

this. Let me have the honor of taking you home?"

He had jumped from the chaise as he spoke, and, with lifted hat, assisted her in with the courteous grace of a thorough "gentleman of the old school," tucking the luxurious white fur robes around her feet and settling her cloak with a deferential "allow me."

And as Lurline settled herself back in her soft nest behind the prancing horses, and yielded herself to the delight of being so cared for and protected, the thought came over her—

"What if it might always be so?"

Before this the village gossips had linked her name with Mr. Thornton's, and she had a shy consciousness that there was something more than mere friendly feeling in the glances which he so often fixed upon her.

Often as she sat in church she would feel rather than see his earnest gaze, and turn to see him drop his eye, like a bashful boy lover, instead of a grave widower, owing to fifty years.

But whenever any of these little tidbits of tattle reached her ears, side by side with the vision of the stately man, with his silver hair, would rise a young face with deep eyes that looked such passion, curling, crispy locks of gold, and cheeks flushed with the tints of early dawn.

"How is Harold?" asked the judge, after they had started.

"His lameness is no worse," she replied; "but this stormy weather keeps him so closely at the fireside, that the confinement tells upon his spirits. He has been unusually despondent and melancholy to-day."

And she sighed as she thought of the added weight of care which this same low state of Harold's spiritual barometer entailed upon herself.

"Ah, yes, I see! His mind preys upon itself for want of some other employment. His highly imaginative temperament makes him more sensitive to the disturbing influences than an ordinary person would be. Does he still stick to his painting?"

"He hasn't done much at it lately," said Lurline briefly.

She didn't say that they were without the means to buy the necessary materials for the young artist to work with.

"No?" said the judge. "That's a pity. If he would only go to work at it now, it would be the best thing in the world for him."

"If he could only be sent to Italy, now, for a few years, you might have yet cause to be proud of your artist-brother, Miss Lurline."

Lurline caught her breath impatiently.

Did she not know all this?

Was it not the bitterest drop in her cup of poverty to see her only brother, her darling, gifted brother, whom her mother had bequeathed to her love and care on her dying bed, pining and wasting day after day, his sensitive nature suffering in sympathy with the physical ills which might be cured, had she but the means to provide the costly medical attendance necessary; his bright talents rusting, his noble aspirations stifled in this dread atmosphere of poverty and privation?

It was hard, very hard, when all around them the vulgar rich were wasting their substance in riotous living.

It was the overmastering sense of this injustice of fortune that broke down her usual proud reserve, and made her turn half angrily to the judge.

"Mr. Thornton," she said, with a tinge of bitterness in her clear tones, "I wonder if you have any conception of the meaning of poverty? I can assure you, speaking from my own experience, that its bitterest sting is not in material things, but in seeing the noblest growths in our souls withering slowly, day by day, under its blighting breath."

"Oh," she went on passionately, "if I could only, by any exertion of these two hands of mine, place my brother in a position where his soul could blossom out as Heaven meant it should, I would work the flesh off to the very bone to accomplish that end."

She drew a long, sobbing sigh, and leaned back again, the passion dying out of her face, and leaving it marble white, and with such a pitiful look of pain for one so young and so very very beautiful.

Some strange emotion was at work in his face.

He leaned forward eagerly to scan more closely the half-averted countenance at his side.

"Lurline," he said, then paused. His blue eyes were tender; his face had the eagerness of youth.

Then he caught his breath, and went on in a strange, stifled tone.

"Lurline, there is a way by which you can do all this for your brother, and more, even more, for another soul."

"Lurline, have you ever thought of me as a lover—as a husband? Could you love me, dear? Will you take me as a Christmas gift? Speak. Though I am an old man, my heart is warm and true, and no boy could give you such tender, such adoring love as I should lavish on your feet every day of your sweet life."

The color all came back in a rosy flood as she shyly raised her dark eyes to his face.

They went fluttering down again as they met the fire in his.

"You are too good—too noble," she murmured; "but, Mr. Thornton, I do not love you. That is—"

"Never mind," he interrupted, impatiently, "about the love, just now. You do not dislike me. Love will come bye-and-bye. Only give

me some hope, and I will wait for an answer three—yes, six months, if you say so."

