

I had resolved to keep myself well in hand, but my passion was visible in my face. I think that even Mr. Marvell must have noticed it; for after dinner, as we sat for a moment over the wine, he led the conversation to his daughter. He probably knew more of her experience than I did, and good-naturedly desired to warn me.

"She is a clever little witch, is May, but as untamable as a fly. It is a pity she is such a tremendous coquette—only all women are coquettes. Fill your glass, Mr. Holdfast; I got that wine from Metternich."

He held up his own against the light, as he continued:—

"I think a taste for sound old claret is about the soundest taste we can cultivate. And it is a duty to single out sound enjoyments: for the zests of life are easily exhausted. The horizon grows grey; enjoyment flags; the senses fail us. We close up all the avenues to pleasure before we know that they are so few. And when they come, the supreme rewards of success are poor and valueless. Your mistress's kiss does not burn as it used to burn; the truth is, she bores you. You don't relish the wit and the entrées as of yore; your stomach is not what it was, and you weary of D—'s old jokes. You remember how your pulse beat when the Premier praised that speech, and Lady Ida's curls touched your cheek in the waltz; or rather you don't recollect a bit—you have forgotten all about both: poor Sir Robert has been dead for a year, and Lady Ida is as fat as her mother. My good sir, a woman is only—a woman; and when you once get behind the scenes, you learn how far you have been imposed upon, and swear never again to find a world of romance in a sheet of pasteboard and a pot of paint."

He filled his glass and paused meditatively.

"You know Clavering by name—an obstinate old ass; he made a terrible mess in China. Well, Clavering once said a good thing—by mistake. At a dinner of the men of our time at Cambridge, he got pathetic over those who had left us, and made a delightful malapropism: 'Some of them are happily dead,—others, alas! are married.' Our shout of laughter discomposed him terribly: and when he found that he had transposed the words, he insisted on putting them right—amid still noisier shouts. But I think the first edition was, after all, the true one, and had I been Clavering I would have stuck to it."

This was the philosophy that ushered me into the drawing-room, where the witch sat dreaming in the fire-light.

A witch, indeed, as you would have confessed had you heard her sing that night to an arch, saucy air, half passionate, half-mocking, that suited the words well, Lodge's delightful song:—

Love in my bosom, like a bee,  
Doth suck his sweet;  
Now with his wings he plays with me,  
Now with his feet;  
Within mine eyes he makes his nest,  
His bed, amidst my tender breast—  
My kisses are his daily feast,  
And yet he robs me of my rest:  
Ah! wanton, will you?

And if I sleep, then pierceth he  
With pretty slight,  
And makes his pillow of my knee  
The livelong night;  
Strike I the lute, he tunes the string;  
He music plays, if I but sing;  
He lends me every lovely thing,  
Yet cruel he my heart doth sting:  
Ah! wanton, will you?

Rosalind can mock a little at love even while she complains, but I had taken the disease in its worst shape, and was past jesting. A physician—could we physic Love!—would have said from the beginning that my malady was mortal.

Our theatrical projects, however, kept us in the meantime constantly employed. But although we ransacked the library, we could not agree upon a piece. This play was too warm, that was too cold; we could not muster performers for one, nor properties for another.

"I wish we had a poet among us," said May; "only poets are such dull people to have in a country-house. I knew a poet once. I was left to amuse him, and he nearly bored me to death. He told me that he had lost his heart to a particular friend of mine, but I didn't believe him; he had written so many rubbishy poems

about the affections, that he had no heart left to lose. Do you recollect the song he wrote for me, papa, and which you said he had stolen from Master Lovelace? It went somehow thus, I think:—

With jeers and tears and smiles,  
And awful wilful wiles,  
Te May her groom beguiles;  
But my May keeps the grace  
Of true love in her face.

Sweet is May's hawthorn hedge,  
And by the water edge,  
The murmur of the sedge  
But my May's sweeter far  
Than hawthorn hedges are.

The thrush repeats her tale,  
And the sad nightingale  
With passion floods the vale;  
But my May's whisper thrills  
My soul among the hills.

The kisses of the May  
Are scattered every day  
On all who come this way;  
But my May's lips are kept  
Like chastest violet.

And so the foolish fellow run on, with much more on the same key. But he might help us now, could we lay our hands on him. Do you recollect what he was called, papa?

But Mr. Marvell had entirely forgotten.

"We couldn't well advertise for him, I suppose; so we must do without him, and take one of these two. Which is it to be?"

The first was a little gay French vaudeville—artless as the best art is, but exquisitely graceful and petulant. There was absolutely nothing in the story, but the people in it talked about nothing in the most charming way. The hero and his mistress made desperate love; but they clearly didn't care a copper for each other, and their passion ran off in epigrams. "My beautiful lady," said the lover on his knees at last (he went down quite leisurely), "My beautiful lady, have pity on me." And the lady answered, "No, I have no pity. *Je suis la belle dame sans merci.*" And so the play ended.

No, that would not do. May felt perhaps that it was overlike the play she had on hand; so we chose the other. It was Goethe's *Egmont*.

