

"You can't have the prettiest mug of all, I'm sorry to say," Conny informed me, when she had satisfied herself I could want nothing more; "because I broke it last week. I'm not generally clumsy, you know, but I did do that, and it had roses on it, and green leaves."

I expressed my conviction that it must have been very attractive, professing myself at the same time full of admiration of the mug I was using, and Conny's sense of hospitality was satisfied.

"Could you tell me a story?" she inquired, sitting down from her high chair, when all the bread-and-butter was eaten up, and her sister had refused to cut her any more: "or don't you feel well enough?"

"I'll tell you what, Con," said her sister, decisively, "you'll get no story till you're dressed for dessert. Go and have your hair brushed, your hands washed, and your frock changed, and then you may come and sit with Mr. Stevens while I dress for dinner."

So Conny ran off, and I was left with Madeleine, with the warm glow of the nursery fire throwing red lights on her brown hair, and brightening her sweet face into new beauty. At such a moment, who could have believed she was a coquette, before whose witchery young and old fell alike, fondly believing the while they had "made an impression"? Long I sat thus, drinking in long draughts of happiness, building castles of colossal height, all to be inhabited by one enchantress whose wickedness took the form of beauty, whereby she entangled the hearts of men, wooing them to love her by her gentleness, driving them to madness by the laugh in her eyes. But this beautiful witch had said that she loved me, had promised to come and live in my fine castles, and inhabit my high towers, and from henceforth the sole responsibility of controlling her rested with me and my restraining hand. And I was no ways afraid. Love is a strong subduer; now, sitting beside me, her hands clasped in mine, and her blue eyes watching my castles fade and die out in the fire, Prior was as far from her thoughts as from those of little Conny, who, in white frock and coloured ribbons, had returned from ablutions, as fresh and as bright as a daisy, and was now standing beside me, watching our quiet happiness with some impatience and a little scorn.

"Poor Con," said Madeleine, rousing a little, and blushing under the child's scrutiny: "how stupid we all are, aren't we? I should soon have gone to sleep if you had not come in. I think it must be the tea; that and the fire combined. How are you going to amuse Mr. Stevens while I'm dressing for dinner?"

"I shall show him things," said Conny, promptly. And Madeleine left me to amusement.

"Now for the story," I said, drawing Conny, two puzzles, and a toy pump, up to a place on my knee, and stroking her curls. "What's it to be about? I can tell you a story about anything you like," I declared rashly; and Conny instantly put me to open shame.

"Then tell me," she said, holding on by her pump, and settling herself into a position of perfect ease, with a delighted consciousness that it would be beyond my powers: "tell me the story Madeleine tells me the nights you don't come here."

I was completely taken aback. Some story of Madeleine's? Madeleine, whose brilliant imagination could keep Conny quiet for an hour together?

"You would never guess, I see," said Conny, "what it is, and if you don't guess, you can't, of course, tell it. Shall I tell it to you instead? I know it now as well as Madeleine, I think."

"You have heard it very often, then?"

"Very often," assented Conny. "every night when you don't come here, Madeleine comes and sits in that low chair, and takes me on her lap. She turns up her pretty grey silk, you know, for fear I should crease it, and I sit on her petticoat, and she tells me the story."

"Always the same one?"

"Always the same," said Conny, shaking her

curls, "but I don't get tired, it's so pretty, and the end is different sometimes."

"The end is different, Conny?"

"There are two ends!" said Conny, explaining, "one is very pretty indeed. Madeleine likes that one best. I think she tells it oftenest, but sometimes she tells the other end, and then she is so quiet and grave, and once when I kissed her, her face was all wet."

"I'm afraid it will be too sad, Conny, I think I'll hear the other end first. Begun, please."

"Well, don't wriggle," said Conny, evidently beginning from the usual starting-point, and the story was commenced.

"Once upon a time," said Conny, "there was a young lady who had two lovers, one very good, and one very bad. They were both very fond of her, and very polite." (Conny's notion of love-making was politeness carried to its extreme limit.) "And she liked them both, one in her heart, and one in her manner."

Here Conny gave a little gasp. "Do you like it," she asked.

"Excessively," I assured her, "but I don't understand, Conny, 'and one in her manner.' That was rather odd, wasn't it?"

"I thought so," said Conny, doubtfully, "but Madeleine said, 'No, it often happened.' And I suppose she knows?"

"Probably," I agreed, and the story went on.

"The good one, the one she liked in her heart, you know, had to go away for a long time, where he couldn't see her at all. And while he was gone, the bad one came in, and brought her book—story-books, I suppose—and gave her a paint-box, and a dog with a collar, and went out for rides with her, and took her at night to hear music. Very polite, wasn't it?" Conny looked up in my face, and she didn't understand the expression she saw there. "You don't like it," she said; "I shall leave off."

