A GREAT MISTAKE.

"No, because you are ashamed of me," Bee went on, in an hysterical whisper. "And so you ought to be. Any girl with a heart would have told you long ago how sorry she was for—for—oh!—for snubbing you, as you call it, Ted! But I"—she turned her great dark eyes to his now, and he saw that they were full of tears—"I have only gone on plaguing you, and pretending not to care. But"—nodding and still looking up with sweet, wet eyes—"but I did care, Ted, all the time."

"Did you, Bee?" He took the little brown hand, with the bit of honeysuckle in it, under his own large palm, and leant forward to look into her face. The village as,he had said was asleep. "Not a window was left alight to twinkle at his audacity. "Did you really care a little, Bee?"

He drew nearer to her on the narrow bench; his shoulder was very close to the girl's drooping head.

"Yes," Bee said, in an aggrieved tone, sobbing now and turning her brown cheek to his; "but you would not see it; and you have been breaking my heart all this long time with you patience, Ted!"

Ted put up a fond powerful hand to press the pretty cheek closer.

"Poor little dupe!" he murmured, pass his other arm around the ripe young shape. "But you know you don't deserve any pity, Bee. You have treated me very badly, dear."

"I know I don't," she answered, in sobbing disconnected words. "And you will have to bully me a little always, Ted, if you marry me. You will ask me to have you once more, won't you? Because I will, and say, Thank you kindly for wanting me still."

For all answer the young man kissed her simply on the lips.

"Thank you kindly," she said, with a demure face; and in a moment she had fled from him into the cottage and her mother's arms.

Chapter LIX.

Mrs. March had not interrupted her millinery devices in consequence of the calamity which had saddened the household in Upper Brunswick street.

It was all very dreadful about poor Jack, as she admitted with a sigh to Lucy; but she was really quite helpless in the matter. She could not very well explain to poor George what an unmistakable proof she had given previous to the poor boy's accident of the sisterly nature of her regard for Jack. Perhaps indeed she could hardly expect her husband, with his peculiar disposition, to believe her if she did explain.

"What can I do, then?" she asked. "No doubt all Barlaston would unite in a groan of condemnation if I were to offer to nurse my Jack. I can certainly do him no good by staying at home; and dear Minnie is counting on me to make her house a success this year. In fact, I feel that a little change of scene would be very desirable just now. I too have had my small crisis to go through; and it has told considerably on my nervous system."

Lucy had nothing to say. A painful sense of estrangement had arisen between the cousins since the night of the railway accident. It had not been easy for them to take up their old relations after the conversation which had preceded that shock, or to hear the daily reports which reached Doctor March of Jack Throgmorton's progress without remembering what it was that had driven the boy away from home to meet so swift and terrible a punishment for his fault.

Lucy was beginning to feel a hopeless sense of the hardness and weariness of life and its intolerable length. Her presence in the house had become rather a source of embarrassment, she quickly saw, to George than of comfort. She hardly dared now to look him in the face, and the old brotherly kindness he had been used to show her no longer seemed possible to him. Indeed, as if by mutual consent, they avoided each other. Ada's laughing little speeches had contrived in a very short time to make them dread to remain in the same room together unless she were present.

Even the girl's love for little Geordie was not safe from the light shafts of his mother's ridicule. Lucy was obliged to kiss him in secret, and to hide the little affectionate offices she performed for the child, as if they were so many crimes.

She conducted herself in this trying position with a touching reserve and dignity that commanded George's most heartfelt respect. The sacredness of a great sorrow was encompassing them both. Never before had the poor fellow known so unselfish and so pure a regard for Lucy as now, when mocking eyes were following her blameless life from day to day, and when her patient endurance and unselfishness were being made the butt of innumerable smiling epigrams.

The poor child used to flush and tremble at her cousin's words, which, apparently harmless in themselves, gained point from Ada's smile and voice. George searched them, as he had grown used to do, for his wife's real meaning, which was not always easy to discover.

"Dear Lucy will soon be absolute mistress of the house," Mrs. March said lightly, as the time of her visit to Normanhurst drew near. "I can fancy what a charming Darby and Joan you will look when I am gone—Lucy darning the stockings, with Geordie at her feet, and you, dear George, smoking your pipe—just as if you had married Lucy instead of me! I tell her she must look forward to the joys of that position as some slight compensation for her present devotion to my pretty frivolities."

For Lucy was patiently cutting and stitching and fitting all day long as she had done of old, and as she would have done anything in her power to spare George needless expense.

Of late it had begun to dawn upon her that Ada had determined to send her away again. She could hardly have given a reason for this belief. Her cousin often spoke with pretty warmth of her pleasure in her return—and certainly it was by Ada's desire that she had resigned her position at Silverdale.

But Lucy had grown accustomed, as well as George, to detecting shades of meaning in Ada's face and words; and when, as had lately happened a good many times, her cousin had playfully warned her against seeking another situation, declaring that no one wanted her so much as they did, the girl began sadly to accustom herself to the idea of leaving home again.

