

him, Jack kissed her passionately.

"My darling, thank Heaven I have you! I declare"—he continued, flushing, and laughing uneasily—"that girl is a witch!"

"Why? What has she been saying?"

"Oh, I don't know! Yes, I do! Look here Margaret! I came out just now for a breath of fresh air, for I had been working hard all the morning, when I found your cousin sitting under the old cedar. She looked so utterly downcast that I could not help asking her what was the matter. My question evidently upset her composure, for, to my horror, she burst into a flood of tears. Of course then I could not leave her, and had to quiet her the best I could. At last the whole story came out; she gave me a full account of her life, and a pleasant one it was! By Jove, I only wonder the poor girl has stood it so long! And, child, when I heard her dismal little egotistical views of life, every wish even for better things crushed down to a dead level of worldly prosperity and good form, her only clear idea a half-cynical distrust of every one round her, her only knowledge that of things of which she ought to be as innocent as a baby, my heart ached for the girl. Then I thought of you, dear, and all you were to me, and of all this girl might and should be with the right training, and so gave her a straightforward bit of mind. She took it awfully well; but it did not stop her crying, so I was not by any means sorry when she bolted into the house. But it set me thinking of the future, and, if we should have a dear little girl, what a responsibility it would be; and, as you came up, I was just thanking Heaven for the little woman who is of course the plague of my life, but who, after all, is my best chance of ever being or doing anything!"

Mrs. Melford pressed her husband's arms lovingly, and they wandered on together, making plans for Maude Alverton. When that young lady reappeared, she was as cool and composed as ever, and Margaret found herself wondering if she had dreamt of the scene beneath the cedar.

From that day she watched her cousin closely, and the result of her watching was not altogether satisfactory. Maude, becoming used to her cousins, gradually showed more and more of her true self, and, whilst many traits only tended to increase their liking for her, her defects, which, to do her justice, arose chiefly from her education, became more evident. She often let her hosts see—unintentionally truly, but none the less plainly—that she missed the daily luxuries which at

home she was accustomed to consider simple necessities. On these occasions Mrs. Melford winced, but Jack Melford only laughed, sometimes "chaffing" her openly and unmercifully, at others shrugging his shoulders and petting her as if she were a spoiled child.

If Mrs. Alverton's idea had been that the narrow means and commonplace daily life of the Melfords would disenchant her step-daughter, used to luxury, and in spite of her imaginary Bohemianism, as fond of it as most pretty women, that good lady was grievously mistaken. In spite of every disadvantage, the tiny household was as perfectly kept and dainty as that of far more assuming people, and, if more fell on Margaret's shoulder than would have been the case had they been better off, she kept the fact to herself, and no one would have guessed that there was any strain. Certainly Maude never saw anything to shake her belief in the ideality of an artist's life; although perhaps she realised how much Margaret's unceasing and dainty management had to do with the comfort of their daily life, she did full justice to Jack's god-natured indifference to their scanty means and his bright merry way of enjoying and making the most of everything. So much was this the case that Margaret became oppressed by the secret fear that her visitor was unconsciously growing far more attracted by Jack and his pseudo-Bohemianism than was altogether good for herself or in accordance with "aunt Eleanor's" views.

The fact was that Maude, accustomed to the mercenary deference of her interested suitors, and of the toadies of whom her mother's "dear friends" chiefly consisted, found an inexpressible fascination in Jack's cool assumption of authority, and soon learned to treat his wishes with the same unquestioning respect as Margaret did; in fact, she was far more obedient, and often amused Mrs. Melford by a way she had of treating any suggestion of Jack's as an unquestionable command.

One day Margaret appeared in the studio where Jack was hard at work.

"What is it, dear?" he asked, noticing her troubled face.

"I'm rather worried, Jack dear, that's the truth. Do you know—don't laugh, please!—I almost fear that Maude—"

"Well, that Maude—what?" questioned her husband, mimicking her anxious tones, yet watching her keenly all the time with half-closed eyes.

"Why, that Maude"—and Mrs. Melford hesitated—"Maude is getting to care more for you than is altogether good for her."