

"No," she answered, coldly, and with a haughty gesture. "I would not have you assume an anxiety you do not feel. You are wise in your generation. I am past such wisdom. You have your world. My son is all the world to me."

For a moment the beauty stood toying with her bracelet, then she went and stood opposite the proud, upright figure, and looked down at her with white face and flashing eyes.

"Are you blind?" she asked, in a low voice, and her lips trembled. "Do you think it is only you who suffer? Yes, I am wise in my generation. I can suffer and be silent. More, I can suffer and seem glad! Do you think that it is nothing to me that the man I love may be lying now on some inglorious battle-field, cold and stiff? You do not understand. You think that I am a fool. I know as well—better than you why he has left us. I know that it is that miserable girl who has driven him to this; but I have vowed to overcome her, and I will do it. You think me cold and heartless. Let it be so. Time will prove which of us has suffered most—you who sit idly at home nursing your sorrow, or I who face the world and hide it. You think he is dead. Let it be so. I would rather he were dead than that he should return to her."

She stopped, the diamonds scintillating on her heaving bosom. Lady Chesterton looked up at her in dazed wonder.

"I do not understand you, Helen. You love him?"

"I love him," answered the beauty, quietly. "I have loved him all through, and I have known the price I must pay to gain him. But for that miserable girl I should have won him ere this: but fate is against me. Well, I have sat down to play against fate. I am patient; I can wait; I shall win. Meanwhile I take care that the world shall have no cause to laugh at me. He has left you, but there is no shame in that. He has left me, but if I did not face the world there would be shame for me. I can wait. He will come back, and I shall win him."

And with a proud gesture she threw the lace shawl over her shoulder, and strode up and down the room.

Lady Chesterton rose and moved toward the door, but turned ere she went out.

"If that is so, I pity you, Helen," she said with a stifled sob. "I feel that he is dead."

"And I am sure he is not," retorted the beauty. "Good-night." And though the carriage was waiting at the door, she recrossed the room, threw herself into a chair, and seemed buried in thought.

Half an hour passed. The coachman, swearing inaudibly, struggled with his impatient horses, the footman yawned in the hall, and wondered what had come to the young mistress; but still the beauty sat buried in thought, wearing her heart upon her sleeve for any daw to peck at.