"I promised George that I would stay," she thought sadly. "But I shall be better away if he is to be made unhappy through me. He is the only person to be considered now."

One morning, at breakfast, Mrs. March looked up from her letters with a little exclamation and a laugh.

"How droll!" she said. "You remember your friend Mrs. Marmaduke Thompson of Sheffield, Lucy?"

Lucy looked at her cousin, startled.

"Exactly. Only fancy! she is again in want of a governess for the small Thompsons; and she has been writing to dear Minnie to inquire about you. I think Mrs. Marmaduke Thompson must go further afield; mustn't she, dear Lucy?"

Lucy tried her best to smile.

"I dare say she would be very kind," she said, in a faint little voice. The girl felt that sentence of exile had already been pronounced upon her.

George looked up from his newspaper and with a rather stern glance scanned his wife's face.

"Has Lord Meldrum started then on his tour of the world?" he asked abruptly; and Ada looked at him in mild surprise.

"What in the world put poor Lord Meldrum into your head, dear George?" she demanded in return. "I am sure I do not know."

"O!" said the Doctor curtly; and the meal proceeded in a somewhat uncomfortable silence.

The young man was nevertheless equally convinced with Lucy of his wife's intention, and a bitter wrath raised within him. He resolved that in this instance he would take the law into his own hands. Lucy had been driven from his house once, he reflected fiercely, as he went about his work, and she had been brought back when there was some thought that she was at last going to make a home and a position for herself. Would it not be a lasting disgrace to him if he were to allow her again to be banished from the household where she had lived, a perpetual sacrifice to others, and to be sent adrift in the world once more—perhaps to be once more recalled, subject to her cousin's lightest caprice?

"The child shall not go," he decided. "I have yielded too weakly in many things for the sake of a quiet life.

He immediately took steps to find out whether Lord Meldrum had indeed left England. A kind note from Lady Susan Denzil assured him that his suspicions were correct. Lord Meldrum had sailed a week before, and had no intention of returning to England for at least a couple of years.

"I heard from Lady Susan Denzil to-day, Lucy," he said at dinner, on the day when he received the letter from Silverdale. "She sends you all manner of kind messages. Lord Meldrum has left England," the young man continued, addressing his wife now. "I suppose Lady Susan forgot to mention the circumstance when she wrote to you last."

"No doubt," replied Mrs. March, smiling. "And so Lord Meldrum has actually sailed. Let us hope he will not write a book about his travels. The poor fellow is capable of any conceivable folly."

She spoke with the gayest unconcern; but George, sadly skilled in reading his wife's face, knew that she had understood him.

"To whom did you intend to marry Lucy?" he asked her that evening. They were alone in the drawing room; Lucy was upstairs with Mrs. Ludlow. "Lady Susan begged me to convey her congratulations to her on her engagement. I did not know Lucy was engaged."

Ada shrugged her daintily clad shoulders.

"Did not every one say that poor Jack Throgmorton was in love with her?" she asked gaily. "I looked upon it as settled. How do we know that it was not her refusal which sent him away so suddenly?"

With a weary and impatient sigh the young man flung himself back in his chair.

"If you will be serious for a few minutes, Ada," he said bitterly, "I should like to talk to you about Lucy."

Mrs. March made a demure little face and folded her hands.

"I will be as grave as a judge, dear George," she answered. "What about Lucy?"

"This to begin with—that she shall not go to Mrs. Thompson, or whatever the woman's name is, and that I have already written to Sheffield to that effect."

"You dear impulsive George!" cried Ada, with a little horrified laugh. "Poor Mrs. Thompson will think you are crazy. I think you might have waited till she asked Lucy to go."

"It seems to me that we should be ashamed, you and I, Ada, to allow Lucy to think of leaving home at all. There is no necessity for her taking a situation. She has her own little income, and she certainly earns her board and lodging very honestly, by her attention to the house and Geordie. She need feel under no obligation to us."

"I quite agree with you," murmured Ada prettily. "It is what I am always urging upon dear Lucy. But—que veulez vous? If she thinks it right to go, you know very well go she will. The dear child has such a strong sense of duty."

"Why should she think it right to go?" demanded the young man abruptly. "Why should it be her duty?"

"I do not quite think that we have any right to inquire into her reasons," protested Ada gently.

"I think we have," the young man retorted, rising and going to stand with his back against the mantlepiece and his eyes fixed on his wife's downcast face. "I have had enough of juggling and mysteries and pretty little speeches with no meaning in them, or two meanings. Let us talk plainly for once. Why does Lucy consider it her duty to leave her natural home and go among strangers?"

"Dear George," murmured Ada, with gentle dignity, "I think you are forgetting yourself! I am not used to being questioned so violently."

George passed his hand tiredly across his eyes.

"Forgive me, Ada, if I spoke roughly," he said, with much patience; "I feel rather strongly on this point, and cannot wait to pick and choose my words."

"Is there any immediate necessity for discussing it?" asked his wife rather languidly. "Do you even know that Lucy has any intention of leaving us?"

