

Who can tell? It appears to Kate as if this strange reluctance absolutely overmasters her will; and when she speaks it is to say:

"Don't think me foolish and perverse, but can you not wait a little longer?—can you not wait till to-morrow? I pledge myself to answer you then."

If Fenwick thinks of the verse he quoted so lightly a few minutes ago, he does not say so. A shade of disappointment falls over his face; but he says, kindly, "You must make no such pledge. Forgive me for tormenting you—and don't think of answering before you are ready to do so."

"But, as you said, there is no good in this delay," she cries, eagerly. "I will not encourage myself in weakness any longer. I promise to answer you to-morrow."

"That must be as you please," he says, and lifts the hand which he has been holding to his lips.

It is with an odd sense of having fettered herself, and of being still free—until to-morrow—that Kate goes away to make her toilet. As she stands before the mirror, she wrings her hands together. "What must I do—oh, what must I do!" she says to herself. "If there was only *somebody* to tell me! I cannot rely on Miss Brooke, and I cannot rely on myself. What is it right to do? That is the question. Oh, if I only knew!"

The evening passes pleasantly enough. Gentle harmony spreads its wings over the group, among whom there are no conflicting desires of any kind. If Miss Vaughn gives a sigh when she compares Kate's future destiny with her own—Fenwick, young and graceful, with Mr. Ashton, old and slightly shrivelled—who can blame her? But she is a philosopher, and does not waste more than one sigh in idle regret. "After all, the old man suits me best," she thinks. "I can manage him."

After dinner Kate summons all her courage to her aid, and, sitting down by Mr. Ashton, offers her congratulations on his approaching marriage. They are received very graciously. The man of the world cannot be other than gracious to a pretty woman with charming manners, even if she is his niece, whom he has disliked without seeing, and dreaded without knowing. He even expresses a hope that she will be present at the ceremony, and a regret that she has declined to accompany him abroad. "But that, of course, is not remarkable, from what Miss Vaughn tells me. Am I premature in offering my congratulations? If so, pray excuse me."

Kate blushes crimson. What can she say? If he is premature, it is not her own fault. She glances across the room at Fenwick, who is talking to Miss Vaughn. Could any woman in her senses ask for more than he offers? Attracted by the magnetism of her gaze, his eyes meet her own, and he smiles—Mr. Ashton, who is watching the by-play, nods his head.

"Take a word of advice from me, my dear," he says, "though you may readily think that I have no right to offer it. I can see that everything is right so far as he is concerned. If the hesitation is with you, end it at once. You are very pretty, *petite*, but good looks don't last forever—and the prettiest of women could ask no better establishment than this which is within your grasp."

Kate does not resent such plain speaking. In fact, she is dumb. Has the oracle for which she has been waiting spoken? It almost seems so.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"Love is not love
That alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove."

Next morning the subtle, intangible cloud of the day before has altogether vanished from Miss Brooke's face and manner. She is bright as the sunshine which lies over the earth—a decided contrast in appearance to Kate, who looks pale and more grave than usual when she enters the breakfast-room. She has slept scarcely at all, and nothing has such power to depress the system and the spirits as a night's vigil. During all the long hours that lie between the midnight and the dawning, she has been going over and over her problem, without arriving at any decision; and so she rises weary and depressed.

Her appearance excites much concern, and draws forth many inquiries, which she puts aside as lightly as possible. "I think I took cold while driving yesterday afternoon," she says. "My wrap was too light, and I became chilled."

"Have you a sore throat?" asks Miss Brooke. "Diphtheria is very prevalent."

"I have no sore throat worth mentioning," answers Kate, with a laugh.

"Perhaps, although the weather has not changed, the sore throat may prevent our ride," says Mr. Fenwick.

Kate flushes at this. "No," she replies. "I think a ride is the very thing I need. Somebody says that a canter is a cure for every ill that flesh is heir to—and I half believe it."

"It is settled, then, that we go this afternoon?"

"Yes, it is settled."

Nothing more is said on the subject, but Kate feels the web of fate drawing close and closer around her. "Of all things in the world, I despise a coquette most!" she has told herself severely, so it is fixed that Fenwick must receive his final answer this afternoon; and what that answer is to be, she is utterly unable to tell.

