

I don't want you or your puddings!"

The children stared at one another open-mouthed and terrified. Such open ebullitions were unfamiliar to them. But Mrs. Lovell by this time was angry in turn. "I will go," she said, slowly, with suppressed wrath in her voice, "and—I will not come back again. Wilfred, I can stand your vulgar violence no longer. I have made up my mind I shall get a separation."

At that precise moment Hilda entered.

"Get a separation, then, by all means," the father answered grimly. "None too soon, I think. I've known for months that was the only way out of it. And, now that you've dragged your children in on purpose to hear openly what they must have guessed long ago, there's no reason for delay. 'For the children's sake,' we always said; but it's better, after all, the children should know we had parted by mutual consent than be admitted to see us quarrelling like this. For my part, I'm sick and tired of the whole business. I shall go off to the seaside—and get leisure at last to finish my 'Greek and Etruscan Studies.'"

"Mother, dear," Hilda said quietly, taking her mother's arm, "come and let me stir the pudding." For she guessed what had happened. "Father, you'll come, too." She seized his arm also.

Wilfred Lovell hesitated for a second. It was too abrupt a surrender. But Hilda's touch on his arm was soft, and he loved his daughter. "Well, if you wish it, my dear child," he said slowly, climbing down with an ill grace—"though, of course, you are aware it's a degrading superstition."

"Yes, dear, so it is. A relic of barbarism. Come and stir the pudding, and explain to us all you have found out about it."

#### IV.

Lunch was a silent meal. Wilfred Lovell ate savagely, mused, and looked gloomy. His wife pretended to be extremely busy with the children's food. The little ones sat awe-struck. Only Hilda tried to keep up some hollow semblance of cheerfulness. But, deep in her own heart, she was sadder than any of them. She had a sorrow of her own. What a terrible revelation for that trustful Percy!

After lunch, she took her mother's arm again with a gentle pressure, "Now, dearest," she said soothingly, "you must go up and get ready."

"Get ready—for what?"

"Why, you know, for Signor Metelli's concert."

"Signor Metelli's concert? I'd forgotten all about it. I can't go to-day. My eyes are too red, Hilda: I'm not fit for it. Your father's cruelty."

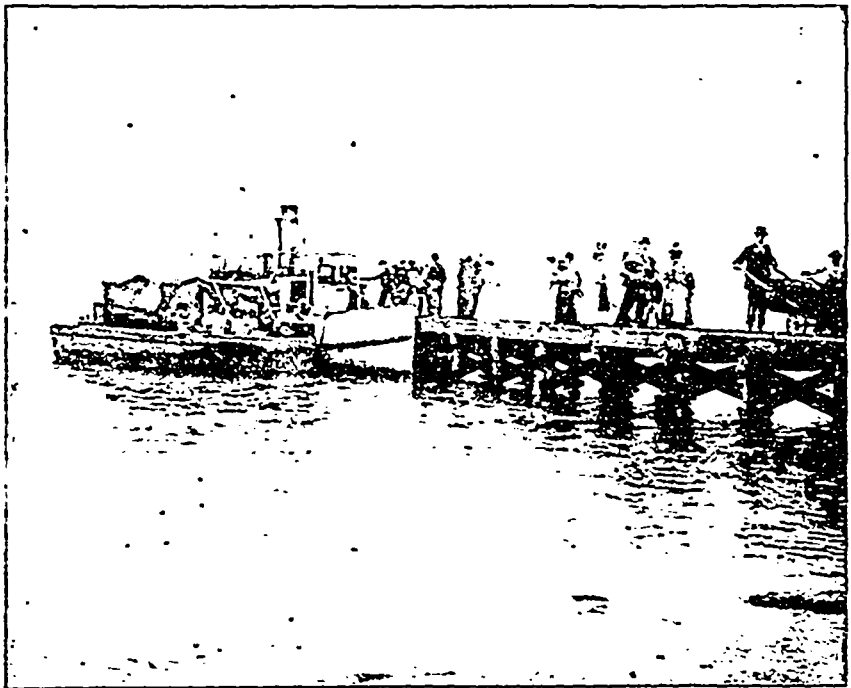
"That's how you speak to my daughter about her father!" Wilfred Lovell interposed, looking up from the *Spectator*.

"Now, papa, you mustn't. Go to your dressing-room and get ready. You must both of you come with me. Do as I tell you, dear. It's the best thing for all of us."

Wilfred Lovell moved with reluctant steps towards the door. "Very well," he said, gloomily. "It won't be for long, that's one good thing. As soon as this beastly Christmas rubbish is over—"

"We shall all settle down again in our places as usual; yes, dear, I hope so. Now go and put on your nice coat—I won't stir out with you in that horrid old one: and, mother dear, you must wear your grey. It's the right thing for a concert."

With infinite difficulty she got them both off, and



ARRIVAL OF THE CHILDREN AT THE LAKESIDE HOME DOCK, JUNE, 1898.

induced them to dress. Then she sent for a four-wheeler, and drove with them to the hall. "A pair of lovers," indeed! Her heart sank when she thought how she should ever break the doleful news to Percy. For this time she felt sure they really meant it.

As they were nearing the door, Wilfred Lovell broke the silence in which they had all ridden. "I do this to please you, Hilda, my child," he said, looking across at her, "but I want you clearly to understand that the moment this silly Christmas nonsense is finished and cleared away I intend to take your mother's advice and put an end to such scenes by having a separation."

They entered the hall, Hilda trembling. After they had taken their seats, about the middle row, she glanced around the room, on the look-out for Percy. A man would doubtless have failed to find him in so large an audience; but Hilda's quick eyes soon picked him out; he had managed to get a special seat near the platform, no doubt from Madame de Meza. It comforted the poor girl to reflect that, being a man, he would probably fail to perceive the trouble in her face, and the hard look of anger in her father's and mother's. Men don't read these things like women. But the discovery, after all, was merely deferred. Sooner or later, he must know, and then, what a painful beginning for their engagement!

The singers came forward and sang their various pieces Hilda hardly heard them. Through a veil of mental mist vague sounds of sacred song came wafted across the air to her unheeding ear. She was too full of trouble to notice them. For months she had worn herself out in trying to smooth things down for those two whom she loved so dearly—for she loved them both alike; now the rupture had come, and there seemed no way out of the difficulty made by it.

At last, after three or four performers had been cheered and retired, a hush fell upon the hall—a great hush of expectation. Somebody rustled on to the stage. Madame de Meza swept forward, tall, queenly, defiant. Hilda raised her eyes, and looked upon the great singer. The woman's handsome face and big eyes somehow arrested her attention even then. She looked so strangely sympathetic. For a moment Madame de Meza paused, as the hall rang with redoubled applause at her appearance. Then she closed the big brown eyes; the rich lips moved silently. She was praying, after her wont—praying with her old-fashioned New England earnestness. When she raised her eyelids again, she gazed round the room as if in search of something. She was seeking her inspiration. After a restless