"You have suggested it yourself. What is the use of denying it, my poor Ada? You wish her to go, and Lucy knows it. I, on the other hand, have resolved that she shall not go, unless you can bring me some good reason for her doing so."

"In that case there is no more to be said," returned Ada, smiling coldly. "How warm it is still! Do you mind opening that window, dear George?"

"There can be only two causes for Lucy's uneasiness in my house," pursued the young man, ignoring or not hearing this plaintive little request, and speaking with extreme clearness. "Either she feels too dependent on us—in which case an arrangement can be made, poor child, to spare her pride—or else Lucy believes that you have some unpleasant feeling about her living with us. You know best, Ada, which is the real reason."

Mrs. March broke into a silvery little laugh, and lifted her finger in arch reproof.

"You mean that I am jealous of her?" she asked. "Oh, you gay deceiver! It certainly had not occurred to me to be jealous—jealous of my poor, dear, prosy old Lucy! But if you tell me to be so, of course I will try!"—and she again laughed delicately.

"Ada," her husband answered, gravely offended, "I do not think that you should meet me in such a spirit when your cousin's welfare is at stake."

"Oh, oh," cried Ada in playful dismay, "is it as serious as that? Oh, you naughty, naughty George! I should like to know what right you had to look so black over my poor little friendship with Jack Throgmorton when you have yourself been secretly cherishing such dangerous sentiments for another! No wonder poor dear Lucy is so anxious to fly from you, you provincial Lovelace! I believe we have found out her reason at last!"

She stood up as she spoke and moved to her piano, by which she stood, striking a succession of brilliant chords, and accompanying them with a prolonged and skilful shake. George March turned faint and cold with a feeling of impotent disgust. It was his wife who was speaking, the woman to whom he was bound for life.

"I see that you are determined to try to make Lucy's longer stay under my roof impossible," he said, his deep angry voice dominating all her silvery cadences and roulades. "But I keep to my resolution. Such words harm no one but the woman who speaks them."

"A joke harms nobody, of course," Ada answered, sitting down to the piano and wheeling round with her hands in her lap. "And, seriously, my dear, kind hearted, wrong headed George, if I ever had cause to be jealous of my poor little cousin—and I am not conscious that I had—don't you think our marriage was the completest proof I could have desired of your indifference to her. You were free to have asked dear Lucy to be your wife; but you chose to ask poor me. It was very bad taste perhaps. But I am too happy myself in our prosy delightful provincial existence to doubt that you have ever repented your choice, dear George."

George was silent.

"I was actually expecting a compliment," continued his wife, softly laughing. "I forgot how many years we have been married. There, that is a compliment for you, though I did not intend it for one, sir."

Still George stood and looked at her in gloomy silence. Mrs. March shot an arch glance at him from her large greenish gray eyes.

"Is it still thinking of its Lucy," she said playfully. "Dear George, we shall speak to her together. I will go on my knees to her if necessary. But I am afraid you will find that dear Lucy too can be obstinate and that she has resolved to go."

"If I find that to be the case," said the young man curtly, "I will make arrangements for her to go to Groome. Mrs. Ackroyd will only be too glad to have her. Lucy would find a home there."

Ada clapped her hands delightedly.

"What a charming idea!" she cried. "By all means let dear Lucy go to Groome. My little desire will be all the sooner gratified, no doubt. The Acacias is still to be let, I believe."

"Ada," said her husband sternly, with an indignant flash of his dark eyes, "you will oblige me by dropping that tone. It is offensive and unwomanly."

"My dear George, I am trying my very best to be jealous!" declared Mrs. March, gaily. "But I will forgive you for following Lucy if you will only follow her to Green Knowe."

The young man was about to make some fierce retort, when Lucy opened the door and came in. The girl appeared uneasy.

"I want you to look at Geordie, please George," she said. "He seems to me very hot and restless. I am afraid he has taken cold."

Ada cast an amused glance at her husband's disturbed face.

"An excellent opportunity, dear George!" she said in a stage whisper. "When Geordie is in the case, dear Lucy can refuse you nothing. I do not think there is much the matter; he was perfectly well and particularly noisy a few hours ago. But by all means go and see him."

Anger gave place to despair in George March's face. What was the use of answering this smiling woman? He turned from her, letting his hand fall by his side, with a gesture of helpless misery that went to poor Lucy's heart.

"Perhaps it is nothing," she faltered. "I am sorry if I have disturbed you Ada; but I thought it better—"

"Come, my dear," George said kindly; "I will go and have a look at Geordie. You can come back presently and relieve your cousin's anxiety."

Ada raised her eyebrows archly over this sarcasm.

"I am going to inspect Tucker's progress," she said. "I will come and take a peep at Geordie when I am quite sure that I shall not be in the way."

The boy's ailment was declared to be one of those sudden attacks of indigestion which sometimes produce so remarkable a disturbance in little children; and Lucy, who had been unconsciously dreading something worse, drew a long breath of relief as George, having finished his tender examination of the little fellow, laid him down on his pillow and prepared to go down stairs.

