

THE VILLAGE ANGEL; Or, Agatha's Repompense.

CHAPTER XXII.

"REAL LOVE BRINGS ON EARTH AND ENDS IN HEAVEN."

Valerie D'Envers stood alone in her room, her face flushed, her eyes bright with victory; her heart beating, every pulse throbbing, every nerve strained to its utmost tension. What an easy victory it was, after a—she would love her if he were free. He should soon be free! In her madness she had supposed to think that the very fact of his declaring himself not free in reality proved that he was not so; she did not believe that if her suspicions were correct, and he was not married to Agatha, he was free that moment, and there, to make her an offer if he wished to do so. Like many other clever people she overreached herself; in the delirium of her mad love, of her triumph, of her wild hopes for the future, she overlooked the most practical and sensible view of the case.

She had but one longing now, and it was to find Agatha from her throne and take her place. She was just a little puzzled how to begin. She held the power and the profit in her own hands, but they would require delicate management. She could not go to Agatha, for instance, and tell her the story; that would most certainly be a blunder. She must not, at present at least, say one word to Madame, who would overcome with horror at the bare idea of such iniquity. To go to Sir Vane himself would, of course, be absurd; he knew his own secret. It was the greatest puzzle she had ever had.

She must strike at Agatha, if she struck at all. She felt a sure conviction that the girl had been deceived in some way, but in what way she could not imagine. She knew enough of Agatha to be quite sure that she was no hypocrite; it was a spiritual character was quite transparent to her. She had watched her closely, and was sure of her freedom from all knowledge of a guilt.

How often she had found her, in the early morning on the dewy night, with her pretty gilt prayer book in her hands; how often she had seen her in the pretty little church by the lake, kneeling there when she believed herself unseen; how often, in the twilight, had she found her seated by the organ, singing, with her soul on her lips, some of those grand old melodies. She remembered, too, the tender, delicate purity of the girl's whole life. She had never heard a faint word on her lips, she had never seen the slightest symptoms of levity; she was always sweet, serene, calm and angelic. These she remembered, also, her wonderful charity to the poor; for even there, in the solitude of the chateau, Agatha found out some one who wanted help and relief.

Thinking over these things and relying a great deal upon her knowledge of human nature, Valerie came to the conclusion that Agatha had, in some way or other, been deceived by Sir Vane; that he had made her believe that she was his wife, and that she was happy in that belief. She must undo that belief, and let her know what her proper place was. It would, in all probability, break her heart; but then some one's heart must be broken—as well Agatha's as another's. She was the victim and must suffer, as victims always do. She was just a little sorry for her; but every woman should know how to take care of herself, and if Agatha had not done so, the fault was her own, and she must take the consequences.

She decided that she would not be in a hurry. It was better to wait a few days longer than to act too precipitately; and, during those few days, she decided that the world was as little as possible to Sir Vane, and as much as possible to Agatha.

It so happened that the day after this some friend of Madame's, the Count and Countess d'Envers, came to spend a day with her, and Madame, thinking to give pleasure to her English lodgers, invited them to dine with them.

The countess herself was a pretty little blonde woman, very vivacious, animated, and fond of gossip. The count just the reverse—tall, dark, but, yet evidently delighting in the society of his wife.

Agatha looked supremely beautiful that day. She wore a dinner dress of white brocade, with a suite of superb pearls. Valerie wore her most bewitching costume of pale amber, with Marshal Niel roses in her dark hair and on her white breast. The countess admired Agatha the most, but liked Valerie the best. She was more of her world than the retired, spiritual girl, who looked as though she only wanted wings to make her escape. The count and Valerie dined and drank and chatted together; the countess and Agatha rather avoided each other by instinct.

