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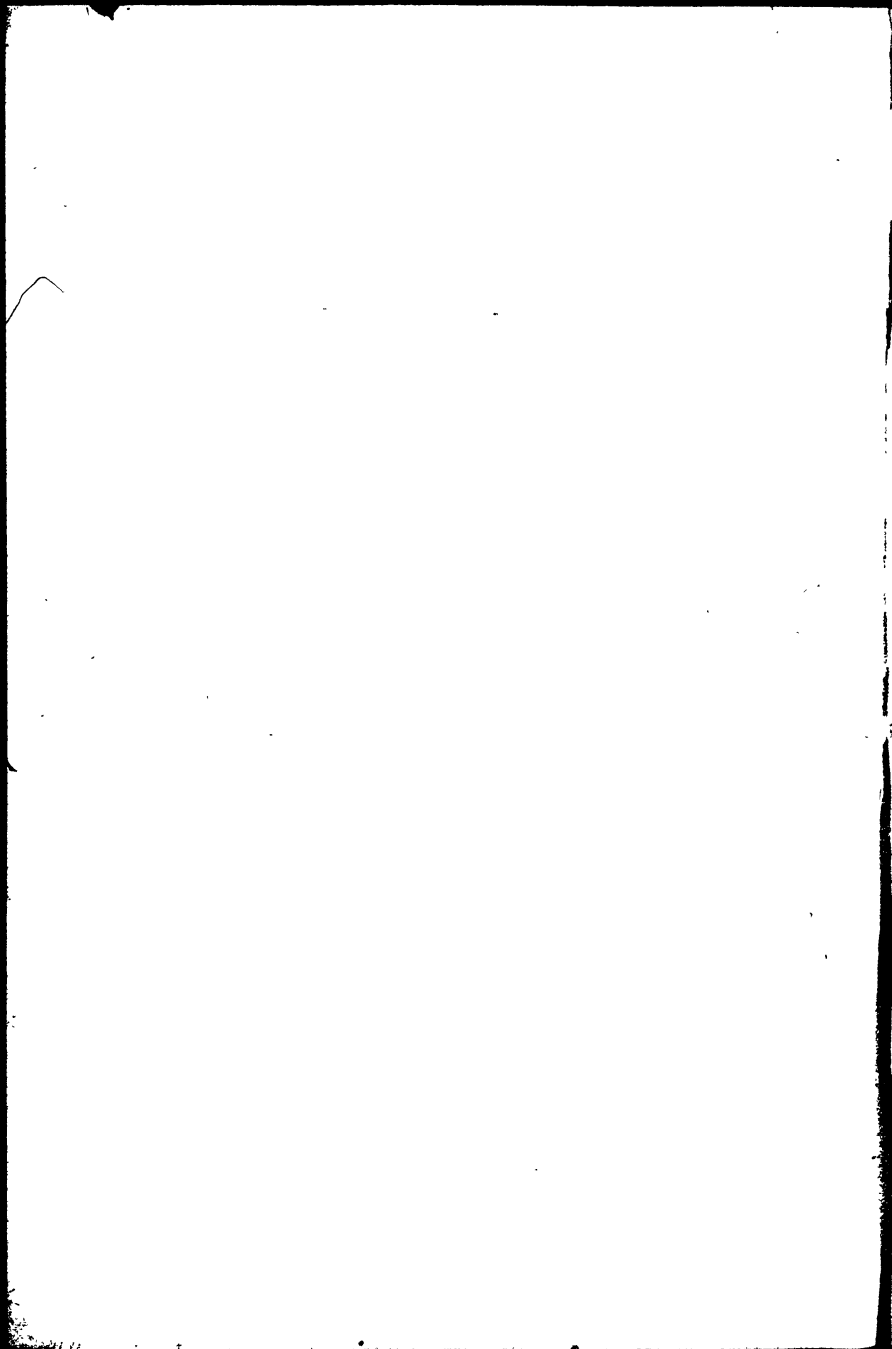
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"Oh, love! oh, fire! Once he drew
With one long kiss my whole soul through
My lips - as sunlight drinketh dew!"

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Dedicated

TO

MY READERS.

ONLY a little story of two human hearts ; but if the perusal of it yields even a passing interest, it will have gained for itself all that it has been written to seek.

One word more in deprecation of criticism ; with the very best of will,—

‘Frustra laborat qui omnibus placere studet!’

CARYLLS, FAY GATE, SUSSEX.



THE MATCH OF THE SEASON.

PROLOGUE.

FALLEN AMONG THIEVES.

AN autumnal morning—bitter as the blasts of adversity—cold as the hard world's sympathy. Just a sickly gleam of light broke through the sullen clouds, and fell athwart the red and amber-stained window of a church, on two forms that looked shadowy in the pervading gloom.

'Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder.'

The words rang out clearly on the silent aisles, and two human beings were linked together for life till death.

He was only a boy—boyishness lingered over his figure, and his face bore the freshness of colouring that belongs to extreme youth.

A good-looking boy, with the stamp of blue blood set unmistakably on him.

She was his antithesis.

By calling, a Columbine—by appearance, suggestive of tinsel and spangles, of garish gaslight, of innate boldness and freedom of life. Her beauty was of that gorgeous type that many a patrician maiden would have willingly bartered her birthright for—a magnificent creature of flesh and blood, resplendent in a 'morbidezza' of colour, and in ruddy wealth of hair; her eyes were of the dark rich blue that grows purple in the shade; her lips were full and 'vermeil tintured;' her skin was snow and Provence roses, and her form was like a young Athene's.

What marvel that her bridegroom gazed at her with passionate adoration! Her beauty was a dream! She was an angel! And her love was a heaven he had reached on earth.

'We shall not meet to-night, Amelia, but to-morrow! Ah, I shall count the moments till to-morrow.'

One ardent, yet shy kiss upon her brow—one fond and fervent look into her lovely eyes—and hurrying nervously down the gloomy aisle, he was soon lost to view.

There was no sign of nervousness about *her*. Just a little complacent smile of gratified ambition and petty triumph be-strode her scarlet lips. Just an extra lift was palpable in the carriage of her head as she walked slowly out of the church with her two bridesmaids.

Both of these were young and pretty, both were attired in *bizarre* hues, and both were—ballet-girls.

'Does he not look like a *real* gentleman?' the bride whispered effusively to one of her companions.

'He looks what he is—a *boy!*' was the contemptuous answer.

'Never mind about that! I have always wanted to be a *real* lady, you know.'

'And now you *are* one! I wonder if Hal Thorndyke will think the more of you for it?'

Hal Thorndyke was utility man at the Amanda Theatre, and at his name the bride blushed rosy red.

'You ought not to blush *now* when Hal is mentioned, Amelia!' But to this there is no response.

Later on, when night had unfurled her sable wings—finding himself free, and fired with love and longing to look again on his newly-wedded wife—the boy hurried to the theatre, where he had first seen his 'fate,' Amelia Willoughby.

How well he remembered that evening!

All day long he had toiled in the City office, where he gained a paltry stipend—scarcely enough to keep body and soul together. A longing for amusement, for excitement—a longing natural to his nineteen years—had come over him, and, ashamed to meet men of equal birth with himself in the cheaper seats of the large theatres, he had gone to a minor house—unfashionable and ill-lighted, and where a third-rate company called forth the praise or hisses of a highly appreciative but noisy audience.

It was a pantomime, with a clumsy plot—a vulgar harlequin, an ungainly pantaloon, an outrageous clown—but the columbine!

At first sight of her he had lost his heart, his breath had come quick and hard, his eyes had gazed on her as though they

could never gaze their fill. In the intensity of his admiration, he had clenched his hands, and could scarcely restrain himself in his seat.

She was so beautiful—*so beautiful!*

He remembered all this, and the recollection fevered his blood still more as he reached the Amanda, to find the pantomime over, the company dispersed, and the lights out, save one or two dim oil lamps that revealed the dingy stage entrance; and, cruelly disappointed, he was on the eve of trudging homewards (for he did not dare venture to intrude on the house where his bride lived, under the protection of a drunken old father, without signifying his intention first), when two figures passed quickly by.

One was the figure of a tall man, and the other of a woman, closely veiled and cloaked, but the eyes of love are Argus eyes, and he knew at once the figure of Amelia—*his wife*.

What irrepressible rapture thrilled him as he murmured the last word with a beatific smile on his lips, and yet, curiously enough, he felt as if an invisible hand stayed him from arresting her steps or addressing her.

With fast-throbbing pulses, he followed close in the wake of the familiar and beloved form, dogging her steps like a shadow, till she paused with her companion before a shabby house.

The flickering light from a gas-lamp fell on the man's face, and the boy recognised it at once as the face of one of those mechanical beings on the stage, who walk—dance—and stand still—but never speak.

The pair were so absorbed in themselves that they never noticed the young features, half hid by a slouching hat, and, opening the door with her key, the columbine entered the partially dark passage, side by side with the man, while her husband of twelve hours stole in, unobserved, following them upstairs.

He had been in the house before, and stepping into a small ante-room, he secured a view at once of an inner apartment, where a homely meal was laid for *two*.

There was not a suspicion of evil in his mind. Oh, no! he loved the woman too dearly for that! He would as soon have doubted the mercy of Heaven as the creature who was to crown his life with bliss infinite, and yet a jealousy gnawed at his heart-strings that made him yearn to put his lithe, trembling fingers round the man's burly throat!

He stood with straining eyes and bated breath, his figure quivering from head to foot, but he never dreamt that there would be enacted before him a drama of misery and despair.

He loved her so! He believed in her *so!*—loved her just like a boy loves, madly—blindly—implicitly. He believed in her goodness as much as he believed in his mother's, and would require much proof—proof undeniable, diabolical—to tear that pure and earnest love from his soul, that enthusiastic and unlimited faith from his young and devoted heart.

The meal over, the man lounged back in his chair, pipe in mouth. Through the atmosphere, redolent of smoke, it could be seen that he was about thirty-five. His herculean proportions would not have failed to create intense admiration in the Ring, and his immense breadth of chest showed up beneath an old brown velveteen coat. A skye-blue cravat was knotted loosely round his throat, and he was altogether a good-looking ruffianly fellow, with curly, black hair, bold features, and reckless, defiant eyes.

Lolling indolently back, one of his arms was thrown carelessly over the shoulder of the woman, who knelt by his side, and looked up lovingly into his coarse, handsome face.

'Amelia!'

The name almost broke in a wail from the boy's white lips, but with a superhuman effort he crushed back the sound.

He felt as he watched that he *must* have further proof yet—proof of words, beside proof of looks—before he could drive the woman out of his heart for ever.

Amelia, his bride of one day—his *wife*. The woman who had sworn just twelve hours before to cleave to him till death! *Till death!* Oh, the bitter mockery of it! He had scarcely touched her lips, and the cup of bliss was being struck out of his grasp!

Through the horror of his feelings, he had a vivid sense that though she was only his wife in name, she yet held in her power—his happiness and his honour!

Even as he gazed at her, kneeling there beside that other man, her beauty dazzled him—maddened him. The whole character of her face was changed from what he had seen before—her face was *spiritualised*.

True, the gas-light touched each tress till it grew almost too ruddy, and seemed all aglow and afire, but the superb purple iris of her eyes, beneath the shadow of those sweeping lashes, looked like wells of tenderness and truth.

The too vivid colour on her cheeks had faded to the faint flush of a sea-shell, and the full lips smiled with the innocent pleasure of a child as they touched ever and anon the coarse, brown, caressing hand.

The transformation was marvellous. All the refinement she

possessed in her nature, if such a term as refinement could be used, was called forth by the voice and touch of the man she really cared for.

For to the worst and lowest of human creatures real love is doubtless a great purifier.

'This is our last evening together, Amelia,' the man said, looking straight down into the loving eyes that had scarcely left his bold, good-looking face since the two had entered the room. 'To-morrow you will have your husband here, and you and I must part. Do you hear me, Amelia? To-morrow, or rather, to-night, we two must say good-bye, and go each our own way, you to live like a lady, in luxury and comfort, I to go to the devil, perhaps—who knows? It's you, sweetheart, who have kept me straighter than I was before, and now you are going to leave me there isn't much chance of my doing much good! Why, you smile, girl! Has all this no pain for you? Are you such a good-for-nothing that it's only a change, and nought to cry at?' he asked angrily, pushing her away, while his brow darkened, and a cloud swept over his eyes, and made them cruel and threatening.

'Hal!'

The smile on her scarlet lips was gone, and replaced by a tremulous quiver, as she felt the rude and repelling gesture.

'Hal, dear, you are right down mad to talk like this! Don't you know that you and I can never part and yet live, Hal?—for if I lost you I would just drown myself! I have married a gentleman, but it was only for you—to benefit you, Hal—and I hate him!'

The boy who listened swayed a little as these last words, vehemently spoken, met his ears, and he clutched blindly at the wall to keep himself from falling, while he sent up a prayer that his sense of understanding might not fail him, for he felt that he *must* hear, that he *must* know all—all the treachery and the falsity—all the misery and desolation—all the shame and the sin!

'You'll promise not to forget me, Hal? You'll swear that no other woman shall take my place?' she sobbed.

'I'll swear, Amelia,' he answered, emphatically, as if he would not have sworn his soul away, without even a scruple of conscience rebuking him. 'You know that, with all my faults, I have been fond of you. I wish now that this marriage had never taken place, for what shall I do without you? But it can't be helped. We must make the best of it. Come, don't fret so, dear; and he stooped towards her.

But a young hand armed with giant strength suddenly dealt

him a sharp blow that sent him back, and a young face livid with rage and jealousy glared into his own.

'Touch her if you dare! She is my wife, and I will let no man pollute her lips, now that they belong to me!' and catching her arm, the boy hurled her across the room with all his might and main, and falling with a dull thud against the door, she lay there white and senseless.

Hal Thorndyke recovering himself, sprang up, and seized the slim figure of his assailant in a deadly grasp.

'You are the chap who loves her, and I am the man she loves!' he cried, in a loud, coarse voice. 'We'll see if I *dare* not touch her lips, even with her whey-faced stripling of a husband looking on. Amelia! get up and come here!'

But there was no sign of obedience to his imperious mandate.

She lay quite quiet—even motionless—with the gas glare touching her features with the livid hue of a corpse.

Both men, a little staggered at her strange appearance, stared at her aghast—Amelia Willoughby, the columbine at the Amanda, had never shown symptoms of physical weakness, or a tendency to swooning before.

'She is just fooling, I believe. She is afraid to kiss an old friend before her husband!' Thorndyke cried, with a hoarse laugh, and releasing his hold of his rival, he strode up to where the woman lay.

White, so dreadfully white, and all in a heap, with her face turned on one side, and her long lashes casting dark shadows on her cheek; even her lips seemed grey and set.

'Get up at once, Amelia, and tell this boy which of us you like the best—do you hear?'

Stentorian as was the tone, there was not a word in reply; not even a quiver of the lashes.

'You won't, won't you? I'll see if I can't *make you speak!*' he cried, in ruffianly accents, stamping his heel in his rage.

He did not mean it, perhaps, for he loved her as much as his selfish nature could love, *but his heavy nailed boot had come a shade too close.*

A dark mark crashed down on her blue-veined temple, a strong shudder passed over her body, and she lay once more, still—rigid.

'My God! is she dead?' the boy gasped, shaking like a leaf, and steadying himself against a chair, all his wrath fading away before the grim reality of death. He only remembered how very beautiful she was, and how he had loved her!

And Thorndyke, falling on his knees, laid his hand on her heart, with a terror-stricken look in his eyes.

'Yes ; we have killed her between us, I believe !' he said at last, in a whisper. 'She is dead, sure enough, or she would have answered to my voice, I'll swear ! Amelia ! my girl, I didn't mean to hurt you ; I wouldn't have injured a hair of your head !' and bending down, he pressed his lips to the white face.

But suddenly his mood changed, and his expression altered from tenderness into ferocity, and springing on the boy, he threw him on the floor, battering him mercilessly with his huge fists.

'I'll have my revenge for my girl's death, anyway,' he hissed into his victim's ear—his victim, who was powerless as an infant against such herculean strength.

And the blows, cruel and cowardly, fell thick and fast on the poor young face, until sight, and sound, and sense left him ; and when Hal Thorndyke had planted his brutal mark on the white brow, he caught him up as if he were a child in his arms, and carrying him downstairs, flung him out into the darkness.

In the early morning they found him lying on the pavement, blind and dazed, his lids blackened and swollen, a desperate cut showing up a dull red just under a soft dark ring of hair, his coat torn almost in shreds.

Roused into semi-consciousness by the touch of human hands, his lips moved.

'I have no wife !' came low and faint, 'I have no wife !'

'I should think not,' said a pitying bystander, 'unless someone has been child-stealing. Poor chap ; he looks as if he had fallen among thieves.'

It was quite true—he *had* fallen among thieves, who had not robbed him only of hope and happiness, but also of that which is best of all in a man's life, faith in the goodness and purity of woman !

CHAPTER I.

MENS PRÆSCIA FUTURI.

'And grief shall endure not for ever I know,
As things that are not shall these things be,
We shall live through seasons of sun and snow,
And none be grievous as this to me !'

A DEEP, wine-coloured sky, all flecked and dashed and speckled, like a bird's wing, with small white foamy cloudlets, among

which Hesperion twinkles up pale and faint. From the ivy-muffled windows of the old village church, the glorious 'Cantate Domino' floats out on the fragrant dusk, full and sonorous. A pretentious little breeze, born in the south, and soft as a child's kiss, swishes and murmurs by, bearing on its balmy breath whiffs of clover. Two demure doves, perched on a topmost bough, bill and coo amorously. A pure and silvery young moon hangs out in the distant heavens.

'Look at me, Miss Wylmer!'

She obeys him and looks.

What she sees through the Midsummer gloaming is a man of medium height, with broad shoulders and a strongly knit frame. He has a haughty, resolute face; a well-poised head and short, wavy, brown hair; a pair of lazy, grey eyes, black-lashed and deeply set, under straight, defined brows; firm lips, a trifle thin, a massive jaw, and a clear, colourless skin.

Not by any means a 'beauty' man—a 'curled darling,' fit for a carpet knight—but a man whose face has the power to attract as well as to repel.

'Well! And what do you see in my face?' he asks impetuously.

She turns away with a deep flush on her cheek, and a false little laugh on her lips that sounds somewhat harsh and jangling, like silver bells out of tune.

'Nothing,' she answers flippantly; 'that is—nothing I care to look at a second time.'

It is a rude, ungentle, unmannerly speech, but he shows neither anger nor mortification as it falls on his ear. All he says is,—

'So!'

A deliberate, slow, long-breathed 'So!' almost phlegmatically Teutonic in inflection, but thorough little ignoramus in human nature as she assuredly is, she has by dint of natural intelligence already divined that there is nothing phlegmatic or Teutonic about Guy Trevylian's temperament.

Tropical more likely.

The large pupils of his grey eyes have an odd power of 'concentration,' and they concentrate and scintillate and rouse into slow fire as he fixes his regard steadily and keenly on this bit of a girl, who dares to answer him mockingly, while she, feeling absurdly shy and nervous, droops her lids under his gaze.

'I did not ask you if there was anything to *attract* in my face,' he murmurs, after a moment or two, in a low and curiously passionless voice. And with the inconsistency of woman, a

which this true daughter of Eve possesses more than her rightful share, the passionless element in his tone irritates her. It may be that his accents ring out usually sharply, with a subtle keenness of feeling resounding in them that unconsciously flatters her even while it startles, and she misses the pleasant 'hashish;' so vexed, she stands silent and apart, tapping her dainty little foot on the velvety grass with the pretty petulance of a child.

Near them are a clump of tall oaks, and above these the moon rises slowly higher and higher in the great vault of ether, and her silvery beams falling athwart the spreading branches, bathe the faces of the man and the woman in tender liquid lustre, and form a carpet of diamonds for their feet. The amorous lullaby of the two little doves has dwindled into a drowsy twitter.

The southern breeze has grown quite laggard under its heavy burden of perfume. The strains of sacred music are hushed. The lights are out in the old village church, whose white walls gleam like ivory under the moon's pure rays, and everything is still, so absolutely, weirdly still, that one could almost hear the great heart of nature go—throb! throb!

'Why will you wilfully misunderstand my meaning, Miss Wylmer?' he asks quietly.

'What *did* you mean?' she replies, in feigned indifference, turning away her head and blowing vigorously like a tomboy at a morsel of thistle-down that floats past her.

'I asked what you saw in my face to make you believe that I shall let you go out of my life so long as I have the power to stay you.'

'But you haven't the power!' she flashes defiantly, although it must be confessed that her limbs quake ignominiously, and her spirit waxes craven and weak as she inwardly recognises the falsity of her assertion.

'Nonsense! *I have!*' he answers resolutely, seizing hold of her hand in a grasp like a vice.

For a brief moment she struggles to free herself, then realising he is victor, and, making a virtue of necessity, she shrugs her shoulders and lets ten slender fingers, white and cold and limp, lie in his strong clasp; but the blood flies up fast and hot to her face, and her feelings are so paradoxical that she hardly knows whether that scorching flush rises from anger at his audacity or from the strange sweet spell that lives in his touch.

Anyway, this clasp of his hands sends a thrill of painful bliss or blissful pain through her frame.

'Ah! how I hate you!' she cries, in a shrill voice, that drowns the gentle drowsy twitter of the doves, and rings on the silence around.

He starts slightly as he listens. Although he does not believe her, it hurts him, these words from lips that he would fain have for ever beside him, for kisses and tender vows. And in the clear moonlight she sees his mouth quiver a moment, then grow firmer and more resolute than before.

'Since when have you learnt to tell *lies*, my child?' he questions quietly.

'*Lies!*'

It is an odious word, and it stings more sharply than nettles. She is a creature of impulse, warm, though crude, in every feeling, ignorant as a savage of the supreme art of self-control, but frank and open as daylight. Snatching one hand from his grasp, she strikes him with all her might and main on the cheek, and a diamond hoop she wears brings a narrow livid line across his flesh that quickly deepens into dull red.

Horribly ashamed, and almost terror-stricken at her work, she totters back a pace or two, and leaning breathless against a tree, tries to smother a hysterical sob that gurgles in her throat a sob which is as much the fruit of temper as of penitence, for she is not of an angelic nature.

Then a curious feeling of mingled self-reproach and recklessness forces her to look full at him and laugh, laughing more because she evokes no corresponding mirth.

'Come here, Miss Wylmer,' he says gravely, and not moving a jot himself.

'I will not!' she answers, as defiantly and wilfully as she can, but yet in a tone which sounds to her own ears like a contemptible feeble little gasp, and clinging to her haven of refuge—the tree. She feels sick and dizzy and miserable, and as if something was swaying her from her orbit.

That 'something' potent, irresistible, though she barely realises as yet the full potency and irresistibility of it, is the look in Guy Trevelyian's eyes.

'Come!' he reiterates, in a low but imperious tone, that resembles a ukase.

She deliberates a second, and calls up all the pride and dignity of budding womanhood. How dare he speak so? It is the first time a man has *ordered* her, and her passionate, untamed spirit rebels.

'Come!' he repeats once more, but this time so softly, so wistfully, that she goes towards him, though slowly, hugging the flattering unction to her soul that her whole reason for

obeying is to make an *amende honorable* for the blow that glares back at her red and reproachful.

'Peccavi!' she murmurs mockingly, with a low, sweeping curtsy of sham humility, but with her head well up in the air, and her slender figure pulled up to every scrap of her five feet and six inches.

With a little smile he accepts her apology, showing a gentle courtesy that makes her feel tenfold mean and small.

'I wish the blow had not come from Dal's ring, though,' he says after a minute. 'Good gracious! what a dreadful virago you are, my Nest!'

'I am not *your* Nest, Mr Trevylian.'

'You will be, by-and-by,' he answers confidently. 'Just now you belong to Dalrymple Wentworth, I suppose. How proud you should be of your conquest, Miss Wylmer! A good heart, doubtless—tender, true even—but after all, only a—boy!'

'Dal is *not* a boy!' she replies loftily. 'He is quite twenty-two! And anyway, he is quite old enough for *me*!' she adds, with a swift, meaning glance.

'True,' he rejoins, and once more she detects a quiver on the corners of his mouth and a ring of pain in his voice. 'I am thirty-two—ten whole years older than Dal. Much too old for *you*! Oh, Nest, Nest! Why on earth cannot we put back a few years of our life as we can the hands of a clock?' he cries impatiently, and under the tell-tale moonbeams his grey eyes glisten as if with unshed tears.

'You are as bad as a woman, crying over your age,' she exclaims wantonly, but with a babyish inclination to weep herself, just to keep him company.

'I was not thinking of myself. I should not care if half a century had passed over my head. I was only thinking about *you*—thinking that if we were man and wife—you and I, Nest that we should be like May and December—I quite elderly while you were in the flush of youth and beauty.'

'And I *hate* elderly men!' she answers, with a warm blush. 'I would far rather be a young man's slave than an old man's darling! How awful you would look if you were bald, Mr Trevylian!' she adds, as the golden light streams down full on his thick wavy brown hair, touching it with rich mellow shades.

He does not seem to hear her, or else he does not heed her remark, for his eyes have an expression in them like those of one arousing from a dream.

'I wonder if we shall ever be man and wife, Nest?' he says so abruptly that she starts involuntarily; but recovering herself, cries carelessly,—

'Never!'

'I don't know so much about that. You see *I* may desire it.'

'*You—you?*' she replies, with a peal of merry laughter that is echoed faintly on the air.

'Yes, *I*. Do you know, Miss Wylmer, that I have a great deal of determination, and as a rule determination goes a great way to victory?'

'This case will be the exception that makes the rule,' she says, with another laugh, which, though forced, does excellent duty for genuine mirth.

'Tell me, have you a good heart?—good and loving and womanly?' he asks softly, looking straight into her eyes.

'Good, and loving, and womanly enough for some people perhaps! But not elastic, Mr Trevylian—not a heart to take in all sorts of lodgers.'

At this moment the moon hides her face behind a long bank of darkling cloud, then suddenly emerges bolder and brighter than before.

The wind has freshened, and whispers mysteriously to the leaves that flutter at its touch, and the sleepy doves wake up to bill and coo.

Both he and she glance up at them as they nestle close on their lofty perch.

'Moonbeams and poetical allegories go hand in hand! Shall I seize the occasion, and tell you a pretty little nursery rhyme all about turtle doves, Miss Wylmer?'

She bends her head in assent. She is just of that tender age to resent being thought 'young' and suited to nursery rhymes, but it seems impossible at this hour to air her dignity.

The night is so unutterably perfect—so thoroughly delicious, the cool shadows come slanting down forming long, dark, grotesque bars; the spiked blades of grass sparkle like dew-drops; puffs of purple and white clover steal up in incense to heaven; a myriad stars, like clustering gems, twinkle in the sapphire dome, pale, and holy, and watchful.

Each of these things has a strong and subtle spell of its own, and bound in it, she stands motionless, with upturned face, while he tells his story.

The old, old story, though told in nursery lore, old as Time, enduring as Eternity, as fresh now as when Adam told it to his Eve, amid the delights of Paradise.

'Very high in the pine tree
The little turtle-dove
Made a pretty little nursery,
To please her little love.

She was gentle, she was soft,
And her large, dark eye
Often turned upon her mate,
Who was sitting by.
"Coo!" said the turtle-dove,
"Coo!" said she,
"Oh, I love thee," said the turtle-dove,
"And I love—thee!"

It seems to the girl, who listens with bated breath and quick-beating pulse, that his voice is like some quaint, magic melody she has heard long, long ago in one of her sweetest childish dreams—but she says saucily,—

'Such rhyme would suit Dal, perhaps, but it hardly becomes a man of your ripe years, Mr Trevylian!'

He moves a step or two nearer to her—so near, that in the absolute silence that pervades around, she can almost count the rapid throbs of his heart.

Are those throbs all for her, she wonders; and, ashamed, she half acknowledges to herself the hope that it may be so.

'Listen, Nest! Supposing you *knew* that your love would bring perfect joy to a man—that it would brighten his life, turn his home into Eden, lighten his troubles, be his sword to fight with, his wings to soar,—would you, or rather, *could* you withhold that love from him?' he questions impetuously, with a hot colour on his cheek, and his usually lazy eyes flashing with animation and eagerness.

The flash and fire of his glance and words thrill her from head to foot with a new-born rapture, but she stands calm and motionless as a modern Undine, afraid to let herself 'go.' Her heartstrings are in Guy Trevylian's hands, while her honour and faith belong to another.

'One cannot *withhold* a love, if it does not exist!' she mutters, in a low voice.

'You are quibbling, Nest!—quibbling not only with me but with yourself,' he answers impatiently. 'We will suppose that the love *does exist*—'

'And is not withheld from the rightful recipient, Dalrymple Wentworth,' she breaks in hastily, hating herself for her falsehood.

'Pshaw! Don't let strangers intermeddle with our joy!' he cries contemptuously. 'At this moment I forget that anyone lives, save our two selves—you and I, Nest. I'll put it another way. Supposing you *knew* that, without your love, a man would grow worthless and *reckless—bad*; that, denied the only gift he craves on earth, he would drop lower and lower, socially and

morally, until he fairly went to the devil. That wanting you, thirsting and hungering for you, he would starve and—die—would you, *could* you, withhold your love from him?' he questions fervently, and taking her hand he clasps them tight and firm, while his gaze burns down into her inmost being, and she feels bewildered and dazed by an odd conflict of feeling, a tug of war between loyalty and unloyalty—love and self-scorn, and a desperate defiance that is plentifully dashed with deprecation, and flavoured also—alas! by an awful weakness of the flesh.

'Say,' he orders in a quick imperious fashion—'say just yes, or no!'

But she is quite dumb.

She has not the moral courage to answer 'Yes,' and she has not the right to say 'No,' bound as she is to Dal. She knows that this man has no earthly right to hold her thus, and question her thus, forcing her to listen, and to answer at his will.

Yet she stands, a thorough daughter of Eve, before him, with the pink bloom fading from her cheek and white lids drooping, and a craven heart, feeling that her duty to herself and to her plighted faith is to go away there and then, and, if she can help it, never look again on the face that tempts her, yet lacking utterly the courage to move a step away from him; for she, Ernestine Wylmer, Dalrymple Wentworth's affianced wife, has let Guy Trevylian's image fill every niche of her soul, and, worst of all—she has let him find out the fact!

That he has no desire to reject the heart yielded to him, is proved by the voice teeming with passionate and infinite tenderness, in which he pours out to a pair of young, enraptured ears all that is in his own soul.

'Love!—my love!—whom I worship—whom I hold dearer and more precious than aught on earth—more precious a hundredfold than life itself! My love!—my darling! whose sweet face is beside me night and day—whose whole heart is mine, my very own!' and catching the slight figure in his strong arms, he presses kisses on her brow and cheeks and drooping lids, and on her cold trembling mouth; swift caresses that swoop down eagerly and seem to burn her lips like molten fire; that sear her soul, and take away her breath and her sense of right and wrong, and reveal to her a world hitherto unknown; caresses—the memory of which will never leave her, come what may, for they are the awakening of passions hitherto slumbering in her breast—passions that no other touch will call into being and force like Guy Trevylian's kisses have done.

For a little moment—which seems an eternity to her, so much

of feeling does it contain—a little moment, which she hardly knows is happiness or pain—she rests in his clasp, every throb of her pulse answering to his, her spirit in desperate revolt, yet curiously restful, her vision dizzy, scared, blind to everything save the proud, resolute face whose tender grey eyes look down straight into her own.

Poor child! there is nothing fast in her nature, though she lingers without a struggle in the arms that hold her captive, with her white face pressed down on his breast. She closes her lids, to shut out everything—everything if she can. The voice of self-reproach, the memory of her broken troth.

It is only for a moment or two, though; then she releases herself hastily from the detaining clasp, with a strong sense of shame and dismay and humiliation about her that makes her impotently dash her hand across her brow and cheeks and mouth to try and drive away the infinite and irresistible thralldom of Guy Trevelyian's kisses. But they seem to cling to her, and she feels their burning sweetness, while her blood leaps and surges, and her heart bounds.

Suddenly she looks up at him, with flashing eyes and quivering lips.

'Insolent!'

She literally hurls the words at him with the untutored vehemence of her nature, but he smiles faintly, and she knows at once how supine and absurd her protest has been, and flinging herself down on the bank hard by, she bursts into a torrent of tears.

For a few seconds he stands motionless, and apparently as cold as a stone, gazing down at her as she lies in her childish 'abandon' of grief, her clasped hands covering her eyes. It is possible that he is still wrapped in an Elysian dream of the caresses that have but whetted love's hunger and thirst! But presently he goes and kneels down by her side.

'My poor little girl!'

He says it with unutterable softness; the passion has again died out of his voice, and it sounds grave and penitent, even a little troubled.

'Forgive me, Nest,' he goes on, stroking back the long hair that, unloosened, falls like a veil over her shoulders, 'I had no right to touch your lips by force, my child! I had no right to hold you in my arms. Yet, Nest, I know that some day you will come to my arms of your own accord, and offer those sweet lips to me!'

She starts up indignantly at these words. So, because like a poor, weak, wicked little fool, she let him see into her heart

for a moment, he believes that she is bad enough to do it again. The thought lashes her into fury with herself and him.

But Guy does not notice her vexation. There is a far-off look in his eyes, and a confident expression on his mouth, as he rises from his knees.

'Don't you believe in prescience, Nest? I do. I can see clearly into the future at this moment,' he murmurs dreamily, and forgetting her tears, she sits up and gazes at him wonderingly.

'What do you see, Mr Trevelyian?' she questions ironically. 'Is it by any chance someone called Ernestine—Wentworth?'

He starts a little at this thrust. Then, regarding her with a slow, level look, says, in quiet, deliberate accents,—

'I see someone called Ernestine *Trevelyian*. I see a small, dark face, with eyes like stars, and lips like rosebuds, brightening into smiles at my approach, shadowing with pain at my absence. I see two little dusky arms forming a magic circle round my neck—a delicious mouth pouting for my kiss. I see a small, fluffy, brown head lying restfully on my heart, and I hear a sweet voice like the turtle-dove's murmuring, "I love thee!" Oh, Nest!—oh, Nest! shall all this be? Say, shall it be? Ah, my darling! if you would but come to me now fully and freely! If you would but let your heart speak—your soul bound to meet my soul! A few foolish words may perchance bind you to another man; but *you* know, as well as I do, that I am your true lover, my Nest! Come to me! It is but a matter of time, after all. Then why let even one drop fall from our cup of bliss—why let one grain slip from our sand of life? See, my own, own love—my sweet—how these arms of mine are trembling to hold you again! The blood in my body leaps at your touch; my heart wearies for you; my soul craves for you with a desperate craving, Nest, that will not be denied!'

He says it all in a quick, passionate voice, his breath sweeping over her cheek, his eager face bending close to hers, his grey eyes, full of fire and intensity, fixed on her as she stands as if spellbound.

She neither blushes, nor starts, nor shrinks; but, with quite awakened senses recognises his absolute power and her own pitiable weakness.

Presently the sharp tension on her nerves gives way, and, trembling like a leaf, she leaves him without a word or a look.

Guy Trevelyian does not attempt to follow her, but stands and watches the slender receding figure, with the clear moonlight revealing a soft tender smile on his usually firm lips.

He loves her so much--so much ! and why he loves her so is an absolute mystery to himself.

There are myriads of women more beautiful and alluring, ready to be wooed and won by him. But he has set his heart on this slip of a girl--foolish, frivolous, saucy, unreasonable, with a quaint gipsy beauty on her face, and with her faith pledged to another man.

CHAPTER II.

A FOOLISH TROTH.

'Love he comes, and Love he tarries,
Just as fate or fancy carries !
Long he stays, when sorest chidden,
Laughs or flies, when pressed or bidden.'

AURORA'S fingers are making great rosy blotches in the cool tinted sky, when Nest arouses with a smile on her mouth from a halcyon dream, in which a pair of lazy grey eyes, warming into slow fire, have figured. Springing out of bed, she goes to the window, and throws the sash up widely, confident that no vulgar gaze will rest on her young prettiness, which is considerably enhanced by the loose, snowy garb, and long streaming tresses, picturesquely tossed, and ruffled, and tumbled—for Nature is the best hairdresser up to twenty-five—though after that age, perhaps, she yields her prowess to Truefit.

It is the rose month, June, and the misty dawn teems with sweet aromatic breath of the lovely queen of flowers, mingling with the perfume of the heliotrope and mignonette growing in lavish masses in the vicarage garden.

The fair young spring, with her maiden blush, her tiny glistening buds, and tender opening foliage, has ripened into hot, voluptuous summer, and nigh as it is on the mystic break of day, the soft amber sunlight comes down in long streaks, steeping everything, high and low—tree, and leaf, and blossom,—while all is as quiet as though the enchanter's hand had hovered over the scene, and bound it with a spell.

Nest is pagan to the core ; and the freshness of this hour is worth all the rest of the day to her, she thinks, as, leaning out of the casement, she pulls idly at the scented petals of a Dutch

honeysuckle that covers the wall, while fiery-eyed Phœbus, driving his car through the heavens, kisses her on brow, and cheeks, and soft, slim throat, leaving, maybe, mementos of his caresses in little tawny freckles that will not go materially to improve her good looks. But no matter; at seventeen one is not apt to think of what 'may be'; and, philosophically indifferent to her complexion, the girl quaffs great sniffs of fresh air, with the long trails of the honeysuckle bobbing down, cool and fragrant, above her, and a big blush rose, with a tender pink bloom like her own, thrusting its dew-laden face right into hers.

Disdaining the Doric, or the Corinthian, or even the Victorian, the Vicarage is a queer cross between an old-fashioned farmstead and a model almshouse. It has a grey stone back, considerably the worse for time's ungentle touch, and a brick-red, consumptive-looking front; but under these early glints of yellow light, the whole place wears a holiday aspect. The glebe meadow is enamelled with pure white velvety daisies and golden cowslips, and at the far end of it a little narrow line shows up—it is the river—Yarl—quivering and wriggling like a gigantic worm, and at it drink some large, meek-looking, dark brown cattle.

Nest's eyes rest dreamily on the trees, laden with a glorious promise of luscious peaches and mellow apricots. She has a reasonable weakness for all the nice things of this life; but at this identical moment the sin of gluttony is far from her. The pale yellow butterflies, 'offspring of the air,' skim festively over the clumps of white clove pinks; the drooping clusters of the barberry gild the dark, glossy leaves like burnished ore. Gaudy rhododendrons linger yet here and there, lifting up their blood-red faces among the tamer tints. The greedy bees begin to hum with drowsy pleasure over the scented heads of the fox-gloves; and the long, slim dragon-flies, with their filmy, prismatic wings, dart backwards and forwards like so many living jewels.

Nest loves these pleasant sights among which her seventeen years have passed, but now she only feels a general sense of pleasantness as she stands absorbed in communion with herself.

Wonderfully gay, certainly volatile, laughter-loving, and even childishly reckless of the future, a decided little flirt, given to sunning her wings in the world's alluring and evanescent smile, she has yet no lack of brain and mind, and she knows quite well that at the present time she stands on the verge of a precipice (metaphorically),—what she elects to do now she is quite aware will inevitably affect the whole course and meaning of her existence.

Four men, distinctly dissimilar in all points, look which way we will, personal and mental, but each of whom is evidently in love with her, are, figuratively speaking, down at her dainty, stockingless feet, offering her four very widely different destinies.

Which of them is the one she is to take for better, for worse—for richer, for poorer, till death?

She half closes her white lids to shut out the outer world, and calls them up in rotation before her mind's eye.

Place à Dal.

Dalrymple Wentworth, familiarly called 'Dal' by man, woman, and child, is her betrothed—with conditions.

Within a few weeks of her betrothal, she had practically learned, even if her natural intelligence had not taught her, that the wife of Dal's choice would be a woman Society delights to honour; a woman whose lot would be cast in the pleasantest paths of Tophet; a woman who would never lack the fleshpots of the Egyptians, and who would 'walk in silk attire, and siller ha'e to spare.'

All these excellent advantages own a very substantial attraction for her; Dal offers her—in fact, everything that can tend towards a luxurious life; and if she really ends by marrying him, she will have wealth, social position, and a capability of using such benefits effectively—a capability which, it may be remarked *en passant*, many women are denied.

Nest chews up viciously a sprig of honeysuckle, and quickly and deliberately sums up these advantages on the tips of her slender fingers, just in the same fashion as she has done her sums in the schoolroom, only last year. She realises a total of at least half-a-dozen and more, but unconsciously her small white teeth come down rather hard on her ripe red under lip that looks as if 'a bee had newly stung it,' and the ghost of a frown puckers her forehead. Then she forgets 'Dal' as much as if Dal did not exist or never had existed, and proceeds to the village squire.

John Dillon is pretty well off in worldly goods. In fact, he is quite substantially well off in land and houses and cattle. Nest, from her casement, can see a thin line of blue smoke curling upward from the chimney of the old grange where he lives and flourishes. He is a splendid judge of horse-flesh and stock, grows the best mangold wurtzel and swedes in the neighbourhood; he is lucky in speculation and careful in his habits. He smokes and drinks in moderation, observes the Ten Commandments with due respect; is generally first in at the death, and owns the best breed of fox terriers in the southern counties. His temper is first-rate, his heart in the right place, his appear-

ance passable. No one could mistake him for an *habitué* of Piccadilly or Pall Mall. But he has stalwart arms, good legs, and a pair of honest eyes that are a passport wherever he goes.

She who marries him will have a very good time of it. She need not fear that love will fly out of the window, or poverty come in at the door; affection and prosperity of a sober, enduring, jog-trotting kind will always be his. Ambition or intellect find no abiding place in his ample breast or close-cropped head, and gaiety, pleasure, fashion, and excitement will certainly be lacking at his board and hearth.

A woman, when she is once married, however, Nest reflects, recalling many axioms of her youth, does not care for such things; her desires and affections are naturally set on her husband and children, etc., etc. Now, it is impossible to deny that John Dillon is the very best fellow in the world, and worships her—though she has shown him the cold shoulder always—to fatuous stupidity; also if by any chance she became the presiding genius of the 'House that Jack built,' she would be almost next door to 'Home.'

And 'Home, sweet Home,' has a wonderful charm for her, in spite of many little drawbacks that the Vicarage possesses. Irrepressible Gus, her pickle of a pet brother, with his round, laughing face, would be able to look in upon the domestic paradise of the Grange every day. The young olive branches, with which the Vicarage abounds, could make the Grange their playground, and the little meek-faced mother, dearest of all, could superintend the household, when a ride across country, a fox terrier show, or the newest bit of fiction from Mudie's or Smith's engrossed the time and attention of the legitimate mistress. The Grange is a sweet, old place, a little old-fashioned, it is true; the Dillons have had it for several generations, and have taken pride in the heavy curtains and ponderous furniture liked by their great-great-grandmothers; but since the present owner has lost his heart to Nest, things have been altered to please her taste. Nest is given to 'fads.' The æsthetic is her last. So the Grange dining-room has got a pomegranate wallpaper by Morris, a sage green dado by Dr Dresler, a lovely Persian carpet by *Faidl-ou-deen*, a genuine Pintruccio, one or two undoubted Bottocellis, Japanese bronzes, hawthorn pattern china, heaps of daffodils and lilies, plaques of Palissy ware, mediæval work, and an old Nankin dragon overlooking the whole.

In fact, the place is full of the 'snappiest' things, and Nest half repents her coldness and cruelty to the squire when she thinks of them; but the picture, which ought to be wonderfully

attractive, somehow gives her, to-day, a suffocating feeling. One little grain of love for the bluff, honest, and hearty lover would colour it with the enchanting views of Eden; failing that grain—she shudders, and goes on quickly to the third aspirant to her heart and hand.

He is an aristocrat—a real live marquis, and he will be a duke some day. His name is Elmsdale, and though he is short and thin, and not at all handsome, he is the best match in London, and therefore altogether irresistible to most girls.

Yet!

Nest makes quite a little *moue* of dissatisfaction, and her fertile imagination conjures up number four.

Number four is Guy Trevelyian.

On his rather romantic pseudonym, she pauses full five minutes; the dozen letters that compose the name seem to have an individual charm, and the total carries a magic in its sound that makes her lids droop lower, and the faint shell-like pink on her pretty rounded cheek wax quite deep, while her scarlet lips soften into a shy and tender smile. It is not so easy to sum up what he offers, while her foolish girlish truant fancy will dwell so persistently on himself. With vaulting ambition, and love of excitement and gaiety and luxury and wealth—everything, in fact, fading from her mind—she finds herself wandering back to the preceding evening. How the demure little doves perched above cooed their amorous lullaby! How the mystic moonbeams lent such softness to that firm mouth of Guy Trevelyian!

'Ah, what an evening it was!' she sighs, half audibly, absently picking to pieces the wax-like petals of the Dutch honeysuckles, and she wonders if she will ever, ever know such an evening again!

She is only seventeen—just out of the schoolroom—and as yet, the world has not spoiled her—as yet—or she would not be so foolish as to put in comparison with this one evening—this delicious oasis in all the existence she has known—her experience of greatest triumphs at the county balls, and find these triumphs pale as gaslight pales by the side of Nature's golden light; for the men whose homage made those triumphs dwindle into pigmies by the side of *Guy Trevelyian*.

Why this should be she cannot tell—which of her sex can analyse the cause when the result is that subtle, exquisite thrill that comes but once to most women at the voice, the look, the touch of the *first* love of their lives?

Guy Trevelyian is by no means a Phoenix among his kind in beauty, neither would impartial critics put him down as especially

fascinating. To some he would be not commonplace—that is a term that could never apply to him—but simply unattractive, yet his words and tones come back to Nest again and again. They thrill with strange sharp sweetness to her heart, and she asks herself, with a sudden, almost deadly pang, what existence would be without him. Standing there, with the soft wind lifting the rings of hair off her brow soothingly, with the hum of bees in her ear, the scent of roses sweeping over her, the yellow sunbeams falling upon her, she lifts up her face, and thanks God for those hours passed with Guy Trevylian. Come what may, nothing can take away the memory of them, not in all the long, long years that she may live.

On this sweet summer morning she loses her identity in Guy Trevylian, for he fills her heart, her soul, her being, and with the glamour of his grey eyes upon her, she forgets entirely to consider how little, how very little, he has to offer her.

She never thinks in this dream of passion of questioning in what region, short of Arcadia, two people, young, healthy, and with moderately good appetites, can live on a few hundred a year, or how careful, even futile, the daily struggle will be to make two and two into eight instead of four.

She exists in a halcyon oblivion of the demands of those harpies, the baker and the butcher, and of all the elegant nothings that go to make the happiness of fashionable ladies.

No! she stands at her casement, her slender fingers toying with the fragrant blossoms, her eyes with a far-off look in their limpid depths, a smile, half gay, half serious, but exquisitely loving, on her rosebud lips, as she thinks of the man himself.

The man who looked at her yestere'en with such passionate looks, out on the green ridge yonder, and said, in a low thrilling voice,—

‘I wonder if we shall ever be man and wife, you and I, Nest!’

She remembers that she answered him then with a hard defiant—

‘Never!’

But she answers the question now, clasping her little hands over her shy face, on which the flush grows and deepens. Here, in the lovely day-dawn, she half shuts her lids and calls up the features which she knows now are the dearest in the world to her, a face not handsome, but which owns a power that no other face has ever owned for her, and the sight of which makes her redden and pale and her pulses beat with alternate hope and fear.

She sees 'neath her drooping lids but one thing, a mouth

proud and strong, with the silvery moonlight revealing all its love and its pain, and from under its spell, she is motionless—enthralled. Rousing herself at last, she turns to the toilette-table and stares steadily at herself in her mirror.

There is not a vestige of womanly vanity in this. She only desires to sum up the exact amount of attraction she possesses.

Is she pretty enough to enchain *his* fancy for ever and ever? and this is what meets her gaze.

A little oval face, grave and gay, cloudy and sunny in quick succession; a clear olive skin, two dark brown eyes that look too big for the face, long black curly lashes sweeping over cheeks tinted like damask roses, a small insignificant nose, a pair of lips tolerably fresh and red, a figure more tall than short, more supple and slim than rounded and voluptuous, and a sheen that glances and goes on every wave of her hair.

These are all, and they do not make up a grand array of charms, so she turns away with a shrug of her shoulders and concludes that she must be a 'man's beauty' anyway, since she has found favour with some of the sex.

'Nest! Nest! hurry up,' whispers a voice at her door, cutting her ruminations short, and she knows it is Gus, her brother, the biggest young rascal and dearest old boy that was ever born to torment and delight in the same breath.

'Coming,' she whispers back, and rushing headlong at her ablutions, she literally flings on habiliments that lie pell mell around.

Arrayed in hat and habit, and without so much as one parting glance at the glass, she slips noiselessly down stairs for fear of awaking the elders, for she and Gus are bent on enjoying this summer morning.

If there is one thing she loves more than another, it is horse-flesh, and a ride on Claptrap, the old brown mare, with no looks to boast of but plenty of go, and with Gus on the roan pony as escort, is just short of Olympus. It is quite early still. The sun has barely dried up the glisten of dew, the flowers lift up fresh blooming faces to the light, and the air is as sweet and delicious as a draught of new milk, when Nest creeps out of the back door into the large square yard where the Leghorns are pecking and scratching and flapping their wings at a rakish old rooster, and two ducks and a drake waddle complacently, while half-a-dozen pure-white fantails swoop down close to her skirts for their accustomed corn.

And these are all she has for companionship—Gus being nowhere. Nest is not a Griselda by any means—patience, in fact, is a virtue that she has never attained to as yet, whatever

the trials of life may teach her later; so she screws up her mouth, gives a low whistle, and sharply cracks her riding-whip as signals, to which a face—round as a ball, with a pair of fat red cheeks—responds by peeping out of a stable window.

'Hush! *we must wait for Dal.*'

Then, like Jack-in-the-box, it vanishes.

Nest knits her straight brows until they nearly meet, and feels, as she mentally expresses it, as cross as two sticks.

Dal!

Somehow she is less than ever in a mood for Dal—or Dal's chronic condition of utter spooniness—this morning. Dal, who after Guy Trevelyian, is like a dreadful reminiscence of her childhood called 'pap,' to a bottle of sparkling Moselle. But before she has time to lash herself into greater discontent, Dal makes his appearance, and, as far as appearance goes, he certainly is the very beau-ideal of a sweetheart.

In the newest thing imaginable in the way of tweeds, and with an irreproachable little hat perched jauntily on his fair curls, he looks as spick and span as if he had just stepped out of a bandbox. And at first view of his dear love, he blushes up as furiously as a girl in her teens.

'The top of the morning to you, my darling,' he says, beaming all over, as he makes a dash at the fresh red lips.

But she is a great deal too quick for him; making an adroit duck of the pretty little head, she misses what Boucicault calls 'the coward's blow betwixt nose and chin.'

'Don't,' she says reprovingly; 'someone will see you!'

'Who?' he asks innocently—taking a survey of the surrounding poultry. 'There is no one to say a word—if I took a dozen of them!'

A dozen of them!—a dozen of—kisses!

Miserable little sinner as she is—she remembers with another sharp sweet thrill, those swift passionate kisses under the silvery moonbeams, that fell with blissful pain and painful bliss on her lips and cheeks and eyelids; and remembering, she shrinks away from her betrothed. The pullets flap their young wings vigorously—the cocks crow shrilly—the ducks and drake join the chorus with a loud quack!—quack!—and in the general hubbub, Nest, thankful, scrambles on unaided to Claptrap's broad back, and trots through the farm-yard gate into a meadow.

In another moment Dal, on his thoroughbred, reaches her, and Gus, as gooseberry, ambles up to the other side.

'Twa's company and three's nane,' says a homely old Scotch proverb, and the truth of it has been tested, I daresay, by many

—by you, perhaps, my fair reader—when stern paterfamilias or a scheming and worldly mother have adhered to you, just as the soft speeches and softer eyes, to say nothing of a lovely moustached lip of some fascinating ‘detrimental,’ have been near.

But in this particular case, the trio are very good company as they jog along, chatting and laughing like the children that they are. They go through a glorious old beech copse, with the long amber rays beginning to slant athwart the brown gnarled trunks, and to quiver and dance on the cool intensely green depths of the midsummer foliage. The ground is studded all over with tiny harebells—drooping their dark-blue eyes modestly—and the sky above looks like a gigantic plain of clearest azure and crystal. Presently they reach a white gate, which Gus charges and opens, and filing into the high road, they go down in a sweeping canter, with the early breeze, laden with puffs of clover, wooing their faces sweetly. The way slopes between picturesque banks that are one lavish tangle of wild roses and flowering palm, with an undergrowth of every imaginable moss, and fern, and lichen, and at the very bottom of the incline lies the river. River, however, it can scarcely be dignified into.

The Yarl is only a pretentious little arm of water, very narrow and extremely shallow, and so limpid that one could almost count the shiny white pebbles that gleam up from below.

Claptrap and the thoroughbred, who have, like their respective riders, grown to know one another well by dint of sheer association, splash amicably side by side along the ford, with the roan pony close in their rear.

The current eddies past—the water lies with cool shadows here and there, and the young sunbeams touch into vivid beauty of gold and green the wealth of verdure that lines the shore.

It is the loveliest little bit in the world for Turner or Claude Loraine, and represents the scenery of Devonshire, which, with its deep arching shades and exquisite flowering lanes, is true Arcadia.

Nest—who is sufficiently of an optimist to accept life as it comes—positively revels in the hour. It is such a thorough day of midsummer beauty, so full of green waving woods—of golden wheat-fields, over which the ambient air steals with gentle billowy swell, of bloom and fragrance, of depths of pleasant shade and long stretches of velvet turf, that existence in itself seems a boon, and she glances at Dal to mark if he also appreciates.

But alas! according to Wordsworth,—

'A primrose by the river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him,
And it was nothing more.'

No ; the beauty of dell and hollow—the spell of sunlight, the song of birds—the loveliness of all nature, in fact, is at this moment a sealed book to Dal, who is employed in staring at his lady-love, with the rapturous possessive stare that irritates her beyond all else ; especially just now when her whole soul is in a 'see-saw' condition. With a curl of her rosy lip, she deals poor old astonished Claptrap a smart cut, and speedily reaches the other bank, closely followed by her escort. Once more on *terra firma*, Gus gallops off to give his roan pony a 'breather,' he asserts, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, and so the others are left as virtually alone as an enclosure of fields and fences, and no sign of life, save cows and sheep, and an occasional pig, can make them.

'Where were you last evening?'

Dal asks this with an abruptness that bursts on her guilty ears like a bombshell, and sends the hot blood tingling to her cheeks.

'I left the whole home-kit at coffee to hunt for you, much to Miladi's disgust, but—'

'Froggy would a-wooing go, whether his mother would let him or no!' Nest says provokingly.

Dal treats her little outbreak into rhyme with a grave wall of silence. He is evidently engrossed in domestic tiffs and grievances, and if it pleased her to liken him to the faithful pig, he would probably be indifferent to the compliment.

'My mother nags so awfully, Nest!' he murmurs, rather peevishly, his pretty weak mouth pouting like a spoilt child's. 'She never leaves off bullying me about you. "Dal!" she said yesterday, "will you do me one favour? Your duty to me obliges you to accede to my request, surely. Will you please look before you leap? That girl, with her airs and her graces—her supreme wilfulness, will drive you into a lunatic asylum or an early grave, my poor deluded boy! Those long-limbed, gipsy-faced women are imps of Satan, I believe."'

'*Merci, Miladi!*' Nest utters mockingly, but all the same she flushes deeply as she hearkens to the eulogies her mother-in-law elect deems fit to indulge in. The colour soon dies away, however. On this particular morning, like yesterday's particular evening, she feels as if she were Guido's Aurora moving about the clouds, and as if she can bear most things with commendable patience and philosophy. even Lady Wentworth's

scratches, and there are certainly no *pattes de velour* about the dame in question.

'What a pity she did not bring him up in the way he should go, so that when he was old he should not depart from it,' she laughs carelessly, glancing at her affianced rather contemptuously, when she thinks how like a big baby he looks.

