loneliness which oppressed her.

When she had written her answer she went into the nursery, where Elsie was sleeping calmly in her little cot, and told Marie to run out and post it, saying she would remain

with Elsie while she was absent. It was growing dusk now, and Ida seated herself in the window seat with her book, to catch as much light as possible; but soon her book dropped forgotten on her knee, and leaning her head on her hand, she fell into a reverie, as she gazed away over the sea which looked cold and grey now that the sun had set. Suddenly she turned her eyes from the distant sea to the road below, and there she beheld a shrouded figure leaning against the gate of the tiny garden in front of the lodging house—watching her. With a start, she recognised Luigi Olivetti, and springing hastily away from the window, she flung herself on her knees beside her child's bed, and burst into a passion of hysterical tears.

"Oh, Ned, Ned," she sobbed, as her husband's loving, honest face rose before her. But even as it did so, Kate Brierly's seemed to rise between her and it, looking at her with cold, revengeful eyes, in which lurked a triumphant smile; and with a despairing sob, she clasped her hands closer to her face, while a cold shudder passed over her as she realised how little likelihood there was of Ned's ever becoming reconciled to her *now*.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TELL-TALE ENVELOPE.

IT was late when Mrs Brierly reached home after her visit to Ida, and she found Wilfred waiting somewhat impatiently for his dinner in the drawing-room.

"So here you are," he said as she entered. "It only wants a quarter to seven."

"Plenty of time," she replied coolly." "I have been calling on Mrs Huntingdon, and I had no idea how far away she lived."

"I am glad you went to see her at last, poor thing," said Wilfred in a relieved tone.

"Why is she specially to be pitied?"

"Oh, she must be so precious dull all by herself here, where she doesn't know a soul."

"She had a visitor to-day, however."

"Any one we know?"

"Count Olivetti."

"Olvietti!"

"Yes; and I caught him kissing her hand —ha, ha!"

Wilfred bit his lip, but said nothing further. After all, it made very little difference to him personally whether Mrs Huntingdon had allowed Olivetti to kiss her hand or not, but it hurt him deeply to see his wife so spiteful. Her parting laugh, as she left the room, rang in his ears, and he could not forget the malicious gleam in her eyes. Surely this could not be the Kate with whom he had fallen in love! That Kate had been wayward and capricious, certainly, but always open and honest, and generally good-natured; but the Kate whom he had married seemed quite another woman—soured, hardened, and disappointed. Why was it? he asked himself. Was it that he had failed to make her happy, or could it be that she had never got over that early disappointment of which she had spoken to him once? She had confessed that some one had played her false, and Wilfred remembered how ill she had looked before her marriage. She had picked up her spirits again since then, but in a hard, defiant way —more as if she were determined to conceal what she suffered, than as if she were really happy.

"I wonder who the fellow was?" thought

Wilfred moodily; but at that minute Kate made her appearance, and they went into the little dining-room, where a dainty though simple meal was laid—for Kate was a clever manageress, if somewhat extravagant, and everything about her little *ménage* was excellently ordered. Presently Wilfred chanced to mention that he had sent the flower-show tickets to Mrs Huntingdon, and an ominous frown contracted his wife's smooth brow for a minute as he made the announcement, but she said nothing till the servant had left the room, when she exclaimed with considerable vehemence,—

"What did you mean by sending those tickets to that woman?"

Wilfred started from the reverie in which he had been indulging, at this abrupt address, and inquired coldly,—

"What woman?"

"Mrs Huntingdon, of course. I really think you might have consulted me before sending the tickets to her. It would have been more—gentlemanly."

Kate had begun speaking with considerable vehemence, but had gradually assumed her customary tone of half-insolent nonchalance, and her last sentence was uttered in a coolly contemptuous tone that irritated her husband almost beyond endurance.

"I asked you who you wished the tickets sent to, and you said you did not care, and told me to burn them if I liked; so as all our friends have got tickets already, I thought I might as well send them to Mrs Huntingdon," he replied, speaking with an elaborate calmness that betrayed his irritation as distinctly as any words.

"She can't use them any way, as she has no one to go with," said Kate, rising from the table with a shrug; "unless, perhaps, she gets Count Olivetti to accompany her," she added with a short laugh.

Wilfred made no sort of reply to this, but took up his hat quietly, and went off—Kate knew not whither. What she did know, however, was, that he would not return till very late at night; so after yawning for half-an-hour over a novel, she slipped over to the Newmans' rooms, where she found several ladies and officers assembled, and where she spent the remainder of the evening very pleasantly.

Nothing more passed between her and her husband next day, *àpropos* of the tickets which had been sent to Ida Huntingdon; but Kate did not forget them. She could not be said to love her husband, yet the idea that he preferred another woman to herself was unendurable to her, though, had she but

understood it, he was ready to think her the most perfect of women if she would only treat him and his wishes with a little more deference. Certainly there was no fear of his ever caring for any one else as he cared for her ; but Kate, having once admitted the spirit of jealousy and distrust into her heart, was blind to all reason, and began to fancy that Ida was trying to win Wilfred in order to revenge herself upon her—Kate. She heard accidentally that Wilfred had been seen walking with "that pretty Italian friend of his" one day, and being too proud to ask her husband the truth, she tormented herself by fancying that Wilfred was in the constant habit of visiting Ida and walking with her.

In point of fact, he had only met her by chance one day in the street and walked a few steps with her, but Kate chose to make a mountain out of her mole-hill, and even found a sort of melancholy pleasure in believing herself a martyr. If we hate any one very intensely, it is always a satisfaction to believe that they have injured us, so as to justify our hatred to ourselves and others ; and by degrees Kate really got to believe that Ida was deliberately trying to make mischief between her and Wilfred. No doubt Wilfred's want of tact was in a great measure to blame for this. Instead of dropping the subject of Mrs Hunt-

ingdon altogether when he saw how his wife disliked her, he made a point of always standing up for Ida against his wife when the latter tried to speak ill of her. This he did from a simple sense of justice (for he was convinced that Mrs Huntingdon was an unexceptionably nice person, in spite of all Kate said), and partly perhaps out of contradiction; but it annoyed Kate intensely, as did also his open, undisguised admiration of Ida. It seemed to her that he made a point of praising Ida in order to aggravate her (though it was usually she who brought the subject of Ida on the tapis); and he certainly did not display much tact in this respect. For instance, when Kate was discussing how she should have a new dress made, with Mrs Newman, in his presence, he stupidly observed that the dress Mrs Huntingdon had worn at church last Sunday was very pretty, "and so graceful, you know;" and then felt surprised and indignant when Kate remarked coldly that "she should be very sorry to copy Mrs Huntingdon in *anything*."

One day, about three weeks after Ida's appearance at B——, Kate came to her husband and informed him that she wished to have a maid of her own, "like other ladies." She did not so much request Wilfred's permission to engage one, as announce her intention of doing so, and Wilfred replied irritably

that he had plenty to do without paying the wages of a lady's maid; whereupon Kate proceeded to explain to him that it would be far cheaper for her to keep a maid to make her dresses than it was to buy them from shops and dressmakers. She was very much in earnest about this, and took the trouble of speaking persuasively when she saw that Wilfred was beginning to raise objections, and finally she silenced all his arguments, and half persuaded him that a maid would save them money in the end.

"And I have heard of such a delightful woman," she added. "She is coming to see me this afternoon; I expect her every minute."

"What are her wages?" asked Wilfred dubiously.

"Thirty pounds, but—"

"Thirty pounds!" Wilfred was beginning, when the entrance of the servant to announce that a young woman was waiting to see Mrs Brierly put a stop to the argument, and Wilfred left the room hastily just as the maid was ushered into it. He glanced at her carelessly in passing, and felt certain he had seen her face somewhere before, though at first he could not remember where; but presently it flashed across him that she was Mrs Huntingdon's old maid Julie. He had met her once

on the stairs of old Mrs Huntingdon's house in Lynborough, and had accidentally put his foot on her dress and torn it out at the gathers, and the disagreeable frown with which she had turned and regarded him had impressed itself upon his memory. Now he thought that, as he had nothing particular to do this afternoon, he would go and see Mrs Huntingdon, and ask about Mademoiselle Julie's qualifications; it was not his business to do so certainly, but he was in great hopes of finding out some good excuse for forbidding Kate to engage the woman, for in his heart of hearts he did not quite believe that a maid would prove such an economical institution as Kate had made out.

So he betook himself to Mrs Huntingdon's house, and found her at home, looking rather dull and hipped, he thought—certainly the last three weeks of solitude had not agreed with her, and she was not looking quite as bright as she had done when she first came to B——. She brightened up, however, as her visitor entered, and received him with a friendly smile of welcome; he had only been to see her once before and once since his wife's visit, so that this made only his third call altogether, and Ida, being entirely ignorant of the jealousy with which Kate was beginning to regard her, received him warmly, both because

she liked him, and also because any visitor was a welcome relief to her to-day.

"How kind of you to come and see me," she began, holding out her hand. "I am beginning to find this place terribly dull."

"I should think you must indeed," said Wilfred compassionately. "But I suppose you will soon rejoin Madame de Clinville?" he added cheerfully.

A shade passed over Ida's face for a minute at this question, for she had received a letter from her aunt that morning saying that Count Olivetti, who had been called away from Trouville for a few days on business, had now returned, and was hard at work at the completion of her portrait; but she gave no hint how soon she meant to leave Trouville, and in the meantime Ida groaned under the loneliness and monotony of her life at B——.

"I suppose I shall be rejoining her by-and-by," she replied thoughtfully.

"You have only got your *bonne* with you here, haven't you?"

"That is all."

"You don't have a maid of your own?" added Wilfred artfully, but colouring rather as he spoke, for he was not quite certain how far she might think his question impertinent.

"No," she replied, laughing pleasantly. "Marie does all I want for me."

"Do you find maids pay?" he inquired. "Some people say they are a most economical institution."

"Well, that depends; they may be where there are one or two ladies to dress—if you can find a maid who will undertake the charge of more than one lady—but I think an expensive maid hardly pays for one person to keep; and, of course, an inexpensive one, who can't make dresses well, is useless, unless you require a great deal of personal attendance."

"Then you don't find them pay?"

"Oh yes, sometimes, when I am going out a great deal in Paris."

"But not when you don't go out much?"

"No; but why do you ask so particularly? Are you thinking of engaging a pretty maiden to brush your hats and curl your whiskers?"

"Not a bad idea, upon my word, Mrs Huntingdon. But the fact is, Kate has been bothering me about some maid whom she wishes to engage, and I am afraid it will be rather an expensive affair."

Ida coloured with annoyance on hearing this, for she had no wish to interfere with the Brierlys' domestic arrangements, and she replied hastily that she had no doubt a maid would be very useful to Mrs Brierly.

"Useful, perhaps, but expensive. When I left home, Kate was just interviewing that

ugly French woman who was with you at Lynborough—"

"What! Julie Lemercier?" exclaimed Ida, in a tone almost suggestive of alarm.

"I don't know her name, I'm sure; but I recognised her face. It isn't often one sees anything so *recherché* in the way of ugliness. Should you recommend her to Kate?"

"No; I don't think she would suit Mrs Brierly at all," replied Ida decidedly.

She did not wish to influence Wilfred Brierly to oppose his wife's wishes, but she was very anxious to prevent her old maid entering Kate's service, and naturally supposed that if the latter did not engage Julie she would engage some one else who would suit her quite as well.

"Ah, you don't think she would suit Kate?" said Wilfred, in a relieved tone.

"No, I don't think so. She grumbled dreadfully with me, because the establishment in my mother-in-law's house was not large enough for her; and she was—was impertinent to me."

"Then certainly she won't do for us," said Wilfred, much pleased by this discovery; and after chatting a little longer upon indifferent subjects, he took his leave and went home, though it was still some time to his dinner hour. He found, on reaching his rooms, that

Kate was out; but soon she made her appearance, and informed him at once that she had engaged Julie Lemercier, and that she was to enter her service in a few days' time, when she was leaving her present situation.

"You shouldn't have been in such a hurry to engage her. Have you written for her character?" said Wilfred, in an annoyed tone.

"Oh, that doesn't matter; I am certain Julie will suit me perfectly. She used to live with Mrs Huntingdon, and I know her capabilities quite well enough already."

"I've just been calling on Mrs Huntingdon, and I spoke to her about this maid, whom I happened to recognise as I went out, and she said—"

"I don't care what Mrs Huntingdon said," interrupted Kate calmly. "I have engaged Julie."

"Then you will have to write and tell her that I can't afford to pay her wages. Yes, you will; I don't want to go to ruin any faster than I can help. I'm going at a hand gallop as it is, and you know it."

"Well, you may as well go at a scamper," retorted Kate irritatingly; and Wilfred bit his lip at her heartlessness.

"I don't intend to pay thirty pounds for a lady's maid, any way," he replied firmly. "Your bills are heavy enough without that.

Oh no, I don't believe they would be any less if you had a maid. Mrs Huntingdon says she does not think—"

"I'm not going to listen to what Mrs Huntingdon thinks," said Kate haughtily.

"She does not think this Julie will suit you at all. She left her on account of impertinence, and she gave herself airs—"

"Well, when she is impertinent to me, I shall dismiss her."

"You must write and tell her you cannot engage her, at once."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," said Kate firmly; for she felt convinced that Ida had been talking Wilfred into refusing her permission to keep a maid, and she was resolved not to submit to Mrs Huntingdon's interference.

"Nonsense; I insist upon it," exclaimed Wilfred, waxing wroth.

"I think you had better write yourself," said Kate, sinking languidly into a chair, and speaking with her most aggravating drawl.

Wilfred bit his lip, and restrained the angry exclamation that rose to his lips with some difficulty. At last he said, speaking calmly with an effort,—

"I am sure you know, Kate, that I would gladly give you anything I could afford; but when I tell you that I can really *not* afford to

pay for this maid, I am sure you will be reasonable and give her up."

"If you had listened to what I said, you would understand that a maid would save my dressmaker's bills immensely."

"That's just what I doubt. Mrs Huntingdon said she didn't find her maid pay."

But Kate was now a great deal too angry to reply, and maintained a sulky silence till dinner was announced. That meal passed far from comfortably, for both Mr and Mrs Brierly were a great deal too cross to attempt ordinary conversation, and of course they could not discuss the knotty point in the servant's presence. As soon as Kate rose and returned to the drawing-room, however, Wilfred followed her, and tried to argue her into a more "reasonable" frame of mind, but in vain.

"It is Mrs Huntingdon who has put it into your head to refuse me a maid," she said defiantly, "and I do not choose to submit to her interference."

"By Jove! you are unjust. Mrs Huntingdon never tried to influence me, beyond saying that she did not think this woman would suit you."

"That is unfortunate, since I have already engaged her."

"But you will write and put her off?"

"Certainly not."

"Then I will."

To this Kate returned no answer whatever, and after vainly attempting to elicit some word from her for several minutes, Wilfred seated himself before the writing-table and began a letter in Kate's name, in which he informed Julie—Julie—what—?

"What's the woman's name, Kate?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder at Kate, who was reclining in an easy-chair, calmly perusing a novel. But she neither moved nor spoke, and after repeating his question twice, Wilfred had to acknowledge himself beaten. He could easily obtain the woman's name from Mrs Huntingdon, but that would be of very little use without her address, and evidently it was impossible to get anything out of Kate. She understood his embarrassment, and sat secretly enjoying it, though she gave no sign to show that she was even conscious of his presence in the room.

"Well, have your own way!" exclaimed Wilfred angrily at last, springing up and flinging his unfinished letter into the empty grate. "As you feelingly remarked a short time ago, I may as well go to ruin at a scamper as a gallop."

Then he seized his hat and left the room, shutting the door after him with unnecessary violence, and Kate remained alone, with some-

thing very like tears in her clear grey eyes. But she forced them resolutely back, and lashed herself into a fresh rage as she thought of Ida Huntingdon.

"I daresay Wilfred has gone to ask her Julie's name," she reflected wrathfully, "but he won't be able to find out her address. Ha, ha! I think I have got the best of it this time," she muttered aloud, with rather a forced laugh, as she stooped and picked her husband's uncompleted letter out of the grate.

It was a bad habit of his to crush up his letters in his hand after reading them, and fling them carelessly into the fire or grate, as the case might be. Kate had often remonstrated with him on the untidiness of this habit, though she sometimes found it convenient, as in the present instance. But as she knelt on the hearthrug, smoothing out the crumpled sheet, her eye was attracted by another bit of letter-paper which was half concealed beneath the summer shavings that filled the fireplace, and pulling it hastily out, she found it to be an envelope addressed to Wilfred in a pretty, delicate, woman's hand, which she instantly recognised as Ida Huntingdon's, while on the other side was Ida's monogram, which she knew so well. So Wilfred was in the habit of receiving letters from that woman, she thought angrily; but

she grew very pale, and a pang of something like pain shot through her heart, as she wondered whether she had really forfeited her husband's love irrevocably. She had not taken any pains to retain his affection, but that was principally because she had been so insolently secure of her complete power over him; and, woman-like, she respected him more now that she found he was not so completely her slave as she had imagined. But her principal anger was directed against Ida, and it was with a vicious gleam in her eyes that she folded the luckless envelope, and put it in her pocket.

"Ida always was a fool," she muttered, "but I shouldn't have thought she would have been such a goose as to write a *billet-doux* to my husband on her monogram paper."

As the reader has probably guessed already, this was simply the envelope which had enclosed Ida's note of thanks to Wilfred for the flower-show tickets which he had sent her; but to Kate it seemed proof positive that Mrs Huntingdon was in the habit of writing private notes to her husband, and she shed some very genuine tears over it, which showed that she was deeply affected, for, as a rule, she was not a young person given to violent emotion of any sort.

"Thank goodness, we go to Tyndale the

day after to-morrow," she cried passionately; and then, with a half-triumphant laugh, she thought, "What will Ned say when I show him this envelope? Aha! Madame Ida, I think I shall be revenged for the mischief you have made between me and my husband, if I was not for the way you and Luigi Olivetti deceived me!"

CHAPTER VII.

GOOD ADVICE.

IT was on the following afternoon that Ida came to return Mrs Brierly's visit. It was ten days since Kate had called on her, but she had put off returning her visit as long as possible, for after Kate's rudeness to her she very much disliked the idea of meeting her again. But for common politeness' sake she was obliged to call on the Brierlys, though she could hardly have chosen a more unfortunate time for doing so. Kate was still fuming over Wilfred's attempt—unsuccessful though it had been—to prevent her engaging Julie Lemercier as her maid, and she was still burning with indignation against the woman who dared to write private notes to her husband; so, after shaking Ida's finger-tips stiffly, she took no further notice of her, but devoted all

her attention to two other ladies who happened to be calling on her at the same time. So for five minutes Ida sat silent on a sofa, feeling very uncomfortable, while the others laughed and chatted loudly ; and when, at the end of her five minutes' penance, she rose to take her leave, she vowed that this was the last time she would ever expose herself to Mrs Brierly's insolence. How any one calling herself a lady could treat any guest in her own house so rudely, was to her incomprehensible ; but it is an unfortunate fact that ladies often are extremely ill bred in such matters.

" Who was that young lady ? " asked one of Kate's other guests, as Ida left the room.

" A Mrs Huntingdon. She is separated from her husband—such a nice man ; he is the heir to his uncle, Sir Pomphry Huntingdon, of Tyndale Court, you know. I used to know him very well when I was a girl, and I can't understand how any one can help getting on with him."

" Dear me, what a pity ! " sighed the first speaker, who was rather a good-natured person, and liked pretty faces. " And she is so young and pretty too."

" Oh, she is terribly made up," replied Kate impatiently, and then she changed the conversation to other topics.

Later in the same afternoon she was sur-

prised by another visitor—Mrs Elton, the wife of the Lynborough clergyman.

"You are the last person I should have expected to meet here," she said, with more surprise than cordiality, as she shook her guest by the hand.

"My husband has not been very well lately," replied Mrs Elton, "so we have come here for a couple of weeks' holiday."

"And have come to see me? Very kind of you, I'm sure. We are going to Tyndale Court to-morrow, so, of course, I am very busy packing to-day."

"I hope I am not in the way?"

"Oh, not at all," replied Kate politely, but not very heartily.

"I won't detain you long; I came to inquire if you knew the address of Mrs Ned Huntingdon," said the clergyman's wife, with more honesty than politeness; and Kate wondered why it was that good people always had such disagreeable manners, quite forgetting that Mr Elton, who was quite as good a man as his wife was a woman, was charmingly courteous, and very amusing and agreeable.

"Ah, I hardly thought you would take the trouble of coming here solely to see me," laughed Kate carelessly.

Of course Mrs Elton ought, in politeness, to have protested that it gave her the greatest

happiness to see Kate again, but she was far too conscientious to say anything that was not strictly true; so, as she had *not* come here for the sake of seeing Kate, she made no attempt to deny the latter's accusation, and thus tacitly admitted it to be well founded.

"I saw Mrs Ned in the street as we were driving from the station, but, of course, it was impossible for me to speak to her then," she said stiffly, for Kate was thoroughly antagonistic to her, and she always appeared in a more disagreeable light when talking to her than she did with any one else.

"And so you came to ask me for her address? How nice of you to tell me so! Now most people would have pretended that they came for the express purpose of seeing *me*, and would have asked me for Mrs Huntingdon's address quite accidentally, as they were saying good-bye. Of course, it would only be polite of them to do so; but I do hate that sort of humbug, don't you? I like people to be honest, and say what they mean, even at the risk of appearing rude and unladylike."

"I cannot tell untruths," replied Mrs Elton, colouring slightly.

"Oh, there is no need," said Kate sweetly. "I assure you I do not care in the least whether you came to see me or not," and she looked straight at Mrs Elton and smiled;

while the clergyman's wife remained silent, completely dumbfounded by this young woman's impudence. "And now tell me all about Lynborough," proceeded Mrs Brierly cheerfully. "How is poor Ned Huntingdon looking?"

"Much older—he looks quite a steady-going man now, instead of a mere boy."

"Ah, no wonder, poor fellow! He was so fond of his wife—quite devoted to her, in fact; and then to find out she cared for some one else! It must have been terrible for him."

"I was one of Mrs Huntingdon's greatest friends at Lynborough—"

"And she deceived you, as she deceived every one else. All the time that she was going about with that sweet, demure face of hers, she was carrying on a clandestine correspondence with some one."

Kate longed to confide the whole history of Count Olivetti to Mrs Elton, but was restrained by the remembrance that all Lynborough supposed him to have been her own lover. It would be too mortifying to have to confess how she had been befooled, so she refrained from making any direct mention of the artist's name.

"I think I must say good-bye now," said Mrs Elton, rising abruptly and holding out her hand.

"What! has my dreadful news frightened you away?" laughed Kate, rising readily.

"I think, Mrs Brierly, it would be more charitable and Christian-like to refrain from spreading such a story," said the visitor coldly.

"Perhaps; but it is true all the same. I suppose Ned Huntingdon is still with his mother? My cousin, Lady Nashville, who left this a couple of days ago, wrote to me that she had seen him driving in a hansom in London; but I suppose he had only run up there on business."

"He started for Germany yesterday."

"For Germany!" Kate's face fell considerably at this announcement; but she comforted herself by the reflection that she could write to him and tell him how well and happy Ida was looking—without him.