It was a very pleasant party, and Madame gave them a most recherche dinner. The dessert was placed out in the garden, under the shade of tall trees with great, spreading boughs. Very pretty and picturesque it looked, the dishes filled with ripe, luscious fruit, the glasses, with their long, slender stems; the sparkling wine, the rare flowers, and the beautiful women. The countess warmed to her task. There were several very piquant scandals floating about concerning them in high places. She related one or two, which were received with marked admiration by Madame's circle and suppressed amusement by Sir Vane.

At length came one less comical and more serious than the rest. It was of the beautiful young Princess D—. It was well known that she had loved with her whole heart a distant cousin of hers, who was in the army; but her parents had wished that she should marry the Grand Duke Reinberg, whom she disliked so much as she loved the other. All Europe was sorry for the beautiful young princess, who was compelled to do what she was told, and marry the old grand duke. That which might have been foreseen happened—in time the beautiful princess hated her lot, and found it unbearable. The grand duke became a jealous tyrant, and she ran away with him, to the sorrow of all Europe.

her beauty and youth, had been buried forever from the sight of men. They listened eagerly. It was a tragedy—but then, as the Count suggested, it would have been more complete had the young lover killed himself as well. There was a languid smile for what was evidently intended as a witticism, and every one present seemed to draw a great moral lesson from the anecdote. Agatha's fair face had grown very pale; she had never heard such a story before.

Sir Vane had done her the greatest wrong that could be done, but he had, at the same time, evinced the greatest respect for her innocence and simplicity; he had never allowed the scandal or gossip of the world to come near her, and he looked round now most uncomfortably; he felt quite sure that it was the first story of the kind that she had heard. Her eyes were dark with horror, all her smiles and brightness fled. She hardly knew the meaning of the word divorce; in Whitecroft it was unknown; husbands and wives loved each other there, and were quite content to live together, loving each other, in primitive fashion, until they died; such a thing as divorce was not known, and yet here they talked of it as if it were an every-day event.

The white, scared face made Sir Vane feel very uncomfortable. He arose and invited her to take a cigar with him. The two gentlemen walked toward the lake, the countess and Madame had mutual confidences to make, the two girls, Agatha and Valerie, wandered to where the marble fawn stood with the eternal smile on his young face. "You look pale and tired, Mrs. Heriot," said Valerie, glancing at the pale, thoughtful face and shadowed eyes.

"I am not tired; but, Valerie, is that horrible story true, do you think?"

"Which of them?" asked Valerie, calmly. She knew what was coming, and was ready to make the most of her opportunity.

"That terrible story about the young princess who poisoned herself," replied Agatha.

"Yes, I should say it is perfectly true. I remember something of it when I was in Paris. Why need you look so white and frightened about it?"

"It seems so horrible," she replied, "such a foul mass of sin, and they talked about it as quite a common event. It seems to me a horrible crime to marry without love—a perjury."

"What would you think then of those who love and do not marry?" asked Valerie.

"Love and do not marry," repeated Agatha, "that could never be; no one would be so foolish as to love when they could not marry."

"You do not know much of life, Mrs. Heriot," said Valerie, with a smile. "One might think you had always lived in a church."

"I know little enough of that kind of life," said Agatha. "I have lived among people who have called sin sin, but I have never heard of such things as these."

"You do not know much, then," said Valerie.

"I am glad I do not. It seems to me, Valerie, that these people call any and everything by the name of love."

"What do you call love?" asked Valerie.

A sudden light came into the pale face; a beautiful gleam shone in the violet eyes.

"Oh, Valerie, there is but one kind of love—there could not be more. I believe in the love that begins on earth and ends in heaven."

"With marriage as an intermediate station," laughed Valerie.

"I have always thought of love and marriage as one," she replied.

And then Valerie laughed to herself. Of a certainty this fair, spiritual girl had been cruelly and wilfully deceived; and she tried to make herself believe that it was her duty to open her eyes so long blinded to the truth.

CHAPTER XXIII. DISTILLING THE POISON.