'Cannot you be serious for five minutes? I *hate* being chaffed,' Dal murmurs pathetically; 'you *must* see how the whole thing breaks my heart!'

His heart!

She turns round in her saddle, and stares full into his boyish face. A physiognomist would detect in her regard, curiosity, perplexity, mockery, and even a dash of dislike. His white brow, milk-white as a woman's, is quite unruffled, there is not a furrow of pain or trouble to be traced upon it. His eyes are blue as the heavens above them—as clear as crystal—and perfectly innocent of a shadow, or of a *thought*.

And Nest falls to wondering what sort of institution this young man's heart can be. Is it a sieve, or a hollow muscle, or just a something essential to human anatomy, possessing no more romance about it than his—*liver!*

Hearts are associated so absolutely in her mind with resolute faces, strongly-knit frames, and, above all, deep set eyes, that look like windows of the soul.

Dalrymple Wentworth is adorably handsome. There cannot be two opinions on the score of his good looks, and he is as well aware of the fact as his neighbours; tall and slight, perhaps a trifle too willowy for a man; the loveliness of a woman on his face, and that very womanliness its only drawback; his head all over little golden hyacinthine curls, like a cherub of Rubens, or a cupid in a valentine; his eyes Prussian-blue to the deepest depths; his flaxen brows delicately pencilled as a Circassian; his features small and faultless, and his mouth as sweet and as wanting in *verve* as a child's.

Altogether he is an extollable, lovable, yet, withal, contemptible specimen of his sex; though if he is vain, there is nothing offensive in his vanity, and none of that arrogant self-conceit and overpowering self-complacency that make puppyism a mild epithet to apply to a man.

He is a perfect gentleman in birth, breeding, and feeling, though an *enfant gâté*, and dreadfully wanting in backbone, and prone to that general masculine feeling of believing himself irresistible; and he has but one idea in his head at the present time—the girl he is going to marry.

She is the Alpha and Omega of his days the torment of his

existence, the one thing that he believes in, the woman whom he worships with all the might and main of his unstable, vacillating character.

'Nest, my darling! what on earth can I do to arrive at a quiet life at home?' he asks, in a limp languid voice, that makes her long to shake him or pinch him.

'Give me up!' she suggests quickly, and the sluice-gates of relief seem to open out widely at the very merest possibility of her advice being followed. 'Give me up, and Miladi will be sugar and spice, and all that's nice.'

'Give you up!—*never*—not even—'

'With the certainty of my driving you into a lunatic asylum, or into a premature grave, according to Miladi? Dal, dear boy, hearken to the words of Scripture, "Honour thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long in the land."'

As he listens, Dal's fair skin grows pinkish, and his Prussian-blue eyes moisten, looking like a couple of dewy forget-me-nots.

'Nest, dearest!—have you ceased to love me, then?' he questions reproachfully.

Has she ceased to love him?—has she ever loved him?—that is, if love be 'strong as death.' If it be what she has heard of—and read of—and dreamed of—and—and—what she has *felt*—only for an hour or so, it is true—an hour when an earnest, passionate face bent over her, and two burning eyes looked straight down into her own, while her very soul seemed to thrill and quiver and leap to meet them.

She is certainly dubious on the important point of her feelings for Dal, and scarcely likes to answer him. She knows that he may take her into his arms, and kiss her as often as he pleases, and it pleases him very often—but the pastime brings no flush to her cheek, or even one little extra throb to her pulse. No! there is no doubt but that she and he have just drifted into this sort of thing, and she has really thought no more of the courtship between them than of eating her breakfast.

But Dal looks upon the matter in a different light altogether. He loves those kisses dearly, like a child loves toffee or sugarcandy, because they are so sweet and so satisfying, and he watches her now with a long grave face that does not suit his style of beauty in the least; but before she has made up her mind what to say, Gus gallops back to them, red and breathless. 'Come along!' he shouts, 'do leave off spooning, and have a canter.'

So off they go, the three of them, and in the brisk delicious air, the charm of the exercise, Nest forgets everything, even

the preceding evening, for she is young and foolish and frivolous, and seizes with eager hands each passing pleasure.

At last they turn their horses' heads homewards, and ride slowly along a road that winds like a brown ribbon through fields of mellow corn. Sweet puffs of wild flowers come from the tall hedgerows, and the east is all aflame with the gorgeous golden tint of a pheasant's breast, such as art has neither name for, nor power to reproduce.

The ripples of the little Yarl shimmer up under the reflection of the sun's glory, and it looks all silver and gold, like a streamlet in the Arabian nights.

'Where were you last evening?' Dal asks once more, and his pertinacity on this point irritates her into a flagrant solecism of good manners.

'Where was I? In my skin, of course?' she flashes impatiently.

'Nest, if there's anything my mother dislikes, it is your flippancy!'

'And if there is anything I dislike, it is your mother!' she retorts.

He does not dream of remonstrating with her upon this, for all the filial reverence imaginable cannot go so far as to invest Miladi with a mantle of pleasantness. Even to Dal, her first-born, and the sole creature for whom she cares as much as she *can* care for anybody or anything, she has always been a species of Nero in petticoats.

To the world in general, she is a cold, harsh, unbending woman, whose extreme *hauteur* has gained her the sobriquet of 'Miladi'; and placed on a knoll, nestling within a clump of magnificent trees, is the house where she dwells and reigns over old Sir Piers her husband, and her numerous progeny, with an autocratic sway that beats the Czar to fits.

Nest averts her eyes in dislike from Wentworth, lovely and imposing as it is; but Dal regards it tenderly.

'I don't want the poor old Guv or Miladi to hook it yet; but *wouldn't* it be a jolly place, just! if *you* were mistress, Nest?' he murmurs enthusiastically.

'No!' she blurts petulantly, on the spur of the moment, for she has just been thinking that, if she ever marries Dal, Wentworth will be the sepulchre for all the love in her heart to lie in by-and-by—dead—dead—for ever and aye!

'You do not mean to say that you don't care for Wentworth, Nest!' he cries, amazed and intensely disappointed. 'Why no man could find jollier diggings in which to spend his days!'

'I do not know about a *man*—men have such queer notions

about things,' she answers cynically, as if she had gauged men's natures thoroughly; 'but I am quite sure that a woman would like something different, and not be so very remarkably unreasonable in her requirements either!'

'Good gracious! what could she possibly want?' Dal asks, forgetting his ordinary languor, and rising excitedly in his saddle, as if he were going at a fence. 'Society—scenery—'

'I abominate scenery; it's always the same. Trees, hills, hollows—hollows, hills, trees.'

'Society!'

'Society! what society? The same as I have had ever since I could speak,—the J.P.'s and their wives, fat, and prosy, and stupid; the doctor and his wife, fussy, vulgar, hateful; the county folks, stuck-up, horrid! I have not had a real morsel of pleasure like other girls. I haven't had one bit my proper share in the poms, and vanities, and sinful lusts of the flesh, and yet I am to be shut up for the rest of my natural existence in—Wentworth!' she goes on breathlessly, with a confused notion that she is the most ill-used young person in the world.

Dal stares at her aghast, with intense mortification legibly inscribed on his countenance.

'And what could be a nicer, quieter place than Wentworth for anyone, man or woman, to pass the evening of their life in?' he questions, after a moment or two, in an aggrieved tone.

'Certainly there is nothing like taking time by the forelock,' she sneers; 'but I should be content to let the evening of my life provide for itself, so long as I could have the morning as I chose.'

After this crushing remark, which appears to daze Dal's reflecting faculties, a short silence ensues, during which Nest looks back furtively, and beckons to Gus; but, scenting war ahead, he shakes his head, and pulls in the roan pony to a snail's pace.

'Marry me off-hand, Nest!' Dal says, suddenly.

'What for?' she asks, in a matter-o'-fact tone.

'Well, you see, this see-saw state of things unhinges a fellow awfully, and makes him feel thoroughly out of sorts. I am jealous, too—jealous as a tiger—of—'

'Who?' she interrupts hastily, bending over and stroking Claptrap's grizzly mane, while she reddens like a rose from pure consciousness.

'Of everyone—of Elmsdale, for instance.'

'Oh!'

This little interjection denotes, in this instance, a sense of relief.

'If you would only marry me at once, Nest, it would be best for us both,' Dal goes on quietly. 'You would be settled down comfortably for life; and my mother would cease pitching Mabella Moreton at my head.'

Mabella Moreton!

Nest pricks up her ears at this name. She has an instinctive feeling that at some future period of her life the owner of it will bring her vexation, if not trouble and pain; but if the pain Mabella Moreton deals her is only in marrying Dal, she knows she can afford to forgive her, and to laud her attractions as well; and Mabella Moreton's attractions are legion.

She is a widow—a young widow of twenty-five; and the defunct Moreton has left her splendidly endowed.

She literally lacks nothing—the world seems to have been made for her, and she is made for the world. She is one of those lovely butterflies, in fact, that seem to skim along life, their brilliant wings untarnished by the rude hand of pain or trouble. All the goods the gods can give appear to drop into her lap without the asking—purple and fine linen, jewels, the fat of the land, are her portion. She has a pretty, blonde, supercilious face, with *mignonne* features, enframed in a quantity of fair hair. Altogether she strongly resembles the portraits handed down to us of beautiful, ill-fated Marie Antoinette—a resemblance of which she is remarkably vain.

The blonde skin, fair hair, and chiselled profile make up a very attractive whole; but the light blue eyes are too near each other, and they are shallow, even false, and the scarlet lips are curiously thin.

In her manner she is a second 'Miladi,' whose especial favourite she is. She has all the quiet and cool insolence of her type; and if it is necessary to her ideas to crush any presumptuous person, who does not sufficiently recognise her exalted claims to admiration, the way in which she abstracts all power of seeing from her eyes, and hearing from her ears, is both amazing and edifying.

'Why not please Miladi, like a good boy, and make Mrs. Moreton the future Lady Wentworth?' Nest asks eagerly, for it seems to her that once married and settled in the big house on yonder hill, Mrs. Moreton will be removed from exercising any pernicious influence on her (Nest's) life.

'I!' flashes Dal angrily, wrath blazing in his eyes, and a deep flush creeping over his white skin, that makes Nest involuntarily think of a boiled lobster. 'I marry any other woman but —you?'

Then his voice drops down to his boots, in a little low, pathetic

wail, and the fire of his glance is quenched in a mist of pain.

'For God's sake don't torture me, Nest! You will make me believe you are tired of me if you talk like this,—that you want to thrust me out of your life! Oh! my own darling, do you want to break my heart?'

'Bosh!'

She has caught the word from careless, irreverent Gus; and it comes out with a heartiness that gives weight to it.

'What nonsense! You are not of the sort, Dal, to break your heart about any woman. You haven't it in you to love anyone—*passionately*.'

She is thinking of Guy Trevelyian as she says this. She sees even now right away across this fair-haired boyish lover of hers—a pale, passion-tossed face, a pair of lazy grey eyes quickening into fire, a stern mouth relaxing into ineffable tenderness.

'Ah! *that* is how I want to be loved,' she murmurs, *sotto voce*, forgetting that she is not alone.

But Dal hears her distinctly with his sharp, young ears, and gazes at her thunderstruck.

She is developing a new phase of character. She has never before allowed him a glimpse of her inner nature.

Bright as a sunbeam, lively as a kitten, full of life, and sweet as a flower—these are what she has seemed to him hitherto, and he has accepted her so, and adored her so; but now she fairly takes away his breath.

He is not much given to diving below the surface. His boyish *insouciant* temperament on the whole prefers her as she was—gay, laughter-loving, brimful of sauciness, wilful, and sparkling. Still she is—*Nest*—and Nest must always be fairest, dearest, nearest in all the world to him.

'I can do nothing but love you better than anything else, my darling,' he says, as plaintively as a sick canary.

'As for breaking my heart, well, perhaps you were right in saying "Bosh!" to that. Hearts are tough things, I fancy; but I am sure I should feel like cutting my throat if you chucked me over. You see, I have never cared for anyone but you since you were so high, Nest!' and he holds up rather a stunted stick. 'I should have no idea whatever how to begin putting you out of my life now. If you ever meant to throw me over, you ought to have told me long ago, before my feelings grew and grew, until they are ever so much stronger and bigger than myself. Indeed, you should have, Nest!'

All this, in a voice slightly monotonous and mildly reproachful moves her only into vexation.

She misses the masterful wooing that took her by storm. She yearns to listen to the magic melody of the voice that even in a nursery rhyme bore upon it that universal diapason of divine harmony—the music of the spheres.

‘That is just the way with you men!’ she remarks caustically. ‘How on earth is one to know the proper way to treat you? You are indignant if one is not civil to you; and if one is, you consider it necessary to fall in love forthwith, and make yourselves troublesome and disagreeable by being exigent and jealous. I have told you, Dal, scores of times, that I hate the idea of marrying and settling down here. Matrimony, to be really nice, ought to be a complete change,’ she adds loftily. ‘What would be the good or the sense of it, if one just steps across that paltry little Yarl from the Vicarage to Wentworth, and goes on the same humdrum grind that one has done all one’s life? I want to go to Rome, and Paris, and Monaco. I am dying for heaps and heaps of—dissipation!’

‘Dissipation!’

Dal gasps out the word, opening his light eyes so wide that she thinks he will never be able to shut them again; and his resemblance to the lobster is superseded by a likeness to an owl, which does not tend materially to heighten her opinion of his natural intelligence.

‘So!’

She almost jumps from her saddle; the little word brings back so vividly the witching hour last night. The gleaming moon and watchful stars; the soft swish of the summer breeze; the subtle fragrance; the trailing shadows; the coo of the amorous doves; the mysterious whisper of the leaves; and above all—above all—the presence that lent a charm to all of these.

Poor little thing! Guy Trevelyian has her in his grasp. So supreme is his influence, so fatal his attractions, that even the remembrance of his lightest word, the memory of his slightest tone, has the power to thrill her through and through. His face, his look, his voice permeates through her being, and she is already unconsciously the puppet, of which his hand holds every wire.

The word ‘So!’ from Dal’s lips sounds like a feeble little ejaculation emanating from a feeble little spirit. It lacks feeling and inflection; it is not even profound or guttural enough to be Teutonic.

‘Pray, what have I said to shock you?’ she asks sharply.

‘Your views of marriage have rather taken me aback, Nest, answers the heir of Wentworth, who, like a good many English-

men, is what is called a model of domestic virtue. He is one of those to whom it would never occur that there was a duty in life beyond his own well-tilled fields, or a pleasure beyond his own hearth—a young fellow renowned in the county where his people have been born and have vegetated for generations—a walking epitome of amiable qualities, and eminently fitted to make the happiness of a really good woman.

What he is calculated to be for a woman who is not really good—that is, a woman who has a hot, perverse heart, and a wilful spirit that soars quite above the homely occupation delegated to her sex—it is impossible to say. If we took the verdict of the censorious on such a subject, we should discover that such a woman deserves no happiness, and that domestic misery is her proper portion on earth—a purgatory requisite to purify her nature before she quits this sublunary sphere.

‘How?’ Nest asks quietly, though she feels irritated within.

‘Well, your notions that matrimony ought to be a complete change in everything, you know. I thought it was all so comfortably arranged that you and I were to get married down at the old church, where we have prayed together for years and years; that we should take a little trip somewhere for our honeymoon, and then come back and settle down at Wentworth for the rest of our lives. I can’t understand you wanting change, Nest. Now, I think that it would be a thousand times more jolly to go on here amongst our old friends and familiar haunts. Perhaps it may be because I love every stick and stone of the place. However, rather than let any ridiculous idea of mine raise up a wall between us, I am quite ready to be off to-morrow anywhere you like, my darling. China, Egypt, Japan, or—’

But she interrupts him urbanely.

‘My dear old boy, I wouldn’t have you move a step from the home of your forefathers for anything. I wouldn’t let you leave the soil where you have *grovied* and taken root, not for the world. Apparently monotony is a thing after your heart, but I require a change to freshen me up. I feel suffocating, stagnating here, so I am going away for a little while.’

‘Going away! Where to, Nest?’ he asks, turning as white as a sheet, for he loves her awfully—not with the love she wants, with the love with which she alone will be satisfied—but with all the love in his heart.

‘Only to London. Mrs Lorimer, an old flame of dad’s, has asked me to spend the remainder of the season with her in Chesham Place. I shall have a good six weeks of it. Six whole weeks of the most delightful pleasure and dissipation!

Six whole weeks of pomps and vanities, Dal! You stupid old Dal, why on earth don't you rejoice with me, instead of looking like *that*?'

'That' means a long white face like a Knight of the Rueful Countenance. Two Prussian-blue eyes, blank and bewildered, and a twitching mouth like a flogged schoolboy's. But to please her he pulls himself manfully together, and champs away at the drooping end of his fair moustache, to hide the quiver on his lips.

'You see, darling Nest, you are so awfully pretty, and lots of fellows will be finding it out. But they won't love you as I do. *They couldn't*, Nest!

There is a genuine desolation in his voice that touches her, and she replies quite heartily,—

'I believe you, Dal dear, indeed I do! You think too much of me, I am afraid. I am only a frivolous little wretch, with a wicked craving for change and excitement, and lots of things. But I *do* care for you. Sometimes I think I am really fond of you.'

He gives her a wistful glance. Her gipsy beauty has enslaved him more than he knows, and it seems to him at this moment that this long-limbed, dusky-faced imp of Satan, as Miladi calls her, is the ruler of his destiny for good or evil, for ever and ever. He catches hold of her hand, and with a confused notion that it belongs to him in a way, she lets him hold it.

'Don't go to London, my darling! Give up the visit, for God's sake, and the attractions it offers, and come to me. If an infinity of love—love so devoted, so earnest that it must hallow each hour of life—leaven each moment with happiness, and make even death not to be dreaded if we could die together—will satisfy you, you will never regret what you gave up for its sake!' and lifting her hand he presses his warm young lips to the pink tips of her fingers half-a-dozen times.

For a moment his unusual eloquence startles her into both astonishment and admiration, but the feeling is only ephemeral. The time is gone by when any man's words can really influence her—save one man's.

'Oh, but I must go,' she answers decidedly, though she feels a little penitent at the sight of his crestfallen face. 'Besides, Dal, it will be better for me to see something of the wicked world before I settle down, like Joan, to someone's Darby! And as for flirting about—the biggest flirts make the best wives, you know.'

'I *don't* know!' he cries, feeling as jealous as a Turk; but she does not heed him.

'And, Dal, just think how nice it would be for you if I could say when I come back to this horrible stupid old place, looking faded and worn and limp and ugly, that, notwithstanding the lots of men who have been spoons on me, and the heaps and heaps of experience I have gained, you are the only one I care for or admire.'

'But *will* you ever say so, Nest?' he asks solemnly, with great piteous eyes, and waiting on her answer with a fast beating heart.

'I dare say I shall. At any rate, we will hope it, and as hope is such a jolly comfortable feeling, let us stick to it. But here we are at home. Thank goodness, no one is stirring! Take me off, Dal!'

Dismounting, he obeys her—obeys her slightest will, as he always does, spoilt as he is. Just for the hundredth part of a moment he holds her against his breast, and for the first time she sees a real shadow cross his usually bright face. Seeing this, she almost repents her determination to go to London.

'How soon shall you leave here?' he questions, in a low, husky voice, averting his head so that she shall not see the moisture in his eyes that his manhood is ashamed of.

'In about a week or ten days. Don't look so cut up, Dal. I shall be back before you can say "Jack Robinson!"'

'But you will not be the same,' he murmurs hopelessly. 'Somehow I feel that I shall lose you.'

He little knows, poor fellow, that he has lost her already!

She just shrugs her shoulders in a pretty, petulant fashion habitual to her, and gathers up her habit with an impatient gesture. She does not care enough about the boy to argue the point with him, and with a quick glance at the stable-yard clock, she prepares to run into the house, for the Vicarage folks breakfast at nine.

'Won't you kiss me before you go in, Nest?' Dal asks dolefully.

She hesitates an instant. But after all, she is in a manner engaged to him, and one kiss more or less will not much signify, so she holds up her cheek, with a pink flush on it, saucily, and he stoops and presses it quietly, though the sweet fresh lips in such close vicinity fire his brain, and with the crimson blood in his face, he strides away to the gate to which his horse is tied.

Nest walks slowly up the back-stairs to her own room, and straight towards a small goblet of water that stands on her toilette-table, then she deliberately scrubs away at her cheek to wash off poor Dal's kiss.

'After all, why should I mind it? It was so tame, so harmless after—*those others!*' she whispers to herself, with a burning blush.

CHAPTER III.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST.

'Swift years of lilting and sweet long laughter,
That wist not well of the years hereafter,
Till Love woke—smitten at heart by a kiss
With lips that trembled—and trailing wings.'

FOR a minute or two she stands in the centre of her room motionless as a statue, with her eyes going out to the green ridge yonder, and a smile hovering over her mouth, a smile so shy and tender that it adds a new beauty to her face. Then she smoothes the hair that fluffs and crinkles at the smallest provocation, and slipping on a white print, sprinkled all over with tiny rosebuds, she marches sedately down into the breakfast-room, and right into the bosom of her family.

'Blessed is he whose quiver is full of them.'

Surely the Reverend Theodore Wylmer ought to be blessed, for his progeny have numbered ten, though only seven of them have been spared to plague and please him.

'Dad' himself is a dear, grumbling, hypochondriacal old thing, with ailments as plentiful as blackberries in autumn, and his wife is just an angel, both in face and disposition.

Then there came in rotation—

Maud,
Nest,
Gus,
Jack,
Jill,
Pop,
and
Mop.

Jack and Jill and Pop and Mop are of that tender age which only suggests squalls, sweetmeats, a general stickiness, and Gregory's Powder, so that the three elders are only to the fore.

Maud has the advantages and the disadvantages of enjoying

a number of years beyond her sister, the three defunct young Wylmers having been between them. Maud is twenty-seven, ten years older than Nest, but she is so beautiful that 'age cannot wither her or custom stale her infinite variety.'

A trifle wax-dolly, perhaps, with her baby features, a skin all blush-roses and white satin, red lips rather materially full, a great fuzz of golden hair twisted and tortured into the extreme of the mode, and immense china-blue eyes with not much expression to speak of.

But everything in the world has its drawbacks. So it is with her. A chronic frown puckers her fair brow, a chronic, peevish droop mars her mouth. She is what is called a victim of misplaced affection, or, rather, a holocaust on the altar of man's fickleness.

'*Amor et melle et felle est fœundissimus*,' to ape the Reverend Theodore's pet Latin, and gall predominating has made the eldest Miss Wylmer a nuisance to herself and to others.

Eight years ago, one Duncan M'Pherson, a real Scotch laird, with heaps of 'siller,' wooed her.

'Blair in Athol's mine, lassie !
St Johnstone's bower and Huntingtower,
And a' that's mine is thine, lassie !'

quoth he, in his broadest brogue, and she, with a deal of 'vaulting ambition pricking the sides of her intent,' and with nothing substantial in view, jumped at him.

What matter if his cheekbones were a trifle high, his eyes innocent of colour, his hair warm in hue, and his speech nasally, he had lots of counter-attractions, and

'Oh, the gallant 'Pherson,
He was always thought to be
A superior pershon !'

But the course of true love did not run smooth. Maud, as a beauty, was capricious and exacting, while Duncan's temper was fiery to match his locks. Plenty of damsels set their caps at Blair in Athol, etc., and Maud's airs and graces—mostly put on from an erroneous notion that they tended to captivate and unchain—were novelties to the practical straight-ahead Scot, who was as raw as his own clime, and rough as his native heather.

"Shall I—like a fool"—quoth he,
"For a haughty hizzy dee ?
She may go to—France—for me."

And as Miss Wylmer was a fixture at Ravenshill, he just went off himself.

This little episode was a culminating sore to several disappointments that it had been Maud's ill-fortune to meet, and it curdled the milk of human kindness in her, especially as no eligibles had cropped up, since, in the melodious Celtic brogue—

'Duncan fleech'd and Duncan pray'd,
And she was deaf as Ailsa Craig !'

On the whole, there is a decidedly malicious tendency in Maud's character; and, when no other target is by, she huris her little gall-laden shafts at her younger sister, whose undeniable success with the sterner sex is mortification of the flesh.

'I saw Dal ride off in a fine tangent this morning, Nest,' she observes spitefully. 'His face was as red as a turkey cock's. If you don't take care—you mark my words—you—will—lose him !'

Nest calmly continues the occupation of nibbling at a morsel of kissing crust, thickly lathered with honey, and turns a deaf ear.

Now, it is the most cherished desire of the parental hearts that their second daughter should be suzeraine of Wentworth when it pleases Providence to remove Miladi to her place either among the angels or down below, and Dal has been their thing of beauty and a joy for ever since the hour when they laughed and cried, and laid their fond benedictions on the young engaged couple. One little speck on Dal's and Nest's horizon—no bigger than a man's hand—assumes therefore the gigantic proportions of Mount Jura, to the anxious paternal and maternal vision, and Maud's evil prophecy electrifies her audience.

The matutinal meal comes to a sudden standstill, even Jack and Jill, and Pop and Mop, leave off champing vigorously at their bread-and-butter and treacle, to stare at the improvident delinquent who is going to 'lose Dal,' and Gus comes down a 'real waker,' as our transatlantic cousins have it, on her poor toes.

'My dear Nest ! you surely cannot be guilty of such utter—*utter* folly as to risk your future happiness by any undue display of temper,' Paterfamilias adjures in the same solemn voice with which he appeals to his rustic congregation about their souls.

'Nest ! *don't* let anything rise up between you and dear Dal ; you will never meet with anyone so truly perfect as he is,' murmurs Mrs Wylmer, in her soft little voice ; 'remember Duncan M'Pherson !'

Upon this, Nest shoots a mischievous glance at her siste..

The crimson on Maud's cheeks rivals a couple of leviathan peonies that grace the breakfast board, and her delicately pencilled brows meet in a curve over the bridge of her small Grecian nose.

'Please don't mention Duncan and Dal in the same breath, mother !' she says loftily ; 'one was a *man*, and the other is a *boy*. They are as different as chalk and cheese !'

'Dal's the *cheese*, of course,' Nest breaks in, with a merry laugh ; 'that old Duncan, with his carrotty hair and horrid brogue, was a caution. I hate plain men !'

Whereupon Maud makes a dash at her at once.

'How about Mr Trevelyian, then ?' she asks ; 'he is plain enough, to all intents and purposes, but you don't seem to hate him !'

Nest buries her face in her teacup to hide a blush, and to stop her mouth from a return missile.

'Talking of Trevelyian, he is coming to make his adieux this evening. I am sorry he is going ; he is a first-rate naturalist and geologist,' Paterfamilias, who has a weakness for all sorts of fossils and creeping things, mumbles regretfully through his toast.

The news of this visit certainly does not tend to cool Nest's cheek, and suddenly springing up from her chair, she capsizes the milk-jug and the sugar-basin.

Mrs Wylmer, napkin in hand, darts at the lacteal fluid, whose evident proclivities are towards the much-worn carpet ; and Maud, her natural acerbity of disposition overcoming her usual indolence, dives under the table, to drag out by their chubby legs Jack and Jill, and Pop and Mop—who, taking mean advantage of the general confusion, are swallowing saccharine lumps whole, and *ad infinitum*, regardless of choking or economy.

And Nest, with a glance of dismay at the results of her awkwardness, sidles towards the door, to seek refuge in her own room, when her mother arrests her steps.

'Has the dressmaker sent home your peacock blue ?'

Nest nods her head and frowns ; she knows quite well why the maternal mind takes especial interest in this particular garment ; it is simply because peacock blue is Dal's favourite colour.

'Does it fit—is it pretty ?' continues Mrs Wylmer.

'So, so,' Nest answers carelessly, not feeling at the moment as if fine raiment is an important consideration of existence.

'Wear it this evening, Nest,' cries Gus, 'and kill two birds with one stone.'

She goes up to him as he sits astride the low window-sill swinging his legs, and pinches his ear till he yells.

'What did you mean by that sapient remark?' she asks.

'Oh, nothing, only that Beauty and the Beast will both be here to-night,' he answers.

Beauty and the Beast are sobriquets of Dal and Guy Trevilian at the Vicarage.

Nest says not a word in reply, but, turning away, runs upstairs humming,—

'For men may come, and men may go,
But I go on for ever.'

Directly, however, she has the door between her and the others, and she knows the key will keep out all intruders, she subsides on to the ground, panting and breathless, with a failing heart, and buries her flaming cheeks in her hands.

'After last night, after all that happened, *how* am I to meet *him*, with Dal's eyes watching me?' she asks herself piteously, half aloud.

CHAPTER IV.

UNDER THE LABURNUMS.

'In the change of years, in the coil of things,
In the clamour and rumour of life to be,
We, drinking love at the furthest springs,
Covered with love as a covering tree,
We had grown as gods, as the gods above,
Filled from the heart to the lips with love,
Held fast in his hands, clothed warm with his wings;
Oh, Love—My Love! had you loved but me!'

IN spite of her perplexity, Nest looks eagerly at herself in her mirror, when she has donned the brand new 'peacock-blue' and added one or two touches to her dusky tresses.

'Vanitas Vanitatum!' quoth Solomon, and the Reverend Theodore frequently impresses these words on his offspring, to restrain their hankering too much after purple and fine linen.

Nevertheless, it is very pleasant, Nest thinks, to feel that she is decidedly looking her best in a dress that fits her slim figure like a glove, and she struts backwards and forwards to mark if

her *tournure* is irreproachable, while a glow of self-satisfaction rises on her cheek, and her eyes grow as bright as a couple of summer stars.

Beauty and the Beast will both look on her prettiness this night, but, forgetting all about Beauty, she wonders if she will find favour in the Beast's grey eyes.

Jack and Jill, and Pop and Mop, splashing in their evening bath, shout and scream and keep high gala in the nursery, but beside this there is no other sound, and no one is in sight, not even inquisitive Maud, as Nest passes swiftly downstairs and through the hall, and runs down the steps to the lawn.

Everything is looking sweet and delicious outside.

The western sky is full of a warm and rosy flush, and hardly a twig moves, for the faint breeze that stirred the tall tree-tops has gone whispering away again amidst the delicate silver of the willows and the sombre shadows of the weird-like firs.

The sun shines down with all his might and main, and going across the garden, between beds of heliotrope and verbena and mignonette, and hovering for a moment or so like a butterfly over the heads of the fragrant flowers, Nest finally sinks down on a cool mossy bank like emerald velvet, and which is well sheltered by the long drooping boughs of a couple of big laburnums.

Laburnum blossoms are everywhere, weighing down the branches in heavy yellow clusters, fluttering their petals earthwards, and powdering the grass with golden spangles, and plucking some that hang temptingly above her, she sticks them fantastically, with the skill of an embryo coquette, into her hair and on her breast, and all the while she is conscious that she feels exceedingly restless and ruffled.

Moreover, her heart beats taster than it has ever done before. Why?

Nest is seventeen, almost a child, and the power of analysing human emotions has scarcely come to her, yet she has a very strong suspicion that she has fallen head over ears in—love.

Love, that mighty, tyrannical, omnipotent, uncomfortable thing that, like Jonah's whale, swallows one up, individuality and all.

Up to one month ago, she had been a young philosopher, looking on love at first sight as only the nonsense that quite school-girls indulge in, but which at seventeen is a folly to be scorned.

But one summer's day, just a month ago, she knows she succumbed humbly, hopelessly, slavishly to a pair of lazy grey

eyes, and a pair of resolute lips, belonging to a man whom Maud pronounces 'quite plain.'

Nest shuts her eyes close to try and keep out his image, however plain it may be, and gnashes her teeth at her wickedness towards Dal, as she feels even now that the boisterous waves sweeping over her heart have been stirred by a mystic hand, and already she has lost the strength—and worse still, the *will*—to quell the tempest.

After all, it is quite shocking to think that she has known this man—who dares to make love to her in a manner all his own, who even clasps her and kisses her, whether she will or no—for just one calendar month.

One month, four weeks of newborn existence, a glimpse into a new world, which contains all she has ever read of or felt of a mad happiness, a blissful pain, a painful bliss.

Does she wish this man had never been?

Nest, with due regard for Sapphira's untimely end, dares not answer this question to herself in the affirmative, so she just does what most women would do—she yields herself to the inevitable, since the inevitable is so pleasant; and, still with closed lids, sets off dreaming, and as she dreams, a voice breaks on her ear,—

'My lovely little Queen of Sheba!'

Starting, she opens her eyes wide, and sees the man she has been dreaming of standing by, with the leaves flinging quivering shadows on his cheek, and the errant beams touching his usually pale face with a little warm glow, and a love light in his eyes that makes him not plain now, but handsome as a god, and above him, flashing in the sunlight like so many pendant gems in their setting of green, droop the golden laburnum flowers.

Nest cannot check the flush that creeps over her face and throat, but by a supreme effort she looks back at him coolly, and keeps her place calm and dignified on her daïs of velvety turf.

'My name is Miss Wylmer!' she announces stiffly, whereupon he laughs, and in another moment, like William and Mary, they occupy the daïs side by side.

'You are not *Miss Wylmer*,' he says, after a minute, during which she vainly essays to look severe and repelling.

'I am Miss Ernestine Wylmer, any way,' she responds gravely, in the delusive hope of nipping familiarity in the bud.

'What a pretty name your godfathers and godmothers gave you,' he goes on quietly; 'but it is not half as pretty as its abbreviation Nest—*my Nest*.'

Again the tell-tale blood rushes to her face, and she can

scarcely control a little shiver that passes over her, like an impromptu douche trickling down her back.

He looks at her steadfastly, almost rudely, noting down all her points as if he were an auctioneer, from the crown of her flower-decked fluffy head to the tiny tip of the bronze shoe that peeps from under her trailing skirts of peacock blue.

'Have you *any* idea how lovely you are, Miss Ernestine Wylmer?' he asks, in rather an unsteady voice.

She glances up quickly to see if he is laughing at her, and feels ashamed of the gorgeous tints of blue and yellow in which she has arrayed herself like a popinjay.

But she meets his eyes, so grave, so tender, and so true, that she glances away again, and plucking wantonly a handful of spiked blades of grass from her throne, she sends them flying through the air with mock petulance.

'Beauty is only skin deep,' she answers, trying to screw up her lips firmly. She is not very learned, is Nest, and her wise saws come principally from the headings of copybooks. 'I would rather be good than pretty.'

The wind whispers her last sigh to the smiling earth, the perfumed garden, the slumbering birds, the dew-steeped glades and dells and hollows, and to the green ridge of softly-defined hills that perkily raise their peaked heads against yonder burnished cloud. The sun—'God's crest upon his azure shield'—sinks right royally to his rest on a mighty cushion of purple and gold, the burning crimson of his mantle quickly fades out of sight, and only a mellow flush floods the western sky.

'And you are *not—good?*' Guy Trevylian whispers to the girl by his side. 'Shall I tell you why?'

She shuts down her lids again hard to keep out the subtle glamour of his face, while her long curling lashes cast pretty soft shadows on her cheek.

'It is because, try as you will, you cannot love—*Dalrymple Wentworth.*'

She starts.

'Love him! *of course* I love him!' she begins, in an indignant voice, but pauses abruptly as she catches Guy's steadfast gaze. 'That is, I have known Dal ever since I was a scrap, and cared for him as—as—'

'As much as you care for Gus!'

'Yes,' she replies boldly, 'and that is awfully.'

'Ah!' he murmurs, and a smile irradiates his features, a smile so wonderfully bright that she thinks the sun has arisen again, 'and are you absolutely engaged to him?'

'Yes and no; but since when have you constituted yourself my father confessor, monsieur?'

'You *might* tell me a little about yourself,' he says pleadingly, 'if it is only for the sake of *last night*.'

'Last night' has lost none of its influence, and she obeys.

'I have nothing much to tell, just nothing, except that feeling I had treated Dal badly, that I had flirted with him ever since I was eight years old, and led him to believe that I really cared for him; and knowing he was so good and long-suffering, I promised him that, if I saw no one else I liked better, I would marry him by-and-by.'

A dead silence follows this little confidence, as far as *words* go; but Guy's eyes speak volumes, and his pulse throbs fast as he grasps her hand in a close, warm clasp.

'And have you seen anyone you like better?'

Another silence, save that a slight breeze rustles the laburnum boughs, and a shower of petals fall on Nest, crowning her with gold.

'No one!' she replies, clearly enough.

'No one?' he asks once more, almost inaudibly, and the eyes to which she has succumbed plead for him wistfully, while his mouth is trembling like a woman's.

'No one,' she repeats carelessly; but she droops her big brown eyes, lest he should read the truth in them.

Guy releases her hand at once, and catches his breath.

'It is well. Yet, lest you should be deceiving yourself, Nest, my advice to you is not to marry Wentworth, unless your feelings towards him change very much. You have not the smallest conception—for, after all, you are only a child in years and in knowledge of the world—what it would be to tie all your youth and beauty, and above all, your heart, in the horrible bondage of a loveless marriage. Nothing is really more criminal or degrading on earth.'

'Do you really think so?' she asks, scrutinising his face keenly.

'Do I really think so? Yes, and I know so!' he answers emphatically. 'Scores and scores of women have made, and are making, such marriages, and is the end of it happiness? If so, I have yet to see an instance of it.'

'It is wiser any way to marry with feelings of indifference than for love, and be disappointed afterwards,' she remarks sententiously, like a young Solon in petticoats.

'You forget, then, what Tennyson says, and in whose sentiments I fully agree,—

"I hold it true, whate'er befall
 I feel it when I sorrow most,
 'Tis better to have loved and lost,
 Than never to have loved at all."

Child, we are alone here; there is no one to hearken, and we are talking frankly. Look at Mrs Moreton. She made what the world calls the best match of the season. A man rolling in wealth, and who was really her slave. But she cared no more for him than you do for—Dal. The consequence was, that they were both wretched. He drank himself to death, and she—well, she is no more what she was as Mabella Clyde.

'She was engaged to you once, was she not?' Nest asks, nervously and hurriedly, with an incipient jealousy devouring her, lest his answer corroborates Rumour's oft-times false tongue.

'Yes,' he replies, without hesitation, looking down absently on the ground, on which long bars of shadow have begun to trail, 'she was engaged to me for two years; but then, you see, I was even a bigger pauper in those days than I am now. She married Moreton simply because he was rich, and she found scant happiness in the silks and satins and laces and fine jewels for which she sold herself. She knew that I loved her, and that the loss of her would hurt me more than I can say, but what was that to her? And yet women are called gentle—loving! Ye gods! for cold-blooded cruelty, for passionate devilment, a woman is to a man what a hawk is to a dove—a tiger to a tame cat! Mrs Moreton, in spite of her handsome fortune of seven thousand a-year, her fine house in Mayfair, her opera box, and carriages and horses, and her *troupe* of interested suitors, is not a happy woman, and I do not believe she would object to a little platonic sympathy from *me* now,' and he laughs a short, bitter laugh.

'And you would not object to give it, perhaps,' Nest flashes hotly, jealous as a Turk, though she does not know it herself, that this woman has ever really and truly been dear to him. 'I hate Mrs Moreton! And I cannot be even Christianly sorry for anything—*anything* she may have had to suffer. I think her awfully mean and deceitful and avaricious, and—and horrid altogether. What business had she to go and marry a man who cared for her, just for his money, when she was head over ears in love with someone else?'

'Don't you expect anyone to be sorry for you then, when you go and marry Dalrymple Wentworth,' he says quickly.

'Bah! Comparisons are odious,' she remarks blandly, with a futile attempt at a 'put down' air. 'You see, you don't know

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Dal as I do. You don't understand a bit. He is so handsome, and so kind and good and devoted, that a girl would be a positive brute if she did not care for him.'

He winces visibly as he listens to these eulogies, although he is convinced that she does *not* feel love for the flaxen-haired, good-looking boy.

'But however miserable I might be—wicked enough to be—if I married him,' she goes on vehemently, 'you may be quite, quite sure I would never want or ask for sympathy from any one, platonic or otherwise.'

'God grant you may never, never feel the want of sympathy, my child,' he says softly; 'and in order that you never may, do not, I implore you, marry out of pity or out of kindness, or out of gratitude for a man's devotion, any more than for money or position. You sacrifice yourself, it is true, for a higher motive, but still, it is a sacrifice all the same, and will bring woe surely in its train. I wish with all my heart and soul I could believe that my poor words may influence you in this matter.'

'And why should they?' she questions, with a decided curl of her red lip, while the green-eyed monster sticks his fangs well into her heart. 'Preachers to be heeded should practise what they preach. Yours is the doctrine of following the light and not the lantern. Now, tell me honestly, on your honour, are you not contemplating a marriage of interest one of these days, Mr Trevelyian?'

She looks him boldly straight in the eyes as she speaks, for she has heard his name coupled once or twice with the rich widow, Mrs Moreton, but she feels rather nervous at her own pluck in cross-questioning, when she marks a swift ashy pallor sweep over his dark cheeks.

In the partial light he looks positively livid.

He hesitates a moment. It is pleasanter for him to answer 'No' to this girl, whom he loves already with the whole passion of a singularly passionate character; but Guy Trevelyian is not, with all his numerous blemishes, an adept in falsehood. It would not come at all easily to him to tell a lie, or even to prevaricate.

'I don't know,' he says at last, slowly, as he looks back at her steadily, with a curious sort of expression in his eyes, 'but one thing I *do* know, and that is, if I ever make a marriage of that sort, there will be what lawyers call extenuating circumstances in my case. I am hovering just now on the brink of uncertainty, however; one little word may decide me one way or the other.'

As now, with head bent down and averted from him as much as possible, she hearkens to this, a dreadful and deadly faint-

ness swoops over her. A dense fog seems to rise up before her vision, and, on the spur of the moment, she catches at his arm.

Startled, he looks down hastily, and even through the mist that dims her eyes, she can see almost a wild joy flash over his face.

'Nest, my little darling, you love me! You fear to lose me! he whispers hurriedly, catching her to him, and straining her to his breast. 'For God's sake speak the truth, and tell me if it is not so. Speak now, and decide your life and *mine!*'

Freeing herself, she rises, and stands before him, very erect and stately, but with a white little face, and with her hands clasping and unclasping nervously, and she answers him in a strange, forced, constrained voice,—

'This is all folly, Mr Trevelyian, and you know it! You are not a bit serious and sincere. Besides, I am going to marry Dal, and you—you had better marry a rich woman like Mrs Moreton!'

Seizing her hands, he draws her down again on the mossy bank, until her head is level with his shoulder, and her face close to his own.

What a sweet little face it is, he thinks; with its big star-like eyes, its damask flushed cheeks, its tender rosebud mouth, and with the blue dress and drooping yellow flowers giving a quaint beauty to it. He *must* have her for his very own; the thought that this little face will ever be on another man's breast goes through him like a knife.

He holds her firmly in his stalwart arms, his eyes hold hers in a spell; their hearts beat almost against one another.

'Come, tell me you love me, Nest; love me as I love you! for it is the truth,' he whispers passionately.

And it is the truth. The whole—whole unvarnished truth. She loves him—loves him as she has never loved anyone in her life, as she can never love anyone in her life again. To see him—to hear his voice—to touch him, all these are a delight that one little month has revealed to her, that eternity will never make her forget.

'Come, Nest! My own, own Nest! Just once let your mouth speak all that is in your heart; whisper it—here on my lips, Nest! So, and so!'

And he kisses her, drawing her arm round his neck.

What does he care if there is a dumb protest in her eyes, since her lips are his? Shadows are falling round them. A star or two peeps at them, veiling and unveiling their light as if in shyness. The soft breeze swishes by, lifting her dusky tresses till

they almost mingle with his hair. This mystic hour of gloaming—ah! will she ever know it again? or will she only see it in tortured memory? The mossy bank—the laburnum's golden clusters, and through the trailing shadows, her lover's passionate face, her lover's burning eyes! She is sorely tempted to speak now; to tell him that she loves him—loves him so much that life will be everything with him, and just Dead Sea fruit without him. That she is willing to throw her faith to Dalrymple Wentworth to the four winds of heaven, so long as the eyes of Guy Trevelyian gaze into her own, and his voice whispers in her ear. For she can want nothing more than these—nothing. Of course he knows he has her heart and soul in keeping—but even he, with true love's instinct, cannot know how absolutely she has yielded up every fibre of her being to him since the first day they met!

'Listen, my Nest; if you will tell me you love me now, I will never marry any other woman but you so long as I live—so help me God!'

She shuts her eyes, while a smile of joy passes over her as she hearkens to these words.

But woman nature is a paradox.

With a full consciousness of all that this man is to her, she draws herself away, and speaks with a flippancy that amazes herself.

'Marry Mrs Moreton, Mr Trevelyian! And forget, as I shall forget, that we two have ever spoken aught but conventional words to one another! You loved her, you know, and *on revient toujours à ses premières amours!*'

But she does not add that she is jealous—so jealous of his having loved any other woman but her, while he is her first and last love, that she feels sick and dizzy.

He gazes at her with surprise; women have always appeared enigmas to him. But this one, lovely, and crude, and country-fied, beats all others hollow. Just a moment before, she almost lay in his embrace, her eyes and lips rife with sweetness and softness—and now, even the thickening gloom cannot hide from him a defiant figure, a little, hard face, and curling mouth.

'Tea, tea!' shouts Gus, at the top of his healthy young lungs, from the other end of the lawn. 'Where are you, Nest?'

She does not answer, because she cannot. Her tongue seems to cleave to her mouth, and once more a shiver runs over her frame—a shiver of pain; but she walks on, with Guy Trevelyian by her side, while she thinks to herself that she must be mad,

for this is the second time she has put his love out of her life.

Will there be a third chance for her?

Suddenly she lifts up her eyes, and meets his gaze. Ah! the sadness of it, the infinite—infinite yearning and regret which she reads in the grey depths. Her pulses seem to stop beating; her spirit sinks—softens—relents and—yearns.

‘Guy!’

It is the first time she has called him by his Christian name, and it breaks from her in spite of herself.

‘Yes,’ he cries, standing still and facing her, while the pure starlight lends ineffable tenderness to his glance. ‘Once again, for God’s sake, say you love me; that you will marry me, Nest, or it may be *too late!*’ he adds, under his breath.

The third chance is given her, but it is *too late.*

‘Why, Nest, my darling, I thought you were lost!’ Dal exclaims reproachfully, emerging from a belt of laurastinus, and taking her little, cold hand, he draws it through his arm with a decided air of proprietorship.

One little, earnest, wistful, pleading glance she gives the other side of her; Guy Trevylian’s features gleam as hard as stone, and he is looking straight before him.

Then she marches into the Vicarage arm in arm with her affianced husband, and runs the ordeal of the lights and of Maud’s sarcastic face, with a feeble, deprecating smile on her own mouth, for which she scorns herself.

‘You look all scared and as white as a ghost, Nest,’ Maud says aloud; ‘and as if you had had a mental castigation. You have not by any chance been playing *Petruchio* to Nest’s *Katherine*, under the laburnums, Mr Trevylian?’

Nest does not dare look his way; but, to avoid Dal, she smuggles herself in at the tea-table, under the united wings of her mother and Gus, and, once safely established, she devotes herself, with a newly-developed gluttony, to hot muffins.

Before any other answer can be given to Miss Wylmer’s question, Dal, who is experiencing quite a fiendish sensation of captiousness, suspicion, and jealousy, and whose countenance lacks its usual amiability, breaks in with a good deal of *malice prepense*,—

‘Nest would not do for *Katherine*, Maud; the character would suit the charming widow, Mrs Moreton, far better. You will have a splendid opportunity of breaking her in, Trevylian, as she has suddenly arranged to go up to town to-morrow by the mid-day express—same train as you said yesterday you proposed taking.’

A morsel of hot muffin falls unheeded from her little, cold fingers, and Nest's dark orbs send a pleading look at a pair of grey eyes across the table.

The look is seen, but not responded to as it would have been under the laburnums; but Nest's heart leaps, as she hears,—

'I am leaving by the seven A.M. to-morrow, so as to catch the night mail for Paris, and shall therefore be denied Mrs Moreton's companionship *en route*. Miss Wylmer, what especial comestible have you a hankering for, in case I drop into Boissier's?' and Guy smiles one of his sweet, rare smiles.

'Vanille caramels,' cries Maud effusively, beaming all over under the potent influence of that smile; and then she sighs, for she remembers that vanille caramels were Duncan M'Pherson's daily offering during the halcyon days that are no more.

'And you, Miss Ernestine?'

For the first time since they entered the house, Nest catches his glance, and her own lids droop involuntarily.

'I hate sweets,' she says carelessly, unconsciously helping herself to five lumps of sugar in her tea as she speaks.

'Oh, my! what a tarradiddle, Nest,' cries Gus lustily, *enfant terrible* as he is. 'You *know* that you adore *nougat* more than anything in the world!'

'Always excepting *Dal*, of course!' Maud informs Mr Trevillian in a stage whisper, with an inane simper on her pretty coral mouth.

'Of course, *cela va sans dire*,' he answers, quietly enough; but once more, from under a great Chelsea jar of roses, Nest spies a momentary quiver on his lips, and a shadow on his eyes, and she feels as if hanging was too mild a punishment for her sister.

The elders engross him after this. The Rev. Theodore enters into a lengthy disquisition on natural history in general, and the Californian beetle in particular; and as the clock strikes nine, he rises to make his adieux.

He shakes hands all round before he goes up to Nest.

It may be that he wants the touch of her little palm to carry away with him to Paris.

She has taken up a stand at a distant window, but as stargazing is a lazy habit of hers, according to Maud, her unsociability on this occasion evokes no comment. She is feeling supremely grateful that Paterfamilias has challenged Dal to a game of chess, when she hears the step she would know among a thousand coming her way.

The window is wide open—a delicious twilight blends exquisitely with the lustre of the young moon hanging out in the still and tinted sky.

The fresh fragrance of grass and flowers sleeping in the dew; the big trees, with their brown trunks and mighty shadows; magnolia blossoms, pure and scented, hanging above and around; all seem full of peace, replete with that supreme magic of repose that dwells in a midsummer eve.

Presently, from the leafy depth of a little roseray, there comes a subtle trill—a full-throated note.

'It is a nightingale,' Guy says, in a hushed voice; and both he and Nest lean out of the window to listen.

But nightingales, like men and women, are fickle; and after that one lovely *roulade*, no note is heard.

'Checkmate!' cries Paterfamilias triumphantly.

'Yes!' answers Dal impatiently, with jealous eyes on the pair by the window.

Then Guy Trevylian whispers hurriedly,—

'I leave my heart with you, my Nest.'

For an instant their hands linger together, then he snatches the sprig of laburnum from her breast, and is gone.

When Nest turns from her survey of the night, a moment or two afterwards, it is to find Dal occupying the window by her side.

'I hate that fellow!' he mutters crossly.

'Hate *what* fellow?' she asks innocently, opening her large eyes in feigned wonderment.

'Every fellow who makes love to you, to be sure,' Dal falters angrily. 'I think men regular curs who try and poach on other men's manors.'

She looks him down with crushing contempt.

'And I hate slang, and mean, petty spite! I suppose you are hitting at Mr Trevylian, because Mrs Moreton is in love with him; and that rails you.'

'It is not very likely that a fact I have known, in common with the rest of the world, for ages, should suddenly rail me. Mrs Moreton may love Mr Trevylian as much as she likes, and as much as everybody knows she does. It's *your* feelings towards him that I am bothering about.'

'Don't fash yourself on that score,' she answers, with flashing eyes; 'as far as *I* am concerned, Mrs Moreton may have Mr Trevylian all to herself; I don't care if I never see him again!'

She is jealous—jealous—horribly, ghoulishly jealous. Yet, through it all, she is ashamed of herself for her unloyal speech, and wishes her tongue had been cut out before she made it.

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Oh, will her falsehood bring any harm on her dear love?
and she grows pale as she thinks of it.

'Really, Nest—really?'

'What do you mean by that, Dal? Am I such a story-teller
that you want me to repeat things over and over again? I
am getting quite sick of it all,' she says, in a hard, cold tone
that stabs him to the heart.

'I don't want to doubt you, Nest! Heaven knows it makes
me quite miserable to think you give a thought to any other
follow.'

'I don't,' she murmurs, rather sullenly.

'Well, don't be angry with me, darling,' he says, very plead-
ingly; and giving a glance around, he finds the family circle
have vanished into thin air, so as to allow him a sweet good-
night.

'I am not angry. Trifles do not anger me,' she answers, with
a dignified air. 'But I am awfully tired, so I'll say good-night,'
and she puts out her *left* hand.

Guy's touch lingers yet warm and close and tender on the
right one, and she *cannot* give it into another man's clasp
ready.

'What is the matter with your other hand, Nest?' Dal
asks anxiously. 'It is not hurt, I trust! I like it best,
because my ring—our betrothal ring—is on it.'

'No, it isn't!' she cries, slipping off the diamond hoop, and
letting it drop on the floor. 'And I am glad to be rid of it.'

'It makes me feel like a criminal with a rope round my neck.
Pick it up, Dal, and wear it yourself, or give it to someone
else who will prize it more.'

'Nest!'

Dal looks at her aghast, horrified, and drops—real big drops
gather in his Prussian-blue eyes. Then he picks up the
diamond ring and offers it meekly to her.

'Please take it back, my darling,' he falters, 'and forgive
me if I vexed you with foolish jealousy. It's only because I
love you so, Nest;' and slipping the ring on her finger, he
kisses and kisses her hand.

She draws it away quickly with a shudder—the touch of
Dal's warm young lips seems to hurt her. For the nonce she
is hard and cruel and unforgiving.

'Good-night,' she says, curtly.

'Good-night! Won't you say something nice to me before
I go, Nest?'

'Bosh!' she answers coldly, and without another word she
walks out of the room and upstairs wearily.

'So everyone knows Mrs Moreton is in love with' him. Money and position as well as love she offers him,' she mutters, with a sinking heart. 'What chance have I against all these?'

CHAPTER V.

FOOL'S PARADISE.

'Why let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungalled play—
For some must watch—while some must sleep,
So runs the world away.'

THE highroad runs from the village of Ravenshill, and passes the southern lodge of Wentworth Park, and half-way between village and lodge stands a moderate-sized villa of modern build.

It is a mongrel edifice; the roof and windows aspire to the Gothic, the frontage of red brick looks Queen Anne-ish, and on the whole there is a cockney stamp and a common-place aspect, fit for common-place folk.

It certainly is not a casket for beauty or refinement—nevertheless—with the quips and cranks of Dame Fortune—beauty is enshrined within.

The Lindens is not an expensive abode, and suits the purse of the wife and daughter of a certain Colonel Vane, commanding a regiment of cavalry serving out its periods of service in India.

When Angela Vane's education is fully completed, she and her mother are also to go eastwards, an event to which the deserted and desolate old *sabreur* looks forward with infinite relish.

He is very weary of his bachelor existence, his mess life, with its attendant billiards and 'brandy pānee;' and through the long hot days, when existence, human and vegetable, seems to stagnate, he counts anxiously the time of his probation, and pictures the happiness of regaining his Lares and Penates.

She is a delicate, ethereal-looking woman, little Mrs Vane, with rather a *spirituel* cast of face, that, in spite of many years in an Indian clime, yet retains a good deal of soft peach bloom, and her nut-brown tresses are still thick and lustrous.

The only child of a proud old county squire, she had been nurtured in the lap of luxury, remaining in blissful ignorance of the value of pounds, shillings, and pence, until one fine day a picnic sealed her fate, and she married for desperate love a dashing captain of six feet two, without a sou beyond his pay, and instead of congratulations had condolences showered on her.

There is a strange lack of worldliness about her character, and if her nature is a trifle shallow, its limpid depths show up an almost childlike purity and frankness.

She is absolutely incapable of grappling, like the strong-minded British matrons, with the perpetual petty grievances that the exercise of rigid but necessary domestic economy entails and is 'sat upon' to an alarming extent. She lives, poor little soul, from cock-crow to night in a chronic condition of meek resignation and quiescence to being mercilessly rifled by those harpies, servants, upon whom she looks as so many birds of prey, and feeling unable to cope with them, consigns herself to perpetual martyrdom.