Mrs Elton walked away from the Brierlys' rooms feeling very much disturbed in her mind by what Kate had told her concerning Ida Huntingdon. She had known Ida well at Lynborough, and had liked what she had seen of her very much; but she now began to reflect that she had not seen so *very* much of her after all. That Mrs Brierly would tell a deliberate untruth, she could not believe; but she hoped sincerely that she might be mistaken; and yet Kate had been very intimate with the Huntingdons, and was likely to know

the truth, whatever it might be. It was certainly strange of Ned to have left his wife as he had done—there must have been some good reason for his doing so; and yet Mrs Elton was unwilling to think ill of Ida. But she was not a woman who allowed her personal wishes and feelings to outweigh her judgment, and she set herself to consider the pros and cons of the case as coolly and impartially as if she had been a judge. From the very first she had been inclined to suspect that Ida did not care for her husband as much as he cared for her, and the more she had seen of her the more this impression had been confirmed. Mrs Elton was not a woman to listen to gossip, but she could not forget that there had been some talk in Lynborough on the subject; she knew the way in which marriages were arranged abroad, and Ida had admitted to her that she had never been allowed to see Ned alone before their marriage. What more probable than that the poor girl had been forced into marrying him against her will—perhaps even when she cared for some one else? If so, of course Count Laurenti had been careful to prevent Ned's seeing too much of her before marriage. But all this was mere surmise, and Mrs Elton was not given to surmising; what was clear to her was that Ida had failed in her duty to her husband after marriage. Kate

Brierly might be mistaken in affirming so positively that she had so far forgotten herself as to carry on a clandestine correspondence; but she had allowed Ned to see that she was not happy with him, and had behaved in such a way as to drive him from his home for years. Of course Mrs Elton had no business to interfere in the affair, but it seemed to her that if she went calmly on her way without attempting to make Ida see the error of her ways, she would be like the Levite who passed by on the other side when he came upon the man who had fallen among thieves.

"I used to have some influence with her," she thought to herself, "and if I can induce her to seek a reconciliation with her husband, it will be a good action."

So she walked swiftly on to Ida's lodgings, though it was already growing late, and was fortunate enough to find her at home.

Ida was sitting in a desponding attitude in an old arm-chair when her visitor was announced, and she rose hastily, dashing what looked very like tears from her eyes as she did so.

"How are you, my dear?" said Mrs Elton, kissing her kindly, and dropping a great deal of her customary stiffness as she spoke. "You have been crying?" she added gravely, as she looked into Ida's face.

"Oh no, indeed," said Ida hastily. She liked Mrs Elton in a way, and had found it a great relief to escape from her mother-in-law's house at Lynborough to the rectory in the old days; but she felt instinctively that Mrs Elton would not sympathise with her present trouble, which arose principally from *ennui*, and vexation at Mrs Brierly's rudeness to her.

"You look better than when you left Lynborough," proceeded Mrs Elton. "I was surprised to see you in the street the other day; I had no idea you were in England. I got your address from Mrs Brierly."

"Did you?" said Ida, in a constrained tone that did not escape her friend's notice. "It was very kind of you to come and see me," she added sweetly. "I know hardly any one here, and find it terribly dull."

"I suppose you see a great deal of your old friend, Mrs Brierly?"

"Oh no, very little. I hope to leave this place soon, and rejoin my aunt, Madame de Clinville."

"You will not rejoin Mr Ned?"

"I do not think so," said Ida, looking down and colouring uncomfortably, while she began to think Mrs Elton one of the most tactless people she had ever met. The clergyman's wife also felt inclined to shrink from speaking of Ned to Ida, but she thought of the Levite

and the man who fell among thieves, and persevered.

"Ida," she said gravely but kindly, and laying her hand on her young friend's arm, "what is wrong between you and your husband? No; have patience with me, my dear, and let me speak. I know I must apologise for doing so at all, but I am sure you will believe that I am only anxious for your welfare. We are old friends, Ida, and I am so much older than you that I look upon you almost as if you were my daughter. Tell me, my dear, is it true that you are really separated from Mr Huntingdon?"

For a minute Ida bit her lip in silence; then she said, rather coldly,—

"I do not see the use of talking like this, Mrs Elton. I suppose you mean to be kind, but you can never understand the case properly, and—I would rather drop the subject, please."

"Ida, if you could have seen how ill your husband was looking when he came home, I am sure you could not help pitying him."

To this Ida made no reply, for a choking feeling rose in her throat and seemed to deprive her of the power of speech.

"I am sure you are not happy, Ida," proceeded the other earnestly. "I do not believe any one can be happy who neglects their duty."

"I have not neglected my duty, Mrs Elton."

"Have you not? It is a wife's duty to make her husband happy, and yours looks heart-broken."

A flush, half of pain, half of anger, rose to Ida's cheek, as she replied with some excitement,—

"You need not be so quick in laying all the blame on me. I told you you could not understand the true state of the case; and I do not see any use in discussing it further."

"I am not speaking out of idle curiosity, but from a solemn sense of duty. You say you are not alone to blame for your estrangement from your husband; but do you think that excuse will serve you on the great day when you will have to give an account of your stewardship? It will not matter to you then what others have done; it will be for your own actions, and yours alone, that you will have to answer. You have a husband who, I am sure, loves you devotedly, and who is exiled from his home and rendered miserable on your account. I do not ask to know the particulars of the case; I do not wish to understand them; but you are the wife, and it is the wife's duty to submit herself to her husband, even if he is the one most to blame. I cannot believe that Mr Ned has done any-

thing to deserve his present banishment from his wife and home; but, however that may be, it is your duty as his wife to seek a reconciliation with him. Ida, it is your solemn duty; if you neglect my warning now, you may regret it bitterly when it is too late—when the night has come when no man can work."

No doubt Mrs Elton fancied she was only fulfilling her duty in saying all this, and Ida saw that she was quite sincere in her professions of goodwill towards her; but she wished her friend's conscience had made her a little less officious. It was horrible to be talked to like this. Mrs Elton's manner was so solemn and impressive, and Ida, who was at all times excitable and impressionable, began to find it almost impossible to control her emotion.

"You do not understand," she said impatiently.

"You are the wife; it is for you to submit, whatever the case may be."

"So you said just now," replied Ida coldly. Her cheeks were brightly flushed now, and she was trembling with excitement, but she still retained sufficient self-command to speak calmly, and to endeavour to stem the torrent of her friend's good advice.

"You are angry with me, Ida? Yet you know I am only anxious for your welfare."

"Perhaps; but I think we had better change the subject now. How are all the people at Lynborough?"

"Oh, Ida! if you could see your husband, I think you would not harden your heart like this. I tell you he looks heart-broken."

"I cannot help it," said Ida unsteadily.

"Can you not? Is all hope of a reconciliation at an end between you?"

Then, as Ida made no reply, Mrs Elton repeated her question impressively. "Is it?"

"How can you ask such cruel questions?" cried Ida passionately, springing up, and walking up to the window to hide the tears which were at last forcing their way down her cheeks.

"My dear," persisted Mrs Elton, following her, and laying her hand on her arm, "I am glad to see that you feel it like this. When we have done wrong, the best thing we can do is to repent—"

"But I have done nothing wrong," cried Ida indignantly. "I have been unfortunate, but that is all."

"I think we generally bring our misfortunes on ourselves—"

"That is not very charitable."

"Ida, you are unhappy, and so is your husband; will you do nothing to save both yourself and him?"

"What can I do?" cried Ida bitterly.

"Write to him—he is now in Germany—"

"In Germany!" echoed Ida, while her heart bounded at the thought that now he would not meet Kate, and then sank as she felt how far removed he was from herself.

"Yes; he did not know you were in England, I fancy. But write to him, and ask him to come back to you. Ida, listen to me" (as Ida made an impatient gesture), "this is your plain and positive duty; do not refuse to obey it."

"It is no use," replied Ida, with a half-sob.

"Have you ever asked him to return to you?"

"I have."

"And he will not?"

"Oh, Mrs Elton, do not let us talk about this any more. I cannot bear it."

"Come, my dear, you must not despair. Your husband is a good and just man, and if you ask him to forgive you—"

"To forgive me for what, Mrs Elton?"

"My dear, you are very young, and may have been foolish; but tell your husband you are sorry, and wish to atone for the sorrow you have caused him, and I believe he will come back to you; for he used to love you very truly, Ida. Whatever you have done, he will surely forgive you, if you write and ask for pardon."

"You seem to take it for granted that I *have* done something wrong."

"Would Mr Huntingdon have left you for a mere quarrel?" asked Mrs Elton gravely.

"Why do you speak to me in that tone, Mrs Elton?" asked Ida, growing rather pale.

"It is not my place to reprove you; you must know best yourself how much or how little your husband has to forgive. But I know how good he is, and do not think you need be afraid of appealing to him."

"Does every one judge me as hardly as you do?" asked Ida passionately.

"I do not judge you at all."

"I think you do. You speak as if Ned has something serious to forgive me for. I suppose people will talk about me under the circumstances; but I should not have supposed *you* would have listened to gossip."

"No more I do," said Mrs Elton coldly. She could not help thinking Ida must be greatly to blame in some way, and she was annoyed and disappointed at the way in which she refused to submit to the faintest word of disapproval. Ida was quick to detect the change in her friend's manner, and her own excitement died away as if by magic before Mrs Elton's new coldness.

"You are a good woman, Mrs Elton—a much better woman than I am," she said

quietly and sadly; "but you have shown yourself very ready to judge me."

"I do not judge you. I have heard cruel things said about you, but I refused to listen to them—"

"You have just come from Mrs Brierly; I suppose she has been maligning me to you?" exclaimed Ida suddenly.

"It does not matter what she said—"

"But it does," interposed Ida haughtily. "She is the cruellest enemy I have in the world, and it matters very much to me that one who used to be my friend, should have listened to and believed her tales against me. I do not know what she told you; but it must have been something utterly untrue, for I have done nothing to deserve the tone in which you have spoken to me. However, I think we have talked about this long enough."

"Perhaps we have; but I am sorry you have taken what I have said so much amiss. I hoped to influence you to seek a reconciliation with your husband for both your sakes, and for your child's" (here Ida winced visibly); "but never meant to reproach you, as you seem to imagine."

It occurred to Ida that it would have been much more to the point if Mrs Elton had minded her own business; but she was thankful to drop the subject, and listened patiently

while Mrs Elton proceeded to give her a little of the Lynborough news.

Old Mrs Huntingdon was ailing—that was what had brought Ned to England for a few weeks; Dick Carr was said to be dying of consumption, and Emily's heart was quite broken because Mrs Williamson would not allow her son to marry her; while Bella was just about to be married to a young man from Australia.

These, and other little bits of information, Mrs Elton gave before taking her leave, to show that she did not wish to quarrel with Ida for declining to follow her advice; and the latter sat and listened to her wearily, with forced politeness, and was very glad when at length she took her departure. Then, when at length she found herself alone, the strong restraint which Ida had put upon herself throughout this trying interview gave way, and she flung herself into an arm-chair and sobbed till she was thoroughly exhausted.

Mrs Elton's words had harrowed her feelings cruelly, and had opened her eyes more clearly than ever to the hopelessness of her position with Ned. And then that reference to the child had startled Ida, and roused a fresh source of anxiety in her mind. Was it possible that her poor little innocent Elsie would ever suffer from her parents' estrangement? It

would be too cruel; and Ida's tears redoubled at the mere idea. Tears came more naturally to her than to most Englishwomen (indeed, it had been one of old Mrs Huntingdon's causes of complaint against her that she was always laughing, and crying, and kissing people), but now she did not sob out her unhappiness in a few minutes as she usually did. When she had wept all her tears away, and was reduced to exhausted silence, the dull, heavy pain was still gnawing at her heart, uneased by the tears which had only served to make her head ache painfully. And she was not only unhappy about Ned and little Elsie; she was very angry, too, with Mrs Brierly and Mrs Elton. She was deeply hurt by the way in which the latter had listened to Kate's ill-natured words about her, and resented the way in which she had allowed them to influence her. And if Mrs Elton, who had always been her friend, had been so influenced by Kate's words, how much more so would not others be? It was not a cheering reflection; and could Ida have heard the conversation that was taking place between Mr and Mrs Elton at that minute, her vexation would have been considerably increased.

"I am very much disappointed in Ida Huntingdon," said Mrs Elton severely, as she poured out her husband's tea. "I used to like

her—and, indeed, I like her still—because she was so sweet and attractive, and I was sorry for her when she first came to Lynborough, poor young thing; but I never fancied that she had much steady principle, and I frequently detected her in little untruths—"

"Pooh, my dear," laughed Mr Elton, "you are too particular. I suppose you call it a fib if I say I am glad to see some one when I am not."

"Certainly I do."

"But you must remember that everyone's views are not the same as yours. I have no doubt Mrs Huntingdon had no idea she was guilty of an untruth when she made one of those little politely false speeches which used to horrify you so."

"No, indeed; she was quite surprised when I pointed out to her how wrong it was. But she always listened to what I said quite good-naturedly, and I really think I had a good deal of influence with her at one time. But to-day she refused to attend to anything I could say, and refused to admit that she was the least to blame for this rupture with her husband."

"Well, my dear, I think it was rather a delicate matter to meddle in," replied the clergyman, and Mrs Elton was nearer losing her temper than she had ever been in her life.

CHAPTER VIII.

RETURN OF THE REBEL.

IT was a great relief to both Mr and Mrs Brierly to get away from their home worries to the ease and comfort of Tyndale Court, though Kate found the latter place rather dull. But she was beginning to learn that dulness is not the worst of ills, as she used to consider it in her girlhood. Of late, bills had been pouring in upon her husband in a most disagreeable manner; the tradesmen who supplied them with goods were beginning to grow insolent; and Kate had a milliner's bill hanging over her head, which she scarcely dared to mention to Wilfred, worried and harassed as he now was by the pressure of his debts. If he had not been so aggravatingly conscientious, Kate declared that they could have got on for years, instead of finding themselves in such diffi-

culties after fifteen months of married life; but the instant he got any money, he went off and paid part of their debts with it, so that he was without ready money until his next dividend became due, and people saw that he was "hard up," and talked about it, till it reached the tradesmen's ears. Then, too, it gradually leaked out that he was not on speaking terms with his father, and this injured his credit more than anything. Kate began to find it difficult to get as many new dresses as she required (it was this that had put the idea of engaging a maid into her head), and her dressmaker was always threatening to send her bill in to Wilfred; so altogether she was not sorry to get away from B—— for a little while.

"You must try and see your father, and get him to help us," she said to her husband, as they sat opposite each other in the railway carriage (Wilfred had suggested coming second class, but Kate had negatived the idea with scorn). "He surely cannot intend to cut you for ever, just because you had the good taste to marry me."

"It wouldn't be like him," said Wilfred, with a sigh as he reflected how little real authority Sir George had at home.

"Perhaps the Huntingdons will help us," said Kate meditatively, while her husband

coloured and bit his lip savagely at her words. "Of course papa ought to do something for us, but I am very much afraid that he won't."

Colonel L'Estrange had sent his daughter a little help from time to time, but she had not found it convenient to mention the fact to her husband, who would instantly have seized the money to pay off some of their bills with. So she had very little hopes of getting anything further from her father just at present, but she was determined to make Wilfred see *his* father, and try what could be done with him.

Sir Pomphry and Lady Huntingdon received their guests very kindly, and Kate was pleased to find that they too were very anxious that a reconciliation should be effected between Wilfred and his father.

"It was one reason why I wished you to come to us," said Lady Huntingdon to her god-daughter; and Kate thanked her, and took the opportunity of explaining some of her difficulties to her.

"You should not have married a poor man, Kate," said her ladyship reprovingly; "you are so extravagant. I think you might have gone without a maid until your husband had made friends with his father. By-the-bye, I am sure I know that woman's face."

"Very likely; she is Ida's old maid."

"Ah, that Julie! How could you have engaged her, Kate?"

"Why should I not? She is an excellent maid."

"But to bring her back into this country again! Really it was very inconsiderate of you, my dear; indeed, I cannot understand how you came to engage her at all."

"Is the poor woman to be punished because Ida chose to misbehave herself?"

"Ida did not misbehave herself," said Lady Huntingdon coldly. "Julie brought her those notes, and she dismissed her. I don't see what else she could do. It is Ned who is so absurd in leaving her, poor thing; she behaved very well, I think. But that Julie is so spiteful, I am afraid she may talk, and spread stories in the country about Ida."

"It doesn't matter to me whether she does or not," replied Kate impatiently; and Lady Huntingdon turned away, thoroughly disgusted with her god-daughter's selfishness. She and her husband had taken such pains to hush up the estrangement between Ned and his wife, and though they were forced to admit to their friends that the young couple did not get on very well, they had laid the entire blame on incompatibility of temper, and had always spoken of Ida before people with

studied kindness; and now Kate had brought Julie Lemercier into their house to gossip with the servants and spread all sorts of false stories about her old mistress! Kate repeated one or two trifling anecdotes which Julie had told her about Ida to Lady Huntingdon, greatly to the latter's indignation.

"Of course, if you encourage that woman to talk, she will do so," said her ladyship, in cold displeasure. "But it is absurd to put any faith in what she says, for you know quite well what a spite she has against Ida, and what lies she told old Mrs Huntingdon about her."

As it happened, Mademoiselle Julie did not talk about the Huntingdons to any one except Kate (who encouraged her to do so, as Lady Huntingdon had declared), for she was sharp enough to see that her tales would not redound to her own credit, and that her wisest plan was to conceal the fact of her ever having been in this part of the country before. Fortunately none of the servants whom she had known before were now at Tyndale, so her identity was not discovered and Lady Huntingdon's fears were not realised. But her ladyship did not know this, and her displeasure with Kate was so great that she resisted all her hints for assistance in paying that terrible dressmaker's-bill which was hanging over her.

"Certainly Ida played Kate a cruel trick about Count Olivetti," she said to her husband, "and I suppose it is very natural for Kate to hate her. But we have been very kind to Kate too, and I think she ought to have more consideration for us."

So Kate saw that her only hope of help lay in the Brierlys, and two days after arriving at Tyndale Court she persuaded Wifred to go to Brierswood and ask his father frankly to forgive him. He had never done anything to soften his parents' displeasure yet, and he began to think that perhaps they were only waiting for him to apologise to forgive him freely; for he could not believe that even his mother, cold and hard as she was, could really wish to banish him from his home for ever. It had been a great mistake allowing Kate to seek an interview with his parents alone; he felt that now; but that had been in the early days of their marriage, when her slightest wish was law with him, and when he had had such great faith in her tact and cleverness. But now he saw that her visit to Brierswood had been in very bad taste, and must only have served to irritate his mother still further against them; and it was with considerable trepidation that he made his way along the well-known road to his old home. Would his father see him? he wondered; and

would his mother ever consent to receive Kate into her house? Suddenly, as he was walking rapidly up the Brierswood avenue, he came face to face with his sister, who started violently on recognising him, but stood still, without uttering a word of welcome.

"Augusta," he exclaimed eagerly, holding out his hand, "won't you speak to me?"

"What a start you gave me, Wilfred," said Mrs Proctor, placing her hand in his extended one. "How do you come to be here?"

"We are staying at Tyndale, and—and do you think my father will see me?"

"I don't know, really. He is very vexed with you, you know, Wilfred," replied the sister hesitatingly. She was glad to see her brother again, and would have been ready to welcome him home, but she remembered Kate and hesitated.

"Take me to him, Gussie; surely *you* will stand my friend," he pleaded, quite forgetting that it was this very Gussie who had turned his wife so ignominiously away on her last visit here. But Mrs Proctor could hardly refuse her brother admission to his father's presence, as she had done his wife, so she turned and walked back with him to the house.

"I am glad you have come by yourself to-day," she said. "How could you have allowed

Kate to come here alone, as she did last time? Why, it was enough to anger mamma for life. And then Kate didn't ask to see *her;* it was papa she tried to see, and that made mamma still more angry."

Wilfred sighed, but made no reply, and they walked on in silence, though each was taking careful note of the other's appearance; and Augusta thought her brother looking harassed and worried, while he came to the conclusion that matrimony had not agreed with his sister.

"Come with me," said Augusta quietly, as they reached the front door; and she led the way across the hall to the library, where her father sat writing at his table near the window.

"Papa," she said hurriedly, "here is Wilfred come to see you." And then she retired, leaving the father and son together, well knowing that the former would not be slow to pardon his favourite child if left to himself. And considering how honestly Mrs Proctor detested her sister-in-law, this was a very magnanimous proceeding on her part; but she was not very happy in her own married life, and the more uncongenial she found her husband and his sister (who continued to live with them) and daughters, the more disposed she was to cling to her own family for affection; and she had always been fond of her brother—consequently

she was all the more disappointed at his marriage with Kate L'Estrange. She was on a visit now to her parents, with Mr and Miss Proctor and the two girls (for her husband and his sister objected to her leaving home by herself), and she found the other ladies all working in the drawing-room, whither she repaired on quitting the library.

"Mamma," she began, "what do you think? Poor Wilfred has come home, and is in the library with papa."

"Wilfred!" echoed Lady Brierly, starting up. "When did he come? How do you know?"

"I met him at the door, and let him in."

"Which was an extremely foolish proceeding, in *my* opinion," remarked Miss Proctor sourly; for the days had changed since she and Augusta used to fly into each other's arms and embrace whenever they met, and young Mrs Proctor found her sister-in-law terribly officious and interfering, while the latter had discovered that Augusta was not half as sweet and yielding as she had appeared in the days when she was striving to outrival Kate L'Estrange in Mr Proctor's middle-aged affections.

"She could hardly refuse to admit her own brother," said my lady sharply, nettled by Miss Proctor's interference. Then turning to her daughter, she asked,—"Is he alone?"

"Yes. He and Kate are staying at Tyndale, but he has not brought her here."

"He shows good taste," remarked Lady Brierly coldly; and then she stood fidgeting uneasily for a moment, unable to make up her mind what to do.

"I should think you would hardly receive Kate, Lady Brierly," remarked Miss Proctor after a moment's pause.

"I do not know," replied Lady Brierly sharply, and feeling more disposed to forgive Wilfred and Kate than she had ever done before.

Just then Sir George put his head in at the door, and called his wife out of the room; and Mrs Proctor also followed them into the dining-room.

"My dear," began Sir George nervously, "Wilfred is here—"

"So Augusta tells me," said Lady Brierly sternly.

"Of course I could not forgive him till he made the first advance, as you said; but he seems very much cut up about this quarrel, poor lad, and speaks very nicely."

"I do not mind seeing him," said the mother, also rather nervously. "Since he is alone," she added.

"My dear, don't you think we had better make the best of things, and have a general peace?" suggested Sir George. "Wilfred

could not possibly accept our friendship for himself, unless it was extended to his wife also."

"I don't see why he shouldn't," struck in Mrs Proctor, whose dislike to Kate was stronger than that of either of her parents.

"Of course he can't; no man could," insisted Sir George. "You must see that for yourself."

"I expect Kate has run him into dreadful debt," sighed Lady Brierly thoughtfully.

"He looks terrible worried, poor lad," said the father, almost pleadingly. "Come and see him, Anne; he is waiting in the library, poor fellow."

So they all passed over to the library, where they found Wilfred looking very pale and anxious, for his father's long delay in returning had rather alarmed him.

"Mother!" he said, as Lady Brierly entered; and she made no resistance when he took her in his arms and kissed her affectionately.

After that, of course, he won the battle easily; and when, by-and-by, Sir George suggested that Wilfred and Kate should come to Brierswood for the remainder of the former's leave, Lady Brierly raised no objection.

