

is, isn't he?—and the only atonement I can make is to abstain from tormenting you in the present or the future."

This assurance has by no means a cheering effect on Miss Vaughn—being, indeed, exactly opposed to what she desires to hear.

"Torment me!" she repeats. "You could not do that if you tried! Do you think I have forgotten—anything? Ah!" (a sigh), "women don't forget easily. It would be better for them if they did."

"Would it?" says Tarleton. "That's odd! I thought they had a remarkable facility in that way; and I certainly never fancied that you were troubled with recollections of the victims you have crushed in your triumphal progress."

She makes a slight impatient movement. "You only talk in this way to vex me," she says. "I cannot believe that your memory is so short that you do not know better! I am sure you have not forgotten—all that you might remember."

"No," he says, "I remember a good deal—more, perhaps, than you do. But is it worth while to go back to these old scores? If I unwittingly began the subject, pray accept my apologies. I am not often guilty of reviving matters which are, or ought to be, buried in the tomb of the Capulets."

"Frank!" she cries, with a thrill in her voice which almost startles him, "how can you be so cruel? You know—you must know—that I could not have acted differently!"

"I am willing to believe it," he answers. "Don't think that there is any need to defend yourself at this late day. I have learned to appreciate my folly as it deserves."

"Your folly! Have you learned to consider it only that?" she asks in a low tone.

"Yes," he replies, meeting her glance with a cool steadiness which she understands; "thanks to the lesson you were kind enough to teach me, I have learned to consider it only that."

There is no hunt the next morning. Kate is waked at daylight by the sound of falling rain, and she turns over and resigns herself to slumber again, knowing that there will be no winding of horns, no baying of hounds, no gathering of huntsmen, in such weather. Indeed, the outlook is dreary enough when the breakfast-bell sounds, and the inmates of the house begin to straggle down-stairs in detachments. Whither has all the bright beauty of the earth vanished? Instead of glowing tints and tender haze, there is shrouding mist and falling rain, and an angry wind tearing the bright leaves from the trees and scattering them broadcast.

But even such a day as this has its charm in a country-house full of gay young people. The gentlemen grumble a little over their hunting disappointment, and indulge in a few gloomy forebodings with regard to the races of the coming week; but these things do not weigh on their spirits, and they are quite ready to make themselves agreeable during the wet, overcast morning. Only Mr. Vaughn seems restless and ill at ease.

"I wanted to go to Arlingford," he says to Kate, who remarks his impatience, "and it is provoking to be detained by such disagreeable weather."

"If I were a man I should not mind bad weather," she remarks. "On the contrary, I think I should like to go out in a storm. There is something exhilarating in riding in the teeth of the wind—and it would be directly in your face if you went to Arlingford."

"A pleasant prospect, certainly?" he says. "I do not think I shall take advantage of it, though the delay is very vexatious. I want to see Burdock particularly, and—"

He stops, and Kate, before she considers, asks, "Who is Burdock?"

"He is one of the owners of a racing-stable," Mr. Vaughn answers, "who is expected to reach Arlingford to-day, with several horses."

"And you are anxious to see them. That is very natural; but you have all next week before you in which to do so."

"It is not the horses I am anxious to see; I know them very well. It is Burdock himself. But it is impossible to go out in this deluge! Will you come and take a game of billiards? It is the best means of killing time."

Kate agrees, and, while she is enjoying the billiards—she plays fairly, and is devoted to the game—Miss Vaughn is sitting in a bay-window of the drawing-room, with an unread novel in her lap, and her eyes, which to day are rather sombre than brilliant, turned to the outer world, where the rain is falling in slanting sheets, and the trees are tossing their boughs in the high October gale. One glance at her listless face is enough to show that *ennui* in its worst form has marked her for its own.

"What a fool I was to come here!" she is thinking. "How absurd of me to expect anything save what I have found—ineffable boredom! Can I make any excuse for leaving, I wonder? I could, if it were not for Ashton; but I am sure he will insist on my remaining until he is ready to go. As if I care for these stupid races!—or as if it matters to me whether he succeeds with this girl or not! How rapid and tiresome and silly these people are!"—a peal of merry laughter has at this instant risen from a card-table at the other end of the room. "What a fool I was to come!"