Her 'cross, now-a-days such a common one, might be regarded in a ludicrous light by her acquaintances, only few natures are adamant enough to refuse sympathy when she recounts her little troubles in a gentle, pathetic, though slightly monotone voice, and with a piteous expression in her mild hazel eyes.

She, too, awaits anxiously the expiration of her probation in England, and longs to find herself installed within the plaster walls of her Indian bungalow, her mind in repose, undisturbed in its serenity by the appalling complication of the butcher's, baker's, and grocer's accounts.

Her life just now is certainly not an enviable one. Although she is just one of those women who suggest being made of porcelain, to be handled gently and preserved from all violent concussions, she is for ever in a state of laceration either by the arrival of 'bills' or the non-arrival of the Indian mail, for she adores her gallant old *militaire*, with his furrows and his grizzled moustache, with all the fervour of the bygone past.

Angela Vane, the daughter, is just seventeen, with a graceful, willowy figure; and a fragility of organisation that strikes almost painfully.

Her face, pure and seraphic, is a prototype of Correggio's Magdalen, and her tender blue eyes have an habitual tendency to glancing heavenward with an appealing look in them.

Her little features are chiselled like a cameo; and the small oval face is enframed in soft hair, too dark to be flaxen, and too light to be auburn. Her temper is as sweet as her face.

In fact, Angela Vane is one of those nonpareils in nature rarely met with. She is scarcely fitted to mix with 'creatures of mortal mould,' and yet she is composed of that real stuff out of which good loyal wives and loving mothers are made.

She has been for years and is still Nest Wylmer's bosom friend and great ally. They are the same age and are almost inseparable, notwithstanding their strong and striking contrast in all points.

On Nest's part, it must be confessed the attachment savours a little of despotism and patronage, while Angela's feelings are wholly of affection and implicit faith. She is a little too much given to sentiment, and is highly impressionable, but, though susceptible and romantic, she is quite capable of a depth of constancy that such soft yielding natures don't usually possess.

Like a good many girls of her calibre, it is a positive necessity to her to cling to something; she could not live without doing so, for her heart is overflowing with warmth, and it would be a punishment to her not to lavish that warmth on some object.

Not for a moment must my readers surmise that Angela is a gushing young lady, a victim to ill-disciplined feelings, or inclined to that dreadful 'cheek by jowl' flirtation, upon which girls in these days look as an innocent pastime. Purity in all things, in look and language and manner, are as natural to her as purple bloom to a grape or unsullied whiteness to untrodden snow, and she is just of that age when woman's nature, if unperverted, begins to lose all the crudeness that characterises girlhood and measures its capacity for the higher aims and saintly purposes that surely—surely—underlie this life of ours!

The Vanes come of a good old stock, in which pride has descended from father to son, and Angela is as proud as her forefathers, and would rather die than show her heart to anyone.

For there is a secret hidden in this heart of hers, a secret that makes her blush, and sigh, and weep even, when no one is by to see.

She loves somebody, and her friend and ally, Nest, is her rival.

The object of her love is quite ignorant of, or else insensible to, the amount of worship lavished on him, and Dal Wentworth, though he marks with a sharp pang Nest's frequent indifference to his approach, quite overlooks the lovely pink flush in Angela's cheek, and the soft light in Angela's eyes that rise up to greet him.

Very young and very inflammable, there is but one woman in

all the world just now to poor passion-tossed Dal. He firmly believes that if Nest goes out of his life, there will be a complete end to that ethereal essence called 'love' in his composition.

He is quite content to sit and gaze in a moonstruck sort of fashion on her changing face. He is happy when he holds her little hand in his, and he is in a delirium of delight when she permits him now and then to clasp her slim waist or touch with his warm young lips her forehead or her cheek.

For Nest is strangely stingy to him of her lips.

So Angela's soul looks out of her azure eyes in vain, and the tremor in her voice when she speaks to him makes as little impression on short-sighted Dalrymple Wentworth as the swallow's wings dipped into the surging main.

He is going to marry Nest, and his heart is hers to trifle with, mercilessly mutilate or trample on, and yet to retain as her own, he thinks, with the honour and loyalty that is a part of his character.

Nest, however, is sharper-sighted than her lover—women in matters of love are always so much more acute than men—and she has found out Angela's secret.

She feels no vestige of malice against her unsuccessful rival. It may be perhaps because she does not care for Dal sufficiently to be jealous, but, like a true daughter of Eve, she experiences a strange gratification in flaunting the conquest of him before Angela, not so much in words as in actions. She domineers over poor Dal twice as much when Angela is by, and though it might be put down to a good motive, a desire to crush fallacious hope and save future pain, it is more probably an emanation of female vanity that likes to show off its power over a human heart—for Nest is dreadfully imperfect.

She never forgets the French proverb, '*la langue des femmes est leur épée, et elle ne la laissent par se rouiller,*' for she positively seems to revel in levelling shafts at Dal, though she is denied one gratification that her sex delight in, namely, contradiction, which goes a long way to keep the apple of discord on the bound and rebound.

An indulgence in 'nagging' is quite an ex-parte luxury in her case, for though the worm turns when trodden on, Dal, apparently more abject than that creeping thing, bears all, and bears with an exemplary patience that outrivals Job's.

At this especial time, Nest's mind is in a particularly chaotic condition, unsettled and unhinged, and her conscience is rather self-condemnatory as well, making her temper fractious and trying.

It is the day after Guy Trevylian's departure, and the lovely weather has tempted the usual trio—Nest, Angela, and Dal—into the shady gardens of the Vicarage. As a graphic description of their feelings towards each other, a map of their respective positions may suffice.

Nest half lies in an indolent attitude on a grassy slope, not the mossy bank under the golden laburnum clusters—to that she has designedly turned her back.

Her shabby straw hat with its long streamers is flung down beside her, her brand-new peacock-blue is discarded for an old green serge dress that has seen its best days long ago, and she is apparently deep in Scott's 'Heart of Midlothian,' the only waters of literature allowed by the Reverend Theodore to his offspring, but in reality she is not reading, and is gone off into a brown study, quite oblivious of an audience. She certainly looks charming, in spite of her careless attire, as she lies there, with one little hand embedded in her hair, as it supports her head, her face is slightly flushed with the heat, her very long black lashes droop over her half-closed eyes, and her slim figure is symmetry itself, and Dal, sitting opposite on a rustic bank, drinks in the beauty of the picture she makes, with a rapt look in the ultramarine eyes that never swerve to the right or to the left of him.

It is his sweetheart lying there—his wife that is to be!—and as he gazes, he begins to count up how long it will be before that exquisite form, that *entraînante* face, will belong to him for ever and ever!

A little apart, and placed purposely just where she can see *him*, herself unseen, stands Angela, doing violence to her nature, which is as truthful as a child's, for she is hypocritically pretending to be employed in sketching the very laburnums, with their drooping blossoms, that Nest is determined not to see to-day, while in reality she is trying to transmit to paper a handsome boyish face, a face with perfect features and hyacinthine curls—the face that she sees by day and dreams of at night.

Evidently it is love's labour lost, and her work is unsatisfactory, by the knitting of her brow and the vexed look in her eyes.

The silence has lasted some time, while the purple butterflies skim lazily over the clove carnations, and a very vicious-looking bumble-bee comes and settles on a rose, and then buzzes away again with a monotonous hum—and a few fluttering white clouds float athwart the great sapphire plain of sky, and a sweet fragrance of heliotrope and mignonette encompasses them.

But Dal and Nest are matter of fact and material enough just now. The loveliness of faint blue ether—the greenness of foliage, the perfume of flowers—'Earth's fairest children,' as some poet calls them—find no favour in their sight, for he is thinking only of her, and she is thinking only of—Guy Trevelyian.

Presently Scott's 'Heart of Midlothian' tumbles ignominiously with a jerk out of Nest's hand on to the turf, betokening in its fall absence of mind in the peruser. Dal stoops and picks it up, and seizing, as it appears to him, a golden opportunity, imprints a fervent kiss on the hand languidly extended for the book.

This fervent little kiss is the straw that break's the camel's back. Nest, brimming over with a mighty love and a desperate regret for the man who 'left his heart with her,' flushes deeply. The caress seems a sacrilege to Guy Trevelyian. With dilating nostrils and curling lips, she flings down unfortunate Scott again with an impatient gesture.

'Dal, I *wish* you would learn to leave me alone!' she flashes. 'I *hate* being watched and kissed, and made to look like a fool before other people!' and she glances meaningly at Angela, and sees something that lashes her into greater irritation.

Yet it is only a pretty, golden-haired vision, with unutterable tenderness in its soft blue eyes, that gaze pitifully at Dal, the culprit, and then, for the first time, turn with reproach in them on Nest herself.

It is quite enough. Nest's quick temper rises to bubbling point. She is not accustomed to bear reproval from anyone tamely and meekly in these days. By-and-by, when she has been through a furnace of pain and affliction, perhaps she will learn, when smitten on one cheek, to turn the other. Now, even Maud's seniority does not protect her from a retort courteous from her younger sister when she deserves it.

Never pausing to reflect—reflection is a thing her impulsive nature is not given to, and not weighing the cruelty of her words—she blurts out vehemently,—

'Why on earth do you not transfer your love-making to Angela, Dal? She would willingly be the recipient of it, and be thankful, too, I know.'

Once having vented her anger in these words, and being naturally imbued with ladylike feelings, she is very much ashamed of herself, and to cover her mistake with bravado, she gives a sharp, unpleasant laugh.

Dal glances involuntarily at Angela as Nest speaks, and in the burning blush, the pained expression in the eyes, in the

dumb but eloquent prayer of the lips for forbearance, he reads at last the vigilantly-guarded secret of Angela's heart.

In another instant he holds her in his arms, her white face pillowed on his shoulder. But she is quite unconscious of her position, for she has quietly fainted.

'Nest, Nest!' he whispers reproachfully. 'You are not satisfied with being unkind to me, but you are cruel to this child, who has done nothing to vex you! Poor little thing! She isn't strong enough to stand taunts, you see.'

And he looks down commiseratingly on the white face, but flushes himself as the golden-fringed lids slowly open, and the eyes beneath them thank him mutely but eloquently for his championship.

Nest notices at once the sympathy in his face, and the gratitude in hers, and bites her lips in annoyance. She is vexed to be the primary cause of a silent understanding between these two. Not that she really cares for Dal, still, woman-like, she is unwilling to make him over to anyone else -- at least not yet.

Pushing him aside, she kneels down by Angela, patting her on the back as if she were a baby. But Angela refuses to be comforted, and the faint culminates in a torrent of tears.

At last calm is partially restored, and Nest reverts again, in a pitiless sort of fashion, to the sore subject.

This is one of her 'wicked' days, as she is accustomed to call certain days in her life, when some malicious imp of Satan bestrides her spirit, and prompts her to all sorts of things of which her conscience entirely disapproves.

One would fancy that a knowledge of the falsity her own heart harbours would make her lenient to others, and disinclined to probe a hidden wound in another woman's soul. But not a bit of it.

'Angela, you absurd child!' she says tartly, 'what did I say to raise such a storm in a teacup? You must have a guilty conscience, or you would never have taken my words to heart like this,' and, stooping, she scrutinises the tearful eyes, that certainly flinch from her regard. 'I believe you *are* in love with Dal,' she goes on flippantly, 'and all the while he is in love with me! What a stupid game of cross purposes we are playing?'

'Hush, Nest,' Angela whispers imploringly. 'How can you say such things for him to hear? You don't know what you make me suffer. Mr Wentworth worships the ground you tread on; and I would die to see you both happy.'

'Little hypocrite!' laughs Nest. 'I want to impress upon

you the fact that Dal would be much happier with you than with me. You would sit at his feet, and adore him, while I should—'

'Have a contempt for him,' she is on the point of adding, but she pauses.

'If he is wise enough to awaken to the knowledge of what is best for him, I should not think of interfering between you two. I'll call him—'

But the skirts of her green serge are seized with utter disregard to their crumpling.

'Nest, *don't* be unkind. It is downright cruel of you to try and expose to a man who has no other thought but you, *my* feelings! Listen, dear,' and Angela draws her down close, and in spite of the humiliating confession, her white face grows radiant, and the pretty, soft eyes flash as if with pride in the object she loves. 'I *do* love him; and I shall never love anyone else as long as I live! But I know he cares no more for me than he does for the wind that passes him by, and dies on some distant shore. But you, Nest—you, who are so dear to him—do not treat him so! Be your own self to him. True love is not to be had every day, Nest, so do not throw it away.'

'Rubbish!' Nest answers, carelessly.

'True love' has been offered her four times already, she thinks, so she does not value it as much as she should. Still, when Angela is gone, and Dal comes to her, looking very unlike himself, and very 'down in the mouth,' some feeling prompts her to clasp his arm, and to say, with a smiling face,—

'I won't be cross again, Dal—*do* make friends!'

Make friends. Friendship is an absurd word to express his feelings, as he not only forgives her, but seems to love her doubly for the ill-humour she has displayed, just as we prize the sun when clouds have hidden it away for a while.

Sitting there amongst the sweet-scented flowers, and under the arching trees, with the pale primrose light in the western sky, the stars twinkling dimly above, and nature at peace after the cares of the day, the knowledge of Angela's love fades right away from his memory like an idle dream, and he only remembers that his dear one is his own again; and the sun sets, and the sun rises, and the days that intervene between Nest's departure for London glide swiftly on their course, making no particular footprints on the sands of time, but yet they lap Dal's senses in a sort of Elysian dream.

From the hour he opens his ultramarine eyes to the hour he

closes them, he breathes, and walks, and talks—laughs, eats, drinks, and is gay—in the fool's paradise life is to him.

Nest's love is ambrosia of the gods, that we are told bestows health, and strength, and mental bliss on the mortal who is granted it.

Poor young fellow !

The girl, who up to this time has been wilful and capricious, has suddenly put on the meekness of a lamb. It does not really suit her style, perhaps, for only to look on her face is enough to know that hers is a '*jeunesse orageuse*.'

There is not naturally placidity in the stormy light of her luminous brown eyes, and in the quick compression of her full under-lip beneath her small, pearly teeth, if anything occurs to ruffle her temper ; but for the nonce Dal's heaven is wonderfully serene, and he delivers up his heart and soul to the enjoyment of it. A very pretty pair of lovers they make too—both so young, both good-looking, and both apparently in love—as they sit side by side, *a la* Paul and Virginia, under the spreading oaks of the Vicarage. Dal utters a few inanities—foolish, loving inanities—but conversation usually drags, and after a minute or two, he half closes his eyes, and indulges in a beautiful dream.

'It was dreaming ! it was dreaming !
It was dreaming, after all !'

as the song has it ; but nevertheless the dreaming is very pleasant, and he pictures himself a second *Claude Melnotte* with a wish for Paphian bowers, in which he and Nest could dwell, and on whose delights he would fain expatiate to his sweet love, only that, unlike *Pauline*, Nest laughs at fantastical talk, and much prefers the topics of the day.

He loves her so ! more perhaps—though he does not know it—because his mother has set her face against the match, for it is curious how opposition fans the flame of love, or what we call love in these days.

Meanwhile Nest, not caring much to disturb Dal's dream-moments, basks indolently in the sunshine which she loves, because it is in consonance with her tropical temperament, and occasionally heaves a sigh of *ennui* at the part she has elected to play. Guy Trevylian has gone to Paris, and she does not know if they two will ever meet again ; and her conscience is alive with remorse and regret after the short but delicious time in which he had filled her life.

Impulsive, and with good feelings, she fancies she cannot

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atone too much, by excessive outward *empressment*, for the injury which she knows she is doing Dal in letting Guy's face haunt her as she does—but in spite of her the last tones of his goodbye linger on her ears with a sharp and subtle thrill, to the total extinction of the tender whispers that fall from Dal's lips.

Yet she contrives, girl as she is, and a mere novice in diplomacy, to veil her real sentiments under an acquiescent if not demonstrative affection; and she disguises them with a skill that does more credit to her brain, or to her ability to become rapidly that contemptible thing, a true woman of fashion, than to her really pure and loyal nature.

CHAPTER VI.

VANITAS VANITATUM.

'Men, some to business, some to pleasure take,
But every woman is at heart a rake.'

THE day on which Nest sets out to take what she ingeniously calls her proper share in the 'poms and vanities and sinful lusts' is just a snatch from Paradise.

It dawns with an unwonted crimson. The heliotrope, and mignonette, and clove carnations smell more deliciously; the roses blush more brightly, the birds sing louder, the sun ascends his throne in greater splendour, and, in fact, all nature seems to smile.

Dal, who is in love to fatuous stupidity, thinks his little sweetheart has never looked so charming as when she trips down to him for a very last good-bye walk under the shade of the southern wall, where the peaches and apricots will be quite ripe and luscious by the time she is back again to eat them.

She is equipped in a dandy, double-breasted jacket of sage green, a little fast in cut, perhaps, but undeniably becoming to her slight, willowy figure; a little stuck-up collar, defining by its tightness a slender throat, is fastened by a jewelled fly, his own gift on her last birthday, and a tiny hat, with a long black ostrich plume curling over the brim, perches coquettishly well over her brow.

Altogether she is the sweetest, prettiest thing imaginable, and

Dal's heart sinks as he remembers that other men's eyes beside his own will linger admiringly on his darling's *riante* face for the period of six whole weeks.

Six long weeks—what an eternity they seem to his love-sick soul!

She slips a tan-gauntleted hand through his arm, and looks up into his woe-begone face, her own features rippling with pleasure and excitement.

'And, you will promise not to pitch into me, and blame me too awfully, Dal, if I happen to find someone very nice, someone I can like, in Tophet?'

'Tophet' is the Reverend Theodore's pet name for London, and it has become a familiar word in his household, thereby losing a good deal of its significance.

Dal colours furiously, and a mortified expression crops up in his blue eyes.

Under this aspect, which has at any rate the charm of novelty (for if his eyes *have* a flaw, it is a sort of vacancy in their depths), his personal appearance decidedly improves, and young persons like Nest, foolish young virgins who have not learned to trim their lamps with the oil of caution, are rather apt to loose their heads to masculine good looks.

She has never thought Dal an Adonis; it may be that dark men are more to her taste, yet he is a splendid specimen of England's gilded youth, with a fair, aristocratic cast of face, a trifle insipid, perhaps, and not overweighted with intellect, yet withal a face that most women would be liable to look at again and again. He has a tall, slender, swaying figure, that betokens more refinement and *sangre azul* than strength and protection. A very good figure it is, but Nest likes broad shoulders and stalwart arms; still, with a crimson flush dying his fair skin, and a light born of wounded love and pride animating his eyes, his features certainly have more expression than usual, and Nest, little flirt as she really is, when she peeps up at him, almost believes that she had better pledge herself at once to marry him at a certain date, and so put all other men out of her head.

But presently he grows pale, the flash dies out of his glance, his face recovers its normal insipidity, and she blesses her stars inwardly that she has not been rash, and hearkened to a foolish impulse.

'You *dare* not like anyone else, so long as you wear your engagement ring,' Dal says, rather doggedly, hurting her hand.

'Nonsense!' she answers carelessly, frowning and wincing

with the pain he has given her; 'after all, it is only a *conditional* engagement ring.'

Upon this reminder, he subsides at once from fever-heat into the meekness of the traditional lamb.

'True!' he ejaculates plaintively; 'so I must live in hope that no one *will* come between us two! I have been horribly jealous of Trevilian and Elmsdale, and John Dillon, and of everybody else who has even looked at you; but now I know the feeling was simply absurd and petty, compared to the tortures I shall endure for the next six weeks. Anyway, Nest, I may be more to you some day than I appear to be now, or may be—*nothing*.' He almost breaks down here, and gulps audibly, 'But you will always be everything to me! I am not an eloquent lover, darling. I haven't a bit the gift of the gab, like some fellows; and somehow fine speeches always seem to stick in my throat, but you don't want me to tell you that the happiness or misery of my life lies in these dear little hands,' and he falls to kissing the tan gauntlets ravenously.

Nest is so really amazed at the genuine pathos in his voice that she can answer nothing, and feels a little moved herself. So he goes on after a moment,—

'One thing I must say to you, Nest, before we part. I would lay my heart down in the dust for you to trample on—better that than, out of mere kindness or sense of honour, you married me, and crushed your own happiness in the act! No, no! I don't mind one bit how long I wait for you, and all the time I shall hope for you, and pray for you; but unless you can look me straight in the face, and *swear* that you have not an atom of feeling for any other fellow, you shall never bind our life to mine.'

He gives quite a long breath as he finishes, and once more she glances up at him furtively, and this time with a certain respect.

It is the most lengthy and most eloquent oration he has attempted, and he rises ever so many inches in her estimation.

Up to this identical moment he has never displayed anything surprising in the way of magnanimity or self-immolation on the altar of unselfishness. He has, in fact, entirely confined himself to the sweet rhetoric of pet names and caresses; but now he beats Solon into fits, and just for an instant he succeeds in driving lazy grey eyes and resolute mouth out of her mind.

A chivalric young Viking, full of fire, and pathos, and sacrifice, with hyacinthine locks of gold, and eyes like dew forget-me-nots, strides up and down the path of the

kitchen garden by her side, with a new-born eloquence on his tongue, and she believes she really likes him.

'Don't forget, Dal, dear, that you and I are engaged—conditionally, it is true, but I sha'n't let you off your bargain; she whispers, while Maud and Gus keep their backs discreetly turned, and the train, with a shrill demoniac snort, prepares to start.

Dal looks at her and smiles, a tender smile, but a dubious one, and once more, with a quick look around, he fell to devouring the tan gauntlet.

Then with a shy, sheepish face, like young lovers have, he tips the guard a sovereign to lock the door, so that no audacious masculine regard shall feast on his sweetheart *en route*.

Nest is not of a nature to give way to pathos, but she is conscious all the same of a sharp little pang, as her lover's downcast face, Gus and Maud's familiar features, and the lovely road, winding away to the silvery little Yarl, vanish like a dream.

As the solitary hours in her first-class carriage drag slowly on, great particles of dust, and a general sense of fatigue and stuffiness, slightly obliterate her *colour de rose* visions, but she pulls up bravely against the discomfort, satisfied that it is a very small price to pay for the enormous novelty that is about to enter her life—that mature life of seventeen years that stand so deeply in want of experience.

Cramped up within the narrow limits of her native Ravenhill, she believes that she has been denied all expansion of heart and brain.

Through the heat and glare of the day she travels, except one short ten minutes, during which she stretches her limbs on a brisk walk on the platform, and seeks satisfaction for her healthy young appetite in an antediluvian sandwich and a stable bun, that tries the capabilities of her strong little teeth.

Then, as the noontide heat grows less, she pulls a wrap over her shoulders, settles her dusky head comfortably in a corner, and falls fast asleep—in a slumber too deep for dreaming.

'Paddington! Paddington!'

The train stops with a spasmodic jerk, and Nest is rudely awakened by a lurch, first forwards, then backwards, at the guard, with Dal's sovereign snug in his pocket, unlocks the door, and helps her carefully out, with a smirk on his face.

For three-quarters of an hour, a four-wheeler, going snail's pace, shakes and bumps her about, and finally deposits her at a handsome entrance in Chesham Place, Belgravia.

on his She stands a moment with a failing heart, then mounting the
 steps, she gives the bell a mild pull.
 —con- Mrs Lorimer is at home.
 rgain; Nest follows the ancient servitor at a respectful distance up
 cretely the wide staircase, regarding his emaciated calves and canary
 are to lush breeches with a certain awe, and her sense of smallness
 creases as he flings open a cream-and-gold door with a
 ubious grandisonian air.
 veour- An old woman, who is not exactly an old woman, sits just
 ave, he opposite, and bolt upright, with a huge pile of damask cushions
 lacious propping her up behind and at the sides.
 is con- She affects a Louis Quatorze coiffure of a mass of frizzled
 down white curls. She has a pair of very keen eyes, of neutral shade,
 lovely and a nose which is unmistakably Roman. And as Nest goes
 like a timidly to her, she laughs, and tenders a hand withered and
 slowly grey, but with magnificent gems sparkling on every finger.
 ue and 'How do you do, my love?' she says graciously, her hawk
 but she eyes examining the small flushed face of her visitor. 'You are
 it is a commonly pleasant to look at, I am glad to say. You must
 s about have been dieted on roses to have such a lovely colour. I
 stand warrant you have not been in many stuffy ballrooms in your
 Ravens- life.'
 sion c 'No,' answers Nest, plucking up courage. 'I am only seven-
 excep- ten, and there is very little society at home—at least, none at
 limbs: all,' correcting herself, remembering the mandates of her youth,
 for he- 'but the truth should be told at all times, 'but I hope to in-
 a stab- crease my knowledge of balls now.'
 rap over- 'So you shall, and you will enjoy them amazingly,' decides
 corre- Mrs Lorimer, thumping her clawy forefinger monotonously
 g- against an exquisite little Sevres snuff-box. 'You are really
 s ruder- remarkably pretty, my dear, uncommonly like what your father
 rds, at- was when last I saw him. Dear! dear! I am afraid to say
 unloc- how many years it is ago. "Handsome Theo," he was called.
 k on- 'He hadn't gone into the church then, and he *was* a wicked
 going- fellow. So sly with—women.'
 deposes- Nest listens open mouthed.
 via. That Paterfamilias, with his sleek hair and sanctified look, a
 le inclined to obesity, in spite of his plaisters and wraps and
 dding, should ever have posed for Don Juan, is enough to
 onish her weak mind!
 But Mrs Lorimer does not pause for an answer. She likes to
 on, like the man with the cork leg.
 Yes, you will have plenty of admiration and attention, of
 curse. You will probably make the best match of the season,
 and you must not let your little head get turned. Recollect

that is only allowed to heiresses, and I fancy Handsome Theo has not garnered up much for his progeny. How many are there of them?’

‘Seven,’ Nest says.

‘Seven! Good gracious! Who would have thought it? It only seems the other day since Theo and I were spoons together. Is he as irresistible and fascinating as ever?’

Nest thinks of him as he is, and not as he may have been, and feels a violent inclination to laugh at the semi-sentimental, semi-regretful tone of her interlocutor—an inclination which she conceals by energetically blowing her nose.

‘Dad’ is so thoroughly antipodean to sentiment, so thoroughly anti-romantic, with his ailments of the back and opposite his back, his air cushions, pills, powders, to say nothing of nauseous black draughts, that to fancy him ‘spoons’ is a stretch of imagination she has never arrived at in her wildest flights.

Since the failure of his health—or the fancied failure of his health—which is now quite ten years ago, he has almost handed over parochial duties, with a salary, to a plain-faced, low-church curate, and exists generally in a recumbent position, devoting himself to those refreshing waters of literature known as modern advanced thought. He has a little money besides the living of Ravenshill, and he owns a few acres, the cultivation of which has devolved on a working foreman and on Gus the astute, who, young in years, yet wears an old head on his shoulders; and this is a prudent arrangement, for it is not likely that any human being, with an average modicum of intelligence, can grapple conveniently with the problems of the age, and attend at the same time to the condition of crops and stock, for speculative philosophy, as a rule, does not agree well with practical agriculture, and neither do the most exhaustive researches into the nature, state, and descent of man throw any especial light upon the subject of phosphate fertilisers.

To his progeny of seven, Dad is very much an object of indifference, playing no active part whatever in their lives.

From big to little they know—have known instinctively from the hour of their advent on this sea of storms—that their society and prattle weary him and fret him, and, therefore, they give him as little of that as possible.

Even little Mop, with her cherub face and lisping accents, reposes all her infantine tears and shrieks of joy on the sympathising maternal bosom.

Stern, Dad is not—tyrannical, never—but ‘bothered’ often than which, it may be asserted, there are few things more distasteful and disheartening to the infant mind.

'Dad is very nice, but he is rather old now, Mrs Lorimer,' Nest says, as a sort of wakener, thinking that a very long lapse of time has been forgotten by her hostess.

'True, my love. What a thing it is to be young—what a thing! And so, of course, Handsome Theo cannot ride at a fence now, I suppose? He used to go over them as light as a bird; many's the time we have done it in company.'

Nest has never heard of the Nimrodian proclivities of the author of her being. Since she can remember, Dad has been slightly corpulent, and the idea of his flying like a bird over anything presents itself in such a ludicrous light that once more she has recourse to her handkerchief to conceal the mirth that rises to her lips.

'Did you get that dress out of Noah's ark?' Mrs Lorimer questions abruptly, in a sepulchral voice. 'Sage green, too! Such a trying shade for a dark skin; and now I come to look at you, you are certainly very dark, my dear. If I had never known Handsome Theo, I should have thought gipsy blood ran in your veins—your mother, perhaps—half-cast by any chance?'

'Mother's as fair as a lily,' Nest flashes indignantly; 'and so is Maud, and all of them, excepting me.'

'Dear me! how remarkably strange!' murmurs the old lady, in a dubious sort of way, eyeing her visitor keenly; 'but, however, you are very nice-looking, and when I have taken you to Swaebe, you will be a credit to your father. By the way, I might take you to a ball to-night, if you have a presentable garment.'

Nest reddens at this pleasurable prospect, and forgets her vexation that the sage-green *chef d'œuvre* of Miss Smith, the Werth of Ravenshill, should have been put down to a remnant of Schem, Ham, and Japhet.

'I have a nice white tulle and wild roses,' she answers eagerly; 'it is quite new, and fits like wax.'

'White tulle and wild roses—it sounds poetical,' murmurs Mrs Lorimer, energetically tapping away at her snuff-box; 'but poetry is not always to be depended on, you know. I must see you on before we can decide whether it's good enough for your debut. Go up to your room at once, my love. Ring the bell, and my maid shall go with you.'

It sounds very much like a mandate, and Nest obeys, and in the course of ten minutes she flutters into the drawing-room again, with the fleecy waves of tulle billowing round her, and big bunches of wild roses blushing in her hair and on her bosom, and catching up her aerial draperies here and there.

She certainly looks uncommonly pretty, and she knows it; and the pleasant consciousness lends a bright bloom to her cheek, that bids fair to rival the flowers she wears.

'Walk up and down the room, my love,' Mrs Lorimer orders, and again Nest obeys, and promenades the lengthy apartment with a slow, sinuous glide that she has learnt at the Ravenshill academy for dancing and deportment.

'That's good, very good!' enunciates the old lady unctuously. 'Now, suppose I am Queen Victoria, and curtsey low!' and she draws herself up in an attempt to look regal, bridling her head until all the Louis Quatorze frizzled curls commence to tintillate.

Nest makes a profound reverence, with all the loyal blood in her body stirring within her. She knows she was at the head of the Ravenshill deportment class, and has a comfortable feeling of assurance about her.

'You'll do!' pronounces Mrs Lorimer solemnly; 'you can go now and disrobe yourself of your finery, and then you shall have some dinner, of which you will be very glad, I dare say.'

'Yes!' Nest avows frankly; for the antediluvian sandwich, and the stale Bath bun, have ceased to sustain nature, and she is hungry, dreadfully, unpoetically hungry.

A little later she rises, all the better for a dainty repast, a dinner served in exquisite silver and crystal, and at which she has been regaled with *entrées* and *entremets*, the subtle piquance and sweetness of which are a revelation to her countrified experience of plain roast and boil.

Eight o'clock chimes by the magnificent marble clock, when the hothouse grapes and pines are removed, and it will be some moments before the butler with the emaciated calves re-appears with the post-prandial coffee.

This palatial mansion is to be her abiding-place for six weeks, so Nest decides to take a closer survey of her surroundings; she glances at her hostess for permission, as a preliminary step, but Mrs Lorimer has retired into a huge arm-chair, and with her frizzled head slightly lopsided, is fast locked in the arms of Morpheus.

Nest rises softly from her seat, and on tiptoe proceeds on her tour of inspection round the large and superbly-furnished room. What an embodiment of luxury it is! It positively seems to smell of money, with its carved oak, its glittering buhl, its bronzes, its yielding velvet pile, and, above all, its pictures.

One of Sir Joshua's beauties faces an enchanting Gainsborough; a sunset of Turner's—a mass of amber and crimson

cloud, soft and full of unspeakable peace—is *vis-à-vis* to a lovely head, dark and mellow with gleaming tints of Giorgionis; Titians, Peruginos, Romneys, succeed one another in bewildering splendour; and Nest lingers—rapt, entranced—before each. She is no connoisseur; her judgment is crude, her own efforts but feeble daubs, but a thrill of pleasure and excitement goes through her, for this is her first *real* feast on immortal Art.

Presently she reaches a sort of nook, formed by the embrasure of a big bay-window, and here, as if enshrined amidst panellings of shining oak and gilded mouldings, hangs the glowing portrait of a woman. Not struck by its beauty, but simply spellbound by mingled sensations of surprise, dislike, and a desperate jealousy, she stands as if riveted to the floor, her cheeks deeply flushed, and her hands cold as ice.

'A face to look at, my love,' Mrs Lorimer suddenly says, in a low, hoarse voice like a raven, awakening from her forty winks.

Nest starts visibly.

She has felt stunned and sick at heart, standing before this portrait—the portrait of a woman who she feels instinctively is her enemy, and her rival, but she recovers herself with an effort.

'But not a face to like!' she flashes decidedly, forgetting in the evil emotions it has aroused in her breast, that the owner of it may possibly be a dear friend, or even a near relation of her hostess.

'Hum! *men* like it, and that's everything, I suppose! I have known a man go mad over it!' comes distinct, in a still croaky voice; and as Nest listens, she believes it is a bird of ill omen.

'Anyone you know, Mrs Lorimer?' she contrives to ask calmly, but with the green-eyed monster nibbling furiously at her heart-strings, and with an awful presentiment that she is going to hear—what—she does not quite realise herself.

'Yes! a nephew of my own, my dear—a clever, clear-headed, strong-minded, sensible man, but as big a fool as could be over that woman's face. I don't say he died for love of her, for men have died, and worms have eaten them, but not for love, according to Shakspeare, you know; but he did the very next thing to it—he died socially—that is, he never went out anywhere, grew as sulky as a bear with the world, and has eschewed all womankind ever since *she* played him false!'

'And has—Mr Lorimer—'

'Not Lorimer, not my husband's nephew, but my own—Guy Trevylian, my only sister's son, and poor as a church rat,

unless I make him my heir, which I shall do, if he chooses to marry who I please !'

Nest hearkens to all this with a sinking spirit, and glances furtively and nervously at the dread arbitrator of Guy Trevylian's destiny.

Very awful and very imposing she looks, sitting now bolt upright, with a high, cream-coloured cap, and a big tuft of marabout feathers tipped with green nodding over one strongly-defined eyebrow. A pair of gold-mounted glasses perch on the bridge of her Roman nose, and a row of enormous teeth gleam at Nest, reminding her of the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood.

'I fancy I have seen the original of this portrait,' she murmurs, in a feeble voice. 'It is a Mrs Moreton, is it not?'

'Mrs Moreton, now, but Mabella Clyde when Millais did that, and pronounced it his loveliest work. The picture does not belong to me ; I am only keeping it for Guy until he owns the original—an event which will not be long in coming off, I suspect !' Mrs Lorimer says, with a satisfied chuckle.

Upon this Nest ceases her voyage of research, and goes back meekly to her seat at the table, pours out the coffee—a task which is evidently expected of her—with a shaky hand, while she stares at her own reflection in the tall silver coffee-pot. Very ugly and lantern-jawed she finds it, and she looks away again quickly and angrily.

'Mrs Moreton is very well off, you see, and just the proper wife for Guy. She is a woman of the world and ambitious, and will instil these good things into him. He is sadly unworldly, and lacks ambition terribly, poor fellow ! I have made up my mind to this match, and I never allow myself to be balked in anything if I can help it, my love !' Mrs Lorimer goes on, in the intervals of demolishing a plate full of hot crumpets, and drinking her third cup of coffee, whilst Nest sits opposite white and silent ; and she nearly jumps off her chair as nine strikes, and Mrs Lorimer bids her go and dress for her first plunge into the pitfalls of Tophet, so engrossed is she in painful reflection. Her step is slow and lagging, and her heart very heavy, as she mounts the great staircase. True, she is just on the eve of having her proper quantum of the pomps and vanities she has yearned for ; but somehow she keeps thinking of Solomon, as she slips on her fresh undulating waves of tulle, and absently fastens the wild roses in her hair and on her breast.

'Vanitas—Vanitatum.'

She is not well up in Latin, only little scraps that she has picked up in a desultory fashion from 'Dad.' This little bit, however, she repeats to herself while she takes her last look into

her mirror, even while she wonders if by any chance Guy Trevelylian will be at this ball.

She would not dance with him or flirt with him for the world, she is sure ; but she confesses to herself that 'she longs—positively longs—to see him just once again, if it is only to show him that, as far as she is concerned, he is welcome to woo and win the woman over whose face he had gone mad, and for whose sake he had died a social death.

And when, whilst driving through the noisy gas-lit streets, she closes her eyes and calls up that soft spangled summer's night, full of unutterable love and fragrance, with the delicious *Cantate Domino* floating through the silent air, and Guy Trevelylian's kisses falling on her lips, she shrinks back into the corner of Mrs Lorimer's luxurious barouche, and, with two little, white-gloved hands, hides her burning face in shame.

CHAPTER VII.

TOPHET.

'The air was dreamy with flowers, the room was lovely with light,
The soft waltz tunes were floating afar in the warm June night,
And she danced with one and the other, she was far too lovely
to care,
And she never looked as she passed him by, alone in the window
there,

She came to the window one moment, she gazed afar in the night,
She was dazed with too much dancing, or dazzled with too much
light ;

So he never moved from the shadow, so he found no word to speak,
And he never saw, as he turned away, the tear on her young, bright
cheek !'

MOST of us at seventeen are optimists, so Nest enjoys her first plunge into the pitfalls of Tophet immensely.

She experiences a flutter of timidity on entering the arena of future conquest, but speedily regains courage under the very substantial wing of Mrs Lorimer, who certainly makes a splendid and imposing chaperon.

A rose-coloured *brochè* rustles round her tall form, and the cream cap with the marabouts is exchanged for a regal turban,

with silver wheat ears, that bob up and down over her strongly defined brow. Some imaginative individual once told her that she resembled Rebecca in *Ivanhoe*, and she has ever since posed perpetually for that handsome but *délaissée* young person.

'My young friend, Miss Wylmer,' she says to every eligible masculine she runs across, and then, in an aside, '*The Wylmers of Devonshire, you know.*'

Not that the Wylmers of Devonshire either aspire to or have as yet acquired any celebrity in the world as to birth or position, but Mrs Lorimer has lived long enough in Tophet to be aware that the mere saying of things often impresses them as facts, especially if they are said in the off-hand, not over lucid, fashion of 'society.'

Novel readers do not care for digressions as a rule. But one remark *en passant*. How shocked our dear, respectable, truth-loving old grandmothers and grandfathers would be if they could hear the fearful and unnecessary fibs that the 'world' tells nowadays! Miss Wylmer's sparkling face, fresh toilette, and *piquante* manners, ably second Mrs Lorimer's introduction, however, and she soon bids fair to become the success of the evening. Still, in spite of the demands for her hand by the best dancers in the room, she feels a considerable amount of pleasure when a voice that is familiar sounds on her ear, and Lord Elmsdale stands before her; and she thinks he looks uncommonly nice, as she glances up at him, and meets two very admiring eyes.

'This valse, for the sake of auld lang syne?' he asks, softly, smiling pleasantly; and Nest, ignoring the claims of young Moneybags, a city Cræsus, with sleek hair, parted scrupulously down the middle, and an enormous expanse of shirt-front, rises from her seat with more alacrity than dignity, and the next moment is floating round the large room, to the thrilling strains of 'Dream Faces.'

She pauses at last, hot, flushed, and quite breathless, and leans against the wall, while her partner fans her assiduously; but she only means to pause for a minute or two. She cannot remember when she had such a divine waltz, and her feet are impatient to be off again.

'Doesn't this sort of thing tire you?' Elmsdale asks vaguely, in a drawl which by habit has become second nature. 'I don't think ballrooms are endurable for more than an hour.'

'Don't you?' says Nest, opening her big brown eyes wider in amazement, for it appears to her just now that Tophet, with an excellent string band, a floor as slippery as ice, and a good partner, is a snatch from Paradise.

The light shines down upon the lovely, flushed faces, the sweet, flashing eyes, and the bare ivory shoulders of the women, who whirl round gracefully—through the heated atmosphere steals the perfume of a thousand exotics. It is in fact a scene of revelry, flowers, and beauty, the which, in her country experiences, Nest has never looked on before.

‘I love waltzing!’ she cries enthusiastically.

‘Do you? Shall we have another turn?’

So they go off again, and as they float round and round, her small, dainty head, with its coronal of blushing wild roses very close to the ends of his drooping moustache, his arm clasping her slim waist firmly, her hand in his, Guy Trevelyian enters the room, and, standing within the embrasure of a window, watches them—watches them jealously, savagely.

Nest, although she is unconscious of it, has her revenge fully at this moment for all the feelings she experienced while Mrs Lorimer expatiated on Mrs Moreton’s portrait. But—

‘She danced with one and the other, she was far too lovely to care, And she never looked as she passed him by, alone in that window there.’

No, by all that is light and fickle in the nature of woman, she has even forgotten the existence of Guy Trevelyian; and he thoroughly feels this fact, with his forehead frowning into an unmistakable frown, and a cold and hot sensation creeping over him as he marks her in Elmsdale’s clasp—his Nest, his wild flower! And suddenly turning on his heel, he leaves the room, trying to shut out from his ears the strains of the hateful waltz.

‘Have you been in the verandah, Miss Wylmer?’ Lord Elmsdale questions, as they promenade down a long gallery that is literally besieged with warm and panting votaries of Terpsichore, in search of coolness and strawberry ice. ‘It is quite fairyland,—cascades, and triumphal arches, and floral garlands, and all that sort of thing, don’t you know?’

Even with this not very lucid description, it sounds very inviting, and Nest is eager to go.

The verandah is lovely. Lady Glendower, the hostess, is quite fanatical on flowers, and tier upon tier of splendid and fragrant bloom line the way, interspersed by gracefully nodding ferns and stately palms, and here and there, with ‘a dim religious light’ falling from coloured Chinese lanterns, are, in æsthetic jargon the ‘snappiest’ little nooks—just big enough for ‘two.’

The very oldest and wisest of 'twos' might lose their heads if not their hearts, for a little while, and yield to temptation in such a spot—might stretch out eager, idle hands to pluck at the roses of pleasure as the sweet, golden time skims past.

And as Lord Elmsdale and Nest are neither of them very old, or staid, or wise, it is impossible to deny that they have fallen into temptation, and are flirting. And, after all, what can be more natural than that two human beings, flung together in a sort of earthly paradise, should flirt.

Flirting, however, very mildly, as flirtation is understood in these advanced days—flirtation as really innocuous as milk and water, though appearances are decidedly against them in Mrs Grundy's eyes, and in Guy Trevelyian's, who has a second survey of the pair through the branches of a tall oleander. Heaps of other couples, bent on the same game, and infinitely more in earnest, shrug their shoulders as they stroll by, and whisper that 'that fellow Elmsdale, misogynist as he pretends to be, is deep in another desperate love affair.'

To men, who are inclined to pose for the part of male flirt (the which nothing is more contemptible if he is young, more dreadful if he is old), a bit of advice,—

There is one quality essential to doing the rôle well. It is the quality of appearing completely absorbed in the object of attention—of being drawn out by her presence and proximity from all recollection of self or surroundings.

The great secret of Elmsdale's success (and though he is short and thin, and not over handsome, it must be confessed that success is not lacking) is that he thoroughly attends to the business in hand, and never permits his attention to wander for a moment from the queen of the hour.

He is thirty years of age, and has lived in the world and for the world half that period, and he is no fool, especially in woman nature. He knows quite well when a woman is worshipping his marquisate more than himself, and he is quite conscious also that it is the merest A B C of flirtation that is passing this evening between him and the tawny-eyed, *piquante* girl by his side, in whom he is far more interested than he has ever been before in the myriads of 'beauties' that he has known and made love to. These were quite little ephemeral episodes, in fact, to the feeling he experiences now, as he sits with his gaze fixed on the alluring young face, and the pretty shoulders that shine up like polished marble under the Chinese lamp-shoulders which, considering how dark Mrs Lorimer has pronounced her, are marvellously white and very symmetrical.

Elmsdale is dreadfully tired of so-called 'society ladies;

whom he meets night after night in fashionable Belgravian and Mayfair assemblies. He is weary to death of those hackneyed words and stereotyped looks and smiles, all of which he has learned by heart long ago. The proximity of the professional beauties fails to quicken his pulse one jot, and the graciousness of the grandes dames 'has lost its savour,' and he knows that though he has made up his mind never to marry a girl who has gone through the perils of London seasons, that an ordinary immature piece of rusticity and innocence would sicken him.

But there is a wonderful freshness and originality in this young person 'from the country.' Her patronage, her impertinence, her sparkling face, all make up a delicious and novel *mélange* that fairly captivates him, and with it all there is not a single angle about her.

She is all soft bends and curves, both in person and mind. She teems with coquetry double-distilled, but it is a coquetry that goes hand in hand with good taste, in spite of her rustic breeding. She has none of the making of a fast woman in her, and when she has developed fully into flower, he believes it will be of a high order, and not of a gaudy one.

Already, though only seventeen, and, it must be confessed, very much of a dunce where learning is concerned, she shows an innate grace and subtlety, and a *savoir faire* that quite impress the man of the world, and though it is true that 'beauty is only skin deep,' she is certainly awfully pretty. There is a charm about her little face that words cannot describe—a deliciousness about her colouring and her ripe red lips—and she has two immense eyes, dark as a Seville woman's, that tell him in mute but eloquent fashion that he finds favour in them.

How should he know that it is only for the nonce?—that Nest's real feeling about her is a sort of frivolous triumph? What girl does not delight in feeling that she pleases—even captivates? And Nest has tasted this dangerous and attractive cup of knowledge once or twice before in her life, and it does not seem to pall on her at all—in fact, it seems to grow on her. She has a few grains of common sense left, however. The *terandah*, with its exquisite bloom, its subtle fragrance, its mystic charm, and the soft mysterious sort of light that should always accompany them, is very alluring, and so are Lord Almsdale's eyes and accents, especially on this identical evening, when her heart is so dreadfully sore about Guy Trevelyian. But still she knows that this pleasant little *tête-à-tête*, like all pleasant things, has lasted quite long enough, and should be ended.

'Do you know that we have been here a very long time? she says; 'had we not better go back to the ballroom?

'Why should we?' he asks, in his languid voice, fanning himself slowly with a big palm leaf, and feeling very comfortable—he is by a natural consequence lazy—'I am sure it is awfully nice here. Are you tired of me already? Of course, in that case, let us go.'

'No, not a bit tired,' she confesses; 'but we have been here an hour, and Mrs Lorimer may entertain a faint sensation of wonder as to what has become of me.'

Being of an unworldly and disinterested disposition, it never strikes her that, Elmsdale being the match of the season, Mrs Lorimer is not likely to grumble at her *voisinage*.

But he remembers this, and smiles.

'Let her wonder; it is good for her, poor old lady. Don't you know that wondering develops the—the speculative faculties? *Don't* go! I have a heap of things I want to say to you, and in that horrid crowd other fellows will be bothering us. I want to know if you have ever thought of me since I left Ravenshill three months ago, or whether it is true what I heard?'

He says the last words in a very low voice, regarding her intently.

'And what did you hear?' she asks, with feigned indifference, but she feels the tell-tale blood rise to her face.

'Why, that you were thinking of rusticating at Ravenshill for the term of your natural existence with—'

'With?'

'Dal Wentworth.'

'I *wish* people would mind their own business!' she flashes hotly. 'One cannot really speak to a man without being engaged to him! One would think marriage was the one end and aim of life!'

As she says this, she knows she is quibbling with the truth, and her conscience, which is still remorseful and tender, gives a throb of compunction, her eyes droop on the circlet of brilliants that seem to hold the slim third finger of the right hand in hateful bondage as she draws it lazily through the sparkling water of a miniature fountain that is near her; and through the cloistered greenness and dimness, poor old Dal's blond face appears to look at her reproachfully for denying him.

'Then it is not true!' Elmsdale cries, forgetting his ordinary languor, for he has a new-born longing to convert this charming little girl into an embryo duchess.

'I don't really know what I shall do!' she replies, with a

decided dash of petulance. 'How absurd it is to ask such questions. We women don't make our own lives; they are made for us.'

'Nonsense! you can make them in a great measure, don't you know!' he answers, very earnestly. 'You need not let yourself be put into a groove for which you are unfitted. Somebody says—I forget who, so many people say things, don't you know?—that it is the tendency of life to drift square people into round holes, and *vice versa*, but we ought not to allow it. I should never drift into anything I did not like.'

'You might! You might drift into matrimony, and find you had married the wrong person.'

'Yes, I might do that,' he answers, with an affected sigh; 'but as society is constituted in this nineteenth century, marriage is such an awful leap in the dark, that no man or woman can be blamed for the evil consequences that may follow.'

'It would be a very good thing if the people who were thinking of marrying could be shut up in the Palace of Truth together for, say, one week,' remark the astute lips of seventeen. 'But do you suppose anybody would ever marry anybody after such an experiment?'

'Oh, yes! if bank-stock and houses and horses, and all the other good things of this life, were in prospect. There are Trevylian and the rich widow Mrs Moreton, for instance. You don't suppose he cares a straw about her *now*? Still, he would like her money.'

'Are they really engaged?' Nest asks, with wonderful calm, but she clenches her little fist so hard over the mother-of-pearl handle of her Watteau fan, that it gives a click, and she feels her cheeks grow so hot that she bends over the fountain on pretence of closely examining a lovely large water-lily that floats 'pale with passion' on the surface.

'It is not *possible*!' she mutters, *sotto voce*.

But Lord Elmsdale's ears are curiously sharp.

'Why is it not possible?' he asks hastily, roused from indolence into a surprised and suspicious condition, and regarding the mutable, drooping face intently. 'Has Trevylian been making the running, I wonder? No doubt he flirts in the absence of his liege lady; most of us do, I am afraid, but nevertheless he is bespoken. I do not mean to say that he is absolutely engaged, but Mrs Lorimer is determined on the match, and as she is Trevylian's *El Dorado*, I wouldn't mind laying heavy odds that she has her way.'

Is Nest already under the influence of 'Tophet,' that she never quails under these words? Though they cut like a

'ash, she simply looks grave a moment, then cries impatiently, 'How horribly contemptible it is for men to be so mercenary!'

'I will not retort that women are quite as much so, though I *have* heard that Wentworth is pretty well off,' he says, meaningly; 'but I will ask you, how can men help being mercenary? Some of them are born idlers, and good for nought—work they cannot, and to beg they are ashamed—what is left to them then? But never mind about men in general; tell me about one in particular. You don't know *how* anxious I am to know if you are engaged to Dal Wentworth?'

'I am,' she answers, with a merry laugh; but her heart aches dreadfully, and she can hardly keep the tears that well up in her eyes from falling; but Guy Trevelyian, who is fascinated to that opening among the oleander branches, only hears the old ringing mirth.

'So he never moved from the shadow, so he found no word to speak, And he never saw, as he turned away, the tear on her young bright cheek.'

'You seem to be the happiest being alive, Miss Wylmer,' Elmsdale says, after a moment, a little vexed that she should be so merry, and so well satisfied with her position as Dal Wentworth's affianced wife. 'It is supposed that no one is entirely pleased with his or her lot, but yours seems to me an exceptional case.'

'I think you have spoken to me about a dozen times in your life, Lord Elmsdale. Do you usually decide so promptly on other people's feelings? If so, you must possess rather exceptional powers of observation, or else an exceptional confidence in your own acuteness!' she says, with another laugh.

'I think I can read your feelings in your face,' he says slowly, studying the bright face so vivid with colour, the eyes that flash with animation.

'You may read, but you may not understand.'

'That may be true,' he replies, more reflectively than is his wont. 'It does not follow that because I have read I have understood; but yet—' He pauses.

Man of the world—butterfly—flirt, though he may be, there is something in this girl that prevents his paying her the compliments that rise glibly enough to his lips for other women. He cannot tell her that her sweet face is too mobile to deceive, that the frank, limpid depths of her big, brown eyes could not wear a look that falsified the feelings in her breast.

'Yet you cannot help believing that my life is perfect and

my happiness unalloyed !' she laughs once more, but this time he can detect a bitterness in her accents.

'When you have lived as long as I have, Miss Wylmer,' he says, with the air of a *blasé* man, and of one nearly double her age, 'you will learn that one must be a fool if one believes in unalloyed bliss. I think that you *fancy* yourself very happy; but, if you analyse the matter, you may find you lack one great thing.'

'And what may that be?'

'Content!'

It is a shrewd guess on his part, and Nest flushes as she thinks how easily even a stranger has divined her state of mind.

'Content is a thing that everyone lacks, you know. All of us find monotony horrid—all of us think that we should like to season our lives with a little more spice, colour, zest, perfume; some of us lack all these nice things entirely, and probably will lack them to the end.'

'But why?' he asks her, with a peculiar tone in his voice that makes her turn and look at him. 'There *are* people born for a humdrum existence, perhaps, but you are not one of them!'

'How should you know what I was born for, Lord Elmsdale? I don't wish people to fancy I am dissatisfied with my lot. If I were, I would not keep my pledge to marry Dal.'

'And you think that to live always at Wentworth, always in the shadow of Miladi's presence, will satisfy you in the future?'

She tries to look cold and stern, but at the mention of 'Wentworth' and 'Miladi,' her natural impulsiveness *will* find sway. It is a relief to her to give vent to her rebellious feelings, in fact.

'Are you a magician, Lord Elmsdale? And have you the power to spirit me away if I tell you that the prospect of living near Miladi is too dreadful?'

She repents her indiscreet outbreak when she notes the deep flush on his face, and the way in which he regards her. He is falling rapidly in love, and he knows it.

'If you will ever like me enough to *believe* in me,' he says, in a very low tone; 'there is no knowing what I may not have the power to accomplish; but magicians require implicit trust, don't you know?'

'Which I am of too unbelieving a nature to give, I am afraid,' she tells him lightly, feeling that he is encroaching a little, considering her position as Dal's future wife.

'Perhaps your nature will alter with years and experience, and you *will* trust in me later ! At any rate, I don't want you to forget that in this world our lives are pretty well what we make them.'

'That is untrue !' she cries quickly ; and then remembering that a flat denial is not the thing in polite society, she blushes, and adds quietly, 'or if it is true, it is only of *men* and not of women ; we are merely creatures of circumstances.'

'That is because you do not know how to take advantage of those circumstances,' he says, self-sufficiently, provoking Nest, who knows full well how arbitrary the circumstances of her life are. How Dad and the little mother and all the others, down to tiny Mop, cling to Dalrymple Wentworth as the family prop and stay.

'You only say so because you may have been exempt from obeying circumstances. I agree with the majority of people who think that we *are* subservient to circumstances,' she replies wilfully.

'I don't know about that ; but I *do* know that to circumstances one owes a very good turn occasionally ; for instance, that which brought me here to-night.'

His voice falls as he says this almost to a whisper, and she feels rather than sees a look which deepens the colour on her face, while she meditates a move, when the voluptuous strains of the lovely '*Ma Vie*' valse fall on the verandah.

'*Do* let us have one more turn !' she cries eagerly, and in another moment they float round the ballroom so smoothly and harmoniously that they look but one person.

Suddenly, with a crash, the music ceases.

'Ah, how delicious !' Nest says breathlessly. 'I could dance with you all night !'

Her cheeks glow like damask roses, and her eyes shine like twin stars.

'And I could dance with you *through life* !' Lord Elmsdale murmurs softly, his arm still round her, and his face very close to hers.

Nest is quite countrified enough to feel uncomfortable, and her long lashes unmistakably droop under her partner's fervid glance.

'Mrs Lorimer would be glad to leave, when it is Miss Wylmer's pleasure to do so,' a low, grave voice says, and she starts and looks up quickly.