So Wilfred returned to Tyndale in triumph, and even whistled gaily as he strode along. The instant Kate saw his face as he entered the Tyndale drawing-room, she knew that his

visit had been successful, and her heart gave a quick throb of relief, though she was also annoyed that he should have succeeded where she had so signally failed.

"Well?" she asked quietly—apathetically almost—as he entered; "so you have bearded the lion in his den, have you? And how did he receive you?"

Her careless tone grated on Wilfred, excited and elated as he was, and after glancing quickly round to see that there was no one else in the room, he replied impatiently,—

"Why do you ask, if you do not care?"

"I do care, of course. Don't lose your temper, mon ami, but tell me how you fared with your parents."

"Oh, it's all right. They were awfully good, and they've asked us to finish our leave with them. The poor old governor looks terribly aged, and he seemed awfully glad to see me again. Of course, you see, he couldn't forgive me till I'd apologised—"

"And I suppose you did so humbly, and said you were very sorry you had ever married me."

"Kate!" exclaimed Wilfred reproachfully.

"Well, I daresay you have seen a great many women whom it would have been far more worth your while marrying than me," laughed Kate, thinking of Ida Huntingdon.

Wilfred looked annoyed and puzzled. Kate had indulged in one or two of these sort of speeches of late, and he did not understand what had come over her.

"No, I have not," he replied quietly and firmly; and then he proceeded,—"I met Augusta in the avenue, and she behaved like a brick, and got both her father and mother to see me. So now we are to go to them at once. The Huntingdons will understand our leaving them, and will not be offended."

"Have they written to invite me?"

"No; but my mother sent a kind message to you, and we are to be there in time to dress for dinner."

"I don't see how they can expect me to go without a written invitation, after the way they have treated me—turning me out of their house and refusing to see me!"

"Come, Kate, we may think ourselves very lucky to have got the invitation at all."

"If it wasn't for your debts, I shouldn't think of going without a proper invitation. Did you say anything to your father about money?"

"Not to-day," replied Wilfred in a constrained tone.

"If he asks you to his house, he must give you some assistance," remarked Kate meditatively; and then she went away to seek Lady

Huntingdon, and tell her the news; and of course her ladyship was delighted with it, and offered no opposition to her guests' speedy departure.

So the following afternoon the Tyndale carriage conveyed the young couple over to Brierswood, and Kate groaned loudly over the prospect of spending a fortnight in the "enemy's household," as she termed it.

"You should not call it that now," said Wilfred gravely. "Perhaps you may find it dull, but it won't be worse than Tyndale in that respect, and if you can only make friends with my mother and Augusta, it will be very pleasant."

"Hum," muttered Kate dubiously. "That 'if' is a very big if. Your sister was extremely insolent to me the last time I was here. Ah, there is the drawing-room window I got out of. I would not let the footman see me beat my retreat, so I got out of the window, and I suppose they none of them ventured into the drawing-room for the rest of the day, for fear of finding me there. Where could they have sat?—in Sir George's library, since you say your mother disdains having a boudoir? Ha, ha! I wonder what they thought when they found I had vanished?"

"Here we are," said Wilfred, as they drew

up at the door. "And, Kate dear, do try to be civil to my mother."

"You must not expect too much from *me*; I'm not such a piece of decorum as your pretty friend, Mrs Ida Huntingdon," replied Kate viciously; and as the footman opened the door, she sprang lightly out, and mounted the steps to the hall door, where the solemn butler stood waiting to conduct her to the drawing-room.

There was an instant's delay, while Wilfred was disengaging the tail of his light overcoat which had got jammed into the opposite carriage door; but Kate, instead of waiting for him, marched quietly down the hall towards the drawing-room door by herself; and the butler, after a quick glance to see that his subordinate was attending to Wilfred and the wraps, proceeded to open it for her, and usher her into the presence of her husband's family.

They were all assembled solemnly together to receive the prodigals, and Lady Brierly had prepared herself to be grandly courteous and forgiving to her son's wife, and had quite made up her mind that she would kiss her; but her self-possession was sorely tried when Kate appeared in the doorway *alone*, and advancing towards her with extended hand, and smiling blandly, quite as if it was a matter of course for her to find herself here,—

"How do you do, Lady Brierly?" she said easily. "What a long time it is since we have met. Wilfred is outside somewhere; he will be here directly."

Then, as the astonished old lady recovered her breath with a little gasp, and made a movement as though to kiss her daughter-in-law, the latter turned coolly away and proceeded to shake hands with Sir George.

"Wilfred gave me your message," she said, smiling up at him in a way that irritated Lady Brierly still more, "and of course I came here directly. How kind of you to wish to have me here."

"My wife and I are very glad to see you here," replied the baronet gravely, and with a slight accentuation on the "my wife;" and just then Wilfred hurried in, and glanced anxiously at his wife, who, he saw, was in one of her wicked moods.

She behaved very sweetly, however, till it was time to retire to her room to dress for dinner, and talked sauvely to Mrs and Miss Proctor, without appearing to see any coldness in their manner towards her. But when she at length retired, and Sir George and his son also left the room together, the pent-up storm of indignation burst forth, and Lady Brierly and her daughter even forgot the presence of Miss Proctor in their anger.

"Well, that is the most perfect piece of impudence I ever saw in my life," said Mrs Proctor in a subdued tone, as if fearful of being overheard. "One would have supposed that *she* was the forgiving party, not we."

"And she thanked *Sir George* for her invitation!" groaned Lady Brierly.

"Fancy her travelling about with a French maid," chimed in Augusta. "And I'm sure that dress she had on couldn't have cost less than fifteen guineas."

"She turned up her nose when you tried to kiss her," struck in Miss Proctor disagreeably; and Lily and Julia Proctor smiled slily at each other, while their stepmother took occasion to reprove them for their unladylike habit of "giggling;" and Lady Brierly, suddenly reminded of Miss Proctor's presence, checked her flow of wrath, merely remarking, by way of a *finalé*, that Kate seemed a most ill-mannered young woman.

"Lady Brierly, can you tell me what o'clock it is, please?" said Kate, suddenly appearing through the curtains which separated the back from the front drawing-room; and Lady Brierly started as if a gun had been let off at her elbow.

"What is it, my dear?" she asked nervously, and far more amiably than she would have spoken had she been cool and collected.

"My watch has stopped, and so has the clock in my room," explained Kate gently. "I really think I must get Wilfred to buy me another watch."

"It is half-past six," said Lady Brierly stiffly; and, with a murmured thanks, Kate glided away, and a dead silence fell upon the remaining group.

Presently Julia Proctor, who had been growing very red, rose and left the room; whereupon her sister hurried after her, and immediately there rose a suppressed laugh outside, which put the finishing touch to my lady's vexation.

"I wish you could cure those girls of giggling, Augusta," she said sharply. "It is really a very unfortunate habit for themselves, poor things."

Augusta shrugged her shoulders despairingly. Her husband had made his money in iron, and had omitted to take any pains with his daughters' education until he had retired from business five years ago; and now his wife found it hard work to model them, backed up as they were in all their faults by their aunt, who resented any fault found with them as a reflection on herself, since she had brought them up almost entirely since their mother's death.

CHAPTER IX.

"ONCE FOR ALL."

AT half-past seven, just as the gong was sounding for dinner, Kate swept into the drawing-room, where all the others were already assembled, in a costume that took the gentlemen by storm, and caused the ladies to look grave as they thought of the sum it must have cost.

"A French maid, and such costumes!" thought Lady Brierly in dismay. "Poor Wilfred! he is indeed being punished for his folly in marrying her."

But Wilfred himself was well pleased that Kate should have made herself as attractive as possible on this first evening in his parents' house, and Sir George, who handed her in to dinner, began to think that really Wilfred had had some excuse for falling in love with

her. Mr Proctor was seated on her other side at table, and all through dinner she kept up a lively conversation with him and her father-in-law, and succeeded in charming them both.

"A charming young woman, but an expensive one to keep," thought Sir George, and this opinion was strengthened considerably when he and his son came to discuss the latter's embarrassments later in the evening. After the ladies had withdrawn from the dining-room and Mr Proctor had discreetly left the father and son alone together, the former began,—

"And how have things been going with you all this while, Wilfred?"

"Not very well, sir," replied Wilfred uneasily.

"So I fancied."

To this the younger man made no reply, and his father continued, after a slight pause,—

"I hear you have got into difficulties: is it so?"

"How did you come to hear that?"

"One does hear things. I was very sorry to hear this."

"I think I shall have to leave the army," said Wilfred, with a quiver in his voice.

"Is it as bad as all that?"

"I'm afraid it is. You see eight hundred

a-year isn't much of an income, and my pay is next to nothing, and—and the truth is, we've been living at a devil of a rate."

"Your wife is extravagant?"

"She didn't understand; it was my fault; I ought to have known that we were spending too much money."

"And so you think you will have to leave the army?"

"I am afraid so."

"Even if I help you with your debts? How much are they?"

"Somewhere about nine or twelve hundred."

"Rather a wide margin, isn't it? Why, you must have been living at the rate of two thousand a-year instead of one. If I cleared you to-morrow, you would only get into debt again, at that rate."

Wilfred only sighed, and his father continued,—

"I heard from your Uncle Blair yesterday that you had written to him asking to be appointed the agent to his property in Ireland."

"I thought it was the only thing for me," said Wilfred, colouring. "Somehow one spends more money in a place like B—— than one would in an out-of-the-way Irish district. And then the pay would be higher."

"What does your wife say to this plan?"

"I haven't said anything to her about it yet, but I'm afraid she won't like leaving the regiment for the Irish wilds."

"I shouldn't think she would. But I daresay it is the best thing you can do. However, we will see about it."

Had Sir George consulted his own inclinations, he would have promised to pay his son's debts on the spot, and to make him a sufficient allowance to enable him to remain in the army; but the baronet dared make no rash promises without his wife's permission; and besides, his common-sense warned him that if he paid Wilfred's debts, fresh ones would soon spring up, while he knew that he would find it difficult both to pay twelve hundred pounds down for his son, and allow him another thousand a-year as well, for Brierswood was slightly encumbered, and he (Sir George) had always lived well up to his income.

On entering the drawing-room, Wilfred was rather surprised not to find Kate in it; but on being informed by Miss Lily Proctor that she was in the billiard-room, he repaired thither, hoping to be able to say a few words to her about the Irish appointment he was trying for. On entering the billiard-room he found that she was not alone, however, but was leaning gracefully on her cue, and looking up in the face of Mr Proctor, who was standing near her.

"Dear friend," Wilfred heard her say as he entered, "I know that it is to *you* that we owe our invitation here. Ah, I knew you were a friend to be trusted and relied upon."

"What humbug is this?" wondered Wilfred, considerably annoyed, for he knew that Mr Proctor had had no hand whatever in procuring them Sir George and his wife's pardon, though he appeared to be accepting Kate's thanks very complacently, to judge from the expression of his face. It changed, however, to a look of heavy confusion as he caught sight of Wilfred, and Kate also looked slightly annoyed.

"So here you are at last," she said lightly, addressing her husband. "I thought you meant to spend the rest of the evening in the dining-room." Then turning to Mr Proctor, she added,—"What a lovely evening this is for a stroll. Let us take a turn round the garden."

Mr Proctor hesitated, for though he found his sister-in-law a very pleasant companion, he had not forgotten the disagreeable scrape she had led him into during her last visit to this part of the country. The scene outside The Folly gates was still fresh in his memory, as was his disagreeable reception at home afterwards, and he felt inclined to avoid any renewal of his friendship with Kate. But when she turned and repeated her summons to him, he

felt himself compelled to obey, and reluctantly followed her into the moonlit garden, where he enjoyed himself very much, in spite of his inward misgivings; and Kate made quiet fun of him to her heart's content.

"What a conceited old fool he is," she said afterwards to her husband. "I wouldn't be in Augusta's place for anything. He might be endurable by himself, but his sister and daughters are too dreadful for anything; and their affection for your sister seems to have died a sudden death. I always thought it would, once she was married."

The following day was Sunday, and every one went to church, except Mr Proctor, who had caught cold during his nocturnal stroll the previous evening; and Kate, who said she had a headache, and lay in bed for breakfast. When the church-goers returned home, however, they found her seated in the drawing-room, chatting confidentially to Mr Proctor, and looking as blooming as usual.

"I hope your head is better?" said Lady Brierly coldly but politely.

"Oh yes, thanks; it got all right as soon as you had gone to church. Mr Proctor has been amusing me since then."

His wife, mother-in-law, sister, and daughters glanced sharply at Mr Proctor as Kate said this, and he fidgeted and reddened,

and certainly looked the very reverse of innocent.

Kate was seated comfortably in Sir George's special arm-chair, and she was reading Lady Brierly's novel (for though my lady was strictly religious in some ways, she saw no harm, she said, in reading an amusing novel on a Sunday), and during the hour which elapsed between the return from church and the announcement of luncheon she stuck resolutely to them both, though Sir George stood on the hearthrug looking the picture of discomfort, and Lady Brierly set every one (except Kate) to search for the missing volume.

"Have you seen it anywhere, Kate?" she asked at last; and Kate looked up innocently, and replied, "No, she had not;" and so the search continued till luncheon-time, and was even continued afterwards, until late in the afternoon, when Julia Proctor discovered that Kate was reading it—had been reading it, in fact, all day, while they were hunting for it. Lily and Julia thought it a capital joke, and giggled immoderately over it; but the other ladies, and even Miss Proctor, were highly indignant.

No doubt it was principally her daughter-in-law's conduct that induced Lady Brierly to forbid her husband to give Wilfred any extra allowance. He might pay some of his most

pressing debts, she said, but she did not see why they should provide more money for Kate to waste. She had always disliked the idea of her son's being in the army, and now she was not sorry to learn that he thought of leaving it. She could not understand or sympathise with his natural unwillingness to do so; and when he argued that Kate would not like it, my lady became all the more determined that he should do so. So after several letters had passed between her brother (Mr Blair) and Sir George, it was finally settled that as soon as Wilfred could send in his papers and retire, he was to go to Ireland as his uncle's agent, on a salary of five hundred a-year, besides a comfortable little house, and a horse for riding about the estate. Then came the task of breaking the news to Kate, and Wilfred felt almost nervous about doing so, well knowing how annoyed she would be. He had put off telling her until everything was settled, fearing that unless he did so she might persuade him to swerve from the resolution which it had cost him so much to make; but now that everything was arranged, it was high time she should be informed of what had taken place; and so one day, when Lady Brierly had discreetly left them alone together in the drawing-room, he began,—

"Kate, my dear, I have something to tell you."

"What is it?" asked Kate sharply, detecting that something was wrong from the tone of his voice.

"What should you say to my leaving the army and trying to make money at some other trade?"

"I should say there could be no necessity for your doing so, since Sir George has made friends with you."

"But he will not make me any fresh allowance—"

"But he will clear your debts?"

"The most pressing ones. But, you see, they come to a good deal, and my father has always lived pretty well up to his income—"

"It was horridly selfish of him. Fathers of families have no right to live up to their incomes."

"He has, any way; and, as he says, it is no use his clearing us, for we should only get into debt again to-morrow."

"Of course, if you agree with him so tamely, he will not help you."

"I must help myself. My uncle, Mr Blair, wants an agent to manage his property in Ireland, and I have applied for the post—"

"You!" cried Kate, sitting suddenly upright, and dropping all her customary nonchalance of manner.

"Yes; it is the only thing for me. I

get five hundred a-year, and a jolly little house—"

"Oh, Wilfred, you surely cannot think of leaving the army!" exclaimed Kate entreatingly.

"I'd give a good deal not to."

"But you will not—you must not. And to bury yourself in the wilds of Ireland! Oh, it would be too dreadful!"

"My dear, I am very sorry; but what can I do?"

"You will not go to Ireland, at any rate. Dear Wilfred, say you will not," pleaded Kate, and she rose and put her arms round his neck, and kissed him as she had not kissed him for a long time.

"Kate, you know that I feel it as much as you do; but it is all settled now. I have sent in my papers, and my uncle has agreed to take me."

"Then I do not see why you have pretended to *consult* me, since it is all settled," said Kate icily, removing her arms from his neck, and turning away to hide her face.

She was bitterly hurt, as well as dismayed. It was monstrous of Wilfred to have arranged an affair of such importance without even mentioning it to her; and she thought of the days when her will had been law to him, and a sharp pang shot through her heart as she

saw how completely she had lost her sway over her husband. Still, in common courtesy, he ought to have told her what he was doing. Why, even his mother and sister must know by this time, and it mortified her inexpressibly to receive the news after them.

"It won't be half as bad as you think in Ireland, I daresay, dear," said Wilfred soothingly. Lots of fellows are only too glad to get appointed land agents there. Mrs Huntingdon told me—"

"Oh, don't talk to me about that Mrs Huntingdon; I hate the very mention of her name," flashed Kate, turning to leave the room in a fury. In so doing she came suddenly face to face with Mrs Proctor, who was entering, and who raised her eyebrows on seeing that she had interrupted a "scene."

"I wonder what makes Kate detest Mrs Ned Huntingdon so?" said Wilfred, as Kate shut the door, and he and his sister, who had overheard his wife's parting speech, were left alone.

"I think that is easily explained," said Mrs Proctor, to whom Kate had also been speaking ill-naturedly of Ida. "You know that Count Olivetti was supposed to be in love with her."

"With Mrs Huntingdon?"

"No; with Kate. Now she declares that he was Mrs Huntingdon's admirer, and if

so, she must know that he was playing *her* false."

A sudden sick feeling took possession of Wilfred's heart as he heard this. Kate had confessed to him that she had been in love with some other fellow who had played her false, but it humiliated him to learn that it was Olivetti, the Italian artist. He had supposed hitherto that his wife's dislike to Ida had been caused by her strong partisanship for her old friend, Ned Huntingdon, and now it hurt him sharply to find that it had arisen merely from petty spite and jealousy — of *another man.*

"Do you believe it?" he asked harshly.

"*I* always liked what I saw of Mrs Huntingdon," said Mrs Proctor, mistaking his meaning, and being disposed to take Ida's side purely out of opposition to Kate. "At any rate, I think it is very wrong to go about maligning her, as Kate does; and very foolish too, for every one will know why she is so spiteful. Besides, the old Huntingdons always speak quite nicely of Ida—even the old mother, though she evidently dislikes her."

"I daresay," muttered Wilfred vaguely, for he had hardly taken in a word his sister had said; and just then Lily and Julia Proctor came in from their walk, and Wilfred fled from the room, leaving them arguing with their

stepmother upon the propriety or impropriety of walking without gloves.

As he crossed the hall, he met Kate dressed in her hat and mantle, and asked where she was going.

"To The Folly," she replied coldly, and passed on without looking at him.

Later in the evening a note came from her to Lady Brierly, requesting that her maid might be sent over to The Folly with a few things for her, as she found her mother was not very well, and wished to remain with her for the night. In truth, she intended to spend the remaining four days of her husband's leave with her own people, to show how deeply she resented the way in which the Brierlys had kept her in the dark about her husband's plans, and the next day Julie was despatched to Brierswood for some more clothes. When Wilfred went to The Folly to inquire for his mother-in-law, he found that she was certainly unwell—indeed, she had been ailing for some time—and Kate informed him that she did not intend to return to Brierswood, for that his mother and sister made it quite too disagreeable for her there. He was not altogether sorry to hear her decision, for he had a shrewd suspicion that *she* had made it rather disagreeable for his mother and Augusta during her stay at his home; and indeed, Mrs Proctor

had good reason to rejoice at her departure, for during the last few days Mr Proctor had taken to frequenting his fair sister-in-law's society a great deal more than his wife approved. Kate, however, was deeply hurt and offended by the ready way in which Wilfred had agreed to dispense with her company, and when the time came for him to return to B—— she declined to accompany him, saying that her mother still required her to nurse her.

So Wilfred went away alone, and Kate began to wonder jealously whether Ida Huntingdon was still at B——. Wilfred never mentioned her in his letters; but one day Kate got a letter from Mrs Newman, in which she mentioned that Mrs Huntingdon was still at B——, and that Mr Brierly was very attentive to her. Mrs Newman wrote laughingly, for she had no idea of Kate's feelings on the subject; but her letter made the latter very unhappy, and the very fact of her husband's never mentioning Ida's name to her only served to confirm her suspicions. The fact was that Wilfred did see a great deal more of Ida now that his wife was away and he had no home to speak of. He liked her, and found it very pleasant to drop in and chat to her now and then; and she was dull, and welcomed him gladly, since his wife was not with him to

make herself disagreeable. It is needless to say that she had no idea that Mrs Brierly was jealous of her, or she would never have spoken to Wilfred again, though his society was a great boon to her just now. But at last the welcome time arrived for her to rejoin Madame de Clinville on the Riviera, and she left B—— in high spirits, and Wilfred quite missed her after she was gone, and said so frankly to Mrs Newman.

After Ida's departure, he thought he might as well mention the fact to his wife; but she took no notice of his communication, and indeed she had almost dropped writing to him of late. But one day, about a fortnight before the time fixed for him to go to Ireland, he got a letter from his mother, begging him earnestly to come and take his wife away from the neighbourhood, as, if she were allowed to remain in it any longer, she would work some dreadful mischief. Lady Brierly did not mention what the mischief was, but Wilfred instantly imagined two or three things that she might possibly be doing; and first and foremost, he thought it probable that she was offending his parents beyond all hopes of forgiveness, by giving herself airs to them. So he wrote to Kate, saying that he was coming down to Brierswood, and hoped she would be ready to return with him the follow-

ing day, as he was not able to leave B—— for more than a couple of days. On arriving at Brierswood, he found his parents alone, as the Proctors had returned home some days previously. His mother was alone in her drawing-room when he arrived, and there was something mysterious and suggestive in the way in which she received him, which tried his nerves sorely, and made him feel that she had something very serious to announce to him.

"Well, here I am," he began. "I've written to Kate asking her to be ready to return to B—— with me to-morrow."

"If she will go," sighed my lady.

"She must come soon, as I go to Ireland in a fortnight. But what's the matter?—I hate all mysteries," exclaimed Wilfred impatiently.

"I don't know how to tell you," sighed Lady Brierly dolefully. "No, don't get so impatient, my poor boy—it is hard for me to have to tell you this."

"You may as well do so at once, at any rate. What has Kate been doing?"

Lady Brierly sighed again profoundly.

"If she stays here any longer, she will make irreparable mischief between your sister and her husband. Poor Augusta is very unhappy about it already."

"She has been flirting with old Proctor?" said Wilfred, half inclined to laugh.

"She has been behaving shamefully. Mr Proctor goes to see her every day, and spends hours at The Folly now; and when Augusta remonstrates with him, he says the *rudest* things to her. The poor girl came to me in tears the other day, declaring that her heart was broken, and so I wrote to you to come and fetch your wife away before she does any more mischief."

"Kate can't mean anything serious, mother. I have often heard her laugh at Proctor as a 'pompous old fossil.'"

"I don't care what she means; I only know that she is making your sister supremely unhappy. But if you don't believe me, ask your father—he's in his library."

Wilfred thought this rather a good idea, for he fancied that his mother, being prejudiced against Kate, might have exaggerated unconsciously; and he was sure he would learn the truth, whatever it was, from his father. So by-and-by he betook himself to the library, where Sir George was sitting, evidently expecting him.

"Well, Wilfred, so here you are," he began kindly. "Your mother wanted to see you alone first, so I waited here for you."