"One or two tiny powders which I shall send you, and a wakeful night for cousin Lucy," said the young man, smiling sadly, "and I think we shall have Geordie all right to-morrow."

Lucy lifted her little drowsy hand to her lips and covered the little child lightly for the night.

"I will sit by him," she whispered, looking up at George with her blue April eyes. "You will say good night for me, won't you, to Ada? I shall not go down stairs again."

"Good night, child," he answered unsteadily, "and Heaven bless cousin Lucy."

Chapter LX.

Doctor March went away to his study, having despatched Edwards with Geordie's prescription.

It was an oppressive night late in August. Not a breath was stirring. The great white stars shone in the purple heavens beyond the wide-open sashes of the study windows. Here and there a yellow light shone in the tranquil houses of the old square; the dark branches of a tree rose straight and still against one lit up window. The silver calm of a harvest moon was over all the quiet scene.

George flung himself into a chair. His pulses were throbbing heavily, his heart was over-full of misery—it was all he could do, to sit still and think.

He had spent many and many a bitter hour in that old room, but to night it seemed that a crushing sense of humiliation, of powerlessness, was added to his suffering. A terribly tragic perception of the irrevocability of the step he had taken four years before came upon him with the force of a new discovery; it seemed that he had never before thoroughly realized what an abject thing his existence had become.

What woman had ever before spoken to her husband as that smiling woman up stairs had spoken to him? He had given her his name and his life and all its best hopes and joys—his marriage with her had seemed to him a moral self murder—and she could make his fidelity, his honor, his manly truth, the subject of a jest,

The young man chafed under the intolerable recollection of her airy nods and smiles, which had meant so much more than her words. They were an outrage to him, as well as an insult to the poor girl who was watching up-stairs by Geordie's cot, taking the place the child's mother had abandoned.

He clenched his fists with a fierce exclamation of disgust as Ada's words came back to him one by one. How low he had sunk when he was obliged to listen to such jests! And yet how was he to fight with smiles and innuendoes?

"Poor Lucy, poor child!" he groaned out, dropping his heavy head into his hands. "You did not know what was to be the fruit of your poor false sacrifice. You thought that by some happy accident evil might bring forth good for once. And how shall I blame you—a little, motherless, frightened creature—when I, who should have been stronger, had not the courage to be true at all hazards? I wanted to keep you near me, and so I consented to a lie and swore false promises to the woman you gave me for my wife. But now, in spite of all—after the agony and the shame and the bitterness—I must let you go! We have gathered no figs from our thorns, my little Lucy, nor any grapes from the thistles that have hedged us in!"

As George spoke he suddenly remembered the few little relics of his love for Lucy Thrale which he had kept buried in one of the drawers of his writing table, and which he had sometimes taken out and looked at while she was away.

"They shall be burnt," he thought. "I have no right to keep them any longer. It must be with a perfectly clear conscience that I henceforth fight her battles, poor child! I am her brother from this hour and nothing more."

He unlocked the drawer and took the little packet out. There were not many things in it—a small shabby glove she had dropped in the schoolroom at Primrose Alley, and which he had thrust into his breast pocket with nervous delight when Maria was not looking, a bit of pale blue ribbon, a faded flower or two, and the little ball of crimson wool which he had picked up in the garden at King's Road.

There was a little roll of manuscript too, addressed in her pretty half formed girl's hand.

As the young man took it up the thought came back to him of the happy night when he had first put the little velvet chair by the fire and had dreamed of the slender shape that was to sit in it, and whose blue eyes were to meet his as he looked up from his work at the desk.

He remembered how he had planned that some day the darling chestnut head was to come peeping over his shoulder, and Lucy, seeing the roll, was to be told, between fast coming kisses, who her editor had really been, and how they would read the poor little story together and laugh at the hero, of whom George had been a shade jealous in earlier days. That was what might have been.

Now he was going to burn the last little links that bound him to that sweet and foolish past.

There were the beloved worthless treasures, and there was the empty polished grate. No one was by, the opportunity was favorable; and yet the young man lingered over the performance of the task he had set himself.

One by one he lifted them sadly to his lips; slowly he unwound the bit of scarlet wool from its morsel of paper. If he kept that where would be the harm! What tales could a scrap of worsted wool tell? He could tie it around some of his papers, and put it away where it should never meet his eye to remind him of what was better forgotten.

So he thought one moment; but the next he had swept all the faded trifles together and laid them in the empty grate.

The gas had been lit and lowered, doubtless by Lucy, who looked to his comfort in such little things; but he searched about in vain for a match. He took up the crumpled paper that had served as a foundation for the ball of wool, and smoothed it out so as to fold it into a spill; as he did so, some words caught his eye which seemed oddly familiar:

"Ada,—I can bear this suspense no longer. Since I spoke to you in the garden, I——"

The young man stared at them stupidly.

These were the words of the letter which the poor girl had written in his name—was it likely he could ever forget them?

And it had actually been on a copy of that fatal forgery which the cruel girl had chosen to wind her wool on that day in the garden while he pleaded as for his very life and she spurned him and trampled on his heart!

