

## ONE STANDARD.

BY JULIA SCHAYER.

If a contented mind be a continual feast, then Mrs. Howard Ovington, of Cosmos Place, may be said to have occupied the place of honor at the festive board, Mrs. Ovington was an eminently contented woman.

Starting in life with a silver spoon in her mouth, she had only laid it aside for one of gold, in other words, from a petted and luxurious childhood she had passed to a still more petted and luxurious life. Her husband, her children, her house, her social position, herself, were all perfectly satisfactory. The inner serenity induced by such an exceptional state of things invested Mrs. Ovington's comely person with an air of easy complacency that was vastly becoming, and won for her a wide reputation for sweetness and amiability. At thirty-five she was fair and unfaded.

It must not be imagined that Mrs. Ovington was indifferent to the condition of that large class who have been born with pewter spoons or no spoons at all, in their mouths. It was one of her chief sources of satisfaction to be seen among the foremost in all charitable works. Particularly she gave time and money to the reformation of unfortunate women and children, and it was of a young person of this class that she was thinking as she stood at the mirror one wintry day patting into place the violet velvet bow beneath her chin.

"Yes," she said, half aloud, "I think I will trust her," touching the electric bell near the dressing-table.

A moment later there was a knock at the door, and a girl in house-maid's dress entered. She was very young, hardly full-grown, and a pleasant-looking girl yet something in her face testified to experiences belonging rightfully to no human being, least of all to one of her age. Yet it was not a bad face nor a bold one; there was sweetness in it, and an appealing look that seemed asking for confidence and sympathy. There was not much of either in Mrs. Ovington's manner as she spoke to her.

"Susie, I am going out. This chiffonier is to be exchanged. If the men call for it during my absence, take out the contents, and arrange them in the new chiffonier in precisely the same order as now. The key is in the upper drawer."

"Very well, ma'am. I'll be careful," said the girl, with a pleased look.

"I am afraid it is a good deal of a risk," said the lady to herself as she swept down the stairs. "I never quite trust these reformed girls. Still, Susie was never charged with stealing, and there is nothing in the chiffonier but underwear and some sashes and scarfs. Besides, Mrs. Burton, our president, particularly charged me to let the girl see that she is trusted. I suppose it is all right."

When Mrs. Ovington came home that evening she found the new chiffonier in place, and a glance showed her that her directions had been faithfully carried out.

"She is a handy little thing," said the lady, as she turned the key and went down to dinner. "Mrs. Burton was right. She is going to prove a treasure."

A few days later Mrs. Draper was entertaining her friends Mrs. Flaxman and Mrs. Rose at an informal, cozy little luncheon, such as intimate friends delight in. As the ladies were laying aside their wraps in the guest-chamber, Mrs. Flaxman, a pretty, stylish woman, with a bright, careless face, exclaimed:

"What a lovely chiffonier! New, isn't it, Fanny?"

"Oh yes! That is, I have just bought it, and bought it for new, of course. But thereby hangs a tale. Fancy, when I came to use it, I found some difficulty with one of the drawers, and pulling it out to investigate, just see what I found!"

Here Mrs. Draper produced from the chiffonier some articles of woman's wear, which she exultingly displayed.

"How perfectly lovely!" Mrs. Flaxman. "This is an imported cape; the lace on it is worth at least five dollars a yard. And what an exquisite scarf! You lucky creature!"

"Isn't it? I think I got even with that man selling me the chiffonier for new."

"I should say so, indeed. Have you heard of any thing like it, Margaret? Isn't Fanny lucky?"

The face of Mrs. Rose, thus addressed, was a study. At first smiling, then surprised, incredulous, confused; "I—I don't think I understand," she said, hesitating. Then looking Mrs. Draper wonderingly in the face, "Of course you are not in earnest, Fanny!"

Mrs. Draper cast a bewildered glance from Mrs. Rose to the other lady, flushing hotly. "In earnest?" she repeated.

"About keeping those things," said Mrs. Rose, quietly, the confusion in her face giving way to pain, and something more than pain.

Perhaps if the two had been alone, the answer might have been different, but as Mrs. Draper stood embarrassed and doubtful, evidently overwhelmed with an entirely new thought, Mrs. Flaxman broke in, with a good-natured, mischievous laugh:

"Of course Fanny will keep them. What else should she do? Take them back to the man that tried to deceive and take advantage of her? Ridiculous?"