"I was very much surprised by what my mother told me—"

"About Kate?"

"I think my mother must have exaggerated, sir."

"At any rate, I think you had better get your wife away. Proctor certainly goes a great deal to The Folly, and Augusta naturally dislikes it. She seemed very much distressed about it when she was here the other day, poor girl."

So Wilfred set out for The Folly in a very stern and uncompromising frame of mind, and his temper was not improved when, on reaching the L'Estranges' house, he found Mr Proctor established in the drawing-room by Kate's side. They both looked rather surprised at his unexpected appearance, but Kate greeted him with cool ease, though her companion looked rather uncomfortable, and soon rose to take his leave. As soon as the husband and wife were alone, the former began,—

"I am glad to hear your mother is better, as I suppose you will be able to return with me to B—— to-morrow?"

"You have done very well without me all this time," observed Kate coldly.

"But you will be ready to come with me to-morrow?"

"I am afraid not."

"But I wish you to come, Kate."

"Why?"

"Well, if you will have the truth, I am very

much afraid that you have been making my sister jealous—"

"Fancy being jealous of her solemn old Jacob," laughed Kate.

"He is her husband, and she is unhappy about his friendship with you. Perhaps you have tried to make her jealous out of fun, perhaps out of spite; but, at any rate, I am resolved that there must be an end to this sort of thing."

"And how do you propose to prevent it?"

"By taking you away. Proctor is a great fool, but he'll do well enough if he's left to himself."

"And supposing I decline to accompany you?"

"You will not do that."

"Why should I not? You have done very well without me so far, and it is from no love of me that you wish to take me back now. You do not seem to see that it is no worse for me to be friends with Mr Proctor, than for you to be so with Mrs Ned Huntingdon."

"That is quite different."

"It is not different in the least."

"Well, you will come back with me to-morrow," said Wilfred peremptorily, and with a heightened colour, which showed that he was rapidly losing his temper.

"I shall not."

Wilfred sprang from his chair, and paced the room rapidly for a minute, while he tried to subdue the intense irritation which Kate's words and manner roused in him. At last he said, pausing in front of her, and speaking in a voice of repressed passion,—

"Kate, I warn you, if you do not come with me now, I shall not ask you to do so when I go to Ireland."

"I can hardly expect you to do so, since you did not even condescend to consult me about the advisability of going there at all."

"Once for all, Kate, *will you come?*"

"Once for all, I will not."

"Good-bye, then," muttered Wilfred, turning on his heel without another word, and dashing out of the room. And Kate remained alone and triumphant; yet in spite of her triumph there was a misty feeling of tears behind her eyes as she heard the house door slam, and knew that she had sent her husband away from her, perhaps for ever. But she forced back the softening tears resolutely, telling herself that it was not her fault if her husband had ceased to love her; and her eyes were clear and hard as ever as she went upstairs to inform her mother that she had refused to accompany Wilfred, but intended to remain and nurse her.

CHAPTER X.

A STRANGE MEETING.

IT was a bright February afternoon, in Rome. More than fifteen months have passed since the events recorded in the last chapter, and young Mrs Brierly is staying here with her father, now a widower, for Mrs L'Estrange had died three months after Kate's quarrel with her husband.

The poor lady had been very ill for some time before her death, and Wilfred hearing this, felt his wrath softened against Kate, and began to think that her refusal to accompany him had been prompted principally by filial considerations, though she had been too much offended with him to confess this. He heard too, from his father, that she had ceased to encourage Mr Proctor's visits (for she was wise enough not to wish to offend her husband

beyond all hope of forgiveness); and when Mrs L'Estrange died, he wrote and asked Kate whether she would not now join him in Ireland, since there was nothing further to detain her at The Folly. But she replied that she could not leave her father just yet, as he had not quite recovered from the shock of his wife's death; so it was not till the spring had fully come, that she at length joined her husband in Ireland.

She found the quiet country life there terribly dull, and grumbled incessantly at everything and everybody connected with the place; and when, towards the close of autumn, her father wrote, giving a piteous account of his loneliness, and begging her to come to him for a few weeks, she was only too thankful to accept his invitation. Nor was Wilfred altogether sorry to be freed from her constant complaints, though he would doubtless find his home very dull without her. She—glad though she was to escape from Ireland—was nevertheless very sore and hurt by the willingness with which Wilfred gave her leave to depart, and instead of returning at the end of the four weeks which she had originally proposed spending with her father, she persuaded the old gentleman to shut up The Folly and come abroad for the entire winter. So they had come to Rome, and settled themselves

at an hotel in the Piazza di Spagna, somewhat to the annoyance of Kate, who would infinitely have preferred private apartments. But Colonel L'Estrange insisted that they must come to an hotel for economy's sake, and Kate had been obliged to content herself with engaging a private sitting-room, without which she declared that she could not exist in an hotel.

On this particular February afternoon she was sitting in her drawing-room with her father, waiting for the arrival of the hired carriage to take her for her afternoon drive, when the servant entered and informed her that a gentleman was waiting to see her.

"What a nuisance!" muttered Kate. "The carriage will be here in a minute. What is the gentleman's name?" she added, to the servant.

"He did not give it; but he said he was sure you would see him."

Had it been a lady who was asking for her, Kate would probably have sent down word that she was engaged; but a gentleman was more interesting, so she bid the servant show him up. She waited with some curiosity till he came in, and then started up with a delighted exclamation as she recognised him, in spite of the deep bronze to which his face

had been burnt, and the sunken eyes which spoke of illness and suffering.

"Ned!" she cried, holding out both her hands, while her father rose more slowly from his chair, rubbing his glasses, and muttering, "God bless me!" in a bewildered tone.

"This is a warm welcome," said Ned, as he took Mrs Brierly's hands gratefully in his. "One learns to appreciate kindness when one has been knocking about all over the world as I have."

"And you have just arrived in Rome?"

"Only this morning."

"And where are you staying?"

"In this house."

"How nice! And where have you been all this time? It is such an age since I heard from you. Why did you never write to me?"

"I did not know you would care to hear from me."

"Now, that's a fib," laughed Kate, shaking her finger at him. "You know very well that I like to hear all about you. Where have you been lately?"

"All over the world. I have just come from Egypt now."

"Your travels don't seem to have agreed with you."

"I have been suffering from a kind of low fever lately," said Ned lightly; but he could

not blind Kate's sharp eyes to the fact that mental suffering had as much to do with the change in his appearance as ill health. The fever might have made his eyes look hollow, and his face worn ; but it could not have aged him so terribly. All the old boyish brightness and openness had left him, and instead he looked a careworn man, with a kind, grave face, and pleasant but quiet manners. What a change ! Kate thought compassionately, with a feeling of real pity for her old friend.

" I see my carriage is at the door," she said, looking out of the window. " Do come with me, and we can have a good talk while we are driving."

" I shall be very happy, if you have room for me," answered Ned. " I don't feel up to much walking to-day."

"Then the drive will do you good. Papa, you need not come with me, since I shall have Ned as a companion ; I know you hate driving."

Colonel L'Estrange had no particular dislike that he was aware of, to driving with his handsome, chatty daughter ; but he never opposed her hints (*i.e.* commands), and moreover knew that very little of the conversation would fall to his share if Kate had another esquire with her ; so he nodded his head, with a " Very well, my dear," and Kate led the way down to the carriage, followed by Ned, who was secretly

amused by the quiet way in which she had got rid of her father's company.

"How funny it seems to be driving with you again," began Kate, as they drove off.

"Yes; and very pleasant for me to be driving with you, too. Have you been long in Rome?"

"Three months. It is very pleasant for me; I know such a lot of people here, and go out almost every night."

"Brierly is in Ireland, isn't he?"

"Yes; and a horribly dull place he is settled in. I quite dread the thought of returning to it in the spring, as I shall have to."

"He must be very dull without you."

"Yes, poor fellow; but, you see, my father wanted me. He felt my mother's death so much," added Kate, with sudden gravity, for she had been really fond of her mother, in spite of her cold nature.

"I was so sorry to hear of that," murmured Ned.

"How is *your* mother now? She did not seem very well when I saw her before we came abroad."

"She is not very well. I think she is coming here for the spring."

"Ah, then you have come to meet her?"

"Yes — partly," said Ned gravely. The truth was, that he had come to Rome principally to see Ida, whom he knew to be here

also, with her aunt, Madame de Clinville. He had no wish to leave his wife for ever, though, in the first pain of finding that she was not happy with him, he had rushed away from her presence for awhile. If he had not cared for her so intensely, he might have gone on living with her, and presented a fair face to the world all along; but his passion of disappointment had been too strong for him, and he had been wandering about the face of the earth for nearly three years, vainly trying to school his feelings into indifference towards Ida. In this he had not succeeded, but he had accustomed himself to the idea of accepting merely her friendship and esteem in return for his love; and he began to feel that, in justice to her and to their child, he ought not to leave her longer. It would all depend on her now, he told himself, whether she returned to England with him or not. He had heard from Kate Brierly how bright and well his wife was looking at B——; and though he sighed to think that his absence was a relief to her, he hoped that her new spirits were a sign that she had ceased to grieve for her girlish love. She was older now than when she first married, and if she had got over her youthful infatuation for Olivetti (Ned could not help calling it an infatuation), and he could only prevent himself expecting too much from her, they might be tolerably happy together yet.

At any rate, it was right that they should come together; but Ned thought he would like to find out whether she was happy without him before asking her to return to him.

He was destined to find out sooner than he expected, for as he and his companion were driving towards the Pincian Hill, they passed another carriage with two ladies and two gentlemen in it, the former of whom Ned instantly recognised as his wife and her aunt. He fixed his eyes upon Ida with breathless eagerness as she was whirled past him, and noticed with pain how bright and happy she was looking, and how eagerly she was talking to the gentleman opposite her. It was with a start of surprise and vexation that Ned recognised him as Colonel Vernor, the man who had admired Ida so much on her first visit to Lowsworth. Ned was not prone to jealousy naturally, but it was naturally disagreeable to him to see another man conversing familiarly with his wife, when he himself was banished (even though wilfully) from her presence. Also, Vernor was a well-known flirt, and Ned could see he was trying to flirt with Ida now.

"You knew your wife was in Rome?" asked Mrs Brierly, looking curiously at him.

"Of course," he replied briefly.

Kate bit her lip as it occurred to her that he might have come to Rome to see his wife,

and it was in a suggestive tone that she remarked how well Ida was looking.

"Yes," sighed Ned, for it seemed clear to him that his wife was far happier without him than she could ever be with him. Well, he would never force her to return to him against her will, he reflected bitterly.

"She seems to be enjoying herself very much with her aunt," proceeded Kate. "They are very gay, and Madame de Clinville is considered a great coquette—even here, where it is quite the thing for married women to flirt. That was one of her admirers with her just now."

"Who? Colonel Vernor?" asked Ned, in a relieved tone.

"Oh no; Colonel Vernor is a great friend of your wife's. I meant the other man, Count Bruno Visconti. Very handsome, is he not?"

"I did not notice him."

"No; you were too much occupied with watching Ida. I do not think she saw you."

"No," he said slowly, and then, after a minute, added, "Do you see much of her?"

"No," said Kate, so coldly that Ned turned and looked at her in sudden surprise. "She mixes more in the native, and I in the English society, you see," she added quickly.

"But she strikes you as being well when you do meet her?"

"Oh yes; very well, and — and very happy; which is only natural, since she is so young, and pretty, and admired."

"And she gets on well with her aunt?"

"Capitally. Madame de Clinville is not very old herself, you know, and she is a charming companion, if a somewhat indifferent chaperon."

"How do you mean?"

"Simply that Madame is one of the greatest flirts in Rome, and you cannot expect her to look very particularly after her niece."

"You do not think she is a bad companion for Ida?"

"Oh, not particularly. You know you must not judge Italian ladies by our English standard; they are allowed so much more liberty—once they are married."

"Ah, but English girls are much better off,—*they* can choose for themselves," said Ned bitterly.

Kate laughed to herself as she thought how very nearly her own case resembled Ida's, in spite of the boasted advantage of the English system. Ida had married a man she did not care for, while loving Luigi Olivetti; and so had she; and though she was not formally separated from Wilfred, yet she was virtually so at present; and it was her firm intention to

come abroad with her father every winter, and only spend the summer months (since Wilfred refused to keep a hunter for her) with her husband in Ireland, in future.

"But you must not ask me about your wife. I really see scarcely anything of her," she added aloud, in a tone that made Ned say reproachfully,—

"You do not like her, Kate?"

"I have not much reason to like her," returned Kate coldly and significantly.

"I think you misjudge her, Kate. You used to be too generous to bear malice so long."

"Oh, I am not thinking of that stupid affair about Count Olivetti—by-the-bye, he is in Rome now—though certainly Ida treated me very cruelly about him. But I could have forgiven *that* perhaps in time, if she had left my husband alone."

"What—Brierly?"

"Yes—Wilfred. Do you know your wife nearly caused a separation between us."

"Nonsense, Kate; you don't know what you are saying," exclaimed Ned indignantly; but his heart sank nevertheless, and he turned very pale, for Kate spoke with a tone of passionate sincerity, as if she herself quite believed in the truth of what she said.

"Nonsense indeed!" she cried excitedly—and it was a rare thing for her to get excited

about anything—"I tell you it is true. Wilfred was as fond of me as a man could be before Ida came between us; and now" (with a quiver in her voice) "he doesn't care one bit for me."

"He must, Kate. Surely you are mistaken."

"I am not. He seemed quite relieved to get rid of me this winter," and Kate bit her lip savagely, to hide how it trembled; but Ned saw it, and he felt that she must be speaking the truth, and for a minute the houses and people and carriages and trees seemed all whirling round and round him in a confused mist, while a loud singing in his ears quite prevented him hearing what his companion was saying. But presently the faintness passed off, and Kate's voice once more reached his senses.

"It is only fair that you should know the truth," she was saying. "It was when you were in England that your wife came to B—— and completely fascinated Wilfred. He used to go and see her by himself, and he used to walk about with her, till she went by the name of his 'pretty Italian friend.'"

"I would rather not hear any more about this, please," said Ned abruptly.

"Very well; but I must say I expected more sympathy from *you*."

"I am sorry for you, Kate; but talking does no good," he replied sternly; and Kate suffered the subject to drop, feeling confident that Ned would not be quite so disposed to forgive his wife *now*. They were driving slowly through the Pincian grounds, and Kate suggested that they should get out and walk about a little, while the carriage waited for them. Ned agreed readily, for he felt that he could not sit still much longer after what he had heard; so they got out and walked slowly up and down beneath the already green trees, listening to the band which was playing; and Kate met several friends, whom she introduced to Ned—somewhat to his annoyance, as he did not wish to be recognised until he had decided whether to see Ida or not. At last he told Kate this, and begged her not to introduce him to any more people; and she replied laughingly, that if he was so shy, he had better come out of people's way, and led the way through a large gate into the Medici gardens, away from the music and the crowd. They strolled along a quiet path bordered by high, formal walls of box, and down a dark elix avenue, past stone benches with lichens climbing about them, and forlorn-looking statues minus arms and noses, and finally seated themselves on a bench facing a gravel square, with a fountain in the centre, and orna-

mented with several stone vases of aloes. They sat silent for several minutes, he thinking of all Kate had told him, and she wondering whether she could not tell him something further to his wife's disadvantage; for she was terribly afraid lest he should rush off to Ida at once, before hearing half she (Kate) had to tell him about her. But she decided that she had said quite enough for the present. She had told him of Ida's conduct with respect to Wilfred, and she had let him know that Olivetti was in Rome—two very important points.

Presently a French *bonne* passed by in her fresh cap and apron, knitting as she walked, and calling out cautions to her little charge, a child of about three years old, who was running on in front with its ball. At sight of the pair, Kate suddenly sprang forward and called to the child, who being quite devoid of bashfulness, responded readily, and came smiling up to her, while the *bonne* stood by, also smiling, for she was accustomed to have her little charge admired by strangers.

"Come and speak to this gentleman, little one," said Kate in French. Then turning to Ned, she whispered hurriedly,—"She is your little girl."

Ned started, and his bronzed cheek grew dark red as he drew the pretty little creature to him, and pushed back the white hat which

shaded her head and forehead. His child! how strange it seemed meeting her like this; and yet, glad though he was to hold her in his arms, he could hardly see her for the mist before his eyes. She had Ida's lovely dark eyes, he saw; but her complexion and hair were fair, and he felt vaguely disappointed because she did not resemble her mother more nearly. But still she was his child, and he held her between his knees and stroked the golden curls from her small white brow, while he gazed long and earnestly into her face. Kate had discreetly turned away from him, and was speaking pleasantly to the *bonne;* but presently the child grew frightened under Ned's intense gaze and began to whimper, whereupon her nurse pounced upon her and carried her off, scolding her as she went for being so *malhonnête* as to cry when a gentleman spoke to her.

"It is hard that one's own child should not know one, but should cry as if one were a stranger at the sight of one," said Ned bitterly, as he watched the retreating figures of the nurse and child."

"Why don't you take her to live with your mother? The poor old lady is terribly lonely, Ned, since she has lost you. Do you never think of her?"

"I do often; but—"

"Think what a happiness it would be to her to have her grandchild with her; and then the child would grow up to know and love you."

"I cannot separate it from its mother."

"Why not? Ida does not care for it, and would probably be only too glad to be freed from the expense of its maintenance."

"I thought you said you knew very little of my wife," said Ned coldly.

"Oh, if you speak to me in that tone, I shall give you no more advice. But though *I* see very little of your wife, my maid is great friends with her French *bonne*, Marie, who declares that Ida takes hardly any notice of the child, and shakes it and slaps it most unkindly when it cries or makes a noise."

But Kate had overshot the mark here, and Ned detected the tone of servants' gossip at once when she spoke of the shaking and slapping. Gently indifferent Ida might be to the child, but Ned knew she could never be actively unkind to it; and he returned no answer to Mrs Brierly's last remark, and looked so cold and incredulous that Kate jumped up abruptly, and suggested that they should return to the carriage, to which Ned gladly assented; for he was longing to be at home and by himself again, free to think over all he had heard and seen on this eventful day.

CHAPTER XI.

ELSIE'S NEWS.

THE De Clinvilles had taken apartments in an old palace belonging to the Visconti, a noble but poor Roman family, who lived in the first flat themselves, and let the rest of the palace to different families. Palazzo Visconti was not situated in the most fashionable part of the town, but Madame de Clinville and the Contessa Visconti were old friends, and so Madame liked being in her house. The Visconti family consisted of Count Bruno, now the head of the family, and two little girls, who were educating in a convent. The Contessa's elder sister, who was a widow, also resided with the Visconti.

As Mrs Brierly had informed Ned Huntingdon, the young Count Bruno was one of the Marquise's most devoted admirers, and not a little

proud was she of her conquest, for Count Visconti was one of the best looking and most admired of the Roman *jeunesse doré.* He was not without eyes for other fair faces, however, and his glance rested admiringly on Mrs Brierly as she drove past him to-day with Mr Huntingdon.

"One of your English friends, Madame?" he asked languidly, being far too discreet to show his admiration openly before the Marquise.

"You guess well," she replied lightly.

"Ah, they did not look anything but English," began Visconti in a tone of contemptuous pity. But he paused abruptly on remembering Colonel Vernor's nationality. But by-and-by they dropped the Colonel, and then Madame de Clinville took up the subject and remarked,—

"You can always tell an Englishwoman by her dress."

"And yet, dear aunt, I have seen many who dress well in England," observed Ida gently. "But who were these people?" she added, for she had not perceived Kate and her companion.

"Mrs Brierly and—and some friend of hers," replied the Marquise lightly.

"Oh," said Ida, in a tone which warned Count Visconti that the subject had better be dropped, and he conversed upon indifferent subjects until they reached Palazzo Visconti.

"Will you not come in and see my mother, Madame?" he asked, as they reached the door leading from the great staircase to the Visconti's private apartments. "I know she is anxious to see you, and to present my sister, who has returned from her convent this morning, to you."

"Ah, I must see your sister. Is she like *you*, Count?" asked the Marquise sweetly.

"Not in the least, Madame. She is fair, like my mother."

"Ah, if she is like her mother, she must indeed be charming," smiled Madame, as the young man ushered her and Ida into the large bare room where his mother and aunt sat working.

The former was a tall, fair, faded-looking woman of forty, whom ill-health and poverty combined had rendered peevish and discontented, and whose principal pleasure in life was to make herself out a martyr on every possible occasion. She was undeniably graceful, however, and her face lost part of its captious expression as she rose to receive her visitors with a charming smile.

"Dear Madame, it is truly good of you to come and see me," she began, kissing the Marquise affectionately. "I would have come to see you, only the stairs fatigue me so dreadfully. I never go out, with my wretched

health, except to church ; and that, of course, is a duty."

" Well, you see, I come to see you instead. And is this your daughter ? "

" Yes. Come here, Rita," said the Contessa to a pretty, golden - haired child, who was bending over an embroidery-frame behind her aunt, Signora Monti, a small, dark, brisk, little lady of fifty, and a great contrast to her languid younger sister.

Rita rose obediently at her mother's command, and advanced shyly to kiss Madame de Clinville's hand ; and the latter, after paying Contessa Visconti a compliment on her child's beauty, fell to chatting upon other matters, while Ida signed to Rita to sit down beside her, and began talking kindly to her.

" And you are glad to be at home again, Contessina ? " she began, smiling.

" Oh yes, Signora," said the girl shyly.

" But you were happy, too, at the convent, were you not ? "

" Oh yes ; and I was sorry to leave my sister, Carlotta."

" Ah, you are very happy to have a sister— I always longed for one."

Here the Contessa made a sign to Rita to retire, and she obeyed instantly, though she was longing to know what they were going to say—for she guessed instinctively that it must

in some way concern her. Perhaps Bruno saw the wistful look in her blue eyes, for he rose after she was gone, and opening the door quietly, glanced down the passage to assure himself that she was not lingering near; and having assured himself on this point, he returned to the side of his mother, who was saying insinuatingly,—

"Yes, she is rather a pretty child, but her dowry will be so small that I fear we shall find it difficult to marry her. But I know how large your acquaintance is, Madame, and if you *should* hear of anything suitable—"

"I will let you know without fail. Let me see—perhaps I may know some one who would do. Would you consent to let Rita marry a commoner?"

"I would rather not."

"But if he were rich, and did not ask for a dowry?"

"Ah, that is a great thing."

"Of course it is," said little Signora Monti briskly. "You cannot have everything, and surely it is better for the girl to marry a rich commoner than to go into a convent."

"What a curse it is to be poor!" sighed the Contessa plaintively. "But what do you say, Bruno?"

"That Madame la Marquise is right, as she

always is. May we inquire the name of the young man you refer to, Madame?"

"Signor Marco de Maroni. His father is a rich old widower and a great invalid. He never leaves his house almost, and sees little of society; so, as I was a great friend of his wife's, he has commissioned me to look out for a suitable wife for his son, and it seems to me that your little girl would make him a charming little *sposa.* Signor Marco is a delightful young man—not handsome exactly, but such charming manners, and an adorable temper; your little one could not fail to be happy with him."

"Well, if you think it would do, Madame."

"I am sure of it. Did you not say you were going to the Marchesa Fretoni's reception next Saturday? Perhaps I could introduce the young man to you there—I am sure you will be pleased with him."