George March opened the paper out again fully—the paper which had been his death warrant—and looked at it with dreary eyes. The light was low; he did not see it very clearly at first.

Then suddenly an awful whiteness spread over his face to the very lips, and he started up as if he had been shot, clutching at the back of his chair with one hand to steady himself, and rubbing the other hurriedly across his forehead.

"Good Heaven, it is impossible!" he muttered, in a hoarse voice. "I am going out of my senses—it is impossible, I say!"

He strode to his writing table, turning on the gas under which it stood to its fullest, and sat down.

There he spread the paper before him, holding it flat with his two hands. It seemed written in blood as his dazed and bewildered eyes followed the blotted lines.

But at last there was no room for further doubt.

The paper was a rough draft, containing many alterations and erasures, of the letter remembered only too well, and in the margin were various imitations of his own hand, and particularly of his own signature.

But the writing of the rough draft was not Lucy Thrale's. It was his wife's!

Chapter LXI.

It was Ada Ludlow who had written that letter, and not Lucy Thrale!

George March was so stunned by the discovery that for a long time anything like reflection was impossible. A confused sense of horror, of frantic unavailing remorse, of a dangerous rage within him—this was all he was conscious of as he sat with his clenched hands on the paper staring blankly before him, as if he had died where he sat.

He might have remained there all night, but that, after a time, the piano began to play again overhead, and his wife's voice broke into the opening thrill of a brilliant vocal waltz that rang through the silent house like the song of a bird.

At the sound the unhappy young man started to his feet, clenching his fists and uttering a horrible execration. Great drops of sweat started out on his forehead and round his mouth; he made a movement towards the door, but checked himself, and, with a groan, fell back into his chair, breathing heavily and wiping his forehead.

"Let me think," he said painfully—"let me try to think!"

It was on the day before Ada Ludlow had met him with that lying letter that he had talked to Lucy in the garden for the last time.

He remembered how he had gone home, startled by Lucy's accusation that he had been Ada's lover before he was hers, and how he had determined to write at once to Miss Ludlow, asking for an interview

He remembered that he did so, and that he sent his groom with the note, which was answered by a message from Lucy, in consequence of which he went next morning to King's Road, to be met with most unparalleled effrontery by that woman the proofs of whose guilt he was actually carrying at the moment in his breast pocket.

It seemed incredible now, looking back on the four years of his married life, that he had not detected the imposture, that his suspicions had glanced aside from that white soft-speaking woman upstairs, to fall on the poor little trembling creature whom she had cowed and terrified with her cold smiles.

What a miserable blind fool he had been! What a contemptible victim to a scheming adventuress!

Again the cold and sickening sweat broke out on the poor fellow's brow. With trembling hands he took out his pocket handkerchief and wiped it away, trying still to collect himself, to make sure this time that he was not mistaken.

How had Lucy come by that rough draft of the letter unless she were some way implicated in the forgery? He began to go over in his mind what had taken place in the garden at King's Road that day; and by degrees he recalled the whole scene—how he had gone out by the windows of the back drawing room and found Lucy and young Ackroyd sitting together on the bench under the church tower and how the girl had started up on his appearance and ran across the grass.

He remembered that Ted left them together after a moment or two, and that he himself followed Lucy, meaning to make a last appeal to her compassion, and found her stooping over the dog—Ada Ludlow's dog, given to her by that unfortunate boy. The tinkling of the bell on the pug's collar and its peevish snarls and yelps as Lucy played with it had annoyed him at the time. She was struggling to rescue something from its jaws, he remembered, instead of looking up and listening to what he had to say—something—The paper.

Yes: that was how Lucy had come by it. George recalled the poor child's trouble, and how, to hide it, she had begun to wind the wool round the scrap of paper she held—the paper she had taken from Ada Ludlow's dog. No doubt, the dog had picked it up unnoticed in his mistress's room, where, as Doctor March also recalled, Miss Ludlow had been confined for some days with a cold.

It all came back distinct and dreadful to the young man's mind. An awful oath burst again from his livid lips, a murderous look flashed into his face.

Once more he started up, crushing the paper in his hand. His wife's silvery roulades were still following each other in a melodious flight; he heard the light beating of the chords that marked the measure of the waltz and then the final triumphant trill a reprises shaken out of her throat by a high note, and the little crash on the piano which brought her song to an end.

The sound maddened him. He would go to her, he muttered through his set teeth, and confront her with the proof of her crime. Not another instant should she believe him ignorant of it. Was it not time at last that she, for whom so many pangs had been endured, should feel—if she could feel anything—the agony of discovery and of honest people's scorn.

He had tried, Heaven knows, to find excuses for Lucy when he supposed that it was his sister—poor innocent child!—who had done him that supreme wrong. He had told himself that she had not sinned for her own selfish ends, and that she had endeavored to atone for her sin by the most patient and sweetest self sacrifice.

But that smiling woman in silks and satins—that singing jade who had made his home a hell and poisoned his whole life with unavailing hatred and despair—she should find no mercy in him, he swore—no more than she had shown to him.