She meets a pair of grey eyes, full of reproach, bent on her, and she returns their regard with a frigid little bow ; never so

much as holding out a hand in conventional greeting to the man 'who left his heart with her.'

The man who is going to marry Mrs Moreton is, of course, nothing to her—absolutely *nothing!* In point of fact, she rather dislikes and despises him, so she turns away indifferently, and smiles up in Lord Elmsdale's face, as she takes her fan and bouquet from him—smiles as we women so often smile when our very soul is rent in twain with anguish.

'I'll see you to the carriage,' Elmsdale says courteously, with quite a glow of pleasure that the other man is snubbed. And Guy Trevelyian moves away without another word, and thanks God that he does not wear his heart on his sleeve.

'She has found out already that he is the match of the season,' he says angrily to himself, trying to feel contempt for her; then he gives another covert glance at the little face, animated and flushed no longer, but very white and wan, and he relents at once.

In a sort of maze, Nest lets her aristocratic cavalier cloak her with *empressment*, and squeeze her cold fingers with tenderness. And in a sort of maze, which is accompanied by a sort of mist, she sees Guy Trevelyian, as he stands bareheaded on the steps, after putting his aunt into the carriage.

Then she gulps down a stupid little sob, and sinks back wearily in her corner.

'Capital ball,' her chaperon pronounces decidedly; 'everything first-rate, and no expense spared; none of your rubbishy light refreshments, but a good substantial supper, and the Moet et Chandon A I. How have you enjoyed yourself, my love?'

'Immensely, Mrs Lorimer,' Nest contrives to mumble through a dreadful choking sensation in her throat; 'such a delightful evening unfortunately spoils one for another ball.'

Then she collapses, after this feeble attempt at satire, and Mrs Lorimer, thinking such late hours have overcome the little rustic, leaves her in peace.

Had Nest been furnished with a necromantic mirror in her bedroom, she would have seen Guy Trevelyian pacing up and down like a policeman before Chesham Place, with the chill air gratefully fanning his throbbing temples, and his heart feeling like a lump of lead, and through the London fog he conjures up with a lover's fertile imagination a couple of tall laburnums with their clusters of gold; and he hears a voice whisper for the first time, '*Guy*,' while a girlish mutable face looks up into his own.

CHAPTER VIII.

TWO WOMEN.

'Tis hard—'tis hard—my darling,
 To give up all our dream.
 To be no more together,
 By wood and wold and stream.
 To say good-bye for ever
 To the love of long ago.
 But oh, 'tis harder, darling,
 To think it better so.'

MRS LORIMER, who is quite a Macchiavelli in her arrangements, having fixed the afternoon for a 'talk' with her nephew, remarks blandly, between her mouthfuls of *Riz de veau à la neige*,—

'You look pale, my love, and want fresh air, so I have written to my friend, Mabella Moreton, to chaperon you in a drive at four o'clock.'

Nest, who not only looks pale, but feels tired and limp, as she languidly swallows a morsel of chicken, starts at this information, which sounds like an 'order,' and her cheeks flush, and an unmistakable frown puckers her forehead.

These little indications of ruffled temper or spirit do not escape the hawk-like eyes opposite.

'You know Mrs Moreton, my love, don't you?' is all that she says, suavely, however.

'Yes, I know her a little,' answers Nest, in a slow, low voice, that might easily pass muster for sullenness, but it is not so. Nest has no sullenness in her nature. She is quick to wrath, and quick to forgive, and she is very impulsive, so she has to bite her lips to prevent herself from frankly adding, 'And I dislike Mrs Moreton immensely.'

But in her sojourn at Chesham Place, very short as it is, she has already learnt the fact that Mrs Lorimer is given to 'fads,' and that her present fad is Mrs Moreton, also that Mrs Lorimer's resolves are as immovable as the laws of the Medes and Persians.

By-and-by, when luncheon is over, and her young and usually excellent appetite has failed entirely to do justice to the whipped cream and pine-apple fritters, which are perfect dreams in their way, she saunters up the great staircase to her own bedroom, and peers out of the half-closed green venetian blinds.

It looks wonderfully hot and dusty and glary, and Tophet loses a good deal of its charm.

Nest glances at the little buhl clock on the mantelpiece. The hands point to half-past two. The big landau, with its ponderous roans, will not come round till four, so she flings her morning dress into a white heap on the floor, throws a cool muslin wrapper round her, shoves her little feet into slippers that Cinderella might envy, and, lounging back in a delightfully easy chair, delivers herself up to reflection.

Right opposite her is a mirror, but she never even glances into it. Beauty or ugliness are matters of indifference to her just now. If she did look at herself, she would possibly gather a few grains of hope and comfort, for her face is one of those that the broad daylight suits best. There are no flaws to be brought out, and the rose bloom and creamy skin are able to defy criticism from the sharpest eyes.

Spoiled, Nest may be to a certain extent from admiration and attention, but she is quite free from petty vanity, and perhaps it is the very absence of self-consciousness that constitutes her greatest attraction.

The clock ticks monotonously; a streak of yellow sunshine obtrudes itself through a chink in the blinds, and falling on the portrait of one of Mrs Lorimer's ancestors, imparts to his visage an amber bilious look.

Nest notices this, and laughs, then closes her eyes with a sudden sensation of irritation and weariness, and, after a minute or two, the hot glary London sunlight fades right away into oblivion, and twilight seems to her to pervade the room.

Away in yonder sky, a soft primrose flush arises. A faint young moon lifts up its slender sickle and pearly beams, and pale stars cluster in the azure heavens. Laburnum blossoms in their glory of gold trail above her head, flutter earthwards, and lie at her feet in mellow flakes, the lazy air comes sweet and warm, and complete silence and solitude reign.

Somebody's lips touch her lips, somebody's arm encircles her waist, somebody's hand clasps her own. Her brown eyes glitter, her heart beats fast!

It is the first time in her life of seventeen years that a man's lips have touched her's—*so*—that a man's arm has clasped her—*so*!

Her eyes droop with their burthen of lovelight, her rosebud mouth feels once more the thrill of that never-to-be-forgotten caress, and she smiles tenderly, blissfully a smile that comes as the heart of a careless, unthinking child changes into the heart of a loving, faithful woman.

Suddenly Nest's day-dream ends. Opening her eyes, they rest on the opposite mirror, and her even white teeth are set.

'How *could* he!' she flashes aloud, 'how *dared* he! He thought me a child, to be kissed and caressed by any man who had a mind to do it! He thought me a toy—a wretched plaything for five minutes' amusement, but he shall find out his mistake.'

She catches a glimpse of her excited face, her hot, quivering mouth, in the glass.

'So you are engaged to Mrs Moreton, Mr Trevilian? Well, I'll try to be sensible and strong-minded, and do my best to forget the past—yet, it was very, very sweet!'

She murmurs the last words very wistfully, and clasps her hands over her eyes.

'Guy! *my* Guy! it seems hard, *hard* to wish that you and I had never met! I *don't* wish it—I shall remember the blessed past as long as I live. I shall marry Dal, of course, and jog on for the rest of my natural existence in that hateful Wentworth, with Miladi picking holes in me from cockcrow to sunset; and Dal, my only tower of strength—Dal, good gracious! I might as well lean on the reed shaken by the wind that Dad preached about the last Sunday at home.'

She jumps up impatiently as she comes to this conclusion, and goes through the duties of her toilette, attending as carefully to each detail as if nothing had occurred to disturb the even tenor of her life; and no one would believe she had been ruffled, when Nest, fresh and bright as a flower, and arrayed in a little pale pink costume that suits her admirably, takes her place calmly in the landau side by side with Mrs Moreton, saying the while to herself,—

'I shall *never* like you.'

Nor does this apparently unreasonable determination arise only from jealousy, or from the antagonism which is usually supposed to exist between two pretty women.

It is a sentiment that a great many people of both sexes, and old as well as young, experience in Mrs Moreton's proximity. It may possibly proceed from her latent assumption of intense superiority, or from the only half-veiled patronage of her manner, a thing that often produces a counter assertion on the part of others.

Be this as it may, the fact remains that she is intolerably patronising, and would, without a doubt, try and do the affable to the Kaiser himself if he chanced to fall in her way.

That the woman is excessively handsome, Nest admits to herself frankly enough, as she glances covertly at the small

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blonde, supercilious face, with its mignonne features and its wide-open, light eyes and profusion of fair hair; and she knows how to dress herself too, in order to set off her attractions to the greatest advantage; her cream-silk, with its facings of turquoise blue, and her tiny bonnet of forget-me-nots, and the exquisite filmy lace at her throat and wrists, form a *toilette à ravir*.

'The Row is full still,' Mrs Moreton remarks languidly. 'I see several of the *habitués*. There is nothing so unpleasant as to be in town the *fag* end of the season. Earlier one is sure to meet with old acquaintances, or to make agreeable new ones.'

Nest, whose experience of town is so very limited, ventures on no reply; and in order to thoroughly examine her rose-leaf face and liquid dark eyes, of which the fair widow has an incipient contempt, she puts up her glass and murmurs condescendingly,—

'You, I believe, know nobody in town, Miss Wylmer?'

'Nobody!' blurts Nest honestly, with a careless laugh, 'or I can count all my acquaintances here on my fingers; but, you see, one can fortunately enlarge the circle, and I have every disposition in the world to enlarge mine indefinitely. I am quite ready and willing to know everybody and anybody, especially of the male sex, who happen to be walkable, talkable, and danceable!'

'Little Goth,' Mrs Moreton thinks, as she listens to the brave avowal, and her thin lip curls as she regards the young person who has the very bad taste to utter it. Nothing but shocking rusticity and unripe years can excuse such sentiments. Why on earth should Mrs Lorimer have had the folly to invite this girl to Chesham Place, but to be a stumbling-block in her path?

'After you have been in society a little while, you will probably grow more fastidious,' she remarks superciliously; 'at least, it is to be hoped so. There are heaps and heaps of men in the world, who are capable of walking and talking and dancing, but whom one would not exactly care to know.'

'Possibly! I have not the slightest doubt but that I shall grow quite as fastidious as yourself, directly I have plenty to choose from,' Nest answers, with unheard-of assumption; but somehow, even though Mrs Moreton may be engaged to Mr Trevylian, she does not feel nearly so ready to be extinguished by her as she used to do in their meetings at Wentworth, when Miladi's partiality for the widow made up a strong alliance, offensive and defensive.

During the rest of the drive, the ball of conversation lags considerably on its way. Mrs Moreton bends her head haughtily now and then to some passers-by, and Nest, in her girl-fashion, engrossed in watching the people in the Row—a novelty to her—almost forgets that her rival with Guy sits alongside. Presently, as the carriage reaches a less crowded point, Lord Elmsdale rides up to it. He looks better on horseback than elsewhere, and a slight flush lends more attraction to his thin, pale face. Just recognising Mrs Moreton's presence by a bow and no more, he addresses Nest eagerly,—

'Are you going to Lauderdale House to-night, Miss Wylmer?'

'Yes,' she answers, blushing a little under his *empressé* manner and looks. 'At least, Mrs Lorimer said something about it this morning.'

'If you go, will you give me the first two vales?'

'I shall be only too delighted,' confesses Nest, remembering how much she enjoyed dancing with him at Lady Glendower's; whilst Mrs Moreton listens in horror at the supreme rusticity that so openly avows its pleasure at being asked for a waltz.

Lord Elmsdale looks straight down into the frank, brown eyes, and topples into love deeper each moment.

He has found his Phyllis—a little wild rose, 'set with wilful thorns'—but so charming in her utter ignorance of society's ways and wiles. So engrossed is he in the sparkling young face, that he forgets Mrs Moreton's existence even.

'I fell fast asleep this afternoon and dreamt of our valse,' he murmurs tenderly. 'I never knew that a ball *could* be so nice. I shall never forget last night's.'

'Nor I,' answers Nest unthinkingly—recollecting only the part where she suffered.

'Talk of our fastness in town!—rustic maidens beat us hollow!' Mrs Moreton says, in a shocked tone and in a stage whisper, so that her words may reach Elmsdale's ears.

Nest hears them too, and laughs provokingly.

'I really think it is time to go home,' her chaperon announces captiously.

'Remember our first two vales to-night, Lord Elmsdale!' Nest cries, quite indifferent to her departure from the reserve due to the *convenances*. 'I shall ask Mrs Lorimer to go early for I wouldn't miss them for the world.'

'No more would I, don't you know,' he answers, flushing with pleasure as he takes off his hat.

Five minutes of silence ensue. Then Mrs Moreton says scornfully,—

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'How soon you have found out that he is the best match of the season!'

'He—who?' asks Nest, who has been absently staring out of the window.

'He—who?' mimics her companion,

"Pretty innocence, oh, la!
I heard a lamb cry ba!"

You must really excuse my being sceptical of your ignorance on this point, Miss Wylmer. *Of course* you know that the Marquis of Elmsdale is the best match of the season.'

'Is he?' Nest answers indifferently. 'He is the best dancer I have ever waltzed with, which is more to the purpose as far as I am concerned.'

Whereupon Mrs Moreton sneers, and vouchsafes no reply.

Meanwhile, just after the landau had left Chesham Place, Guy Trevilian knocks at the door, with an unusual flush on his cheek, and an immense deal of perturbation in his heart. He feels rather a sensation of self-contempt as he stands on the steps waiting for his summons to be answered. After all, he thinks, a boy might allow himself to be carried away in a maelstrom of mad, overwhelming passion; but a man of thirty-two—a man who has been knocked about the wicked world like a shuttlecock—who has suffered already from woman's fickleness and falsity, might surely have passion subservient to reason.

But even while he reflects thus, there is another train of thought running through his mind, and it is to this effect:—

What will Nest say to him to-day? Will she have repented of her coldness of last night? Will the bonnie brown eyes of his young love fill once more with the look they wore as she stood by his side on Ravenshill bridge, with the soft moonbeams revealing their tenderness?

And truth to say, he looks and feels uncommonly blank when the only thing of beauty that meets his gaze on entering the drawing-room is the angular figure of his aunt.

'I thought Miss Wylmer was staying with you,' he ventures to say, after the first greetings are over; mustering up all the difference possible to his voice.

'So she is; but she has gone out driving with Mabella.'

'With Mabella,' he repeats mechanically, and feeling dreadfully annoyed as he pictures them together—the woman he adores, and the woman he ought to marry.

'Yes, Mabella is such an excellent chaperon, you know. So very strict and fastidious about acquaintances. And that little

Wylmer wants looking after sadly. I found that out at once last night. She is a born flirt. So was her father; and what's bred in the bone comes out in the flesh, you know! I remember my old spoon—Handsome Theo—used to take half-a-dozen girls, turn about, in one evening.'

Guy, who is accustomed to these little reminiscences, and aware that, once wound up, Mrs Lorimer goes on like a musical box, interrupts. He is burning with impatience to have his aunt's opinion about 'last night.' His own is severely condemnatory of Nest's conduct; but he hugs to his soul the comfortable idea that his jealous feelings have aggravated her ways and manners.

'And what made you fancy last night that Miss Wylmer is more given to flirting than most young ladies?' he questions carelessly, playing a monotonous tattoo on his best hat by way of relief.

'By the shocking way in which she encouraged Elmsdale. He danced with her, and then took her off—goodness knows where—from everyone. Of course, if he is serious, it would be a splendid marriage. But he only meant to flirt, and I should have warned the child not to let him make a fool of her if I did not think she was a match for him. When Greek meets Greek, then comes the tug of war! And if little Wylmer has not a large slice of devilry in her nature, I am no judge of my own sex.'

And Mrs Lorimer tintillates her Louis the Fourteenth curls solemnly, and taps away as is her habit on her *vade mecum*—the Sévres snuff-box.

'Yes; but you see Miss Wylmer is very young—almost a child, and she is so thoroughly inexperienced in the world. She has not an idea of the rocks and shoals that may lie ahead, or of the number of ravening wolves abroad,' Guy murmurs, with considerably more of plaintiveness in his accents than he is aware of. 'After all, it would be but kind of you, my dear aunt, to give her a gentle hint of Elmsdale's flirting propensities, and generally loose reputation, if you only do it for her father's sake.'

The last words are rather wily on his part, and have the desired effect.

'I will, if I see any danger, for I have taken rather a fancy to the girl herself—perhaps it is because she reminds me of Handsome Theo—he was such a mixture of guilelessness and impudence, and so is she; but, you see, Elmsdale may really be struck this time, and I should not think of putting any impediment in the way of her becoming a marchioness.'

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A marchioness! Nest marrying Elmsdale and becoming a marchioness! Nest, with her rusticity, and her quaint gipsy beauty, and her Bohemian ways! It takes Guy's breath away as he realises the possibility of such a thing, the possibility of his little love taking up her position among the upper ten thousand, and he feels horribly sick at heart; but he says nothing, for the simple reason that he knows it would be of no earthly use.

What good could accrue from arguing with Mrs Lorimer, when she is more stubborn than Balaam's ass, and more contrary in her ways than the famous pig who refused to jump over the stile, and has his peculiarities handed down to posterity? Walking up to the window, he stands drumming his knuckles on the pane in a monotonously dreary tune, while he champs away viciously at his moustache, and clouds gather thick and fast on his brow.

He remembers—he has never forgotten for one moment—those two evenings at Ravenshill when he kissed Nest, and he is unreasonable enough to believe that such a proceeding on his part made her there and then his especial property.

He objects dreadfully to sharing with anyone. Dal Wentworth, after all, is only a boy—a good-looking, effeminate lad—and not worth much thinking about; but Elmsdale, whom he knows, and everyone in town knows, is quite another thing. Elmsdale has never done anything dishonourable; he has never run off with another man's wife, or jilted a girl, or trifled with any woman beyond the point where trifling is held to be legitimate in this advanced age; but it is well understood that he has caused many a heartache, and that he knows as well how to cause them as any man of his day.

He amuses himself thoroughly—just to kill time, perhaps—and for a girl just entering society, a girl in her teens, a child who has rusticated in the wilds of the country all her young life, Lord Elmsdale is, Guy thinks, absolutely perilous. Elmsdale is the ravening wolf who will devour his one ewe lamb, and he is helpless to save her. He can say nothing, do nothing, for Nest herself has built up a barrier of ice between them. Nest, perchance, young and frank and ingenuous as she seems, may have the germs of worldliness and ambition budding fast in her breast, powerful auxiliaries to Elmsdale's cause—fatal to Guy's love for her! It is not every girl who can be strong-minded enough to turn her back resolutely on a marquis, and Guy is positively reduced to the forlorn hope that her half engagement to Dalrymple Wentworth may be a bar between her and this dangerous eligible peer.

In the midst of these cheerful reflections he is roused by Mrs

Lorimer's voice, a voice not usually melodious, and now—under the influence of a cold caught at Lady Glendower's ball—as croaky as a crow.

'Guy, I *do* hope that in the three months which have elapsed since I saw you last, you have made up your mind to come to a definite understanding with Mabella. I see no good in your shilly-shallying any longer. You are not a boy, and if a man lacks decision of character, he is really not worthy of respect.'

A momentary silence follows this little harangue, during which the clock chimes out a quarter to five with irritating loudness, and Mrs Lorimer's bony forefinger taps at her snuff-box. Guy never winces, though the words hit hard. Perhaps he fully expected them when the arrangement for a visit this afternoon was made, and has braced up his nerves as men brace them for the surgeon's knife.

He looks through the filmy lace curtains out on the glary, dusty street, seeing nothing, as he answers quietly,—

'If you think that a spirit of indifference to this as to everything else, synonymous with having made up my mind, perhaps I may answer—yes. At least, I have every desire to do as you wish, simply and wholly *because* you wish it. When a life is so utterly barren and useless as mine seems likely to be, what on earth does it matter after all what one does with it?' he adds, hopelessly and drearily, thinking of Nest as Lady Elmsdale.

'*Après cela le déluge,*' he mutters to himself through his set teeth, and once more Mrs Lorimer rouses him.

'I think you are extremely ungrateful and unreasonable, to talk in this absurd manner,' she responds sharply.

She has not one scrap of sympathy with anything appertaining to 'rubbishing sentiment,' as she calls—or rather miscalls—every phase of genuine feeling. Cold as a stone, hard as granite, strong-minded and thoroughly practical, she has not a vestige of mercy or clemency for any human being moulded on another pattern to herself.

Her extreme lack of sympathy, her horrible hardness, have often struck Guy before, but never so much as in this moment, when, in spite of everything, in spite of Nest's conduct last evening, in spite of adverse circumstances, his whole soul has softened into almost womanly tenderness, and he would give the world to find some responsive spirit.

He turns and glances at this grim arbitrator of his fortunes, and wonders if she can ever have been girlish and pliant—if she can ever have loved a man with the love of woman—have clung to his neck and yielded up her lips to his caress, as most of her sex have done, at any rate once in their lives.

Looking at her as she sits, erect, angular, her features hard and impassive, the answer is decidedly 'No.'

Though a creature of flesh and blood, her nerves are iron, her face, in its utter want of mobility, repellent to view. It may be that her very ugliness is an excuse for her nature, for women with extremely unlovely countenances are often unlovely in character.

'Am I asking anything very dreadful of you, Guy?' she questions sneeringly, 'anything that you should assume such a martyr-like tone and manner about? Most men, especially poor men, would not think themselves greatly injured by being offered a very handsome, stylish wife, backed with a very handsome fortune.'

'Forgive me, if I seemed to speak ungratefully,' Guy essays to reply penitently, but he feels very sore and miserable at heart, and very rebellious against the taunts at his poverty. *Maabella Moreton* has never held out less attraction for him than she does at this hour, when she is the instrument of torture. 'I know it is but natural that you should wish the marriage, since you like *Mrs Moreton* so much, and I quite recognise your right to dictate the terms on which you will leave your wealth. They are not, as you say, oppressive terms. I grant that. A handsome, stylish wife, and money sufficient to make life *couleur de rose*, sound very nice and tempting, yet sometimes it appears to me that anything would be more bearable than to make such a mercenary bargain as this would be on my side.'

'And why in the name of all that is ridiculous, should it be only a mercenary bargain?' cries *Mrs Lorimer*, in a highly exasperated tone, a point to which her naturally irascible-temper does not take long to arrive at. 'Pray, is *Maabella Moreton* hideous or disagreeable? Don't lots of men fall in love with her, and would give their eyes and ears to marry her? And who has ever been so foolishly in love as you were with her?'

'True; but you know that "Love once dead, nothing will ignite the ashes,"' Guy murmurs, in a low voice, hating himself for having ever wasted so much feeling on any other woman but *Nest*.

'Guy, I should have thought you were old enough now to put such namby-pamby ideas aside, and to look at life from a sensible, practical point of view,' is the crushing reply.

'I thought a little while ago that I was old enough or indifferent enough to do so,' he answers slowly, 'but now I feel inclined to ask you for a short reprieve; let me delay my answer for a few weeks, and at the end of that time, I pledge you my word, I will decide finally one way or the other. Either I will ask *Mrs More-*

ton to take me for better for worse (I am afraid the worse will predominate), or I will take my hat, make my very best bow for all your well-meant kindness, and pass out of your life for ever.'

'Don't talk like that, Guy,' she cries, actually softening a little; 'you know I have been an old fool about you always; I have cared for you ten times more than for my other nephews and nieces—I really think you ought to remember this.'

'I do remember it. I shall never forget your goodness, not under any circumstances whatever. But most likely,' he goes on, with a ghastly attempt at a smile, 'I shall marry Mrs Moreton if she will marry me. I haven't much hope or courage to begin a new life with a new face beside me. It will, after all, be infinitely easier to drift on somehow, with a familiar one.'

'I meant to act for the best in everything, Guy,' Mrs Lorimer says, after a moment, awed by the bitter yet subdued recklessness of his tone.

'I don't doubt it,' he answers hastily, and with the air of one who is anxious to avoid a discussion. Then the tell-tale blood rushes to his face, for he sees the well-known landau with its pair of fat roans stop at the door. He takes in at a glance—not Mrs Moreton's dainty cream and blue toilette and bonnet of forget-me-nots, but a slight figure robed in palest pink, with a little white hat drooping low over his love's dark eyes—and with fast-beating heart and bated breath he listens for the ascending steps.

In another instant she will be here, face to face, hand to hand—ah, God! would it were heart to heart!

Then the door of the drawing-room flies open, and Mrs Moreton sweeps in alone, looking more than ever like Marie Antoinette—but Marie Antoinette in a temper.

On the porcelain blush and white of her face, there are manifest traces of dissatisfaction, a deep line betwixt her golden brows, a certain set about the thin red lips, all more or less indications of ruffled feelings.

'How awfully warm it is,' she cries fractiously, sinking into a corner of a sofa, her cream skirts trailing away from her. 'When it is really warm in town, the heat is intolerable! One feels as if one was shut up in a box. I told you a fortnight ago, Mrs Lorimer, it was full time to be off to Brighton or Scarborough.'

'And I told you I did not agree with you,' Mrs Lorimer replies decidedly. She has no idea of allowing anyone the slightest advantage over her. 'And, moreover, I see no reason to retract

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'Which it certainly has not. There's anything I detest it's bread-and-butter misses. One never knows what to talk about to them. They are not equal to one's conversation—and one is not equal to making conversation to suit them.'

'You might be philanthropic and try and drag them up to your own high level, Mrs Moreton,' Guy Trevelyian says, with rather a cynical laugh, emerging from his nook from behind the window curtains.

She starts visibly—her fair face pink all over—her shallow blue eyes lighting up with animation.

'You here? Why I did not even know you were in town.'

'I only came last evening, barely in time for Lady Glendower's ball. Did not Miss Wylmer tell you she had seen me there?' he asks, quite wistfully, longing to hear something about her, something about her sayings, something which may perhaps tell him that he is not quite forgotten.

'Oh, dear no. I suppose she did not remember your existence, even!' Mrs Moreton replies carelessly, but with infinite *malice prepense*. 'She is dreadfully elated with her apparent conquest of Lord Elmsdale, and full of his divine waltzing. Poor little thing!—she is so unused to society and admiration that his attention has quite turned her head.'

'Poor little thing! I suppose she has gone upstairs to think over her conquest,' Guy says, with a curt laugh, that has no mirth in it.

'Yes, she said she had a headache, but I fancy it is a heartache.'

'"Ah, there's nothing half so sweet in life as love's young dream," quotes Guy, with a mock tragical air, feeling a perfect 'Othello' within.

'*Nothing!*' murmurs Mrs Moreton, with a deep sigh, and a swift meaning glance at her *soi-disant* lover, who catches it, and instead of responding, looks the other way.

Mrs Lorimer taps her snuff-box louder, and sniffs, from the united effects of a cold in the head and scenting something in the atmosphere. Mrs Moreton's sentimental tone must surely tell on Guy, and a *tête-à-tête* and proximity are certain to complete the charm.

'Ring for tea, Mabella dear, whilst I go and write to Mrs Mauleverer,' she says, in the most careless way imaginable. 'I am sure Guy would like a cup.'

'No, thanks. I am due at the "Rag" at half-past five,' Guy breaks in with a little laugh, as he shakes hands with Mrs Moreton in adieux.

Then he goes up to Mrs Lorimer.

'You are forgetting our little compact already. Remember you have promised me six whole weeks!'

'Six whole weeks of what, Mrs Lorimer?' Mrs Moreton questions, directly the door closes upon him.

'Oh, of shooting, you know, and I hope he will succeed in bringing down some game worth having,' the old lady replies gravely.

'Are you going into Suffolk this autumn then?'

'Probably.'

'And are you going to ask *me*, dear Mrs Lorimer?'

'Of course. Why, my dear Mabella, the shooting-party would be a dead failure without *you*!'

At this Mrs Moreton's brow clears of puckers, and with a delightful anticipation of the good times when she will have Guy all to herself, and the horrid Wylmer girl not by to interfere, she settles herself comfortably to her tea and thin bread and butter.

'Did you meet little Wylmer at Wentworth, Mabella?' Mrs Lorimer asks presently.

'Yes. I believe she was trying to catch Dal, the son. At her age, it is wonderful how interested her nature is. She flung herself at Lord Elmsdale's head to-day in a way that was really quite shocking!'

'Ah, I see she has an eye to the loaves and fishes. Well, perhaps it is a good thing, as she will leave Guy alone, poor dear pauper as he is!—*à propos* of Guy, I *wish* he could find some woman with money, who would love him and make him a good wife.'

Upon this Mrs Moreton rises, and gracefully throws herself on her knees by the old lady's side.

'I have money, dear Mrs Lorimer—and—and—I am so foolish, but I *cannot* forget what I felt for Guy in the past.'

'Do you feel anything in the *present*, Mabella? Don't kneel there, you'll crinkle your skirts, but sit down comfortably and tell me if you would marry Guy if he asked you?'

'You *know* I would, dear Mrs Lorimer!'

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CHAPTER IX.

LE PREMIER BAISER.

Yea, if I could—would I have you see
My very love of you filling me
And know my soul to the quick.'

THERE is a brilliant gathering of the *crème de la crème* at Lauderdale House to-night, and Nest, in spite of her headache or heartache of the afternoon, finds it a pleasant duty—the duty of making herself agreeable to men's eyes. Her toilette has the invaluable assistance of Mrs Lorimer's *femme de chambre* Louise, who like all her compatriotes possesses in matters of adornment the soul of a born artist, and who is charmed with the subject that is now on her hands.

A few touches of her skilful fingers metamorphoses the simple little white ball dress of inexpensive material into a costume replete with elegance and *chic*, and when the last spray of Cape Jessamine (a floral offering of Guy Trevelyian's, though it has come anonymously) has been put coquettishly into hair and corsage, Nest looks into the great swinging cheval glass, and is immediately filled with an honest amazement at her own exceeding comeliness.

'I never was half, not a quarter so pretty before in my life!' she cries, with a merry laugh. 'I had no idea I *could* look so nice!'

And she really means what she says. She has always had a suspicion that she is very passable, but now she knows that she surpasses anything she has believed herself to be.

'Mademoiselle has enormous capabilities,' Louise confesses, well pleased that her efforts are so much appreciated. 'Mademoiselle is not like the English meeses, so straight, so stiff—she quite—*quite* French!'

Nest rather demurs to this inwardly, she leans to fatherland and likes being an Englishwoman born and bred, but she gives a gracious little smile and thanks, and wrapping her fleecyawl round her, trips downstairs.

She feels her heart give a great throb, however, as she walks to the drawing-room and finds herself face to face with Guy, but plucking up her courage, she holds out a little ungloved hand that chills him by its excessive coldness, and which does not abide long in his clasp.

He offers her a cup of coffee, and for a few moments appears

to be engrossed by a cup himself, then remembering that this *tête-à-tête* is not likely to be of long duration he says suddenly and rather abruptly,—

‘Will you not speak to me, Miss Wylmer?’

‘Yes! would you tell me, if you will be so good—how I am looking to-night. Mrs Lorimer desired me to look my best—and I should like to satisfy her!’ she answers carelessly.

Quite a sharp pain smites him as he listens. It seems impossible that she can ever have cared for him! After all, she is but a frivolous fickle butterfly, and all his infinite love and longing have touched her as lightly as the wind. He regards her absently while these thoughts pass through his mind, and she with a good deal of natural aptitude reads easily all he thinks in his face.

Is she sorry for the pain inscribed on his features? No one bit. With true womanly triumph she loves to discover that she *can* pain him, his suffering is incense to her vanity, and to her heart, for she loves him too, loves him more than she knows herself.

‘Well!’ she says, ‘let me have your verdict, Mr Trevilian!’

He does not reply for a moment, but it is not difficult to see the dumb but eloquent admiration that shines out of his grey eyes, and she flushes a little in spite of her.

‘I think Mrs Lorimer will be satisfied; you look as well as a woman could wish to look!’ Guy answers at last, with a truly commendable moderation considering how fast his pulse is beating.

‘Oh, thanks!’ she cries, piqued. ‘I confess you are slightly indefinite, but when one fishes for compliments I suppose one is properly rewarded by not getting them.’

He sees at once that she is vexed. She is but a child after all, with all a child’s inability to hide her emotions. In her vexation, puerile, even slightly contemptible as it may be, she grows really more attractive. An additional spice of devilry in Miladi and Mrs Lorimer are pleased to call it, sparkles up her glance, and a wilful, irresistible, provoking pout bestrides her ripe red lips.

‘You *know* you are lovely!’ he exclaims passionately. ‘Would you should you wish me to tell you so?’

‘Because it is pleasant to hear!’ she answers frankly, and she faces him with eyes as full of merry candour as a child’s.

‘Will you dance with me to-night, Miss Wylmer?’

She hesitates, then she suddenly remembers that a decided refusal may be construed into jealousy and anger about Mr Moreton, and replies lightly,

'With pleasure, if you ask me when I am disengaged.'

'Will you dance the second waltz with me?' he asks eagerly, and she absolutely experiences a sense of gratification at being able to say,—

'I regret! but I am engaged to Lord Elmsdale for the first two waltzes.'

Guy turns very red, and feels a very irritable sensation in his ordinary well-disciplined mind.

'Well, then, promise me the third!'

'The third,' she repeats doubtfully. 'I will try and remember to keep it for you, but so many asked me last night, and I said yes to everybody, without taking the trouble to understand nearly which dance they wanted.'

He feels intense annoyance and mortification as he listens.

'I had no idea that you were already such an established queen of society that it was necessary to bespeak a place on our programme days in advance!' he manages to say, however, quietly.

She flashes a covert glance at him which is full of exultation and her heart gives a triumphant throb. This man who dared—she flings away the memory, for it makes her feel so hot and cold, and angry and indignant—this man shall see her men flock round her and plead for a look or a smile, he shall know that the girl he trifled with, strove to make a plaything, a trumpery toy, is the coveted prize of other hearts. She is recalled from her dais of pride and scorn by a very humble voice.

'You will understand, will you not, that I shall gladly take any dance you are able to give me, and—Nest!—for heaven's sake do—'

'Come along, my love,' cries Mrs Lorimer, rustling into the room, resplendent in an Algerian opera cloak, with as many colours in it as Joseph's coat. 'The carriage is here, and we shall be late!'

So Nest does not hear what she is to do 'for heaven's sake,' she hurries after her chaperon. Only, in spite of Mrs Storeton, she cannot help a thrill of pleasure as Guy pulls her up more closely round her, lingering over his task, and for a moment holds her hand as he helps her into the carriage.

The crush is terrible at Lauderdale House, and difficult to wade through, but Mrs Lorimer's tall, gaunt figure opens the way, and in a few moments she and her charge are safely disengaged on an ottoman against the wall.

There are many prettier women at this ball than at Lady Pendower's on the preceding night, and Nest looks at one

and the other with honest admiration. Presently, among the bevy of beauties, one passes who appears to her countrified eyes the most beautiful woman she has ever seen, and who is attired as only Worth or Pingat can attire.

Green silk, of the faintest, most delicate shade, that suggests water shimmering under moonbeams, clouds upon clouds of fleecy, snowy lace, caught up by trailing sprays of tea roses. Fancy the costume that a French *modiste* can fashion out of such materials!

In her brown hair—rich chesnut brown—wreathing in and out of the lustrous coils, pure pearls glisten, on her cheeks two pink spots burn. In her glorious eyes there is a delicious softness. She is 'a daughter of the gods, tall and divinely fair.'

Gladys, Lady Underhill, is one of the most noted professional beauties of the season, and has shoals of admirers, and at this moment her eyes are cast down at the superb Trianon fan she carries, and she is evidently absorbed in the conversation of her partner.

This partner is Lord Elmsdale, and he is bending and speaking very low under the sweep of his light moustache, whilst his glance rests immovably on the lovely face beside him.

Notwithstanding his engagement to Nest, he has danced this first waltz with Lady Underhill and a quadrille and set of Lancers are also gone through with her, before he comes to claim a dance.

'Where have you been hiding yourself?' he asks Nest, in a soft voice—a voice he has grown so accustomed to modulating when he addresses a woman, that it sounds inexpressibly tender, even when he says 'Good day!'—'I have been looking for you ever so long, surely you have only just come!'

'No,' Nest answers, with a careless laugh, though at heart she feels angry and indignant. 'I have been here some time, since the beginning of the waltz, in fact, which I believe you were to have had, were you not?'

She says this so indifferently that she piques him in return. Elmsdale, who considers himself a second Cæsar, experiences a twinge of mortification, and it evinces itself by a decided accession of colour to his usually pale face.

'I am sorry the waltz was so uninteresting that you only *thought* you had promised it to me!' he remarks, in a low reproachful tone, to which she turns a deaf ear.

'Did you say you have been looking for me?' she asks.

'Of course I have!'

'Strange, is it not, how one misses people when one is

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looking for them, and discovers them when one is not. Now I was not searching for you, and yet I saw you long ago !' she goes on innocently.

'And did not even speak to me. How unkind !'

The words are commonplace enough, but the voice is eloquent, yet it does not deceive the listener.

With all her youth, she is not wanting in intelligence, and is more than a match for him, in spite of his knowledge of the world and his ingratiating ways.

'It would have been rather unkind if I *had* spoken,' she replies. 'You were remarkably well entertained or entertaining--'

He looks down at her with a question in his eyes, and she nods slightly towards a green silk train and trailing tea roses that seem to hover a good deal close by.

'Ah ! Lady Underhill ! she is a very old friend, and I was very interested in her account of her husband's illness. Poor Underhill—I am so fond of him, don't you know !'

Nest makes a little *moue* of doubt as he says this, and then they set off on their waltz, and once more in the pleasure of dancing she forgets everything. But a 'society' man has to dance with so many, that Elmsdale is glad when the dance is over, and he can take her out of the crush into the coolness and comparative quiet of the long corridor.

'What has become of little Wylmer ?' Mrs Lorimer asks of her nephew, who, looking pale and a little spiritless, sinks down on the ottoman by her side.

'Improving her knowledge of human nature, the flirty side of it, under Elmsdale's able tuition, I presume,' Guy answers dryly, and a little grimly even. 'I saw them in the corridor a moment ago.'

'I wonder if she'll catch him ?'

Guy starts, and makes no answer, then goes into a brown study amidst the lights, and the flowers, and the lovely women around.

'Guy ! have you seen Mabella ?'

'Yes.'

'Have you spoken to her ?'

'Only "how-do-you-do ?"'

'Don't you intend to speak to her ?' and in spite of herself, Mrs Lorimer's voice sounds very anxious.

'Yes ! if it comes in my way,' he answers, rather haughtily:

He has not sold himself yet for the miserable mess of pottage, which just now looks most unattractive to him, and he has a reluctance to surrendering his neck meekly to the halter of

obligation. However, it does come in his way a little later, and sauntering up, he drops into a chair by Mrs Moreton's side.

'All alone?' he asks, and his voice falters a little, for it seems so like the old, old days to be sitting beside her, with the ivory of her magnificent shoulders gleaming under his eyes, and the perfume from her lovely blonde hair going out to him.

'Yes; all alone! I don't mind doing a wall-flower in the least. General Stanhope was with me, but I am not in the mood for talking to everyone, so I suppose he found me stupid and left me,' she says languidly.

'I hope you are well! Do you know, you are not looking so well and strong as you were at Wentworth.'

She glances up at him quickly. What a glance it is; so full of wistfulness—almost of pleading. It is the old look of bygone days, when he and she were Adam and Eve in a terrestrial paradise, before the serpent, Ambition, crawled across their path and blighted its flowers.

It is the old, old look of bygone days, and it even now makes his pulse, if not his heart, beat a little faster, while the vivid flush on her fair cheek deepens.

'Oh, I am well. Well enough!' she replies, with a faint, forced, bitter little laugh. 'One's looks must go off after a time, you know, and sometimes one grows not to care *how* one looks. *You* are not changed at all, *Guy*.'

She lifts her eyes once more to see how he takes her utterance of the familiar Christian name, and she sees that he does not even notice it, for his gaze is bent on Nest, who is entering the room on Lord Elmsdale's arm.

'Do you admire that little Miss Wylmer?' she questions indifferently, although she is almost choking with jealousy and mortification.

'Yes! She is pretty and attractive, and her style is so unusual,' and quite a warm glow creeps over his face as he says this.

Regarding him keenly for a moment, she makes him no answer.

Such duels as these are common enough in human life, and that man or woman has the best of it who is the least readable to his or her companion.

Just now, unfortunately for herself, Mabella Moreton has very much the worst of it.

Guy reads her through and through, and cannot help feeling a certain pitiless scorn and triumph for the woman who trampled his heart in the dust for her pleasure and convenience, and threw him over for the sake of filthy lucre. After all, there is

not much blame to him if he shows her now how lightly he holds the memory even of the pain she dealt him.

'I should be glad, Mrs Moreton, if you would take the trouble to cultivate Miss Wylmer. She is so frank and bright, and so thoroughly natural. Altogether she is a sunbeam, and enough to make an old man feel quite young.'

'But how about an old woman, or one who *feels* old. We are not usually pleased by a sight of the freshness and youth we have lost,' she answers, with a deprecating look, longing in her foolish heart for one little word from his lips that will be incense to the vanity which she repudiates.

'Why imagine you have lost them?' asks Guy coldly—carelessly—asks as Elmsdale or any other man might ask. Remember that I have known you for a long time, and my testimony is unimpeachable that you have lost nothing you need regret.'

'*Nothing, Guy?*' she repeats significantly, turning and facing him, and for an instant two pairs of eyes fully meet, when Guy quietly looks away.

He has given her civil words, complimentary even, but it is the manner and the tone that lack—that in their complete and evident indifference harrow Mrs Moreton's heart, and make her clench her white hands hopelessly, helplessly under the shelter of her fan. She presses down her teeth on her nether lip, and lowers her lids to hide the anger in her cerulean orbs.

'You are very kind,' she says, after a little, 'but the testimony of my looking-glass is more unimpeachable still. What stupid things balls are!' she goes on hastily, to cover her nervousness.

She feels dreadfully unsatisfied—restless—and he resolves to keep aloof from 'remembrances,' and 'reminiscences,' and all tender points. Much as he has undoubtedly loved her once, he knows perfectly that that love is reduced to the veriest ashes, and that neither opportunity nor proximity will ever be potent enough to re-ignite it into a flame.

Never, for love once dead between the sexes, can never live again.

'She bowled me over coolly once, and now she would like me to be her very devoted,' he thinks, as he watches her uttering breath, her lagging words—the flicker of the long lashes that kiss the crimson cheeks—the white gleaming shoulders, the softened depths of the usually rather shallow blue eyes.

Someone comes up, addresses a conventional remark to her, and Guy at once seizes the occasion to rise.

As he does so, Mrs Moreton speaks eagerly :

'I'll try and cultivate Miss Wylmer ; I have no doubt she is charming, since you admire her so much, Mr Trevylian !'

Guy bows, and without replying, saunters away, while her eyes follow him, and under the light, dim as it is in the corridor tears glitter in them.

Meanwhile, he enters the ball-room, with its gay music and its bevy of beauties, just in time to find the band playing the third waltz of the evening. Strangely enough it is '*Le Premier Baiser*,' and as he recognises the air, a thrill goes through his heart and his face flushes.

Nest, who has contrived to free herself from her numerous admirers, sits demurely beside Mrs Lorimer, with impatience plainly inscribed on her brow. At sight of Guy, her April face clears up, and forgetting all about the reserve and dignity which she had resolved to treat him, she cries,—

'I thought you were never coming, and I was afraid I should lose the waltz altogether !'

After all, it is the dance she cares for most, and as he believes this his spirits sink below zero.

'Don't let us waste a moment, then,' he says, with a forced smile. But in spite of everything he has not felt so happy for many a day as he clasps her waist and her hand lies in his.

They scarcely pause until the music stops, then he takes her into the corridor, and sinking down on a soft *fauteuil*, she has closed her eyes and fans herself languidly.

Guy gazes at her a moment keenly.

'Ah ! who would recognise the "Nest" of Ravenshill in the Belle of Society ?' he says. 'I am afraid she is in a fair way to become an indolent fine lady.'

Upon this she opens her eyes very wide and flashes a look at him.

'You really think so ! I should have fancied that was the very last thing anybody could prognosticate with regard to me. Now Lord Elmsdale was only saying to-night that my great charm consists in my being so thoroughly unlike what he calls "society misses."'

'Really ! It is very impertinent of him to make personal remarks, I think,' Guy replies, with a slow fire gathering in his grey eyes. 'And might I ask how long you will retain the dissimilarity, if you have it, with Elmsdale and Co. flattering you and fluttering round you all the evening, and teaching you all the tricks and fashions of their class, Miss Wylmer ?'

'That I am sure I don't know,' she answers carelessly, with a bright laugh. 'I have not thought about the matter at all

Is there any necessity to do so? I only hope I shall not be quite spoiled by the time I get home again.'

She says this so naively that Guy smiles in spite of himself. The golden light of the huge chandelier falls like an aureole round her head, her fingers toy with her fan absently. A more serious expression has stolen over her sparkling face, and her eyes are brimful of thought.

'May I ask if there is any danger of your being utterly spoiled before you get home again?' he asks.

'Great danger of it,' she says, with quaint earnestness. 'You must surely see it as plainly as I do. After being admired and envied, and made to feel myself quite a person of consequence, how am I going to drop back with tolerable philosophy into the one which seemed to me before dreadfully flat and dull, even when I knew no other? It will be awfully hard, you see.'

'Awfully hard, certainly,' Guy murmurs, thinking that such a face as hers deserves a different fate than being wasted on the desert air.

'Yes! it will be uncommonly hard,' she goes on, in her queer, outspoken way, giving an impatient sigh. 'But I suppose I must bear it, and so I hope I sha'n't have gone quite to the bad, at the pomps and vanities are very nice, and I shall miss them so much that I shall be as peevish and discontented as an old maid when I go home, and make the little mother and Gus, and especially Dal, wretched.'

Dal!

Guy starts visibly as the name falls suddenly on his ear, then grows white to the lips, and passes his handkerchief over his face to hide the feelings which he knows are written on it.

'Tell me, were you really and truly in earnest when you said you had engaged yourself to Dalrymple Wentworth? Do you mean to say that your father and mother have really allowed a wild like you, with no knowledge of the world—of the society of men—to go and engage yourself?'

'I am not a child, Mr Trevilian. I am seventeen, and my little mother was married at that age. As for Dal, after all, I have known him all my life, and treated him very badly, poor, old fellow!'

'Do you consider engaging yourself to marry him in the light of treating him very badly?'

'No, not exactly. But it is a long story, and it would not interest you.'

'Yes, it would!' he cries hastily. 'If you have not found out that everything about you interests me almost more, I care less for my own privacy, than it can interest Elmsdale or Wentworth, or any

other man, you have far less discernment than your sex usually possess.'

'Yes, I think you *do* feel a sort of interest in me,' she replies demurely, furling and unfurling her fan. 'I suppose it's because you think me such a child in comparison with yourself!'

'Just so,' he answers dryly. 'Yes, it's because I am so much older than you. Do you remember that evening—a Sunday evening it was—at Ravenshill, when I told you my age?' he asks slowly, looking straight at her.

He sees that she remembers—in the vivid colour that dyes her face—in the swift lower of the broad, black-lashed lids—in the nervous twitch of the lissome fingers.

And he smiles. After all she has not forgotten. What she remembers has the power to make the blood leap to her cheek, and the sweet, soft eyes to droop under his regard.

There is only one other couple in the far end of the corridor, all the others are dancing fast and furious in the adjoining room. Guy gives a quick glance round, then he stoops and presses a passionate kiss on the slender wrist near him.

'I have not lost you *yet*, my Nest,' he whispers, and before the burning blush has left her face, Elmsdale comes and claims her for the next dance.

CHAPTER X.

A DETHRONED QUEEN.

'By Castor! Love
Hath both its gall and honey in abundance.
Sweet to the taste—but in it we swallow bitter,
Even till we loathe.'

NONE of us require to number many years before we find out that everything in this world is a mixture of gall and sweet, gall mostly predominating, so that Nest only shares the common ill of the human race when she discovers that with the pomps and vanities attendant on a residence in Chesham Place there are the hand-in-hand disagreeables.

She is so very young and so easily impressed, that one of the real agreeabilities is Mrs Lorimer's French maid, whose talent in transmogrifying the plainest and cheapest garment into a thing of beauty and taste is astounding. Still even this

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has its drawbacks! How in the world can she ever content herself again with the handiwork of Miss Brown—the Ravenshill 'Worth?'

The flounces and furbelows, the wonderful details of the toilette, that convert her as if by one magic touch from the tolerably neat, freshly-attired young person who created no particular *furor* in county circles, into the belle *par excellence* of Mayfair or Belgravia, the cynosure of all eyes, the evidently chosen of Lord Eimsdale, who is the best match of the season, is a toilette which inspires in her a certain respect, such as she has never yielded before to such frivolities, for up to this time she has been like the lilies of the field, that toil not, neither do they spin, and simply grow and bloom and look pretty, because they are put there apparently for that purpose.

Town has another attraction besides the French maid, it consists in there being so many men always ready and willing to devote themselves to her on the smallest provocation, but before Nest has been many days Mrs Lorimer's guest, she inclines to the belief that all these advantages are in a great measure counterbalanced by the very unpleasant propinquity of Mrs Moreton.

Ever since she first set eyes on her it is scarcely possible to express the dislike that this woman—fair to excessive fairness, ladylike, low-voiced, *distingué*—has awakened in Nest's breast, and it is still more difficult to set down in black and white the subtle causes, irrespective of jealousy, of this aversion.

It must be remembered, however, by those who may accuse her of caprice or ill-nature, that never before in her experience of seventeen years, with the exception of Miladi, whom she thoroughly detests, has she come in contact with a specimen of that insolent fine-ladyism, which is perhaps the most dreadfully aggravating thing to approach and wrestle with.

She does not in the smallest degree comprehend how to bear philosophically an unseeing gaze that studiously ignores her, or a supercilious stare that is evidently meant to annihilate her.

Neither can she tamely submit to being snubbed and patronised when it pleases Mrs Moreton to notice her at all.

We have all heard the tradition about the unreasonable worm that turns at last when trod upon.

Now Nest being as far as is possible from 'meek,' does not wait like the worm to turn, but at once sets Mrs Moreton and her snubbing at defiance, with a gay audacity. Still the bearing of her adversary is a chronic annoyance, and her historian begs to apologise for the real malice with which she mutters to herself, clenching her little white teeth,—

'I shall be even with you yet, Mrs Moreton !'

And Mrs Moreton on her side has conceived quite as great an aversion to this girl, whose *riante*, sparkling face has set men's hearts aflame, and whom she can by no effort succeed in 'putting down.'

Except to a very few intimates, who can be counted on her fingers, Mrs Moreton's manner is, as has been said, remarkably offensive. To Nest it is especially so, for cogent reasons. Imperious Mrs Moreton for two seasons has posed for 'The Beauty,' and among her admirers, Elmsdale has been prominent. True, this is but a thing of the past, and since, his affections have wandered here and there, in a manner habitual to them, still she is irritated by the visible admiration in his eyes for Nest.

And she is ever so much more irritated by the apparent defection of Guy Trevylian.

For to all means and purposes he has surely gone over to the Philistines' camp.

She has, however, an immensity of vanity, and she verily believes that his defection is only on the surface. Yet it stirs her to wrath that he should even *seem* to attach himself to the unconscionably long train of one so utterly insignificant as this Devonshire lass, this bit of rustic, wax-work.

She is indignant that Guy—*her* Guy in the past, *her* Guy, if she can manage it, in the future—should even think the girl worth speaking to, and with the usual and singular inconsistency that often characterises the feminine mind, she pours out the vials of her anger on the woman, who is passive—instead of on the man, who is active.

But such is life. We women as a rule are curiously unreasonable creatures, and just a little leaven of spite towards our fellow sisters is as indigenous to our hearts as oaks to British soil.

On this especial morning, Nest is tired and sleepy after the dancing and dissipation, and she lounges lazily in a deliciously easy-chair, with Ouida's last novel—(Mrs Lorimer is not strict about her waters of literature)—in her lap, but even the exciting pages cannot keep off 'the dustman' as the children say, when she is aroused by the sudden entrance of Mrs Moreton, and amazed by the unusual *embressement* of her greeting.

Nest wonders why on earth the weather which has been most monotonously sunshiny and glary for ever so many days, should be a topic of conversation for full five minutes, or why Mrs Moreton should expatiate eloquently on the toilettes in the Row on the preceding day, since she must be quite aware that

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no knowing the wearers from Eve, she (Nest) has no especial interest on the matter.

Presently she leans back once more in her luxurious lounge, and in spite of her commendable efforts in the cause of good manners, finds her lids persistently drooping over her poor sleepy eyes, when Mrs Moreton pronounces a name that at once rouses her,—

‘And so you have not known Guy—Mr Trevylian long?’

This is said abruptly, but, withal, the voice that says it is decidedly wistful.

Nest, sitting bolt upright now, surveys her with two large, dark eyes that are wonderfully bright and clear, considering their late vigils.

‘No. He has stayed down at—you know—at Wentworth, once or twice—that’s all.’

‘I fancied I had seen him walking near the river at Ravenshill with you and your sister. You saw a good deal of him, didn’t you?’

‘A very great deal. He is so nice, and we all liked him immensely. I remember meeting you one day when we were out walking, and I happened to ask who you were.’

Mrs Moreton, forgetting her ordinary languor and reserve, bends forward at this, with cheeks burning crimson.

‘And what did he answer?’ she questions eagerly.

‘Only that he had known you a few years back, and that you used to be friends.’

‘Used to be!’ is the bitter reply; ‘that is so like a man. I really believe that it costs men nothing to throw off the feelings of years.’

Nest feels a hot spirit of partisanship crop up for jilted Guy, and is conscious of an ill-natured desire to implant a sting.

‘I said something of that kind to him, and he replied that he did not throw off his friends, but that sometimes his friends said him the compliment of throwing him over when they found more serviceable ones.’

‘Oh!’ ejaculates Mrs Moreton, and she looks down on the splendid velvet pile at her feet, while she evidently reflects.

There is quite a silence after this, which Nest seizes on to indulge in a yawn behind one of Ouida’s most sensational pages.

A faint wind comes through the open window, and slothfully stirs the foliage of a couple of orange trees that stand in presden tubs close by, and it stirs also the soft dark tendrils of hair that wander on Nest’s forehead. It is a very soothing sensation, and once more she forgets she is not alone, and yields herself up to the drowsy god.

And again she is aroused—this time by a deep sigh that breaks from her *vis-à-vis*.

Nest stares at her wonderingly.

She lies back, looking like a soulless doll, fair and pink and white, flaxen-haired, and with her china blue eyes wide open.

Can that sigh have been heaved over the fiery furnace of love that swept over her in the olden days, and sweeps over her still? Or is it—and for the sake of womanhood we will believe it so—that she heaves a sigh over the supreme folly of a heart that against her will, cannot quite forget the madness it once went through.

Presently she speaks, and this time her voice is rather hard and defiant.

‘I suppose you have heard people say that Guy Trevylian is engaged to be married, haven’t you, Miss Wylmer?’

And bending once more forward, she watches the small *piquante* face—watches eagerly, hopefully, to see, maybe, if her words bring a shadow of grief on the starry eyes, a flush of pain to the roseleaf cheek.

But if she watches for such signs of suffering, she is foiled for Nest carelessly turns over another leaf of her novel, to the merits of which it must be confessed she is not doing justice and replies quietly, even stolidly,—

‘Yes, I have heard people say so.’

‘And did you believe the report?’

Upon this point-blank question, Nest raises her glance, and looks straight back into the cruel blue eyes.

‘No. I did not.’

‘And why not, pray?’

As she asks this, unconsciously to herself, Mabella Moreton’s voice rings out almost fiercely.

‘Because Mr Trevylian told me himself that it was not true and if I like anyone I never doubt their word.’

‘Ah, but, my poor child, men are deceivers ever. The world’s fair, but it is very false. When you are a little older you will find this out.’

‘I think I am finding it out quite fast enough, without any need of growing older,’ Nest answers gravely.