Then Madame de Clinville rose to depart, but before doing so, Ida made the Contessa promise to let Rita pay her a visit that evening after dinner—which, however, the Contessa seemed unwilling to do, until assured that there would be no gentlemen present except Monsieur de Clinville.

"And perhaps Count Visconti will bring her up to us," added the Marquise smilingly.

"See what it is to have the reputation of

being good-natured," laughed Madame, with a comical little *moue*, as she and her niece found themselves alone in their apartments. "Every one comes to me to arrange their children's marriages, because they know I shall take trouble about it. What a discontented woman that Contessa Visconti is! I do not expect any thanks from her, however much trouble I take. But it is for the De Maroni's sake that I wish the marriage to come about. Old Signor de Maroni begged me to get his son a *noble* bride, if possible; and the girl is pretty enough to please Marco, I should think."

"Poor little thing," murmured Ida compassionately.

"Why, she could not have a better husband than Signor Marco."

"Yes, he is nice; but she is such a child," sighed Ida.

"Ah, bah! that is a fault that will soon cure. She will not find it easy to marry when she is old."

Ida said no more, and turned silently away; but she thought of the days when she had been a girl of sixteen herself, just coming home—at least, she had no home in reality—from her convent, to be married to the old Marchese Montini, whom she had never seen.

"Did you really not see Mrs Brierly

to-day?" asked the Marquise suddenly; and Ida shook her head, and replied in the negative.

"Nor who was with her?"

"I saw nothing."

"Well, I suppose I may as well tell you—your husband was driving with her."

"Ned! and with Kate!" echoed Ida, turning so ashy pale that her aunt thought she was going to faint. "Did he see me?" she added breathlessly.

"Yes, and he looked as if he would devour you with his eyes. They looked quite hungry, I declare—something like the wolf's eyes in Red Riding-hood."

"And he was with Kate Brierly?" muttered Ida again.

"Why, did he not say something about coming here in his last letter to you? He must have come on purpose to see you."

The letter to which Madame de Clinville referred had been written from Egypt about a month ago (Ida had not received any letter from Ned for many months before this one came), and in it Ned had said something about his perhaps coming to Rome, which had raised her spirits greatly at the time. She had written back begging him to come at once, but unfortunately he had left Cairo before her letter reached it, and so did not know how

eagerly she was expecting him. But now that she found he was in Rome and had not come to see her, she felt her hopes fade and wither away into nothing, and a hard, bitter feeling of disappointment came over her.

"If he had come to see me, he would have come straight here," she said.

"But he may only just have arrived in Rome."

"He will *never* come back to me now that Kate Brierly has got hold of him," cried Ida wildly.

"I do not see how Mrs Brierly can prevent his coming."

"Don't you? Do you not know that she is a cruel, unscrupulous woman, bent upon revenging herself? She will not mind what she does, or what lies she tells, so long as she can prevent Ned returning to me."

"Well, you must hope for the best, cherie," said the Marquise, kissing her niece kindly. "I think you made a mistake when you persuaded me not to call on Mrs Brierly. Of course she was very rude to you, and certainly it was her place to call on me first. Still, it is awkward meeting her at parties, as we do now and then. But see what o'clock it is! It is a miracle how the time has flown. I must go and dress at once."

Monsieur and Madame de Clinville and

Ida dined alone that evening; they were going to a court ball afterwards, and both ladies were dressed before dinner, with the exception of a few finishing touches, as Madame wished to be free to converse with Count Visconti when he arrived with his sister. After dinner Ida retired to her own room to put on her flowers and diamonds, accompanied by little Elsie, whose greatest delight was to assist at her mother's toilette. To-night she did not summon her maid, but fastened in her own flowers, and allowed the child to clasp the necklace and bracelets, while the little thing laughed and chatted merrily, without noticing the shade on her mother's brow. But presently she looked up triumphantly from clasping a big bracelet, and caught Ida's eyes fixed wistfully on her, and in a minute she too grew grave.

"You do not laugh, petite maman," she said, holding up her face to be kissed. "You look just like the gentleman in the garden to-day."

"What gentleman?"

"A gentleman who took hold of me, and looked at me, and kissed me. Marie said I was *malhonnête* to cry—was I?"

"What was the gentleman like?" asked Ida tremulously.

"He was big—very big."

"And fair?"

"Fair?"

"Had he yellow moustaches—you know what a moustache is? Count Bruno has black moustaches above his lips."

"This gentleman had yellow hair on his face—and there was a lady who spoke to Marie."

"Had the lady yellow hair too?"

"Yes; and he called her Kate—like the little English girl I play with."

Ida asked no more questions, but clasped her child suddenly to her, as if some one was about to snatch her from her.

"Oh, if they take you from me!" she murmured in Italian, which Elsie did not understand, as she only spoke French. "What did the gentleman say to you?" she added presently. "Did he ask about—about me?"

"No; he said nothing. He only looked as if he were going to cry—oh, why do you cry, maman?—maman — maman —" half sobbed the child.

At this minute there came a soft tap at the door, and Ida hastily dashed away her tears and called out to inquire who wanted her.

"It is me, Signora," said Rita Visconti's voice outside, and Ida had to bid her enter, though the tears were scarcely dry on her cheeks.

"May I come in?" said Rita, advancing timidly.

"I would not have come in here, but Madame de Clinville sent me. Ah, Signora, how beautiful you look!"

Ida laughed, and after bathing her eyes with rose-water (while Rita talked to Elsie and pretended not to notice Mrs Huntingdon's tear-stained face), she led the way back to the drawing-room, where Madame de Clinville and Count Visconti were seated *tête-à-tête.* Elsie had been carried off to bed by Marie, and Ida seated herself with Rita a little apart from the other couple, and talked kindly to the girl until Bruno said that it was time for his sister to return to her mother's apartments. He accompanied her thither himself, and she went away radiantly happy, because Mrs Huntingdon had told her she might come and see her whenever she felt inclined, and had promised to take her to the opera some evening—if Contessa Visconti permitted it, of course.

CHAPTER XII.

RITA VISCONTI.

THERE was some discussion between the Contessa Visconti and her sister as to the advisability of going to the Marchesa Fretoni's reception or not. The Contessa was delicate, and imagined herself more so than she really was, and for years she had almost entirely given up going into society; besides, she would have to buy a new dress for Rita if she took her, and the expense was a serious consideration, for it would not do to allow a daughter of the Visconti to go into society worse dressed than other girls, and good dresses are expensive to poor folks. But Signora Monti declared that it was absolutely necessary to go to this party, since Madame de Clinville expected them to do so; and finally settled the difficulty by offering to pay for Rita's outfit herself.

Very bright and happy the young Contessina looked on the eventful evening; she had no suspicion that her fate was to be settled to-night, and enjoyed to the full the prospect of seeing society for the first time—and of seeing it in a pretty new dress.

"I never thought I was so pretty before," she thought, with innocent vanity, as she surveyed herself in her mirror, after completing her toilette with the partial assistance of old Betta, her nurse, who, however, was frequently called away to assist the Contessa, who was singularly helpless about doing anything for herself.

"Ay, but you are pretty, honey," mumbled the old woman, who had lost her teeth and did not speak very distinctly. "I wonder how many fine gentlemen will fall in love with it to-night?"

Rita laughed and blushed, and wondered too. She was only sixteen, and life was to her a kind of fairy tale, in which people did nothing but enjoy themselves, if they were pretty, and ladies, and not forced to work. She had been content enough in her quiet convent, but since leaving it a feverish longing had come over her to mix in this bright, happy world without, and she had been bitterly disappointed to find that her life at home was not likely to be much more lively than it had been in the convent. She listened with dismay while her mother in-

formed some visitors that she never went out anywhere now, and she sighed impatiently when she saw Madame de Clinville and Ida setting forth to their parties in lovely costumes and glittering jewels. She had been five days at home now, and this was the first time almost that she had left the house; for the idea of walking merely for the sake of walking never occurred to her, and beyond going to pay a couple of formal calls with her mother one day, and attending morning mass with her aunt, she had been nowhere.

"Oh, how I wish I could go to parties every night!" she cried rapturously, still gazing at the reflection of her fair hair and blue eyes in the glass.

"And so you will, dearie, if you marry a rich gentleman whom you are to meet to-night."

"What do you mean, Betta?" asked Rita, turning suddenly from the glass to look eagerly into the wrinkled, yellow face of her nurse.

"I mean what I say; you will meet a rich gentleman to-night who is to marry you. Oh, I know all about it; but do not tell la Signora Contessa or any one else what I have said, or you will get your poor Betta into sad trouble."

"Of course I will not tell. But tell me, dear Betta, what is his name, and what is he like?"

"I do not know his name, figlia; but he is young and rich—that much I have found out."

Rita stood pensively opening and shutting her fan, while she thought of all Betta had told her. She was by no means unwilling to marry, provided her intended was handsome and agreeable; but then, would he be so? She felt rather frightened as she thought of the relentless way in which her fate was coming upon her; and yet, as Betta said, it would be nice to wear beautiful dresses and jewels, and go to parties, like the French Marchesa and her niece upstairs.

"Come and show yourself to the Signora Contessa, figlia," said old Betta, and Rita tripped off to her mother's chamber blithely, to display her finery.

"I really think your aunt might have bought you a handsomer dress," began the Contessa peevishly, looking up as her daughter entered. "Turn round and let me look at you. Really, the dress is ridiculously plain — and those Fretoni are so vulgar; they know they are not half such an old family as we are, and so they take pleasure in dressing up magnificently whenever they come to pay us a visit—which isn't often, by the way—to show how much richer they are."

"But the Contessina looks lovely!" muttered old Betta, in a half-deferential, half-offended tone, while Rita bit her lip and hung her head.

"I wish she was a little bit taller," said the Contessa discontentedly. "Now run away, child, and leave Betta to finish me," she added; and Rita moved away, feeling inclined to cry—for tears and smiles alike come easily when we are sixteen, and her mother's fractious tone had completely damped her happy spirits.

They were late in starting that evening, for the Contessa took a long time to dress, and did not care to be early at the reception, and Rita's impatience grew almost unbearable, as the minutes dragged themselves slowly by. Her cheeks burned, and her little hands grew hot and trembling; but her fever of expectation was considerably cooled when she found how very little interest her mother and brother (her aunt did not accompany them) took in the coming party. Had she been going with a merry party, her happiness would have been perfect; but what with her brother's cool indifference and her mother's grumbling, her spirits were pretty well subdued by the time she reached the handsome mansion of the Marchesa Fretoni. Here she was kept close to the side of her mother, who seated herself on a sofa beside another lady to whom she talked a long time, while Rita sat beside her, feeling shy and forlorn, and bitterly disappointed.

Bruno had left his mother and sister as soon as they entered, and had just succeeded

in getting introduced to Mrs Brierly, who happened to be present to-night.

"I saw you driving the other day, Signora," he began, in a tone that implied a great deal. "I have been longing ever since to have the pleasure of meeting you."

Kate smiled, for Count Visconti was Madame de Clinville's sworn cavalier, and she thought it would be rather fun to detach him from his allegiance to her.

"You were with Madame de Clinville and her niece, I think," she said. "I should not have thought you could have noticed any one else."

"Ah, Signora, how could I help observing you?" asked the Count, raising his eyebrows plaintively.

Suddenly the image of Wilfred rose before Kate—dark and handsome too, but how infinitely more manly and noble than this effeminate, perfumed dandy by her side. But she continued to smile sweetly, as she said,—

"Was it not odd?—that was Mrs Huntingdon's husband driving with me. His wife pretended not to see him."

"Indeed!" murmured Count Visconti, with some curiosity. "I fancied her husband was in India."

"He is in Rome now, at any rate. Mrs Huntingdon is pretty, is she not?"

"Yes, for those who admire that style," murmured the Count, gazing sentimentally at Kate, though in truth he thought Ida twice as pretty.

"She is a dreadful little flirt, isn't she?"

"Yes, I suppose she is," drawled Visconti, seeing that he was expected to agree.

Just then Kate chanced to turn her head slightly, and as she did so her eyes met the dark, lustrous ones of Count Olivetti. In spite of her accustomed self-command, she could not prevent herself starting slightly at his unexpected appearance; but he did not seem to recognise her, and passed on without a word or sign of any kind; and though, had he addressed her, she would have turned her back ruthlessly upon him, yet she was indignant at the cool way in which he had cut her.

"Who is that?" she asked of Count Visconti.

"That? Oh, Olivetti, the artist," replied Visconti carelessly. "He is not generally received in society of this sort, but he was brought here to-night by an English gentleman who has taken him up and whose portrait he is painting."

"He is a great friend of the De Clinvilles, is he not?"

"Hardly a friend," said the Count, in a tone of polite contempt. "But he painted a charming portrait of Madame de Clinville."

"Indeed! When?" asked Kate eagerly.

"I cannot tell exactly—a short time ago, she said."

"Within the last three years?"

"Oh yes; Madame told me it was not two years old," replied Visconti, in some surprise at the curiosity which his fair companion evinced on the subject.

Then he made his excuses and hastened up to Madame de Clinville, who was just entering the rooms; for he did not wish to offend her by seeming to devote himself to the English beauty.

Kate was glad to let him go, for she was anxious to see whether Olivetti spoke to Ida Huntingdon; but though she watched them both carefully, she did not see a single word exchanged between them the whole evening. Meanwhile, Visconti was doing his best to appease any displeasure which the sight of him talking to Mrs Brierly might have roused in Madame de Clinville's breast.

"Ah, Conte, so you have made friends with Mrs Brierly, I see," laughed the Marquise; while Ida wondered if Kate had informed the Count, or any one else, that Ned was in Rome. But of course she had—it was not likely she would suffer such a good opportunity of spiting her (Ida) to escape her.

"I was introduced to her, and talked a little to her till you came in, Madame," replied Visconti; and Madame smiled contentedly.

"Come," she said, "there is Signor Marco de Maroni; let me introduce him to you," and she beckoned to a young man, who hastened up to her, and whom she introduced to Count Visconti.

After they had all talked together for a few minutes, she took Signor de Maroni's arm and led him away to introduce him to Contessa Visconti, who was now seated on another sofa with Rita by her side. The latter was feeling miserably dull and disappointed; she had no friends among the gay throng around, and she watched Ida, whom she particularly admired, with wistful envy, as she moved about, smiling and talking, and surrounded by friends and admirers. Presently an old school-fellow of hers passed by, leaning on the arm of a gentleman to whom she was talking very earnestly, and whom Rita supposed to be her husband, for she knew that her friend had left the convent to be married. Would Caterina see her, she wondered anxiously; and presently Caterina did perceive her, and paused to speak to her for an instant.

"Ah, Rita, so you have come home from the convent. I am glad you are strong enough to come out a little now, Contessa" (to Contessa Visconti); "one sees you so seldom. And how are you enjoying yourself, little one?" she added, turning hastily to Rita, to escape the

stream of complaints which she saw the Contessa was preparing to pour forth.

"I know so few people here," said Rita wistfully.

"Ah, you must get married, and then you will be able to enjoy yourself," said Caterina lightly, as she moved away with a nod and a smile; and Rita began to think that surely Betta and her friend Caterina must be right in saying she would be happier if she married.

"Was that Signor Bieletti" (Caterina's husband) "with Caterina, mamma?" she whispered.

"That! Oh dear, no; Signor Bieletti is old enough to be her grandfather," said the Contessa. "Ah, there is Madame de Clinville at last. I really think she might have spoken to me before."

Rita's cheeks flushed as she saw the Marquise approaching them leaning on the arm of a very pleasant-looking young man. Rita glanced swiftly and keenly at him, and then drooped her eyes with a feeling of disappointment, for though pleasant looking, he was by no means handsome, and Rita wished the man she married to be perfectly handsome. She guessed full well who the stranger was whom Madame de Clinville was presenting to her mother, and whom her mother in turn presented to her; and she glanced shyly up at him now and then, and admitted that he talked pleasantly and seemed very nice. But still he

was so common looking! Presently raising her eyes to take another stealthy survey of young De Maroni, she caught the dark, beautiful eyes of Count Olivetti fixed on her with an expression of deep, unmistakable admiration in them which flattered and frightened her at the same time. For a minute she was unable to withdraw her eyes from his, so startled was she; then she lowered them to the floor, blushing like a rose; and just at that minute her mother rose to bid her hostess good-night, and Rita saw no more of her handsome stranger. But she could not help thinking of him all the way home and contrasting him with Marco de Maroni, greatly to the latter's disadvantage. She was terribly anxious to know whether this Signor de Maroni really was the man she was to marry; but she dared not ask her mother, and the Contessa considered her too much of a child to be treated with any confidence, and did not intend to tell her anything about the affair till it was all definitely settled. On reaching home, she dismissed the girl to her own room, where Rita found old Betta waiting for her, full of eager curiosity.

"Well, Contessina?" she began eagerly. Rita had been a delicate child, and Betta had had the principal care of her till she was twelve years old, when she had been sent to the con-

vent (her mother had refused to send her before on account of her delicacy), and the old woman was fonder of the girl than of almost any one in the world; still it cannot be denied that she was not a very desirable companion for her.

"I found it very dull," said Rita, sinking disconsolately on a chair.

"But the rich gentleman—did you meet him, figlia?"

"I met one—but I don't know if it was he."

"Yes, yes; I tell you it was he, my pretty one. I heard the Signora Contessa tell her sister that he was to be introduced to her to-night. And what is he like?"

"Oh, he is quite plain."

"What matter?" A plain husband is as good as a handsome one, provided he gives you fine dresses and jewels, and lets you amuse yourself, and is not jealous. Ah, a jealous husband is a sad affliction."

Rita did not quite agree, but she said nothing, and crossing the room, leaned her arms on the window-sill and looked out, while she idly twisted a white rose, which she had worn that evening, in her fingers.

Down in the street below a man was passing slowly along, glancing up at the windows of Palazzo Visconti in a way that attracted Rita's attention. She looked at him, and met his eyes, and instantly recognised him as the

stranger who had regarded her so admiringly that evening; and in her sudden start at again seeing him, she dropped the white rose from her hand. It fell straight at Olivetti's feet, and he, thinking it had been flung intentionally, picked it eagerly up and raised it to his lips.

"Oh, what have I done!" cried Rita, shrinking back in dismay.

"Per Bacco! he is handsome," said old Betta, who had been standing close behind Rita and had witnessed the whole affair. "Who is he? Where did you meet him? See how he kisses the rose! He is looking up to get another sight of you. But who is he, dearie?"

"I do not know—I saw him to-night—"

"Did I not tell you there were many who would fall in love with your pretty face to-night?" cried the old woman triumphantly.

"But mamma does not know him, and he never spoke to me—he only looked at me," faltered Rita.

"And are not looks enough? A man need not speak to you to fall in love with you, pretty one. This one is deeply in love, I could see, by the way he looked at you and kissed the rose you threw him."

"I did not throw it, Betta; I dropped it," said Rita.

"Well, it made the poor youth very happy any way."

Rita blushed, laughed, and began to feel that it was very nice to have a handsome man fall in love with her at first sight; but then she remembered Signor de Maroni and sighed.

"I wish Signor de Maroni was handsome," she said. "But perhaps you are mistaken, Betta, and he is not to be my *sposo* after all. I wish I knew, but they will not tell me."

Betta nodded her head knowingly and left the room; and presently she returned, and catching Rita's hand, whispered eagerly,—

"Come with me, Donna Rita, and we shall find out. Madame de Clinville is with your signora mother, and they are talking about you. Come!"

Rita suffered herself to be led stealthily up the passage, to the door of the drawing-room, where, by Betta's desire, she applied her ear carefully to the key-hole. She had a guilty feeling that she was not doing quite right in thus listening to what was not meant for her ears; but surely, she thought, she had a good right to know what so nearly concerned herself, and if her mother would not trust her—well, she must find out as best she could.

"Then it can easily be arranged," Madame

de Clinville's voice was saying. "Signor Marco was much pleased with your, little Rita; now Count Bruno and Signor de Marona can arrange all the rest."

"It is provoking Lent being so near," murmured the Contessa's plaintive voice. "The Carnival begins in ten days, so it will be impossible for the marriage to take place till after Lent."

Then followed something which Rita could not hear, but from the rustle of dresses she imagined the Marquise must be taking her leave, and turning hastily round, she fled down the passage, followed by Betta, to whom she had to repeat all she had overheard as soon as they were safely in the shelter of her room.

The girl slept very little all that night, but tossed feverishly about, thinking of Olivetti and De Maroni, and wishing they could change places. Girls who have been accustomed to mix in society from their babyhood almost, cannot understand the wild excitement which Rita's adventures had roused in her. She had been locked up in a convent and treated like a baby until a few days ago; and now she suddenly found herself betrothed to one man, and with another handsome lover — as she imagined—at her feet. What wonder that her mind was in a ferment, and that she felt

totally incapable of thinking rationally about anything? At sixteen very little excites us, especially if we have led a secluded life; and Rita was extremely excitable naturally, and easily depressed or delighted.

Next day the reaction came, however, and she found her daily life duller and more irksome than ever. She hung over her embroidery frame languidly, pausing now and then with her needle suspended in mid-air, and felt pettish and impatient when her aunt rebuked her sharply for her idleness. But fresh excitement was in store for her, for by-and-by, as she was in her own room seeking for some fresh embroidery silks, old Betta came in cautiously, and after carefully closing the door, produced a beautiful bouquet of white camellias and violets from beneath her apron, and held it triumphantly towards the girl, saying,—

"There, Contessina mia, see what the beautiful gentleman sends you!"

"What gentleman?" asked Rita, taking the bouquet with a bright blush.

"Ah, the Contessina knows quite well," laughed Betta. "He wore the white rose in his button-hole, though it was all dead and withered; and see what he has given old Betta, for love of her pretty mistress," and she extended her wrinkled palm with some money in it. "Will the Contessina not see whether there

is anything in the bouquet?" she added. "Ah," as Rita drew out a note, "I thought so."

Just at this minute there came a light tap at the door, and without waiting for an answer Ida Huntingdon walked in. In vain Betta called out to her to wait, while Rita endeavoured to hide the bouquet under a shawl; she had seen the flowers, though she pretended not to notice them at first.

"I came to ask if you would like to go to the opera with me to-night, Contessina," she began, smiling kindly on the frightened girl. "Will you?"

"Oh, a hundred thanks, Signora—if my mother will let me," faltered Rita, while Betta beat a hasty retreat from the room.

As soon as she was gone, Ida began gravely, fixing her eyes full on Rita's troubled face,—

"And who sent you those flowers I saw in your hand just now, Rita?"

"Betta brought them to me," faltered the girl.

"Yes; but who gave them to her? Ah, I see you know. It was Count Olivetti, the artist; I saw him give them to her as I was coming down the stairs to ask your mother's leave to take you to the opera. No, do not look so frightened, poor child; I do not look a very severe judge, do I?" and Ida took the girl's hand kindly in hers as she spoke.

"But tell me the truth—do you know much of this Count Olivetti? Where did you meet him first?"

"Oh, Signora, it was last night. I did not speak to him, but I saw him look at me—that was all, indeed," replied Rita, considerably relieved by Ida's tone, but still thinking it prudent to tell her as little as possible.

"And to-day he has brought you this bouquet? You must make Betta take it back to him, dear; it was very wrong of her to bring it to you."

Rita hung her head and bit her lip in silence, though she began to think Mrs Huntingdon was taking too much upon herself in thus interfering in what did not, after all, concern her.