Valerie was for some days quite at a loss how to use her power—it seemed almost useless to her. She had given herself immense trouble and expense to learn Sir Vane's true history, and now that she did know it, now that she had it by heart, it seemed to her of no avail. Her plan was to separate them, and to put herself in Agatha's place. He would not dare to trifle with her—she was Mademoiselle D'Envers, belonging to a good old French family; she had been to the court-balls, and more than once at the Tuilleries; the beautiful empress, then in the very zenith of her beauty and popularity, had spoken to her several times, and the emperor had praised her. Indeed, had there been any way of pushing her fortune at court, she felt that she should have made a great success there. Even an English baronet would not dare to trifle with her. A country girl—a doctor's daughter—was a very different person from a descendant of the old line of D'Envers.

She was not afraid that he would trifle with her; to win her heart was very different from winning the heart of an obscure girl like Agatha Brooke; but she felt that all her skill would be needed. If she made the least mistake her plans would all fail; the elaborate structure she had raised would all fall to the ground. She must use such cautious skill as would insure her success when Agatha was dethroned. The difficulty would be to part them. She felt quite sure now in her own mind that there had been no proper legal marriage—that, in some way best known to herself, Sir Vane had deceived her. She saw plainly enough that Agatha honestly and in all good faith believed herself to be his wife. She must part them without drawing down his anger upon herself, or running the risk of losing him afterward. There was one great danger which she could foresee, and it was this: if any suspicions came to Agatha that she had been wronged, she would probably go to Sir Vane, with sobs and tears, and, loving her as he certainly did, would perhaps offer to make her his wife in earnest; then Valerie's hopes were all in vain. She must prevent that; and a plan shaped itself in her mind by which she could let Agatha know that she had possession of her secret without saying anything to Sir Vane. It would be easy, safe, and sure.

It was worthy of her—worthy of the French stage, and showed, as her inquiries had done, a genius for intrigue that was almost unsurpassed. She could imitate handwriting, and what she proposed to herself to do was this: she would write an anonymous letter and address it to herself. She would send it to Paris to one of her friends, who would post it to her addressed to Mademoiselle D'Envers, Chateau Bellefleur, Lucerne, Switzerland, and this letter should contain the story. She would read it to Agatha, and then let her do as she thought best. She was not afraid of letting Sir Vane know that she had received such a letter; he could not be angry at her showing it to Agatha; it would seem only natural that she should do so, as she could not be supposed to show it to him.

In any case she was quite safe, as no one could ever suspect her of writing such a letter. No one knew she hated Agatha, loved Sir Vane, or interested herself at all in their affairs. They would never suspect her. She quite approved of her plan.

"I am developing quite a genius," she said to herself, with a self-pleased smile. "I believe I could write a drama for the stage. After all, it is quite true that men and women are only puppets, and one can pull the strings at one's pleasure."

She was walking on the terrace as she matured this plan of hers, and suddenly over the roses came a sweet voice, crying: "Valerie! Valerie!"

She looked round. Agatha was walking toward her, and at the sight of that fair, innocent face something like remorse smote her. How could she torture one so gentle, so sweet, and fair? When a man resolves upon torture he is cruel enough, but when a woman makes such a resolution she is a thousand times more cruel. Valerie stood still to watch the beautiful girl coming toward her.

"You made me very happy the other day," she said, gently. "You told me—and the words were sweetest music to me—you told me that if you had met me when you were free, you might have loved me."

"Did I?" said Sir Vane. He did not even remember the words, but she thought he perhaps questioned their wisdom.

"I do not expect to have very much happiness in this world," he said, gently; "but if you would tell me that, and assure me that it is true, I would not ask greater happiness. If we had met three years ago, should you have loved me?"

Her voice seemed to die away in liquid music, and he was only himself, very weak, and severely tried.

"You need not doubt it," he said. "I should certainly have loved you."

But he did not add that it would have been with a light love, and that he would soon have ridden away.

