

and I attributed my aunt's formality to her weakness in this respect.

Grace Merton, I have neglected to mention, was an orphan like myself. Perhaps this similarity in our positions made the bond of sympathy stronger between us, only in every other respect we were entirely of a piece.

She was fair and pretty, I was dark and ugly; she was penniless, and I was well off. I pitied from my very heart this young and lovely girl left to battle with the world, surrounded by all the allurements and temptations which such a beauty as hers would lay her open to.

Grace met me with a hearty embrace on her arrival.

"My dear old girl," she cried, holding me before her by my two hands; "I declare you are growing quite pretty."

I smiled and shook my head. No, I was not weak enough to take that in. I attributed this expression to the natural warmth of her disposition.

In her eyes probably I might have been so—in the blind eyes of a loving friend; but, alas, when I turned my head and marked the contrast in the opposite mirror, conviction told me that if I was not positively ugly—I certainly had no pretensions to good looks.

"My dear Grace," I replied, "you are seeing your own beauty reflected in me; but I fear I am a very unflattering mirror of yourself."

She laughed, and circling her arm in mine, led me out into the lawn.

"Now, Gertrude," she said, when we reached the summer-house, "let us sit down and talk. You can't think how curious I am to see this intended husband of yours. Oh, you lucky girl, don't you appreciate your good fortune?"

"Indeed I do, Grace—I love him with all my heart."

"Not all," echoed my companion, placing her arms around my neck. "Not all; reserve a little corner in your heart for poor, neglected, deserted me."

I glanced up at the lovely profile bending down upon me, with its angelic softness, a half-earnest, half-merry glitter in the azure eye. I gazed at the parted coral lips enclosing the white teeth, the thick eye-lashes which swept the cheek, tinted with a roseate blush, as the words "deserted me" left the lips.

Truly, some women would have exchanged a coronet for such a face as hers. Its soft modesty made it doubly lovely.

"Deserted!" Could any human being desert or forsake such a creature? Such a face, and yet it was only the face of a weak woman; only a face, with neither a heart, nor a soul, though I did not see it then. I thought her as pure as heaven, and have marvelled—

since time and suffering have matured my judgment—how God could place so bad a heart in so lovely a being.

Bernard came on the second day of her visit, and I introduced them. He admired her very much; but did not seem in any other way taken. How blind men are to other women's charms when they are in love!

On her side I perceived a far greater admiration; she was at her very liveliest, her manners more fascinating than I had ever seen them before—she played and sang with increased expression. She had evidently become greatly smitten with my handsome lover, and I felt proud to see it.

Alas! I did not read beyond. I, in my native simplicity, did not dream of the arts and deceits a cunning woman is capable of when she acts with an object. Days passed with very little incident; but the sixth day struck the key of my life's song.

I happened to be watering the plants in the conservatory; I had entered by the garden, and having my slippers on, my presence there was unperceived by the inmates of the drawing-room.

The glass reflected two forms to me—one Bernhard, who was seated in the arm-chair reading, the other Grace Merton, who languidly reclined upon the sofa. She wore a dark blue dressing-gown, and her hair fell carelessly around her shoulders.

I stood for awhile admiring her, thinking what a striking attitude she formed for a fresh picture. She was neither reading, nor doing the flimsy fancy work she usually indulged in; but seemed to be in deep meditation, and was pulling to pieces the leaves of a rose, which lay beside her on the table.

"Bernard," she said, at last, half-pettishly, somewhat annoyed to think that my intended should so far ignore her presence, "do throw aside that horrid book!"

My lover closed the book, and looked at her half-astonished—whether at the mention of his Christian name, or whether at the tone of the speaker, I knew not; but he certainly looked very much surprised, as if he was not used to such familiarity from her.

"Do you dislike reading, Miss Merton?" he inquired.

"No; not exactly that," she replied, with perfect good taste; "but—but don't you like my company a little, Bernard?"

She uttered these words with a well-assumed simplicity, which would have deceived a cleverer person than I. She would be irresistible to stronger men than Bernard.

I looked on as one in a dream, fascinated by the lovely picture, though I can't say I felt gratified to hear that low-toned, winning voice directed towards the man I loved.

She blushed, and held down her head, as if she had too deep a friendship for Bernard McGregor, and it held its fatal influence over him. He rose to her side. What could he