

addressed to him in a girlish hand. It reminded him that he had that evening promised to meet one Mary Vyner at Oxford Circus, at eight o'clock. It then wanted but twenty minutes to eight so he went into the Strand and mounted an omnibus which would take him past the spot.

It's a dreadful thing to confess, but Mary Vyner was a milliner's assistant in Vigo Street, Regent Street. I am afraid I must add that Ralph Warren had never been properly introduced to her; and while I am about it, I may as well admit that he was in the habit of meeting her about twice a week, in the evening, too, at eight o'clock, and of taking her to a theatre (he was on the free list everywhere) or some other place of amusement, where they beguiled the time until eleven, when Mary Vyner had to report herself in Vigo Street. This is all very shocking indeed, and quite indefensible, and, indeed, the only thing that anybody could find to say in palliation of its atrocity was that Mary Vyner was, on the whole, a very good little girl, that Ralph Warren, although a free liver, was not an utterly unconscientious scamp, and that although they had known each other for about two years, no harm had ever come, or was ever likely to come, of their meetings. I don't mean to say that Mary Vyner's was altogether a perfect character; she was rather thoughtless, rather too fond of admiration perhaps, and certainly imprudent in allowing Ralph Warren to meet her, time after time, without ascertaining how he proposed that these meetings should end. But notwithstanding this, Mary Vyner was a quiet, modest, lady-like little girl, whose greatest fault was an absolute devotion to, and an overwhelming belief in, the merits of the rather graceless young gentleman who was then on his way to meet her. She had learnt to love him with all the fervour that her blind little heart was capable of; and if he did not reciprocate her attachment to its full extent, he was still a great deal too fond of Mary Vyner to do her any deliberate wrong. So these heedless young people met, and met, and met again, and beyond the fact that it was very shocking and highly improper, no harm whatever had hitherto come of it.

Ralph Warren was in some perplexity. He hardly knew how to break the important news to Mary Vyner, and still less did he know how to act with reference to her, now that his position was so materially altered.

"Mary," said he, when they met, "I've good and bad news. My grandfather is dead."

Mary had never heard of his having a grandfather, for Warren had purposely kept the aristocratic features of his family history a secret from her. However, he didn't seem very much distressed, and Mary consoled with him in the usual form. She was so matter-of-fact as to wind up by asking Singleton whether his position would be at all improved by it.

"Very considerably. He was Lord Singleton, and my father was his second son."

"Lord Singleton! Then there is only one between your father and the title?"

"There is not one. My father's elder brother died with my grandfather, and my father takes the peerage."

"Your father Lord Singleton? Oh, Ralph, you never told me this?"

"Why should I? It would have frightened you away from me."

"It would. Oh, Ralph, you won't leave me—say you won't leave me! Promise me that!" said poor little Mary, with her eyes full of tears.

"I must leave you for a short time to go to Singleton—my father's place; but—I will return."

They walked on in silence. It was pretty evident that they would "assist" at no theatre that night.

"Ralph," said she, after a pause, "you may go away from me if you like, and I will never, never follow you or trouble you again. I have loved you, oh, so much, so much! and I think I shall never be happy again if you go; but do go, dear Ralph, if you think it best. I shall be dreadfully sad and dull at first—oh!" (bursting into tears) "how sad and dull I shall be!"

"Little Woman!" said Ralph, placing her hand in his (it was quite dark), "don't cry so terribly. Come into the Park, and we will talk this over."

I am afraid that when Ralph went to meet Mary Vyner that night, he had made up his mind that that meeting must be their last. But the Little Woman's sobs had moved him, and he felt that the tie between them was not to be so easily broken.

"Listen," said he, impulsively, but yet with a quiet force that astonished him, "I never openly told you that I loved you, because I never thought—I didn't expect to be over able to marry any one. But if you will have me, Little Woman, now that my prospects are brighter—if you will take me with all my faults, as I am—now will be married, privately, as soon as the affairs connected with my grandfather's and deaths are settled."