The young man strode to the door at last, and flung it open and went up stairs to the drawing room. Only Lucy was there. She was gathering her work together; but, as George entered, she started nervously, seeming inclined to run away.

"Ada has gone to bed," she explained with a timid glance at him. "I thought I would get my work basket now that Geordie is asleep." Then she saw the fierce disturbance in the poor fellow's looks, the swollen veins, the bloodshot eyes. "Is there anything wrong?" she faltered.

"Don't be frightened, my poor little Lucy," George answered in his kind rough voice, forcing a smile on his face the blanched and startled face she turned to him.

All the murderous rage in his veins was throbbing itself slowly away as he stood in the girl's gentle presence. The wonder and compassion in her blue eyes were like a cool touch on his confused brain. He had come up stairs full of revengeful determinations, burning with the intolerable sense of his own wrongs; but here was one who must be considered by him before all the world, and to whom he owed the humblest apology that a man could make.

"Oh, fool, fool!" he groaned in great bitterness of spirit. "How could I ever suppose an innocent girl like this could contrive and carry out the audacious fraud which has ruined me?"

Lucy tried to pass him as he stood looking at her with heavy remorseful eyes; but he put out his hand and stopped her.

"Stay a moment, Lucy," he said very gently. "Sit down, my dear. I must speak to you to night before you sleep."

Lucy looked uneasily at the door; but he shook his head and broke into a dreary laugh.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "No one shall make any more vile jokes at your expense after to-day. You are quite safe here, my poor child, with me."

As he spoke he put her into a chair—she was trembling like a leaf—and went and stood at a little distance from her. There was a pause then, while Lucy sat trying to read his face with her anxious eyes, hardly breathing in her vague dread of some new misfortune.

"I have to acknowledge, Lucy," George began in broken sentences as he fought hard for self control, "a cruel wrong that I have done you these four years and more, and to humbly ask for your forgiveness."

"I have nothing to forgive!" Lucy cried, more and more frightened. "Oh, please do not talk of the past! It is of no use. It will only make you unhappy, George."

"Yes, it is of some use when there is guilt to be punished and a wrong to be made right."

"I—I don't understand you."

"But you understand, dear, how I have always believed that the letter which was sent to your cousin in my name was written by you?"

She sat and looked at him in helpless misery. What was coming?

"I know," she answered quietly. "I have never blamed you for thinking so."

"I do not think so now. I"—a spasm in his throat made the words almost inaudible—"I know the truth."

"The truth?" Every drop of blood had faded from Lucy's face. "You know who wrote the letter?"

"Yes. Oh, Lucy, would to Heaven you had told me sooner! You poor little thing! See what it is all ended in. Would to Heaven you had told me before it was too late!"

"I did not know!" she stammered out humbly. "Oh George, what could I have told you, except that I did not write it? I did not know indeed!"

"You did not know who wrote the letter?"

"No—oh, no, no!" she cried in an eager whisper. "I only felt that to speak would make terrible trouble. I was afraid. But I thought it would all come right. I thought you would go back to Ada because you had loved her before you saw me."

"It was your cousin who told you that?"

"Yes."

The young man let his hands fall at his side with a gesture of despair.

"What chance had an honest man against such an infamous tissue of lies?" he cried: and he ground out a curse between his teeth.

"Oh, George, don't, don't," Lucy exclaimed piteously.

He did not hear her.

"Whose writing is that?" he answered; and he held out the crumpled letter.

The girl glanced at it, bewildered, without taking it from him.

"It is Ada's," she said; "and some of it is yours. Why?"

"Because"—with a curious desperate calm—"this is the rough draft of the forged letter, which was sent to your cousin in my name. And it was your cousin who wrote it."

Lucy stared at him.

"Ada?" she said stupidly.

"Yes—Ada. Your cousin and my wife—it was she who did it."

"How could Ada write a letter to herself," the girl said. "What do you mean?"

She put her hand to her head and looked away from him, and then back at his dark and distorted face. He did not speak.

"How could Ada write a letter to herself?" she repeated in a sort of wail.

Her look went to George's heart.

"Don't look like that Lucy," he urged vehemently. "How should you or I understand what some women can do? I tell you that Ada Ludlow wrote that letter and forged my name, and that by such means she became my wife. Heaven—when I think of it!"

He was livid with excitement. He began to pace up and down the floor, with both hands to his head. Lucy did not stir.

"How do you know?" she said, when he came back to his place on the hearthrug. She was staring at him again with her great dilated eyes. "How do you know she wrote it? Where did you get that paper?"

He told her in a few rapid words; and then she stood up and went nearer to him, and fell cold and rigid, upon her knees beside him."

"I did not know." she said, putting up her hands to catch at his arm—"I did not know, I did not know."

Her eyes were quite wild.

"Lucy, my child," cried George, tenderly, trying to raise her as she went on with the blank repetition of the words—"Lucy, speak to me, look at me! Do you think I have an angry feeling in my heart about you?"