These thoughts are not cheerful company, and she is about to take refuge in the pages of her novel, when Randal enters the room, and, after a quick glance around, discovers her retreat and advances toward it. She is not sorry to see him. Though she has left the group at the further end of the apartment, and declined all their advan-

ces, she by no means feels equal to the burden of solitude; so she lifts her eyes with a faint smile, as he draws near and sinks on an ottoman at her feet. It is a necessity of life with her that some one should fill this position; and since the man whom she wishes to see there has respectfully declined further service, she is willing for Randal to swing the censer, rather than that it should not be swung at all.

Randal is ready to serve in this capacity for an unlimited length of time. He begins his duties by remarking: "I am afraid this pastoral mode of existence wearies you! It was Dr. Johnson, I believe, who said that all people who live in the country must be either stupid or miserable. I think that, to-day, you belong to the latter class."

"It is kind of you to say so," she answers, languidly. "I feel more as if I belong to the former. I am stupid, and altogether out of sorts. I suppose it is the effect of the weather."

"Such a day is enough to bring a legion of blue-devils upon one. But is there no way of driving them away from you?"

"I fear not. Nothing can rouse me, so I advise you to go and find some more amusing companion."

"I don't like amusing companions, and one more interesting I could not find."

"Are you sure of that? Moods do not add to interest, and they are a besetting weakness of mine."

"Don't call them a weakness. They are like the lights and shadows on a landscape. Who cares for broad, unchequered sunshine?"

"Why, you are poetical as well as complimentary," she says; and he has his reward in the gratified smile which dimples the corners of her mouth.

"It would be a dull lump of clay that you could not inspire," he answers. "You inspired me long ago with something which has, so far, won from you little or no reward. You know what that is very well."

"Do I?" She is not averse to the conversation taking this turn, but she does not lead him on by any show of interest. "Perhaps so; but I have already told you that I am stupid to-day."

"That is the tone you always take with me," he says. "Why is it that you do not think me worthy of an answer? Am I not as good as other men?—and certainly not one of them can love you better than I do!"

"Speak for yourself," she retorts; "it is wisest. You cannot measure the love of other men, though you think that you know something of your own. As for my not thinking you worthy of an answer, that is your mistake. I have answered you: I have told you that you have a chance. I can say no more than that."

"But you told me that months ago. Has it become greater, or less, since then?"

"How can I tell! There are so many things to be considered. You must wait until I have leisure to weigh them all."

"That is what I have been told," he says. "I have been warned that you will never answer definitely—that you prefer to keep men dangling for months and years on a thread of hope."

"Warned!" she repeats. Her eyes expand with something like a flash in their depths.

"Warned—by whom?"

"That does not matter—" he begins, when she interrupts him imperiously.

"It does matter! Tell me at once!"

"So many people have been good enough to offer me such a warning, that it would be difficult for you to arraign them all," he replies, evasively.

"Has any one offered anything of the kind since you have been here?" she asks, with her glance bent on him.

He understands her meaning, and hesitates a moment. Then the temptation is irresistible. He will violate no confidence, utter no untruth, so he answers, "Tarleton said something of the sort yesterday—but the story had grown old in my ears before he repeated it."

"Tarleton!" she echoes. Her eyes give one great flash, and then the lids sink over them, a flame of colour darts into her cheeks, her hand closes nervously over the book in her lap. "What did he say?" she goes on. "That I am heartless and mercenary, and care only for the gratification of my vanity?"

"No," answers Randal, indignantly. "Do you think I would have allowed any man to speak of you like that? He merely said that I am wasting time in pursuing a shadow."

"Well," she says, coldly, "why do you not heed him? Why do you continue to waste time in pursuing what may indeed only prove a shadow?"

"Because I cannot help it," he answers, with genuine passion in his voice. "You know that I may be a fool, but so long as you tell me that I have a chance, my life is in your hands."

"That is a way you men have of talking," she says, lifting her shoulders with a careless gesture. "It is romantic, but absurd. Your life is not in my hands at all—I utterly decline such a responsibility. We do very well as we are. Let the future take care of itself."

"You may think that we do very well as we are—I don't. There is a difference of opinion to begin with."

"Very likely," she answers. "Divergencies of opinion are common on all subjects. Can you think of nothing more entertaining as a topic of conversation? What gloomy, depressing weather! By-the-by, do you really think Frank Tarleton means to settle here?"

