

fell upon her lap and remained there, open but unread for the next hour, for it took her an hour reviewing the events that had culminated in that blow.

She had many questions to ask herself, the first was, had she ever really loved that man whom she now loathed more than the most odious things in the world?

She could never have had any love for him. She had accepted his wooing of her because she had fancied that she could not endure her father's second marriage. Her father was Sir Hubert Percy, and since the death of his wife, she had been the mistress of the house, and had been very proud of her position. Percy Place was a big house, but no one could say that it had fallen off in the scale of its hospitalities while she had discharged the duties of hostess. She knew this, and when one day, three years after the death of her mother, her father told her that he was about to marry again she had felt very indignant. It was in vain that Sir Hubert had explained to her that she would have as much more freedom under the altered régime than she had before, she felt that his intention to marry again was equivalent to an announcement that she had failed in her duty. She had gone away to live with her aunt in another county and within a year she had accepted the offer of marriage made to her by Stephen Lacon.

Everyone—except such as knew Stephen Lacon intimately—said that the match would be a brilliant one for her; for Lacon Park was a noble property, and a good many people estimate the brilliancy of a marriage on a property basis. But in the county there were some who were ready to affirm that the girl who hoped to make Stephen Lacon happy must be optimistic indeed. There were many rumours in regard to his selfishness—his queer temper—his vanity, and some of them reached the ear of Stella Percy's father. He warned her—she remembered now as

she sat in front of the fire in her room with an aching head, how her father had warned her and had only given his consent to her marriage with reluctance. But she had been self-willed; she had refused to listen to any counsel, and she had married Stephen Lacon.

Before a month had passed she had learned something of his nature, and that knowledge was a revelation to her. She had not thought it possible that any man living could be of a nature so opposed to all the ideas she had formed of what a man might be. A man! He possessed none of those qualities which she had believed to be common to all men—a sense of honour, an instinct of reverence for a woman simply because she was a woman, a desire to protect the weak against the strong. All these qualities went with manhood, she had always supposed, and she was shocked to find that her husband was deficient in all. From the first he had treated her more as a servant than a wife; this was when he was at his best. No servant would have remained a day in his house if treated as he treated her when at his worst. He made no pretence of having any affection for her, and when one day, exasperated beyond endurance, she had demanded of him to say why he had ever asked her to marry him, he had given that cynical laugh to which she had become accustomed and said,

"I married you for this—this—you were so high and mighty I thought I should like to bring you down to the level of the rest of us."

That was three years ago. She had suffered humiliation after humiliation at his hands; but until this day he had never actually struck her. He had command of the countless ways in which a cruel man—an unmanly man—can wound a woman without raising his hand against her. She did not believe it possible that even he would ever be guilty of brutality such as his; but she found that she had been mistaken. He had struck her, simply because she had