It is wonderful how people can at times blind themselves, but there is no creature on earth so blind as the woman who loves a man, who in his turn is indifferent to her. Valerie was quite blind; she judged Sir Vane by herself; she thought he must have grown tired of Agatha, however much he might love her.

"I shall cherish the memory of those words," she said, "and some day I may remind you of them."

But in her blindness she overlooked this fact—that if he loved her, he had nothing to do but put Agatha away from him.

The little scene ended entirely to her satisfaction, and Sir Vane laughed heartily when he remembered it.

CHAPTER XXIV. SIR VANE'S UNEASINESS.

Valerie saw her way quite clearly now. Her passion had completely blinded her. She made herself believe that Sir Vane cared as much for her as she did for him, and that, if he were free from what was, after all, an incubation, it would not be long before he asked her to be his wife. She would not look the inconsistencies of the matter in the face. She considered herself much more beautiful, more brilliant, more gifted in every way than Agatha; more like herself, a great deal. Therefore, it seemed quite natural to her that she should prefer her and love her best. She did not even understand the charm of such a character as Agatha's; it was lost upon her. She drew up her superb figure to its full height, as she said to herself:

"I shall make a far better Lady Carlyon than that fair haired dove, who has not three feet outside her church and her Bible. She is not fitted to be the mistress of Garswood—I am."

And from that moment she thought of nothing else.

A bright morning dawned; the sky was blue, with a few lovely white clouds floating over it. So fair a day had seldom gladdened the beautiful earth.

"Why should I mind?" she asked herself. "Why should I hold my hand because she must suffer? When a great general wants to conquer a kingdom, he does not stop to count the slain, to count the mangled bodies, the widows' tears, the broken hearts; he does not stop to speak of the torture, the agony, the pain; he goes on to victory; and so must I. I must not stop to speak of the tears she will shed, of the sobs and sighs that will rend and scorch her fair life. I must go on to victory."

She went to meet Agatha with a smile on her lips—she who had deadly hate against her in her heart, who had planned her ruin, kissed her face, and spoke loving words to her.

"You look fresh as the morning itself, Mrs. Heriot," she said. "Were you calling me?"

"Yes, Madame saw your head was uncovered, and felt anxious about it. I promised to tell you."

"Poor auntie; she has always shown more anxiety over my head than my heart," laughed Valerie. "You English ladies think more of your hearts than your heads."

"It is hoped so," said Agatha.

Valerie's eyes were fixed on her in admiration—the tall, graceful figure in the white dress; the fair, flower-like face; the golden hair in the light of the violet eyes.

"It is true," she said to herself, "she is more like an angel than a woman. She looks fair enough, and ethereal enough, if she had wings, to fly."

Even when she had her arms round Agatha's waist, while she caressed her and talked to her, she was wondering what the fair face would be like when she knew the truth; how the eyes would lose their light, and the lips their smile.

"It will most probably kill her," she said to herself, "and the merciful thing will be for her to die. I do not see what is to become of her, if she lives."

When a woman acts the part of Judas, she does it far more thoroughly than a man.

The hand that was to deal Agatha her death blow touched lightly the golden hair.

"I know, ladies," said Valerie, "who would give all they have on earth for such hair as this."

"If they gave everything for it, of what use would it be?" asked Agatha.

"You do not know the value of beauty," said Valerie. "Wait until you go out into the world, Mrs. Heriot, and then you will see what is the value of hair like yours. Pale, pure gold, is thought almost as much of as a crown. At one of the balls I went to at the Tuilleries, there was an English woman with just such hair, and the whole court was infatuated with her. She was the rage for many weeks."

"I would rather hide my hair under a cap than be the 'rage' anywhere," said Agatha.

"You will not always think so," laughed Valerie. "You have the glamour of love on you now; but the time must come when that will fade, even your little, and you will want to see the world with me," said Agatha, with a look of content.

Valerie's brilliant face paled a little. "You mean Mr. Heriot—is he your world."

Do you think any man ever went on loving all his life?"

