

"As it is—I'm not. And yet—I wonder if you understand?—I feel so near caring for him.

The little more, and how much it is!
And the little less, and what worlds away!

"Is that how it goes?

"Now can you in the least realize how unhappy I am about it? Ought I, liking him so well, to have said 'No,' on what most people (though not you, fortunately) would call a mere fanciful objection? I don't know. The fact remains that I don't love him, though I might if —"

"Ah, well; principles are dull things, and when one reflects how ridiculously out of proportion to their practical usefulness is the fuss that is made about them, one is tempted to cry aloud in the words of the Pharisee. Still, I have done to-night—for the sake of a principle—the cruellest thing I ever did in my life."

She threw down her pen with a sigh and a weary gesture, and pushed the half-written letter into her case.

Then she stirred the fire absently, and drew up a low chair in front of it. The idea of going to bed was not attractive; she was too restless and troubled.

Her eyes wandered listlessly over her bookshelves, but she did not rise from her seat. The lamp near her burnt low, and as she stretched across to turn it to a higher flame, she noticed a magazine lying on the table behind it. It was a new number, and had evidently been brought to her room while she was out.

"This will do; heaven grant something light inside!" she thought indifferently.

"Where's the paper knife? Ah! here's a story. A very thin layer of jam between two thick slices of bread. Stale bread, too—'Dis-establishment' and the 'New Woman.' Yes, in that case I'll take my jam—neat."

She settled herself against the cushions and began to cut the leaves.

Twenty minutes later the book dropped into her lap. Her eyes were shining; she pushed back her fair hair with an excited gesture, rising as she did so.

"Now," she said, deliberately, apostrophising the photograph above her writing-table, "all things being equal, I'd marry the man who wrote that story—if he asked me!"

She began to wander about the room with bent head, thinking.

"That's what I meant, and couldn't put into words. The man who wrote this understands."

"Would Jim Graham understand all my moods? No, I'm sure he wouldn't! Would this man—this," she glanced again at the page—"Henry Fergus, understand? Some of them, at any rate."

"I wonder—," she paused and suddenly stopped short in her restless pacing to and fro. A smile crept slowly into her eyes. Then she sat down again by the fire, with her hands folded.

Her stillness as she sat gazing at the leaping flames conveyed in some curious fashion a sense of the growing excitement which possessed her.

"Why not?" she said at last, half aloud, moving at length from her low chair.

She sat down once more before her writing table, the smile still hovering about her lips, and took up her pen. It moved slowly at first, but before a quarter of an hour had passed it was flying over the smooth sheet.

She wrote straight on, at white heat, with scarcely a pause for two or three hours.

With a long sigh she pushed the papers back at length, and rose slowly from her place, stiff and cramped.

Her story—in effect, a half-playful rejoinder to the one she had just read—was finished, but she had been writing all night.

The room was filled with the curious unreal light of dawn. Leighton started as she looked about her, and glanced half-guiltily at her own white-clad reflection in the glass.

"I never did such an absurd thing before in all my life, as to sit up all night," she thought, seizing her dressing-gown hastily. "Whatever time shall I get down to breakfast? and how furious Aunt Mattie will be if I'm pale to-morrow—no, to-day, I mean!"

CHAPTER III.

"Mr. Graham is obliged to leave town," observed Mrs. Lavington one afternoon some time after the "Grand Remonstrance." She glanced severely at her niece as she announced the fact.

"Is he?" Leighton answered, serenely examining the tea-cosy. "How shabby this is getting. I must make another. When did you see him, auntie?"

"This afternoon. He called when you were out, to say good-bye. He reminded me again that his sister is coming to town on a long visit and hoped I would look after her sometimes. I said I should be delighted, of course. So likely that I should want to fill the house with a host of girls! Does he imagine that it's all the same to us whether he comes himself or sends his sister as substitute?"

Mrs. Lavington put down her cup on the tray with an irritated rattle.

"I don't think it's likely," observed Leighton, musingly. "He would be an exception to the usual run of men in that respect, don't you think? When does Miss Graham come?"

"Oh, next week—the week after next—I'm sure I don't know," exclaimed her aunt, in an exasperated tone, picking up *The Queen*, with the air of one who wishes to be left in peace.

Dolly Graham had been in town some weeks when the Harringfords gave their annual picnic.

