

DIVORCED.

"What o'clock is it, John?"

"Nine o'clock, sir." And the English valet of Richard Lestrangle drew aside the curtains of the bedroom-window to let in the light of a leaden-skied, cold December morning.

"Any letters?"

"Three, sir; and eight Christmas cards."

"Ah, yes; it is Christmas Day. I declare I had entirely forgotten it. Order breakfast to be ready in an hour, and open the register in the dressing-room." And Mr. Lestrangle sank back upon his pillow to enjoy a delicious quarter of an hour in bed before rising. Half waking, half sleeping, his eyes wandered vaguely over the fresh new fittings of the elegant room, enlivened here and there by the brilliant tones of a water-color by some famous French artist—such as Leloir and Madeline Lemaire. The most fashionable upholsterer of New York had done his work well, and while contemplating the rich coloring and artistic arrangement of the apartment, Richard Lestrangle became absorbed in thought.

Free once more—unfettered, unmarried, and his own master! His divorce had been pronounced only ten days before, and a smile of satisfaction curved his blonde moustache at the idea that the affair was settled at last. He could celebrate his first free Christmas at his ease. What a bother it had been, to be sure!—what with lawyers to consult and papers to sign, and all the torment of uncertainty! All was ended now, like an evil dream. He could go his own way and amuse himself as he liked, without accounting for his movements to anybody. Free!—absolutely and delightfully free—at last! He turned on his pillow with a sigh of satisfaction, and then he began to meditate concerning his marriage.

It had been a mistake from the very first. What had he, a gay young society man of New York, with ideas of life learned mainly in Paris and in London, to do with a pious, prudish New England damsel with a taste for art and a turn for science? When he met Miss Clara Frost, of Providence, seven years before at Newport, he had been at once fascinated by her delicate bloom and the sweetness of her expression, and by the charm of her manner—naturally winning and, as yet, unsophisticated. She had been the belle of an unusually brilliant summer season at that renowned watering-place, and half the men of his own especial set had been in love with her. That had piqued him to the pursuit of a prize that so many of his friends had striven in vain to win. She had been indifference itself to him at first, and he could not resist the temptation of striving to melt the light veil of snow—half coldness and half purity—beneath which the expression of her real feelings was concealed. In this effort he had become himself sincerely interested in a feminine nature that differed so widely from any he had heretofore known. It was probably this spark of genuine affection that had made his wooing irresistible. He succeeded in his suit, and Miss Frost became Mrs. Richard Lestrangle within a very few months after the date of their first meeting.

From the earliest moment there had been elements of discord in the nuptial harmonies. Two people more thoroughly unsuited to each other in tastes, habits and convictions it would have been hard to find. Mrs. Lestrangle was unaffectedly reserved in her manners, and exceedingly particularly as to her mode of life and her choice of associates. She turned a cold shoulder to the flirtatious dames and damsels, with histories attached to every one of their names, that she encountered in society. She frowned upon the petted libertines of the hour, and would have nothing to say to any of them. She preferred the strains of Wagner to the melodies of the *opera bouffe*, read Browning and George Eliot in preference to Zola, was a devout church-goer, kept the Sabbath strictly, and was in all respects a woman of serious and severely irreproachable life and manners. And, what was probably the most trying of all her peculiarities to her husband, she developed an abnormal propensity to jealousy. In the comfortable seclusion of his new bachelor-quarters, Mr. Lestrangle passed in review the trying scenes to which this tendency on his wife's part had subjected him. The hysterical tears called forth by her discovery of certain scented notes directed to her spouse in feminine hand-writing; the outbursts of indignation aroused by sundry drives and dinners he had taken with ladies who probably were *sans peur*, but who were assuredly not *sans reproche*; and especially a scene of vehement wrath, induced by the discovery of a bill for a bracelet that never had encircled the arm of Mrs. Lestrangle, and which she afterward recognized as a sparkling adjunct to the very elegant costume of Mademoiselle Joliejombe, the leading *danseuse* in the new ballet of "Argentine," at Niblo's Garden. The birth of their little daughter, an event that usually furnishes a fresh link to unite a young, newly married couple, had only brought in its train fresh sources of dissension. For Mrs. Lestrangle, like many young mothers, ran into the opposite extreme from the usual actions of fashionable maternity, and devoted herself exclusively to her infant. She gave up society altogether, never went anywhere with her husband, relinquished all practice of the accomplishments in whose perfection he had been wont to take pride, and thereby had insensibly weakened the already slender ties that bound him to his home. His little Kitty!—ah, yes; she certainly was a charming little creature! And at this point in his meditations Richard Lestrangle stirred uneasily on his pillow, as though a thorn, unfelt till that moment, had suddenly developed the sharpness of its prick in the midst of his bachelor comfort. Then rose before him a vision of a former Christmas Day, when the young mother had delighted in showing off, for the first time, his baby daughter's first accomplishment—that of walking alone. It was a pretty picture thus recalled to him by memory: His wife in the elegant afternoon costume of dark blue velvet and costly laces, donned by her in honor of the day, and the little one, flushed and eager in her embroidered frock and wide blue sash and dainty little shoes—the first that