"I should hope so," said Agatha, with a happy laugh. "I know one who will."

"It is happy for you to think so," said Valerie. "I think most men tire of love in a very short time—in one, two, or three years, as the case may be. You remember the lines:

"Man's love is of man's life a thing apart; The woman's whole existence."

"I do not believe them," replied Agatha; "and when it is the case, I should think there is some fault in the object beloved."

"It is the nature of a man to tire soon of one object," said Valerie.

"I know to the contrary," said Agatha, with a happy smile.

Valerie laughed. She did not want her companion to see the poison underlying her words.

"I think," she continued, "that women are more selfish in their love than men. If a man marries a woman for love, he names her to his level, and gives her his name and position. If a woman marries for love, she wants her husband to give up the whole world for her, and never is so happy as when she has taken him from everything useful and noble in the world, and keeps him all to herself."

But Agatha was too simple and too unconscious to take the words to herself. The sunny light and laughter did not die from her face as it would have done had she understood the sting that Valerie intended to convey.

"I often wonder—although you will say that I have no right to wonder—how it is that you can allow Mr. Heriot to give all his life to you as he does."

"Why should I not?" asked Agatha, with a happy smile.

"In reason seems to me plain. He is so clever, so gifted. What a statesman he would make; what an eloquent speaker; what a polished orator; and now he is lost to the world."

"He is happy," said Agatha; and her rival had no reply.

"People look at things so differently," said Valerie. "A retreat for a few weeks or a few months in a quiet place like this is excellent; but if I were in your place I should urge my husband back into the world, to take up a position and make the best of his life. I should be ambitious for him. Now you, on the contrary, enjoy the quiet of an existence like this."

For the first time the fair face was troubled, and a cloud came over it. Could it be possible she asked herself, that her love was selfish, that by acceding to his wish to live here in this beautiful solitude she was doing him an injury, marred the usefulness of his life? Valerie's keen eyes noted with delight the shadow—the first she had seen—on that sweet face. He pleased himself; it was not she, Agatha, who had asked him to come here. He had told her that he was tired of the brilliant world, tired of noise and gaiety and fashion, that he longed for quiet, for rest, and love. And then it occurred to her how much was in his life of which she knew nothing—when he had lived in the great cities—when he had traveled—he never spoke to her of it, but seemed to live entirely in the present.

Was she selfish in loving him so well—in making life so happy to him that he was content to live in this quiet place and never spoke of returning to the world at all? Her troubled eyes sought Valerie's face, but she was too proud, too delicate to discuss such a question with her. If ever she spoke of it at all she would be with her husband. Valerie saw that she had gone far enough.

"How foolish I am to ramble on in this fashion," she said, "but sometimes when I see Mr. Heriot I think what a grand statesman or officer he would make; he has an air of command such as you see in fine men—but then, of course, he knows best. Now I will make my aunt happy by going in search of a garden hat."

But she had troubled for the first time the course of the happy life which had been, untroubled until now.

CHAPTER XXV. THE COQUETTE'S ADVANCES.

Valerie spent many anxious hours over the composition of that letter; one word too little would make it inefficacious, one word too much would be fatal. She brought all her wit, talent, skill, and ingenuity to bear upon it, and when it was finished she said to herself that it was inflexible, perfect of its kind. She sent it to one of her gay, careless friends in Paris—a lady who, gay and careless as she was, would have burned her fingers off rather than have posted such a thing. Valerie made her believe that it was a corrected bill which she was obliged to show to her aunt. The lady posted it, and never thought of it again. Valerie thought to herself that before it came it was as well if she could make sure of Sir Vane's real intentions toward her—whether, if he were free, he would really marry her. If he did not care for her sufficiently for that, she need not take any further trouble. It was useless for her to set him free for another.