They had reached her door by this time, and lifting her in his arms, he carried her across the sloppy side walk, never letting her down till he had set her feet within her own little dark passage.

"That is the way I'll take care of you when you are my wife," he whispered. "These dear feet shall never tread any troublesome or dangerous paths while I live."

He opened the door into the little sitting-room, where Harold's low lounge was drawn up beside the scanty fire.

"Harold," he cried, "I have been trying to persuade this sister of yours to accept me as a Christmas gift, with an Italian education for you thrown into the bargain. Will you not add your entreaties to mine?"

Lurline glanced from the pale worn face of the invalid, made still more ghastly by the great luminous, dark eyes, wherein the restless fire of genius glowed to the man, standing tall, erect, and stately in the centre of the room, his presence shedding dignity and splendor over that poor abode, and thought that the sacrifice was not such a greater one, after all.

And then, what life, what gladness would it purchase for this poor prisoned soul!

She went over to her brother, and laid her hand on his hot forehead.

"Oh," she moaned, low to herself, "if I had never loved Ray Nelson!"

But her brother threw his arms up like an eager child, and, clasping her round the neck, drew her face close down to his.

"Oh, Lurline," he whispered, "if you only could!"

She released herself, and turned to Thornton with downcast eyes.

"No, do not answer me now," he said. "In six months I'll ask you again. Try to love me a little—ever so little, Lurline."

And raising her soft, slender hand to his lips, he bowed low, and was gone.

How different, ah, how different from those impassioned partings of old, when she and Ray had clung to one another's arms, and kissed over and over again!

That night, she dreamed that she was about to be married to Thornton.

Priest and people had assembled in the little village church, and she stood before the altar, in snowy white, her hands clasped in her future husband's.

But just as the last "I will!" fell from his lips, the hand that held hers grew suddenly icy cold, and, with a sickening cry, she turned and saw that the man at her side was a ghastly, terrible corpse, and that it was not Thornton, but Ray Nelson.

And she awoke with the old ache in her heart a thousand fold deepened, and new that Ray Nelson, and not Thornton, must be the man she should marry, if marriage was to be to her anything more than a horror and a sin.

So, though she said nothing to Harold about it, she set herself to work again, with redoubled diligence, her sole desire now being to save money enough to take the two to Italy, where they could live in some humble way, she gladly toiling that he might study, and by redoubled love and tenderness atoning to him for the hope deferred.

But the times were hard, work was scarce, and the applicants for it numerous.

She well-nigh ruined her eyes over embroidery, at starvation prices, and many a time the cold, grey light of morning found her still at work.

The worn shoes were repatched, and the alpaca, rusty now, turned and turned again, in order that she might buy brushes and colors for Harold.

Meanwhile, Thornton was most kind.

He was too wise to help her materially, even supposing she would have accepted such aid, willing that she should endure the sharpest pangs of poverty for a season, in order that the comfort and luxury which only waited her acceptance, might appear the more alluring by contrast.

But he sent her bouquets of rare exotics from his conservatory, and early grapes from his hothouse; and, often, in the soft spring twilight, he called for her to drive with him in the pony carriage which, by-and-bye, should be hers, he thought.

It would be wrong to say that Lurline was never tempted.

Often, as she bent with aching temples over her work, before her mind's eye would rise a vision of what her life might be did she choose to accept the lot which fortune had thrown at her feet.

And often, when she passed Thornton's mansion, that stubborn, lofty resolution of hers was shaken to its very foundation, and, perhaps, had been at her side there and then, her destiny would have been irrevocably sealed.

But he was content to bide his time, and never by word or look attempted to win a premature answer.

So, at last, the twenty-fifth of June came round—the day Thornton was to receive his answer.

Harold had been in unusually good spirits all that day, and as the warm summer twilight crept over the earth, he had his easy chair wheeled to the low window, where the faint evening breeze could lift the damp, dark curls from his pale forehead.

"Lurline, darling, come here," he called.

He laid his hand on her shining hair and patted and caressed her soft cheek fondly.

