

I am not well—I said more than I meant—do not leave me just yet.” She spoke now hurriedly and entreatingly.

These extraordinary changes of tone and manner impressed Lady Alice disagreeably. And yet she hesitated: she did not like to carry out her purpose of leaving the house at once, when she had been entreated to remain. Looking at her, Mrs. Romaine seemed to make a great effort over herself, and suddenly put on the air that she used most to affect—the air of a woman of the world, with peculiarly engaging manners.

“Don’t hurry away,” she said. “I really have something particular to say to you. Will you listen to me for two minutes?”

“Yes—if you wish it.”

“I do wish it very much. You will stay? That is kind of you. And I will ring for tea.”

“No, please do not,” said Lady Alice shrinking instinctively from the thought of eating and drinking in Rosalind Romaine’s drawing-room; “I really cannot stay long, and I do not drink tea so early.”

Her hostess smiled and withdrew her hand from the bell-handle. “As you please,” she said indifferently. “It is so long since I had visitors that I almost forget how to entertain them. You must excuse me if I have seemed *distract* or—or peculiar. You see I have had a great deal to bear.”

“I know it, and I am very sorry,” said Lady Alice gently.

“You are very kind.” Was there a touch of satire in the tone? “And—as you are here—why should we not speak of one or two matters that have troubled us sometimes? As two women of the world, we ought to be able to come to a sort of compact.”

“I do not understand you, Mrs. Romaine.”

Rosalind laughed a little wildly. “Of course you don’t. But I do not mean to talk conventionalism or commonplace. Just for a minute or two, let us speak openly. You have come back to your husband—yes, I *will* speak, and you shall not interrupt!—and you hope no doubt to be happy with him. Don’t you know that I could wreck your whole happiness if I chose?”

The color rose in Lady Alice’s face, but she looked clearly into the other’s face as she replied—