After breakfast Miss Brooke orders the carriage. "I have some shopping to do," she says,

"but I won't take you with me, Kate. You really do not look well. You must stay in and rest this morning, if you intend to go out this afternoon. Make yourself comfortable in the sitting-room by the fire—there are two or three new magazines which nobody has opened. I will tell Oscar to excuse you to any one who may call."

"Thank you—I should like that," says Kate, gratefully.

Thus she is left with the prospect of a whole morning perfectly free from interruption, in which to consider the momentous question pressing upon her. The magazines lie with uncut pages, while she considers and yet again considers it. What is she to do? On one side there is absolute dependence on her uncle, or else upon the generosity of Miss Brooke, between whom and herself there is not the slightest natural tie; on the other, wealth, independence and kindness, a devotion which has touched if it has not won her heart. "Everybody would say that I am a fool to hesitate," she thinks. "But is it right to promise to marry one man when even to see another—Ah! what am I talking of! I shall never see him again, and he is not worthy of a thought. Shall I wreck my life for the idle flirtation of a few weeks?"

So her reflections go round in an unending circle. It would be easy to say to Fenwick: Wait. "But what do I gain by waiting?" she asks. Amid all this whirl and tumult of thought, her head begins to ache, her heart grows sick. "Shall I go to Mr. Ashton, after all?" she thinks, with a kind of grim amusement. "O Kate, Kate, between two such exalted stools, do you mean to come to the ground?"

At this moment something touches her impatiently. She drops her hands and looks down. A pair of dark eyes are gazing up into her face with an expression of entreaty. They belong to Filippo, who, sitting beside her on the couch, has been regarding the fire with an air of serene content so long as her fingers caress his head. When that attention ceases, he first looks up, then, finding his glance disregarded, touches her with his paw.

Kate knows what he wishes to suggest. At this hour she often takes him out for a run in the bright sunshine, and Filippo thinks he would like to go now.

"Well, why not?" she says to herself. "It is a good thing to gratify even a dog—eh, Filippo? I can think as well in the open air as by the fire, can I not? And, alas! I fear the thinking will not come to much good anywhere."

With this despondent conclusion, she rises and rings the bell, sends Susan for her hat and cloak, and having assumed these articles of dress, bids Filippo come with her, and goes out.

Not far off is a small park which, even on this wintry day, is attractive and pretty, for leafless trees can throw delicate shadows, and here and there fountains are playing brightly. Kate wanders up and down the walks, still thinking, thinking, thinking of her problem, and still as far as ever from a conclusion respecting it.

"Why is life such a riddle to some people," she considers, "and so plain to others? There is Sophy—how plain it was for her! The man who loved her was the man she loved; and they had nothing to do but to make up their minds to spend their lives together. Am I envying her? God forbid! Trouble is not sent to those who have no need of it, I suppose—and she had none, dear Sophy! But trouble is one thing, and perplexity is another; one can set one's teeth and bear the first, but the last is very, very trying. One would not mind it so much if the happiness of others were not involved in one's decision. What is right to do? If I only knew, I would do it!"

No need to question that. The resolution on the fair young face can no more be mistaken than the expression of troubled doubt in the eyes. While so reflecting, she has been sitting on a bench near one of the fountains—now, preparing to return home, she looks round for her attendant. "Filippo!" she calls; "Filippo!"

Filippo, who is in the act of exchanging amicable salutations with a small black terrier at some distance off, does not heed, but a man, passing along one of the walks near by, starts and turns. Amid the roar of a host, he would know that voice! know it so well that, like Romney Leigh, he might say:

"Sweet trick of voice!
I would be a dog for this, to know it at last,
And die upon the falls of it."

He gives himself no time for thought or deliberation, but moves impetuously in the direction from which it has proceeded, and so it chances that Kate rises—to find herself facing a pale, agitated man, whom she saw last as he lay bleeding and unconscious in the October moonlight.

Involuntarily she recoils a step, uttering a cry such as in all her life has never passed her lips before—amazement, consternation, rapture, all are blended in it. Who can explain the mystery of attraction—this soul answering soul—which we call love? Absence has tried these two, estrangement has done its worst to tear their hearts asunder, both believe that they have deep and serious cause for resentment, yet it is as if a great electric wave of gladness passed from one to the other, when they once more stand face to face, "after long grief and pain."

Tarleton recovers himself first, and, without offering his hand, lifts his hat ceremoniously.