‘Will you let me give you a little advice, my dear Miss Wylmer? Of course I can have but one object in doing so—it is simply the interest one woman feels in another if she sees that other in danger of a false step. You are very young; I daresay you are not more than twenty.’

‘I am just seventeen,’ Nest breaks in quietly.

‘Seventeen! I should have thought by your manners and

ment of shyness you were more than *seventeen*. However, the
 of your being even younger than I fancied further induces
 to murmur a warning in your ear. Men now-a-days are not
 marrying men—that is, they are not marrying men as far as
 unless girls are concerned. A girl may attract them by her
 pretty face, enchain them for a while by her innocence or her
 sweetness, according to the taste of her admirer, but there it ends.
 He may break her heart, but he simply goes on to number two,
 number fifty, as the case may be, and rehearses the same
 act, until the final tableau, which is ordinarily marriage with
 a heiress or a rich widow.'

And this is Mr Trevylian's *role* in life, I suppose you mean
 to say,' Nest asks, a little scornfully. 'If so, the heiress or
 rich widow ought to be congratulated on the prize in store
 for them. You are much older than I am, Mrs Moreton, and,
 without doubt, having bought your experience of men dearly, are
 able to hold your own against them, but do you know, I would
 rather be young and foolish and suffer for my youth and my
 beauty, than be always on my guard in case such a despicable
 specimen of manhood as you have painted comes across my
 path !'

At this moment Mrs Lorimer comes in, and, looking from one
 to the other, taps her snuff-box reflectively.

'Will you stay to luncheon, *Ma-bella*?' she asks graciously.

'No, thanks,' Mrs Moreton replies, rather curtly; 'I am
 going to an afternoon at Mrs Dering's, and must go home for a
 preliminary *siesta*.'

'By the way, we are going to Mrs Dering's also,' Mrs Lorimer
 says, 'that is, if this young person is sufficiently awake to dress
 herself.'

Upon this Nest starts up from her Castle of Indolence, and
 casts a bright beaming eye on her hostess.

'I am quite awake for anything so nice. I would not miss
 going for the world, Mrs Lorimer. Every one I know is to be
 there—Lord Elmsdale, and Mr Trevylian, and—'

'Stop there, Miss Wylmer!' cries Mrs Moreton spitefully.
 'You do not want to mention anyone else, surely, since we all
 know you think Mr Trevylian a host in himself.'

'The best colours like a rose, but is quite equal to the occasion.'

'Yes; I do! I like him better than anyone else in town,
 and is it a wonder, since he is always ready to talk to me, and
 to come with me, and—'

'Whatever else Mr Trevylian is ready to do, Mrs Moreton
 is a deaf ear to, as she sweeps haughtily out of the
 room.'

For a minute Mrs Lorimer gazes after her in amazement then she murmurs meditatively,—

‘I cannot imagine what could have made Mabella come here at this unearthly hour of the day, before my time for coming downstairs too! What do you think of her, my love?’

‘I have not thought much about her, Mrs Lorimer. It is so difficult to form an opinion of anyone on so slight an acquaintance, and I really know nothing of her—nothing!’ Nest answers, disclaiming any intimacy with vehemence, ‘but perhaps I may say that I have not taken a fancy to her.’

‘Ah, ha! I suspected as much. You did not give me the impression just now by your face that you were swearing eternal friendship. Of course, you were talking about some man—men are the usual rock on which women split. May I ask who you were discussing?’

Nest scents a pitfall at once, and as she does not consider that Mrs Lorimer has any right to ask this question, she draws herself up, and raises her pretty little nose just a shade above the level of her companion’s Roman one.

‘We were talking of different things—nothing very particular—and I fear I was not very amiable!’ Then she loses sight of her reserve, and flashes—‘After all, it is none of my business that she jilted Mr Trevylian as she did, but I think it’s infamous of the woman to act as she did.’

‘Was she talking of Guy?’

‘Yes.’

‘And what did she say about him?’ persists the old inquisitor so determinedly, that the pressed victim resigns the point.

‘Nothing to speak of, if one analyses it. She asked me whether I had seen a good deal of him, and whether I liked him, and whether I had heard he was engaged—and—that is all, I believe,’ and Nest pauses to take breath.

‘Tell me, my dear, has it struck you that Guy is in love with her?’

Nest crimsoned, and going up to the open window, tries to cool her cheeks.

‘No; Mr Trevylian’s manner to Mrs Moreton strikes me as very much what it might be to quite an ordinary acquaintance.

The lynx eyes watch her very closely as she speaks.

‘Dear me! And so you have not perceived any signs of understanding between them?’

‘No; indeed, I have not!’ cried Nest bravely, and as she leans to the belief that her powers of observation on this subject have been acute, the sparkle comes back to her face with a smile to her lip.

"I am sorry to hear this, my love—deeply sorry, for I fancy you are very sharp in most things. It is true that Mabella kept me dangling in her train for two years, and finally jilted him for a better match, but it is equally true that now she is desirous of fastening her chains upon him. She is very fond of him—always has been, I suspect, though, of course, she has been brought up to respect the Ten Commandments, and to behave herself properly before the world. She loves him, I'll be bound, with every inch of love she has in her, and what is more to the purpose, she is willing to say, "With all my worldly goods—I thee endow!" Now Guy is a poor man, and Mabella Moreton is a very rich woman, and naturally I desire my nephew to make a good marriage. He is not fitted for a steel pauper; he has expensive tastes and habits; he is indolent and has no idea of work. There is nothing for him but to get a wealthy wife, and he knows he cannot depend on me; that is, I have told him over and over again, that every penny I have shall go to the Asylum for Idiots at Earlswood rather than he should benefit, if he does not choose to marry a man I wish, and I wish him to marry Mabella Moreton!"

Understanding and listening to this long harangue, Nest feels very sore at heart; but she crushes down her inclination to cry, and breaks forth in a merry laugh instead, which rather amazes Mrs Lorimer. The harangue has been given for a purpose, and this merriment soon takes away its point.

"Let us hope that Mr Trevelyian will see the error of his ways, and return to his allegiance to Mrs Moreton," she says lightly; "but we are forgetting time in our interesting conversation, and I am engaged half-a-dozen dances to Lord Elms-

"Then we must not be late for Mrs Dering's, my love. Elmswood is a man so run after, that it would not do to offend him, my dear. Don't you forget that he is the best match of the day, and he is so very charming."

"Very charming!" Nest echoes, "and he dances divinely."

"Does he ever say anything nice to you, my dear?"

"The best glances at her—the old face is the queerest mixture of pride and anxiety—and once more the girl laughs.

"Yes; he says *I dance divinely!*"

"Hum! and is that all!"

"And he said he would like to dance through life with me, my dear," she answers demurely.

"Vo! And what did you answer, my love?" Mrs Lorimer asks, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Nothing."

'Nothing! Well, perhaps it was best, it wouldn't do for him to think you were ready to jump at him.'

'Especially as I am *not!*' Nest cries saucily, as she runs out of the room.

'What fools women are,' Mrs Lorimer soliloquises. 'Mabella fancies the child likes Guy; but anyone can see with half an eye that it is "the coronet" she is hankering after—an embryo duchess! What a glamour these words have for us. Now I never had a chance of a title, but if I had had, what a duchess I should have made. What pride, what haughtiness I should have shown to everyone. I should have *crushed* everybody under my heel, I hate them so! I hate the whole world—a parcel of false humbugging creatures. There isn't a soul who cares for me, I believe, except for my money, and my dinners, and my fine house.'

These cheerful reflections do not tend to improve Mrs Lorimer's temper, and the little business between Guy and Mrs Moreton irritates her above everything. No immediate prospect does she see of the matrimonial arrangement on which she has set her perverse heart—or whatever serves her for that organ. Guy bestows very little attention on any woman, and the only one who seems capable of rousing him to anything like animation is Nest.

But Nest, for reasons of her own, treats him in an off-hand fashion, and when she is at a ball flirts outrageously with other men. So Guy, believing that these moths suit her better than his graver self, does not press his claims for notice, though in secret he suffers horribly.

But Lord Elmsdale has no such retiring sentiments. He has no notion of surrendering to what he calls an unappreciative throng, the charming little wildflower he has renewed his acquaintance with, and he contrives to see more of her than anyone else can, for Mrs Lorimer encourages him with shameful openness.

To her it appears quite a feather in her cap to secure such a *parti* for her *protégée*, and she leaves no stone unturned to bring about meetings at parties, and picture galleries, and dinners, so that all the London world begins to assert that Elmsdale monopolises an undue share of Nest's time, and wonders when and how this desperate flirtation will end.

Lady Underhill wonders the same thing, and says as much this afternoon at Mrs Dering's.

They are dancing an impromptu cotillion, and she is Lord Elmsdale's partner.

She has been specially piqued and provoked at his very open

and decided devotion to Miss Wylmer at the last ball, and has longed for an opportunity of calling him to account.

In his usual fashion he leads up to the subject on which she is burning to speak.

'How very little I have seen of you,' he says, with a tender emphasis, as he puts his arm round her waist. 'If matters go on like this, I shall feel inclined to challenge Prince Yourasou, who has been monopolising you so much. How can you endure that fellow? He has not three ideas in his head, and he dances like a bear.'

'All Russians dance like that,' Lady Underhill says; 'and you are mistaken in your estimate of Prince Yourasou's ideas. He has more than three; but one wants some ideas of one's own to find them out, you know,' she adds maliciously. 'But I am really surprised you should be aware of who has been monopolising me. Your own time and attention have been so completely engrossed by that delicious piece of rusticity—Miss Wylmer. Your devotion is unparalleled—pray how long is it to last?'

For all the ring of defiance and carelessness in her voice, Elmsdale is far too great a man of the world not to detect the little tremble in the tone, so he answers very pathetically,—

'How can I tell? One must *passer le temps*, don't you know! If I could but see something of you—but this, you said, was not possible.'

'Yes; but I did not say it was impossible for you to see *anything* of me,' she answers impetuously.

'True; but what with that idiot, Yourasou, that little French monkey, De La Tour, and that woolly-headed, sauer-kraut-eating German, Eisenbock—in fact all the Embassies at your feet'; it is—'

'All nonsense!' she interrupts coldly, 'and you know it as well as I do. Whatever a man desires to accomplish, he generally *does* accomplish. Miss Wylmer has more devoted admirers than I have—she is so dreadfully promiscuous, you know—and yet you contrive to see a good deal of her, so much so, that all town is wondering if you are going to make a marchioness of her.'

'Town is very kind to take so much interest in my affairs,' he says nonchalantly, as the cotillion ends, and offering his arm, they fall in with the rest into the refreshment-room, and seeing a vacant window ledge, take possession of it.

'At least we have found coolness,' he says, passing his perfumed handkerchief over his brow, upon which little, light rings of damp hair are lying.

'Yes,' assents her ladyship, languidly eating her brown-bread ice, and nibbling prettily at a pink wafer. 'I wonder why people undergo the fearful exertion of dancing in the dog-days.'

'I am awfully sorry I persuaded you into it,' he answers penitently.

'Oh! it does not matter now, we are comfortable enough here, and we need not move yet, unless you are engaged to someone for the next dance.'

'No; I am not,' he answers, thinking that by the time he is released from what was once pleasure, but is now duration vile (alas! for the fickleness of man nature), Nest will be engaged, fathoms deep.

He is recalled from his regrets by his companion remarking abruptly, and *à propos* to nothing,—

'By the way, I heard to-day that your little rustic is engaged to be married.'

'Engaged? Who to?' he asks indifferently, but he colours in spite of himself, and screwing up his programme into a fan, uses it vigorously.

'To Guy Trevelyian.'

Elmsdale laughs at this, but the words vex him somehow. Nest has confessed that she is pledged to Dal Wentworth; but Dal not being present, that affair has become rather shadowy, but Guy Trevelyian—in town, and an *habitué*, of course, of his aunt's house—is a real rival.

'For a man with Trevelyian's prospects, such a marriage would be too absurd,' he answers carelessly; 'besides, Mrs Lorimer has decided that he shall marry Mrs Moreton.'

'And you, I suppose, mean to marry Miss Wylmer?' breaks from her, hastily, for she has been watching his face, and drawing her own deductions from it.

'Suppose I do?' he asks, in a slow, deliberate voice, 'can you blame me?'

'I don't blame you!' she cries bitterly; 'I know, of course it is no business of mine—that it would be sheer madness on my part to ask you to resign such an idea.'

And Lady Underhill has tears—absolute tears—shining on her long lashes.

Common sense tells her that her reign is over in this man's heart, but it is none the less true, that common sense is not what she yearns to listen to now.

In the most rapid soul that a sojourn in Tophet ever starved there is still some small lodging left for that divine and delicious folly that men call—*love*.

This woman, fair, worldly, and admired, loves this man, who is ruffled in temper, with a frown on his brow, by her side.

She loves him—not to the extent of resigning any of the world's goods for him—not to the degree of making any self-sacrifice for him, even if he were foolish enough or wicked enough to ask it, but quite enough to feel a very bitter pang at his marrying, and placing a double bar between himself and her.

Elmsdale is not a handsome man, and as a rule she worships beauty, but the more she looks at him, the more she craves for a gleam of passion in his eyes, the stronger grows her desire to listen to love words from his lips—but she craves in vain.

Silently he gazes rather blankly at the opposite wall; so that it behoves her to break the silence,—

‘Of course, I know I am very silly to have spoken on the subject of Miss Wylmer at all, but I really did *not* think you were contemplating anything serious in your attentions to her.’

‘No, more I do,’ he replies coolly, clasping her hand under the shelter of her ice plate, ‘but if I *did*, you *must* know that I would be more for *your* sake than for anything else. How

can I be so selfish as to ask you to give up everything for me, when you have been taught all your life to consider worth possessing? How can I be so totally unworthy of your liking, as

to wish to compromise your name? You know, Gladys, people have talked about us. A lot of your own set—Lady Axminster,

the Southcotes—were certainly cool to you at Lauderdale House. That is why I have avoided you so much of late—have offered

myself a holocaust on the altar of unselfishness, and for *your* sake, Gladys, I ought to—marry!’

For a moment she is tempted to tell him that she does not desire such a sacrifice; that for his sake she is ready to give up all she has in the world—good name and position. Worldling as she is, it must be confessed the last is of the greatest value to her shortseeing gaze.

‘No, for just a moment or two love and prudence run a neck and neck race, and prudence wins.’

‘You are perfectly right in what you say, Elmsdale,’ she replies, with a thrill at her heart echoing in her voice; ‘and I know it as well as you do! We have been reared under

the same conditions and for certain ends, you and I, and we have not put them aside. We are fit for nothing but society,

and society would not recognise us if we let love rule our lives. We should simply mar each other's lives and make

ourselves other miserable! True, Underhill is a brute—wine and women have been the ruin of him—but he is my husband, and

I had better stick to him if I want to get through life comfortably.'

Upon this Elmsdale releases her hand so pettishly that the ice plate is nigh unto destruction, and subsides once more into silence. He is not of a nature to ponder deeply on social or any other kind of evil, but just now the worldliness of the woman's nature strikes him rather forcibly.

'And shall you marry Miss Wylmer from *love*?' Lady Underhill asks suddenly.

He flushes deeply.

'Of course not. But even if I don't, what of it? Do people in our world deem it necessary to care for the man or woman whom they marry?'

And Lady Underhill, reflecting on the world of which she speaks, cannot honestly affirm that they do.

CHAPTER XI.

CROSS PURPOSES.

'I have put my days and my dreams out of mind,
Days that are over, and dreams that are done,
Though we seek life through we shall surely find
There is none of them dear to us now—not one !'

MEANWHILE, thoroughly oblivious of Lord Elmsdale or the fact of his being the match of the season, Nest is dancing with extraordinary lightness and grace and with a poesy of motion which is all her own. Though how she has acquired the art of such perfection among the roses and cabbages of Ravenshill is hard to understand. Her partner is an extremely good-looking young Guardsman, who supports her so well that half the eyes in the room are bent on them. Oswald Dennistoun is charmed with her, and as he wheels her round in a slow voluptuous movement, he murmurs something—only a compliment of some such *banalité*, probably, but it has the effect of deepening the wild-rose bloom on her cheeks, while she gives the swift peculiar upward glance, which the famous La Recamier is said to have practised to the utter distraction of mankind.

But notwithstanding the innocence of floral and vegetable companionship for seventeen years, Nest, like the said La Recamier, is a flirt to the backbone, and words and smiles

and swift upward glances come to her as naturally and are as really innocuous as mother's milk.

Who can blame her then for that which is purely constitutional? Not surely Guy Trevelyian, for as he watches her there is not a vestige of anger in his heart, only a little throb of pain, while a shadow sweeps over his brow.

He is leaning against the doorway, talking in a desultory sort of fashion to Mrs Moreton, who sits close by; but even as he talks his grey eyes follow the gay figures flitting about the room. On which especial figure his gaze mostly dwells, it would be difficult to say; but, when Mrs Moreton remarks, with a magnanimity which is simply put on—

'How well the little rustic dances!'

Guy assents with a slight bend of his head.

'And what a dreadful little flirt she is,' Mrs Moreton continues, in an indifferent tone. 'I really do not think there is a girl in the room to equal her. Who would believe that she had just emerged from the jungles?'

'Which fact goes a long way to prove that flirting is inherent in the feminine disposition, like original sin and all that sort of thing,' laughs Guy, but his laugh is very forced, like his companion's magnanimity. 'I fancy, however, that Miss Wylmer has had some training in the art before she came up to town. You see, there are few places even in the jungles where it is not possible to find a subject on which to try a maiden sword!' he says, with a little bitter laugh of irony.

'Dal Wentworth was the subject, I fancy. I feel a good deal of sorrow and sympathy for him, poor boy, and so would you, if you could hear Lady Wentworth dilating on the way these Vicarage people hooked him, and how infamously they try him by her numerous love affairs! How Dal's soul would be harrowed and torn in twain if he had seen Oswald Manistoun whisper just now, and something very pleasing too, when her great saucy eyes answered him very kindly!'

'Guy's pulse beats faster and his straight brows knit together, as he makes an effort and answers quietly and indifferently—

'In the shams, the tricks of this wicked world! and the most useful of them, the smiling lips that hide an aching or a break-hearted. It is but an acted lie, but we all do it—the best and the worst amongst us.

'Why are you not dancing? This is something which I have always expected, to see you lapse of your own accord into the ranks of obligatory wall-flowers! You, who, I remember, were so passionately fond of dancing!

As he says this, she quite forgets Nest's existence. Looking up at him, she replies hastily, excitedly,—

'I should like to "make believe" for once that I am young still and capable of enjoyment! Will you help me, Guy—will you waltz with me for the old days' sake?'

Guy glances at her—her mouth is actually trembling, and her eyes glitter with excitement. He is certainly a little surprised and rather taken aback, but what can he say? What could any man say in his position?

There is but one course open to him he thinks, though he had resolved that Nest should not see a vestige of attention to Mrs Moreton on his part; still Nest, engrossed as she is with her new conquest of the *debonnaire* Guardsman has thrown the gauntlet first.

'I shall be delighted,' he replies. 'Of course I should have asked for a valse, but somehow I have not felt up to dancing this afternoon.'

She rises at once, and takes his arm and clings to it a little closely.

'I feel as if I *must* have one waltz—and with *you*,' she whispers.

So he leads her into the circle, much to the gratification of Mrs Lorimer, whose hawk-eyes spy them at once, and somehow they both think of the old days, as he clasps her slender waist, and the perfume of wood-violets, which she always wears, sweeps across him; but as has been said before, ashes are not combustible, and Guy finds after a moment that both his head and heart are perfectly steady, even with the memory of his old madness, and he also finds his glance wander over his partner's head to follow Nest, as she leaves the ball-room on Dennistoun's arm.

He wonders where the two are going, and what the young fool of a Guardsman will say to her. 'What a heartless little flirt she is!' he thinks, as he strives to strangle his jealousy while he whirls round and round with Mrs Moreton. 'She means to marry Dal, of course, but she cannot make up her mind to spare anyone!'

By this time, the afternoon has closed in, and the evening shadows begin to slant into the room and long galleries, which are fitted up luxuriously for the benefit of exhausted dancers.

To one of these galleries that open into a superb conservatory, Guy and his quasi-love betake themselves. It looks wonderfully cool and pleasant, the long glossy leaves of the tall palms hold out a refreshing welcome, and the scent of stephanotis is heavy on the air.

'Prettily got up, isn't it?' Guy says carelessly, although the whole place presents a great green chaos to his absent eyes.

'Yes! it is lovely!' assents Mrs Moreton, half closing her milk-white lids and speaking in that low mysterious voice that is suggestive of sentiment and dangerous memories. 'Do you know that this conservatory reminds me of the one at Mansfield Park, where we stayed together *once*—Do you remember, Guy?'

'Yes! I remember,' he answers, rather grimly, flinching at her tender pronunciation of his christian name.

Does he not remember it? As she speaks, it all comes back to him, words, looks, tone, ay, kisses—a memory that a few months back might have stirred him to fierce regret and fierce indignation, but which now only moves him to cold contempt for this woman leaning heavily on his arm, clinging to it with passionate clasp! A woman who did her very best to ruin his life for him, just because it suited her convenience and her ambition, and who has not the self-respect to understand the supreme dignity of silence.

Mrs Moreton's ill-disciplined heart is meanwhile beating with a nervous flutter. Foolish, weak, impulsive as she is towards Guy, she still has one excuse, she longs to clear herself a little in the eyes of the man she shamefully jilted, but whom, she believes, she has never ceased to love with a love, which, though worthless, is yet the most genuine feeling she has.

Finding that he gives her no encouragement to proceed in her reminiscences, she speaks again after a short pause, and this time there is a decided quiver in her voice.

'Perhaps it is foolish or wrong of me to allude to the dear old days, they seem so utterly past and gone!'

Here she stops. Possibly she fancies he will protest against her assertions, but he is either as hard as a stone or as cold as ice, for he never so much as turns and looks at her.

Not a bit of it, he stands steadfastly regarding a waxy blossom with an interested gaze, developing a new-born taste for floriculture.

'I have wanted to speak to you so often on this matter, Guy, but I have lacked courage.'

Curiously enough, this very day, when she is more demonstrative—more outspoken—Guy has finally made up his mind that sooner than marry her he will go to America—the Colonies—the Fiji Isles—anywhere, so long as he can hug his freedom to his bosom and be allowed to go on loving Nest.

So he answers her, and, despite his best efforts, he cannot conceal his distaste to the subject.

'Why should you desire to speak of it? What good can possibly accrue by alluding to that which, as you say, is utterly past and gone?'

She feels horribly faint and wroth as she realises his meaning, but she has been too long a denizen of Mayfair and Belgravia to show her feelings or her teeth.

Both in love and war she is an adept at fencing, and even now, with the glamour of this man's presence over her, she does not forget her training.

'Only the good of making you think less harshly of me. Though you have never reproached me, I can feel in your manner at times that you think my conduct to you was infamous and inexcusable. Very likely it was. And yet I *must* tell you all—'

'Please—please do not pain yourself by telling me anything?' he interrupts, annoyed, perplexed, feeling in a false position, yet forcing himself to remember that courtesy is due to a woman if the heavens fall. 'I trust you will not vex yourself by imagining that any explanation is due to me. I beg your pardon very sincerely if my manner has seemed to express anything like reproach or a sense of injury. Believe me, nothing was further from my thoughts.'

She clasps his arm a shade closer and looks up imploringly.

'Guy—Guy, I would rather have reproach a thousand times than this cruel coldness! Your manner shows, as much as a gentleman's *can* show, coldness and contempt. Oh, please don't disclaim! I don't mean that you have ever in the faintest particular transgressed in politeness, and all that sort of thing, but you have made me *feel*—well, never mind what you have made me feel! Now I *know* that I did not break your heart,' she cries, quite bitterly, as if it were very reprehensible of his heart not to be broken.

'I know you are in love with that girl, that you are perfectly indifferent to me, still I cannot help longing for your good opinion, and for the sake of those old days, when you did love me, Guy—love me more madly, more passionately than you will ever—*ever* love anyone else—I want to explain to you how I was influenced!'

'Forgive me if I repeat that it is not worth while,' Guy answers, a little less frigidly, for her passion and pathos touch him. After all, sinning against him, did she not far more deeply sin against herself? Did she not sell herself into bondage? A loathsome bondage, against which she must have rebelled every hour of her married life! 'I can imagine everything—can understand everything, I am sure, without

harrowing you by an explanation. Let me tell you that I do not blame you now. Of course I felt very bitterly for a time. You see I cared for you—well, as much as a man can care for a woman, but reason and prudence showed me that you were perfectly justified in acting as you did.'

'It is very easy for you to talk in this manner!' she cries, with a great rush of emotion in her accents. This philosophical indifference on his part is much—very much harder to bear than the bitterest, most passionate reproaches could be.

She realises now, finally and altogether, that her empire is entirely over, that she has no lingering hold, platonic or otherwise, now, on Guy Trevelyian's heart.

It is likely that this realisation will be of service to her after a while—that it will give her pride and strength and even energy to go out into the world in search of a fresh conquest.

But at present she feels a choking sensation in her throat, with which she valiantly struggles for a moment or so, then suddenly amazes and dismays her companion by bursting into tears.

Not calm, well-regulated tears, trickling slowly down her cheeks, such as the daughters of society are trained to shed, but big, scalding drops, that rain from her eyes and quench all the fire of her glance.

'Ah, don't think me more of a fool than I really am!' she gasps. 'I am often hysterical, and any agitation brings on an attack like this.'

'Let me go and fetch some water,' Guy says hurriedly.

Water and a fan on occasions of this kind are the only two ideas that occur to a man. Guy has her fan and is using it violently as he speaks, so there is nothing left for him but to suggest water.

'No, no!' she exclaims, 'I shall be all right in a moment, and there is no one here to mark my folly.'

Guy gives a glance around, and devoutly thanks Providence that the conservatory is completely devoted to them and the palms and the stephanotis.

He does not remember when he has felt so nervous and uncomfortable before, and though he is sorry for her, he pities himself still more.

He obeys, and stands quietly beside the velvet divan on which she has subsided in her woe. She is filled with a sense of humiliation, for she is quite aware that she has made a thorough fiasco of her explanation, and subjected herself, if Guy were as vain as most of his sex, to a certain degree of scorn.

'I don't know what you must think of my giving way like

this,' she murmurs, almost inaudibly, 'but I remember of old that you are very good, very noble, and I hope you will not misunderstand me or think—'

'I think nothing, except that you are tired and nervous,' he says kindly, taking her hand in sheer pity for her evident discomfiture. 'Don't imagine for a moment that I misunderstand anything. But I feel I have been to blame. I ought not to have spoken so coldly perhaps—you must forgive me.'

'I have nothing to forgive. It was desperate folly of me to allude to the past, but I thought it would make me happier to explain how I came to treat you so badly. It has troubled me more than you can imagine to know how you regard me, and I could not resist this opportunity to try and find out.'

'I understand exactly what you wished, but it is all over now, and explanations are only useless and painful. Will you care to re-open an old wound?' he asks, with a thrill of sadness in his voice—a thrill with which the present has nothing to do. It is a tribute to the past of which they have been speaking. To the romance of youth, that lost its soft and golden light, and died, when the woman trod upon his heart on her path to the 'world' she craved to reach.

But though the romance of youth is a good thing—the passion of manhood is a better one, and who dreams of mourning the death of the blossoms of spring, when we see the glorious flowers of summer?

'And you forgive me really—absolutely, Guy?' she questions wistfully. 'You will not think bitterly of me, at any rate, as I was always easily influenced, you know, and when my father told me it was best for him—'

'Yes, yes! I forgive you freely and entirely!' he cries hastily, for he does not wish her to lower herself by any confession of regret, although they pander to his vanity. 'Do not, I beg of you, trouble yourself with any further thought of me. Live, and make the best of your life. We can none of us do more than that.'

'I hope you will do more! I trust you may be really happy,' she says pathetically.

He shrugs his shoulders with a gesture significant of helplessness.

'I do not think of being happy,' he says. 'I have, in fact, resigned all such extravagant expectations.'

Just as he asserts this in a ringing bitter tone, a voice comes to his ear.

'What a delicious corner for a love-sick couple, Wylmer!' Oswald Dennistoun says,

'Appropriately appropriated, too,' Nest answers, with a laugh, but there is a hard, defiant sound in her mirth, and as Guy quickly turns towards her, he sees that the colour has left her face and her large eyes literally blaze with contempt as he meets them.

His avowal that he has resigned all expectation of happiness has brought a feeling of self-scorn to her, and a torrent of rage and jealousy sweeps over her on finding these two here— and alone.

After this Nest never doubts again that she has a heart.

It is usually in just such a moment that women and men make that discovery, often too late to do themselves or anyone else any good.

In the twinkling of an eye she and Dennistoun are gone again. And then Guy says resolutely,—

'We must not stay here any longer, if you are able to exert yourself, Mrs Moreton—and I think I am engaged for the next dance,' he adds, pretending to study his card.

She rises without a word, and walks into the ante-room, and when Guy has cloaked her and put her into her brougham, he goes back slowly into the dancing-room, with a fast beating heart.

Nest is standing beside Mrs Lorimer; her face is still very pale, and when she sees him, she averts her head.

'Guy will take care of you, my love,' Mrs Lorimer says, as the Venezulean minister assists her out of the crowd to her carriage.

So Nest puts her little gloved hand through Guy's arm, but so lightly that he can scarcely feel her touch.

'I should like to speak to you to-morrow, Mr Trevylian,' she says abruptly, and as haughtily as a young queen. 'Can you call about four?'

'Yes,' he answers, as he looks wistfully into her eyes, but they are as bright as diamonds, and as hard and cold.

CHAPTER XII.

AND YOU SAVED ME—MY SWEET !

'The loves and hours of the life of a man,
 They are swift and sad, being born of the sea,
 Hours that rejoice and regret for a span ;
 Born with a man's breath, mortal as he,
 Loves that are lost, ere they come to birth,
 Weeds of the waves, without fruit on earth.'

IN a violet *cachemire* that fits her slight figure like wax, and with a narrow silver zone encircling her supple waist, Nest awaits with a good deal of trepidation the appointment she has made with Guy. Mrs Moreton is due at a concert at four o'clock, and Mrs Lorimer takes a siesta daily at that hour, so she knows she is pretty safe from intruders.

Not that she desires to see Mr Trevylian alone, for the *pleasure* of it ! The only feeling she has for him as she dawdles restlessly about the big drawing-room, unable to work or read, and only varying her walk by an occasional peep out of the window, is a thorough disdain and contempt of this man whom she believes to be as profound a hypocrite as ever trod the earth.

Still, when she hears his knock at the hall door, a knock she has somehow grown to recognise among numerous others, the wilful blood rushes to her face, tingling her cheeks and her ears, and she presses down her hand on her heart as if to try and stop its throbbing.

When Guy enters the room, however, to all appearances she is cold, and calm, and dignity itself, and instead of shaking hands she bows her little head imperially, raising up at once a wall of reserve as high as Mount Jura between them.

Silence for a minute, then Miss Wylmer turns with a stateliness of demeanour that surprises her audience.

'I asked you to come here to-day, Mr Trevylian, because I felt that I owed you and Mrs Moreton an apology for my appearance last evening in the conservatory. I hope you did not think I was eavesdropping ; and I went as soon as I could.'

'Why should you have gone away ?' asks Guy. He is dreadfully annoyed at the whole thing ; horribly annoyed at the false position in which Mrs Moreton has placed him. But it never occurs to him that the position has deceived Nest. In reply to his question the girl throws her dainty head proudly back.

'I am not in the habit of listening to *anybody's* private conversation,' she flashes, 'and I should certainly not select yours and Mrs Moreton's to begin with. As a matter of choice I had no alternative—however, I beg you to understand that I was not in the least, not in the very smallest degree, interested in anything which you and she had to say, and I am sorry I could not get away before. I had heard a little.'

'So you said before,' Guy answers, a little haughtily, with a gleam in his grey eyes and a gravity on his mouth that rather frighten her. The truth is, her manner is far from conciliatory and he has been much tried lately; 'but you must allow me to ask you again why you should have imagined that Mrs Moreton and I had anything to say to one another which you or Dennistoun or all the world might not listen to?'

Nest laughs out a mocking, satirical laugh, extremely unlike her usual sweet, gay mirth, and he sees her pretty red lips curl. 'You forget that I was unwillingly obliged to hear what you and she had to say to each other!' she answers, in a hard, defiant tone.

'And what did you hear?' he questions coldly, almost sternly, 'beside a few stupid allusions to a past which is dead for both of us!'

'Oh, I heard a lot that was edifying, extremely so!' she cries, with a good deal of bitterness. 'I heard of old wounds being re-opened, of excuses of weakness being made, and of all expectation of happiness being mythical. It was a splendid occasion to improve my knowledge of this world, and—as Dad says—it is a very, very wicked one, full of miserable sinners, and—*and* roaring lions. What a pity Mr Dennistoun and I broke in on your *tête-à-tête*; you might have "Kissed and made friends," like the children say.'

'Nest!'

Guy is astonished, shocked, even a little disgusted. The style of talk is wholly unworthy, he thinks, of the girl whom he loves with all his soul, and he looks at her with surprise and concern.

'I don't understand,' he says, in a broken tone, 'what change has come over you; such sentiments are not at all what I should have expected from you.'

'You know nothing about me,' she retorts angrily; 'you have no right to expect anything from me.'

'True,' he answers, with sudden iciness in his accents. 'I thank you for reminding me of that fact; the thoughts, words, or deeds of Dalrymple Wentworth's future wife concern me very little.'

'It does not matter to you whose future wife I may be,' Nest answers contemptuously; 'but at least Dal did not in one breath tell me he cared for me, and in another breath tell another woman that he had given up all expectation of happiness, because she had chosen to jilt him.'

'Good heavens! is it possible you thought I was alluding to Mrs Moreton's conduct when I said that?' Guy exclaims. 'Is it possible that you did not know that I was alluding to—'

He pauses, rises from the chair which he has been occupying some distance from her, and drops into a seat on the sofa beside her.

'To what?' she asks, and the hardness in her voice certainly softens.

Guy hesitates in spite of this encouragement, and another golden minute drops like a bubble into the great gulf of time. Then he looks at her steadily with his handsome eyes, that are—

'As the sky and sea on a grey day.'

'Nest! do you remember that you asked me, under the dear old laburnums at Ravenshill, if I did not mean to make a holocaust of myself on the altar of interestedness?'

Nest is surprised and a trifle startled at this sudden and unexpected question, and, truth to say, her heart beats with a suffocating sensation.

Of course, he is going to tell her of his approaching marriage with the rich widow!

She plucks up courage, however, shies the remnants of a bunch of Parma violets, which she has mercilessly picked to pieces, into the grate, and says lightly,—

'Yes, I remember; but the question was a very impertinent one, and there is not the slightest reason for you to answer it, you know, especially if you don't care to do so.'

Guy smiles. She looks so dangerously pretty, with her eyes full of wistfulness, and her lips full of mirth; and when he smiles he grows wonderfully good-looking. It may be only from the contrast to his ordinary gravity, Nest thinks, as she glances at him, but it requires a very strong head to resist the fascination of his eyes, and the soft, almost womanly tenderness that breaks on his mouth.

'I promised myself that I would answer your question *some day*, and I always like to keep my word—most men do, you know. Moreover the answer is very brief, and requires very little trouble to utter—or for you to listen to. My answer to your query is simply—no.'

'No?' she repeats incredulously. 'Ah! you are joking. You don't mean to say that you have made up your mind *not* to marry Mrs Moreton?'

'Yes, I do; I mean just that,' he replies emphatically. 'And why do you think for a moment that I am not in earnest—in sober, though not sad earnest?'

'Because Mrs Lorimer told me you *must* marry her, and from what she said, I fancied you were really engaged. I don't see how you can retreat with honour,' she goes on gravely.

'I am thankful to say there is no engagement. Nothing from which I cannot retreat with honour and self-respect!'

'But what will Mrs Lorimer say?'

'I don't know—I am afraid I don't much care! She was anxious for the marriage, and for a time, in sheerest apathy and in an utter hopelessness of spirit, I felt as if I might gratify her—as if I might make up my mind to settle down and be content with the mere husks of life. But this mood did not last very long. Something came and roused me from my unhealthy lethargy. I looked round, and took breath as well as thought. After all, what are the base material goods of existence, in comparison with freedom and self-respect? Therefore I am here to-day a free man, free in spirit as well as in fact, free after a dreadful bondage of twelve months.'

Nest gazes at him in amazement. A singular change sweeps over his features as he speaks, the listlessness has vanished from his face, the laziness from his eyes. He looks like a man to whom life, and hope, and resolution, have suddenly come. Unconsciously he throws back his head and shoulders, with a gesture that seems to her to be full of courage and exultation. He appears to thrill with the words he has uttered, and golden words they are, though so few heed them.

'*After all what are the base material goods of existence in comparison with freedom and self-respect?*'

'Once in many a man's life, I suppose,' he goes on, 'he has to choose, not only between God and Mammon, but also between Mammon and his higher self, and on that choice depends the whole course and meaning of his after life. For years past I have felt a hopeless sense of existence, pre-arranged as it were and fitted into a narrow groove, which seemed to crush all energy and manhood out of me. Before I could decide for myself with regard to what my life and career should be, my father died, leaving me nothing but a paltry pittance. Then I strove to add to it by a clerkship in London; but in lieu of doing good I did—*harm*.' He pauses, his face grows very white, and a slow fire gathers in his eyes. 'Thank God! the

evil passed away before it could make my life worthless as Dead Sea fruit. Then my aunt took me up with the avowed intention of making me her heir. She lavished money on me, but kept me at her beck and command, and I chafed against it, but not so very much. In a certain sense, the world was before me—its pleasures ready to be plucked if I willed it—no wonder the smothered flame of independence within me gave only faint and fitful signs of action. Then came a blind unreasoning passion for Mabella Clyde.'

Nest moves away a little further from him, and a stab goes through her, but though he notices the gesture, he continues his life's history, for he is resolved she shall know it all—*ay, all, by-and-by*, if he ever wins her for his wife.

'It was a passion that I thought filled every hour and coloured every act of my life. Great Heavens! what an idiot I was! Looking at Mrs Moreton now, I can in no wise understand my insane infatuation, or what enchantment existed for me in her commonest words and looks. However, I presume every man who has arrived at my age has passed through a similar period of folly, and looked back on it with unmitigated self-scorn and pity. I really think, however, that my folly must have been a degree or two more intense than other people's. I worshipped her, followed her about, was her absolute slave for two years. Well, I told you how I was treated. We parted as lovers with tender caresses, and when I saw her again, she was married to old Moreton!'

His voice drops a little over the last words. Lightly as he has spoken, who knows but that even yet the old pang of wounded love and vanity stirs him, or, if not the pang, the memory of it? It must indeed be a very tough and callous nature that does not flinch when the scar of an old wound is handled roughly.

The clock on the mantel points a quarter to five o'clock; forty-five moments have flown by since Guy Trevylian arrived, and Mrs Lorimer will be coming down for her afternoon tea, Nest thinks, and Guy, as he sees her eyes glance at the time-piece, guesses her thoughts.

'I must finish my story quickly in the few minutes that remain to us. You must not think that I made a fool of myself very long after the death of my hopes. Of course, such a blow stuns a man for a time, but if his courage is of the right mettle, he soon recovers.

'But I found that I could not look on life exactly as I had looked on it before; I had even as a boy been sceptical of sincerity in women; I had good cause to be sceptical too, and

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Miss Clyde's conduct was a culminating proof. Trifles ceased to amuse me; I felt the need of some serious and definite aim in life, and wanted to work, but Mrs Lorimer would not hear of it. Literary men's life she regards as a species of genteel vagabondage, unrecognised by good society.

'Now I am quite well aware that many men, feeling as I did, would have burst what they called their chains of obligation and gone their way, but I could not do it. Those chains to me were very real and binding. I knew how much I was indebted to her; I also knew there was but one way I could acknowledge or repay my debt—it was by sacrificing my inclination. There were many people who called me mercenary for acting so, but I was not really so. So I gave up my second dream, and sank into an apathy that seemed to eat like rust into my soul. After a few months I went on the Continent, and lounged like a dissatisfied spirit over half the civilised world—plunged into dissipation, drank, gambled, spent money as if I had thousands instead of hundreds at my command, and then pulled up in my mad career to face a self-contempt and utter weariness of spirit that helped to sober me completely.

'A year ago, I met Mrs Moreton in Paris, where she was staying with Mrs Lorimer, and then my aunt told me this was the wife she had selected for me. I was in a desperate mood which inclined me to any desperate act that would relieve me from money responsibilities, still I could not bear with philosophy the idea of linking myself to one whose treatment had turned every drop of my blood to gall and wormwood.

'I asked for time to consider the matter. I was fancy-free. Why not marry Mrs Moreton or anyone else who had the wherewithal for a short life, but a merry one. Love and ambition were both dead for me, what remained but the mere outside of life?—and it was in this state of mind that I was going to meet my fate, when—'

His voice sinks almost to a whisper; his eyes look into hers earnestly—passionately—his mouth quivers with emotion:

'When I went to Ravenshill and saw you—and you saved me!—My sweet!'

'I?'

'Yes; *you!*' he replies eagerly, watching the expression of her April face while he speaks. 'You did not guess it perhaps, yet you might have! It was you, my Nest, who roused me out of myself—my fallen, crushed self. It was you who made me feel how sweet a thing womanhood could be—how pure and how innocent; you see, Mabella Moreton, and women like her, had represented the sex to me for so long. My old reluctance

came back on me with redoubled force, but still I hesitated, thinking of Mrs Lorimer, until now. *Now* hesitation is at an end, for I *know* that I love you, and *you* only, my Nest, and that if you don't marry me—as God hears me, I will never marry any other woman!

The passionate energy of his voice rings out strangely on the room, and Nest quivers from head to foot with the suppressed excitement, that makes her feel as if she has received an electric shock from a galvanic battery.

But she does not speak a word, and the man who is beside her, hanging on her answer to learn his fate, watches her in perplexity and pain.

'Nest, I know you believe yourself partially bound to Dal Wentworth, and that while you believe so I ought not to have spoken, but I could not let you go on thinking that I was to marry another woman—I could not bear to see other men striving to win you, without asking you to give me a chance as well. I know you do not love me yet as I love you, but may I try and make you?'

He gazes at her with eyes that plead more than his voice, and Nest looks back at him, shy and silent. She trembles all over, and does not know what to reply. She is flattered—touched—even a little triumphant of having won this man from Mrs Moreton, and with it all she is full of a misty, struggling sense of loyalty to Dal.

At last she speaks diffidently—her airs and graces dispersed to the four winds of heaven—her face pale even to her lips, and her hand cold as ice,—

'I think you are mistaken in thinking anyone wants to win me here, and I cannot imagine what anybody anywhere can want with me. But of course that is a matter of taste. But Mrs Lorimer will never forgive your not marrying Mrs Moreton.'

'Never mind about Mrs Lorimer,' cries Guy, his face glowing with hope and smiles. 'You and I are all alone here—as alone as we were that night at Ravenshill. Ah, *you* remember!'

She does not answer, but he sees a little smile creep to her mouth, and taking her two hands in his firm, strong clasp, he gazes down wistfully into her face.

'Let us speak only of ourselves! Oh, my darling! Do you think you can ever learn to love me well enough to marry me? Recollect I am a poor man—that I have nothing to offer you like Elmsdale or—Dal!'

'Dal—we forgot Dal!' she falters. 'I should act as badly and heartlessly as that Mrs Moreton acted to you if I threw

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him over. Poor dear Dal! He has loved me for years and years, and you and I have only known one another for a few months, you see.'

Guy loses heart at this, but he gulps down the expression of disappointment that rises to his lips. Bending lower, he looks into her eyes, and his arm steals round her.

Nest lets the arm rest there—in fact, she scarcely knows it is there, in the turmoil of her feelings.

'I loved you the very first hour we met, my sweet, though I did not guess it myself. Don't compare yourself for one moment with that—that woman. The cases are not parallel at all! You have not, I am sure, vowed passionate love and devotion to the man of whom you speak, nor bound yourself by every tie of honour to be true to him, and him only.'

This is true, Nest thinks. She has certainly never professed much love for Dal. In fact, she has behaved very badly and coldly to him very often.

Suddenly she rises out of his clasp, saying,—

'There is Mrs Lorimer's step on the stairs.'

Guy draws her nearer to him again with one arm, and lays a hand over hers while he listens a moment.

'Yes,' he says, 'it is her step, and before she comes, tell me, Nest, that you *do* care for me, and that you will not marry Dalrymple Wentworth? Oh, my darling! Just think what we both shall feel, if, by such an act, you raise an inseparable barrier between us! My Nest, my own—own Nest—put your arms round my neck, and tell me that you love me and will be my wife.'

His face is very close to hers, and it is a terrible temptation. But she is a good little thing in the main.

'I think I would rather break with Dal first,' she says, in a low voice. 'You see, if I do that I shall not reproach myself so much for having let myself—' She stops, colours, and Guy laughs—a bright, happy laugh, such as he has not laughed for many a day.

'*For having let yourself love me?*' he whispers. 'Is that it, Nest? Say it is, and I will wait till you are quite—quite free before I ask for a kiss from those sweet lips.'

But she struggles out of his arms, and with a demure face sits down on a distant chair.

'Mrs Lorimer is at the door,' she cries hastily.

But Guy is not to be done out of both word and kiss, and following her, he falls on his knees before her.

She looks down on his face—the face that haunts her dreams

and lives with her by day. The grey eyes look pleadingly into her own.

A mighty love sweeps over her whole being for him who sealed her as his very own, with those caresses on the green ridge at Ravenshill, and in another moment a kiss from a sweet red mouth would flutter down on Guy's, but a sense of honour towards Dal rises up between them like a wall, and as Mrs Lorimer makes her appearance by one door of the drawing-room, Nest escapes by another.

Not, however, without the old lady's lynx eyes having caught sight of the tail of a violet dress.

'I suppose that child has been flirting with you while I was upstairs, Guy?' Mrs Lorimer remarks testily. 'Like the busy bee, she improves each shining hour. It would indeed be hard, if one searched over the globe, to find any creature more spoiled than she is. I certainly prophesied that her head would be turned, but that it would be turned to half such an extent as it is, I never imagined.'

'I cannot see that Miss Wylmer is particularly spoiled,' replies Guy coldly.

'I suppose you cannot see it,' Mrs Lorimer observes, sarcastically; 'having helped to bring about the result, it would be strange if you did not admire it even. But it is a great pity for the girl herself—a dreadful pity. She had much better go home and marry that boy, Dal Wentworth, who has got more love for her than brains about him. As a rule, at least, men worth marrying, who have self-respect and whom one can respect, don't like fast women for wives.'

'I really don't think it possible to stigmatise Miss Wylmer as "fast," whatever that odious and comprehensive term may be supposed to mean,' answers Guy hastily. His whole blood is up in Nest's defence, and he feels hot and cold as he thinks of the way in which she is maligned. 'She is fond of pleasure and admiration, but that is surely natural enough, and pardon me when I say that you, more than anyone, have encouraged her in liking both. For example, see how you have left her to Elmsdale's good offices. As for her manners or her character standing one moment in the way of her finding a husband, I cannot, of course, answer for other men, but I should be the happiest man alive if she would marry me.'

'Guy!'

Mrs Lorimer literally gasps; she drops her Sèvres snuff-box—which fortunately falls on a soft crimson satin *tabouret*—and then she draws her breath heavily, as if she were about to have

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an apoplectic fit, while her sallow cheeks grow as red as the peony.

'Guy, are you gone stark, staring mad,' she asks, in a sharp, quick voice, 'or are you simply jesting?'

'I am neither mad nor jesting,' he answers, quietly and steadily enough, to prove that he is sane, and far from inclined to pleasantry.

Mrs Lorimer does not attempt to answer this; she simply clasps her long, clawy fingers together, and fixes her pale eyes full on his face.

Nothing daunted by this stare, for somehow his interview with Nest has given him a sensation of lightheartedness and courage, he begins at once to explain frankly and dispassionately his feelings and intentions.

Not even the expression of sardonic bitterness on the thin lips opposite deters him from speaking. When he finishes—when he has announced in a cold and deliberate voice, that he has arrived at his ultimatum—that he can never marry Mrs Moreton—when, in a warmer and more passionate tone, he has declared that he will, if possible, marry Miss Wylmer, and that he has resolved to adopt literature as his profession, Mrs Lorimer answers, in a harder, sterner tone than he has ever heard drop from her mouth before, for all the years he has made her house his home:—

'Guy, if you have finally and definitely made up your mind to this course of action, I shall waste no words on you, but bear the bitter—most bitter—disappointment you have provided for me as well as I can. I shall not pretend to say that I forgive you, for I don't, and I never will—*never*—you hear me, Guy?—and I beg of you to mark, learn, and inwardly digest this. I only do say that if you persist in a course which dubs you a lunatic, I shall wash my hands of you for evermore, and that I hope, with all my soul, that you will live to see and repent of your desperate folly, as you deserve to do.'

These last words—vindictive, resolute—ring out on the quiet room almost like a malediction from the old withered lips, and they are accompanied by the monotonous tapping of the long, bony forefinger against the eternal snuff-box.

Guy, in spite of himself, shudders a little as he listens, believing it to be an ill-omen.

It is to be hoped that Byron was right when he wrote—

'A curse is like a cloud—it passes.'

At any rate, Guy does not attempt to remonstrate or palliate

in any way ; this, he knows, is Mrs Lorimer's decision, and like the laws of the Medes and Persians, it is sealed and signed.

Mrs Lorimer is, as has been said before, as stubborn as Balaam's ass ; that stubbornness she is pleased to dignify by the name of 'pride,' and likens herself complacently to Lucifer in this feeling.

But it is quite certain that none who have been acquainted with her, have ever known her to soften or retract.

Guy marks in every line of her face, and hears in every tone of her voice, the keen bitterness of the disappointment his avowal has dealt her. She has so determinedly set her obstinate old heart on his marrying Mabella Moreton, that no other woman, young, lovely, or even passing rich, would be acceptable in her eyes.

And Guy, seeing and hearing this disappointment, and remembering with a vivid sense of gratitude, which is unfortunately rare in the world, all he owes her—remembering her rough but unwavering affection for him—her lavish liberality towards him, even while her dealings with others have been unusually fitful and capricious—feels a sense of remorse seize him. Folks who do not readily feel kindness, cannot tell how deeply it touches those who do—cannot tell how a refined and generous man is affected by obligations which another of a coarser, commoner mould would barely regard.

But for Nest, who has fairly bewitched him, Guy might yield as he has yielded now, might sacrifice his life, and his happiness and independence, but the thought of his little sweet heart keeps him firm. He cannot for one instant now entertain the thought of marrying any other woman on the face of the earth. He is in love—madly, desperately in love—and Nest's influence is over him for all time.

So when at last he replies, it is not to retract one iota of what he has said ; nay, the memory of all that passed between him and Nest but one short hour ago, strengthens him to suffer all but one thing, and that is—her loss !

'I should be glad to hear you wish me well, though of course I can hardly expect it,' he says, very quietly, and his face, the chief characteristic of which is resolution, softens considerably as he speaks.

'I know too well how severely you look on my decision. I can, however, with all my heart wish *you* well, and express my sincerest hopes that you may find—not a more grateful—but a more docile subject for your kindness. Don't think that I expect anything from you in any way or at any time, and do not misinterpret me, when I say, that I can never forget all you

have done for me, and that I shall always think of you with the greatest affection and gratitude so long as I live.'

'Bah!' she cries, in a ringing, caustic voice—a biting voice. And who cares for gratitude or affection without proof? Words when unsupported by deeds are literally worth nothing. They are as light as air, and touch me as little. There! I have heard enough—more than enough, Heaven knows!'

She gives a wave of her hand as a sort of dismissal, and turns away captiously from him.

So, after a moment's hesitation, Guy takes up his hat and gloves and walks to the door.

Here he pauses and looks round, with real emotion shining in his deep grey eyes.

'Good-bye,' he says, 'and forgive me!'

But the set lips vouchsafe no answer, so he slowly passes out, and in the hall runs against a tall figure that is just entering it.

'How do you do, Trevylian?' says a languid voice, and Guy starts and flushes, as he recognises—Dal Wentworth.

'How do you do?' he answers mechanically. 'Are they expecting you?'

Dal laughs, a boyish merry laugh, forgetting the languor which is put on.

'No! An irresistible impulse moved me to come and have a look at my little girl, and I obeyed it. Have you any faith in dreams, Tre, old fellow? I had an awful dream last night. I dreamt someone had spirited Nest away from me, and the devil a bit could I find her, so I took the first train, and here I am. How is she?'

'Miss Wylmer was quite well the last time I had the pleasure of addressing her,' Guy answers stiffly. The words 'my little girl' chafe him horribly, then suddenly he speaks with jesuitical cordiality. 'Go upstairs, Dal, you'll find Mrs Lorimer, and I'll order the servant to tell Miss Wylmer of your arrival. I am afraid she is gone out.'

'Gone-out!' Dal reiterates, in a crestfallen voice, as he slowly mounts the stairs, and as soon as the great gold and cream folding-doors of the drawing-room shut him in with Mrs Lorimer, Guy says, in a quick decisive tone which all the dependants in Chesham Place know,—

'Go up and tell Miss Wylmer I am anxious to speak to her for a moment. I won't trouble to go upstairs into the drawing-room again, but perhaps she will kindly come down into the library.'

It seems to him as if his heart will burst if he cannot secure

a word with her before evening, when he knows she is doomed to a formal dinner-party which Mrs Lorimer gives on certain nights of the week.

Walking up to the window, he looks up, instead of out. The deep red sunset gleams through the foliage and flowers that adorn the balcony and falls in chequers of light and shade on the floor. Right away a bank of purple cloud stands motionless like a pillar of heaven. The summer air is soft and slow. And it is an evening that suggests at once that *dolce far niente* which we seldom enjoy in our sea-girt isle.

Presently the door opens almost noiselessly, but nevertheless Guy hears and turns eagerly, and going to her he catches both her hands and clasps them firmly.

'Dal is here!'

'Dal!'

The swift pallor that sweeps over her face goes through his heart like a knife, and she reads something of his feeling in his eyes, for she smiles faintly and says,—

'It's only surprise.'

'Sure, Nest? Sure that it is only surprise—that no stronger feeling drove the blood from your cheek when you heard Dal was *here*—close to you?'

'Sure,' she answers, freeing her hands from his clasp, and placing them on his shoulders, she looks up into his face. 'Poor old Dal! I shall be very glad to see him—but I don't *love* him. I am afraid!'

'My darling! my darling!' Guy whispers passionately, 'it is *me* you love, though you won't say so. Yet you know that the words would make me the happiest fellow in the world. Will you say them—some day, Nest?'

'Perhaps!' she answers, but she blushes over face and neck as she meets his glance.

'*Perhaps!*' Guy repeats, in a disappointed tone.

'Well, not perhaps—but—yes,' she says, in a low voice.

'Then I will rest content, and meanwhile, let me entreat of you to think—to think seriously over what we said this afternoon. It is but a poor plea to speak of myself—of how madly I love you, and how desperately I long for you, my Nest! Yet if you could in any way realise it! However, you must choose as your own heart dictates. Only for God's sake, Nest, listen only to your heart! Don't let yourself be swayed by any fear of giving pain, or by any old associations, I pray of you.'

And clasping her hands once more, he leaves her.

CHAPTER XIII.

GOD BLESS YOU—AND GOOD-BYE!

'When hope is chidden
That fain of bliss would tell,
And Love forbidden
In the breast to dwell,
When fettered by a viewless chain,
We turn and gaze, and turn again,
Oh, death were mercy to the pain
Of them that bid—Farewell!'

FEELING very much of a culprit, Nest mounts the stairs slowly, and with trembling fingers opens the door.

The first thing that meets her view, is the back of Dal's long willowy figure, as he stands by the window, watching for her appearance down the street. But at sound of a step, he turns, his face beaming all over, and rushes half-way across the room. Here he pauses, with a sudden recollection that a grim old face, surmounted by tintilating curls, is witness to his first greeting of his Love.