"Rita, dear, will you not believe that I know best?" pleaded Ida. "Send that bouquet back to Count Olivetti and promise not to have anything more to say to him, and I will say nothing to your mother about this. Oh, Rita! believe me, I have known life-long unhappiness caused by just a little folly of this sort."

"I will be unhappy all my life if I marry Signor de Maroni," cried Rita irrelevantly and with a sudden burst of tears.

"Does the silly child really believe she is in love with this man whom she has only seen

once and never spoken to?" wondered Ida; but she only kissed Rita kindly, and made her sit down on a seat beside her.

"I can quite understand all you feel, Rita," she said, when the girl's excitement had somewhat abated. "It is not so long since I was a foolish child of sixteen myself; but I am old enough to see how foolish I was then. You think that you will always feel as you do now; but, my dear child, in two years you will not feel like the same person you are now. Your ideas and wishes will all have changed, and you will look back and wonder whether the silly little girl who cried about a man she did not know, could possibly have been you. Now, dear, you will send back that bouquet, will you not?"

"Of course, if you wish it," said Rita somewhat reluctantly, as Ida at once perceived.

"And promise not to have anything to say to him?"

"Ye-es," said Rita, but in a tone which did not satisfy Ida as to her sincerity.

"I speak so firmly to you, child, because I have felt the mischief of this sort of thing myself," she said earnestly. "I was only your age when I left my convent, and I fell in love—or fancied I did—with a man I met just as you met Count Olivetti. I saw him at the theatre first, and he kept looking up at

me. I remember it quite well, Rita, and how I could not help thinking of him afterwards, as I have no doubt you have been thinking of Count Olivetti. He sent me notes through the maid of the lady I was staying with, and I read them, though I never answered them. Oh, Rita! I would give anything I possess now, not to have read them. If I had only done as I ought and returned them unopened, I should have been a happier woman than I am; but, unfortunately, I read them, and then we contrived to meet. I had no mother to look after me, and I saw very little of my father, and I had no one to warn me as I am warning you. So I used to receive his notes, and meet him, and go on thinking of him till I fell in love with him—not in imagination, but in real truth."

"And then?" asked Rita eagerly.

"And then, dear, I had to marry some one else."

"*I* would not have done so," cried the girl indignantly.

"I had to. But it served me right—I ought never to have listened to him. But the worst is to come. I got a good husband—the best a woman could possibly have, and who loved me far better than I deserved. He saw I was not happy with him at first, and then he found out all about my first lover and left

me, thinking I would be happier without him. Oh, Rita! I would give ten years of my life to recall him, now that it is too late."

"But he would come back if you asked him, Signora mia?" said Rita softly.

But Ida only shook her head, and turned away her face to hide her tears.

"Dear Signora," murmured Rita, taking Ida's hand in her own and kissing it, with tears of sympathy in her own eyes.

"Oh, child, always be open and truthful, whatever you are, and you will save yourself untold trouble in the end. Never tell little fibs to your husband when you get one; and do not trifle with his affection if he cares for you. If once he finds you out in an untruth, he will never believe you again, even if you speak the truth. My husband thinks I ask him to come back to me merely from a sense of duty—he will not believe I should be happy with him."

"Do you not see now, child, the danger of acting as you were nearly doing?" continued Ida presently. "You know nothing of this man who sent you those flowers; no more does your mother; and do you not see how wrong it would be of you to have anything to say to him without her knowledge or consent? My folly has spoilt my life; I do not want you to spoil yours."

"I will do anything you like," cried Rita eagerly. This was the first time in the whole course of her life that any one had treated her with confidence, and as if she was a rational being; and Ida's words had given her her first vague notion of what real life out in the busy, bustling world was.

"That is a good child," smiled Ida approvingly.

"I will call Betta and give her back the flowers at once; and this note which came in them—I have not read it."

"Better not, dear," said Ida; and just then Betta appeared in answer to Rita's summons, and looked very blank indeed when her young mistress gave her back the bouquet and bid her return it immediately to the sender. She dared not remonstrate before Ida, however, and retired unwillingly.

"Betta did not like taking it," laughed Rita, as the old woman withdrew sulkily.

"No; of course Count Olivetti paid her to give it to you. Very likely she will try to bring you other messages from him."

"I will not receive them then. But oh, dear Signora, I do not want to marry Signor de Maroni."

"You do not know him, dear, or you could not help liking him. He is not handsome like Count Olivetti, but he is infinitely nicer,

really. He will be good to you, dear, and you will be happy as his wife. Now, good-bye till to-night; I must go to dress for my drive with my aunt; and do not forget what I have said," and with another kiss Ida departed, glad that she had been able to save Rita from Olivetti (who, she knew, had only attempted to make love to the poor girl in order to gain some sort of footing in the house where she—Ida—lived), but feeling heartsore and miserable all the same, for her interview with Rita had been very painful to her in many ways. It had been hard to confess that her husband would not return to her; for though she was certain he had originally come to Rome for the purpose of seeing her, she felt that there was little likelihood of his coming to her now that he had fallen into Kate Brierly's hands. It was six days since he had first been seen in the town, and all this time he had made no sign, and Ida began to think he never meant to. She had taken all the blame on herself when speaking to Rita, and she was well aware that the world would also lay all the blame on her—it always does lay it on the woman; but in her heart she could not help thinking that she was more sinned against than sinning, for surely she had given Ned no reason to neglect her as he was doing?

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS PROCTOR'S LETTER.

AND why had Ned never taken any notice of the wife whom he had come to Rome expressly to see? In the first place, he had been ill for five days after his arrival with a slight return of his fever, and had been unable to leave the house. During this time he had found Kate a charming nurse and companion; she made him lie on the sofa in her sitting-room, and talked to and amused him all day long. For his sake she stayed at home a great deal more than usual, and during the five days of his confinement to the house she contrived to impress him more firmly with the idea that Ida had made mischief between her and Wilfred. She let him discover the envelope with Ida's monogram, which she had found in the grate of her drawing-room at B——, in her

writing-case, and then assured him, with tears in her eyes, that Ida had been in the habit of writing privately to Wilfred; and Ned, after making due allowance for Kate's natural exaggeration, could not help thinking there must be some truth in what she said. Evidently she was very unhappy about her husband's coldness to her; and as Kate had supposed, Ned resented the wrong Ida had done his friend far more than he did her coldness to himself. He hesitated about asking her to return to him, and while he did so Kate whispered to him daily that Ida would never be happy with him.

So things went on for five days, and on the sixth Ned was able to go out for a drive, and Kate persuaded him to accompany her to the opera in the evening. As it happened, this was the very evening on which Ida was taking Rita Visconti to the opera, and the first thing Ned saw on entering the box which Kate had persuaded him to take for her, was his wife seated opposite him, with a pretty little fair-haired girl beside her, and the young man who had been in her aunt's carriage, on the day he first saw her leaning over the back of her chair, talking to her.

"Ah, there is Ida," said Kate, as if it was the most natural thing in the world for a husband and wife to sit opposite one another

like strangers, after being parted for three years. "What a good thing she does not see you. That is Count Visconti behind her; he is always with her and her aunt. The little fair girl is his sister."

Ned sat silent and uncomfortable during the whole performance, for though Ida did not see him (as he supposed), it was agony to him to see her smiling and talking to other men—especially the obnoxious Vernor, who spent half the evening in her box.

As the evening wore away, a bright flush rose to her pale cheeks, and made her lovely eyes flash and sparkle with more than usual brilliancy, and she laughed and chatted to the men who dropped into her box with an amount of animation which rather surprised Count Bruno—for, as a rule, she inclined to be gently reserved towards her admirers. What was the matter with her to-night? he wondered; and then, glancing round the house, his eye fell on Kate and Ned, and in an instant he understood the whole state of the case. Ida had seen her husband, though she was careful not to glance towards him, and all the time she was smiling so brightly she was suffering a martyrdom.

Kate, who also saw what her rival was suffering, took especial pains to make Ned pay her devoted attention, well knowing that Ida was watching them, though she never turned

her eyes directly towards them. But Ned, poor fellow, was far too miserable himself to respond to Kate's advances, and at last she rose to go before the end of the performance, in a pet. As they left the house to enter their carriage, they passed close to a man who was lurking about the doors, evidently watching for some one.

"Did you recognise him?" whispered Kate, as Ned handed her into the carriage.

"I did," he responded gruffly. "It was that devil Olivetti."

"Easy to guess what he was waiting for," sneered Kate.

"Do not speak in that tone, Kate," exclaimed Ned indignantly. "After all, it cannot matter whether the fellow watches my wife or not—lots of other fellows do so too."

"I think, after all that has happened, she would have shown better taste if she had had nothing further to say to him," remarked Kate severely.

"She has not."

"Count Olivetti has been painting Madame de Clinville's portrait lately, any way. Of course Ida mayn't have seen him—but still it was odd. Surely Madame de Clinville might have chosen another artist."

"Ida is not responsible for her aunt's actions."

"Perhaps not; yet I hardly think her aunt

would have employed Olivetti against Ida's express wish."

"Ida is a good woman—when you have said that, you have said all," responded Ned frigidly.

"My dear Ned, what *do* you know about her? Absolutely nothing. Besides, girls change completely from eighteen to twenty-one very often. Ida was an ignorant child when you married her; now she is a woman of the world, and has had the advantage of Madame de Clinville's companionship for nearly three years. She has been an apt pupil, I should say, judging from the way she flirted to-night—"

"That will do, I think," said Ned's quiet, firm voice; and Kate, who had imagined from his previous silence that he had not resented her freedom of speech, was half frightened by his unexpected interruption.

"There were a good many people in the house to-night," he proceeded rather stiffly.

"Yes," responded Kate. "Did you see any one you knew?"

"Oh no; I know no one here," replied Ned; and Kate laughed inwardly, for in the box beside his wife had been Mr and Mrs Proctor, who were spending a few weeks in Rome to see the Carnival. They had not called on Kate, and to-night no sign of recognition had passed between them; but Kate had seen Mrs Proctor

looking disapprovingly at Ned, and knew that she would write and tell Wilfred all about him. "But what does it matter?" thought Kate defiantly. "She can only say she has seen Ned at the opera with me. I'm sure Wilfred need not be jealous, for Ned is as surly as a bear—and so ridiculously loyal to that stupid little wife of his! Never mind, I think I have sown the seeds of distrust in his heart, for all his grand air." And she had indeed said enough to plunge Ned into a sea of doubt and miserable uncertainty.

Clearly Kate hated Ida and wished to blacken her in his eyes; he saw this, and determined never to allow her to breathe his wife's name in his presence again—if he could help it; yet he could not help thinking there might be truth in part of what she said. Probably it was because Ida had accepted that fool Brierly's attentions at B—— that she had incurred Kate's hatred; and Ned felt that, had he been in Kate's place, he would have hated her too. No doubt it was spiteful of Kate to seek to revenge herself as she was doing; yet though she might have exaggerated, there must be truth in what she said, for it was quite impossible she could lie in such a matter as this. Yes, it must be true that Ida had made mischief between Kate and Wilfred; but for the rest, he would not think of it even. Even if Olivetti

had painted Madame de Clinville's portrait, it did not follow that he had seen Ida, and—

"How agreeable you are!" broke in Kate's mocking voice beside him. "Come, tell me why you are so angry, mon ami?"

"Am I angry?"

"Are you? Of course you are—furious."

"I am sorry you think so; but certainly I am very much annoyed by the tone in which you spoke of Olivetti just now, and once for all I must beg you not to connect his name with my wife's any more. You can have no reason to do so, for I know that she would never exchange a single word with him—"

A low mocking laugh from Kate interrupted him.

"Wouldn't she? Well, when I went to call on her at B——, I found him with her in her lodgings; and my maid, who is great friends with your little girl's nurse, says that he visits Ida and her aunt constantly."

The carriage stopped suddenly, and Ned sprang out and handed his companion into the house without a word. She tried to lead him into her drawing-room, but with a polite good-night he turned away and mounted the stairs to his own room at the top of the house. Here he spent the long wretched hours of the night in pacing restlessly about and fighting with the miserable fears which Kate's words had roused

in him. How could Ida be so rash as to receive visits from Olivetti? and yet it was only too certain that she did so. What awful charges these were that were brought against the woman he loved! She was evidently happy without him, her husband; and she had renewed her friendship with her old lover. She had learnt to flirt; and she had made mischief between the Brierlys. Could anything be worse? And yet, poor child, poor child, perhaps he was partly to blame too, he thought with a groan. If he had only stood by her bravely all along, things might not have come to this pass. Surely he had been mad to leave a girl of eighteen with no better protector than the silly little Marquise, from whom she was more likely to learn harm than good; and yet now he shrank from taking her back to England with him. She would never be happy there, and he could not endure to see her unhappy; and then too, when he thought of her conduct to the Brierlys, he grew too indignant with her to think of taking her back. So he remained in a state of indecision for days, unable to make up his mind to forgive his wife, and yet unwilling to leave her longer with her aunt, who he felt sure could not be a good companion for her. He could not leave Rome, as his mother was coming there in a couple of days and would expect him to be with her during her visit;

but he avoided showing himself anywhere in public, as he did not want Ida to hear of his presence in the town. He avoided Kate, too, as far as he politely could; and his manner to her was so cold and reserved, that she saw her words had made a deep impression on him, and triumphed inwardly. As to his being offended with her for telling him the truth, what was that to her? She did not care, she told herself; and perhaps it was rather a good thing that he should not be seen with her too much, as it would prevent people talking. But people were talking already, a great deal more than Kate supposed. She had published the fact of Ned's presence in Rome to every one, in spite of his earnest request that she would keep it secret, and though fortunately hardly any one knew anything about the Huntingdons here, yet it had reached the ears of the Proctors that their sister-in-law was doing her best to console a very handsome young man, who was staying with her and her father, for having quarrelled with his wife, a well-known beauty in Roman society. At first Mrs Proctor had not heard Ned's name, but then she saw him at the opera, and a lady who was with her pointed him out to her—as the gentleman about whom Mrs Brierly was always talking.

"I think she must really be in love with him," laughed the lady. "I was only intro-

duced to her yesterday, and she attacked me instantly with Mr Huntingdon's story—only I managed to cut her short. They say she does the same to every one."

"She is my sister-in-law, you know," said Mrs Proctor; and the other lady, who was a comparatively new acquaintance, blushed, and stammered out an apology. But she could not withdraw the words she had spoken, and Mrs Proctor did not forget them. As soon as she got home she sat down, late though it was, and wrote the following letter to her brother in Ireland :—

"My dear Wilfred,—I think it is only right to let you know of the way in which your wife is behaving here. I fear you will have to come and look after her again, as you had to once before during her visit to The Folly; only this time it is not *my* happiness that she is endangering. You know, I suppose, that Mrs Ned Huntingdon is here with her aunt for the winter; well, your wife has got hold of Mr Huntingdon somehow. He is staying in the same hotel with her and her father, and never goes out anywhere; but your wife has published his presence all over Rome, and has spoken *most* uncharitably of poor Mrs Ned. I am certain she is doing all she can to keep them apart; and others seem to think so

too. I certainly think you ought to come and take her back to Ireland; and I am very much afraid she is running into fresh debt here. Forgive me for writing such a disagreeable letter; but every word of it is *true.* I shall look out for your arrival here *eagerly*,—and with best love, I remain, your loving sister,

"AUGUSTA PROCTOR."

CHAPTER XIV.

BEATEN!

IT was two days after Ned's visit to the opera that his mother arrived in Rome. Rooms had been previously engaged for her in the same hotel where Mrs Brierly was staying or Ned would have tried to move into another house; but as it was, he found himself compelled to remain in the same one with Kate, though he no longer frequented her company as before. It was difficult to shake himself altogether free from her, however, without absolute rudeness, for she refused to see the constraint in his manner, and insisted on being as friendly as ever to him. She also set herself to propitiate his mother, and succeeded so well that the old lady and Miss Boyd (who had accompanied her to Rome) spent much of their time in her drawing-room; and, of course,

Ned had to do so too. Kate behaved very well, however, after that evening at the opera, and made no further attempt to speak of Ida before Ned; but he grew frightened lest she should repeat what she had said to him to his mother, who would never get the idea of Ida's wickedness out of her head if it were once put into it. But what could he do?

The Carnival began the day after his mother's arrival, and she intended to remain in Rome till it was over, even if she consented to spend the spring in some other part of Italy to please him. Each day he was in an agony lest he should find himself face to face with Ida in some place where he would be obliged to speak to her—and yet he longed miserably to get another sight of her face. Towards the end of the Carnival there was a grand fancy ball given by the Artists' Association, and to this Mrs Brierly persuaded Mrs Huntingdon to go, telling her that it would be a lovely sight, and that she might go in plain ball dress if she liked.

The old lady had never been to a fancy ball before, and Kate's description roused her curiosity so much that she expressed her intention of going to this one, and told Ned to get tickets for her, Miss Boyd, and himself. In vain he tried to dissuade her from going, and then to get her to dispense with his

company at the ball; the old lady whimpered and said he was very unkind, and that of course she could not go to the ball without a gentleman to take care of her, and so he was forced reluctantly to yield. He felt certain that Ida would be at this ball, and how was he to face her? At last he decided to go in a black domino and mask, and fancied that no one would recognise him in this attire; it might be rather hot work, keeping his mask on all night, but if Ida were there, what else could he do?

On the eventful night he walked into his mother's room in his mask and domino, and was assured by the startled scream with which she greeted his appearance that he was wholly unrecognisable. They went with Mrs Brierly and her father, very much to Ned's annoyance; but Kate had persuaded Mrs Huntingdon that it would be pleasanter for them all to go together, since poor Miss Boyd was confined to her bed with a headache, and they could all four go in one carriage—and share the expense of it.

On reaching the ball-room Colonel L'Estrange politely offered his arm to Mrs Huntingdon, and so Ned found himself compelled to enter the ball-room with Kate on his arm. It was indeed a lovely sight which now presented itself to them. The whole dancing

saloon was decorated to represent a grotto; the ceiling and walls being pale blue, with pink coral sprays, glistening with icicles, gracefully ranged about them. Graceful silver columns, wreathed round with wax-lights, supported the blue, vaulted ceiling, the top of which was illumined by pale lime-light, which, however, was not permitted to descend where it could produce an injurious effect on the complexions of the ladies. Round the room were innumerable little caves, with sea-weeds and corals drooping over the mouths, and inside little cascades of water, trickling between blocks of ice, and with graceful ferns drooping over them—though I don't think ferns generally grow at the bottom of the sea. There were also huge blocks of ice, covered with ferns, about the sides of the drawing-room, but in spite of this the heat was very great—and no wonder, for the crush was enormous, and very little dancing was attempted, though there was a beautiful band present. But the Italians are never fond of much exertion, even when it is dancing.

Many of the ladies were in plain ball dress, and among these Ned soon recognised Ida. Kate, who was dressed as a *vivandière*, soon left him to dance (or rather pretend to) with some one else, and he returned to his mother's side, but found that

she was being taken good care of by Colonel L'Estrange ; so he wandered disconsolately about for some time, watching the people, and trying to keep out of Kate's way, for fear she should fasten herself on to him again. Presently, as he was standing alone in one of the little caves, he ventured to remove his mask to relieve his aching head, and passing his hand through the bubbling water of the miniature cascade, he tried to cool his burning brow with it. To be in the same room with Ida—to have felt her dress brush against him and yet to be unable to address her—oh ! it was horrible. Never before had Ned felt his position so keenly, and never had he realised so fully how damaging this separation must be to her. Supposing any mutual friend were to recognise him, what would they think when they saw the way in which he cut her ? Of course the blame would fall on her—it always falls on the woman in such cases; and though no doubt she was not entirely free from blame now, yet she might have been if only he had not left her in the beginning. Ought he to leave her any longer ? Ought he not to bury the past in oblivion, and do his best to make her happy for the future, even if he failed to be happy himself ? Yes, that was what he ought to do, and that was what he would do without further delay. There

must be an end to this sort of thing, he must shirk his duty no longer, and the first thing to-morrow he would seek Ida and find out whether she was still willing to return to him.

There was the soft swish of a woman's dress at the entrance of the grotto, and before Ned could resume his mask he found himself standing suddenly face to face with his wife. So softly had she entered that Ned was hardly conscious of any one's presence, till he found himself facing her; and for a minute he was too greatly agitated to speak.

"Ned," she began tremulously, holding out her hands, "won't you speak to me? What have I *ever* done that you should treat me like this?"

"It was for your sake, dear, that I did not speak to you. I was afraid of spoiling your enjoyment this evening," said Ned, taking her hand and holding it kindly.

"You have been very cruel to me, Ned—but I cannot stay to talk, my partner is waiting out there for me. Will you come and see me to-morrow at eleven o'clock? You will come, Ned—for the *child's* sake?" she added pleadingly.

"Of course I will come," he was beginning, when some one was heard entering the grotto, and hastily pulling her hand from his, Ida fled without another word; and Ned, follow-

ing her to the mouth of the grotto, saw her walking away on the arm of Colonel Vernor, with whom he had noticed her dancing several times. He stood looking after her, biting his lips, wishing he had said more to her, and wondering what she meant by saying he was cruel. Cruel for avoiding her! Surely if she were so happy without him, she need not pretend to be hurt because he had avoided her for one evening—for, of course, she could not know how long he had been in Rome.

"Hollo, Huntingdon! so here you are back in the land of the living again," exclaimed a hearty voice behind him, while a heavy hand was laid on his shoulder; and turning hastily round, Ned found that the speaker was his old friend Major Grey, with whom he had once gone fishing to Ireland. "Oh, come, you needn't try to take me in," laughed Grey, as Ned remained silent, trusting to his mask to protect him from further recognition. "Mrs Brierly told me you were here, you know."

"Oh, did she?" replied Ned savagely. "Well, I'm glad to meet again, Grey. Long time since I saw you, isn't it?"

"Yes; you've been half over the world since then, I hear. Where are you staying?"

Ned gave his address, and Grey proceeded,—

"I heard you were in Rome—"

"How did you hear that?" asked Ned sharply.

"Oh, one or two people told me—"

"How the deuce did they know? I go nowhere."

"Mrs Brierly told my sister, and the Proctors saw you at the opera. But have you any reason for wishing to remain *incog.?*"

"Oh no; none in the world. Only I wonder how any one knew about me; that's all."

"Mrs Brierly told me the first minute she saw me to-night. How well she's looking—handsomer than ever. She doesn't get on very well with her husband, I hear. Left him in Ireland, and came here to amuse herself—ha, ha! Seems very jolly without him, too. She's the best-looking woman here to-night, except an Italian lady whose name I don't know. See, there she is, just going out of the room, dressed in white and gold. I wonder who she is."

"I think my mother will be wanting to go home now," said Ned abruptly, for he did not like to admit that the lady whom Major Grey admired so fervently was his own wife.

"Good-night, then," said Grey. "I'll be in to see you some time to-morrow if I can," and with a friendly nod the two men parted; Ned to seek his mother and try to persuade her to

return home. He found her quite willing to do so, but Kate could not be persuaded to quit the ball for a long time, and poor Mrs Huntingdon began to wish she had followed Ned's advice and come in a carriage of her own.

At last, however, they were all in the carriage driving home — Colonel L'Estrange and Mrs Huntingdon yawning piteously, Kate chattering volubly, and Ned answering curtly whenever politeness compelled him to do so. He had never forgiven Kate for the way in which she had spoken to him of Ida ; and now he was bitterly angry with her for betraying his presence in Rome to people when she knew how particularly he wished to keep it a secret. Supposing Ida had heard that he was in the town without coming to see her ! No wonder she thought him unkind ; for after all she had done nothing, as she said, to deserve such treatment at his hands. With these thoughts in his mind, he naturally found it difficult to respond very cordially to Kate's remarks, and his relief was great when at length they reached home.