"I do like it, Conny, it's my back makes me look so. Go on, dear. I want to hear the end. What did the young lady do? Take the things he brought her? Enjoy the rides and the music? Throw the absent one over?"

"I don't understand you," said Conny, in her most sensible manner. "How could she throw him over when he was away; and what should she throw him over? Very silly!" Having expressed her opinion, Conny went quickly on, that she might not be blamed for having given it.

"Well! He talked, and talked (the bad one did), and said such nice things, that sometimes he didn't seem bad at all, Madeleine said: though he was always really, you know. And she could not help liking him very much, and thinking it would be very pleasant to have all his beautiful things for her very own, and go and live with him in his fine large house. Did I tell you he wanted her to go and live with him?" asked Conny, breaking off.

"The end, Conny; did she say she would?"

"Why, no," said Conny, at once sensibly, and with impatience: "that wouldn't have been ending happily, would it, when the other one was good? He was the best fellow in the world," Madeleine said.

"Goodness is not always appreciated."

There was bitterness in my tone, and Conny lifted the pump in reproof.

"Always," she said, "when things end happily."

She had no intention of moralising, but imagined she was stating a fact.

"Well, Conny?"

"Well, she thought all this, till she remembered the other one, and how fond he was of her, and how polite he had always been, though he had not nearly such beautiful things as the bad one had, which, of course, prevented him from being as polite as could have been wished. When she remembered this, she told the bad one he might live in his fine house himself, and keep all his beautiful things (here Conny got considerably excited, she spoke with flashing eyes, and hands that gesticulated, dealing me blows with her puzzles and pump), "that she didn't want them, and wouldn't live with him, because she loved the good one better than she had ever, ever, ever, loved him. And so do I," said

Conny, winding up rather abruptly, and siding with virtue. "Isn't it pretty?"

The pull up was so very sudden that I was not prepared with an eulogium.

"Don't you like it?" asked Conny, disappointed at my silence. "It's so pretty when Madeleine tells it, and much longer. I think I spoil it with my words."

"Like it? It's perfectly charming. I was thinking it over, Con dear, I should so like to hear the other end now."

"I always say, 'If you're not tired,'" said Conny, suggesting.

I repeated the formula, and was indulged directly.

"The other end is pretty, but very sad. When the good one came back, he found that the beautiful young lady—Madeleine didn't say she was beautiful, but I like to think that she was—had—gone—so—far—with—the—bad—one" (the words came very slowly here; Conny was evidently speaking from memory)—"that—there—was—no—drawing back."

"What happened then?" I asked; for the soft voice broke off suddenly.

"I don't know," said Conny, looking frightened. "I'm afraid she forgot the good one, and went to live in the big house, among all the fine things, and that they didn't make her happy, for Madeleine cries so—at least she does sometimes—and sometimes she only kisses me, and sings till I go off to sleep in her arms such pretty sad songs!"

There were no red flashes from the fire now. The room was fast filling with shadows.

"Isn't that sad?" whispered Conny, clinging to me a little, not liking the silence, and secretly afraid of the dark.

"Very sad."

"It doesn't do to mind it, though," she said, trying to combine consolation with sense, "because it's only a story, and not really true, you know. I don't suppose there ever was a beautiful young lady with one bad and one good, and you know there were two ends, and I mean to believe the happy one. Won't you?"

"Dinner, Jack!" said a beautiful young lady in a grey silk dress, and I rose at the sound of her voice.

The dinner was perfection; all my favourite dishes had been thought of. Never had I seen Prior to such advantage. He monopolised Mr. Flutters, and rarely approached the silk dress. Madeleine and I had it all to ourselves. And charming as she always was more than ever so on this evening; happy, I suppose, in the consciousness of her singular beauty, set off to so much advantage by the grey gown, the falling lace of which showed her white shoulders and pretty round arms uncovered.

"Papa," said Madeleine, when dinner was half over, taking a rose from a vase and fastening it into her belt, and looking at it a moment. "Isn't Splutters late?"

Splutters was the only boy of the family, so called by a facetious uncle.

"Is Master Tom in, John?"

"Just in, sir," [said the butler, grinning a little; "but he's all over green paint. He must have knocked up against something, I think he's gone up-stairs to change his things, I was to tell you, miss; and he'll come in to dessert with Miss Constance."

"Dessert!" said Prior. "I know very little of Tom, if dessert will do for him." And Madeleine piled up a plate with solids for Splutters.

Presently the door of the room opened with a rush, and the hope of the house walked in, followed by the second Miss Flutters without her pinafore.

Conny pushed a chair between me and her sister; Splutters planted himself beside me, and stared at Prior. "Lato again, Splutters," said his father. "Take your elbows off the table, sir, and don't stare."

"Cold!" observed Splutter, discontentedly, making digs at the solids with his fork. "Cold greens and lukewarm pie! Who's going to eat that, I wonder?"

"I'm glad it is cold," returned his father. "If you can't come in, in time for dinner, you