Oh! it is hard, hard! All the way from Devonshire, and it has been a hot, dusty, uncomfortable way, his spirit has been buoyed by the thought that a kiss from his Nest will refresh both body and soul.

'Here's "a young man from the country," waiting for you, Miss Wylmer,' Mrs Lorimer announces, with malicious pleasure. 'I have had the greatest difficulty in preventing him from losing himself in London, in quest of you.'

Upon this, Dal colours, and pulls himself up haughtily. The Wentworths have a goodly leaven of pride, and he feels as if he would like to give this horrible old joker a shaking, for daring to make fun of him, only she is Nest's hostess, and entitled to courtesies at his hands.

'London has the pleasure of knowing me well enough, Mrs Lorimer!' he says, with a forced smile, 'better than I care to show *it*, perhaps! But you are quite right in thinking that if there was any chance of my losing myself, I would risk it, provided I found—*Nest!*

'You will excuse me, Mr Wentworth,' she answers curtly. 'I have outlived romance myself, and romance in others, though I am not in the humour for to-day. I have

had enough of such stuff,' she mutters, and with a stiff bend of her head, she marches out of the room.

Then Dal, with a heightened pink on his fair cheeks and a warm light in his Prussian-blue eyes, dashes at the little violet-clad figure that stands a few paces from him, and seizes her in his arms, whether she will or no.

Nest struggles out of his embrace, her face very red and her eyes sparkling with indignation.

'You shouldn't be so rough, Dal!' she cries reprovingly; 'one would really think you *were* "a young man from the country," as Mrs Lorimer called you!'

Dal draws back, grievously hurt, then he musters up courage and says, like a penitent schoolboy,—

'Won't you let me kiss you, Nest?'

'*Certainly not!*' she replies, with an immense accession of dignity that amazes him; 'I am not in the habit of kissing everybody I happen to meet!'

'Everybody! Am I become "everybody," Nest?'

'No!' she laughs, 'not exactly *everybody!* but let us sit down and talk comfortably. How are they all at home?'

And placing herself on a chair, she motions him to one opposite.

And Dal, who is her sworn slave, meekly subsides into his appointed seat.

'They are all well—and you—how are you, Nest? You look prettier than ever, but I don't think the change to town has improved you otherwise!'

'I am sorry I don't find favour in your eyes!' she murmurs, a little mortified, with mock humility; 'other people think me *perfect!*'

'That's *it*—those *others* have spoilt you!'

'Well, it is pleasanter to have nice things said to one, than to hear reproaches!' she asserts wilfully.

'I am sure *I* don't wish to reproach you!' Dal says deprecatingly. 'I know you cannot help being bright and beautiful, I would not wish you to help it, if you could! If you were *my* wife, Nest, I should never be jealous, I should be proud and glad to see other men admire you. But you don't *really* belong to me, and so I cannot help being jealous and miserable and disagreeable. I see already I have made a mistake in coming up to town, and the sooner I go away again, the better!'

She glances at him and sees positive tears standing in his usually sunny blue eyes, and the sight softens her.

'Dal, you will make me feel very uncomfortable if you talk like this! You will make me feel as if I am the most wicked

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girl that ever breathed. To think you have come all this awful distance' (her accent seems to imply that he has journeyed from the North Pole) 'to see me, and I have managed to vex you, directly you arrive!'

'Never mind, darling, about that,' he answers, with a commendable effort at cheerfulness. 'Of course I knew, in a manner, what sort of welcome you would give. How have you enjoyed yourself here, Nest?'

'So, so!' she answers. 'Sometimes I have thought that Society is a failure.'

'A failure!' repeats Dal, with lively astonishment. 'Do you mean to say that you have not enjoyed every hour of your gay life?'

'Yes, I mean just that,' she responds. 'It seems difficult to believe, but all the same it's a fact. The truth is, that being pretty and admired is very fatiguing,' she goes on, with genuine languor.

'What!' cries Dal, staring at her, and longing to press his boyish lips to even the hem of her violet garment.

'It isn't half as agreeable as anyone—merely looking on—might think,' Nest pursues musingly. 'One grows so tired of a succession of men who say exactly the same things in substantially the same manner, and are most of them fit for nothing but dancing monkeys. Now, you see, with the greatest love for dancing in the world, one can't dance all the time, and one grows horribly tired of looking pleased when one is bored, and interested when one wants to yawn—but never mind about London, I want to hear about home. Have you been playing chess with Dad? And how is my little mother, and Maud, and Gus, and the little ones, and did they send any nice messages to me?'

'Yes, I am charged with more messages than I can remember. They want to know if you have grown quite a fashionable young lady, and how your dress is made, and if you have had any proposals of marriage,' he says, scarcely heeding the gist of his own words in his longing to hold her against his breast—this sweet capricious love of his, who will not even let him touch the palm of her hand.

Nest colours up furiously and averts her head.

'You must take back lots of messages for me in return, Dal, when you go. Were you really in earnest when you said just now you must return soon, or were you only fishing to see if I should cry?' she questions, a little anxiously.

'If I had been foolish enough to entertain such an idea, I am afraid I should have been disappointed,' he laughs, with a laugh

that has only a ghost of mirth in it and no more. 'No, Nest, I was in earnest, I assure you. I saw in a moment, when you came into the room, that the distance between us has widened ever so much, so I think it best to go back and wait for better times at Ravenshill.'

'Why, Dal, one would think you had grown firm and resolute, and all that sort of thing,' she says lightly. 'And you really intend to stick to your resolution and go back again?'

'Yes; what's the good of my staying? That hateful old woman has evidently taken a dislike to me, and you—you don't seem to care very much about me, Nest!' he murmurs reproachfully.

She is silent. She cannot bring herself to say anything to soothe the poor fellow's *amour propre*, for Guy Trevelyian's last admonition rings in her ears: 'Don't let yourself be swayed by any fear of giving pain, or by any tie of old associations.'

'So I have made up my mind, and I shall be off to-night.'

'I wish I could be firm and decided like that, Dal,' she says, with an extra *souçon* of respect for him in her regard; 'but you are right to go, for, you see, you would only be boiling over with jealousy of every man I spoke to, and, of course, in London one knows such a lot of men!'

'And you really think I am right to go?' he asks wistfully, hoping against hope that she will relent and bid him stay. After all, he is her affianced husband—conditionally it is true, still up to this time she has never been hard to him, though often 'variable as the shade.'

Nest hesitates a moment. She feels a great remorse rise up in her heart that she has let Dal's image slip out of it, and Guy's image slip in. Then she speaks in her old frank way which he is familiar with—

'Yes, Dal, I think it *is* right. I shall be very sorry if you go. Oh! don't shake your head like a mandarin, for I mean it honestly. I am not using the words as I would to an acquaintance for whom I did not care a fig; but if it's for your *real* good, you know, as they always used to tell us when we were children, and had to take nasty physic, why it's better so. I am sure your remaining would give you very little pleasure, and I am such an abominable person that people grow miserable if they care for me.'

'What an idea you have of yourself,' Dal replies, waxing tender once more. 'I am not going because I am angry with you. No, my darling, I don't believe if you put your foot on my heart and crushed the life out of it, that I would blame you in my latest breath. I love you, Nest, and think you the

prettiest—*prettiest* girl that ever was born to make a fellow happy and miserable in the same moment; but I *hate* to see a lot of men hovering about you, so I think, as I said before, I shall go back to Wentworth, and try and wait patiently till you come and say to me that you will marry me.'

'I am afraid I shall never say that—never!' Nest murmurs in a low voice, not daring to look up at him.

Dal starts, his temples throb and burn, and his heart seems to have left its proper and natural position and to have settled in a big leaden lump in his throat.

'No, Dal; we must not marry! You are far too good for me. I am not fit to tie your shoe-strings, I know that,' she says meekly; 'I don't know anybody who is, except Angela Vane; she is so very domestic, and you need a wife who will settle down at Wentworth for the rest of her days.'

Dal hearkens, and knows it's all up. When Nest proposes another woman for him to marry, it is sure proof that she has got marrying him herself out of her head.

He gives a short, quick sigh, and jumping off his seat, strides to the window, and she has a faint suspicion that, in that position, he dashes his pocket-handkerchief violently once or twice against his eyes.

'Do not let yourself be swayed by fear of giving pain.'

These words in the beloved voice exercise a potent influence over her, so she sits still, feeling horribly penitent and criminal.

'As to my being good, Nest,' he says, after a moment or two's valiant struggle with himself, 'you know that's all nonsense. God knows I am far from being a Paladin, but I always thought it was a shabby thing for a man to torment a woman into marrying him. I don't mean to do that, but you won't be cross with me, Nest, if I just ask you once if there is not a bit of hope for me—the tiniest bit in the world?'

His voice trembles in spite of himself, and his pleading, yearning, Prussian-blue eyes gaze at her through the dim light. He gives a deep sigh and clasps together the hands lying in her lap. She *feels* rather than sees the longing in the fair boyish face turned towards her, and she hears and understands much better than she did at Ravenshill, the accents of repressed passion and desperate regret in the familiar voice—a voice that has spoken tenderly to her for more years than she can remember!

It comes home to her that she is giving positive pain to Dal's sad heart, and for a minute, she shrinks from the cruel task.

'I hope you will forgive me, Dal, dear; and I *do* hope you will not be very sorry,' she murmurs at last, in a pretty,

pathetic voice that sounds to him like the sweetest music he has ever heard. 'I hope you are fully convinced that I would not suit you a bit, and that I am not worth regretting, for I am afraid—I am—sure—there is no hope for you, Dal!'

There is a short silence after this.

The soft summer breeze sways the fleecy lace curtain and comes stealing in, bringing on its wings the breath of fragrant flowers, and it stirs the cool glossy green leaves of a gigantic India-rubber plant that stands in a jasper pot. Up in the sky a few stars wink and blink naughtily at one another, and Dal looks up at them, and then down at his feet. He has lost his first grand stake for happiness. He says nothing, he gathers himself up, and smothers a rebellious sigh, and in the semi-darkness presses his teeth down hard on his nether lip.

What can he say? unless he throws himself on her mercy, and asks her to marry him out of pity, and he's a Wentworth, and too English at heart to do that.

It is Nest who speaks again.

'Dal!' she says, going up to the window and patting him on the back as if he were an ailing child, while he shivers under her touch, 'tell me you are not very unhappy! I don't care a scrap if you are furious with me, I don't care if you call me names and think me the most wicked flirt that ever walked the earth, if you will only say that you don't really mind a jot! I know how pleased Miladi will be!'

He catches her hand in a vice and hurts her dreadfully, but she does not even flinch.

'Yes, Miladi will be pleased. She always said you did not care for me, Nest, but somehow I did not believe her; you see, I *wanted* not to believe her! I have never thought a hard thing of you in my life, and I am not going to begin now. I have tried to win you, and I have failed, but it is not your fault. You can't help it if I am not to your taste, you know! But I love you so, Nest, I love you so! that it just feels as if you had given me my death-blow. Never mind, don't you go and spoil your London season, Nest, by thinking of me and my stupid trouble. God bless you and good-bye!'

Five ice-cold fingers, that tremble as she had never known them to tremble before, grasp hers, Dal's moist forget-me-not eyes look eagerly into her own, then he snatches up his hat, and she hears him going downstairs.

As she listens to the slow, heavy tread, and remembers the blithe swinging gait and light step of a month ago, she puts her face down on the sofa-cushion and sobs like a child.

CHAPTER XIV.

HEARTS AND CORONETS.

'Kind hearts are more than coronets,
And simple faith than Norman blood.'

I AM afraid you are dreadfully tired! You look like the whitest lily,' Lord Elmsdale murmurs tenderly. 'Do let us get out of this hot room.'

To this proposition Nest does not demur. Elmsdale has been dining at Chesham Place, the only guest, at Mrs Lorimer's express desire—fearful old matchmaker as she is—and now that coffee is over, she yields herself up comfortably to the drowsy god, leaving the young people to entertain themselves. And as she closes her eyes, she devoutly hopes that by the time she opens them again, Little Wylmer will have grasped the coronet, and be out of Guy Trevelyian's way.

'Little Wylmer' has a genuine headache—not a fashionable one—and she has not yet recovered the turmoil of her last interview with Dalrymple Wentworth. Dal's poor blank face, when he heard that he was thrown overboard, haunts her perpetually, and she feels a dreadful remorse when she reflects on her fickleness. A breath of fresh air will fan her throbbing temples. So she gladly sinks into an easy-chair that Lord Elmsdale wheels into the balcony—which is gay with vases of roses and heliotrope, throwing up a delicious fragrance on the night.

A big yellow moon, at her fullest, floods all around with a deep amber glory—and the walls of the opposite houses gleam like mother-o'-pearl.

'Oh, what an exquisite evening!' apostrophises Nest, lying back comfortably on her downy cushions, and thoroughly appreciating the beauty she extols.

'Yes!' he answers, lifting up his rather expressionless light eyes poetically to the spangled heavens. 'It is lovely—and moonlight hours are made for love, and that sort of thing—don't you know! At least the poet says so, doesn't he?'

She has heard the gist of this remark before, but differently worded. It was in the gloaming, not so very long ago, near Ravenshill Church. And not only are the words different, but the voices are *so* dissimilar, that she fairly loses patience with *this* speaker.

'The poet!—which poet? Don't be so absurdly vague, Lord

Limsdale !' she exclaims, rather flippantly. She is in fact weary both in body and mind, and out of temper as well—for Mrs Lorimer has evidently sent Guy to Coventry and entailed the Marquis's vapid society on her instead. 'Women may be allowed to indulge in foolish generalities, but men should really be more decided in their discourse.'

'You are quite down upon me this evening,' he says reproachfully; 'have I been so unfortunate as to vex or offend you?'

'No !' she answers languidly, 'not exactly !—I *do* feel rather cross, however. Mrs Lorimer has nearly snapped my head off once or twice. Mrs Moreton ignores me so completely that I almost feel as if I didn't exist ; and—Dal and I have quarrelled.'

'What !' he exclaims eagerly—his face flushing and his eyes kindling—then he adds in a more sober tone, 'But the quarrels of lovers are the renewal of love, they say !'

'They say—*wrong—this* time ! Dal and I have quarrelled for always,' she murmurs quietly.

Upon this he looks at her keenly. Is she by any chance nothing but a little *intriguante* after all—just like the other women who yearn for a coronet ? Is she—just to further her aims—proclaiming her freedom from her old engagement ? But Nest is evidently absorbed in her own thoughts, and in appearance, at anyrate, has no designs upon him.

'It must be your own fault to be out at elbows with everybody,' he remarks, after a minute or two. 'What have you been doing?'

'Nothing ! People have often a propensity to make mountains out of molehills, you know. For want of something better to do, I suppose. After all, I must confess, that this is not only a very disagreeable, but a very unsatisfactory world altogether.' And she winds up her harangue with a short sigh.

'You have changed your opinion very suddenly, and very completely. It is only the other day, a week or two ago, that you told me what a delightful world you considered it !'

'"The other day—a week or two ago,"' she answers, mimicking his tone, 'everyone was nice to me, and besides, several things had not happened.'

'Ah ! you are regretting Dal Wentworth already !'

'Am I ?' she asks, slowly and reflectively, as if she was questioning her own heart, and not him. 'No ! I do not think I am ! In fact, I may say, that I am quite sure I am *not* !'

'What is it, then ? Has Trevylian been making love to you, and thereby causing Mrs Moreton to sit upon you through jealousy?'

'Bosh!' she exclaims involuntarily; then she colours up, and says shyly 'I did not mean to use that word, Lord Elmsdale; please forget it! Gus, my brother, you know, says it often, and I have caught it from him!'

'Don't apologise! Slang from pretty lips is delicious—don't you know!'

'No—I do *not* know!' she flashes quickly, 'and I think it is very horrid of you to accuse me of "slang," whatever that means, because I just said "Bosh!"'

'I did not intend to be horrid! it is the very last thing I should like you to think me! especially as you *know* what I think of *you*!' he replies deprecatingly.

But Nest, still chafed in temper, does not respond as kindly as he expects.

He looks down at her as she lies back in her easy-chair, and notices the full beauty she is in, for irritation has lent a rosy warmth to her pure skin, and her big eyes glitter like the stars overhead.

The very toilette she wears—a soft clinging material of a pale neutral tint, relieved by knots of bright colour at the little slim throat, and at the dimpled wrists, perfectly unadorned by jewelry—conduces considerably to her very undeniable attractions.

She is dangerously pretty, with something about her that the French describe as '*entraînante*.'

Elmsdale has grown to be very fastidious on the subject of female beauty and feminine garments, and he understands the details of dress almost as well as Worth himself, and now when he examines her, a very comfortable and complacent feeling comes over him, that Dal Wentworth having gone to the wall, the field is all his own and the prize worth winning, and moreover, that there is no need of haste, as the end is so very sure.

While he so reflects, Nest, with drooping eyelids now, evolves in her mind where Guy can be this same evening. She knows there is a musical party at the Listers' in Belgrave Square, where Mrs Moreton is going to give '*Comme à vingt ans*,' in her most bravura style, and rather shrill voice, and she wonders if by any chance Guy will drop in among the audience. In spite of all that has been said on the subject, she is really as jealous as a tigress of the rich widow.

'Do you know that you have not really looked at me ever since we came out on the balcony?' Elmsdale says, almost in a whisper, startling her out of her reverie.

'I am looking at the moon.'

'Never mind the moon!—it's only a great yellow ball after

all!—but look at me with those sweet eyes of yours, while I say something very serious to you—*Nest.*'

'I have no objection to look at you as long as you like, Lord Elmsdale,' she answers, turning the sweet eyes in question rather haughtily upon him, 'but I should very much prefer you to call me by my surname. Only a very few intimate friends ever address me as "*Nest.*"'

A dark red flush sweeps over the aristocratic blond face. Never in the whole of a long and varied career of flirtation had she received such an unpleasant—such a very direct—rebuff as this!

It certainly surprises—almost takes away his breath—and steadies him. He has taken a 'header' and found he was going too far! Such rapid running might be agreeable to some girls, but not to this girl, who, with all her folly and frivolity, has not even the germs of fastness in her.

Perhaps this very virtue in her makes him, in spite of her mortification, like this 'rosebud set with wilful thorns,' twice as much for so ably asserting her small self.

His discomfiture, however, is not of long duration, for women of his calibre, the bump of sensitiveness is abnormally small, and shyness is not chronic, though assurance may be.

Before the lapse of five seconds, 'Richard is himself again—calm and cool, smiling and subtle.

'If I ventured to call you *Nest,*' he says, sinking his voice to the most harmonious and perilously tender key she has heard yet, 'it is because I have been letting myself hope that I might become one of your very dearest and most intimate friends.'

'You could not conveniently become "two" could you?' she asks, with flippant sarcasm. 'Although I know you consider yourself a host.'

He entirely ignores her irony, in fact, it simply amuses him, and he half smiles under cover of his moustache.

It is not very likely that a little miss in her teens, a savage fresh from the Devonshire wilds, is going to move him out of his imperturbable self-complacency by childish efforts at sauciness.

So he accepts her puny stab with the stoicism with which a man would meet a gnat sting, and exceedingly enjoys this new phase of lovemaking which has less sugar than spice.

'I should like to be *the* greatest intimate you had in all the world,' he replies hardily, stooping and taking hold of the hand that lies listlessly on the red velvet arm of the chair, tugging it into Parian whiteness by the amber moonbeams.

She reclaims her fingers, however, quickly, and begins to

lightly uncomfortable; but fortifies herself with the thought that if the man is fooling with her, two can play at the same game.

'How modest you are, Lord Elmsdale,' she says lightly, but with a flavour of satire still ringing in her voice. 'I have always heard that in everything but politics, before one can aspire to a position of honour and trust, one must show some fitness for the same.'

'Now I do not want to be uncomplimentary, but can you show me any just cause or reason *why* you should be my greatest intimate?'

'Yes, I can show you a very potent reason, and I think an all-sufficient one,' answers this noble wooer, whom her manner sends into pique, 'I—love—you!'

He brings out this important announcement of his sentiments with a flourish of trumpets. His manner is unconsciously inflated, and betrays at once how deeply he feels his own graciousness and magnanimity in uttering them.

After all it is but a modern version of King Cophetua and the ragged maid, to his real thinking. He is Lord Elmsdale, heir to one of our oldest dukedoms, he is rich as Croesus, the bluest blood runs in his veins. The total is simply—magnificent.

And she, what has she to offer?—nothing! What is she?—where nobody.

Only her face is her fortune, and he forgets that, after all, the power of beauty is greater in most men's eyes than anything else in the world.

Of course there are many ambitious girls in society who would be deaf to his tone, blind to his overweening vanity, and care and alive only to the remarkably substantial attractions he possesses, and there are also many women who have reached advanced years—years passed in the world—who are philosophically accustomed to the conceit inherent in the masculine bosom, and who would not heed Elmsdale's accents if they heard them. But Nest is different to either of these.

She both hears and heeds—the pink flush grows deeper on her cheek, and she turns the large dark eyes full upon him with a glance of devilry that is so hateful to Miladi.

'I am excessively obliged to you,' she says, very quietly, without a vestige of embarrassment or flutter, 'but you must forgive me for not thinking the reason you give an all-sufficient one. Where so, one or two other people might claim the right you give me, and I should find it rather difficult to reconcile the relative merits and exclusive claims of all of you.'

'Do not doubt for a moment that there are other men who would love you; not one, but a dozen!' he replies, conscious of pro-

found amazement at the singular obtuseness she displays to the unprecedented honour he does her—it is not every girl, with no advantages to back her, that would thus play ducks and drakes with a coronet; 'but it is impossible that any of them can love you as I do; don't you know?' he adds, feeling the flame in his breast burn more fiercely from her attempt to blow it out.

'Why impossible?' she asks coolly. 'Each one says exactly that—each one swears he loves me best. How am I to tell whose love is the greatest? There are no scales in which we can weigh love!'

'There are tests though!'

He is piqued, amused, vexed, and interested all in one moment.

He feels that her petulance and defiance give a zest to the matter, which it would lack with an amiable girl of a commonplace nature and conventional manner.

Nest is absolutely delicious in her disregard of the extraordinary prize he is in the matrimonial market, and in her off-hand treatment of an Elmsdale—a marquis—and with all this tantalising fascination about her, he is impatient for a war of words to cease, and for the lips that look so fresh, and fragrant, and inviting in the moonlight, to confess bewitchingly that he has conquered.

But, man of the world as he is, he has not divined that he has never been further from her heart than on this identical evening when her thoughts, *violens volens*, keep reverting to Guy Trevelyian.

Guy! who has told her in burning words that seem to ring on her memory, how he loves her! Guy! whom she knows she loves with all her might and main.

'What kind of tests can we prove love with?' she asks, after a short silence, with innocent demureness. 'I should like to hear, for such bits of information may come in useful at any time, you know! like the receipts in 'Enquire Within,' which Dad carries about in his pocket always.'

'Disinterestedness, for one,' he begins loftily. 'You may be pretty sure a man loves a girl when he is willing, nay glad, to resign every possible or probable advantage for her sake!'

'May I?' she murmurs, half dreamily.

Her eyes droop still lower meditatively, her lips stir in a faint baby smile, while the lines round her mouth soften.

Elmsdale—watching—believes that she is about to yield; but, instead of that, she is mentally reckoning up the possible or probable advantages that Guy has resigned, or is about to resign for her sake.

Elmsdale leans forward, seizes her hand once more, looking at her the while with the eyes which many women admire.

'You cannot doubt that I love you—love you with all my soul—since I ask you to marry me!' he whispers fervently, forgetting his usual languor, and speaking eagerly, passionately. 'How pretty you are; and how marvellously a coronet will become you. Tell me, Nest, that you will consent to wear it!'

She does not rebuke him this time for calling her 'Nest.'

Perhaps she hardly heeds that he does so.

A triumph such as few women arrive at in her humdrum walk of life has come to her. She can be a peeress if she wills. And she would be more than the spoiled, impulsive, pleasure-loving girl she is, if she did not now fully realise the magnificence of this conquest.

Oh! what would Miladi think of this? Miladi, who thought, and openly said, that she had laid snares for the son and heir of the Wentworths.

What would Dad, and the little mother, and Maud, and Gus think, of a daughter and sister being a real live Marchioness! If she were absolutely fancy free, if Guy did not hold her under the spell of those grey eyes of his, she would be able to accept the man and all he has to offer.

Good Heavens! the magnitude of his offering, as she realises it, positively amazes her, almost appals her.

Himself—to begin with.

Himself—Eric Ferdinand Montessor, Marquis of Elmsdale—over whom scores of the fairest ladies, in society and out of society, have gone mad, and whose undeniable advantages make him a Phoenix amongst his kind.

Add to this a splendid old Dukedom in prospective—landed estates, and a heavy balance at Coutts'.

And Nest has learned already in her short sojourn in Tophet, that money is the true sesame now-a-days to the portals of success and pleasure.

While she goes through all this, her aristocratic suitor regards her intently, naturally attributing her silence to that maidenly shyness which occasionally ties women's tongues. And once more he bends over her until his long light moustache almost touches her cheek.

'Nest!—my darling—is it, *Yes?*'

'No!' she answers, starting back. 'At least I mean that I—that you must give me time to reflect—one can't make up one's mind in a minute, you know!' she winds up hastily.

'But we have known each other for ages,' he says, reproachfully, not understanding how any woman could know him even for one day and not jump at the prospect of marrying him. 'Let me see—taking it all in all—it must be at least eight weeks?'

'True! but you must remember that I have not had the slightest anticipation of this; so I am quite unprepared for it. Everybody said you were only amusing yourself!'

'But I wasn't! I am in right-down sober earnest. Nest—say you will marry me!'

'I cannot say so—to-night!'

'When will you make up your mind, then?' he questions, rather haughtily, provoked and mortified at her reluctance.

'I do not know! How can I say, Lord Elmsdale? If you really wish for an answer, you must patiently wait till I get home!'

'But I have never been accustomed to wait patiently for anything,' he says imperiously.

'Have you not? Well; it is never too late too mend, you know!' she laughs merrily. 'Is not Mrs Lorimer awake yet? I think she must be sleeping the sleep of the just! It is awfully late, and I am so tired, I must go to bed.'

'Don't go yet! and for goodness' sake let the old lady sleep on. I want to speak to you about something, and this is as good an opportunity as I am likely to have, with Dennistoun, and Trevylian, and all those fellows eternally loafing about.'

'But I am tired—dreadfully tired—and I cannot keep my eyes open! I want rest!'

'Cannot you rest in that chair, and listen at the same time?'

'*Cela dépend!* if it's very interesting, the subject you wish to speak on, it will excite me instead of resting me.'

'I do not know whether you will think it interesting, but it is a very important subject to me. I have been watching you very closely lately—watching you, as a man naturally watches the girl he has made up his mind to marry—and I—I don't *quite* like your way with other men; don't you know!'

These last words are uttered deprecatingly; but she starts visibly.

'Really!'

The hot blood is up in a moment. She flings back her head and faces him; her eyes quite wide awake now, and shining bright and defiant.

'And pray, may I ask *what* there is in my way for anyone to disapprove of?'

Elmsdale hesitates; he hardly knows how to put into words

all he feels. Her curling lip unmans him, and renders him stupid and nervous.

At last he makes a plunge, but men, even at the best, often bungle at the subject that requires most nicety in handling.

'It is, that you lead every man who approaches you to think that you especially like, admire, or are interested in him. Now such a manner belongs essentially to a flirt, and I should hate you to be reckoned a flirt, don't you know!'

'Remarkably considerate of you, I am sure,' Nest answers, in a ringing little voice, 'awfully considerate, in fact; but as far as I am concerned, anybody who likes may call me anything and welcome!'

'Yes; but you forget,' he remonstrates, as gravely as he can, 'that I may be concerned, deeply concerned, by-and-by, in what Society says of you. Cæsar's wife must not even be suspected, don't you know? You lower yourself in accepting admiration largely, and in flirting promiscuously, and of course it would lower me! You are not aware how much you cheapen all I have to offer you when you treat it as you might treat the idle fulsome compliments of the other fellows who hang about you. And, oh, your looks and words are not a bit nicer to me than they are to Dennistoun and Trevelylian!'

She thrills at the last name.

'Are they not?' she asks, with a peculiar accent that rather puzzles him. 'Well! you see my looks and words are not my own. I mean that I never make them otherwise than they naturally are. If they are the same to you as to the other men, does it not follow as a matter of course that I do not feel differently towards you, from what I feel for them?'

It is his turn to start now, and under the strong moonlight, his face looks even paler than usual.

'Possibly that does follow,' he says, after a minute, in an especially haughty tone, 'and you must think me very stupid that such a simple solution of your manner did not occur to me. And am I then to understand that you have only been laughing at me?'

'I do not see why you should understand anything of the kind! You dance well, and I adore dancing. Is it my fault if you choose to give our pleasant acquaintanceship a more serious feature?'

'It does not matter *whose* fault it is! All I want to know is, if you think you can ever care enough for me, to marry me! Nest, *do* you think you can? I would rather hear my fate at once. As I said just now, patience is not one of my virtues, so I should like yes or—no!'

Unconsciously his tone and style are very decided, as he concludes his speech, and though this sort of wooing might suit a woman of the spaniel species, Nest is of different metal.

She has been fed on the cakes and sugar-plums of life too long to submit meekly to distasteful diet.

'I think I had better say "No" then,' she answers, trying to steady the voice which temper renders slightly tremulous; then she recovers her serenity, and goes on very gently. 'Oh, Lord Elmsdale, don't you see that there would not be much happiness for either of us if I said "Yes." You have taken a fancy to my face, but already you are jealous, whether for me, or for your own dignity, it does not matter. And you object to my love of admiration and my desire to make myself agreeable. Now, both the desire and the love are as natural to me as— as anything. I have been thinking about myself very seriously lately, and I see quite clearly that I shall make a worldly, dissipated, frivolous woman—the kind of woman that would not do a bit for a marchioness, you know—and who would give heaps of trouble to her husband, unless, indeed, she happened to marry a man for whom she cared ever so much!'

'And you don't care for me ever so much?' he asks, feeling his vexation and sense of dignity melt into thin air as he looks down into the fair, frank young face, on which the golden moon is shedding her light.

'Well, no! perhaps I don't!' she says hesitatingly, and he winces. It is a dreadful downfall for his vanity; his rejection may get known, the clubs will chaff him, and the men and women of his own set laugh at him, who has hitherto posed for a second Julius Cæsar.

'You see, if I marry you, Lord Elmsdale, feeling as I feel now, it would be mostly for what you offer and not for what you are! and that would be desperately wicked, and wrong, and interested of me, especially when you are willing to make such a sacrifice as marrying me—I, who am out of the charmed circle of your beauties and fashionables. I dare say you think it very strange that a girl shouldn't be head over ears in love with you,' she goes on, with just a faint cadence of humour in her voice. 'I don't pretend to explain such a phenomenon, I only say what seems to me to be the case, hoping you will forgive my frankness.'

'You need not laugh at me, anyway! If you do not love me, of course there is nothing more to be said. I cannot sink so low as to ask for your hand if you cannot give me your heart.'

He tries to speak proudly, but her coldness makes him miserable, *pro tem.* that is to say—at this moment he firmly believes

that the only thing he wants in the wide world is the love of this little rustic.

'No! of course not! especially when there are so many girls who would give you their hearts without the asking,' Nest murmurs penitently. 'It would be a downright shame in any woman to marry you if she did not believe you *AI* in everything!'

'It is all very well to talk of what other women would do! but, don't you know!—when a fellow has been foolish enough to set his heart on *one* woman, the sentiments of the rest of the sex do not concern him very much, as a rule!'

A little pause ensues after this.

Up above, the moon sails on among the fleecy clouds and the little stars keep winking and blinking to one another. The night air freshens, and as a background to the flower-decked balcony, is a room, replete with *luxure*, and with the owner of it still in the land of Nod. Her Louis XIV. curls rest rakishly on a cushion, and with her imposing head-gear slightly awry, she slumbers as soundly as the seven sleepers of old, and Nest, glancing over her shoulder at her, smiles at the grotesque picture her hostess makes, and wonders at the same time if she will regret to-morrow all she has said to-night, when Lord Elmsdale speaks again.

This time, pride has lowered its crest, and melancholy marks him for her own, and his voice is as plaintive as a nightingale's.

'You know how I love you! and after seeming to care for me, it is very hard you should throw me over like this!'

'I am very sorry if I have misled you,' Nest begins humbly, but he interrupts.

'Never mind! only I repeat again that I love you!—love you so desperately that I shall be wretched if you persist in refusing me!'

She glances dreamily out on the mother-o'-pearl-looking houses opposite and into the bright luminous night. Somehow, she always seems to see Guy's face in the silvery moonbeams. She reflects a little, however, and marvels if she is really right in casting away the good things the gods offer.

She thinks of Dad's dire vexation when Dal proclaims his broken troth-plight, of the little mother's fast-falling tears, of Gus's disgust, and even of Maud's malicious attacks, and she remembers that if her dismissal of Dal ends in her reaching a coronet, that mourning will be turned into mirth at the Vicarage.

And what is she casting all these good things away for? For the sake of a man whose heart is at best second-hand, a man

who went mad over another woman only a year or two back. Just for the sake of a few love-words spoken in her ears, that after all may have been vain! For aught she knows, at this very moment, while she is rejecting a destiny far grander than aught she has dreamed of, Guy may be listening to his old sweetheart's voice, trilling and roulading for his especial benefit. Visions of Guy's grey eyes looking into Mrs Moreton's shallow blue orbs rise up in the moon's soft gleaming and torture her.

She turns suddenly to her companion.

'I do not persist in refusing you, Lord Elmsdale—all I want is a little time to think. You cannot blame me for this—since you have been lecturing me for being heedless and gay—I do not say I care for you now as much perhaps as you might wish—but some day—who knows? I may like you even better than you like me!'

Is it prescience that makes her say this?

God knows!

She says it laughingly, carelessly, and even coquettishly, but he is too much in love to cavil at the light words, when her face is uplifted to him with its sparkling *piquante* beauty.

'How long will it be before you give me life or death, my darling?' he asks solemnly, in melodramatic accents that make her bite her lips to hide a smile.

'How long will you give me for reflection?' she answers.

'Three weeks. In three weeks you must give me your answer. You will be at home by that time, and you must write to me; but be merciful, Nest, and send me only one word—"Yes!"'

'In three weeks be it, then,' she answers brightly, but something arrests the mirth, and she grows white to the lips.

'Three weeks!'

They fly in joy, but are leaden-footed in sorrow.

Without speaking again, she holds out her hand, and Elmsdale clasps it and kisses it passionately before she can withdraw it. Then she glides away like a ghost, her features still very pallid, and with an odd, scared look in her eyes.

Just then, Mrs Lorimer awakens, to see Lord Elmsdale opposite, hat in hand, and with a smile on his face.

'Shall I congratulate you?' she asks affably, as she wishes him good-night.

'By-and-by,' he answers complacently.

'I knew little Wylmer could not resist the match of the season,' she mutters, when she is alone. 'And now it will be all right, Guy will marry Mabella, and I shall have had my way. I *love* having my way!' she winds up, with a wicked, elfish laugh.

CHAPTER XV.

OLYMPUS.

'Mine arms are close about thine head,
My lips are fervent on thy face,
And where my kiss hath fed,
Thy flower-like blood leaps red,
To the kissed place.'

NEST has passed the entire morning and the long afternoon in her own room. She is not well, and her pallid face and the deep bistre shades that run under her eyes fully corroborate her words, and Mrs Lorimer, who has not recovered her equanimity of temper since her last interview with Guy, is glad to have the apple of discord out of her sight, while the apple itself is only too willing for a little quiet and rest after the excitement and combat of the latter days.

At all events it is growing late when Nest goes downstairs, looking very pretty and interesting with her white cheeks and pale blue dress. Mrs Lorimer has started for an early dinner party preparatory to the first representation of a drama at the Adelphi, and Nest is sure to have the monopoly of the house for some hours. The large, cool, fragrant drawing-room looks wonderfully empty, and is as silent as the enchanted palace, on which Merlin laid his spell.

She wanders through it, finding no trace of human presence. She is all alone—alone to do what she pleases, and to roam where she pleases—to pace up and down, and linger here and there in delightful idleness of motion. Nevertheless, she does not really appreciate being monarch of all she surveys, for it has its disadvantages in being dull and dreary, and even slightly oppressive.

She strolls on to the balcony where she sat with Lord Elmsdale just seven evenings ago, but somehow, as soon as the recollection of him comes into her head she chases it away again impatiently, and gathering some of the scented bloom, she decks herself like a Greek divinity. Then she saunters slowly back into the room, and drops into an inviting lounge with Tennyson in her lap, but not even making believe to read, save by little snatches.

She feels like a disturbed spirit. So she springs up, lets the poor Poet Laureate tumble ignominiously on the floor, and walks into the largest of the drawing-rooms. Once more a

recollection of Elmsdale comes across her, it is brought by the sight of one of his gloves, which someone has found and placed in a conspicuous position on the summit of a Chinese temple. She recognises it at once, for it is one of Elmsdale's habits to wear French grey kids with broad black lines down the back.

Seizing it, and flinging it on the carpet, Nest absolutely indulges in a sort of savage war-dance on the offending object! She is so angry with its owner and with herself!

Angry with him because he has put her into such an awkward dilemma a fortnight hence; angry with herself that she allowed herself to be inveigled into a promise of writing the 'No,' which she is quite sure she will give, which she would rather die than not give! Since that evening, when for a little while she let herself be dazzled by the splendid future he offered, the glamour of his offerings has faded right away.

'Marry him!' she says, half aloud and very scornfully; 'not if he had fifty dukedoms in prospect. Feeling for him as I do, his coronet would be a crown of thorns. I believe I should go mad under the burthen of it. I told him I did not care for him, and it is very mean of him not to have taken me at my word then and there! I hate men who have no proper pride.'

With this sweeping condemnation of men in general, and Lord Elmsdale in particular, she picks up the glove, taking it fastidiously between finger and thumb, as if it burnt a hole in her flesh, and placing it on a high mantelshelf where it cannot annoy her eye, she goes to the piano and slowly touches the 'beautiful cold keys,' as some *fanatica per la musica* has called them.

Now, though her education has been neglected in many essential points, for truth to say Miss Ernestine Wylmer is an 'unlessoned girl,' music is as much her natural element as air is to a bird.

Even as a baby she had developed a high, shrill, but tuneful soprano, and the talent has been cultivated by a not famous, but yet worthy, professor of the art at Ravenshill. The result is, that instead of striking up into a sing-song waltz or jerky polka, she glides at once into that marvellous bit of harmony, the 'Moonlight Sonata.'

She plays it once—twice—even thrice—not so much because she cares for a monotonous repetition of anything, but simply because this particular style of music chances to suit her mood, and her mood at this moment is far from a very cheerful one.

For several days she has not so much as set eyes on Guy, and inclined to be jealous and even sceptical of his fidelity, she

wonders if he has already grown wise and prudent, and repented him of the sacrifice of Mrs Lorimer's favour and fortune, and left her a maiden all forlorn, without further ado.

As she touches the notes, the tender, passionate chords make a fit accompaniment for her thoughts of the man whom she loves with every inch of her young heart, and she is well on in the repetition, playing dreamily, with her big brown eyes fixed on a glimpse of 'the fringes of a faded eve' seen through the filmy lace curtains, and her spirit far away, when the sound of a peculiar footfall on the stairs catches her ear.

Her hands pause abruptly on the ivory keys, she turns her head, the breath suspended on her parted lips, and listens.

After a minute her listening is rewarded. Footsteps come nearer and nearer, cross the polished parquet of the long ante-room, and draw close. The silken draperies of a sort of arch, within which the piano stands, are pushed roughly aside, and in the opening appears a huge dog.

A dog, literally as big as a Shetland pony, a superb creature, all tawny gold dashed with black, whose hair, soft as silk, curls round him in every direction, and whose large bright eyes are full of an indescribable beauty and affection.

This formidable visitor enters with the stately tread of a lion, his plummy tail drooping, his magnificent head erect, his whole face, where gentleness and strength are so marvellously blended, replete with vivid expectation.

At sight of him Nest makes one spring from the music-stool.

'Rock! / Rock!' she cries delightedly. 'My dear—~~dear~~ old boy! Is it you?'

Rock gives one short bark of recognition to attest that it is indeed his noble self, and that he fully remembers the pleasant strolls he and she and one other, have had together, on ambient days not so very long ago, along the banks of the rippling Yarl.

Then he rushes at her, wagging his tail and fairly knocking her into a convenient chair with the weight of his immense paws on her shoulders, and she is in danger of suffocation, while Rock's great red tongue licks her face in unmolested delight, when luckily a figure steps from behind the arch to her rescue.

'Down, Rock!' Guy Trevelyian orders, in a tone which the dog obeys at once by dropping on all fours and crouching on the floor.

'Has he half smothered you, Nest? No, sir! You have done enough embracing for one day, so stand back.'

'Oh, don't scold him,' she cries, recovering her breath, and with a flush of happiness and excitement on her cheek. 'You have never brought him here before! And he is so glad to see

me again! Rock, my beauty, you are more magnificent than ever. What a grand head he has. Doesn't he remind you of Lord Byron's epitaph on his dog?'

'What, the verse that goes—

"To mark a friend's remains these stones arise,
I never had but one, and here he lies!"'

Guy asks laughingly, and looking as if he would gladly devour the little hands that stroke and caress Rock's silken ears.

She glances up and catches his look, and blushing over face and neck, says confusedly,—

'No, you know that is not what I mean! It is the inscription on the tombstone.'

'I can't remember. Rock, my boy, I don't wonder your head is turned at the sight of her. So is mine. Ah, Nest, do you know, I am even jealous of *him*, when you fondle and caress him so. But what is the epitaph you mean?'

"He possessed beauty without vanity—strength without insolence
—and courage without ferocity."

Now, does it not suit him to a T?'

'So it does. Is it not strange how he knew you directly. He has an instinctive idea that you are going to be *part owner* of him.'

Again she flushes and her lids droop, but a happy smile plays on her mouth.

'Do you recollect how cross Maud was one day when Rock jumped out of the water and on to her new muslin dress? I thought she would have killed him by the lightning of her eye!'

'I recollect! Is there anything that occurred at Ravenshill—even most trivial—that I can forget?' he asks earnestly, watching the changing colour on her cheek. 'I brought Rock here to-day, because I knew my aunt was going out, and I hoped I might find you in. Are you a prisoner to the house "by command," Nest?'

'No! I was tired and cross—and lazy and miserable! And—and—I thought perhaps you might come. You know you have not been here for ages,' she goes on impetuously, 'and I cannot afford to lose any of your society!'—she is too glad to see him to be coy or reserved—'especially as—'

'As what?'

'Well! I think I am going back home! You see Mrs Lorimer is not exactly the same as she was at first, and perhaps

she suspects that you are not going to marry Mrs Moreton—at least—'

'She *knows* I am not going to marry Mrs Moreton,' Guy says, in his queer decided fashion.

'Ah! that's it then! She thinks I have led you astray—and—'

'Visits the sin on you right royally, my child! She might accuse me of every crime in the Decalogue, and I would forgive it much sooner than I can forgive her for making you look so pale as you do—or rather, as you *did*—for, somehow, do you know, you have managed to get some colour back within the last few minutes; and I am curious to know the cause! Who are you blushing about, Nest? I am sure it would never enter your head to blush about *me*!'

'I am not blushing about anybody!' she cries indignantly.

'If I am a little flushed, it is owing to this heat, and to—Rock.'

'Oh! it is owing to the heat and Rock. Now, if I were to say that you were telling *lies*—I wonder if you would hit me again as you did *that evening*!'

She remembers that evening but too well. How often has she not thought of her handiwork with remorse! She has no colour now—her cheek grows what Elmsdale calls the whitest lily—and tears, big sparkling drops, gather in her eyes. Putting up her hand, she touches his face softly.

'You need not be so cruel as to remind me of my misdeeds, when the fruit of them stares at me like this!'

For an instant Guy gazes at her in profound amazement. He knows that the cut from Dal Wentworth's diamond ring has left no trace on his cheek.

Suddenly he recollects, and growing pale, he answers, tremulously,—'That scar did not come from you, Nest! Yours was lower down, and healed long ago.'

'True!' she says, lifting the dark ring of hair that partially conceals the mark. 'And who gave you this—not a woman?' she asks, gravely.

'No—a man—or rather a cur!'

'A man—why did he hit you?' she persists.

He shrugs his shoulders with feigned petulance, and says,—

'Oh, it is a long story, and it would not interest you!'

'Yes—but it would! I want to hear it. Do not tantalise, please. The longer you are silent, the more terrible I shall think the story is, and if you do not mind, you will make an anti-climax of it at last,' she winds up wilfully.

'Who cares about an anti-climax? I do not mean to tell you at all!'

'Yes! but you shall! It is a bad beginning if you are going to have secrets from me,' she murmurs, with pouting lips, that give Guy insatiable hunger and thirst.

'I shall never have a secret from you, my Nest. And, to prove it, you shall hear the story of the scar on my temple before we part to-day.'

'And before we part,' she begins—but the very commencement of her sentence flings such a dreary sensation over her, that she almost breaks into a childish sob. 'Before you leave me again, I want to beg your pardon for the horridly unjust things I said to you the last time you were here. I know, now, that they were unjust, and I hope you will forgive me!'

She stops—her heart fluttering like a bird's—her brown eyes glistening with unshed tears.

'I have nothing to pardon, my Nest. If I implied such a thing, forgive me. When one suffers, one is apt to be unreasonable, and wounded vanity is quick to come to the side of wounded love! I am afraid I have been like a bear sometimes, but you don't know what I have endured from miserable doubt and jealousy. I have suffered tortures when I have worn a smile on my lips. After all, what more natural than that you should not love me?—what more natural than that you should care for others—Elmsdale, for instance?'

'Nothing more natural, I suppose!' answers Nest, feeling her spirit rising, and her sauciness reviving as the consciousness is borne in upon her, that she is still complete mistress of the situation. 'But natural things do not *always* come to pass, do they? There are exceptions to all rules, you know! I told you before, that my heart was not elastic, and couldn't take in all sorts of lodgers!'

'Since you have been in town, I fancied you had forgotten that!'

'Why should you have fancied it?' she asks, unfurling a huge fan and attentively studying—by the rather dim light—one of the artistic designs, apparently an old Japanese woman riding on a kettle.

'It would be wiser to ask why I should have thought Elmsdale's attractions would not be irresistible!' Guy returns, a little dryly. 'I am not a lunatic!—and I am quite capable of recognising advantages beyond my own!'

'But Lord Elmsdale has no advantages beyond you—except, perhaps, that he is a little richer!' she says, frankly.

'I did not mean to imply that he is my superior, mentally or morally,' Guy observes, with a faint smile, 'but the point of which you speak—wealth—is just the very thing that women most care for.'

'Women may,' she replies positively, 'but I don't; I am sorry you should give me credit for such nasty feelings. I do not think money worth anything,' she goes on scornfully. 'I have changed my mind lately about lots of things, and among the rest, I am not at all sure that admiration and fashion and riches, make anyone really happy!'

'Yet everybody, Mrs Lorimer included, thinks you have been hankering after a coronet!'

'Really! everyone usually knows one's feelings better than one knows them oneself,' she retorts petulantly. 'No doubt I am very frivolous and strongly inclined to be mercenary, but I counted the cost in time, and it seems to me to be a great risk to marry without love. So I have not said "Yes" to Lord Elmsdale, and I have sent away poor, dear Dal for ever and ever!'

'Have you really—Nest?'

Guy looks down on the sweetest, softest face in the world—Nest is really blushing now—blushing furiously up to her temples, for she is not a fast girl, and she thinks she has said a little too much, but her face, in spite of its drooping lids, tells its story of love with exceeding clearness and sweetness to Guy's passionate gaze.

'Darling! my own darling! and did you send away both of them for me?' he whispers, in a tone that thrills to her heart.

'I am sure I don't know for what else!' she answers, in a low tone, 'and I thought I was nicely rewarded when you never came near me for days and days!'

'I could not come! I did not dare come while Mrs Lorimer was in the house, but I have thought of you every moment of the time. Oh, Nest! I can scarcely realise even now that you are really mine—my very own! Are you sure you will not repent giving up Wentworth, and the honour and glory of being a marchioness? Do you remember that it is a poor man you are going to marry?'

'I like poor men,' Nest announces stoutly, 'they are infinitely more agreeable than rich ones, and do you want *all* the sacrifice to be on your side?' she asks, with a swift, loving, upward glance of her brown eyes. 'I call that dreadfully selfish! I am glad—ever so glad to have had a real live lord to give up for you. Dal perhaps was different—it hurt me awfully to send him away!'

'My sweet! and you will never, never again think that I care for Mrs Moreton? God knows, my own, that you have all—all the love a man *can* give! The old madness of the past is utterly dead, but I cannot deny that it existed! Are you sure

you will not scorn a heart that has loved another woman, my child ?'

'I wish you had never loved anyone but me !' she avows frankly ; 'it is the only thought that will bring pain !' and he sees in her face that she *is* jealous—jealous of the ashes even of a dead love.

'Nest !' he says abruptly, and glancing quickly at him, she marks a quiver that is familiar to her, cross his mouth, and a shadow in his eyes, 'I am going to tell you something !'

Catching hold of her arm, he draws her close to the window, just where the last remnants of light fall full on her features.

'I want to see your face while I tell you the story of the scar on my temple, then I shall know if, by my own confession, I have lost my hold on my darling's heart !'

She answers nothing. A sort of presentiment fills her that she is about to hear that which will dash the happiness of this evening hour with regret—if not with worse.

'Mabella Moreton was not my *first* love,' he says, in a low voice that trembles in spite of him. He knows he is staking his life's whole happiness on his adherence to truth, his detestation of all that is false and dishonourable, 'I loved another woman before—I loved her so much that I—*married her !*'

The two last words ring out almost discordantly on the silent room from the trenchant bitterness of his accents.

Nest starts away from his clasp, and gazes at him dumb and white, while her heart feels frozen.

'Ah, *don't* look like that !' he cries, in a tortured voice, 'and for God's sake don't shudder away from my touch like you did just now ! It kills me ! I could not marry you, Nest, with the burden of a secret in my breast ! Think, child, I might have kept the wretched story from your ears, but I felt that I couldn't—I *couldn't*. No shadow of reserve must come between us two, not if you love me as I love you !'

'Is she—*dead* ?'

Upon this Guy laughs, a short bitter laugh, that is only a phantom of mirth.

'*Dead*—of course she is ! Oh, my darling, so you thought you had set your affections on a would-be bigamist !'

'I don't know what I thought !' she murmurs apologetically, drawing nearer to him as an *amende honorable* for her doubts.

'Yes, yes ! she is dead—thank God ! she died before I had time to realise what an excellent thing her death was for me ! I was a boy when I first saw the woman, Nest, and she was years older than me—years and years older than I in iniquity ! She was beautiful to my eyes then—to my eyes now—the eyes

that dwell on your face and are loth to leave it—she would be simply hideous in her splendour of flesh and blood, and with the tinsel and sin that were part and parcel of herself. It is only a very young man or a very old one who can see beauty in an *evil* face! She married me to become a 'Lady.' We parted—thank God—at the church door, and she was dead before I could hurl reproaches for her falsity at her. The man—my rival—was there. I could not let myself be wronged, without wreaking vengeance upon him. But I was a child in his brute force, and shall bear all my life the mark of his hand, a memento of my boyish folly and credulity. Now I have told you all, Nest, do you hate me for it? or will you bury its memory and take me to your dear heart again?"

She lays her head on his shoulder, and clasps her little hands over his arm.

'I *wish* you had never loved anyone but me!' she repeats once more, 'but I suppose I must be content if you love me now, and will keep on loving me till I die. After all, what does the past matter so very much?' cries this young Epicurean; 'I believe in the present, and in the future!'

'The future which we are going to meet together!' Guy says, with the earnestness of deep happiness in his voice, 'are we not, sweetheart?'

'Yes!' she answers frankly, with her pretty eyes brimful of love for this man whom she is quite ready to take for better or worse, but suddenly her face falls, and a perplexed expression creeps into it.

'One thing,' she asks, with a solemnity which makes him smile covertly. 'What will Dad, and the little mother, and all of them say when they know?'

What, indeed? Guy's spirit sinks as he realises all she will have to endure from the home circle when they find that it is a case of 'All for love; and the world well lost!'

'True! They wanted you to marry Dal, and become the future mistress of Wentworth. They will *hate* the idea of your marrying a poor man!'

'I am afraid they will. You see they expected so much from me as Dal's wife.'

Guy winces at her words, and draws her closer to him.

'Maud will bully me dreadfully, and I—I shall not know what to do amongst them all!' Nest cries piteously.

And Guy, stooping, looks into her eyes, and sees tears and indecision.

'You *must* not let them influence you. You *must* be firm. Oh, my love! you must promise me this, or I shall be beside

myself with fear and anxiety. For I could not lose you now, pet—now that I have begun to feel you are really mine, Nest !' and his voice lingers fondly over her name. 'Will you go and play something? I want to think for a moment, and your music will help me to a decision.'

'What do you want to think about?' she asks, in surprise.

'I want to think how I can best defeat the intentions of your family,' he answers bitterly. 'I am not likely to sit down quietly and let them have their way! If I had to walk over scores of relations, I would do it, so as I won my way to you at last! Now go and play for me.'

'What shall I play?' asks the already obedient little slave of this white Pasha.

'Anything you like, darling; the Moonlight Sonata you were playing when I came.'

She goes up at once to the piano, and sitting down, begins the sweet, subtle strain for the fourth time. If anyone chanced to glance in just now, the dusky room, with the twilight gathering in the deeper corners, and the dying day outside, make a picture worth remembering—through the soft gloaming the white statues, pedestal-throned, look almost eerie in their cold, motionless grace; one large gleaming mirror has caught the mellow orange sunset, and holds it imprisoned, as it were, in its depths.

Through the lace-draped western window, a flush of soft, rosy light falls upon Rock as he lies in leonine grandeur on the velvet pile, prone at his master's feet; while, of the master himself, the light only just catches the white polish of his brow, and the thorough-bred hand that strokes absently the long silken moustache. The piano is entirely in shadow, but its tones—now deep, now rich as an organ, now clear as a silver bell—swell out on the flower-scented air; the sweet melody melting into the composition which has for its inspiration the sole attachment of the great Maestro's life, and through which there seems quivering, like moonbeams on a mountain lake, all that is most tender and exquisite in passion, and all that is apart and above the love of the senses.

When the last echoes die away, the twilight has deepened like a transparent veil, through which there still lingers the last kiss that the sun has left to sweeten his brief absence from the fair and pleasant earth.

A low but wistful sigh reaches Nest as she sounds the last note, and then there is dead silence for a moment.

'Has my music put you to sleep?' she asks, in a blithe, ringing voice.

For all answer, Guy rises from the sofa and crosses the room to her side.

That electric current of sympathy, which is one of the strangest things about our strange organisation—whether physical or mental, it is hard to say—makes her conscious at once of some mood in her lover on which her question has jarred, and keeps her from uttering anything more, even when he comes and stands by her, leaning against the piano.

Rock raises his head lazily and looks after his master, but he is evidently not inclined to abandon his comfortable position, and the twilight baffles his keen eyes. He can see nothing but two shadowy forms—the respective outlines of manhood and womanhood—though his quick ear catches the murmur of well-known voices. He listens for an instant, but the subject does not interest him, so he yawns, gives his huge plummy tail an indolent wag, then drops his massive head again, and dreams probably of the last bone he buried, as Guy says,—

‘To sleep, indeed, as if such music could put anyone but Rock to sleep! You never played better in your life, my sweet. I wonder what magic entered into your fingers. I thought of the Lorely and all the Syrens as I hearkened, and though I did not go to sleep, I dreamed a dream far better than Tennyson’s dream of fair women, for mine was only of *one* fair woman. Shall I tell it you?’

