

brutes who abuse us, and we fly to the refuge of the divorce-court, we are notorious. If we go on the stage, no matter how well we may guard our honest womanhood there, we are notorious. If we turn ministers, doctors, lecturers, philanthropists, political agitators, it is all the same; we are observed, discussed, criticised; hence we are notorious. Now, I've never rebelled against this finely just system, though like nearly all other yoked human beings, I have indulged certain private views upon my own bondage. And in my case it was hardly a bondage. . . Except for certain years where discontent was in a large measure remorse, I have been lifted by exceptional circumstance above those pangs and torments which I have felt certain must have beset many another woman through no act of her own. But now an occasion suddenly dawns when I find myself demanding a man's full justice. To tell me that I can't get it because I am a woman, is no answer whatever. I want it, all the same."

Kindelon gazed at her with a sort of woe-begone amazement. "I don't tell you that you can't get it, as far as it is to be had," he almost groaned. "I merely remind you that this is the nineteenth century, and neither the twentieth nor the twenty-first."

Pauline gave a fierce little motion of her shapely head. "I am reminded of that nearly every day that I live," she retorted. "You fall back, of course, upon public opinion. All of you always do, where a woman is concerned, whenever you are cornered. And it is so easy to corner you—to make you swing at us this cudgel of 'domestic retirement' and 'feminine modesty.' I once talked for two hours in Paris with one of the strongest French radical thinkers of modern times. For the first hour and a-half he delighted me; he spoke of the immense things that modern scientific developments were doing for the human race. For the last half-hour he disgusted me. And why? I discovered that his 'human race' meant a race entirely masculine. He left woman out of the question altogether. She might get along the best way she could. When he spoke of his own sex he was superbly broad; when he spoke of ours he was narrower than any Mohammedan with a harem full of wives and a prospective Paradise full of subservient houris."

Kindelon got up and began to pace the floor, with his hands clasped behind him. "Well," he said, in a tone of mild distraction, "I'm very sorry for your famous French thinker. I hope you don't want me to tell you that I sympathize with him."

"I'm half inclined to believe it!" sped Pauline. "If my cousin, Courtlandt, had spoken as you have done, I should have accepted such ideas as perfectly natural. Courtlandt is the incarnation of conventionalism. He is part of the rush in our social wheelwork, that makes it move so slowly. He could no more pull up his window shades and let in fresh sunshine than you could close your shutters and live in his decorous *demi-jour*!"

Kindelon still continued his impatient pacing. "I'm very glad of your favourable comparison," he said, with more sadness than satire. He abruptly paused, then, facing Pauline. "What is it, in Heaven's name, that you want me to do?"

"You should not ask; you should know!" she exclaimed. Her clear-glittering eyes, her flushed cheeks, and the assertive, almost imperious posture of her delicate figure made her seem to him a rarely beautiful vision as he now watched her. "Reflect, pray reflect," she quickly proceeded, "upon the position in which I now stand! I attempted to do what if I had been a much better woman than I am it would not at all have been a blameworthy thing to do. The result was failure; it was failure through no fault of my own. I found myself in a clique of wrangling egotists, and not in a body of sensible co-operative supporters. Chief among these was Miss Cragge, whose repulsive traits I foresaw—or rather you aided me to foresee them. I omitted her from my banquet (very naturally and properly, I maintain) and this is the apple of discord that she has thrown." Here Pauline pointed to the fateful newspaper, which lay not far off. "Of course," she went on, with a very searching look at Kindelon, "there can be no doubt that Miss Cragge is the offender! I, for my part, am certain of it; you, for yours, are certain as well, unless I greatly err. But this makes your refusal to publicly chastise her insolence all the more culpable!"

"Culpable!" he echoed, hurrying toward her. "Pauline! you don't know what you are saying! Have I the least pity, the least compunction toward that woman?"

Pauline closed her eyes, for an instant, and shook her head, with a repulsing gesture of one hand. "Then you have a very false pity toward another woman—and a very false compunction as well," she answered.

"How can I act, situated as I am?" he cried, with sharp excitement. "You have not yet allowed our engagement to transpire. What visible or conceded rights have I to be your defender?"

"You are unjust," she said. "I give you every right. That article insinuates that I am a sort of high-bred yet low-toned adventuress. No lady could feel anything but shame and indignation at it. Besides, it incessantly couples your name with mine. . . And as for right to be my champion in exposing and rebuking this outrage, I. . . I give you every right, as I said."

"I desire but one," returned Kindelon. His voice betrayed no further perturbation. He seated himself at her side, and almost by force took both her hands in the strong grasp of both his own.

"What right?" she questioned. Her mood of accusation, of reproach, was not yet quieted; her eyes still sparkled from it; her restless lips still betrayed it.

"The right," he answered, "of calling you my wife. As it is, what am I? A man far below you in all worldly place, who has gained from you a matrimonial promise. Marry me!—marry me at once!—to-morrow!—and everything will be different! Then you shall have become mine to defend, and I will show you how I can defend what is my own?"