"Pardon me," he says, "I fear I have startled you very much. Hearing your voice unexpectedly, I—I came on an impulse."

His tone, like a *douche* of cold water, steadies

Kate. She is quivering in every nerve, but nevertheless she manages to say, with something like calmness:

"Surely you knew that I was here. But you—I had no idea of seeing you. I thought—that is, I supposed—you were still at Southdale."

"I left Southdale several days ago. I was at Fairfields the day before I left, and I am glad to say that your friends are all well. I need not ask how you are. I never saw you looking better."

"I always look well," says Kate, in a tremulous voice. "I cannot say the same of you," she adds, hurriedly. "How—how badly you look!"

"Very likely," he answers, carelessly. "When a man has just come out of the jaws of death, he cannot be expected to look well. I am glad to see you once more," he goes on, looking steadily at her, "in order to tell you that I have heard the story of how I owe my life to you, and—and I suppose I should thank you for it. It does not strike me in the light of a blessing just now; but probably it is better to be on the earth than under it—and but for you, I should not be here to-day. Accept, therefore, my thanks—together with my apologies for disturbing you—and I will bid you good-morning."

She does not answer a word, for she is literally struck dumb, but she holds out her hand, and—looks at him. In all his life, Frank Tarleton will never forget that look. What is it that the wistful eyes express far more plainly than language could?—passion, sorrow, reproach? When he feels her hand in his, all pride and anger, all resolution and firmness melt like wax before flame. He holds it tightly clasped for an instant before he cries, like one constrained against his will:

"How can I go! It is like rending soul and body apart! O Kate, how could you be so heartless!"

"Heartless!" says Kate, breathlessly. This is too much. She tears her hand from him, and, sinking on the end of the bench, bursts into tears.

Fortunately Mrs. Grundy is not at hand, to perceive this violation of the proprieties. Nobody is near. Even an elderly gentleman, who was reading a newspaper three or four benches distant, has folded it up and walked away.

As for Tarleton, he is concerned as a man—unless he belongs to the order flatteringly designated as brutes—always is concerned by a woman's tears, and he stands in front of Kate, to shield her as much as possible from the observation of any chance passer-by.

"Don't cry!" he says—and his voice, though gentle, has again grown cold. "I am sorry if I have distressed you. I had no right to reproach you. No doubt it was best to throw out of your life one so unlucky and worthless as I am."

This rouses Kate. She looks up and her eyes flash through her tears. "How dare you talk to me like that!" she says, "when it was you who threw—or would have thrown—me lightly aside!"

"I!" He can say no more for an instant. Then, with a quick movement, he sits down beside her. "What do you mean?" he asks. "Are you so forgetful that I must recall to you how you received me—what you said to me—on that night when I went to say good-bye before going into a duel in which I felt sure that I should lose my life? You did not know that, but I don't suppose you would have spoken differently if you had known. You saved my life on the next night, it is true; but, after having saved it, did you come near me, even to utter one word of concern, even to say farewell? While I still lay in the shadow of death, did you not go away! If I had been melodramatically inclined, I should have torn the bandages from my wound when I heard that you were gone—you, who so short a time before had said that you loved me! But, instead, I swore to recover, if will could aid recovery, in order to hear from your own lips a full explanation of the charges which were only half made and not at all answered that night. I kept my vow. I rose from bed when the doctor said I was periling my life in doing so; and as soon as I dared to travel, I followed you—for what? To be told that I could not see you, and as I left the house to catch one glimpse of you radiant with beauty by the side of the man to whom you are engaged."

The impetuous words have poured forth in such a torrent that Kate has had no opportunity to speak until now, when she breaks in upon him with a cry.

"Was it you?" she says, "was it you—that figure in the hall? And I sat still and did not know?"

"Why should you have known?" he asks, as she pauses abruptly. "Would my presence have been more to you than the presence of any one else? You did not look as if it would. My God!" cries the young man passionately, "shall I ever forget that picture? I was in the outer darkness, alone, and miserable, while you were there with him. That night I felt reckless enough for anything! If Fenwick had crossed my path, I should have put a pistol in his hand and said, 'Kill me, or I shall kill you'—the consequences of which no doubt would have been that I should have been handed over to the police as a madman. Luckily, with morning cooler thoughts came. I determined to leave the city, as I told Miss Brooke I would, but a series of accidents occurred to delay me; so here I am talking to you of things which probably possess little interest to you."