‘Yes,’ answers a low voice out of the fragrant dusk. ‘Only I warn you that I shall expect something very exquisite since it was inspired by my pet Sonata.’

‘I think it was very exquisite—at least it seemed so to me. On second thoughts, however, I will not tell it you just now. We have business to settle, you know. I have to find a way out of your dilemma about what they will say at home, have I not?’

‘Of course, did you not send me away to the piano for an excuse to think, and now you tell me you only *dreamt!*’ she answers saucily.

‘Yes! but sometimes our best thoughts come from dreams, my darling. Heaven only knows where mine has come from, but I have it, and I mean to hold it fast. Look at me, Nest.’

‘How can I when it is so dark?’

‘Why, I can see *you* perfectly, or is it because I see you always—*always!* absent as well as present? I believe your very best portrait will be found on my heart when I am dead.’

‘Like Calais on Queen Mary’s. Why, you are growing quite poetical, *Guy.*’

It is the very first time she has spoken his Christian name to-day, and the sound of it thrills him from head to foot.

'Love teaches us poetry. Who was it said that once in his life every man is a poet? There is far more truth in this than the world believes. Little one! my dearest, sweetest one of all the earth! Suppose there is but one way out of the difficulties that beset us on all sides! Suppose I ask you if you love me well enough to place your hand in mine, and let me claim you as my very own—my wife—before this week is ended!'

'Guy!' she cries, in a startled voice, and Rock, raising his head, gives a deep bass growl.

'Don't you see how it is, Nest? I have tried to abstain from asking you to marry me, thinking you might learn to care for some man who had money and luxury to offer you, but now that I *know* that you love me, since you have given up others for me, I shall leave no effort unturned to win the prize and pearl of my life. For, my Nest, I love you so dearly—*so dearly*—that I would prefer death without you!'

Her hand creeps into his lovingly, and her happiness as she listens to him is so real, so infinite, and so pure, that the angels might look on and bless it with a smile.

'Will you do what I ask, Nest? Will you marry me to-morrow, or the day after to-morrow, and then no one, either Dad, or the little mother, or Maud, or Mrs Lorimer can part us? Remember, love, there are so many slips between the cup and the lip that someone or something may yet part us. Oh, think of this, my Nest, and ask counsel of your heart.'

'Do you really—*really* want me, Guy?'

'Has there been a day, or an hour since we met on the banks of the little Yarl, that I did *not* want you, my child?'

'You are quite, quite sure that you will never regret Mrs Moreton, or her beauty, or her riches?'

'Very, very sure! Nest, don't hold back like a pale shadow in the dark there, and tempt me to take you whether you will or no! Come into my arms, and say you will do what I ask!'

'Here I am, Guy!' replies a low loyal voice, which has the quaintest mingling of childlike simplicity and womanly dignity in it. 'Take me, if you choose, I will do just as you wish; of course you know best.'

'*I will do just as you wish; of course you know best.*'

The words are spoken in such unlimited faith, such utter truthfulness, that for a second Guy hesitates. She is such a child, and is it right to steal his wife from her people like this?

Then he remembers that her strength will never stand coercion and incessant argument, and this decides him.

He cannot lose her now both for her own sake and for his, for if she loves him as he believes she does, absolutely and infinitely, he will be able to give her more happiness than those other men who may be more eligible than himself in a purely worldly light.

So he takes her into his arms, close to his passionate heart, and in the fragrant summer twilight they forget the past and the future, and living only in the delicious magic present, pass like happy children through the golden gates of fancy into the fair enchanted land where love dwells for ever as immortal, and where there is nothing half so sweet in life as love's young dream.

They stand without speaking a word for many moments, then Nest lifts her face—her sweet flushed face—her voice breaking on the mystic hush around, with a cadence like that thrill which we catch in the words of the tender Italian maiden 'who had no cunning to be strange.'

'Tell me, was this your dream, Guy?'

The last faint glimmer of sunset—how loth the day always is to give place to night in the sweet summer time—falls on the shadowy picture they make, the slight pale-robed girl close in the embrace of her lover, her head turned back a little, and her sparkling face upturned to try and catch the light in his grey eyes as she asks the question.

'You want to know about my dream, little daughter of Eve,' he says, smiling. 'Well then, know that there is now and for ever but one fair woman for me.'

'And she is—'

Guy stoops and kisses the fresh red lips eagerly and often, before he answers,—

'She is in my arms!'

Then sitting down, he draws her to his side and lays before her the momentous programme of the next few days—and Nest, who for seventeen years has been known in the bosom of her family as an incarnation of wilfulness—answers to everything he says—

'Yes!'

What else can she answer with Guy's arm round her, and the eyes that have always had a subtle spell in them for her, looking straight down into her own?

She seems to have already no thought or will separate from him, for love has come to her—a mighty, overwhelming love—that, like Jonah's whale has swallowed her up, individuality and all.

Dad, poor old grumbling hypochondriacal Dad, with his physic and plaisters—the little mother whose tears are always so near at hand—Maud, with her caustic tongue, Dal, Mrs Lorimer, Elmsdale—they all appear to fade from her mind like portraits of an olden time. There is only one thing she remembers, and she remembers it with a sort of ecstasy mingled with wonderment ; it is the fact that, the day after to-morrow, she will be Guy Trevylian's wife, and that Mrs Moreton nor any other woman will be able to part them, so long as they both shall live.

Guy's wife !

She murmurs the two little words to herself with her breath coming short, and her heart beating fast, and she closes her eyes and shivers a little shiver of joy.

Later on, she falls asleep, with a half smile on her lips, and with 'Guy' as her last thought.

His power has exorcised the demons of reproach and remorse ; and in her new-found happiness, she quite forgets the deceit and wrongfulness of the act she is about to commit, or if she recollects, it is only to hug the flattering unction to her soul, that once he is her husband, Guy will be to her family—as he is to herself—quite irresistible.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SHADES OF HADES.

'Si che chiaro
Per essa sceuda della mente il fume !'

THE season in Tophet is waning fast.

It is the last night at Her Majesty's, and it is Mrs Lorimer's imperial ukase that 'little Wylmer' shall accompany her. Furthermore, with an extraordinary change from her reserve and icy demeanour of the latter days, she evinces her normal interest in the toilette of her guest 'for this occasion only,' as they say in theatrical parlance.

In reality, Nest has lost favour in the hawk-like eyes ever since they discovered the soft point in Guy Trevylian's heart ; but the old lady adores chaperonage, especially if the chaperonage be of the 'success' of the season, and this enviable position 'little Wylmer' indisputably holds.

'Bah!' Mrs Lorimer cries contemptuously, tapping away at her snuff-box, 'that dress is simply monstrous. A few yards of cheap book muslin hung together, with a garland of hops, making it look like a May-pole! Let Louise use her taste, my love!'

So Louise uses her perfect Parisian taste; and Nest, though she has no thought for the pomps and vanities of to-night, with the grave, momentous, but blissful morrow before her, fully acknowledges that a pale blush-rose toilette with a cluster of delicate blush-roses nestling at her throat, make her exceedingly charming to look upon. It may be said *en passant*, that Mrs Lorimer's insatiable mania for matchmaking is the origin of her interest in the blush-rose garments, for Lord Elmsdale has arranged to accompany them to the opera, and Mrs Lorimer, always bearing in mind the evident snare this dusky-cheeked maiden is to Guy, has a profound hope that the coronet will prove too much for the flirty young person by her side, whose proclivities, as far as she can judge, certainly tend towards the wealthy and velvety side of life.

'Ah, if she did but know!' Nest thinks, with a sensation of alarm, as she covertly glances at the tall, gaunt figure and hard-featured countenance. 'If she did but guess that before twenty-four hours are over, I shall be "*Mrs Guy Trevylian!*"'

And over these magical words, she falls to dreaming until she is roused to a consciousness of to-night, by being handed out tenderly and carefully by Elmsdale, who has waited on the steps with commendable patience, till the advent of the yellow-wheeled brougham that bears the present possessor of what he calls his heart.

It is quite a gala night at Her Majesty's.

Now Nest has somehow looked forward to this occasion with immense pleasure, but she had expected Guy's escort, and not Elmsdale's.

This has dashed her enjoyment undoubtedly, but still she is young and impressionable and passionately fond of music, and she knows that after to-morrow Guy will be always with her, so she plucks up her spirits, and in a tumult of excitement, enters the house and it opens on her unaccustomed eyes like a temple of enchantment.

She is still such a neophyte in the fashionable world's pleasures and pranks, that everything gives a new sensation.

The big boxes, rising tier upon tier, with their curtains of satin and lace, looped back, to show the bedecked and jewelled beauties within—the enormous galleries, upborne on the outstretched arms of Titans and Cupids and Venuses and

packed with human life to the lofty ceiling—the glittering audience—the shimmer of fans, the running ripple of talk and laughter—all these have the spiciness of novelty to her yet.

And how much these sights and sounds stamp themselves on her mind, she will not know till later, perchance, when they will come thronging in upon her memory as a ‘date,’—as a black day—the blackest day in the calendar of her life.

No shadow has fallen upon her to-day, as yet, however.

The delicious summery air with its concomitants of a sky clear as crystal, and blue as Italia’s own—and its fragrant moss-roses and Parma violets, have given her a sense of strength and buoyancy, and with a poetical tendency of thought which, in truth, is new to her, she has once more fancied herself like Guido’s Aurora, moving about the clouds, and (to descend from the sublime to the ridiculous—a scathing process to which most flesh is heir in this work-a-day world), the satisfactory appearance of her toilette, as she stood before her mirror, eyeing the fit of her bodice, and the swirl of her trailing skirt recurs to her, and gives a consciousness of being ‘well dressed,’ which is dear to the soul of a woman.

The stalls overflow with *la crème de la crème*, and present an effulgence of splendour which is rarely met with. Several members of the Royal Family honour the occasion by their presence.

First and foremost, our gracious and good-looking Prince, with his charming smile and affable ways; and here and there the dingy countenance of an Eastern potentate shows up beneath the gleam of his jewelled turban, varied by the olive face of some Turkish bey, surmounted by the inevitable fez.

‘It’s just like a page of the Arabian nights, with its surging sea of light and diamonds, and lace and satin,’ Nest whispers eagerly to Mrs Lorimer. Whereupon the latter smiles grimly, and thinks what a dreadful thing the greenness of rusticity is.

It is a new opera, ‘by desire,’ put on the stage with all the scenic magnificence imaginable—and in the impersonation of the chief rôles Maurel—handsome as an Apollo—lavishes on the audience his sweetest notes, and Nilsson’s delicious trills and shakes fairly bring down the house.

Guy is here also. Delighting in good music, and a bit of a *dilettante* himself, he would perhaps rather have kept the evening before his marriage within the four walls of his own room, but he knows that *she* will be at the opera—and he cannot resist the desire to see her—his Nest—who, on the blessed morn, he will hold to his passionate heart as his *wife*!

He stands beside his stall, heeding no one, and looking neither to the right nor the left of him, his regard immovably

fixed on that bright and pàrticular spot — Mrs Lorimer's box.

Presently he sees Mrs Lorimer come in, with a gorgeous head-gear that surpasses the Oriental's jewelled turban, while a superb canary-and-black striped cloak wraps her angular form and likens her to a zebra.

She is closely followed by Nest in her fresh and dainty dress, and in *her* wake comes—Lord Elmsdale.

Guy starts and flushes, and unmistakably frowns as he marks this, and watches, as jealously as a tiger, each look and gesture of the girl he loves, and of the man who is beside her. Elmsdale is evidently fathoms deep in love ; but oil pours on Guy's wounds as he sees Nest ensconce herself as closely as possible under Mrs Lorimer's wing, and demean herself with quite a matronly reserve and dignity towards the peer.

Conventionality compels Guy to seat himself facing the stage when the opera begins, but not a note of music reaches his ear. If demons shrieked discordantly he would probably have heard them no more than he does the divine harmony that floats over the hushed house.

Absorbed in Nest, and in his love for her, he chafes horribly at even these few hours of purgatory in which he is so near his heaven, but is yet unable to reach it with his Cerberus of an aunt guarding the way.

The absolute intensity of his passion for the girl who is to be his wife, simply astonishes himself.

It is a fierce though pure feeling, and it is so interwoven with every throb of his heart, that he knows it will live as long as he lives, and yet even at this eleventh hour a strange wish rises up within him that he had never looked on the sweet gipsy face, or won her to himself.

In this curious conflict of feeling the first and second acts pass, and he is thankful each time the curtain falls that he may be allowed the privilege in common with his neighbours of putting up his opera-glass and letting his eyes rest more clearly on the conscious mutable face that has enslaved him. Between the second and third acts of the opera is announced on the bill :

A GRAND SPECTACULAR BALLET,

entitled the

SHADES OF HADES.

And once more in obedience to custom, Guy drops into his stall as the ballet commences. The curtain rises very slowly

over the cheerful locality of Hades, a deep lurid glare permeates through the atmosphere, and unholy spirits, male and female, draped in blood-red, disport themselves singly in grotesque fashion, finally twining and intertwining in wild evolutions that represent the Dance of Death.

Presently the music sinks, and sinks lower and lower, to a very low tremolo—distant thunder growls, chasms yawn widely, and imps of Satan shriek and hiss, and the dancers cease their evolutions, and stand motionless, as if spellbound, by a strange weird cry that resounds from the depths of the dismal shades.

Green lights and blue lights gleam fitfully on dark cypress and yew trees, and ever and anon a bird of ill omen rises on the air, flapping its ebon wings.

Suddenly on to the centre of the stage springs Proserpine, the Queen of Hades—a spirit so strangely, so wonderfully beautiful, that at sight of her the minor spirits sink down on their knees in worship.

She pauses a moment, immovable as a statue, with her eyes fixed on the ground, and the heavy lurid glare lights up features of marvellous beauty, and perfect limbs—white, and rounded, and moulded—and revealed rather than hidden by vapoury clouds of snowy gauze.

Her alabaster neck is encircled by ropes of glistening pearls, and brilliant stars, forming a diadem, shine and scintillate on her brow. Flinging up her exquisite arms, bare to the shoulder, she begins a slow voluptuous movement, twisting and wreathing her fair white form in all the contortions of a fascinating though wierdly dance.

She is lovely enough to weave magic spells on every man's heart, and to set his brain on fire, and, gazing on her as she passes to and fro before him, Guy Trevylian, just for the nonce, utterly forgets that such a being as Ernestine Wylmer even exists.

Fascinated, his eyes follow her every gesture, never swerving from their intent gaze, and so strong is the magnetism that this beautiful, bewildering, wreathing woman has for him, that it fairly drives the blood to his heart, leaving his cheek blanched to the hue of ashes, as he sits well forward in his stall, unconscious of, or else totally unheeding, any other human being in the crowded house.

Even when Proserpine's dance is ended, and with a touch of her silver wand she sends the other spirits to their death—as runs the legend—and disappears herself, amidst a conflict of the elements and showers of applause, into a cloud of darkling flame, and the curtain falls slowly once more, Guy still sits

there, his grey eyes dilated, with a stunned look in their depths, and fixed on the fatal spot where Proserpine had stood, and his cold hands clasping and unclasping under his crush hat

'Maurel promised me some stalls for to-morrow's concert,' Oswald Dennistoun, who has the next stall to Guy, says. 'I think I'll just go round and ask for them, and have a closer look at Proserpine—*alias* Mademoiselle Virginie—if I can.'

'I'll go with you,' announces Guy, in a hoarse voice, very unlike his own; and as he rises he sways a little, and catches at his chair to steady himself.

He has the appearance of a drunken man, his face is as flushed now as it was pallid before, and as he looks up at Mrs Lorimer's box, there is such desperate yearning, and wistfulness, and supreme torture in his eyes, that Nest starts and bends eagerly forward to follow his receding figure.

He and Dennistoun traverse the long passages and *coulisses*, and sending a card to Maurel, station themselves at one of the wings near which Proserpine must pass.

Close to them stands a group from the shades of Hades, tawdry with spangles and tinsel, and bedaubed with powder and paint. Never in any case is the adage that distance lends enchantment to the view so verified as in most theatrical women.

Who would recognise the shabby, slovenly drab of the morning when transmogrified into a spirit of the ocean, or some such poetical being, with seaweed and coral and silver lilies crowning her long false tresses, jewelled wings fluttering airily behind, and paint filling up the hollows in the faded cheek, and covering the lines caused by an aching heart and weary vigils!

After ten minutes or so, the music once more sinks to the low tremolo, and Dennistoun and Guy know that Proserpine is on her way to the stage.

Pressing eagerly forward, they see a woman, above the ordinary height of women, with a splendidly developed figure.

She has, however, passed the prime of life, and has a beautiful though haggard face that contrasts ill with her clouds of youthful diaphanous white. The cosmetics, though laid on with marvellous skill, fail to fill up the hollows under her eyes, but the eyes themselves are magnificent—large and of a rich, deep sapphire that gleams purple in the shade—and she has ruddy hair that falls down her bare shoulders in glittering masses and picturesque confusion.

Guy staggers a little and draws a deep breath; his heart seems to stop beating, and his brain reels as if he were going mad.

He has but one idea, one desire left. It is to find out once if his hour has come; to know if this Queen of Hades claims him body and soul for her very own.

Stretching out an arm that shakes like an aspen leaf, he touches Mademoiselle Virginie on the shoulder, with a rough, ungentle touch.

'Amelia!' he whispers, with lips that tremble as if palsy-stricken. '*Amelia!*'

'Yes!' she answers, without hesitation, looking up; and Guy, as he meets the glance of those superb, sapphire eyes, close and full, knows that he is face to face with his—*wife*.

To her gaze there are no traces of the boy she wedded and deceived, in the grave, horror-smitten countenance of the man, who, in this hour of supreme anguish, looks as if three-score years and ten have rolled over his head, and shrugging her bare shoulders, and wondering who this can be who knows her real Christian name, she passes on with a stereotyped smile on her mouth.

'You know her!' cries Dennistoun, in a low tone of surprise, but if he had shouted the words they would have fallen on the air, for Guy, rushing past him and out of the cursed opera house, never pauses till he has reached his own room.

He has just looked on the face that he had thanked God—ay! thanked God over and over again—was lying under the sod, the face that had lured him only to destroy him, and how different is the aspect it presents to him to that which it presented just thirteen years ago, in the early days of boyish folly and credulity. It is as repulsive to him now as it was resplendent then in its deep flesh tints and its coarse materialism—a face of the earth, earthy—the eyes that he had dreamt of and deemed so beautiful, now seem to him to shine like corpse lights on the grave of his hopes; the lips, the soft red over-full lips that he had been proud to caress, are now so loathsome to him that he would he had died ere the shame had come to him of their contact, and the rippling ruddy tresses, that to his young regard had shone like an aureole of glory, bear now to his distorted fancy the vision of Medusa's head crowned with serpent coils.

Poor Guy! he has been bitterly punished for his fatuous folly; the very remembrance of it, a thing of the past, has tortured him through many a solitary hour of his life, dashing his gayest moments with shame and repentance.

As a thing of the *present*, his boyish folly goes near to drive him mad.

Up and down—up and down, through the long dark hours he

keeps a fearful vigil, traverses his room like a caged beast, and eats out his heart in helplessness and misery.

In the ruin of all that made life dear and fair, which this night has brought him, he strives to shut out from his eyes the accursed object they have looked on ; he tries to drive out of his ears the old discordant voice, but it is all in vain.

As the day breaks, as the first rosy tinge flushes the grey sky on the morning that was to have made Nest his wife, the morning that was to have crowned his life with joy for evermore, Guy falls prone on his knees. He is a strong man. There is nothing weak or effeminate about him. But God and his own heart only know what he feels, and a sob breaks on the lonely room, the horrible, harrowing, tearless sob that is only wrung by a strong man's agony.

'Nest ! we love each other so much, that the living could not divide us. It is the dawn of the day which was to have bound us together, you and I, Nest, for ever and ever. Ah, think of it ; think how my heart has throbbed and my pulses have counted each moment to the hour, when I should hold my darling in my arms, and know that she was now my very own ; mine to have and to hold, for richer for poorer, for better or worse, till death. Realise, if you can, the heaven I have pictured, and then perhaps you may understand. The dead have arisen to part us, Nest ; and our love, pure as angel's love, passionate as man and woman's love, infinite as eternity, has become to us now, a scourge, a curse, a—sin ! That woman with the naked, wreathing arms, the creature who last night personated Proserpine, the Queen of Hell—is it not fit name for such as she?—Oh, my child, my sweet, pure child, must I desecrate your ears by telling you the shame of it—is—my wife ; and a thousand devils seem to shriek my misery and despair.

'Forgive me, Nest ? forgive me for having dared to win your love ! forgive me for having touched your lips with a touch that *that* woman had polluted !

'And Nest ! forget me—*if you can*—accursed though my life must be, it will be something to know that I have not made you as wretched and hopeless as myself. Oh, Nest ! God knows—God only knows ! I have never loved you so much as I do now, when I am losing you for ever. G. T.'

This is the letter ; short, not eloquent ; blurred in many parts ; almost illegible, that is placed in Nest's hand as she awakes on the morning of her wedding-day.

She looks up from the page at last, with a stunned expression on her poor brown eyes, and with a desperate anguish on her young face, that is pitiful; and she thanks Heaven that there is no one by to see.

Then she kisses the signature twice or thrice, and puts the letter carefully by as her dearest and most precious possession.

Poor, poor child! Love's young dream is over, and she knows it. Yet none must be aware that for her the world changes from to-day.

Tophet has now no pomps or vanities to which she clings; the sun shines less brightly, and in her breast her heart lies heavy like a lump of lead, and as cold as a stone.

An hour or two later, she takes her usual seat at the breakfast-table.

'You don't look well, my love; you are eating nothing,' Mrs Lorimer observes blandly, staring at her *vis-à-vis* through her gold-mounted spectacles.

Nest opens her lips to disclaim, then closes them firmly again, lest a cry—a cry straight from her heart, will find voice.

'You are as white as a sheet; has anything happened?' presses the hard voice.

'Nothing!' says Nest; and loyal to the dignity of womanhood, she forces a smile to her mouth; 'nothing has happened! but I do not think the heat in town agrees with me; perhaps I had better go home.'

'By all means, my love,' Mrs Lorimer answers, with a benign smile, considerably relieved that this attractive young person will be out of Guy's way; 'and I will send Louise with you to see you safe home. Try and get some roses into your cheeks, or Handsome Theo will never forgive me if you do not go back the better for your season in London.'

'Oh; I am ever so much better for it, Mrs Lorimer, thank you; and I feel as if I was years and years older in knowledge of the world,' Nest says, with a sharp ring of bitterness in her young voice.

'And what is your opinion of the world, my love, now you know it so thoroughly?' questions the old lady, in metallic accents.

Nest stares at her a moment with a dazed, scared look.

'I think it is such a horrid, horrid world, that I wish that I was—*dead!*' she cries, suddenly breaking into a storm of tears.

Mrs Lorimer astonished, rises and dashes a glass of cold water into the poor, little white face, and in spite of the discomfort of this remedy it is effectual in quenching a tendency to hysterics, which she abominates—having no nerves to speak of

herself, she cannot understand anyone else owning such reprehensible tendencies.

In a minute or two, Nest wipes her eyes and her wet cheeks, and then looks up ashamed of her weakness.

'You are a little upset, my love! I should not wonder if that wild-looking woman, flinging about her arms, and cutting capers on the stage, frightened you! Proserpine, indeed! She looked like an escaped lunatic, and what the men can see in such horrible creatures to admire, I am sure I don't know. Why, I noticed that my nephew, Guy Trevelyian, could not take his eyes off her!'

Upon this, Nest catches at the table blindly, then drops on to the floor in a white heap.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN SEARCH OF OBLIVION.

'Tis but the scent of blooming limes,
Blown on some vagrant breeze,
That takes me back to olden times,
And to the old home trees.'

'I AM sick of this life. I think I'll go round the world for a change,' Dal says petulantly.

It is the day after his return from London. Dinner is over at Wentworth, and old Sir Piers, taking advantage of being *en famille*, nurses his gouty foot on an opposite chair, while he quaffs the glass of fruity port that is the real origin of his ailment, and forgets that gluttony is one of the sins in the Decalogue. Hermione and Sybil Wentworth, fast, flirty, and fashionable, are still sunning their butterfly wings in town. But Miladi is here, sitting at the table in lazy enjoyment of the hot-house grapes and luscious peaches.

She looks up quickly as her son and heir announces his startling plan.

'It's that Vicarage girl who has done this,' she thinks, but she only asks quietly,—

'Why, what has put this into your head, Dal? Going round the world sounds very uncomfortable.'

Dal's answer to the first portion of her question would be brief enough.

'Nest!' would be all that was requisite in reply, but he ignores it and goes on to the latter part.

'I don't know so much about that. You see, mother, a *man's* notions about comfort are so different to a woman's; besides, it's time I had a change, I'm getting up in years now,' he says dismally, 'and have a right to look existence in the face and to ask what it has brought me in the past, or is likely to bring me in the future.'

'It will bring you Nest Wylmer, in the shape of a wife, I conclude!' Miladi enunciates contemptuously.

'No it won't. Nest has pitched me overboard!' the poor young fellow announces in a husky voice, averting his face from the table, lest the light should reveal a little mistiness about his Prussian-blue eyes.

Miladi drops her ivory-handled dessert knife and a delicious half-peeled peach with it.

'What!' she cries indignantly. 'Do you mean to say that your marriage has been broken off *by*—Miss Ernestine Wylmer?'

'I do, indeed. So you see, mother, your estimate of Nest was wrong. She is not the deep designing girl you said, who wanted to arrive at "Wentworth" through me! She *hates* Wentworth!'

At this assertion Miladi's face grows crimson, and her cold eyes scintillate steel sparks.

'Please don't recount the likes and dislikes of that young person to *me*, Dal. I have always felt that you were going to make a frightful *mésalliance*.'

'Nest could marry the grandest in the land,' Dal cries loyally, 'and I like her all the better for not wishing to enter a house where she knew she would not be welcome! She is the sweetest, dearest, loveliest little girl in the world, and if she would marry me, I should be the happiest fellow alive; but there, it's no good thinking about it. She gave me my *congé* yesterday, and that's why I want to go round the world. I couldn't stay here, where she and I have been together, and never speak to her, to save my life, and she will be back here next week.'

'Then go, my dear Dal, at once,' Miladi says blandly. 'I wouldn't have your feelings harrowed for anything by a meeting with the lady in question. I always told Sir Piers you hadn't seen anything of the world, and that that was the reason of your falling so readily into the trap laid by those Vicarage people!'

'And I differed with you, Lady Wentworth,' Sir Piers growls

crossly, rendered defiant by a sharp twinge in his toe. 'I never thought a trap *had* been laid, and if it *has*, I wish Dal had been fairly caught in it long ago. To my thinking, Nest is a wife fit for a duke, so that Dal might consider himself deuced lucky if he got her!'

Miladi gives her spouse a stony stare, then turns away her head as if she ignored his existence even.

'When shall you start, Dal?' she questions anxiously, eager to get him out of the toils of the dusky-faced, long-limbed, designing young creature, who has met her haughtiness with a haughtiness equal to it, and who has had the self-respect to stand no airs and graces meekly from her mother-in-law elect.

'To-morrow, if I can,' Dal replies at once, and Miladi, forgetting her usual indolence, busies herself in arrangements for his departure, with so much success, that before the sun sets again, he is travelling as fast as steam and water can take him to the Continent.

Only when he catches the last glimpse of the shining, wriggling Yarl, and the fringe of green on its banks, does he fully realise that he and Nest are indeed parted, that he is going to put the ocean between him and her, that they two may never—*never* meet again, unless it is in heaven.

All the brightness and geniality of other days have left him, all the elasticity of his spirits is fled. He is a young Briton all over now, with a great wall of insular reserve round him, and with a dangerous facing to it that strangers don't care to make a breach in.

There is an expression too in his face that forbids any overtures from male or female, a far-off look in the sunny blue eyes, a line of pain over the facile womanish mouth that has known so well how to smile.

He 'does' Paris and all the other principal continental cities, but finds neither pleasure nor fun in the excitement, and finally, through the misty gloom of a late autumnal day, from the crowded stern of the steamer, Dal watches the shores of Europe fade slowly out of view.

A little later, and a tall, willowy figure might be seen cast carelessly on the cabin floor, with arms folded tightly over a throbbing breast, and with eyeballs burning with held-in tears.

If Nest could see 'poor old Dal' now!

The passage has begun under very unfavourable auspices, for not a day since the 'Asia' has been out to sea but the weather has been rough and rainy, and the saloon but scantily filled, especially by the softer sex, who lie prostrate in their stuffy berths.

But after a week, the glass goes up to fair, and the vessel begins to glide smoothly over the shining sea, with a fine blue and opal sky overhead, and the big bouncing billows lamed down to mild wavelets, and Dal, one morning, on entering the saloon, runs against an apparition that startles him, though it does not please him.

Yet it is an apparition owning a fair, sweet face, and it has a pair of shy eyes with a very unmistakable welcome in their cerulean depths.

It is only Angela Vane, after all, who, with her mother, are passengers in the 'Asia,' but the sudden meeting brings back to Dal very vividly a vision of Ravenshill Vicarage.

After this unexpected *rencontre*, it seems quite natural that he and the Vanes keep a good deal together, and a good deal aloof from the other passengers. To little Mrs Vane, Dal is a godsend. Into his ears she pours her little troublesome griefs, and finds a ready though silent listener, and to Angela's side he continually returns. She is a sort of bond of union, between him and the dear old by-gone days—the only living creature whose presence reminds him of the jolliest and happiest hours his life has known.

But how about Angela?

She scarcely dares own to herself the magnitude of her happiness in finding herself thus brought face to face with Dal—Dal, whom she has worshipped in secret, like a bright and particular star, for ever so long! And as the days fly by on rosy wings, she lives in a dream—a lovely, beautiful dream. The steamer holds her entire world. She wants nothing more.

The very fact of being together within the comparatively narrow limits of the vessel is a matter of deep rejoicing. Dal cannot get far away from her even if he would. But he does not try; so she begins to think he must like her a little, and love may come at last.

'And if it does—if it does!' her heart whispers with a flutter, and her fair face blushes rosy red, and a rush of joy swells up in her bosom.

She would lose hope, perchance, if she could see him in his cabin, with a lock of hair as his sole companion—just a bit of dark, glossy hair, with a golden light gleaming athwart it, but the most precious possession Dal owns.

No sceptic in genuine feeling could doubt how dear this little tress is to him, if he could see him holding it reverently, touching it gently, stroking it fondly, gloating on its lustre, and kissing it as if it were a living thing; and yet he knows that its

sister tresses grow on the head of one who has thown him over, and spoil his life for him.

But Dal is not singular in the influence which Nest's lock of hair has over him. We all know the power which the dead past possesses over us—the secret but puissant influence of the voices that are dumb—the strange vitality of things that seem externally mere nothings.

How often an air on a barrel organ in a neighbouring street brings back the memory of a sweet, soft, summer's day, long, long ago, when someone who is dead—or dead to us—has sung that same melody in an enchanted ear!

So, a breath of subtle perfume, wafted on the wings of the wind, recalls hours and hours of love and joy: a fleeting shade across the sky brings back the view of a ribbon round a slender, swan-like throat; a faded dress, poor and worn, and worthless, is invested by fancy with a greater reverence and admiration than all 'silken sheen.'

Still, in spite of his fondness for this little lock, Dal is a mortal after all, and a mortal of the nineteenth century, owing to a certain extent the selfishness of his kind. So, though he knows he is wrong, he cannot always resist a pleasurable sensation creeping over him when Angela, indiscreet virgin as she is, and who in this case has utterly failed to trim her lamp with the oil of caution, reveals under her long, curling lashes shy glimpses of her heart. Everything is changed since they met at Ravenshill. He is evidently free, and there can be no sin or wrong to her friendship for Nest in striving to win for herself the precious love Nest has flung away. If she could but let him see how utterly, *utterly* she has yielded up her soul to him, without outraging her notions of delicacy and modest reserve!

She is meditating on the possibility of arriving at this, when Dal breaks in suddenly with,—

'I am going to ask you something, Miss Vane, which I have not had the nerve to allude to before,' he begins, rather sheepishly, but gathers strength as he proceeds, 'and yet a great strong fellow like me ought to have nerve enough for anything, I suppose. Well, we are all apt to tail sometimes, you know! and when the dearest and deepest feelings of a fellow's heart are concerned, his courage isn't greater than that of a mouse!' and Dal gives a short laugh that ends in rather a hopeless sigh.

Angela listens to him, mute but trembling. It appears to her as if a bright gleam of sunshine flashes across her eyes, opening a glimpse of heaven, and she sits and awaits the momentous question with a trepidation that brings the warm colour flickering all over her face.

It is coming, she thinks, the seal of her life's happiness; the question that she has not dreamt of hearing so soon. Dal has found out that somebody worships him, though Nest has scorned him.

'I say, Miss Vane!'

It is a cold beginning for a declaration of passion. Scarcely the mode of address any woman—be she ever so ignorant of such things—expects from a lover, still she hearkens with strained ears, and with hope swelling, billows high, within.

'I must speak, for I feel as if I didn't I should feel like cutting my throat. You see, one person fills my thoughts all day long, and you cannot guess how I love her, though I am a fool for doing so.'

Angela clasps two white hands together under the corner of the tablecover and sends up a silent thanksgiving to the fates who have decreed this meeting on board the 'Asia.'

But Dal seems to be gazing out of the port on the sunlit, rippling ocean, and all the beauty and bloom on her face is quite thrown away upon him.

'Yes!' he says, reflectively. 'You alone can tell me all I want to know; and if you could guess a hundredth part of the suspense I suffer, you would not mind my speaking on a subject which, perhaps, I ought not to touch on!'

While he speaks there is deprecation in his accents, but no passion in his glance.

Angela does not notice this, while she wonders at the want of perspicuity in his vision. The chief feeling in her mind is one of astonishment, that he should for an instant doubt the fact that anything he asks of her will meet with an unsatisfactory answer.

'I don't mind!' she says, in a low voice, not daring to look up, in case her eyes answer before his lips frame his question.

'Then tell me—for pity's sake—if you have heard anything of *her*—of *Nest*? Is she well, and happy?'

And Dal—engrossed in the fulness of his own feelings—grasps her by the hands.

She shrinks away from him and pales, and she says a little prayer for strength—strength to bear the downfall of her castle, without any outward and visible sign—and after a minute she says quietly, but with a tinge of pain for *his* sake,—

'Nest was well when we left England, Mr Wentworth, and—and she ought to be happy, since she was going to marry Lord Elmsdale—out of love, I hope!'

Poor old Dal! Even Angela—in spite of the jealous pang that goes through her—pities him as he stares at her, with

big, scared eyes, and such a woful hopeless look on his white face.

'I am sorry I told you about it,' she whispers softly, 'but you *must* have heard, and better now, than if a stranger had mentioned it.'

Then Dal looks at her again, and she sees two large drops glittering in the blue depths of his eyes. They are the last tears for Nest—Lady Elmsdale.

He has hoped against hope that he will yet win her for his wife, but pride, wounded self-love and vanity, make up a gigantic whole, and Dal is not of a steadfast nature. In fact he is a sort of human shuttlecock, and easily moved to and fro.

'Miladi was right in her judgment after all,' he thinks to himself, with a deal of bitterness against Nest. 'She did not want Wentworth when she could get Elmsdale Towers and a coronet along with it.'

'Excuse me a moment, Miss Vane,' he says suddenly, and leaving her, he leans out of the port, and while Angela thinks fresh air is his object, he pulls out a glossy tress from his breast-pocket, and consigns it to the briny deep. 'I am better now, Miss Vane,' he cries, with a laugh, sitting down beside her again. 'You see, you took me rather aback. I had not heard of Nest's good luck—and—and—'

He falters—pauses, and Angela distinctly hears him choke back a sigh.

'Don't give way—*please* don't,' she whispers. 'I wish I could comfort you, but I don't know how. I would give anything to do so!'

She looks wonderfully pretty as she says this, and he glances at her first gratefully and then admiringly.

'It's very good of you to bear with my folly,' he says, with quite a sunny face. 'I am so glad my unmanly grief hasn't roused your contempt. Somehow, do you know, I feel much happier since I have found out *one* person who feels sincerely for me, Angela.'

It is the first time her Christian name has fallen from his lips, and she starts at the novel sound. Her heart is too heavy to say anything however; so, with a little wistful smile, she leaves him, and going to her cabin, cries like a baby.

A few hours later the moon, like a chaste maiden, veils her face behind a grey cloud, and the passengers on board the 'Asia' are fast asleep, when the fiat of human life and death breaks in a sudden crash of thunder that rends the air and startles every soul between whom and eternity only a frail plank intervenes, and the blinding lightning with broad gleams

lights up the mighty ocean all around with a broad, noonday glare that reveals the inevitable danger lurking near.

It is a grand storm, and a terrible one !

In a little while the tempest lashes into fierce fury the already angry waves, that dash up higher and higher against the vessel's heavy sides. Then a lull comes, an ominous lull, that eases her only to make her feel doubly the mountain surges that sweep over like a deluge, seeming to tear up plank by plank.

'Rude Boreas, blustering railer,' rules right royally overhead. It blows the stiffest, hardest gale that has been known for many a day, and the huge rollers keep toppling over the steamer, each big billow with a crest of thick white foam, as though it were crowned with snow, as their victim wallows in the trough of the sea, and the poor 'Asia' creaks and groans heavily and helplessly as the ruthless, cruel waters strike mighty blows upon her, and on the half-clad, shivering forms and the blanched and scared faces of the trembling women and children that stand huddled closely together, wildly clinging to the ropes and bulwarks in the strong grasp of fear, and over all a strange, awe-struck silence reigns, unbroken save by a short but frantic prayer, that goes up now and then from some pallid lips to God.

Driven like chaff before the fury of the elements, the 'Asia' drifts here and there, anywhere and everywhere but in the right course, and the hours grow on, while the gigantic surges never stay their wrath, one moment pouring widely asunder, then threatening to close together and engulf the vessel, that seems to shrink away from them, and to shiver and sway as the furious boulders menacingly approach.

Suddenly a vivid flash of lightning reveals a new horror—a beetling rock—with white breakers roaring beneath, and towards it the 'Asia,' in her unbridled career, quickly drifts.

On, on she goes, one moment lifted lightly, like a huge seagull on the billow, the next instant staggering and reeling like a drunkard, then she falls back heavily into her wide bed of seething surge.

A watery grave is preferable to the horror of being dashed against the beetling rocks, and a boat is quickly launched by a few desperate men, and a rush of affrighted beings fill it, and it founders, sending many an erring soul, perchance, in the twinkling of an eye, into eternity. A second boat-load shares the same fate. Then they lower a third, and Dal, carrying Mrs Vane's unconscious form, with Angela close to him, gets into it, and these three, with five sailors, are the sole survivors that live to tell the tale of that terrible night.

As if Providence has taken pity on the few that have by a miracle escaped the jaws of death, the wind decreases in fury, and the waves grow smoother, and the little craft gallantly holds her own, while its freight, looking back, see an appalling sight.

The 'Asia' has caught fire, and she is a mass of lurid flame from stem to stern, that shoots aloft, illuminating the pervading gloom, and before the boat loses view of the wreck, the ill-fated vessel has burnt down to the water's edge, and the billows roll and toss above her.

As the grey dawn deepens into the red light of day, a large trader espies the little dark object on the surface of the blue ocean, and hastening to its rescue, its drenched and suffering freight in a little while are safe on board, and on the fourth morning after the wreck of the 'Asia' Dal and the Vanes arrive in Bombay.

Dal has grown much softer in his manner to Angela since they have been fellow-sufferers, but since the day his lips and his heart as well had spoken of Nest, Angela has never hugged such vain delusions to her breast as hope and happiness. She only feels that while Dal is by her side, life is not only bearable but beautiful, and that when he has gone away, the light will die out of sunshine, and the bloom out from every flower.

He has promised to spend his few last days in Bombay, at the house the Vanes are located in. The old *sabreur* himself, who has come post haste to meet them, has pressed him to do this, and has taken a strong liking for him. But on the very morning Dal arrives, he is prostrated with a sharp attack of fever. Towards evening, the febrile symptoms increase, and by midnight, he talks, and laughs, and rolls, and tosses in delirium, predisposed to severe illness by the wet and exposure he had had in the boat.

'Likely to be a very serious case,' is the verdict that meets Angela's ears when she enters the sick-room. Her father has brought her there. He has no respect for false prudery or for Mrs Grundy's tongue, and he knows that a little womanly tending is worth all the vigilant male nursing in the world.

Angela neither faints nor gives breath to the fear and dread that knocks at her heart. She just steals up noiselessly to Dal's side, and bends down anxiously over him.

His fair curly hair, like spun gold, is all rough and untidy, his Prussian-blue eyes are wandering and bloodshot, and his face is pallid and flushed by turns, but to Angela's eyes he is as beautiful as a star.

He lies before her helpless, shorn of his strength, weak as a baby, and she worships him all the more for it, if possible, than

before. Now that he is unconscious, she can gaze upon him with eyes flooded with love-light, and by-and-by, when she has smoothed his pillow and his golden fleece, and gently wetted his parched lips and burning palms, she has her reward in hearing him murmur,—

‘Nest!’

It is enough to tell her whose image reigns supreme through the feverish dreams, whose memory lives through suffering and delirium. Nevertheless, to endorse Scott’s opinion,—

‘O woman, in our hours of ease
Uncertain, coy, and hard to please,
And variable as the shade
By the light quivering aspen made,
When pain and anguish wring the brow,
A ministering angel thou!’

Angela keeps watch both night and day, unconscious of physical fatigue, and strong as a lion in her self-devotion. At last, after a hard tussle with death, a good constitution and youth combined gain the contest, and Dal wakes up one morning in his right senses and out of danger, to find himself, like Samson, shorn of his flaxen locks, and to see a white and lantern-jawed visage mirrored in the clear depths of a pair of blue eyes that dance gladly at his recovery. His pulse is low and fluttering as a woman’s, and his mouth trembles as he tries to speak.

‘Have you been with me all the time?’ he asks.

‘Yes!’ she says.

And in token of gratitude, his hand, thin and shaking, goes out to grasp hers, and manages, in spite of its weakness, to hold hers very closely.

The room in which he has opened his eyes is very pleasant. The green venetians are carefully turned to tone down the yellow glare to a soft and mellow light. There are flacons of perfume about, and every available glass or vase is heaped over with the rich and fragrant roses that grow wild and lavishly round the house.

And Angela herself looks wonderfully nice.

She wears a dress light and fresh as a zephyr’s wing, and her golden hair is wreathed round her head in a fashion that makes her resemble Correggio’s Magdalen.

‘Angela!’

Dal has grown to calling her quite naturally now by her

Christian name. The formal appellation 'Miss Vane' is a thing of the past. Yet he never says 'Angela' without her feeling foolishly happy, and blushing like a schoolgirl.

'Yes!' she answers, and somehow she sticks at monosyllables, but in the inflection of this little monosyllable there is a world of tenderness. 'Can I do anything for you, or get you anything?' and she looks round inquiringly at the numerous delicacies provided by Mrs Vane's forethought for the invalid's fastidious palate.

But Dal shakes his poor forlorn-looking head, with its Newgate *coiffure*, in the negative. He has not a scrap of appetite, and the very sight of the dainties are obnoxious.

'I want nothing to eat,' he says languidly, half closing his eyes, then in a minute or two, he turns half round and looks up into her face. 'I only want you to sit here and talk to me!'

Obedient as a slave, she draws a chair beside him, and taking a large fan made of the fragrant grass 'Khus Khus,' and sprinkling water upon it, she waves its delicious coolness over him.

'Are you really better to-day?' she questions, passing her little hand softly over his forehead.

If he was her own brother, the action could not emanate from a purer source. Dal lies perfectly still. He cannot help thinking that it is very pleasant and soothing to feel the soft cool little palm upon the brow that has not yet ceased quite to throb and pain.

'Much better—thanks to God—and to you, Angela!' he says gratefully. 'But though infinitely better physically, I am far worse mentally.'

'Why?' she cries in undisguised alarm, while terrifying visions of a return of delirium present themselves. 'Why should you be unhappy or depressed now that you are stronger, and on the fair road to recovery, I hope?'

'Because, now I am so much better, I suppose I shall soon have to go away and leave you, Angela; you who have been so good to me; whose kindness I can never repay.'

She turns her head away hastily, but she cannot stay the tears that fall one after another down her cheeks, until one bigger than the rest falls on Dal's hand, that he has stretched out towards her.

'What, crying, Angela!' he exclaims, with an unmistakable tremor in his own voice; for illness has divested him of his usual nerve, and makes him softer in his feelings towards everyone in general, and Angela in particular.

'I say, Angela! you *do* care for me just a little? and you will

be really and truly sorry to say good-bye, though I have been an awful trouble to you?’

Perhaps he wants to hear someone say that his presence is pleasant, since Nest has sent him away.

Angela’s mouth twitches like a child’s, and small, icy-cold fingers close and unclose nervously upon his, and he hears her poor little heart beat high and loud, but not a word passes her lips. She even bites her lips hard, to prevent the cry that struggles for utterance.

But there is not the slightest occasion for her to speak. Dal has not lived for twenty-two years without learning from heaps of lips that he is very lovable, although Nest has thrown him over, and he reads at once all her desolation, as plainly as if she had poured out the terrible burden in a tide of eloquence.

‘Angela—my darling!’

It is all over; at this word of love, pride and reserve hide their diminished heads; a little face falls forward on his breast, a heart flutters wildly against his own, and a pair of lips press his sleeve.

He lets her lie in her utter abandonment for a little while, whilst he strokes back her hair, then he gently raises her face, and kisses her.

‘Angela! will you marry me?’ he asks; ‘I’m Nest’s leavings, you know;’ and Angela answers nothing, but he knows she will; for after another kiss or two, he says,—

‘Write to my mother, darling, and tell her I am better, but have given up my project of going round the world; say that I shall take the next steamer back in time for Christmas at Wentworth—and that *Mrs Dal* will accompany me!’

‘She’s not the wife I wanted for Dal,’ Miladi says to Sir Piers when she reads this letter; ‘but she’s nicer than that hateful, designing little creature, Nest Wylmer, and Dal himself is quite content with the exchange now.’

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DAY THAT IS DEAD.

'When winds of autumn go wailing
Up the valley and over the hill,
Like yearning ghosts, round the world sailing
In search of the old love still,
The waves of a mighty sorrow
Have 'whelmed the pearl of my life,
And there cometh to me no morrow
To solace this desolate strife.
Gone are the last faint flashes,
Set is the sun of my years,
And over a few poor ashes,
I sit in my darkness and tears.'

'How dreadfully ugly you have grown, Nest, and you look as old as Methuselah!'

This is Maud Wylmer's sisterly greeting when, Louise dismissed, Nest sinks wearily down into a well-known corner of a well-known shabby old sofa in the Vicarage parlour, with deep triste shades underlining her eyes, and a general pastiness of complexion defrauding her face of its prettiness, for hers is undoubtedly what we call '*Beauté du Diable*,' and dependent in a great measure on health, and happiness, and bloom.

Her normal habit of retort-courteous has departed with her colour, for she gives a sickly smile, and bears Maud's unflattering verdict in meek silence.

'I don't think much of that dress, either,' Maud continues, with a contemptuous sniff, eyeing the simple mauve cambric which has the *cachet* of Louise's skilful fingers on it. 'It just shows what a ridiculous thing Fashion is. Miss Brown's cut and fit are twice as good, and just because she lives in the *country*, people toss up their noses at her.'

Once more Nest listens without answering, but her eyes fall on her pale mauve cambric, and unconsciously her fingers smooth a fold tenderly.

Guy had told her once how much he liked her in this same simple dress.

'Dal came back from London in double quick haste, Nest,' Maud announces irrelevantly to her last topic, and looking at the prodigal on her return home with an ill-natured, scrutinising gaze; 'but he only dropped in just to say good-bye.'

'To say *good-bye*?'

The question bursts from Nest's lips in her surprise ; then, when it is too late, she perceives the mistake she has made in uttering it.

'Yes, to say good-bye, before he went off on a voyage round the world. Didn't you know he was going? *How very odd!*'

Maud glances meaningly at Mrs Wylmer, who passes on the glance nervously to the Reverend Theodore, and from him drops the tail of it on to Gus, who is staring at his newly-arrived sister, with a good deal of satisfaction that she is back again in his faithful young heart.

'Nest is such a jolly old pet ; so different to Maud, you know.'

This is his usual confidence to men of his own age—hobble-dehoys, as Maud stigmatises them.

'Did you part bad friends with Dalrymple Wentworth?' Dad asks, in a sepulchral tone, caused by intense disapproval, and an erratic spasm in the small of his back.

'No,' answers Nest, truthfully enough ; 'Dal and I parted the very best of *friends*.' And she fully emphasises the last word as a sort of salve to her conscience.

'Don't you think, my dear Nest, that it was unwise letting Dal run the temptation of the world, the flesh, and the—the *devil*?' Dad questions once more in portentous accents, letting his voice sink to a whisper at the finish.

'And I always hoped that you and Dal would soon be married,' murmurs Mrs Wylmer tearfully. 'I believe so thoroughly in marriage between quite young people,' she adds, her thoughts flying back to a certain parting between herself and a handsome sailor boy. He married, it is true, a year or so afterwards, and so did she, but her tenacious womanly heart still clings to the sweet past when 'Jamie lo'ed her weel.'

'Perhaps Dal will soon come back from the other side of the world. I am sure he won't see anyone half so nice as Nest amongst those beastly foreigners,' Gus asserts confidently, with budding *amor patrie* under his short-waisted jacket.

Then Nest plucks up courage and speaks.

'Dal and I have decided *not* to marry,' she informs the solemn council of four. 'He knows that I like him as a brother, but *love* is not to be learnt—*it grows*.'

'Like you have done in wilfulness and folly, Nest,' Maud flashes hotly. 'To think that all our grand visions about Wentworth are gone to the wall, and all because you can't *love* Dal!'

Nest looks round very piteously as Maud makes this attack, to see if the family conclave are all against her.

Dad, knitting his bushy brows, gazes at her sternly, while he assiduously rubs away at the afflicted portion of his frame. The little mother surreptitiously wipes away a regretful tear, and even Gus, small in stature, but yet the prop on which Nest principally leans, turns like the trodden worm.

'And I sha'n't get my promised rides after the hounds on Dal's hunters after all!'

It is a selfish sentiment, but the young voice sounds dreadfully piteous in its disappointment.

'I do believe you are hankering after that horrid Mr Trevelylian,' Maud puts in coarsely, beside herself with anger at the state of affairs. 'I always thought you would throw Dal over for him if he gave you the slightest encouragement!'

It is the last straw that breaks the camel's back.

A vision comes to Nest—a vision of the dancing woman with the bare wreathing arms—blue lights and red lights seem to dazzle her eyes, the weird tremolo of music resounds in her ears.

—She loves Guy so much that she *must* put a gulf between him and herself, a gulf only two things can cross—two things that she prays God may never come to her—*shame and sin*.

A moment's silence, a moment's reflection, then—how she came to do it Nest never could realise later on—she rises from the corner where she has sat, almost cowering in the misery of her feelings, and going up to Mrs Wylmer, she stands before her like a young queen, erect and proud, a flush of damask roses on her cheek, her simple mauve cambric dress worn like regal robes.

'You see, mother, I am fond of the pomps and vanities! and Wentworth isn't half good enough for me! It's only an ordinary country place, and my liking for Dal is not strong enough to make up for other deficiencies! But you and Dad will be pleased to hear, that, like the busy bee, I have improved each shining hour in London. Maud shall be presented at Court and have all the gaities she covets, and Gus shall have a hunter of his own, for I am going to marry a *marquis!*'

'*A marquis,*' murmur four voices in four different inflexions, making up a small tower of Babel, and four pair of eyes stare at her as if she were gone stark, staring mad.

'It's the Marquis of Carrabas!' Maud laughs sneeringly. 'Nest is amusing us with a fairy tale!'

Upon this the other three look at her with crestfallen faces.

'It is the Marquis of Elmsdale,' she announces slowly and deliberately, with a calmness that surprises herself.

Only the day before yesterday, not so very many hours ago,

she was the affianced wife of Guy Trevelyian, and now she can stand here quiet and cool, and proclaim her engagement to another man!

True, her heart is beating to suffocation, her brain whirls round, her hands are as cold as ice; but no matter, so long as none of these things are known to anyone but herself.

Guy! Guy!

It is the refrain of her soul, the man seems to have woven his image into every fibre of her being, to have set the seal of his kiss on her heart for evermore.

'And will it be soon?' questions the little mother eagerly. Her tears are dried up now, and the sunniest smile that they have seen for years sits on her flexible mouth.

'It!'

This marriage she means, this loveless union of hands, not hearts, this mockery of all that is most tender and sacred in life, this cruel, cruel holocaust on the altar of woman's pride and woman's fear of what 'they will say!'

This marriage, that will place a coronet on the girl's dainty head, and implant thorns in her white breast, but of this last, Mrs Wylmer knows nothing—guesses nothing.

How should she, with her child standing before her, erect, almost defiant of fate, and as stately, and cold, and calm as though she had been a marchioness born and bred.

Alas! alas! for the farce that this life is to so many of us! The little mother's question is the brimming drop in a cup of gall.

'No,' answers Nest, 'not yet—not for some time! There is so much to be arranged, so many lawyers to see, such settlements to be made! so much—so very much to be done, you know!' she says, in a quiet voice, that fairly takes away her auditors' breath, and then she falls to thinking how much there is to be done before she can be Marchioness of Elmsdale! There is a mighty, surging, sinful love to be crushed right down, a never-to-be-forgotten though short-lived happiness to be put out of sight, a man's face with lazy grey eyes and resolute lips to be thrust away in oblivion—all this, all this! to be done, before she can go, an honest, loyal woman, to the altar, and swear before God to love, honour, and obey Lord Elmsdale!

The task appears so immense, so gigantic, so hopeless, so futile of accomplishment, that her courage sinks, nearly gives way, and she is on the point of crying out that she cannot do this thing—that if she does not wed Guy Trevelyian, she will wed no one—when she once more catches four pairs of eyes, in all of which she reads intense elation, intense satisfaction.

Like a reed shaken by the blast, she vacillates, backwards and forwards. After all, what does it matter to her *now* what happens? She has *lived*, ay, *lived* through the sweetest, brightest, briefest period of a woman's life; she has been lapped in Elysium for the space of a fortnight, and she is awake now to earth—earth, with its cares and troubles, its universal sorrow, its short span of joy. In the future she will *exist*. Better to eat, and drink, and sleep in luxury as Marchioness of Elmsdale; than to be bullied by Maud, lectured by Dad, wept over by the little mother, and reproached by Gus.

'Congratulate me, all of you!' she cries, in a ringing voice, which may be either triumph or despair. 'I am sure I have done my best to please you all.'

The Reverend Theodore rises slowly from his huge arm-chair in which he dozes and fattens half the day, and as Nest sees him approach, she drops melodramatically on one knee.

'This is the approved position, I suppose. What a pity my noble *fiancé* isn't here; but never mind, I'll do proxy for him. Now then, dear old dad, say, "Bless you, my children!" like they do in the play.'

But the clerical mind does not relish levity on this very momentous occasion, and the clerical lips purse themselves up solemnly as they press a paternal salute on the crinkly curls that stray over his offspring's brow.

'Bless you, my child!' he utters sonorously, and then having done his duty, he returns to his haven of comfort among the old faded cretonne cushions.

Then Nest, springing up from her knees, throws herself into her mother's arms, and cries like a baby on the tender bosom which has sympathised with all her joys and griefs ever since she opened her big brown eyes on this wicked world. And Maud feels a new-born respect for her sister the embryo marchioness, and refrains from mocking at the childishness of these tears, and even proffers her services to fetch a glass of the best ginger wine the Vicarage owns, for Nest's refreshment. But Nest shakes her head. She is past alcoholic comfort. All the spice and zest of life are gone, and all she cares for is supreme quiet and solitude.