Come, Fanny dear, don't stand there looking like a criminal at the bar. You must not mind Margaret. If every one tried to live up to her standard, a nice middle things would get into!"

"Is there more than one standard of right?" said Mrs. Rose, gently.

"Certainly there is," promptly responded Mrs. Flaxman, tossing her handsome, saucy head. "There are no end of standards. Take my advice, Fanny, and follow the world's, or you'll rue the day you were born into a civilized community. There, Margaret, don't preach! We are going to have lobster *farci* for luncheon. Don't spoil my appetite."

Mrs. Draper all this time had not uttered a word. Her laughing girlish face was clouded almost to the verge of tears, a kind-hearted but impulsive and undisciplined little woman, it evidently cost her an effort to control her feelings, but it was successful, and when she turned from restoring the articles to the drawer, she was almost herself again, and the three went down to the drawing-room, talking as cheerfully as if nothing had occurred to jar the harmony of their meeting.

Soon after the pleasant luncheon was over, Mrs. Rose, who was a widow, supporting herself and mother by music teaching, went away to fulfill an engagement. For some time the two left together sat by the open fire talking over their pretty fancy-work.

"Yes," Mrs. Flaxman answered, but without much enthusiasm, "she is a fine woman; but she has strange ideas."

"I don't know," Mrs. Draper said, musingly—"I don't know that her ideas are strange, except that they are nobler than other people's, generally. I often wish I could be like Margaret."

"I don't then," promptly returned Mrs. Flaxman. "I should be perfectly miserable. The moment you begin setting up a higher standard, and running against custom, and precedent, people begin to mistrust and dislike you. I couldn't bear it. And it isn't necessary, either. The day for martyrdom is over."

"I don't know," said Mrs. Draper again, slowly. Then, with sudden warmth: "That is the trouble with me—I never know! Whatever I decide to do, I always wish I had done the other thing. I let Mr. Draper decide for me as often as possible," she added, laughing, but not very mirthfully. "It relieves me of so much responsibility."

"That is not my way," Mrs. Flaxman said, with a wilful air. "I like my own way, decidedly, and on all occasions, and I am perfectly willing to take the consequences. As for Margaret, don't wear yourself out trying to be like her. You'll never succeed; and it's just as well. You are quite good enough for *this* wicked world, my dear."

Mrs. Draper joined in her friend's laugh; but when she had gone she stood alone in the guest-chamber, conscious of a strange depressing influence. A bit of the beautiful lace scarf, hung out of the drawer of the chiffonier; she tucked it out of sight with impatient movement.

"Yes, Margaret is too exacting," she said, half aloud. "Still, in this case she may be right. I don't want the things. I will talk it over with Harry when he gets home from New York. He will tell me what to do. A day or two more or less won't matter."

The meeting of the Ladies' Home Mission Society was over, and most of the members had departed. A group of five or six remained, standing around Mrs. Burton, the president of the society, listening with interest to what she was saying.

"Yes, it is a sad case but we must not allow ourselves to be disheartened by it. We cannot expect success in every instance. I did have confidence in that girl, I confess, and even now I don't consider the charge proved, though circumstances seem against her. I do wish Mrs. Ovington had not acted so precipitately."

Mrs. Draper, who had started to leave the room, turned and came up to the group, a look of inquiry on her face.

"We were speaking of the case of Susie Maxwell," said Mrs. Burton. "You remember—the pretty little girl we took from Dares's concert-hall."

"What has happened to her?" asked Mrs. Draper, with singular intentness.

"You know she has been living with Mrs. Ovington. Yesterday Mrs. Ovington missed some articles from her chiffonier, and rather hastily, I think, accused the girl of having taken them. She reports that the girl denied the accusation, became violent, made a dreadful scene, and left the house. This morning Mrs. Ovington came to see me and was determined to have the girl arrested, but I prevailed upon her to wait a day or two. I went to Blake's Court, where the girl's old associates live, but could not find a trace of her. I am feeling very anxious; she was an impulsive, passionate creature. There is no telling what she may do. I shall leave no stone unturned to find her, but it may be too late."

"How unfortunate!" exclaimed one.

"How sad!"

"How terrible!"