"I did not speak," she went on. "I ought to have told you that it was not I who wrote it. But I did not know—I did not know!"

She shrank away from his hands with a shudder as he bent over her, and sat rocking herself in a heap on the floor.

The disclosure seemed to have numbed her. She did not hear George when he spoke to her, or notice his touch. The young man went to a side table where a tray of glasses and decanters still stood, and poured out some wine, which he made her drink by holding it to her lips. She took it quite passively, and let him help her up from the floor. And after a while, as the wine warmed her, she began to cry, her lips quivering piteously, and great tears rolling down her white cheeks and dropping upon her bosom.

George drew a long breath of relief as he saw them, and began to walk up and down the room, giving her time to recover herself. He had no right to try to comfort her, to place the poor little head against his breast and kiss the color and life back into the wan face. All his kisses belonged to the woman who had bound him to her by an audacious fraud, tricked him of his joy, befooled him as man had never been befooled before—to that woman, and not to the sweet girl he loved with such a sacred worship.

A clock struck one. He went back to Lucy, who was sitting quiet enough now, her slender figure convulsed by an occasional sob.

"Don't cry any more, Lucy," he said kindly. "I think I can bear everything so long as I do not see you suffer. But see how helpless I have been even to prevent that!"

"You have been very, very good to me, George," she answered, one last irrepressible sob bursting from her overcharged heart. "If you do not want to make me hate myself, you will not say such things as that."

They sat and looked at each other in silence. For a long time Lucy had hardly dared to lift her eyes to George's face; and it gave her a sharp pang now to trace the changes in it, the lines that trouble and passion had worn round his eyes and mouth within the past few months.

If she had known—if she had only known!—this was the mournful, terrible burden of her thoughts.

Something of the same sort seemed to be passing in George's mind. He had loved this child even when he believed her guilty loved her in spite of the one great blemish on her white life, and now he knew that she was still the little beloved Lucy of the old happy days, the Lucy whose thoughts had been so clear and as guileless as her April eyes; and, as he remembered the coarse and cruel tragedy of their lives, and remembered what their lives might have been, the words of bitter longing would not be kept back.

"If you had loved me," he said in a voice full of anguish—"oh, Lucy, if you had only loved me, it would all have been different. You could not have borne to do as you have done. Oh, my dear, if you had only loved me."

Lucy did not answer. But again the great tears began to gather in her eyes. When, when was her great punishment to end?

"Don't cry, my poor Lucy," said George in his rough tender voice. "I am not blaming you, my dear. How are we to control our hearts, and like or dislike as it would be wisest for us to do? You had my love—you could not give me yours—amen. All that is left me is to protect you as much as possible from the results of my terrible blunder.

"Oh, do not think of me!" the girl cried wildly. "Please do not, George! I don't deserve it."

"You might as well tell me not to breathe, child," he answered with a sad smile. "Listen to me. When I went down-stairs to-night, and before I found the paper, I was making up my mind, with a bad-enough grace, to indulge my own selfishness no longer. It seemed to me that the time had come to give you back your promise—the promise you made me, dear, when you came home from Silverdale—and to admit that my roof was henceforth no safe home for you."

Lucy turned a little pale.

"I say," he continued, "that all this was in my mind to night when I went down-stairs. And I was planning to let you go to Croome, where every one would have been so glad of you. But now everything has changed. That woman has forfeited all claims on me. Let me see who will dare to drive you from my house again!"

A savage fire was burning in his dark eyes; he spoke with a sullen determination that made Lucy tremble.

"We have still to do what is best, George," she said gently, but steadily too. "Right and wrong have not changed—oh," she cried, blushing, "you know that as well as I do! What right have I to be teaching you? You know that your first duty is to Ada."

George burst into a fit of bitter laughter.

"It is so easy," he said, "to preach what is right when it costs you no pain." His voice was jarring and rough with passion. He hardly knew what he was saying; the very ground seemed opening beneath his feet and letting him slip into undreamt of abysses of misery. How could he let go Lucy's hand and feel himself sinking down right into the very bitterness of death? "It is easy," he said, "to talk of doing right when it costs you nothing."

"I know," the girl answered with sweet humility. "I knew that it is you who have to bear the worst pain, George. But you would rather do that than enjoy a happiness at another person's expense; that would not be like you."

"I have borne enough!" the young man cried fiercely. "I am at the end of my tether! It is her turn now to suffer!"

"She is your wife," Lucy said, with blanching lips. "She must never know what you have found out."

"What?"

The word was like a cry of pain and rage.

"No good could come of it," the girl pleaded. "Think a little. If you told her, if you bowed her to the very earth with shame, would it undo the ties that you have made? Would she be less little Geordie's mother? George, what is done cannot be undone. Oh, George, do not tell her! How could you live together day after day with such a thought in your minds; and how could you live apart, and without Geordie? George, promise me you won't! It is all very wretched, I know; but worse wretchedness will come if you try to break the promises you made before Heaven."