"Good still. Little Woman laid her fair young face on his strong chest, and he, bending his head, kissed the big brown eyes that looked up so trustfully into his own."

And this was the plighting of Ralph Warren to Mary Vyner.

### CHAPTER III.

#### LADY JULIA AND HER RIVAL.

RALPH WARREN went down to join his father at Singleton the next day. The meeting of the two was curious enough. Lord Singleton had neither seen nor heard from Ralph since that erratic young man left his government appointment to seek his bread as a journalist. As Lord Singleton's father had "discharged" him on the first occasion of his running counter to his will, so did he discharge his son. It was a part of the family code, supported by many precedents, that erring second sons should be discarded at the first opportunity, until some important family convulsion rendered it necessary that they should be forgiven. The death of the old lord and his eldest son, and the consequent succession of Colonel Warren to the peerage, was an event of sufficient importance to bring father and son together again. They were extremely gentlemanly, and, indeed, courteous to one another at first, but this dignified state of things at length relapsed into a mere cold toleration of one another's presence. The health of the poor crippled elder son was failing fast, and it soon became evident that the ex-journalist would in all probability succeed to the style, title, and estates of Lord Singleton.

So it became necessary that he should marry, and marry

well, and the lady selected for him by his father was that haughty, imperious beauty, Lady Julia Domner, the only daughter of the Earl of Sangazure, K.G., Lord-Lieutenant of the County, and Honorary Colonel of the Turnipshire Yeomanry.

If I have conveyed the impression (and I am afraid I have) that all this was arranged the day after Ralph's arrival at Singleton, I must stop to correct. It was the work of fifteen months. I should like to have conveyed some notion of that interval of time by expatiating at considerable length upon the demeanour of Lord Singleton and his son on stepping suddenly from the gloom of almost penniless obscurity into the full blaze of nobility, wealth, and county distinction. I should like to have told how the new lord made himself utterly ridiculous at first, how, by slow degrees, he arrived at something like a proper appreciation of the form of conduct which was expected of him, and how eventually he subsided into a fairly respectable type of a wealthy but rather foolish county swell. I should like to show how Ralph also made all sorts of blunders at first, more particularly in the matter of field sports and other county amusements, with which he was of course wholly unfamiliar. However, he had more of the natural gentleman about him than his father, and at the dinner-table or in the drawing-room his behaviour was unexceptionable. I should also like to have shown how, at first, he corresponded regularly (though secretly) with Mary Vyner—how Little Woman's eyes gradually, though surely, opened to the fact that Ralph was slowly "getting out of it," how she bore his faithlessness at first with a sham pride which did not sit at all comfortably on her homely little shoulders, and how the sham pride eventually broke down and left her as weeping, heart-broken, deserted, and hopeless a Little Woman as any in wide London. But there are other matters more immediately to the point, and I must not run on too long.

Lady Julia Domner was, as I have said, a cold, imperious beauty. Her father was an impoverished peer, who hoped, by an alliance with the wealthy Warrens, to secure a becoming position for his only daughter. Lord Singleton saw, clearly enough, that his county position would stand all the more strongly for the shoring-up that it would derive from an alliance with Lord Sangazure's family. Ralph, completely cut off from his old associates, and anxious to gain a good footing in his new position, didn't much care whom he married, so that that end was obtained. So the marriage was determined upon, and all parties were satisfied.

In justice to Ralph, I must admit that his desertion of poor Mary Vyner was not unattended by some serious qualms of conscience. He thought often and often of the poor little girl, read over and over again the long touching letters that she wrote upon its becoming evident to her that he was casting her off. But a sense that a public acknowledgment of her as his wife was out of the question, and moreover that he had gone too far with Lady Julia to render it possible that he could break it off with her without bringing himself into public contempt, reconciled him, to some extent, to the course of conduct he was pursuing.