Sir Vane was not averse to the little sentimental scenes they amused him while they lasted, and he laughed at the recollection of them. As for ever crying about Valerie, she was the very last kind of woman whom he liked or tolerated—a tiresome coquette; he had flirted with hundreds, and valued them at their worth.

There could be no greater contrast than between his fair, sweet Agatha and this brilliant, girlish creature; still she amused him, and men have lived who enjoyed even the physical torture of their kind. If any one had told Sir Vane that this queen of flirts had conceived a violent passion for him, he would have laughed the idea to scorn; grand passions did not, according to his theory, belong to that class.

If ever he thought of Valerie's future at all, it was with an amused smile. She would probably marry some old marquis with a string of titles and an unpronounceable name, a great amount of money and large estates; he would give her costly dresses and magnificent jewels—would find her good carriages, and, that great consideration, an opera-box.

He laughed to think what a belle she would be, and how she would flirt with all the gay cavaliers in Paris to her heart's content, while the marquis rested and slept. He had known hundreds of such women; they were very beautiful, very amusing, but as for love—bah! what had that to do with it? Had any one told him that Valerie believed she could part him from Agatha and take Agatha's place, he would have laughed the idea to scorn. He was not tired of her yet, and he wondered at himself. In all his life he had never been contented any one for half so long; in fact, he loved her better than he had done when he persuaded her to run away with him.

Every man has one great love in his life, and this was Sir Vane's. The chances are that if he had been compelled to choose between leaving her forever and marrying her, he would have married her at once. If they had lived in the world

in the ordinary fashion, if they had mixed in society, been able to vary their lives, even ever so little, the chances are that his love would have increased. It was a great proof of its strength that it had borne the strain and tension of solitude. And Valerie thought that she could part a man like this from the woman he loved!

All was fish that came to his net, and when on this lovely day he met Valerie out in the beautiful sunlit grounds, where he had gone to enjoy a cigar, he was by no means averse to a little amusement. If she liked to spend her time in telling him how she admired him, and intimating how much she loved him, it did not hurt him, and it amused her. He could have laughed at each little manoeuvre—he knew them by heart years ago.

He never dreamed that she was serious, that her own infatuation was so great she had begun to believe in his.

She met him with a coy, sweet smile, and by the expression of her face he knew that he was in for a sentimental scene. She made a step backward, as though she would retire, but Sir Vane held out his hand in greeting.

"Good morning, mademoiselle," he said, in his cheery, genial tone. "You have brought the sunshine with you."

But that was not the mood in which she expected to find him, or in which she wanted him.

Dare she venture one word against Agatha, to see how he would take it?

"It is rather surprising to see you alone," she said. "Mrs. Heriot is generally on guard."

She gave him the benefit of one glance from those dark eyes—a glance which should have gone to his heart and made strange havoc there; but it failed and fell quite harmless.

"I am glad you think Mrs. Heriot cares so much for me," he said. "It is very nice to be guarded, as you call it, by a beautiful lady."

"Still," she said, pleasantly, "it would be a treat to see you sometimes alone."

"Would it? Then I must manage it," he said.

And the girl, so clever in all other things, had not the sense to see that he was laughing at her.

"Let us walk as far as the fountain," she said. "How beautiful the lake is this morning; the water is quite clear and deep-blue."

"I wish Mrs. Heriot would come out; she loves the lake when it is in that golden blue light," he said, hastily.

"Oh, happy Mrs. Heriot!" said Valerie. "How delightful it must be to be thought about and watched over every minute. I envy her."

Sir Vane laughed a hearty, genuine laugh, in which there was not one shade of sentiment.

"Some day some one will envy you," he said, "and some one will watch over you."

She shook her beautiful head with the most bewitching air of doubt.

"I am not quite sure about it. Do you know, if I had my choice now in life, what I should be?"

"I cannot guess," he replied.

"Your secretary," she said. "I would choose that rather than any other lot on earth. I should see you every day then, and you would be obliged to talk to me."

"Are those two elements of delight?" he asked, thinking to himself how weak and foolish women were—all but Agatha.