"What a stately lady you will make, sister," he said. "Wait till we see diamond stars shin-

ing in these braids, and these dear fingers encircled with gold and gems."

"And oh, Lurline, if you only knew how I pant for those soft Italian skies! We'll all go together, and I shall be a new creature in that atmosphere of beauty and art."

"Oh, you'll be proud of your troublesome brother yet, mademoiselle. And Thornton is so noble and generous. How much better it is that you should have been kept for him, instead of marrying that flighty Ray Nelson, you used to think so much of. Papa was right, after all, was he not, Lurline?"

Lurline hid her face, while a quick spasm contracted her heart.

Perhaps her father was right.

Was it better, after all, that she should marry Thornton?

Had she any right to sacrifice Harold's happiness on the altar of her own selfishness?

And even if Ray should come back, a proper womanly pride ought to forbid her to reinstate him.

While she yet quivered with these questions, Thornton's well-known knock was heard.

Harold gently raised her, and dropped a soft kiss on her forehead.

"I am indebted to you for all that makes life worth having—yes, for life itself," he said, solemnly, "for I could not live much longer this way, Lurline."

Lurline was white to the lips when she met her lover in the hall.

"You have come for your answer," she gasped, rather than spoke. "You have waited long and patiently—will you wait one day more? I will send you your answer to-morrow, on my honor."

He looked down on her kindly, as a father might.

"Very well, so be it," he said; "although it is a hard thing for an old man like me to wait."

And drawing her arm within his own, he led her into the little parlor across the hall from Harold's room.

His call was a brief one, however, for neither felt at ease.

While he yet lingered over his farewells on the doorstep, Maud Ingalls came along with Mr. Kingsley, the artist, to whom she had lately become engaged, and whose devotion she was fond of parading on every possible occasion.

"Oh, is that you, Miss Veray?" she said, in her soft, lisping tones. "We—that is Mr. Kingsley and myself—allow me to introduce Mr. Kingsley, Miss Veray—have come around to see a little sketch of your brother's, that Mr. Kingsley admires very much—something wonderful in the way of color, I believe."

Mr. Thornton took his leave with a bow, and Lurline ushered the visitors into the sitting room.

Miss Ingalls believed in being popular, and while Mr. Kingsley examined the sketch, graciously kept up a conversation with Lurline, who, she remembered hearing her mamma remark, belonged to a family quite as thoroughbred as their own, and who, if one could credit the village gossip that she was about to be married to Thornton, was really worth cultivating, despite her present shabby mode of living.

"Let me see," she rattled on; "it runs in my head that you used to be exceedingly good friends with that young Ray Nelson, did you not? Well, we saw him at Paris; and papa thinks him one of the most promising young men he has ever met—quite wealthy already, they say, and made it all himself too. And he's going to be married. Did you know it?"

The dim light concealed the deadly pallor that fell over Lurline's face like a blight, and she managed to keep her voice steadily as she answered, with apparent unconcern—

"I had not heard of it. Do you know to whom?"

"Oh, no; that is a secret. I only know that it is so, for I heard him tell papa, myself, that he was somewhat hurried in his business on account of his approaching marriage."

That night it seemed to Lurline that her heart died within her.

Since Ray Nelson was false, what did it matter to her what her future life should be?

If that was the much talked-of love which men felt, she wanted none of it; and if she could give life and happiness to another, why not do it, since nothing could now further affect her for good or for ill.

So, when Thornton came next day, he received the answer he had hoped and prayed for.

Still she could not bring herself to consent to an immediate marriage; and, as it was considered that a winter in Italy was imperative for Harold, he was placed with a valet in the care of friends who were going abroad, and, after his departure, early in November, Lurline set about the preparation of her simple trousseau, refusing with firm pride the rich gifts Thornton would have lavished upon her.

The wedding was set for Christmas, and the day dawned far differently from the preceding year.

No snow had fallen, and there had been scarcely a frost as yet.

Lurline stood in a broad belt of sunshine before her little black-rimmed mirror, fastening the bridal roses in her shining brown hair.

Her dress of snowy India muslin, fine and sheer, fell about her in filmy, cloud-like folds, and the long bridal veil shaded a face strangely beautiful, though all its rare, rosy bloom had deserted it, save in the soft lips, which showed like a thread of scarlet.