He was not happy in his courtship of Lady Julia. He had always preferred the pretty to the magnificent, and her little brother's plump governess was very much more to his mind. Lady Julia began by treating him rather coldly, but she was a clever and intensely appreciative woman, and the singular charm of Ralph's conversation eventually exercised an extraordinary fascination over her. She began by rather disliking him than otherwise—she ended by loving him with as much devotion as her cold, undemonstrative nature was capable of.

The first novelty of the thing over, Ralph found that the fetters of a forced engagement bored him fearfully. The eternal rides and drives—always with the same companions; the eternal congratulations—always in the same form of words; the eternal evenings at Lord Sangazure's, each a replica of its predecessor, came to be looked upon by him with a feeling little short of aversion. He contrived to maintain an outward semblance of affection; but it was a hollow sham, and he knew it. His uneasiness was aggravated from time to time by receiving, at long intervals, letters from Little Woman, written in passionate bursts of grief, imploring him to send her some sign, if it was but a glove that he had worn. But Ralph could never make up his mind to open them—he kissed them and tore them up as they were.

He was altogether in a very unsatisfactory state of mind. He endeavoured at one time to revive the old happy Bohemian days by inviting Dick Pender, who wrote sporting novels, and two or three other "Aged Pilgrims," down to Singleton, but the scheme failed. Dick Pender was worth nothing on horseback, and the others spent the whole day in the billiard-room, and the evenings passed in a sort of genteel martyrdom on the drawing-room ottomans, listening to rapid county politics and stable talk, of which they understood never one word. Dick Pender made many notes on sporting subjects, of which he eventually made profitable use, but the others gained neither profit nor pleasure by the visit, and it was never repeated.

To return to Mary Vyner. The Little Woman fell dangerously sick shortly after her discovery of Ralph's faithlessness, and it became necessary that she should have country air; so she spent six months with her only relation, an uncle, who farmed a considerable number of acres in South Wales. She never breathed to any one the real cause of her illness, and when at length she recovered, and returned to Vigo Street to her work, it was supposed by her companions that her attachment to Ralph Warren was a thing altogether of the past, and her quiet, subdued demeanour was ascribed by them to the effect of the serious illness from which she had barely recovered. But Little Woman's thoughts still ran on the clever scapegrace who had left her. She made all sorts of excuses to herself for his desertion, and hoped and prayed that a day would come when he would return to her. It was silly enough in Little Woman to think such a thing possible, but in her seclusion in South Wales she had not heard of his engagement, and, for aught she knew, he might be out of England, and so her letters might not have reached him.

But the young ladies at the establishment in Vigo Street subscribed to take in the *Times*, and in the columns of that paper she read one day the alliance between the Hon. Ralph Warren and Lady Julia Domner, which had for some time been in contemplation, was definitely fixed to take place at Sangazure Hall, her father's seat, on the 15th of the ensuing month, and that the festivities on that occasion were to be on a scale of surpassing splendour.

She was an impulsive little girl. She only waited to get leave of absence from the Lady Superior, and off she started

to Singleton. With a beating heart she inquired for Ralph, and was told that he had just left unexpectedly for the Continent, and it was not known when he would return. She then asked the way to Sangazure Hall, and finding that it was six miles distant, she hired a trap at the inn, and drove there as fast as she could induce the flyman to take her.

At Sangazure she learnt that Lady Julia Domner was very unwell, and unable to see any one, but on sending a message to the effect that her business was of the deepest importance, Lady Julia consented to see her. Little Woman's big heart bounded within her as she was ushered into her presence.

Lady Julia was a very beautiful woman, with a marble face and blue-black hair, and Little Woman felt her blood rush home as she looked upon her magnificent rival. But she did not cry—she was too excited for that; she stood in the centre of the room, with one hand pressed to her heart, and breathing heavily, as one who had overtaken her strength in running.

"Who are you? what do you want with me?" asked Lady Julia.

"I have come all the way from town to see you; forgive me—I am so unhappy!" gasped poor Little Woman.

"But what business have you with me? I am unwell, and may not be intruded upon without good cause."