When I think of May now, I strive to think of her as "Clara." She was essentially an actress; if she could not be true and brave and honest and loving, she knew that truth and honesty and love were excellent things, and on the stage, at least, she could rise to the heroic mood. Hers was not the martyr-spirit which can go

Through the brief minute's fierce annoy  
To God's eternity of joy.

She would have shrunk from "the fierce annoy" as she shrank from whatever displeased her senses; yet as she read of hero and martyr, her grey eye kindled and flashed and quivered. And May Marvell when she clutched her bosom with her hands to stay the beating of her heart, because at midnight she hears the tread of armed men, and Egmont comes not, was, I believe, not less great than Rachel, or Ristori, or Helen Faucit.

Kate Saville had not yet appeared, and Miss Marvell and I read the great play together. There was something in it—in Clara's unreflective rapture, in Egmont's heroic recklessness—that fascinated her imagination.

I was but a sorry Egmont, I fear,—so poor a performer that Miss Marvell sometimes snatched the part out of my hand, and swore (as ladies swear) that she would be the Count herself. And then, muffling herself in some coverlet or shawl that lay at hand, she would show me with adorable petulance how it was done; how Egmont, bending over his mistress, had unclasped his cloak, and disclosed the jewelled collar of the Golden Fleece. "But this is not *thy* Egmont."

I wonder sometimes that I lived through it all. I was like a man in strong fever, now on fire, anon my teeth chattering with cold. I was in rapture and in agony. This witch had poisoned my blood. As she bent over me that night, as I felt her breath touch my cheek, I was as jealously mad, as fiercely miserable, as Othello. I knew that my senses were deserting me: this potent enchantress had changed me into some wild animal that I did not recognise; and I fled affrighted

from her spells. What if I should smother his in my blind rage as the Moor smothered his bride? As I looked out on the black pools or water on which the moonlight lay, I swore that, come what might, I should not go to her again.

I kept my word. I did not approach the Park. But Fate was stronger than my will. I was to see her once more beside the sea.

She had been walking, and she came up to me with a beautiful flush on her face.

"Kate Saville has come," she said, "and we are ready for a rehearsal. Where have you been for ever so long?" Then, without waiting for my answer, "I hope you are perfect in your *Egmont*?"

"I do not mean to be *Egmont*," I answered, gloomily.

"You are not going to desert us, surely?"

"I shall not act."

"Mr. Holdfast, this is too bad. Kate will be inconsolable."

But I would not. She never asked my reason; she knew by instinct what I meant. She should have gone then; but she still waited.

"Will nothing tempt you? Come up to-night. Kate shall give you a song, her voice is superb; and I—I—I will give you a smile," the coquette added, while a lovely one crossed her eyes and lighted up her mouth.

"Temptress!" I muttered, eyeing her almost savagely.

"My dear Martin," she said at once, quite seriously, "what ails you? One would fancy that you took me for a witch. I suppose the best that you expect is to see me ride away on a broomstick,"—and she affected to pout like a spoilt child that has been crossed.

But I looked her full in the face (for I had ceased to fear her—I was reckless and desperate), and I saw that her eyes did not defy me.

Then came the end,

I took hold of her hand as we stood together, and clasped it in mine. She was not offended; she did not resist; I fancied there was an answering pressure. Her touch kindled all the blood in my body into a blaze. I turned, and looked her full in the face. The smile had faded off the upturned mouth and cheeks, which were pale with fear or passion or love, but it still lingered in her eyes, and I felt that her eyes consented. I stooped down and kissed her on the lips. I was mad with love and her lips did not resist. For a moment they clung to mine, or seemed to cling. Had Heaven been in the other scale, I could not have foregone that kiss. Then the softness died out of her eyes; her face grew set and hard and cruel; she curled herself out of my arms, and retreating swiftly and stealthily, gained a little knoll, from which she turned and faced me. Her eyes were full of menace; she crouched a little, as if with angry shame; at the very moment, I thought of a panther-cat in act to spring.

"Sir!" she said flushing out magnificently, "have you forgotten that you are a boor?"

The voice rang with mockery and bitter pride; yet, turning suddenly, she bowed her face into her hands, and sobbed convulsively. Her being shook beneath the storm. It was not a summer shower; it was a convulsion of nature. I was by her side in a moment: my arm was round her waist; she was tugging at the strings of her hat. "Loose them!" she said; "they are choking me." She sat down on the bank, but for many minutes could not control her hysterical sobs. Her whole nature was moved,—perhaps it needed such a convulsion to teach her that she had a heart.

"May," I asked, penitentially, "what have I done?"

"Martin, you have humbled me bitterly. It is my fault; I know that I led you on. I have been false, light, unmaidenly."

"You are the delight of my eyes," I murmured, passionately.

"No, no!" she replied, piteously; "do not speak so. You cannot be so sorely hurt; it would make me miserable to think that you were hurt."

"Hurt!" I exclaimed; "it is a hurt I shall carry with me to the grave—gladly." Then such a look of pained entreaty crossed her face, that I stopped abruptly. For a moment there was silence; but she did not speak.