

she gave me the first gleam of hope I have had for years.

"The blessed Lord wants us to be happy—wants us to live in the sunshine of life"—that was what she said.

"Then why," I asked her, "is there so much suffering in the world?"

"He does not make the suffering, my dear," she said; "it is sin. He gave us life, that we might rejoice and be exceeding glad—it is a great gift—He gave us life that we might be happy, living in the sunshine and not in the shadow."

I pondered over that, Aunt. I had lived in the shadow of great darkness, and put away all thoughts of joy or hope out of my life. A good man offered me the gift of a perfect love—but I had not the courage to cut myself free from the man who had broken all his vows made at the altar. I thought it would be a sin—a sin to be happy. While my suffering little child lived, I clung to him desperately, as a drowning man will cling to the frailest thing—but the child was taken. It was a sin to wish it otherwise, but oh! I had nothing left—nothing to save me from—from—drowning! Do not blame me too much, Aunt Pragg.

I shall be pilloried by Society; held up to censure, father and mother will disown me. But it was mamma's fault—she kept us ignorant of life. But she knew. It was not a marriage, it was a crime!

Colonel Berring has made great sacrifice for me. He has thrown up his commission, severed all connection with his world, as I shall do with mine. He intends to live upon a small private income, and we are going to New Zealand. When you get this letter, we shall have sailed. I know I can rely upon his honour; he will not let me suffer more than he can help from the step I have taken. No one will miss me. I shall be a dead woman to everyone except the man I love and who loves me.

Lord Wentwell can divorce me, if I cannot divorce him. When he does, Colonel Berring will marry me. It was the only way for me to escape from a living death—unless I took the way poor Madge took!

Wish me well, dear Aunt, in a new life, in a new country—pray that I may escape out of the darkness into the sunshine, and make something better out of my marred and broken life.

Oh, Aunt Pragg, save dear Peggy from the fate of her two unhappy sisters!

Good-bye for ever, dear Aunt.

Your affectionate niece,

Louisa.

Miss Pragg sat silent a long time after reading this letter—then she wiped her eyes.

"I do wish you well! Poor Louisa—so it has come at last!" she snook her head sadly. "The world will blame you, Louisa, but let him that is perfect cast the first stone—and not in my presence, either," she added grimly.

"No matter who is to blame, the woman must always suffer. Louisa will get all the odium, and her scamp of a husband will get his divorce. Everyone will pity him—unless the King's Proctor intervenes, which heaven forbid!

"To think that Louisa—that innocent, pure-minded woman—must put herself into this false position to get free! It is abominable! My poor girl, I do not blame you. At twenty-eight—all her life before her—she has a right to seek sunshine and happiness. Thank God, Colonel Berring is a strong man, a good, honourable man—he will not leave her in the lurch."

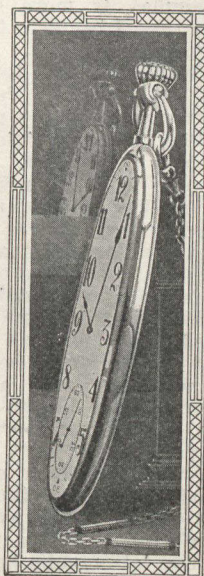
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Consternation reigned in the house in Curzon Street when the disastrous intelligence of Louisa's flight with Colonel Berring became public property.

Lord Assitas suddenly looked like an old man. Easy and indolent, he hated notoriety of every sort, and this second humiliating scandal was a blow to his pride, intolerable to bear.

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