"Come into my room and get your gloves which you left there this morning, Mrs Huntingdon," said Kate, as they were toiling wearily upstairs. "It won't take you a minute," she added, laughing, as the old lady uttered a weary sigh ; and, opening her

drawing-room door, she led the way in, still laughing; but paused suddenly, as a tall figure rose slowly from a chair at the other end of the room and stood confronting her in stern silence.

"Wilfred!" she cried, in genuine surprise, not untinged by dismay.

"Yes; you see I have come to look after you," he said, laughing, but glancing somewhat sternly towards Ned, who had followed the others reluctantly into the room.

There was a round of hand-shaking, and several questions were asked as to the reason of Wilfred's sudden appearance; but he gave them very little information on this point, and merely said that he had found it so dull by himself in Ireland, that he had come to ask Kate to go home with him. He spoke laughingly, as if he only half meant what he said; but Kate saw a dark light in his eyes which she had already learnt to know and dread, and she felt that he was in a dangerous mood, and grew rather frightened in her heart. But she resolved not to yield without a struggle, and as soon as the Huntingdons had left the room she asked in her coolest, most defiant manner,—

"You were not in earnest, were you, when you spoke of taking me back to Ireland?"

"You must come back some time, I suppose," he replied quietly.

"But I don't want to go back just yet. Ireland is not bearable till June at the earliest."

"But if I tell you that I am dull by myself, and wish you to return as soon as the Carnival is over ?"

"You do not want me really," cried Kate passionately. "You do not care for me one bit—"

"Hush, hush, my dear," interposed Colonel L'Estrange nervously ; but Kate proceeded without heeding him,—

"You have some other reason for wanting me—you need not pretend to care for my society so much."

This was so utterly unlike anything that Wilfred had expected, that for a minute his power of speech quite deserted him. Then he said gravely and sternly,—

"I do not see what right you have to talk like this, Kate. It was entirely by your own wish that you left me, and it is quite true that I am dull by myself in Ireland. But you are also right in supposing that other motives have induced me to recall you. I cannot afford to let you remain here any longer—so now you know the truth. I hope you will be ready to return with me in a week's time.

"I am afraid not."

"That is unfortunate, as I fear I can supply

you with no more money. But perhaps Colonel L'Estrange will keep you here."

"I think I must be going home too," interposed the old gentleman hastily; and Kate bit her lip savagely as she saw that she was beaten—for almost the first time in her life.

CHAPTER XV.

ONLY HER WORD.

IDA had had a sore battle with her pride before she had brought herself to address Ned at the ball. It had been hard to ask him for forgiveness which she felt she did not need, and still more so to beg him humbly to come to her now when he had allowed nearly a fortnight to pass without attempting to do so. But for their child's sake she felt that she must make some effort to win him back, even at the sacrifice of her pride. She knew that he had come to Rome intending to ask her to return to England with him, and she felt certain that Kate Brierly must have told him something which had prevented him fulfilling his intention. Whatever that something was, it was utterly false, and Ida was determined to see Ned herself and convince him that Mrs

Brierly had deceived him. She felt hurt and indignant to think that he could listen to Kate's abuse of her, even for a minute; but in justice to both herself and him, she felt that she ought to seek an explanation with him. Kate's malice should *not* succeed in blighting all their lives, she resolved; and then she remembered what Mrs Elton had said about its being the wife's duty to submit and humble herself, even if the husband were in the wrong. Ida did not quite agree in this; but she thought that Mrs Elton had been right in saying that it was her place to recall Ned. He had left her because he thought she was not happy with him; and since he had first refused to listen to her request that he would not leave her, she had been too proud to attempt to recall him. But things had come to a crisis, and unless he returned to her now, he might never do so at all; so Ida, who was older and wiser than she had been three years ago, put her pride resolutely on one side and determined to do what she could to win him back.

She felt almost faint with nervousness and anxiety as the hour appointed for his visit drew near next morning. She had not slept all night, as was easily seen by the dark circles under her eyes, which looked unnaturally large and wistful to-day, as if laden with tears which

they dared not shed; for if she wept she would disfigure her face, and she wished to appear fair in Ned's eyes when he should come. She had dressed herself in a pretty morning wrapper of white muslin and lace, and tied her dark hair loosely back with a blue ribbon, and when she looked in her glass she could not help being well satisfied with her appearance; but after all, how would her prettiness help her with Ned? It was not his love that she had to regain (for she had never lost that), but his trust and confidence. And how would mere beauty suffice to win back these? At last the dainty little clock in her dressing-room struck eleven, and almost at the same minute her maid entered and said that a gentleman wished to see her.

"Show him in," she said faintly; and as the woman retired she sank into a chair, and covering her face with her hands, uttered a quick, fervent prayer for aid. The door opened again, and rising slowly, she found herself standing opposite some one whom she knew to be her husband, though, for the minute, a black mist before her eyes completely hid him from her. She could not speak, and only held out her hand, which he took in both his own, and drawing her kindly towards him, kissed her softly on the forehead.

"You are not looking so well as when I saw you here first," he began, and at the sound of his voice Ida's senses returned to her, and she felt the necessity of using self-command if she wished to effect anything by this interview. She raised her eyes to her husband's face, and noticed for the first time how changed and ill he was looking; and as she saw the nervous twitching at the corners of his mouth, and the sorrowful and—as Madame de Clinville had called it—*hungry*, yet withal kind, look in his eyes as he watched her, she felt her anger towards him softened, and began almost to pity him in her heart.

"You mean the day you saw me on the Pincian Hill, nearly a fortnight ago," she replied reproachfully; and at her words he started and coloured uneasily.

"Did you see me?" he asked.

"No; but my aunt did."

"Ah, I forgot your aunt," he muttered. "I had only just arrived in Rome that day, and Kate Brierly, who chanced to be staying in the same house with me, carried me off for a drive. I have been suffering from a kind of low fever, and for nearly a week after that I could not leave the house; and—and since then, Ida, the fact is, that I have been hesitating how to act. I thought I had wandered about the world long enough, and came here

intending to ask you to return to England with me; but when I saw how happy you were, and remembered how miserable you had been with me—"

"No, I was not miserable with *you*, Ned; that is where you have always made your mistake. I was not happy in your mother's house, and my position in Lynborough was a hard one, you must admit. It was all the little worries and troubles of my daily life that made me unhappy at first; and—and afterwards I was miserable because I saw that I had disappointed you. That was all, Ned—"

"No, it was not all," broke in Ned, almost fiercely. "How could you be happy with one man when—great God!—you loved another? And how can I expect you to be happy with me now any more than you were then?"

"I care for no one but you now, Ned," she replied softly.

"Is that true?" he asked sternly.

"As true as that there is a heaven above us," she replied, raising her eyes bravely to his, though she could not prevent the colour mounting to her cheek. "You need not be afraid, Ned; Count Olivetti is nothing to me now. How do you suppose I could go on caring for a man who could behave so meanly to another woman as he did to Kate L'Estrange, and who persecuted me so cruelly?

No; he is a selfish coward, and I was only bewitched by his handsome face when—when I was a foolish child and did not know my own mind."

"Then you are not afraid to come home with me?" asked Ned, gnawing his lip to keep it steady. He thought of what Kate had told him, of her finding Olivetti with Ida at B——, and of his visiting her here; but he put his doubts resolutely from him and made up his mind to take Ida back without asking any questions. Surely he ought to be satisfied when she showed that she wished to return to him of her own free-will.

"No, I am not afraid, Ned, if—if we need not live with your mother."

"We will live anywhere you like—here if you prefer it," he replied gravely.

"You are too good," she said, with a sudden softening in her eyes. "But I do not want to make you an exile any longer, Ned. It is right that you should live in your own country."

"As you please, my dear," he replied, gratified that she should think of him, yet wondering in his heart whether she was quite sincere. Her eyes looked true, but—but women are good actresses. She saw the slight constraint in his manner, and saw that she must strike at the root of the mischief if she wished to overcome it. "I hope you have not thought

me unkind in not coming to you all this while?" he began. "Of course I should have done so if I had imagined you knew of my presence here—"

"Of course I knew of it—every one knew of it, for Mrs Brierly made a point of telling them. I have been wretched all this time, and I *did* think you very cruel to subject me to such a humiliation. It is a man's duty to protect his wife's good name, and you have exposed me to contempt and suspicion, if not to actual condemnation."

"I thought you were safe from anything of that sort," he said, flushing.

"You forgot that I had enemies."

"Enemies?"

"Yes; Mrs Brierly has done her best to ruin me."

"She is a spiteful woman, I know—"

"And yet you listened to her, Ned."

"What do you mean, Ida?"

"Do you think I do not see that she has poisoned your mind against me in some way? Oh yes, you have *forgiven* me; but for what? What have I done to require forgiveness? Ned, what has that woman told you about me that you cannot forget, even though you may forgive it?"

"I do not see why you should suppose she has told me anything."

"I will tell you one thing which she has told you. She told you that when she went to call on me at B—— she found Count Olivetti with me."

"She certainly told me so," he replied coldly.

"Oh, Ned, do not speak to me in that tone, for indeed I do not deserve it. Do you know why I went to B—— at all? It was to keep out of Count Olivetti's way. I had been staying with my aunt at Trouville, and we met him there, and Aunt Nina took a great fancy to him and got him to paint her portrait. Of course I did all I could to prevent this, for though he was nothing to me any longer, I knew you would think badly of me if you heard I had allowed him to come about me again; but Aunt Nina was obstinate—"

"It was a most awful shame of her," broke in Ned.

"She knew that—that I—did not care for him, you see," faltered Ida, "and so she thought there could be no danger. But I knew there was, and went by myself to B—— for the rest of the autumn; and he followed me there. Oh, Ned, it was not my fault, indeed — I could not help it. He only came to me once, and then returned to Trouville when he found that — that I would have nothing to say to him. But, unfortunately,

Mrs Brierly came in just as he was leaving, and I know it must have seemed very strange to her. I knew she would tell you this, and that was why I asked you to come — I felt I *must* see you and right myself in your eyes—"

"And you have done so, dearest," exclaimed Ned earnestly, as she paused with a sob. "Do not distress yourself," he added, drawing her to him and kissing her fondly. "I believe every word you say."

"And what else did she tell you, Ned?" asked Ida, drawing herself restlessly away from him, and looking anxiously into his face. "Tell me if she said anything else—tell me truly, and give me a chance of defending myself."

"Do you know of anything else she could have told me, Ida?"

"Nothing—but she hates me."

"Shall I tell you why?"

"Because I let Count Olivetti deceive her, of course. It was wrong of me, perhaps; but I was so young then, and my position was such a difficult one."

"Yet that is not her only reason for disliking you. Can you think of no other wrong you have done her?"

Ida shook her head, and gazed into her husband's face with eyes which showed her

ignorance plainly, and Ned heaved a heavy sigh of relief as he looked into them.

"She was jealous of you and her husband," he said slowly.

"Jealous! of me!" echoed Ida incredulously. "Indeed, Ned, she had no cause to be so."

"I cannot look you in the face and believe that she had, Ida; and yet she is certainly very unhappy about Brierly's friendship for you."

"I cannot understand it," muttered Ida, passing her hand across her eyes. "When I went to B—— the Brierlys were the only people I knew, and he was certainly very kind to me. I was terribly lonely there, and thought a great deal more of his companionship than I would have done if I had had lots of friends about me. But while his wife remained at B—— he did not pay me much attention, because she disliked me, and would not let him. I daresay there may have been some discussions between them about me —he may have wished her to be more friendly to me, and she may have been offended at his taking any notice of me. But I did nothing to encourage him; and during his wife's stay in B—— he only came to see me three times. After Mrs Brierly left he came oftener, and perhaps I was foolish to

allow him to do so when I knew how his wife hated me. But I was *so* dull, Ned."

"And you wrote to him?"

"Never!"

"Yet Kate showed me an envelope of yours with your monogram on it, and addressed to Brierly in your handwriting, which she found at B——."

"I *never* wrote to him."

"Then how did she get that envelope?"

"Are you *sure* it was mine?"

"There was no mistaking it. Be quiet, and think a minute; perhaps you will remember presently."

"I can't think," she said, pressing both her hands to her head. "My head is in a whirl—I can't remember anything; but if I *did* write to him, it must only have been a note about something quite unimportant."

"His wife says you and he used to correspond."

"Oh, Ned! I have no proof to offer you—only my word—"

"Which is more than sufficient, dear. I only told you what Mrs Brierly said, because I think it is best to turn these ugly monsters out of one's heart, instead of locking them in by refusing to speak of them. But I do not for one minute suppose that you would really be guilty of such conduct. No doubt

Kate's jealous fancy has invented her own unhappiness."

"I *cannot* remember when I wrote that note, Ned; but I swear to you that Kate Brierly has no more cause to be jealous of me than she has to be jealous of you. I never encouraged her husband; and though he was certainly very kind to me, I am sure he cares for no one in the world but his wife—if she could only see it."

"We will not think about her any more, my darling."

"But she made you doubt me, Ned!"

"Ida, forgive me; I never really doubted you; but I was most awfully miserable about what she told me."

"And you made me miserable by avoiding me as you did. I saw you that night at the opera—"

"You did?"

"Of course I did, though you certainly kept well in the back of the box. Oh! I wonder I did not go mad that night. Oh, Ned, you have been very cruel to me all these years."

"I did not think you cared," murmured Ned contritely, trying to realise that Ida had really not cared for Olivetti all this while.

He dared not ask yet whether she loved himself or not, but he felt that he would be content to know that she cared for no one else.

Un qui aime ; et l'autre qui se laisse aimé. It might not be altogether as it ought to be, but Ned had never expected it to come to anything half so good.

"And what else did Mrs Brierly tell you?" asked Ida, after a lengthy pause.

"Nothing, my darling."

"Are you sure—*quite* sure?" she asked earnestly.

"Nothing worth repeating."

"Ah! but, Ned, if there is a doubt anywhere!"

"But there is not, dear. She told me that Olivetti visited you here; but it was only servants' gossip, and it seems an insult even to mention it to you after what you have told me. Is it true you do not care for that handsome devil now, Ida?" he added, laying his hands on her shoulders, and looking intently into her face, as if to read her very soul.

"I swear it to you, Ned," she said, looking at him with tears in her eyes. "He never comes here, for my aunt was terribly offended with him for running away from her at Trouville in pursuit of me; and when we meet him (which isn't often) we never take any notice of him."

There was no more to be said after this, but for more than an hour Ned remained seated by his wife's side, with little Elsie (whom

Ida had brought from the nursery herself) perched on his knee, chattering away blithely in French and making vehement love to him. Evidently her father was quite a familiar personage to her in name, for the instant that her mother whispered to her who the stranger was she flew to him in delight, and after embracing him rapturously, observed,—

"Now maman will be happy."

"Have you ever seen me before?" asked Ned, flushing with pleasure at the child's innocent words, which told so much.

"In the gardens, with the blonde lady!" cried Elsie delightedly. "Maman asked me about you, and cried—"

"I begin to think I've been a fool all along, Ida," interrupted Ned, putting his arm round his wife's waist and drawing her fondly towards him. "To think that you were crying for me, and I was hesitating to take you back to England for fear of making you unhappy! It is absurd."

"I suppose absurd things will happen sometimes," observed Ida sagely.

CHAPTER XVI.

BEGINNING OF THE END.

NED walked back to his hotel with a buoyant step and happy heart, feeling utterly transformed from the anxious, care-worn man who had traversed the same road two short hours before. How completely the whole aspect of the world had changed to him since he had left home that morning! Then, he had gone forth reluctantly and anxiously, half fearing to have his doubts verified, and feeling that he might be going to his farewell interview with Ida. Now, everything was well with him; the mists had been cleared from his and Ida's lives, and henceforth they could be happy together. She was true! she was true! He kept repeating the words over and over to himself as he strode along, beating time to them with his heels on the pavement, and now

and then varying them with, "He is nothing to her now—nothing! nothing! nothing!"

He reached home at last, and went up the stairs whistling, wondering what his mother would say when he told her what had happened. He could count on Miss Boyd's partisanship, and his mother ought not to be very difficult to manage—if only Kate Brierly had not told any of her ill-natured tales about Ida to her. He was passing the door of Kate's drawing-room as this thought occurred to him, and involuntarily he ceased whistling and a heavy frown crossed his face as he thought of all the mischief which she had made, and might yet make. Suddenly the door opened and Wilfred Brierly strode out, looking so stern that Ned surmised at once that there must have been a regular "blow up," as he elegantly phrased it, between him and Kate.

"Ah, Huntingdon, just the man I wanted," exclaimed Wilfred. "Come in here for a minute, will you?"

Ned complied with the other's request, and entered the drawing-room, where Kate stood looking sulkily out of the window, to hide the tears that were standing in her eyes.

"I am sorry to trouble you about such a disagreeable affair, Huntingdon," began Brierly stiffly, "but in justice to your wife I cannot let the matter pass. My wife tells me that

she showed you this envelope" (holding up the one that has already been frequently mentioned) "as a proof that I and Mrs Huntingdon used to correspond. Now I think it right to inform you that I only received one note from your wife in my life, and that was merely a formal one, thanking me for some tickets which I had sent her for a flower-show. I give you my word of honour as a gentleman that that was all that ever passed between us, and that my wife's jealousy is utterly without foundation."

"Thank you; I quite believe you," replied Ned, glancing to where Kate still stood with her back turned to them.

"I think Kate herself will confess that she wronged both your wife and me by her suspicions," added Wilfred.

"Kate will confess nothing!" cried Kate, turning suddenly round on him with flashing eyes and heaving breast. Evidently she was sorely humiliated by finding how utterly she had been in the wrong, and Ned saw that it must be very galling to her to be exposed in this manner before him. If he had been her husband, he would have pitied and pardoned her, he thought, and by so doing would have softened her; but Wilfred was made of sterner stuff than Ned, and the sight of Kate's tears had long since lost all power to move him.

"Ah, well, your confession is not needed as it happens," replied Wilfred coldly.

"There is one thing I want to say to you, Mrs Brierly," said Ned quickly, to cover Wilfred's cold tone. "You know you told me several things about Count Olivetti" (Ned fancied that Wilfred would not understand this allusion) "which I have since discovered, on good authority, to be utterly without foundation; may I ask you, as a special favour, not to repeat the stories to any one else? I am sure you yourself would be the last person to wish to spread false reports."

Ned spoke with studied courtesy, hoping to conciliate the lady, who he saw was in a dangerous mood. But his tone only made Wilfred's manner appear colder in Kate's eyes, and, as was her wont, she grew more defiant, as her pain increased.

"That depends what you call good authority," she sneered, in a tone that made the blood rush furiously into Ned's face.

"Have you said anything of all this to my mother?" he asked stiffly.

"I told her what I believed to be strictly true."

"But if you found that you had been mistaken, would you mind telling her so? It would be very generous of you to do so."

"But I have not found out my mistake yet."

"You know what you told me about meeting Olivetti at B——. Have you said anything about him to your husband?"

"I would believe nothing against Mrs Huntingdon," broke in Wilfred sternly, thus betraying his knowledge of the whole affair.

"I think it only fair to my wife to inform you, however, that she went to B—— expressly to avoid Olivetti, who was then painting her aunt's portrait at Trouville. I feel that it is an insult to my wife even to breathe her name in connection with that fellow's; but Mrs Brierly shall not be able to say for the future that she *believes* the tales she spreads about my wife to be *true*. Madame de Clinville was deeply offended with her artist for running away from her as he did at Trouville, and will have nothing to say to him here; so now you see how little foundation your suspicions had, and I trust that you will be too just to cling to them after what I have told you."

"I am not a monster of jealousy or injustice," said Kate proudly. "You will confess that the circumstances looked suspicious; and as I had been deceived once by your wife, I naturally supposed her to be capable of deceiving me again. But if you are satisfied with her conduct, it is not for me to blame it."

"Then I will prolong this painful discussion

no further," said Ned, turning to depart. "Good-bye, Mrs Brierly," and with a cold bow he left the room.

He went upstairs to his mother's apartments, but found her and Miss Boyd ready dressed to go to the Corso, where seats had been engaged for them on a balcony, to watch the Carnival. This was the last and best day of it, and the old ladies were in a fever of impatience to start.

"Oh, here you are at last, Ned!" cried his mother as he entered. "How late you are; the Carnival will have commenced already."

"I want you to give up the Carnival to-day, mother mine," replied Ned, kissing her.

"Oh, Ned, and it is the best day of all!"

"But you will give it up for me, mother?"

"You know I would do anything for you, my boy."

"Did Mrs Brierly speak to you about Ida?"

"She told me what I was truly grieved to hear," replied Mrs Huntingdon, considerably surprised by her son's sudden change of tone.

"Well, I have just discovered that not one of her tales was true."

"Not true!" echoed the old lady, aghast.

"Kate Brierly has just confessed so herself."

"But she could not have told a lie, Ned," cried Mrs Huntingdon, in horror.

"She spoke without sufficient authority for what she said, and now she finds she is mistaken. Mother, we have misjudged Ida cruelly, and I want you to come with me and see her now. I have seen her already, and she is going back to England with me."

Mrs Huntingdon hesitated, for though she could not doubt Ned's word, she was slow to relinquish an idea once conceived, and she could not divest herself of the belief that her daughter-in-law was an artful little minx; but Ned's influence was supreme with her, and he knew how to manage her. He did not attempt to argue with her, but merely stated the fact of Ida's innocence firmly, and reminded her that if she accompanied him to visit his wife, she would see her grandchild.

This last inducement carried the day with the old lady, and she finally departed with her son, though not without many inward misgivings. Her carriage was waiting for her at the door, and Ned ordered the coachman to drive through the quietest streets to Palazzo Visconti. He began to wonder now whether he would find Ida at home, for he remembered that she had told him that morning that she and her aunt had been invited to the balcony of a friend to watch the Carnival; and as he had said nothing to her about returning (for he

had been extremely doubtful whether he could induce his mother to come), he thought it quite possible she might be out now. It would be provoking if she were, but still it was a great thing to have got his mother to recognise her at all. Ida could always return the visit and so make friends with the old lady, even if she missed her now.

They reached the Palazzo, and ascended the stairs to the De Clinvilles' apartments, where they found no one at home, as Ned had feared. Madame la Marquise had gone to see the Carnival, said the lackey who opened the door to them; but Madame Huntingdon was in the garden, if monsieur wished to see her.

"We will go to her there," said Ned. "Come, mother; she must have remained at home in hopes of seeing us."

. . . . . .

Rita Visconti had kept her promise to Ida, and refused to allow old Betta to bring her any more messages from the handsome artist; and (also influenced by Ida) she became more reconciled to the idea of marrying young De Maroni, and began to find his conversation more interesting and amusing than she had done at first. She was at an age when girls often worship some other member of their own sex, and set them up as their models and patron saints, to be copied and admired in

every possible way; and though Ida Huntingdon was a heretic, Rita had chosen her for her beau-ideal of every feminine grace and virtue. She was the first person who had ever treated the girl as an equal in sense and judgment, and Rita was flattered by the confidence reposed in her, while at the same time she felt deeply interested in her friend's romantic history, for this was the first real living romance she had ever come across.