Mrs. Draper, almost unnoticed in the breaking-up of the group, had made her way to the pavement, and stood there, pale as ashes, dazed and trembling, for some moments. At last a resolute look came into her face, and stopping a passing car, she entered it, and ten minutes later found herself in the establishment of Primrose & Horton.

Mr. Horton himself came forward to receive her.

"You sold me a chiffonier two days ago," she said, without wasting time or words.

The merchant bowed.

"It was represented to me as new, but I have reason to think that it had been in use before. Is that true?"

The merchant looked puzzled a moment, then smiled a little ironically. "I remember now," he said. "The chiffonier had been sold to another party, who exchanged it in three or four days for one of another style. There was no deception practised. All that we sell is subject to exchange within a given time. Surely you cannot object to the article on that ground madam."

"Would you be kind enough to give me the name of the person who had the chiffonier before I had it?" asked Mrs. Draper, looking so pale that the merchant was alarmed and proffered a chair.

He seemed to hesitate.

"I must know who it was," said Mrs. Draper. "There is a reason for it. If it must be given, there were some articles in one of the drawers that I wish to return in person."

"In that case I cannot refuse," said the merchant, and hastily wrote a few words on a card.

Mrs. Draper's convictions were strengthened as she glanced at it.

Mrs. H. Ovington,  
No. 300 Cosmos Place

In a very short time she was seated in a splendid drawing-room before that imposing personage.

"I came from the meeting of the Home Mission," Mrs. Draper began at once. "I heard there of your trouble with Susie Maxwell. The girl is innocent. The articles you missed are at my house."

"May I ask—" began Mrs. Ovington.

"An explanation? Certainly."

And Mrs. Draper hurriedly related the circumstances. Mrs. Ovington sat silent, with heightened color.

A feeling of resentment against Mrs. Draper sprang up in her breast. Why, since she had kept silent so long, had she not remained so, and spared her the annoyance and humiliation that would be hers if the matter were made public?

Perhaps, whispered a waiting demon, it is not too late now. Perhaps Mrs. Draper might be induced to keep the matter between themselves. It would be worth her while considering Mrs. Ovington's social influence. She looked at Mrs. Draper fixedly, a strange glitter coming into her eyes, a forced smile to her lips.

"You were very kind," she said. "It is a pity you gave yourself so much trouble about so small a matter. May I ask if you have mentioned the matter to anyone?"

"Not to-day. I showed the articles to two of my friends yesterday. I had not decided what to do about them" (Mrs. Draper colored here painfully). "But when I heard what had happened to Susie, I suspected the truth, and went at once to Primrose & Horton's, and from there to you. I am distressed at my delay," she went on, her eyes brimming; "But I hope it is not too late to repair the harm done, in some degree at least."

Mrs. Ovington still wore that strange look. Apparently she had not heard the last words. "You told no one at the meeting?" she asked, eagerly.

"No one."

"Then," said Mrs. Ovington, in her most gracious accents, "you will oblige me so much by keeping the matter between ourselves. It will prevent so much disagreeable talk, you understand. People are so ready to attack any one at all—er—prominent, you know."

"But you do not mean to leave Susie to rest under the false charge?" asked Mrs. Draper in amazement.

The other lady's face clouded. "Oh, of course I shall take occasion to let her know that the things have been found," she said, loftily.

Mrs. Draper rose. "Then you do not feel like going with me to find the girl?" she asked, with repressed excitement.

"I see no necessity for haste," coldly answered the other.

"Then," said Mrs. Draper, with what Mrs. Ovington regarded as most ill-bred heat, "I shall go without you. I feel a great sense of responsibility for what has happened, for, though I discovered the missing articles too late to have prevented the accusation being made, my delay has prolonged the girl's sufferings, and I cannot rest until she is found! I am glad, for your sake, that you can acquit yourself so easily. Good evening."

Mrs. Draper was a little woman without much "presence," but as she said this she became positively majestic in her indignation, and swept from the drawing-room with an air that left Mrs. Ovington—the stately, complacent, queenly Mrs. Ovington—divided between shame and wrath.

For some moments she stood silent and pale, nursing her indignation against the woman who had undertaken to dictate to her in a matter of duty. Then another thought occurred to her. Mrs. Draper, in her excited state, might do her, Mrs. Ovington, a great deal of harm. It would not do to have it said that she had refused to make reparation for the unintentional wrong she had done. Besides, it would sound well that she had gone in person to hunt up