"To-morrow!" murmured Pauline.

"Yes, to-morrow! You will say it is too soon. You will urge conventionalism now, though a minute before, you accused me of urging it! When you are once my wife I shall feel empowered to lawfully befriend you!"

"Lawfully!" she repeated. "Can you not do so manfully, as it is?"

"No!—not without the interfering claims and assertions of your family!"

"I have no real family. And those whom you call such are without the right of either claim or assertion, as regards any question of what I choose or do not choose to do!"

He still retained her hands; he put his lips against her cheek; he would not let her withdraw, though she made a kind of aggrieved effort to do so.

"They have no rights, Pauline, and yet they would overwhelm me with obloquy! As your husband—once as your wedded, chosen husband, what should I care for them all? I would laugh at them! Make it to-morrow! Then see how I will play my wife's part, and fight her battle!" . . .

They talked for some time after this in lowered tones. . . Pauline was in a wholly new mood when she at length said:

"To-morrow, then, if you choose."

"You mean it? You promise it?"

"I mean it—and I promise it, since you seem so doubtful."

"I am doubtful," he exclaimed, kissing her, "because I can scarcely dream that this sudden happiness has fallen to me from the stars! . . ."

When he had left her, and she was quite alone, Pauline found her lips murmuring over the words, in a sort of mechanical repetition: "I have promised to marry him to-morrow."

She had indeed made this vow, and as a very sacred one. And the more that she reflected upon it the more thoroughly praiseworthy a course it seemed. Her nearest living relations were the Poughkeepsies and Courtlandts. She had quarrelled with both—or it meant nearly the same thing. There was no one left to consult. Besides, even if there had been, why should she consult any third party in this affair, momentous though it was? She loved; she was beloved. She was a widow with a great personal, worldly independence. She had already been assailed; what mattered a little more assaillance? For most of those who would gossip and sneer she had a profound and durable contempt. . . Why, then, should she regret her spoken word?

And yet she found herself not so much regretting it as fearing lest she might regret it. She suddenly felt the need, and in keenest, of a near confidential, trustworthy friend. But her long residence abroad had acted alienatingly enough toward all earlier American friendships. She could think of twenty women—married, or widows like herself—who would have received her solicited counsel with every apparent sign of sympathy. But with all these she had lost the old intimate sense; new ground must be broken in dealing with them; their views and creeds were what her own had been when she had known and prattled platitudes with them before her dolorous marriage: or at least she so chose to think, so chose to decide.

"There is one whom I could seek, and with whom I could seriously discuss the advisability of such a speedy marriage," at length ran Pauline's reflections. "That one is Mrs. Dares. Her large, sweet, just mind would be quite equal to telling me if I am really wrong or right. . . There is one obstacle—her daughter, Cora. But that would make no difference with Mrs. Dares. She would be above even a maternal prejudice. She is all gentle equity and disinterested kindness. I might see her alone—quite alone—this evening. Neither Cora nor the sister, Martha, need know anything. I would pledge her to secrecy before I spoke a word. . . I will go to her! I will go to Mrs. Dares, and will ask her just what I ought to do."

This resolve strengthened with Pauline after she had once made it. The hour was now somewhat late in the afternoon. She distrusted the time of Mrs. Dares' arrival up-town from her work, and decided that the visit had best be paid at about seven-o'clock that same evening.

A little later she was amazed to receive the card of Mr. Barrowe. She went into her reception-room to see this gentleman, with mingled amusement and awkwardness. She was so ignorant what fatality had landed him within her dwelling.

"I scarcely know how to greet you, Mr. Barrowe," she said, after giving a hand to her guest. "You and I parted by no means peacefully, last night, and I. . . I am (yes, I confess it!) somewhat unprepared. . ."

At this point Mr. Barrowe made voluble interruption. His little twinkling eyes looked smaller and acuter than before, and his gaunt, spheroidal nose had an unusual pallor as it rose from his somewhat depressed cheeks.

"You needn't say you are unprepared, Mrs. Varick!" he exclaimed. "I am unprepared myself. I had no idea of visiting you this afternoon. I had no idea that you would again give me the pleasure of receiving me. Handicapped as I am, myself, by visits, letters, applications, mercantile matters, I have insisted, however, on getting rid of all—yes, all trammels."

Here Mr. Barrowe paused, and Pauline gently inclined her head saying:

"That is very good of you. Pray proceed."

"Proceed!" cried Mr. Barrowe. He had already seated himself, but he now rose, approached Pauline, took her hand, and with an extravagant gallantry which his lank body caused closely to verge upon the ludicrous, lifted this hand ceremoniously to his pale lips. Immediately afterward he resumed his seat. And at once he re-commenced speaking.

"I feel that I—I owe you the most profound of apologies," he declared, with a hesitation that seemed to have a sincere emotional origin. "Handi-