

yes, faith, maybe three times—I'd be thinking before I throw it back in her face."

"You would do precisely as I would do. Oh, you couldn't take it. But doesn't it strike you that this is an uncommonly cheeky premature discussion? It is never well to refuse before one is asked."

What Mr. Longworth thinks about his chances himself no one knows. Silence is this gentleman's *forte*. But so matters stand this sultry May night, upon which he stands and knocks at Mrs. Windsor's door, little dreaming of the errand she is going to employ him on.

CHAPTER V.

A POINT OF HONOUR.

A MIDDLE-AGED woman servant admits Laurence, and he enters a long low, very spacious hall, softly carpeted, hung with rich pictures, and adorned on either side by a stern Roman soldier in bronze, leaning on his sword. Four doors flank this wide hall; the first of these to the right the woman opens, and says—

"Mr. Longworth, ma'am," and departs.

The room, on the threshold of which he stands for a moment and gazes, as at a picture, is one that is very familiar, and that never fails to give his artistic eye pleasure. It is Mrs. Windsor's sitting-room; here none but intimate friends (and she has very few) find her. It is a square apartment, carpeted in pale, cool colours, gray and blue, curtained in white lace, soft chairs and sofas, also blue and gray, a full-length mirror at each end; two inlaid tables, whereon repose some large albums and Books of Beauty, but not another volume of any sort; water-colour sketches and line engravings on the walls, both perfect of their kind; a few heads in Parian from the antique, pretty and expensive trifles everywhere.

Two or three slender glasses of cut flowers perfume the air, the light falls soft and shaded, wealth and refined taste speak to you in every detail, and meet you again in the figure of the lady, who rises to greet her guest. Her heavy silk falls about her in those soft, large, noiseless folds that women love,

some point lace at the throat is caught with one great, gleaming diamond. Her hair, profuse still, but silvery white, is combed back over a roll, and adds to the severe immobility of that pale, changeless face. No, not changeless, for it lightens and softens as she gives him her hand.

"You are punctuality itself, Mr. Laurence," she says. "It is precisely eight."

She resumes her chair, folds her white hands, upon which many jewels twinkle, in her lap. There are women so womanly, or so restless, that they can never sit contentedly quite idle—some piece of flimsy feminine handicraft must ever be between their fingers. Mrs. Windsor is not one of these; she can sit for hours with those white hands folded, her eyes half closed, without the necessity of either needlework or book occurring to her.

Longworth has a chair in this room sacred for the past two years to his use, a very comfortable and caressing chair indeed, and into its open arms he consigns himself now, leans his blonde head against the azure back with a feeling he has often had before—that this room is a very comforting and restful place, and Mrs. Windsor one of the most thoroughly satisfactory women he has ever met. As she sits before him in her lustrous silks and jewels, her serene, high-bred face, and *trainante* voice, she has all the "stilly tranquil" manner of a real grand dame. At sixty, she is a woman to command admiration, and Longworth admires her; but it is surely a deeper and stronger feeling that looks out of her eyes upon him. If she ever gave her lost idol greater love, then indeed she must have loved beyond the love of mothers.

They talk for a time after the desultory fashion of friends. She tells him of her winter in Washington, and of the celebrities, foreign, political, literary, and musical, she has met there. But her usual animation is wanting; it is not to talk of those things she has asked him to come here. She is rarely at a loss, but she seems to be somewhat so tonight, and it is Mr. Longworth himself who as the clock strikes nine breaks the ice.

"You made some allusion to business