"He talks of it. Whether he means it or will do it, is another question."

"What agreement did he and Ashton come to yesterday about the horse?"

"No agreement at all. Tarleton asks more than your brother will give. I think myself that he overrates the horse. Burdock talks of buying him; but he will be influenced by the manner in which he acquits himself at the races next week."

"Does he intend—Frank Tarleton, I mean—to part with all his horses?"

"No. He has a beautiful filly named Bonny Kate, which he means to keep."

He speaks significantly; but the fact which he states is in itself significant enough. Again the colour deepens in Miss Vaughn's cheek.

"So he keeps Bonny Kate?" she says, with a slight laugh. "What does that mean?"

"I think it means that he has a decided penchant for Kate," answers Randal. "It will probably not last—he was always fickle as the wind—but it may interfere with Ashton's plan, if she reciprocates it."

"And do you think she does?"

"Impossible to say. He is a wise man who can read a woman, and I have never claimed such a wisdom. You ought to be able to tell. Women can read one another."

"I never thought of such a thing until yesterday," she says, speaking with an effort. "It is likely enough on her side. I will observe more closely."

The storm continues during the whole of the day; and the next day being Sunday, there is no hunt. Those who are devotionally inclined, go to Arlingford in the morning to church. Those who are not exemplary about fulfilling their religious duties, stay at home.

The afternoon is of crystalline clearness, and Miss Brooke proposes a walk to Kate.

"Just you and I," she says. "We will not ask any one else to accompany us."

"I do not want any one else," the girl replies, truthfully.

So they set forth, and are soon on the hills. The late storm has made havoc in the forests; but they are still beautiful, and the atmosphere is inexpressibly fresh and clear. Across the purple fields stretch belts of woods, glowing with autumn tints, and far in the west lie the marvellous blue mountains.

"I want to go there on a deer-hunt," says Kate, pointing to the last. "Will you promise to take me this year, but he has not been able to go. He says that he will certainly do so next autumn."

"Perhaps you may not be here next autumn," says Miss Brooke—they are seated on the summit of a height, with the fair prospect spread out at their feet. "Do you not think there might be some things better than a deer-hunt?"

"That is almost exactly what Mr. Vaughn asked me the other day," says Kate. "Probably there are some things better, but since I know nothing about them, and am not likely ever to know anything, it is well to be content with what I have, is it not?"

"Yes; since a contented spirit is better than a fortune; but you are rather young to decide that you will never know any other life than this which you lead now."

"How should I ever know any other?" asks Kate, cheerfully. Evidently the unlikelihood of such a thing does not weigh on her spirits. She loves every hill that rises against the sky, every stream in the valley below her. As she sits, throned on a rock, her eyes wander over the scene with an expression of affection, at which Miss Brooke smiles.

"You have a loyal heart," she says, "but you have also a gay disposition, and I think you would find much to enjoy in a different life. You ask how you are to know it. That question is easily answered; come with me when I leave here, and I will give you as much pleasure as you can desire."

The words are quietly and simply spoken, but it is safe to say that if the rock on which she is seated had suddenly split open, Kate could scarcely have been more amazed. Sophy's and Janet's jests have not in the least prepared her for such a proposal. She looks at Miss Brooke as if she can hardly realize what she has heard.

"Come with you!" she repeats. "I—I do not understand."

"It is surely not difficult to understand," says the elder lady, taking her hand. "I talked the matter over with your uncle yesterday. He leaves the decision altogether with you. I want to take you with me when I leave Fairfield; I want to introduce you into society, and in all respects make your future my charge. Kate, my bonny Kate, will you not come with me?"

"Oh, how good you are!" cries Kate, touched even more by the tone than by the words. "I don't know what to answer—I don't know how to thank you—"

"Never mind thanking me—that does not matter—only say that you will come."

But this is what Kate cannot say. She is stunned by the magnitude of the prospect opening before her, yet instinctively she shrinks from it—feeling that to utter a word of assent will be to change the whole course and meaning of her life, to exile her from the home and the friends she loves, and send her forth among strangers. She does not consider the reverse of the picture any more than a child might. Ease, luxury, travel, the life of the world, admiration and pleasure—she is hardly aware that the possession of all these things hangs on the breath of her lips. She only looks round the far-sweeping breadth of the beautiful country, and,

with a pang at her heart which finds an echo in her voice, cries:

"I cannot! I cannot! Pray do not ask me."