had ever been of real use to her—and the great blue eyes wide open in wondering delight; and the pretty head all covered with rings of golden silk, and the quick, tottering run from the safe shelter of her mother's bosom to her father's outstretched arms! The nymphs and fairies by Leloir, the fruits and flowers depicted by Madeline Lemaire, seemed pale in coloring and uninteresting in subject beside this vivid sketch from the pencil of Memory. Really, if Clara had only been a little less exacting, not quite so insupportable—But at this moment John knocked at the door to announce the readiness of all things in the dressing-room for Mr. Lestrangle's morning toilet, and the reverie was abruptly brought to a close. It was better so, as it was beginning to grow disagreeable. After all, he had not lost his little girl. He would be able to see her from time to time without being bothered by her mother's strait-laced ideas and jealous nagging.

Breakfast was served with dainty accompaniments of egg-shell china and glittering dishes; but though he scorned to confess the fact, to himself, he missed the merry chatter of little Kitty over her bread and milk, and her coaxing petitions for a spoonful of her papa's egg, or for a taste of the half melted sugar at the bottom of his coffee-cup. To get rid of these ideas Mr. Lestrangle devoted himself to the perusal of his newspapers and letters. These last, three in number, were not altogether satisfactory. The first one ran as follows:

"DEAR LESTRANGE,—I regret to say that it will be impossible for me to keep my engagement to lunch with you to-day. My sister has just arrived from Europe, and, naturally, I shall be detained at home for the best part of the day. With sincere regrets, your friend, most truly,

WILSON CARRINGTON."

He threw down this missive and opened another.

DEAR OLD BOY,—When I promised to lunch with you this morning I quite forgot that it was Christmas Day. I have a host of things to attend to—forgotten presents to buy, and there is a Christmas-tree that claims my aid at the last moment. The little ones are clamoring at the door, and my wife insists that I shall lend my aid to the tying on of tapers and bonbons and gilt balls. So, with many regrets, pray excuse your sincere friend,

HARRY DELESSART."

"You need order no luncheon to-day, John—I shall lunch at the club. As for dinner—But what is here?"

And he tore open the third letter.

"Impossible, my friend, to join you at dinner this evening. The Christmas matinee and the evening performance together will take up too much of my time. A thousand regrets, and many thanks for the ear-rings. I shall wear them to-night. Pray come to the Folly Theatre and judge of their effect.

AIMEE JOLIEJOMBE."

"The little deceiver! As if I did not know that she does not dance at the matinee, and was to sham sickness to get off from the evening performance! I wonder who it is that she is going to wheedle out of a brooch to match my ear-rings?"

And in a decidedly bad temper with himself and all the world, Mr. Lestrangle put on his hat and overcoat and sallied forth for a walk.

It was a cheerless day, so far as the weather was concerned. The sky kept its leaden aspect, and the wind was sharp and chill. Now and then a few stray snow-flakes came floating upon the air, as a reminder of possible drifts and blocked-up trains and slippery pavements in the near future. The Christmas services at the various churches were at an end, and Fifth Avenue was crowded with promenaders. Mr. Lestrangle met numbers of faces who had been *habitués* of his household during the period before his quarrel with and estrangement from his wife, but none of those who had been accustomed to frequent the reception-afternoons of Mrs. Lestrangle, and to come to her dinner parties, seemed at all inclined to greet her divorced husband very warmly. Decidedly, society, in the purer and higher atmosphere to which his wife was accustomed, did not smile upon him. Young girls drifted past him with a shy glance and a simple bend of the head. Serene matrons sailed past in the dignity of their velvets and furs, and vouchsafed to him only the chilliest of bows. Nobody paused to speak with him, or to wish him a merry Christmas. There were other divisions of society in which he might be welcome, but the high-toned families of ancient descent that had formed his association in olden days were not at all inclined to treat him with cordiality.

With his equanimity far more ruffled than he cared to confess even to himself, Richard Lestrangle strolled off into the shopping streets of the metropolis. The gay holiday aspect of the stores, the glittering displays in the windows, and the animation and bustle that were evident on all sides, somewhat revived his spirits. But presently he fell to thinking again about the Christmas Days he had once known. The great winter festival is so essentially devoted to children that he could not but remember the gifts and the gayeties that he had planned at one time, at similar seasons, for his little Kitty. He recalled particularly a Christmas-tree party gotten up for his little one, and at which a swarm of joyous children had been present. He had been rather bored at the time by the noise and confusion created by his juvenile guests, but on looking back at the affair he remembered only Kitty's delight, and the screams of merry laughter with which she greeted every separate offering from the wonderful tree that bore such enchanting fruit.

Just then he met, face to face, a certain disreputable man about town, one Hiram Tait, to whom he had been introduced more than once. Heretofore he had declined to accept the acquaintance, owing to Mr. Tait's decidedly shady reputation and dissipated habits, and that personage had met his tacit refusal at recognition with surly acquiescence. Now he swaggered up to Mr. Lestrangle, accosted him in banal tones by the cognomen of "Dick the Divorced," and insisted on going to take a drink with him then and there.