The evening before she had run in to consult Leighton on the subject of cotton versus muslin blouses for the next day, and the all-absorbing question of dress being in abeyance for the time, she strolled across the room to her friend's bookshelves.

"What a lot of books you have," she exclaimed, "and so many of them poetry. You like poetry, of course? Well, I don't. I frankly own it. Ah! Why," she cried, presently, "you have Henry Fergus' verses. Don't you love them? I do."

"I thought you didn't care for poetry," Leighton began mockingly.

"Ah! but then, you see, I know Henry Fergus, and—" She hesitated a moment and began to examine the shelves with a great show of interest.

"Really," Leighton observed, in a very creditably indifferent tone; "what is he like?"

"Oh, splendid!" began Dolly, impetuously; "but then, you see, I'm very fond of him."

Her voice was a little tremulous. Leighton started.

"Dolly! and you never told me!" she cried, reproachfully. "I—congratulate you," she said, slowly, after a moment's silence.

"Isn't that rather premature? You don't know him."

"No—that's true; but I like what he writes."

"Ah, yes. Did you see that delicious little sketch of his in *The Falcon* some time ago? Wasn't it charming? And have you seen this month's number?" she went on, carelessly. "There's an answer to it! Such a dear little answer! He's delighted—it's so flattering, you know; and, after all, he is but a man! You'll never see to thread that needle if you stoop so, Leighton. Give it to me!"

"What did he say?" Leighton inquired, after a moment's pause.

"Oh! he jumped up and threw the magazine down on the table and said 'Good heavens!' After that he laughed."

The laugh rang in Leighton's ears; her face burnt so painfully that she dared not look up.

"He was very interested; I know," pursued Dolly, who harped delightedly on the subject of her absent lover. "He read it twice, and then he walked up and down the room and smiled to himself. Oh, a man's a vain creature. I expect he thought it was a woman, and I dare say it was—the wretch. You'll see him to-morrow, Leighton. I meant to tell you all the time, really, dear; but I wanted you to see him first, and—"

"See him?—I?" exclaimed Leighton, turning round so suddenly that Dolly drew back, startled.

"Yes; he's going with us," she replied, in surprise. "You don't mind, do you? I hoped you'd get on splendidly together—two such clever people!"

"Oh, yes; of course," Leighton assented, vaguely turning over in her mind the chances of escape on the morrow.

* * *

"Such a bother, he couldn't get away by the first train," Dolly remarked for the fiftieth time.

She and Leighton, a little apart from the rest of the party, were covering the strawberries with cool leaves, and incidentally driving off inquiring spiders.

"But I should think," pursued Dolly—"Ah! there he is!" she exclaimed, with a rapturous cry.

In spite of the uncomfortable beating of her heart, Leighton could not repress a smile.

"That is what I call becoming maidenly coyness," she began with mockery in her voice, but Dolly was half-way down the mossy path.

She bent her head a little lower over the baskets, arguing angrily with her own stupidity. He need never know, unless, indeed, she was idiotic enough to—

"Leighton, may I introduce Mr. Fergus?" said Dolly's voice close to her.

She rose quietly to her feet, and raised her eyes a little proudly in spite of herself.

"Mr. Graham! I thought—Dolly said—"

"No! I never said, you said!—and oughtn't a girl to be fond of her only brother?"

Dolly laughed till Leighton with difficulty repressed a desire to annihilate her on the spot.

"May I explain Miss Kennedy?" Graham asked. "Certainly—I shall be glad if you will," she returned a little stiffly.

"It is true my name is Fergus—but professionally only—for a wonder Dolly has respected a confidence, and so"—

"Oh! how mean, and I've kept silence and refrained even from good words when people have praised your work! Never again, as long as I live!" Dolly declared emphatically.

"Mrs. Harringford I can't wait another moment for lunch!"

* * *

She hardly exchanged a word with him all day long; yet, throughout the day she knew he was waiting his opportunity to speak to her, and at length his moment came.

They were walking together across the gorse-covered common to where, late in the evening, the carriages were waiting.

She felt dazed with the whirl of new, conflicting feelings. If only she could be alone to think! Was it possible that the man who wrote the words that had so stirred and charmed her was, after all, James Graham? Then there was one side of his nature she had never known, possibilities of whose existence she had not dreamed—

And now—did it make any difference to her? She could not tell. She—

The silence had been for some moments unbroken. She felt vaguely that the air was very