She lifted her gloves and bouquet, and turned

with a little sigh as she heard a carriage stop at the door.

In the passage she met the little maid. "Mr. Thornton, I suppose," she said.

"No, miss, it ain't. It's a young man, and he says as how he must see you, and won't take no for an answer."

Lurline floated slowly down the stairs in her shimmering robes, but when she reached the parlor door, she stopped with a shudder, and caught at the door-post for support, for there, leaning against the mantel in the old familiar attitude she had seen a thousand times, stood Ray Nelson.

She gazed at him with wide, terror-stricken eyes.

"Why have you come?" she asked, faintly. "You can have nothing to say to me now."

He came towards her with a look of mingled pity and reproach in his great blue eyes.

"I did not wish to come, indeed," said he; "but they insisted that I, being an old friend, should bring you the news."

"The news! What news? That you are going to be married?"

She suddenly remembered herself, and drew up her head with the old proud gesture.

"If I seem startled or confused, excuse me," she said, in her ordinary self-possessed manner. "You see," looking down at her dress, "that it is my wedding day. I am naturally a little nervous. Allow me to congratulate you on your approaching marriage, though you have not paid me that compliment yet," she added, with something of her old manner.

"That is not my errand to-day. Can you bear very bad news?"

He looked at her searchingly, then hurried on—

"I have come to tell you that you cannot be married to-day. Thornton fell dead with heart disease this morning, just as he was stepping into his carriage."

Lurline stared at the speaker blankly for a moment, as though the words made no impression on her brain; then, as their meaning dawned upon her, she swayed backwards and forwards slightly, and with a low cry fell in a dead faint at his feet.

When she came to herself again, Ray Nelson was bending over her, chafing her limp hands, and Ray's voice was passionately repeating her name over and over again, coupled with all those tender epithets that lovers know.

For, seeing her lying there so white and death-like, he forgot that she was all but another man's wife, and that, had not a potentate more powerful than love itself interfered, he would have been guilty of the deepest sin in allowing such words to pass the portal of his lips.

Then Ray explained everything.

How last Christmas he was at the point of death with brain fever, and how, after a slow recovery, he had written letter after letter, which had never reached her, until finally he could wait no longer, but came himself, only to hear on the way to her house that it was her wedding day.

Then someone had met him with the news of Thornton's death, and bidding him go tell Lurline, hurried off before he had time to refuse.

Lurline had a long story to tell, too, and when he heard all, Ray forgave her for what looked like inconstancy.

It was found that Thornton had duly executed a will, leaving his entire property to Lurline, with the exception of a legacy to Harold, sufficient to support him in comfort the rest of his days.

But Lurline would not touch a single penny of hers.

She made it all over to a charitable institution, and she and Ray live in modest elegance in the very house in which he wooed and won her girlish love.

#### SUSPICIOUS PEOPLE.

Depend upon it that people who suspect everybody are unworthy of anybody's confidence. Accurate self-knowledge is at the bottom of their universal distrust. It is the consciousness of evil designs in their own hearts that causes them to doubt the existence of honest intentions in the hearts of others. Of course they are very unhappy, and we know of no remedy for their discomfort except self-improvement. Let them root out of themselves the treachery, the meanness, the greed, or whatever other vicious propensity it may be, which they suppose to have its counterpart in the breasts of all mankind, and their opinions of their fellow-men will at once change for the better. But in the meantime avoid them. People who have no faith in their kind are very dangerous persons to deal with. Taking it for granted that everybody with whom they come in business contact is bent on overreaching them, their object is to spike the enemy's artillery by being the first to overreach. Candour is lost upon them. They consider it refined hypocrisy. Favors they look upon as cunningly-devised lures, intended to lead them into a trap, and while receiving them willingly, chuckle inwardly at the thought that they are old birds and cannot be caught by any such devices. These creatures think they understand human nature! Poor wretches! of all the thousand springs of human action they know but one, and that the worst—selfishness. Let them stop that spring in their own moral machinery, if they can. Let them do it for their own sakes, for they can never know how much of good there is in the world until they do.