"How can you be so cruel?" she says—and again the great tears drop in a scalding flood—

"How have I deserved it, from you? I did not

know that you were here. Miss Brooke did not tell me."

"She said frankly that she would not do so. Your uncle (that I knew from himself) disapproved of any intercourse between us; you were on the eve of another engagement, and to see me would unsettle your mind—this and much more she said; but none of it was half so powerful as that one glimpse of you! At that moment I had two inclinations. One was to rush in and claim you at all costs as mine—the other to go away and never see your face again—and the last prevailed."

"And could you have gone away?" she asks, simply as a child, without one word, without even saying good-bye? And you could have done that, you have not suffered as I have."

"As you have!" he repeats, almost mechanically.

"Yes, as I have, though you think I look so well. But one may look well, and feel badly enough. I know I am weak and foolish. I know I have no proper sense of dignity and self-respect, but oh, how could you treat me so?"

She has said it to herself a thousand times, and now she utters it to him in precisely the same tone in which it has so often fallen from her lips—a tone in which there is no anger, only keen sorrow and indefinite reproach. Tarleton gazes at her in amazement.

"How have I treated you?" he asks. "I have loved you from the first hour I saw you—that is all."

"Loved me!" she cries, with sharp pain in her voice. "Ah, you are mistaken. Perhaps it is charitable to believe you have forgotten. You amused yourself flirting with me, according to a fashion common with you, it is said; but all the time it was Florida Vaughn that you really loved—not me."

A dark red flush surges to his brow—but that it is no flush of shame is evident. His eyes meet Kate's steadily and intently for a moment; then he says:

"I begin to see daylight at last. I have been a fool not to have suspected this before. What did that woman tell you? Repeat it word for word, if you can."

Kate can and does. She has not forgotten one of the words which Florida Vaughn uttered at Fairfields that memorable night. When she has repeated them, however, she adds, quite calmly:

"But it was not for that—not for what she told me—that I cared; nor even for the facts that seemed to support it. I said that I would receive no testimony against you except your own, and that I have."

"In Heaven's name, what did you have?"

"Do you remember writing a letter to Miss Vaughn while she was at Fairfields? Surely, you must remember it; the letter was not one to be forgotten."

He considers for a minute, and then says: "I wrote no letter to her while she was there—what should I have written about? But I remember writing a note of hardly more than a dozen lines about some trinket she had asked me to return. I was willing enough to return it, but, failing to find it, I wrote to tell her so."

Kate shakes her head. "You must have forgotten," she says. "I read it—at least a part of it—and it was no note of a dozen lines, but a letter of three pages."

"I am not in the least mistaken," he answers. "It is you who have been deceived. I swear to you that I neither wrote nor uttered a word of love to Florida Vaughn while she was at Fairfields—nor indeed for many months before that. Do you mean to doubt me now?"

The tone in which he asks the question tells her that, if she answers "Yes," it will place a bar between them which even love might find it hard to forget or forgive. She hesitates for an instant—only an instant—and then she says, passionately:

"It is impossible to doubt you—and yet I read it!"

"You read a letter—mine, I have no doubt—but you did not read the note which I wrote from Southdale. Some other letter—some memorial of my insanity—was substituted. The trick was an adroit one, but if you had only told me—"

"I had no opportunity to tell you," says Kate, "and then—oh, I have forgotten until this minute!—Miss Vaughn asked me not to speak of having seen the letter."

"And did not that make you suspect a fraud?"

"How could I? I was not thinking of fraud. Even if I had thought of it, everything would still have seemed very plain. I knew the outside of the letter, while the inside—"

"Ah, the inside!" he says, setting his teeth. "How can I obtain the genuine note?—how can I prove the falsehood to you? It may be impossible to do so, but I will make the effort. I will go to her to-morrow."

"For what purpose?" Kate asks, half startled.

"For the purpose of charging her with an act of deception and treachery, besides which her brother's horse-drugging feat pales into insignificance."

"Would you do that?" cries Kate, vivid with excitement. "It is what I shall do," he answers, with a determination that is plainly steadfast as well as fiery, "and I only wish that you might be there to hear all that is said."

"Miss Kate!—Susan's voice speaking unexpectedly at her side makes Kate start—"there's a lady at the house anxious to see you, ma'am, and she said she'd wait till you come in, but