"But I must ask you—and you must consider the matter," says Miss Brooke. "You must not decide in what is so important to you, and also to me, like this. Kate, if you knew how near this plan is to my heart, I think you would come with me! You are very dear to all your friends here, but they do not need your companionship as I do."

"I am not sure of that," says Kate, who does not fancy this suggestion. "They are very fond of me, and I have been with them four years—while I have only known you a few days."

"That is very true, but there are a great many things to be considered. I can offer you advantages which it is not in your uncle's power to afford you. Do you think it wise to reject these?"

Kate looks at her wistfully, but does not reply, so she goes on:

"I am sure that if you reflect, you will feel that it is right to come with me; and if you do—believe me that, as far as lies in my power, you shall never regret it."

"I am sure—oh, already I am perfectly sure of that!" cries Kate. "I will ask uncle's advice—indeed, indeed, I cannot promise more."

"Very well," says Miss Brooke, who has no doubt that her point is nearly won. "Take time to consider, and let me know your decision next week."

## CHAPTER XVII.

"We all begin By singing with the birds, and running fast With June-days hand-in-hand; but once, for all, The birds must sing against us, and the sun Strike down upon us, like a friend's sword caught By an enemy to slay us, while we read The dear name on the blade which bites at us!"

In the evening Kate is very grave, as every one notices. She has consulted her uncle on the subject of Miss Brooke's proposal as soon as she reaches home, and Mr. Lawrence, though shirking all responsibility of advice, cannot deny the great advantage which it offers, while Mrs. Lawrence says decidedly that her folly cannot be easily characterized if she declines it.

"But I am so fond of you all," pleads Kate.

"How can I bear to go away?"

"As for going away," replies her uncle, "of course you know that Fairfield will always be as much your home as it is the home of Sophy and Janet. If you go with Miss Brooke it will only be to remain at your pleasure. I have told her that I can hear of nothing else."

"I am sure that if such a chance were offered to Sophy or Janet, they would accept it eagerly," says Mrs. Lawrence. "It does not strike me as such a terrible thing to leave a dull place like this for the gaiety and pleasures of fashionable life."

"Fairfield is not dull," says Kate. "It is the very best place in the world, and I—I am sure I can never be happy anywhere else."

"In that case, my dear," says Mr. Lawrence, "the thing is very plain. Thank Miss Brooke for her kindness, and tell her you will stay with us. I should never forgive myself," he goes on, putting his arm round the girl and drawing her to him, "if you felt that any one wished you to go. It would certainly be a dark day for us all when we lost our bonny Kate."

"Then I will stay!" cries Kate. "O uncle, dear uncle, how kind you are to me!"

"Who could help being kind to you?" asks her uncle.

"Please, master"—the door opens, and an ebony face appears—"Uncle Jake have come in off the plantation, and would like to speak to you."

"Very well," says Mr. Lawrence, and leaves the room.

Kate is about to follow, when her aunt interposes. "Stay a moment," she says, "I do not suppose that my advice will have any weight with you, but still I feel that it is my duty to give it. Sit down and listen to me. Has it ever occurred to you that your uncle is not a rich man?"

For an instant Kate stares—not comprehending the drift of this question. Then the blood starts to her cheeks, and the tears to her eyes. "I see!" she says. "You mean that I am a burden to him?"

"I answer you as I would answer Sophy or Janet—yes," says Mrs. Lawrence. "Neither he nor I have ever grudged anything which you have ever cost us; but elder people look ahead as young ones never do, and I know that our expenses are now greater than our income. Under these circumstances, and considering the uncertainty of life, I feel that the sooner you girls are provided for the better. Sophy's engagement has been the greatest relief to my mind, and what I desire now is to see Janet and yourself as well settled. I think that George Proctor will address you before long, and if you mean to accept him, it might be advisable to decline Miss Brooke's proposal."

"No, no!" cries Kate. "I don't mean to accept him. I could not think of such a thing."

"Then, what do you think of?" asks Mrs. Lawrence. "You are young and pretty now, but neither youth nor good looks last forever. No girl in your position could ask a better settlement in life than George Proctor offers. If you will not marry him, and if you will not go with Miss Brooke, pray what do you expect to do with yourself?"