"They were made in a false belief!" George cried hoarsely. "Shall I not let her feel the shame of her abominable treachery. Shall she flaunt her triumph in my face all my life, believing that I know nothing of the crime with which it was bought. I have endured enough, Heaven knows. Do not ask me to endure this life any longer? That woman and I are better apart."

"Geordie!" said Lucy, with a sob in her heart.

The young man turned away and flung himself into a chair, hiding his face on his arms. Lucy stood up and prepared to go. She had forgotten how strange this late talk between her and Doctor March would seem to the household if they knew of it; she was past thinking of such things now. She could not reason about his discovery yet, or arrive at any conclusions concerning it; but the misery and disgrace of it were strong upon her. Hot blushes of shame mounted into her face at the remembrance of it.

All along Lucy had known how George had suspected her of writing the letter; but she had not felt greatly degraded by that suspicion. She had had the sense of her own purity to sustain her through it all, and the certainty that he must at least admit that she had gained little personally by the cruel wrong that had been practiced upon him. But now what must he think of them all. What must the family be whose women could stoop so low. It was the unwomanliness rather than the dishonesty of Ada's action that was sending the burning blood into Lucy's face as she stood and looked at the bowed and grief stricken head of the man who had been so grievously wronged by her cousin and herself.

"We have brought him nothing but misery," she thought. "Before we came he was the best loved and most respected man in all Barlaston; and we have brought him to the dust."

She drew near timidly, and laid her hand for a second on his shoulder.

"I am going, George," she said humbly. "Won't you speak to me before I go?"

"What can I say?" he asked with a heavy sigh. "I suppose you are right, my poor Lucy; and the best thing will be to keep silence now to the end. What words can alter my life, bring back the past, blot out the intolerable agony of the last four years?"

"We do not deserve any consideration, I know," the girl answered in a voice choked by shame. "I would not ask it only for Geordie's sake."

"Poor little lad!" groaned out the young father.

"And"—Lucy touched him again for a second—"you will try to bear up, George. You have been so brave until now. I must not talk to you again about this; but you will know that I am thinking of you and praying for you always, and that your great goodness fills me with wonder and humiliation."

"Yes, child," he said, with a melancholy smile. "You will be sorry for me as you feed the beggars in the street and clothe the little children who cry to you for help. Well, I am thankful for even so small a place in your regard, my dear; and I would not have you feel such pain as I have felt for you. Your poor little heart is not strong enough to hold it."

"I suppose not," the girl answered, with a pale smile. "But it feels for you as much as it can. George, believe that."

She took up her work-basket, with the orderly habit that was instinctive with her, and walked unsteadily to the door. Her eyes were blinded by a mist of bitter tears; she could not see to walk very straight. George caught her as she stumbled against the chair in which he was sitting.

"Are you ill, my dear?" he asked, springing up with a rush of renewed tenderness.

She could not speak, but she turned her wet eyes and looked at him for a moment. George turned pale.

"Lucy," he said suddenly in a low voice, "was it me you loved after all?"

She did not answer except by her tears.

"What is the use of deceit between us two now?" urged George solemnly. "Lucy, was it me?"

"Yes," she said, breaking into a sob.

The unhappy young man turned away with a despairing soul, letting her hands fall, and walked to the window, where he stood looking out across the black lamp-dotted square. Lucy cried now unrestrainedly. The work-basket had fallen upon the ground. All the pent-up misery of years was flowing in the girl's tears.

"Poor, poor child!" the young man said at last, coming back to her. "What courage you have had. Your heart has held a greater pain than mine, after all, for it was a hidden one. Why do you turn away, my dear? Let us speak freely to each other this one last time. You did love me, Lucy? Let me be sure of that."

"Yes," she answered again, controlling her sobs and the quivering of her lip, "I loved you, George. But you will never speak of this to me again?"

"Do not be afraid." He stood aloof from her. He did not attempt to touch so much as her hand. "Don't you know even yet how high I have set you in my soul? Oh, Lucy my little lost Lucy, we should have been so happy! I loved you so dearly! If you had understood how dearly, you would not have dared to do what you have done. Oh, do not shrink from me; it breaks my heart to see it!"

"I do not shrink from you, George," she said gently. "I was not afraid to tell you. I can trust you."

"Heaven bless you for that, my lost darling; for you are my darling—may Heaven forgive me—my one darling in the world! But I will never tell you so again. It would only make you unhappy; though we know each other too well to be afraid."

She met his dark pained eyes with her clear gaze.

"Yes," she said; "I know you too well to be afraid."

And just then a little plaintive child's cry was heard through the silent house.

"Geordie!" Lucy said anxiously; and she darted from George's side and up the unlit staircase to her room.

[Concluded next week.]

WIVES WANTED.

A Gigantic Scheme by a Woodstock Editor.

The Toronto World says: In order to accommodate the eight hundred bachelors who are said to be under the care of a single Presbyterian Superintendent of Missions in Manitoba and the Northwest, the editor of the Woodstock Sentinel-Review proposes, with all the seriousness of a provincial scribe, to urge a huge excursion of marriageable girls from