

There was a flash of angry light in the deep-set gray eyes.

'If you insist on remaining here,' said he, 'because your father chooses to go pottering about after those rabbits—'

Then he checked himself. Had he not vowed to himself again and again that he would be tenderly considerate to this gentle-souled creature who had placed the happiness of her life in his hands? If she had higher notions of duty than he could very well understand, ought he not at least to respect them?

'Ah, well, Sylvia,' said he, patting her on the shoulder, 'perhaps you are right. But I am afraid you will find it very dull.'

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE CRISIS.

THINGS had indeed 'come to a bonny cripus,' and he was altogether unaware of it. He was vaguely conscious, it is true, that his married life was not the married life he had looked forward to; and he was sorry that Lady Sylvia should insist on moping herself to death in that solitary house in Surrey. But then if her sense of duty to her ailing father demanded the sacrifice, he could not interfere; and there was some compensation for her in the beauty of the summer months that were now filling her garden with flowers. As for himself, he let no opportunity slip of paying her small and kindly attentions. He wrote to her every day. When he happened to have an idle forenoon, he would stroll into Christie's and buy some knick-knack for her. Lady Sylvia had never the chance of gratifying her womanly passion for old china; but now that Balfour had discovered her weakness for such things, she had them in abundance. Now it was a Dresden milk-jug, now a couple of Creil plates, again a Sèvres jardinière, that was sent as a little token of remembrance; while he scarcely ever went down on Saturday morning without carrying with him some similar bit of frail treasure, glad that he knew of something that would interest her. In the meantime he was intensely busy with his Parliamentary work; for, not having been in office, and having no hope of office, the tremendous overthrow

of his party at the general election had in no way damped his eager energy.

When the blow fell, it found him quite unprepared. One afternoon he received a telegram from his wife asking him if he could go down that evening. It was a most unusual summons; for she was scrupulously careful not to interfere with his Parliamentary duties; but of course he immediately hastened down to The Lilacs. He was more surprised than alarmed.

He went into the drawing-room, and found his wife standing there, alone. The light of the summer evening was somewhat dimmed by the multitude of leaves about the veranda; but his first glance told him that she was deadly pale, and he saw that she was apparently supporting herself by the one hand that caught the edge of the table.

'Sylvia,' said he, in dismay, 'what is the matter?'

'I am sorry to have troubled you to come down,' she said, in a voice that was strangely calm, 'but I could bear this no longer. I think it is better that we two should separate.'

He did not quite understand at first; he only felt a little cold about the heart. The next moment she would have fallen backward had he not caught her; but she quickly recovered herself, and then gently put his hands away from her.

'Sylvia,' he said again, 'what is the matter with you?'

He stared at the white face as if it were that of a mad woman.

'I mean what I say, Hugh,' she answered. 'I have thought it over for months back. It is no hasty wish or resolve.'

'Sylvia, you must be out of your senses,' he exclaimed. 'To separate! Why? For what reason? Is it any thing that I have done?'

He wished to take her hand; she withdrew a step.

'The sooner this pain is over, the better for both of us,' she said; and again the trembling hand sought the support of the table. 'We have been separated—we are separated now—except in name. Our married life has been a mistake. I do not think it is either your fault or mine; but the punishment is more than I can bear. I can not any longer suffer this—this pretense. Let us separate. We shall both be free to