

her of his profound homage and sympathy, and of his readiness at all times to be commanded if he could be of any service to her. For this the Lady Mercedes expressed her grateful acknowledgments. Before moving off she added that she would be glad to have a talk with the young artist about the incidents of the story he had contributed to the English periodical, understanding, as she said, that they were founded on facts which had come under his own knowledge; but that opportunity for this talk was not now. The opportunity however arrived sooner than either expected.

When the party that had come from the hotel in search of Leighton and the ladies was about to return, it was found that their boat, which had that morning been hastily pressed into service, had sprung a leak. For the present it was useless; nor was the small craft which had brought the ladies into such peril on the previous day any more seaworthy. Both would have to be beached and repaired. In the meantime, all would have to return in Leighton's yacht, and as the lake was still rough from yesterday's storm, it was feared that it would be unsafe should they overcrowd her. Leighton himself met the difficulty by offering his yacht to those who had come in search of them, saying that he would return by the road with the ladies in a conveyance he thought he could get at the farm which he had visited that morning before breakfast. As the ladies agreed to this, and particularly as Mercedes wished to avoid the return by water, Leighton set off to make what arrangements he could with the farmer. That was quickly done. He obtained a carriage and team, but it was found that the vehicle would only hold two, and he returned to the camp to see if the ladies would drive themselves back to Rosseau and leave him to return by the boat; Mrs. Kinglake, he knew, could handle the ribbons. But Mrs. Kinglake would not agree to this; she insisted upon being the one to return by water.

For the moment, the new phase things had taken seemed to upset Leighton's arrangements; but after a momentary conference between Mrs. Kinglake and Mercedes, the latter cut the complications in two by archly saying to Leighton that, as she had entrusted herself to his care through the night-watches, she was not afraid to drive home under the same guardianship in the noonday glare. Thus merrily was the matter settled, and ere long both parties were under way. The farmer, in the meanwhile, was asked to look after the boats, and Leighton arranged with him to send a man back with the team who would be able to do the repairing and bring the craft back to Maplehurst.

CHAPTER IV.

"O love's a mighty lord;
And hath so humbled me, as I confess,
There is no woe to his correction,
Nor, to his service, no such joy on earth!
Nor no discourse, except it be of love;
Now can I break my fast, dine, sup, and sleep,
Before the very naked eye of love."

The drive home to Rosseau consumed, so Mrs. Kinglake afterwards banteringly said, an unconscionable time. To the Lady Mercedes and Leighton the hours passed on the way, when they thought at all of time, seemed to have wings. On one side, however, there was much to say, and on the other, much to hear. Nor must it be supposed that love was at present the theme. Turned by the disclosure of Mrs. Kinglake once more to the subject of her sad bereavement, the heart of the Lady Mercedes was full of the thought that had for some time taken possession of it. This was the conviction that her husband was still living, but that, having received injuries in his fall from the cliff which would make him a helpless cripple, he preferred that his wife should think him dead than wound her sensitive feelings, and be a lifelong burden on her hands, by suffering himself to be restored to her. This, in the main, with every variety of form and presentation in which the idea took shape in her mind, and with innumerable catechizings of Leighton as to the incidents connected with the tragic story he had

related in the English magazine, formed the subject of conversation between the two on the homeward drive to Maplehurst. Beyond reciting in detail his own experience and conclusions in regard to what had happened in the case of his friend in British Honduras (which formed the groundwork of the magazine story) he could, of course, contribute no new material to his companion's enlightenment. Both by look and by voice, however, he contributed much to her immediate solacement. And yet, perhaps, he perplexed the poor widow as much as he succeeded in solacing her.

Why, he asked Mercedes, should she think it likely that because there were incidents in his story which led her to believe that she was not in truth husbandless, the sequel would prove her conviction, unsupported by a shred of evidence or even probability, to be right? The answer she made to this, womanlike, was illogical; but not the less was the idea to be eliminated from her mind. She simply entertained the conviction; and continuing to nurse it in her mind, it became the more difficult, if not impossible, as Leighton found, to dislodge it. To this extent, however, the two cases were not parallel, and the discovery appeared to give comfort to Mercedes. In the case of Leighton's friend, the husband had, from mere motives of vanity, concealed his escape from death; for in his fall he had not been killed, though he had permanently injured his spine. In poor Wilton's case, had the accident not been fatal—such at least was Mercedes' argument—his motive, she was sure, was not vanity, but being a man of great refinement of feeling, delicate concern for herself. Only for her elopement with Wilton, Leighton was reminded, she would have had to swallow her loathing and marry, as her father insisted, a gilded hunchback. It was the knowledge of this, as well as of his probably crippled and helpless condition, that made it bitter for her husband to return to her. Rather than disclose the fact that in his disablement and deformity he still lived, he preferred, so Mercedes argued, that she should think him dead.

To all this what could Leighton say, what argument could he possibly use, that would not wound the feelings of the beautiful woman by his side, if he attempted to treat her cherished convictions as illusory? He saw this and compassionately refrained. Yet would he have been willing, if the way had been plain, to have dissuaded Mercedes from her broodings, to urge her to be kind only to herself, and to lure her thoughts to a new lover. With his sympathetic disposition and chivalrous nature he could not bear, however, to turn the loved one at his side from her dear misery, far less obtrude himself and his own happiness upon one whose heart was bound up in being loyal to its first and, perhaps, only love. Yet Mercedes was neither morbid nor callous in her sorrow. Her heart, she herself admitted, was susceptible to new influences; and time was graciously, if slowly, doing its good work. For Leighton she felt, she hardly knew why, a real affection; and, on the drive back to Rosseau, there was a moment when, touched by something he had said, she had almost broken her reserve and thrown herself weeping upon her breast. She had a woman's tenderness of heart, and she had also a woman's weakness for sympathy. Nor, given a worthy subject, such as she had near her, on whom to expend her worship and love, was she to be chidden for showing that she was but a woman. Her life, save for the passing gleam of wedded felicity, had had more than its share of gloom and sorrow. Should we wonder now, when Love came along offering to brighten that life with sunshine, that she should peer behind the veil of her widowhood at Love's fair face?

On the return to Maplehurst, Leighton and the Lady Mercedes found themselves volubly catechized by Mrs. Kinglake as to the cause of their tardy appearance. In this lady's mouth the catechizings, however, were a bit of pleasant banter, not a seriously intended interrogation. They were met by Leighton's jocose answer, that after borrowing a carriage and span it was incumbent upon them to go and return them.