But to-day she was in a naughty mood, and the good influence had less weight than usual with her. Her mother, brother, and aunt had all gone to see the Carnival, and had left her alone, because they said there was no room for her on their friend's balcony. Assuredly it was hard, especially to a child like Rita, and she felt very cross and rebellious, and ripe for any mischief that might offer itself to her. Contessa Visconti supposed Betta to be quite sufficient chaperon for her daughter during the few hours she would be absent from her, for the old woman had nursed the late Count and was supposed—and rightly—to be firmly attached to the family. Rita was her special pet, for, owing to her delicate health as a child, she had not been sent so early to a convent as her sister, and so Betta felt that she belonged more exclusively to her. She had often spent

her holidays in visiting the girl in her convent, and now that she had got her home again the old woman's happiness was supreme. She used to weave brilliant romances for her darling, and it was the height of her ambition to see her well married. Unfortunately she did her best to fill her young mistress's head with all sorts of romantic nonsense, and though she impressed upon her that she would do well to marry Signor de Maroni since he was so rich, she would also have liked her to encourage Olivetti's attentions, not only because he paid her well for carrying his messages, but because she took as keen an interest in Rita's love affairs as if they had been her own. To-day she came into the *salotto* after the departure of the Contessa and her sister, and found Rita in tears, and began to pour forth expressions of pity and sympathy, intermingled with caresses and endearing epithets.

"Never mind, my darling," she croned; "when you are married, you will amuse yourself as much as any of them."

"But I am so dull *to-day*, Betta," sobbed the girl.

"And why should you not amuse yourself to-day? If you will, you can find better amusement at home than the Signora Contessa will at the Carnival."

"How do you mean?" asked Rita, drying

her tears, and looking up eagerly into her nurse's cunning, wrinkled old face.

"Supposing a fine lover was waiting to see the Contessina in the garden. The Contessa, and Signora Monti, and the Signor Conte are from home, and so are the other families in the house; the very servants are out—as many of them as could get a holiday, at least. So no one will find out who has been in the garden."

Rita flushed and hesitated; she remembered Ida's warning, but she could not believe that any serious consequences would arise from her meeting Count Olivetti once, and she certainly felt very much inclined for a piece of mischief.

"He is in the garden even now," added Betta persuasively, "devouring his heart with impatience. Ah, figlia mia, how can you be so cruel to the poor youth?"

It ended by Betta's persuading her young charge to grant Olivetti an interview, and with a beating heart and trembling steps the girl descended to the large garden which lay behind the Palazzo, and which the Visconti reserved for their private use, though they had expressly invited Madame de Clinville and her niece to walk in it whenever they pleased.

Betta had whispered that Olivetti was waiting in the pergola, a sort of long covered wall,

completely shut in by a trellis-work of roses, through which the bright midday sun scarcely penetrated; and thither Rita betook herself, feeling rather frightened now that she was actually to meet this stranger, and wondering how she should manage to get rid of him by-and-by, and whether he would get her into any scrapes in future. Supposing he insisted on meeting her again, would she dare to refuse him?

She reached the pergola and glanced down it. Yes, there at the far end of the walk stood the figure of a man, wrapped in a long cloak, and with a broad-brimmed sombrero drawn well down over his face. He was standing within the shadow of the pergola, as if to conceal himself; but his back was turned towards Rita, and he did not hear her light footsteps as she advanced down the pergola towards him. She was close behind him, when suddenly he sprang forwards with a low exclamation, as if addressing some one; and Rita paused in alarm, for an answering cry told that some one else was in the garden and had discovered her lover's presence. Too frightened to fly, she stood rooted to the spot, and through a gap in the rosy wall of the pergola she saw Olivetti standing beside—Ida Huntingdon! Was it possible? Rita pressed her hands across her eyes to assure herself that

she was not dreaming; but an angry flush rose to her cheek as she heard her supposed lover pouring out prayers and protestations to Mrs Huntingdon.

"Ida," he gasped, looking at her with eyes so wild and haggard that Ida could have found it in her heart to pity him if she had not been so indignant; "Ida! for the love of Heaven, speak to me. Only one word! It is all I ask. If you knew how your image has haunted me—"

"Let me pass, Signor Conte," interrupted Ida haughtily. "I have nothing to say to you except to bid you leave my presence for ever. If you were a gentleman, you would not persecute me in this cowardly manner."

"By Heavens, this is too much!" cried Olivetti, seizing her hands furiously and forcing her to face him. "You gibe at and upbraid me for my constancy! you, whom I have ever loved so truly! You make me feel ready to kill you and myself too. Say that you love me! Say that you do not care for that English fool to whom you were sold, or I swear by the holy Madonna and all the saints—"

The man was beside himself with passion, and an Italian in a passion is little better than a madman. Ida was pale and trembling with fear, but she could not bring herself to say

what he wished, though she felt that it was really dangerous to exasperate him further just now.

Rita, in her hiding-place, was trembling also with alarm, and was thinking of flying to call assistance, when suddenly there appeared from behind some bushes a fine, broad-shouldered Englishman, with an old lady leaning on his arm. At sight of him Rita gave a gasp of relief; but Ida uttered a startled cry of fear and wrenched her hands forcibly from Olivetti's, while a bright flush rushed over her pale, delicate face. At the same instant Olivetti caught sight of his rival, and with a low, muttered curse he sprang upon him. There was the swift flash of something bright through the air, and then Ned lay stretched on the turf, white and death-like, and with a dark red stream flowing from his side, where the cowardly stiletto had pierced it. With trembling limbs Ida approached him, and sinking on her knees beside him, caught one of his cold hands helplessly in both her own, fancying somehow that she could help him, if only she had hold of him.

"Go away, go away! How dare you touch him!" screamed Mrs Huntingdon, pushing away her daughter-in-law's hands with a strength that was born of the excitement of

the moment. "He is dead, my boy! my boy! and you are his murderess! Go away —you shall not come near him!"

Ida rose from her knees with a gesture of hopeless despair, for, stunned and terrified though she was, she had sufficient sense to know that to struggle over the wounded man could only hurt him further.

"Oh, dearest Signora, who is he?" sobbed Rita, clinging closely to Ida. And as the latter answered tremulously, "He is my husband," the girl burst into a fresh fit of tears, for like a flash of lightning the whole truth was revealed to her, and she understood that Olivetti must be the lover of whom Ida had told her, and for whose sake her husband had left her. And now he had returned, to find this man holding his wife's hands!

"Oh, forgive me, forgive me, Signora," she cried. "It is my fault—all my fault!"

"Nonsense, child; you did not know," said Ida, coming out of her dream with a start. "Do not cry, but call some one, for the love of Heaven. Ah, he will bleed to death!" she added, kneeling beside him again and endeavouring to stanch the wound. But again the old mother drove her off, as if she had been trying to murder instead of assist him; and she was forced to stand passively by till Rita returned with assistance in the shape of

two men-servants, one the old general factotum of the Visconti, and the other the De Clinvilles' smart French lackey. Between them they carried the wounded man to the carriage, and then Ida saw him driven away from her, for Mrs Huntingdon refused to admit her into the carriage, and it was impossible to make a scene before the servants. All she could do was to send her aunt's servant to the best doctor in the town, to request him to hasten immediately to her husband's aid; and then she went upstairs to her room, and sat for hours as if she had been turned to stone, too utterly wretched to move or even to weep. So Madame de Clinville found her when she returned home later in the day, and in considerable alarm she inquired what was the matter, and listened aghast as her niece unfolded the whole tale to her.

"And you let him go home alone?" she asked at last.

"His mother would not let me enter her carriage. Oh, Aunt Nina, he may be dead or dying, and I cannot see him!" and burying her face in her hands, Ida groaned aloud. "If he dies thinking badly of me, I shall go mad," she moaned.

"Come, you must not let him do. that," cried the Marquise. *Dio*, if we all sat down

and cried when things went wrong, what would become of us? He may not really die, carina; and then you will see him and explain. Come, your father is downstairs; perhaps he may know how to help you."

"My father?" asked Ida absently.

"Yes; he arrived in Rome yesterday. Will you not come and see him?"

"No, no; he can do no good," sighed Ida, to whom her father was little more than a name. But suddenly she started up, exclaiming, "I must go to Ned; I must go to him. He must not die without seeing me and hearing that I am true to him. Aunt Nina, I must go at once."

"Truly it is the best thing you can do, I think. Without doubt he will wish to see you when he gets better. Your father must take you to him."

Madame departed to inform her brother of what had occurred, while Ida proceeded to don her walking dress with feverish haste; but before she was quite ready the Marquise returned, looking vexed and perplexed.

"Victor has returned," she began—Victor being the servant whom Ida had despatched to the doctor, and whom she had also instructed to wait at Ned's house till the doctor's examination was over and his fiat given forth.

"And Ned?" gasped Ida, turning deadly pale. "Will—will he die?"

"Ah, bah! he will get better, I tell you," replied Madame, more reassuringly than truthfully, for Victor had not brought a very hopeful account of young Huntingdon's state. "But here is a note from Mrs Huntingdon to you. Perhaps to call you to her son's side."

With trembling hands Ida tore open the note, but a bright flush passed over her face as she read it, and then died away, leaving it whiter even than before.

"They want the child," she gasped, handing the note to her aunt.

It was merely a few formal lines from Mrs Huntingdon, saying that it would be a great comfort to Ned to have his child with him now, and requesting Ida to send Elsie to them, with the woman who accompanied Madame de Clinville's servant.

"And you mean to send her?" asked the Marquise.

"Certainly," replied Ida firmly, but bringing out her words with difficulty. "If Ned wants his child, I shall not keep her from him. He is good—he surely will not keep her from me—always."

"You must not let him," retorted her aunt sharply; but Ida left the room to go to the

nursery, without making any reply. She told Marie to pack up a few things for the child in a bag, but she herself dressed the little thing in its hat and boots, nor would she allow any one else to touch it till it was ready to depart. She listened to its merry prattle in agony too great for words to describe, for might this not be the very last time she would ever have the child with her as her own? But she forced herself to smile and answer the little girl's remarks as cheerfully as she could, for if Elsie were taken from her, she wished her at least to have a sweet remembrance of her in her young mind. When at last everything was ready and there remained no further trifle to be lingered over, Ida carried the child into the drawing-room to bid Madame de Clinville good-bye before delivering her into the charge of Mrs Huntingdon's maid; and here she found her father, whose presence she had entirely forgotten until this minute.

"Am I to accompany you to your husband?" he asked, embracing her kindly.

"I am not going," said Ida, in a low, choked voice.

"*Dio*, and why not?" cried the Marquise quickly, while her brother looked gravely and inquiringly at his daughter.

"He would not have sent for the child like this if he wanted me," replied Ida huskily.

"I think you are wrong, my child," said Count Laurenti gravely. "Your husband may not have known that his mother was sending for Elsie, and may think you unkind not to go to him."

But Ida only shook her head, and rang the bell to summon Mrs Huntingdon's maid. She did not like trusting Elsie to a stranger, but she had no choice in the matter, since Mrs Huntingdon had expressly said there was no room in their house for the child's nurse. Presently the woman entered, and Ida approached her, intending to place Elsie in her arms, but started back with a little, suppressed expression of dismay as she recognised her as her old maid, Julie Lemercier.

"You are Mrs Huntingdon's maid?" she asked coldly, recovering herself instantly.

"Pardon, Madame, I am Mrs Brierly's maid; Mrs Huntingdon is without one," replied the woman quietly, and without pretending to recognise her old mistress.

Ida said no more, but her fears were considerably augmented by finding that Julie was one of the household where her husband was. Kate Brierly alone might work mischief enough, but with Julie to help her what might she not achieve? All that night long Ida never once lay down on her bed, but paced to and fro in her chamber, wondering

how Ned was—whether he had recovered consciousness, and what he was thinking of her. She sent Marie to inquire for him again late that night, and the girl returned with a very sad account of him. He was conscious, she said; but the doctor held out very little hope of his recovery. And in the morning he was reported better, but still in great danger; and in the afternoon to be much worse again. Count Laurenti went into his daughter's room after the receipt of this last report, and was shocked to find how ill and wan she was looking. Since the previous afternoon she had neither slept nor eaten, and now she seemed thoroughly worn out with fatigue and anxiety.

"My dear child," said Laurenti authoritatively, "this sort of thing must not go on, or you will kill yourself. You must let me order the carriage and take you to your husband. He is too ill to send for you, but he will be pleased if you go to him; and what will he think of you if you make no effort to see him? He will think you selfish and cold-hearted at the least."

"You are right, father," replied Ida languidly. "I did not think of that before. I will go to him if you wish it." Anything would be better than this passive waiting, she felt; and her father's manner was so peremptory and yet so kind, that she yielded to

him unresistingly, feeling that it was a comfort to have some one to tell her what to do.

They persuaded her to take a cup of coffee before starting, and this gave her strength to bear up till they reached the hotel in the Piazza di Spagna where the Huntingdons were located.

Count Laurenti bid his daughter remain in the carriage while he went in to announce her arrival, and she obeyed him unquestioningly, and remained leaning back in the carriage, wondering anxiously whether Ned would be pleased to see her or not. Slowly the minutes dragged past, and still her father did not return, and Ida began to grow sick and faint with anxiety. Was Ned dead? or did he decline to see her? Surely something must be wrong, or her father would not leave her so long in suspense. At last Count Laurenti appeared at the door—at last! and Ida leant forward and held her breath, to hear what he would say. But he only sprang into the carriage, and shouted "Home" to the servant in a tone of suppressed anger.

"Oh, father, what is the matter?" gasped poor Ida wildly, clasping her father's arm with both her trembling hands.

"He will not see you," returned Laurenti curtly; then as Ida sank back and covered her face, with a groan, he added kindly,—

"But of course he will see you when he is better. He is too ill to bear the excitement."

But Ida only shook her head hopelessly, for she saw that her father did not believe what he said, and only spoke so to comfort her. She remained with her face buried in her hands till they reached Palazzo Visconti, when she got out of the carriage and went quietly upstairs to her own room, where she locked herself in and refused to see any one for the rest of the day. Several times her aunt came to the door, but Ida begged so earnestly to be left alone, that the Marquise had to retire without effecting an entrance.

"Truly she is consumed by grief, pauvretta," she said to her brother. "But she cannot live on her grief. She must eat something, or she will assuredly be ill. I go to her with this soup and force it down her throat, if she will not eat it otherwise."

It was six o'clock when Madame again invaded her niece's chamber, and this time she found Ida pliable and obedient enough, and after making her finish the soup, persuaded her to go to bed, and, early though it was, Ida soon fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. She slept on till three o'clock next morning, when she awoke with a start, and remained thinking and fretting for hours, till the sun

had risen and the streets were all alive and bustling. She got up as usual when her maid called her, and joined the others at the mid-day breakfast, though she could not be persuaded to eat much. She listened to the discussion between Monsieur and Madame de Clinville respecting the best time for returning to Paris, with a sort of dreamy wonder whether she would be with them or not; and she was vaguely conscious that her father was very kind to her, and began to think that perhaps he did care for her more than she had hitherto supposed. But through it all she felt as if she were in a dream; only now and then the dreamy feeling left her for an instant, and her misery forced itself upon her with sudden, cruel vividness and distinctness. At these minutes she wondered she did not go mad; but then the hopeless, torpid feeling would creep over her again, and the pain in her heart subsided to a low, ceaseless ache which never left her.

As they were rising from table, the servant entered with a note which he handed to Ida, and at sight of which the blood came surging to her cheek, and then rushed back again to her heart, leaving her deadly pale; for she had instantly recognised the writing as her mother-in-law's, and she knew she must be writing about Ned—or Elsie. Which was it?

For a minute the letters seemed to dance and swim before her eyes, then she made out the words,—

"Ned is asking for you. Come to him as soon as you can;" and with a cry of joy she sprang from her seat, and rushed out of the room to dress, flinging the note to her aunt by way of explanation.

"Parbleu! I believe truly that she cares for her Englishman after all," laughed the Marquise. "I suppose we must order the carriage for her again."

Ida was ready long before the carriage appeared, and in a fever of impatience she begged her father to walk with her to the Piazza di Spagna, and at last he found himself obliged to yield, and they set out together, Ida declaring that she had learnt how to walk in England. It was some way, however, from Palazzo Visconti to the Piazza di Spagna, and by the time they reached the hotel Ida was beginning to get very tired. She climbed the stairs bravely, however, to Mrs Huntingdon's room, where she and her father were left alone for nearly a quarter of an hour, during which time Ida went through alternate fevers of hope, impatience, and despair, and at last began to fancy that Ned must have changed his mind about seeing her after all. Just as she reached this point in

her reflections, however, the door opened, and little Miss Boyd entered, looking highly delighted at seeing Ida again, but not quite certain how far she would be right to let this appear.

"Mr Ned is much better," she began hurriedly. "The doctor has been with him; that was why you were kept waiting. But will you come to him now?"

Ida needed no second bidding, but rose instantly and followed Miss Boyd upstairs to Ned's room—a very small one, near the top of the house, for he never spent much money on himself now. Miss Boyd drew back at the door, and signed to Ida to enter the room alone; and with trembling limbs she obeyed, and found herself again in Ned's presence. He was in bed, lying back among his pillows, and looking far less ill than Ida had expected—indeed, she looked almost the more ill of the two. As she entered he held out his hand towards her with a faint smile, and she clasped it passionately to her lips, and burst into a storm of tears and sobs over it.

"Ida, my darling, why do you cry like this?" asked Ned faintly. "I am much better, the doctor says, and likely to pull through now."

"Oh, I am glad," she replied, as her sobs gradually subsided. "But why were you so

cruel as to send me away when I came to you yesterday? But, of course, it was your mother's doing, not yours."

"I never knew of your coming, darling. I was in high fever yesterday, and unconscious; but through the night I grew much better, and this morning I made them send for you."

"But, Ned, what did you think when—you saw that—dreadful man with me in the garden? It was not my fault—"

"Of course not; how could you suppose I should think it was? Have you been fretting about this, dear? You look quite ill—a great deal worse than I do."

"I have been so wretched," she sobbed. "I thought you would think I had deceived you, and I felt that if you died thinking ill of me, I should go mad. And then I was afraid you would take Elsie from me—"

"Ida, how could you think I should do such a thing? Ring the bell and send for the child."

Ida obeyed, and then said hesitatingly,—

"And will your mother not see me, Ned?"

"You know what she is when she once gets an idea into her head; and I have been too ill to argue with her. But she loves me, and will do what I ask her."

"You mean she will forgive me for what I have never done?"

"Darling, you know she is old and narrow-minded, though she is a good woman at heart. You will bear with her, will you not, for my sake?"

Ida flushed, and bit her lip; but just then the entrance of little Elsie changed the current of the discussion, and for a minute or two the mother and child were entirely taken up with each other, to the exclusion of every thought of other things. Ned watched them with a smile which had still something sad in it. Ida would never kiss him as she kissed her child, he felt sure; yet he felt that he ought to be content, now he knew she cared for no one else; and perhaps in time he might teach her really to love him—who knew?

. . . . . .

Ned's recovery progressed rapidly after this, and Ida never left him again, even to return to her aunt's house. Old Mrs Huntingdon could not endure to be banished from her son's bedside, and in spite of his wife's presence she at last returned to his room, where she helped Ida to nurse him. She was thus thrown into daily contact with her daughter-in-law, and little by little her prejudices were conquered by Ida's unfailing sweetness to herself and apparent devotion to Ned. It was a difficult matter to disabuse her of any fancy which she once took into her head; but at

last she began to comprehend the meaning of her son's oft-repeated arguments in his wife's behalf; and then, too, she was shocked to see how really ill the two days of doubt and anxiety had made Ida. She saw, too, that unless Ned took his wife back with him he would never settle in England again, and so she at length consented to forgive Ida formally—for what she had never done.

They all went home together in April, and until they could get a house of their own Ned and Ida went to stay at Tyndale Court. The Huntingdons had been in considerable alarm during the last three years lest Ned should never return to his wife and home at all, and so they welcomed Ida warmly, and made a great deal of her during her visit to them. At first Ned thought of taking a house in Seaville; but as Colonel L'Estrange was leaving The Folly (he wished to settle in Devonshire, where he thought he could grow his flowers to better advantage), Sir Pomphry insisted on giving it to his nephew to live in, and Ned could not refuse a house that was offered to him rent free, though he would have preferred being farther away from Lynborough if possible.

But things were changed in Lynborough since he and Ida had first lived in it. For one thing Mrs Williamson had left it, and so also had the

Carrs. Old Mr Carr had died about a year after Ned and Ida had parted; and his eldest son Dick, being very delicate, had gone out to try his fortune in Australia, where Bella was married to a thriving young farmer. Harry, the second boy, had got a clerkship in Glasgow, and his mother had gone there to be near him, on the death of her husband. Her two youngest girls were married, one to a young Scotch minister, and the other to a doctor in a country town in Lancashire; but Emily still lived with her, for the poor girl had never forgotten Mr Williamson, and refused all other offers of marriage for his sake, though there seemed small likelihood of his ever shaking himself sufficiently free from his mother's thraldom to marry her. The absence of this family made a great difference to Ida, however, and enabled her to steer her way in the country much more easily than in the old days when she first came to it; and she found her old worries completely vanished during these three years of her absence. Her mother-in-law was never very cordial to her, it is true, but she remained outwardly friendly towards her, and was forced to admit that Ned seemed happy enough now. And so he was; for as the time wore on, he began to feel that he had at last won his wife's love, and that he was as dear to her as either Elsie or the little

boy who was born to them about a twelvemonth after their return to England—greatly to the delight of Sir Pomphry, who had never quite forgiven Ida because her first child had been a girl.

Kate Brierly's end was apparently quite as happy as her old rival's. She returned to Ireland with her husband shortly before the Huntingdons left Rome, and there she remained with him for ten months, when old Sir George Brierly died, and Wilfred was called to succeed him at Brierswood. This was a change after Kate's own heart, and it was with more joy than was quite consistent with the sad nature of the occasion that she prepared to accompany her husband back to England. She made an excellent mistress to Brierswood, in a social point of view, and by her tact and cleverness she at once took the lead in the society of that part of the country. But, for all her social successes, she can hardly be called a very happy woman. Her husband has changed from the good-natured, rather weak lad whom she married, into a firm, self-contained man; and though he is uniformly kind to his wife, she is afraid of him in her heart, and does not venture to defy him so openly as she used to do in the days when she was the tyrant and he the slave. She and Ida meet frequently, and always treat each other

with friendly civility, if not with much cordiality. No doubt they dislike one another in their private hearts, but they feel that it is best to bury the past in oblivion, and not display their personal feelings before the world. And so let us leave them.

Of our little Italian friend Rita it need only be added that the scene in the Palazzo garden had a good effect on her, and made her determine never to have another clandestine rendezvous as long as she lived. Soon after Ida's arrival in England she received a letter from her, informing her that she was married to Marco de Maroni, who was one of the best of husbands; and promising not to forget all the good advice Ida had given her. A few years later, when Ned and his wife were travelling in Italy, they met the young De Maroni, and Ida was quite satisfied to see how bright and happy Rita was looking.

Of Count Olivetti she saw nothing more after that meeting in the garden of Palazzo Visconti; but two years later, Madame de Clinville wrote to her that he had gone altogether mad, and was now confined in an asylum. And doubtless Ida was not sorry to know that for the future she was safe from his unwelcome attentions.

THE END.

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