"They form my notion of delight," she said. "I should like to be your secretary. I should like to write your letters, to discuss all your affairs with you. But one life is mapped out; no one can choose for him or herself. That would be my choice if I could make one," she said.

"I ought to be very much flattered," he said.

"I would rather that you were touched than flattered," she replied, and her voice was so earnest and tender, so full of music, that he was really touched.

He looked at the beautiful, brilliant face with a sensation of wonder that she cared for him. Of course, he was grateful; what man is not grateful touched and flattered by the love or homage of a beautiful woman?

Sir Vane was no exception; they had reached the beautiful fountain where the marble fawn stood in all its eternal beauty.

"I shall always love this spot," she said, as she sank languidly on the garden seat, placed among the myrtle trees. "It was here that I first talked to you," she said; "that we had our first real conversation. I shall always like this better than any other place about Bellefleur."

"You are very good to think so much of me," he said; and the light in his eyes grew warmer as he looked at her.

What a beautiful picture she made; the myrtle thus formed a background; the fountain threw its rippling waters high in the air; the marble fawn stood calm and serene in all its grandeur. She sat there in an attitude which might have been copied from Cleopatra; it was so full of grace this beautiful face, with a look of consciousness dark eyes that dropped from his, and long lashes that swept the dainty cheek. She wore a picturesque morning dress, with a bunch of fresh, fair roses at her belt, and a man might have gone far before he could find a lovelier picture.

"What a difference meeting you has made in my life," she said. "How little when I came home did I anticipate anything of the kind. I often ask myself whether it has been for good or for evil."

"How can you be so cruel, Valerie?" he asked; the dulcet tones of that low voice influenced him insensibly.

"It is you," she interrupted, "who are cruel, and not I."

"Why should knowing me bring you any harm?" he asked.

She raised those dark eyes of hers with a gleam of fire, and looked at him long and steadily.

"Do you not know?" she asked. "Can you not guess? It has been the one happiness of my life to meet you and know you, but this pleasure has become too dear to me. What shall I do in the years in which I shall see you no more?"

beautiful fields and meadows, the lovely hanging woods and the clear streams at home. She wondered how all her dear old friends were (the children whom she had cared for and tutored were growing up), and her father—the dear, absent-minded father; her eyes filled with tears as she thought of him—this fair, sunlit morning had taken her back to him and her old home. She should see them again; she had no fear of that. When this pleasant dream of theirs was broken, said Sir Vane had to return to the realities of life, he would take her home, she felt sure; and when her father saw how happy she was he would forgive her her reticence. She wrote to him at intervals, and her letters were forwarded through Sir Vane's bankers. She did not understand how or why this morning she could not take her thoughts from Whitecroft. The Lake of Lucerne was beautiful enough, but it lacked the clouds of white blossom that made home so fair. Afterward she knew that it was a singular coincidence that, on that day above all other days, her heart and thoughts should have gone back to the old home and the gray church.

She dressed herself with unusual care and elegance—she felt that she must be in accordance with the day, bright and fair. She took out, poor child, a morning-dress reserved for special occasions—a beautiful white Indian muslin, cut in some quaint artistic fashion, showing the graceful curves and lines of the beautiful figure to the greatest advantage; the luxuriant golden hair—lovely enough in itself to have made a plain woman beautiful—was brushed back from the white brow, and fastened with snood of blue ribbon. She gathered from the casement window a deep crimson rose, and fastened it in the bodice of her dress; and she looked the very embodiment of all that was most lovely, pure, and angelical. No wonder that Sir Vane kissed her as though he could never let her go again.

"You are brighter than the morning," Agatha said, "and you are the loveliest girl." How proud I am of my darling! It seems to me that you grow more beautiful every day, and that I should have thought impossible."

"Proud of me!" she said. "Oh, Vane, I do not want you to be proud of me—only love me, that is all; I want nothing but love."