"Lady Julia, I went first to Singleton, but he was not there."

Lady Julia started.

"Has your business any connection with Mr. Warren?"

Little Woman nodded affirmatively—she had no breath to speak with.

"Speak out—don't be afraid; let me know everything."

The proud woman seemed strangely agitated, although her countenance still wore the same cold marble rigidity as when Mary first entered the room. It was in the heaving of that magnificent bust, and the nervous clutching of those long firm fingers, that Mary saw that her words had worked some extraordinary effect on her rival.

"I am Mary Vyner—he loved me. Oh! I'm sure he loved me; give him back to me! Oh, Lady Julia, have mercy upon me!"

"He loved you?"

"Oh! so well; but that was long ago, when he was poor. He left me on his grandfather's death, promising to come back and marry me; but he never came, and I have been so ill."

Little Woman's tears came now.

"You should not have come here to seek your paramour."

"The tears stopped, frightened away by the indignant flash of Little Woman's eyes. Lady Julia saw that she had made a mistake.

"I beg your pardon," said she; "I spoke in hot blood. Mr. Warren is not here; it will perhaps be some consolation to you to learn that he and I are utter strangers from this day. He has just left Singleton, and will never return."

"Left you?"

"Left me. It is enough for you to know that. If it will tend to restore your peace of mind to learn that Mr. Warren is nothing whatever to me—"

The tears in her proud eyes belied it, and she turned aside to hide them. But they came all the more for that, although she strove with all the force of her strong will to repress them. At last she bent her head upon the arm of the sofa on which she was sitting, and let them have their way.

Little Woman crept timidly to her side, and with fear and trembling took her noble rival's hand. Lady Julia did not withdraw it.

"Lady Julia, you are a lady of high rank, I am a poor milliner's girl; don't let me forget that in what I am going to say. I loved Ralph (I must call him so) devotedly; I love him still, or I should not be here. Before he quitted me, each day was an earthly life that died and left me in heaven. He was so good to me, so kind to me, so true to me; he was so clever and I so common-place. He left me to go to Singleton, and I have never seen him since. I have been true to him—who would not be?—I have waited and waited for him, believed in him through the long dreary days and the cold black nights—through a long, long illness which nearly killed me—through my slow recovery—even through the knowledge that he was on the point of being married to you. I loved him in my humble way as devotedly as you could have done. I suffered when he left me as you suffer now. Dear Lady Julia, I came here in hot anger to upbraid you for having torn my love from me; I remain to tell you how well I know how to sympathize with your bereavement, and to beg of you to pardon me for having broken in upon you with my selfish sorrow at such a time."

Lady Julia bent her beautiful head upon Little Woman's shoulder. All sense of animosity, all distinction of rank, was swamped by their common grief.

"We are sisters in our sorrow. God bless you, Mary Vyner, for your sympathy. You must leave me now; but take this ring, which may serve to remind you of the strange bond between us. Now go, but come and see me when I am stronger."

And Little Woman, with her hot sorrow strangely chastened, hurried back to town.

And there she found, at last, a letter from Ralph. A hot, fevered letter, written under a passionate impulse—a letter that told her how he had longed for her throughout his engagement to another, how her form had been in his mind all day, and in his eyes all night, how he had chafed under the fetters he had woven for himself, how he had freed himself from them at one reckless bound, and how he would be at the old trusting place at the old time that night.

And Little Woman kept the appointment.

All who admire Paris—and their name is legion—will regret the decision which M. Jules Ferry has felt himself obliged to take in order to obtain firewood. The trees of the capital are to be sacrificed, and already the axe is laid to the root of many a fine old elm and a plane tree which for many lustres have added to the embellishment of this city and afforded citizens grateful shade in the fierce summer. It is to be hoped that the hatchet will be plied with discrimination, and that the secular timber in the Jardin des Plantes and the gardens of the Luxembourg and the Tuilleries will be spared. Paris must have made up its mind to any sacrifice since it submits without a murmur to be shorn of half its beauty.