Solitude—where, with woman's inconsistency, she can call up every word and look of Guy's, in order to forget him—where she can live over again those charmed delicious moments when, hand in hand, and heart to heart, they two trod the land of Paradise, and forgot that man was born to sorrow as the sparks fly upwards.

By-and-by, when she and the little mother have kissed and

cried, and cried and kissed, Nest wipes her eyes, passes her little trembling hand over her pallid face, as if to smooth away the agony on her features, then she goes up slowly to her own bedroom.

Even at its threshold her heart gives a great leap, and then sinks down with a sort of dull despair. Oh! what has she not enjoyed and suffered since she stood last in this mite of a chamber, with its almost conventual bareness and simplicity, its utter absence of all the *bric-à-brac* that fine ladies revel in.

It seems to the girl as if ages and ages of pain and bliss have been compressed into the latter weeks.

Then suddenly she catches sight, out of the open window, of the green ridge yonder, smiling up as peacefully 'neath the purple and amber sunset as though no life drama of happiness and torture had been acted upon it.

'*I look into the future, and I see a woman called Ernestine Trevelyian,*' he had said.

Oh! vain, vain! and light as air the words had proved! And Nest, as she realises this, shuts her eyes, and once more wishes that she might never unclothe them again. The early beams stream full on her face when she awakes, the morning after her arrival home, out of a dream of fitful fires, and waving white arms and weird-like music.

Will this hideous picture once seen haunt her all her life through? she wonders. Rising slowly and unrefreshed, she goes to her window and looks out, and remembers that it was in early June, the month of roses, that she had leant against that casement, with the Dutch honeysuckle bobbing its fragrant trails above and around her—that she had counted on her finger-tips the four men who wished to marry her.

It is late August now, with gentle winds of the golden weather playing on the Vicarage garden, and sweeping the already fluttering and falling leaves in rainbow heaps under the tall trees that fringe the broad main road. A hot sun scorches the nodding blades of the tall green grass, down in the glebe meadow, and sends fierce rays through the heavy foliage, and gilds the eddying ripples of the wriggling and twisting Yarl.

A few late roses, pale and sickly, still rear their heads among their humble sisters, and lanky chrysanthemums tower up against the garden wall. The laburnum blossoms, few and far between, are shorn of their glory, and lie bruised and withering on the emerald bank where she and Guy had sat.

It is only little more than eight weeks ago, and yet as Nest counts up her lovers once more mechanically, with a wistful smile on her little face, she finds she has only two instead of

four. Dal is gone for good, and so—she falters over the beloved name even in spirit. Squire Dillon is still available, and Lord Elmsdale is very much to the fore.

She shivers a little as she thinks of this last, and shutting the window down with a thud, dresses herself listlessly in one of the dowdiest of Miss Brown's efforts—she feels a comfort in looking her very worst—and walks downstairs.

The Vicarage circle of elders and youngers are already seated at the frugal breakfast-board as Nest goes and quietly takes her old place between her mother and Gus; but she is going to be a marchioness, so Maud forgets to allude to her laggard appearance, and Dad smiles a meek and holy smile at her over the book of family prayer which he still holds in his hand, and Gus, in answer to her languid requisition for a cup of tea, answers briskly and brightly with,—

‘Yes, my lady!’

Which he follows up with a facial distortion, which is his usual mode of evincing satisfaction.

And while she gulps her hot weak tea, Nest shivers again on hearing her future title, and wishes that something would happen—no matter what—to save her from a fate she dreads. Then as she catches the little mother's eyes anxiously fixed on her face, she laughs, and pinches Gus on his red cheek, and helps herself to a thick slice of bread, which she surreptitiously drops scrap by scrap into her pocket.

It is not within the radius of possibility that she can eat when her heart is sick—sick unto death—and her pulses are beating feverishly with unsatisfied love and vain regret, and a mad desire to go to Guy in spite of Proserpine, in spite of everybody and everything.

‘Have you seen much of Mrs Vane and Angela?’ she asks of Maud, when the meal is over, and she feels herself forced to say something, since Maud hovers about on multifarious pretences, dying with intense curiosity to hear more about this wonderful mount of Nest's into the upper current.

‘No, they went off in a great hurry to London to prepare for their journey to Bombay. Good riddance of bad rubbish too. I *hated* that girl, she was such a Jerry Sneak.’

Maud, in spite of her refined face, has a habit of using phrases more forcible than elegant, and so Nest, spiritless and weary, does not think of remonstrating, and simply says,—

‘Why?’

‘Why?’ flashes Maud indignantly, forgetting for a moment the rise her sister is going to have in the social scale. ‘Why, you are just like those wooden idols that have eyes and see not,

and ears and hear not, Nest. I *can't* think where your powers of observation are. Angela was desperate spoons on Dal, and I dare say she'll catch him now that you have thrown him over-board.'

'I hope she will,' Nest answers cordially; 'poor dear Angela will make him an excellent wife, and she will get on famously with Miladi. She has a much better temper than I have.'

'She's a stupid niminy piminy thing, and Dal is much too nice for her,' Maud mutters angrily, feeling that she would not have minded accepting Nest's leavings; 'but it is always the quiet, sly sort who get everything in this horrid world!' she adds, in a tone of resignation, 'and after all matrimony is an awful venture. If Duncan had not been such a hot-headed fool, I should probably have drowned myself by this time. I wonder why women want to marry *anyone*!'

'Why, indeed!' murmurs Nest, 'unless it is to please their family or something.'

'Is *that* what *you* are marrying for?' Maud asks, point blank.

Nest leans out of the window, and busying herself in cutting a cluster of Noisette roses, forgets to answer.

'Then you don't *love* Lord Elmsdale any more than you did Dal?' Maud persists, with a pertinacity which is very aggravating, but Nest has altered considerably within a few weeks.

She turns now and faces her interlocutor, but there is not a vestige of defiance as of yore on her features.

In fact, there is instead, almost pleading, in her soft brown eyes and on her little red mouth.

'No! I don't *love* Lord Elmsdale *yet*, but I am going to try,' she says earnestly, 'and if you please, Maud, I would rather not talk about him or anyone else if I am to marry him.'

After this, Maud alludes no more to the approaching event, and gives the others a hint to follow her example.

Later on, Nest wanders away among the old familiar haunts, finally pausing under the twin laburnums.

One little golden blossom hangs above her head, and raising herself on tiptoe, she plucks it carefully and as tenderly as if it were a living thing.

Surreptitiously, though no one is by, she presses her quivering lips to it and baptises this link of a day that is dead with a bitter tear, then suddenly she flings it away, and going back to her room, sits down and writes a letter.

'Maud!' she calls, when she has sealed her missive. 'Maud!'

She would not have dared to call Maud up summarily to her room some weeks ago, but now she is mistress of the situation,

and she smiles a little as Maud, rousing out of a dream of her presentation court dress, rushes up at her bidding.

'Will you go and post this? I am so tired,' Nest says, in as steady a voice as though this was not her death warrant.

And Maud assents with an amiability which is a novel feature in her, and walks off holding the letter quite reverentially.

'An awfully nice-looking address,' she soliloquises.

"The Most Noble the Marquis of Elmsdale,

"Elmsdale Towers,

"Hants."

'I wonder whether Nest has written a lot of love to him?'

If she could see inside, one word would meet her curious eyes.

A little word, but a momentous word—one that has sealed many a human creature's fate for weal or woe.

The word 'Yes.'

CHAPTER XIX.

CHRISTMAS TIDINGS.

'I sang to my heart in the sunshine of May ;
The garrulous bird in the sycamore spray
Sang to his mate in the nest.
Sweetheart ! the daffodils bloom on the lea,
The blossoms are thick upon bramble and tree,
And all through the long merry year we will be
Treu und fest.'

'CHRISTMAS comes but once a year.'

So the children say regretfully, but children of a larger growth do not endorse their sentiments. They are indeed heartily glad of the fact, for, save to unripe years, the old Yule tide represents more of vexation than of pleasure.

It may be a glorious and thrice-blessed season of the year, regarded from a Christian point of view, but regarded from this side the earth, earthy—a side which unluckily everything more or less possesses—it is a season from which the majority of folks shrink nervously ; a season when the horrible poverty of those poor whom 'we have always with us,' seems to weigh more

heavily and drearily upon them in sheer and startling contrast with the immense luxury and lavishness displayed by their more fortunate brethren ; a season when heads of families are reduced to absolute frenzy in the effort to accomplish that important financial result known as 'making both ends meet,' a season when balls and dinners, receptions, and all the other festive gatherings which go towards making 'Society,' are in full blaze, and when heartaches and headaches, and torn dresses and torn affections, and outrivall'd jewels, and rejected addresses that accompany them are in full blaze also ; a season when dolls and tea-sets, hobby horses, and skipping-ropes and drums are rampant, when one's house is filled, one's pockets emptied, and one's temper ruffled to a degree from which it will not recover for some considerable time.

Yes ! Christmas comes but once a year, and it comes with a melancholy, leaden sky, and a biting, stiff north-easter to London on the 25th of December, in the year which has given and taken away Guy Trevelyian's delicious but short May time of love.

The great Babylon wears its gayest gala attire, the shops are thronged with eager purchasers, the streets filled with bright animated faces, and various penny trumpets have already sounded the perlude to the discord which will probably break forth at night-fall, when Guy sits in his room, his head bowed on his hands, and thinking bitterly of his untoward fate, has no eye for externals.

Well ! his fate *is* very bitter, there is no denying this, even though it has been brought on him by his own folly ; but bitter as it is, men's hearts are tough, and his does not break, however much it may throb and ache.

Still, he has not plucked up enough courage to be 'up and doing,' but sits and thinks of the dreams he had dreamed but a short while back—dreams that are never now to be made reality—those unutterably sweet delicious days—

'Of summer coloured seas ;
Days of golden melodies'

which he and Nest had lived in fancy, but would never live in fact.

Can any sting of earth be sharper than their mockery now ?

They seem to haunt him, as rising, he goes to the window and looks out, and longs, poor fellow, with a terrible heart-sick longing, to be somewhere beyond that leaden grey sky, at rest from this gnawing pain.

A little group comes past; a man in the prime of life, pleasant and fresh-coloured, a typical specimen of our well-to-do middling class, his wife neat and smiling, and a couple of urchins with laughing faces and Sunday best.

All four are laden with paper parcels of all shapes and sizes, and all four look so happy and content that Guy turns away with a shudder and goes back to his lonely fireside.

Wife and children to love—to be loved by. These are good things that are never to be his!

'Am I mad!' he thinks. 'Does every man love like this? What is life to me now *she* has gone out of it? Nothing! less than nothing! save for its duties, and they still remain to be fought out to the end. I should be only too glad to fling this useless burden down—in the dust! I *would* fling it down, God knows, at her feet, if by such means I could save her one pang—my darling—my sweet, bright darling! What devil's art has come between us and shattered the purest, most passionate dream of love that man ever dreamt?'

But answer to this there is none.

Greyly the December sky looks down, weirdly still is the room, and this yearning, feverish cry of a passionate human love falls back on the passionate human heart, like an unalterable sentence of God.

It is growing quite dusk, when a knock at the door rouses him at last, and a letter is brought to him. Stirring a few sad red embers together he reads it and lays it down indifferently.

Everything seems so worthless to him now; nothing seems to interest him, or to arrest his attention.

It is only a few lines from Mrs Lorimer inviting him to dine with her on Christmas Day, a short, laconic epistle, neither friendly nor otherwise; but he is not surprised when he receives the summons, though he has not spoken to her since that memorable day when he had avowed his intention not to marry Mabella Moreton.

But he is well versed in his aunt's character, and understands her caprices and eccentric ways. '*Souvent femme varie,*' says the French proverb, and it was never more applicable than it is to this old woman, who is a perfect turncock in her nature, but though Guy admits her numerous faults and failings, he has yet a lingering affection for her, for the sake of the old times when her kindness and sternness were pretty evenly balanced.

It is close upon six o'clock on Christmas evening, when he enters once more the familiar hall in Chesham Place. At the threshold of the drawing-room his eye involuntarily goes towards

the piano, beside which his last love words to Nest were uttered, and a sick feeling sweeps over him, making him dizzy, but pulling himself up, he walks in as steadily as if no vision had arisen to pain him.

The room is brightened by a glow diffused from a vivid mass of coal which heaps the glittering grate, and looks wonderfully pleasant and attractive with the gems of pictures on the softly-tinted walls, the slender vases full of fragrant hot-house flowers, and one fair cold statue of Venus standing in motionless grace just within the bay window, thrown into greater relief by a rich sweep of maroon velvet curtains, and bathed in the bloom of the firelight that reaches to the distant nook.

Mrs Lorimer, perches uprightly as usual among her satin cushions, in a gorgeous cardinal brocade, and with her long feet, encased in embroidered shoes, extended towards the hot flickering flame. The servant who has preceded Guy with a lamp, stands it on a small marble tripod by his mistress, and by its light Guy sees that the prominent Roman nose is uplifted as of yore, and the thin lips are pursed and firm. There is evidently no relenting, no affection, legible on her features, though a curious sort of a smile hovers over her mouth—a wicked smile, as she put out her clawy fingers and says,—

‘How do you do, Guy?’

And her voice, always of the croaky order, sounds harder than usual—as he heard it in fact the very last time he and she were in this room.

He feels dreadfully callous, however, so he shakes the hand extended to him moderately warmly though by no means heartily, and drawing a chair to the opposite side of the fire sinks into it.

Now Guy is by nature an Epicurean, and as his gaze goes round, in spite of his troubles, it strikes him that life, with a nice glowing fire and heaps of pictures and statues, and evidences of wealth, is certainly much nicer than life in his rooms in Ryder Street, where he dabbles in vain sometimes in his pocket for a sovereign.

Still with this conviction upon him, he is quite sure that he would not, if he could, marry Mrs Moreton, no, not even if her fair form was enveloped in crisp bank-notes.

And he wonders if, by any chance, Mrs Lorimer has thrown the olive branch, just to bring pressure to bear on the great desire of her life.

Marry Mabella Moreton!

Oh! if Mrs Lorimer knew who and what he *had* married!

and he plunges at once into a train of thought, forgetful that anyone else occupies this charming luxurious drawing-room with himself.

'Well, Guy! and how does the world wag with you?' Mrs Lorimer asks, trying to 'speak chirpily, a trial which is not crowned with success, for her natural element is certainly not the aerial or the jocund.

Guy looks up from his meditations with a sickly smile. He even feels an inclination to laugh at being asked how the world wags with him.

It seems almost like adding insult to injury, and as the lamp-light falls on his face she notices that he is strangely changed within the last months. He has grown much thinner, and whether it is that his always deep-set eyes have sunk further into his head, or whether it is that his long black eyelashes cast a very dark shadow on his cheek, she cannot quite make up her mind, but anyway something in his appearance touches her, and she resolves to let him eat his roast beef and his plum pudding in peace before she tells him her Christmas tidings.

So when Guy, like all men who have seen a good deal of this wicked world, and made use of their experience, smiles even while his heart is breaking, Mrs Lorimer actually feels quite an uncomfortable sensation about her hawk-like eyes and her long lean throat.

'I don't know, aunt!' he murmurs, rather inanely, 'but it doesn't much matter I suppose how the world wags; one doesn't live for ever, thank God!'

'That is not a reverent speech, Guy!' she observes testily. 'If it pleased Providence to make you a bed of thorns instead of roses, you ought to bear with discomfort like a man! and not give way supinely like a foolish woman! After all your lot is really no whit worse than that of half the young men who loaf about Town irreproachably got up, with an expensive gardenia in their button-holes and not an idea in their heads how they are going to buy their mutton-chop on the morrow!'

'Oh! it is not the want of money!' he says hastily, 'I hate money!'

'More fool you then! for money is the one real good in life. Why, my dear Guy, one would really think when you talk like that that your head is as empty as your pocket!' she retorts contemptuously, then she goes on, in a sort of wheedling tone which is far more unpleasant than her harsh one,—'Now, just think! If you had not been as unreasonable as a woman, how comfortable you would be at this moment, feeling that you had a heavy balance at Coutts', and a charming *pied de terre* in

Carlton Gardens, instead of "assets nil," and a poky lodging in Ryder Street.

'Very true,' he answers, trying to speak lightly; 'but both these undeniably good things would have been unpleasantly hampered by the conviction that I had sold myself, and disliked my purchaser.'

'Disliked your purchaser! disliked *Mabella!*' Mrs Lorimer cries, in a shrill treble of amazement. 'And pray, who is there in town nicer and handsomer and—'

"If she be not fair *to me*, what care I how fair she be," quotes Guy, with a ghastly mirth.

'And then *Mabella loves you.*'

'*Ah, don't!*' he says, almost in a whisper. 'Have you never felt that the knowledge, even, of some people's liking is a sort of desecration—of—?'

He is going to say 'of one's love for someone else,' but he stops—remembering that he should not wear his heart on his sleeve for daws to peck at—and Mrs Lorimer looks very like a daw at this moment, with her long nose and her sharp small eyes.

'No; I am thankful I have never felt anything so stupid or uncomfortable,' she answers, with lofty scorn. 'When old Paul Lorimer fell in love with me, I was very glad of it. I couldn't abide the sight of him, poor man; but he was able to give me all I wanted in the world, and what can any sane creature want beyond that?'

'What indeed!' Guy mutters drearily, thinking that if he got all he wanted in this world, and that 'all' was Nest, he would indeed be supremely and infinitely content.

'And *apropos* of *Mabella*—she thought she would look in at coffee this evening, Guy;' and Mrs Lorimer gives a keen, searching glance at the listless, white face opposite, hoping to see a faint flush steal over it at the promised advent; but she sees absolutely nothing, only an impassiveness of feature that would baffle the most acute of physiognomists.

Guy does not even answer. It appears to him that he might just as well meet Mrs Moreton this evening, as at any other time. She has no more attraction for him than if she were Mrs Brown—or Smith—or Jones—and, in fact, it is best that the matter should drop into just ordinary acquaintanceship; since, by this, Mrs Lorimer may give up all notion of a closer union between them.

Reflecting on all this, Guy stares vacantly at the fire, and the flame leaping fitfully, shows an abstracted countenance that fairly irritates his aunt.

'I do believe he is still in love with that wretched little Wylmer; but he will get over it by-and-by. Hearts are often caught on the rebound, they say; I'll just give Mabella a reminder of this, and she is quite clever enough to manage the thing properly.'

'Guy, you will try not to show Mabella your aversion to her, won't you? She will be so mortified, poor thing,' she says blandly, bristling up inwardly, like a porcupine, at his obstinacy.

'I have no aversion to Mrs Moreton, only *indifference*,' he answers carelessly; 'but here comes Mason to say dinner is ready;' and rising, he offers her his arm. 'How pleasant it is going down together like this!' he adds, smiling down at her; 'it reminds me of the good old times, when you were fond of me, aunt.'

'And you were an obedient boy, and pleased with the good things I got you,' she replied meaningly.

'But as we grow older, you know, we want the good things that no one has the power to get us—save fate—and mine is a very untoward one,' he says, stifling a sigh.

'You are like the little French boy who said, "*Je veux prendre la lune aux dents*," and if he had got it, he would have found it all moonshine.'

But Guy forgets to smile at this joke. His 'want' has become so essentially a part of himself, that he shrinks from any allusions to it as he would from a knife-stab in his heart.

It is an excellent repast; Mrs Lorimer prides herself on the accomplishments of her *chef*—the things are first rate, and Guy enjoys them as much as if he were fortunate in his love; not that he is addicted to the fleshpots, but somehow he is glad to be back in this house and on moderately good terms with the old woman, who, in spite of her many disagreeable qualities, is about the only near relative he possesses.

And after all, it is a true adage, that blood is thicker than water.

'Come, Guy! let us pledge one another in the old-fashioned way; Paul Lorimer never dined—poor man—without looking over to me with his queer little eyes—he was a dreadfully plain man, you know! and saying in his squeaky voice, "Your very good health, my Lucinda!"'

'Very nice of him, I am sure! And I am delighted to follow his example. So here's your *very* good health, aunt, and may your shadow never be less!'

'Hum! *That* would be difficult, I fancy, unless I turned into a lath,' she laughs, looking down complacently on her remarkably thin and angular figure in its close-fitting bodice of cardinal

brocade 'And here's your very good health, Guy—and a merry Christmas, and many of them!'

'Thank you!' he answers absently—passing the fruit and wine to her, and thinking that many Christmas days—with the feelings he has on this one—are not boons worth wishing him. 'I wonder what this next year will bring forth?'

'Just what every year brings forth, of course,' Mrs Lorimer remarks indifferently—helping herself to a huge slice of melon. 'Births, deaths, and marriages. I wonder which of the three events is really the most desirable!'

'Death, to be sure!' Guy mutters bitterly. 'At any rate, it is the finisher of everything—while the other two are, most probably, the beginning of evils.'

'Tut! tut! my dear Guy—you are too young to have such morbid feelings. Look at me, I am double your age nearly, and I enjoy life immensely, and should be loth to leave it!'

He looks, as desired, and wonders,—

What on earth can she hold on to after all? She loves nobody—and nobody loves her; and, without love, well, *love* is the sole pivot of his thoughts.

'Talking of "domestic occurrences,"—by-the-way—I heard yesterday of a coming marriage which astonished me. The luck of some women is downright incredible!'

'I suppose one of those marriages of *convenience*, in which the woman is a holocaust on the altar of ambition and interestedness. So much youth—so much beauty—in exchange for so much wealth or position,' Guy observes quietly, while cracking his filberts.

'I am not so sure that this particular marriage *is* one of *convenience*,' Mrs Lorimer says slowly—sugaring her musk melon and flavouring it with just a *souçon* of pale sherry. 'The woman is young, and passably good-looking, and poor; but the man has the advantage over her in everything, for he is, what some folks call, handsome—and he is rich: so, after all, it would not be unreasonable to think it is a love affair. He has a title too.'

'A sort of King Cophetua and the beggar maid business?' Guy asks, draining his glass of Mrs Lorimer's famous port. 'Why, it sounds quite romantic! But why be mysterious? I am quite curious to know who these lucky mortals are? The course of true love so seldom runs smooth in these hard times,' he adds, with a quiver on his mouth.

'Who do you think it is? I'll give you three guesses,' Mrs Lorimer cries, with the playfulness of a cat torturing a mouse, and with a grim smile on her lips.

'Is it Dalrymple Wentworth and some Phyllis one has never heard of?'

'No. Young Wentworth hasn't a title!'

'No more he has. Is it Quatrefoil and little Forest of the Gaiety?'

'No!'

'Is it—but, no—I cannot guess—I give up,' he says listlessly.

'It is Lord Elmsdale and—'

But before she can utter another word, Guy has pushed his chair away, and is leaning over the table beside her, his shaking hand laid on hers.

'Lord Elmsdale and *who?*—*not—not*—oh! for God's sake! *don't* say it's *her!*' he cries, in a trembling, almost inaudible tone.

Mrs Lorimer looks at him, and even *her* heart, cold and callous and hard as it is, is wrung by the pain on his white face, by the torture in his eyes, by the anguish in his voice.

'I did not think you really cared so much, my poor boy!' she almost whispers, 'or I should not have told you so suddenly!'

'Then it *is—her?*' he asks, with a stunned look, passing his hand hastily over his face to conceal it from the keen eyes that are reading him through and through.

'If you mean, little Wylmer—*Yes!*'

There is a dead silence after this. Guy swallows a glass of water, and Mrs Lorimer unconsciously chops up her melon into infinitesimal morsels. At last he says, in a hoarse voice,—

'And when is it to be?'

'On the seventh of January.'

So these are her Christmas tidings. In five minutes more, and before Mrs Moreton puts in an appearance on the scene, Guy, muttering some incoherent excuse, wrings his aunt's hand and is gone.

'Little Wylmer' has forgotten him already! And yet, why should he blame her? since he, himself, bade her forget him!

CHAPTER XX.

'I SHALL BE HERE.'

'Before our lives divide for ever,
 While time is with us and hands are free
 (Time swift to hasten and swift to sever
 Hand from hand, as we stand by the sea),
 I will say no word that a man might say
 Whose whole life's love goes down in a day,
 For this could never have been—and never,
 Though the gods and the years relent, shall be!'

'I WISH I was not pretty!' cries Nest, with a positive moan of regret, as she looks into her glass on New Year's Day. She hates her beauty for a moment. It is the root, in fact, of all her troubles. But for the rose-leaf bloom on her cheek, the fresh scarlet of her lips, the starry light in her brown eyes, Lord Elmsdale would not perhaps care to marry her, Guy would not have lingered on as he had none at Ravenshill, weaving his fatal spell, and the misery that lives within her would not have found birth.

'If I had been ugly, I should have been domesticated and good, and have married poor old Dal and settled down quietly at Wentworth under Miladi's wing,' she soliloquises, with quite a desperate longing for a sallow face and great lack-lustre orbs. Then she flings herself on her knees by her bedside, but not for the purpose of prayer. The fiery furnace of Tophet has not yet purified her enough for *that*. No, all she wants is to bury her face in the eiderdown coverlid, and to revel in the luxury of tears.

But Nest is not one to cry for long. She is very young, and she has an affectionate, warm nature, but it is a bright one, and can throw off grief with an ease that is fortunate for herself. So, when the paroxysm of weeping wears itself out, she rises from the hard floor, and nestling into a comfortable chair, prepares to ruminate on the past, the present, and the future.

But the past is too bitter to linger on, so she thrusts it away quickly.

'What is to become of me?' she wonders. 'It would be base and wicked of me to leave them all for—*him*, and yet I shall go mad if I have to keep up this deceit much longer. I hate to meet Elmsdale's eyes and to know all the while that I am the most horrible little hypocrite that ever walked the earth,

Shall I stick to the engagement and make myself a miserable wretch for ever?—or shall I risk everything—and break it? I would not mind Dad's glare over his spectacles, or Maud's nagging, but tears in my little mother's eyes I can't stand—no more than Gus's red face looking long instead of round. If I *had* but the courage to be wholly false or wholly true! Ah, I believe everything would be easier for me if I were better or—worse!

She really epitomises her whole character in these last thoughts.

It is quite true that everything would go easier for her if she were either better than she is, or worse—if she stood on a higher or else a lower plane of action and feeling. As it is, she succumbs to a fate which a nobler and stronger nature, under such feelings as hers, would resist, while she stands firm where a more selfish nature would give way and walk over all obstacles to the desired end.

In a torture of conflicting circumstances thus created, she is rent and torn by the struggle she provokes and out of which comes neither victory nor defeat, and Nest learns practically, that to pause midway between good and evil, to strive to reconcile honour and dishonour, truth and falsehood, is the most hopeless problem that a human soul can attempt to solve.

Not being very clever at problems of any sort, she flings on her hat and cloak, and goes downstairs and on to the lawn.

There is not a sign of life anywhere, for all the Vicarage folks, even to the children, are gone to a school feast in the neighbouring parish, so Nest has it all to herself.

It is not a cheerful prospect certainly which she regards.

The sharp air is laden with moisture. The sky is overcast by lowering masses of grey clouds, scudding along before some wind-storm of the upper air, and showing no single rift in their sullen gloom. A thaw dots the grass with dingy white specks, and the very branches of the laburnums under which she and Guy had sat, seem to droop their bare heads under the obdurate-looking heaven.

It is certainly not tempting weather, yet she longs to lose in physical exertion the sense of mental stagnation which creeps over her, and which, strive as she will, she cannot shake off.

And if she lives to a century, New Year's Day will certainly bring back to her, in strange vividness, this grey afternoon, and the sobbing *miserere* which the trees seem to be sighing over their shorn glory.

Nest shivers a little, draws her fur cloak closer round her

slender throat, and then with an irresistible impulse she sets off towards the ridge that lies beyond the old village church.

'Once more, oh, only once more!' she thinks she will visit that ever-to-be-remembered spot, where Guy Trevylian laid his first kisses on her lips. It was summer-time then, a summer-time of love and hope and joy, but *now!*—she shudders; the old year is dead and her heart is dead too. Tears, which her young eyes easily shed, fall down her cheeks like blinding rain, and kneeling, she kisses (poor child, she is desperately in love) the spongy turf on which Guy had stood.

After a moment or two she rises slowly and starts violently, as she meets Guy Trevylian's passionate eyes, and knows that they have been a witness to her action. Flushing with shame at her *folly*, as she calls it now to herself, she stands apart from him, her hands clasping and unclasping, and as he approaches her, she retreats a few paces and averts her face.

In spite of all that has occurred he has not expected this. Nay, he does not know what he has expected, when, yearning for a glimpse of his lost love, he has hovered like a thief round the spot that holds the jewel of his life.

'Nest, for God's sake don't be so cold and changed towards me!' he murmurs, with quivering lips, holding out his hands to her beseechingly.

His voice stirs her pulses with its old power, his face works on her its old, old spell. For this man, whom she worships, she knows she would throw over everything, almost to wrong, and just for this, just *because* she loves him so—just because he holds her heart and soul in keeping—she flings down the gauntlet of defiance and stands erect, facing him with the *hauteur* of a little empress. The crimson of the sinking sun falls upon her hair, flecking its lustre with warm tints, and gives her face a beauty that does not actually belong to it.

'Am I cold and changed?' she asks, with a curt laugh that sits ill on the soft red lips. 'If you like I will tell you the meaning of it. You and I are nothing to each other now—*nothing*. For in a few days I shall marry Lord Elmsdale.'

Bravely as she utters this sentence—a sentence that embodies all the gall and wormwood her young life has known—a big ball seems to rise up in her throat. It is as if her own hand rolled the stone to the door of her own sepulchre. Marry Lord Elmsdale!

The words are a sesame to the portals that as yet shut out her future existence, a suffocating sense of misery and dreariness steals over her, and she closes her eyes as if to thrust out everything. Then she opens them and—*smiles*, actually *smiles*

up into Guy's face—smiles as women so often do, just when their life is turning into veriest Dead Sea fruit.

This little foolish smile, born of absolute misery, maddens Guy. What he has suffered since that Christmas night, when Mrs Lorimer told him of this marriage, God and his own heart only know. It is not simply the loss of her, but to it are added such tortures of jealousy as have pretty nigh driven him wild. Nest, his Nest, is to be another man's wife—another man will have the right to her, even to her *thoughts*!

With a stride he is close to her, his face bent over her own.

'So!' he says, almost under his breath, and how well she remembers this word, 'you will marry Lord Elmsdale! Nest, I told you before, and I tell you again, that you belong to *me*, through your very love *for me*! Do you believe that after those kisses that fell on your lips, *here*, in this place, that I shall yield you up to any man on earth?'

And he asks this question in concentrated tones, his eyes looking straight into hers. It is but the old, old fable of the bird and the serpent.

Nest feels as if she could not move an inch from under that glance to save her life, and she trembles like a leaf, growing red and white by turns.

Then of a sudden her naturally wilful spirit bursts out, and she flashes in a decided voice:—

'If I will it, you must needs give me up!'

Guy—Heaven help him—grows beside himself as he hears. All the really good and honourable feeling he possesses is thrust aside by an insane jealousy—an unreasoning passion. If he cannot marry this girl, no other man shall. This is the whole sole bent of his mind at this moment. Selfishness, of which he has as small a share as his sex can have, predominates at this hour over generosity or magnanimity. He would rather she lived a long, lonely, loveless life for him, than that another man's heart beat against her own, another man's kisses fall on her mouth.

He laughs, a little laugh that has much more of bitterness than mirth in it, and clasps her hands.

Little dainty white hands that hold his heart in their tiny grasp.

'Love! can you possibly be so blind as not to see that you are too much mine ever to belong honourably to anybody else? that you can never draw back from your sworn fealty to me, no matter *what* has arisen to sever our lives? It may be natural that you who, after all, are only a child, and weak, like the rest of your sex, should be drifted hither and thither by a variety of

feelings ; but you are old enough, my Nest, to know that because you opened a dam, you have not the power to stop a flood. So, Nest, unless I let you, you *dare* not marry Elmsdale or any other man !'

She shakes off his clasp, though his touch thrills her from head to foot, and lifts her into a consciousness of supreme happiness and content !*but he has no right to speak to her now—now that *that* woman lives ! Ah ; how it all comes before her vision, making her giddy, sore, sick unto death—the theatre, the surging sea of diamonds and light, the wildly-waving white arms, and Guy's face when he looked up at her on his way to—*his wife* ! and Nest makes one more effort to be strong, with a dim struggling sense of right waging war with wrong in her soul.

'I may have loved you,' she tells him, trying to steady her voice and to force defiance to her eyes and her tongue, 'I may have let you believe that you could do as you willed with me, but that was when there was no sin in it ; but I am not as wicked as you think. I refuse to let you dictate what I am to do, and what I am not to do, and it is not too late for me to say that our acquaintance must end here, Mr Trevylian !'

Ah ! how immeasurably she loathes herself for her words when she sees the grey eyes dashed with pain, pain dealt by *her* ; yet she stands before him, her little white face full of resolution, her slender figure swaying in her excitement, her hands clenched together, yet withal wearing such an appearance of fragility that it strikes him as absurd—her testing her will against his.

His will ! that in his inordinate pride—and Guy Trevylian is proud to the backbone—that has seemed to him to be almost omnipotent.

'Nest !' he says, firmly but quietly, 'you *know* that I can make you give up this accursed marriage if I choose !'

'Never !' she answers passionately.

She is an enigma that his nature fails to read aright ; in fact, she scarcely understands herself, or knows what she desires or intends to do, and at this moment, she rebels against Guy's asserted power, just as she rebelled an hour back at the misery in store for her in the future.

'I shall marry Lord Elmsdale on the seventh of January,' she goes on, a little doggedly, and Guy, believing her to be after all but of an interested, ambitious nature, grows wroth. He does not like the idea that any woman should consider him a fit subject for playing fast and loose with, and as he grows wroth, a white sternness creeps over his features, that rather startles and frightens Nest.

'Must I tell you again that your words are folly?' he asks, in a changed voice—there is no tender inflexion in it now, it is hard, cold, almost metallic, and a slight *hauteur* rings out in it. 'Like all women, you are ready to make a fool of any man who gives you his love! But, Nest, you don't know *me*, or you would cease this childish contest. I tell you that nothing can stand between us two, and if you cannot be my wife, at any rate you shall not be the wife of any other man!'

It is true what he says—that she does not half know him! She realises this as she glances furtively at the passionate, proud face, with resolution deepening the grey eyes and showing itself in the thin set lips. It is a face in which determination is as clear as daylight, but it is also a face that lives with her in her dreams and lingers beside her in her waking.

'I don't think you have any right to speak to me like this, Mr Trevylian!' she falters, in a voice that has lost its strength and defiance. 'It is true, that, having brought it on myself, I have no right to complain, still, you know, that however much I may care for you, I ought not to do so, to the point of—*"wrong!"*'

There is something in her eyes, in the half-pleading, half-petulant accents, that charms him out of his wrath, and makes him forget the bitter thought that she is bent on a rich and titled match, and Guy, suddenly throwing his arms round her, draws her close to him.

'Oh, my Nest! my Nest! forgive everything I have said. I was a brute! I was mad—mad with the horrible—horrible fact staring me in the face that you were about to raise a *double* barrier between us! If you *were* to come to me, my darling!—my darling!—you *would* forget wrong and sin—everything! The past should be a sealed book, the future an open volume which you would enjoy to your full bent! Tell me, Nest! are you changed to me? Don't you love me well enough *now*, to wish you were mine, my very own?'

'How can I answer such words, now that I am pledged to Lord Elmsdale?' she whispers faintly. 'If I were to break my word to him, I should only render him unhappy, as I did Dal! I can only try to make him a good wife!'

'A proceeding that will end in making you both wretched, perhaps!' Guy murmurs, a little hopelessly. 'Listen to me, Nest!' he goes on, with a false sophistry that is very foreign to his character, but with an infinite tenderness in his voice, and again drawing her close to him—an action, which this time she does not, or rather she *cannot* resist—'Don't waste your strength against the inevitable! You could as soon change night into

day, as set aside the consequences that flow from an accomplished fact. None of us in this world can escape the necessity of giving pain at times to our fellow-mortals, no more than we can escape the necessity of receiving it. If we pause at every step of life to think whose heart we shall break, we should never advance at all! You were born to break hearts, my darling, and you have to choose whether it shall be Elmsdale's heart or *mine!*'

'Not yours, Guy! not yours—for the love of Heaven!' she whispers, fairly under the glamour of his words, and of the voice, so inexpressibly dreary and hopeless, in which they are spoken. 'Guy! I love you! I love you!' she goes on breathlessly, as if she will not have time enough to tell him *how* much she loves him! 'I am only marrying this man to please them at home, and since I cannot marry you, what matters what becomes of my life?' she asks, clasping her hands and looking up imploringly into his face.

And Guy knows now, that, if he bids her, she will leave all behind, all the good and holy things she has been taught to cherish, her innocence and her purity, her home, ay, even her hopes of a better world, to come to him!

He strains her in his arms, and rains down kiss after kiss on her moist eyes and white cheeks, and on the sweet lips that fire his brain—kisses, fast, passionate, and desperate—and she does not rebuke him. How can she? for she knows they are the last, that in a little while, Guy will be as virtually dead to her, as if he lay beneath the sod at her feet.

'You have conquered, my Nest! You have shown me the utter worthlessness and selfishness of my own heart. It is not *your* fault we must part, neither is it mine. Perhaps I did not deserve so precious a gift, and fate has plucked you from my grasp,' he says, in a tone that stabs her to the soul.

And two arms steal round his neck, two eyes look up into his wistfully—tenderly.

'It is I who am not half good enough for *you*,' Nest says humbly. 'Such a changeable little wretch, full of folly and frivolity, is not worth such love as yours, Guy.'

'One thing more, Nest, before I leave you. Suppose, by any chance, that woman was to die and leave me free, would you, at the eleventh hour, give up Elmsdale and his title and his wealth for *me?*'

He listens for her answer with bated breath, as if his fiat for life or death waited on the words of this slip of a girl, whose gipsy beauty, and wilful, winning ways have enslaved him.

'Even at the eleventh hour—*yes*,' Nest answers, with her face

against his breast; and she feels a happiness as she clings to him.

Guy draws a deep breath, then he stoops and kisses her again.

'This kiss is a seal on your promise, Nest. Remember it, for the love of Heaven!' he says gravely.

She looks up at him pitifully.

'I shall not forget, but will a love that brings *murder to the soul* be a happy one, Guy?' she asks doubtfully.

'Oh, my Nest, you don't know *how* I love you! You don't understand. Ever since *that* night, I have committed murder in my soul. I have gone down on my knees and prayed that God would have pity on me, and lift the burden from my life. My brain has burned with feelings of horror and hatred. My fingers have longed to go round that woman's throat!'

His face grows a deep, dark red, his eyes scintillate, and Nest, watching him, grows pale.

'Hush, Guy,' she says, in an awesome voice. 'I am not good or religious as I ought to be. Dad says I am like the sheep that strayed from the fold, but still I know it is wrong to rebel against Providence. And Guy, if anything *should* happen before the seventh of January, and set you free, I shouldn't wonder if we were parted *somehow*, if only for a punishment.'

'There is justice in Heaven, my Nest, and if I *am* free before the seventh day from this, I shall be *here* at this hour. Remember, Nest—*six o'clock*.'

'I shall remember,' she replies, with a heavy heart.

Pushing her hat back from her brow, he regards her face for a moment or two, with keen, scrutinising eyes, then he smiles a little, as if his scrutiny has been satisfactory.

'Tell me once more that you love me, Nest?'

'I love you, Guy.'

'More than anyone else?'

'More than anyone in the wide wide world!' whispers Lord Elmsdale's promised wife, just as the sun sinks right down behind a bank of fiery cloud, and the wintry day falls into the darkness of night.

CHAPTER XXI.

'ALL THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN !'

'We never thought the world was wide,
That friends would fail, and fate divide,
For like a river at our feet,
Life danced along so fair and sweet ;
But oh ! my love ! we know it now,
And all is gone with yesteryear,
Farewell ! Farewell !

In spite of fondest prayer and vow
The world is wide, our ways are drear,
We walk apart, a river flows between,
Ah me ! the distant days, sweetheart,
And all that might have been !

And still as in the golden days,
We tread the old familiar ways,
Where bridge and river, lawn and tree,
Tell their old tale to you and me,
Who come no more together as in days of yore,
Who live with parting words and tears,
For ever ringing in our ears,
Farewell ! Farewell !

We walk apart, a river flows between,
Ah me ! the distant days, dear heart,
And all that might have been !'

How this night passes, Guy cannot tell. In spite of the intense torture he suffers, he falls towards morning into a deep sleep, from which he awakens when the sun is high, and shedding quite a golden light on the spire of Ravenshill church, which he can see from the window of the little inn at which he was in the habit, months ago, to put up. Dressing hastily, he walks with rapid steps down a woodland path leading out of the village into the heart of the country. The wind blows in sharp gusts over the moorland, and the wintry sky is grey and lowering, but he heeds none of these.

Since Nest left him on the old familiar ridge, he has felt stunned, as it were, but now, all at once, his mind seems to take in with cruel avidity the whole extent of the miserable

reality. Somehow, up to this time, he has not even weighed to its full weight the burthen of the loveless lonely life laid upon him; but as in imagination he sees once again the figure of Nest fade away in the dim evening light, he feels as if the blow had only just fallen, dashing away in one fell swoop the cup of life from his lips, and demolishing the whole fabric of happiness that he had built up during a few golden weeks.

Still, can he wonder at the sudden demolition of a fabric slight and intangible, shadowy in its nature, and with nothing but a shameful past as the basis on which it has been erected.

The veil which he had desired drawn over the unspeakable folly and dishonour of his boyhood, has not been gently lifted aside so as to reveal, piece by piece, as it were, to his dear love's eyes all that he most cared to guard from her knowledge, but it has been rudely wrenched asunder by the hideousness of that painted face and wildly-wreathing arms.

Is it possible that a man who could take such a wife as *that* to himself, can be worthy the love and reverence of any pure woman? As Guy asks himself this, his heart fails him, for he pictures to himself how *she*, when the glamour of love falls from her eyes, will see in him one to despise and forget.

Nest has left him, never to return, and she has taken with her all that makes life valuable to him. Heartsore, hopeless, he walks on and on, unmindful of physical fatigue, he knows not where, he cares not whither! What is anything to him now that he and she are parted?

'Is she not his life—

The ocean to the river of his thoughts that terminated all?'

Poor fellow! It *does* appear so very hard to him that his whole happiness should be a holocaust to that one wretched folly of his youth,—that he should suffer so cruelly for the sin of another, for he knows that he has been more sinned against than sinning in that fatal episode.

In all the many years that have gone by since that autumnal day when he had gone down on his knees and sworn to God in the enthusiasm of unripe years to cleave to her and her only, he has been haunted by the face and form of the woman who spoiled his life for him. Amid the gayest scenes, at every feast, like the Egyptian skeleton veiled and chapletted with funeral flowers, her memory has sat at his side, often scaring away by its presence the brightness of the hour.

Only for a few short weeks, while he drank so deeply of love, while love's glamour blinded his vision and bewildered him with

its joy, while love's elixir steeped his senses in temporary oblivion, and lulled him in an Elysian dream, the miserable spectre faded from his mind and left him free to revel in all that can make life an Eden.

But now it is back again at his side, clinging to him tenaciously, binding him more closely than ever with cankering, loathsome chains, mocking at him with its well-remembered taunting smile, flashing its strange eyes in his face, and reminding him in the unmelodious voice of old that he is still a fettered man.

And a poor consolation it is that all this infinite torture has come to him for the sake of a transient passion. Alas! Why had he not recollected in time, that passions are the gales of a man's life, and that it should be his care not to let them rise into tempests?

Just as one loves to look upon the pretty wavelets and the white surf of the sea dancing gently towards the shore, until suddenly, the wind rising, the tiny waves become furious billows that dash over and submerge one, so he, with a boy's inexperience and stupidity, gazed too long and too curiously, and toyed with the attractive emotions of a new and witching pleasure, until it first fascinated him, then imprisoned his feet and swept him into destruction.

Guy's soul is sick unto death, and his brain thoroughly upset—doubts and fears create a havoc within it that he believes himself powerless to bring again into reasonable order. His heart is one chaotic space, and he feels to the fullest of its bitter extent that

'Tis not the whole of life to live,
Nor all of death to die!

as he soliloquises hopelessly, leaning over a stile that separates the path where he stands from a small stream that sweeps along with tiny force and a gentle murmur, unbound by the Frost King's icy fingers, over the large shiny pebbles that lie in its course. Guy's eyes rest dreamily on the clear waters, vaguely pursuing the career of the little objects that float on the surface. Suddenly the idea strikes him of constituting one of these floating trifles his fate, and, paltry as it may be, to allow its evolutions to govern the current of his thoughts. He is far too miserable to be wise. He wants something, no matter how puerile, to decide for him whether he shall succumb to the Fates, that seem dead against him, or whether he shall en-

courage Hope, that blessed thing that Cowley calls 'beggars' wealth,' and which may give him sufficient strength to grapple manfully with the desperate feelings that seem likely to overwhelm him, disordering his faculties and reducing him to a state of fatuous stupidity.

In the midst of all his worries, the utter absurdity of letting his reason be swayed by such trivialities strikes him with a keen sense of the ludicrous and brings a bitter smile to his mouth; but yet he resolves to pursue the idea.

So he tracks one particular straw in its progress.

There is an angle in the bank close by, and he makes a vow that this especial straw shall be the umpire to decide between hope or hopelessness—that *selon*, its safe career or otherwise round the miniature promontory—he shall reach weal or woe!

After all, he thinks, life is made up of bagatelles, so he stands and watches his little pilot boat with eager eyes and quite a throbbing heart, very much ashamed of himself and yet quite unable to turn away his gaze, not even to save his life.

It enchains his glance as though it was a basilisk as it comes gently down the stream, and he cries half audibly in his excitement,—

'Bonum Vehis !'

The straw passes quickly on and on, then meets with a slight obstruction, but the stoppage is only momentary. It doubles the cape—the Cape of Good Hope—and Guy, though he is thirty-two years of age, heaves a sigh of positive relief. Woe is not for him, weal has won, and love subsists on wonderfully small things.

His face is ten times brighter as, hours after he started on his lonely walk, he enters his room at the inn.

CHAPTER XXII.

T O O L A T E.

'Love was to his impassioned soul
Not, as with others—a mere part
Of its existence—but the whole,
The very life breath of his heart!'

THE seventh day of January—*Nest's wedding day.*

Guy Trevylian has kept a wretched vigil during the long hours, pacing his room to and fro, with torture on his poor white face that would or should touch a heart of granite to pity. Each moment that drops into the unalterable gulf of time, seems to him like a nearer approach to that living death which is hardest of all to bear; and which of us, who have felt as he does, who have seen the love on which we have anchored hope and happiness crumble away into dust and ashes, will throw a stone at him, when in hot rebellion, he craves a boon from Fate—the infinite boon of freedom from the loathsome chain that binds him to the woman with the bold, shameless face, and a soul black as Gehenna.

By-and-by the darkness lifts a little from the earth, and signs of human life make themselves heard around, and as nine o'clock chimes, the usual morning meal with its accompanying newspaper is brought in.

Guy does not much heed, he does not even turn his head when the door opens. He knows it would choke him to swallow a morsel of food just now, and sinking further back in his chair, he closes his lids wearily, and prays that he may never open them again—*cui bono*—since he can only awake to hopelessness, misery, and worst of all—hardest of all—to *helplessness!*

At last a knock rouses him from his bitter reverie, and Oswald Dennistoun enters in war-paint.

'I hope you have not breakfasted yet, Trevylian; after guard mounting I feel as if I could eat something with tolerable appetite. How did you manage to sleep through the confounded hubbub last night?'

'What hubbub,' asks Guy, indifferent to all but the horrible hubbub in his own heart.

He has not closed his eyes all night—how could he, knowing that the morrow was *her* wedding day?

Her wedding day! These three words toll through his brain a miserable requiem for his lost love. He feels deaf and dumb and blind—everything—and a maddening sense of desolation swallows up every sense, so that no external sound has reached his ears.

‘Why the fire at the Andalusian. It began during the transformation scene. By the way, Guy, do you remember Mademoiselle Virginie—Proserpine—that woman you spoke to at the opera, you know?’

Guy has suddenly risen from his chair, and standing bolt upright, faces him, his eyes starting out of his head and his lips blue—positively blue, and trembling.

‘Well, go on! what of her?’ he cries eagerly, but Dennistoun, staring at him in profound amazement, forgets to answer. ‘What of her? what of her?’ Guy reiterates vehemently; then suddenly his glance drops on to the heading of a column in the *Post*, that lies partially open on the breakfast-table.

Seizing it, he tries to read, but utterly fails; the letters dance before his vision, and for the life of him, he cannot collect himself sufficiently to comprehend the meaning of the words.

‘This is the account, Dennistoun,’ he says, in a curiously calm voice. ‘Read it aloud, while I have a cup of coffee. Proserpine—Mademoiselle Virginie. I think you said she had—*escaped!*’

‘Not a bit of it; no such good luck, poor devil—listen:—

“And amongst those fatally injured was Mademoiselle Virginie, *premiere danseuse* at the Andalusian, whose clever impersonation of the *rôle* of Proserpine, in the ballet of ‘The Shades of Hades,’ created such a *furor* last season. She died in extreme agony at her apartments in Jermyn Street, at three o’clock this morning, and—”

Dennistoun stops abruptly, for Guy, seizing his hat, rushes from the room.

He reaches the nearest telegraph office breathless, but with a wild joy on his features, that gives him the look of a madman.

“To Miss Ernestine Wylmer—from G. T.

“Free! Remember, six o’clock!”

‘Concise! but *she* will understand, the darling!’ he says, half audibly, in a tone of such rapture and satisfaction that he

amazes the clerk, and he laughs out a laugh as bright and joyous as a boy's, as he enters his own room and finds Dennistoun still *locum tenens*, and the coffee and cutlets drained and demolished.

Slipping on an overcoat, and hastily packing a small port-manteau, he puts his hand on Dennistoun's shoulder.

'Come, wish me God speed ; I am off, old fellow !'

'Where to?' Dennistoun asks, looking in astonishment at the beaming glance and flushed face of the man who is ordinarily so quiet and cool.

'Where to? Oh, to—*Heaven!*' and in the twinkling of an eye he is gone.

'Mademoiselle Virginie's untimely end has driven him crazy, I believe,' soliloquises Dennistoun, going up to the buffet and helping himself to a glass of white curaçoa, then he takes a first-rate cigar, and settles himself comfortably in the easy-chair, in which Guy had sat and suffered tortures through long hours—'Yes, Proserpine is at the bottom of this. I thought he looked uncommonly queer when he spoke to her. An old spoon, I suppose ! He has the reputation of being a Simon Pure, but I suppose he's about the same as the rest of us !'

.

Nest—Lady Elmsdale—drops into a seat and looks drearily round the little familiar bedroom which has been hers for years and years at Ravenshill Vicarage.

She has almost wrenched off the dainty bonnet with its glittering pearls and its clusters of snowy myrtle and orange-blossom, and it lies unheeded on the much-worn carpet at her feet.

Her bridal bouquet of roses and gardenias is flung on the table, and she leans back in her chair, hiding her face with her trembling hands.

Her lips move, but no sound issues from them. Silently but passionately she is wishing good-bye to—Guy.

She has never realised how much she loves him—*how much*—until now, when she knows that she must not even think of him.

'God bless you and take care of you and make your life ever so much happier, my darling !—my darling !' she keeps on praying in her childlike fashion, then she adds, 'and God give *me* strength to forget.'

'Nest, dear, you must make haste and change your dress, Lord Elmsdale is impatient to start,' Mrs Wylmer says nervously, with an intuitive fear mingled with enormous reverence for her noble son-in-law.

But she might as well beseech a stone.

Nest never stirs or removes her hands from her face, and the little mother glances imploringly at Maud as a stronger spirit than herself.

'Nest, for goodness' sake exert yourself,' Maud cries impatiently, and grasping her sister's arm, she drags her up from her chair, pulls off her wedding garb, and inducts her into a sapphire velvet travelling-dress, trimmed with sable, fit and costly raiment for a marchioness, and Nest allows herself to be dressed with the passiveness and indifference of a little child. Arrayed for leaving 'Home sweet Home,'—and home is very sweet to her just now in comparison with the future she is about to face,—she flings her arms round her mother's neck, and cries as if her heart is breaking.

What does it matter, in this moment of supreme misery, if her eyelids are swollen, her nose red, her cheeks tear-stained? She does not care a straw what the man she has married thinks of her, and she must cry, or she feels that she will suffocate.

'Tell Lady Elmsdale that the carriage is ready,' says a voice at the bottom of the stairs, with something imperative in its tone that makes it very distinctly heard in 'My Lady's chamber.'

Nest shudders visibly, and blanches considerably. This is her lord and master, whom she has sworn to love, honour, and obey.

Well, obedience is not very difficult, especially when an absolute apathy to everything assists it.

She wipes her tears slowly, and turns to Maud.

'Good-bye,' she says; 'and Maud, if I have been cross and disagreeable sometimes, please forgive and forget it!'

There is something so dreary in the big brown eyes, and the poor young voice, something so hopeless in the droop of the pretty red lips, that even Maud is touched a little as she hands her sister a velvet bag, emblazoned by a silver-gilt coronet, that flashes in the firelight.

'You *have* been rather nasty sometimes, Nest, but I'll forgive you for everything, if you present me next season. And Nest, you will have to give me my dress too, you know,—white satin and Honiton lace, and lilies of the valley all over it.'

'All right!' answers Nest, with a sickly smile, as she takes up her muff and gloves, 'and I hope you will be as fortunate as I have been and make a grand match. It is so nice to be a marchioness, you know.'

'By the way, Nest, here's a telegram for you, congratulations,

I suppose. It came just before we started for church, but in the hurry-scurry I quite forgot to give it to you.'

Lady Elmsdale's eyes grow positively fascinated by the yellowish brown envelope, yet her fingers shake so that she can hardly tear it open, and her heart beats with a strange instinctive dread, and she becomes as white as a ghost.

At last she tries to pluck up courage. In half a second the envelope flutters to the floor and the sheet of paper is unfolded.

'Free. Remember six o'clock.'

Lord Elmsdale's newly-wedded wife does not faint or scream.

Without uttering a word, she crushes the paper in her palm, and sits down in the old familiar chair, while her eyes go out straight towards the green ridge yonder.

At six o'clock *he* will be there, waiting for his wife. She is unconscious of, or else she does not heed, the two pairs of eyes gazing at her in wonderment.

What are anyone's eyes to her now, since she can never—*never* look again into Guy's grey ones and tell him that even at the eleventh hour she is ready and willing to give up everything, all the pomps and vanities of the world, the wealth and titles that women love; that she would leave all without a sigh, and cleave unto him so long as they both shall live.

Never more, oh, never more can she say such words to the man whom she loves more than her life, and all that life can give. The only man of all the world whose power has been potent enough to make her heart throb, and her pulse quicken at the sight of him—at the touch of him.

A peremptory knock comes to the door, and a voice, that is now absolutely hateful,—

'Come along, Nest, what ails you?'

What ails her indeed? What can she answer? Can she tell him that it is a mortal ailment, from which she will never recover?

So she does not attempt to answer, and after a few moments' silence, Elmsdale's steps are heard descending the stairs.

'I must speak to Gus,' Nest gasps. 'I want to say good-bye to him—and alone.'

Wondering at this strange request, and her still more strange looks and manner, her behest is yet obeyed at once, and on the exit of Mrs Wylmer and Maud, Gus, with an importance about his small person which has come on since he became brother-in-law to a marquis, marches grandly into the room.

'Gus, dear boy, you must not forget me,' Nest cries, wistfully and softly, for this brother of hers has always had a good slice of her heart, and to be of benefit and pleasure to him has been one of the chief incentives of her marriage.

'Of course not,' he answers, and Gus, who is a sharp youth, thinks how very stupid his sister is, for who would be so foolish as to forget his goose with the golden eggs—the El Dorado of the future.

Is not Nest going to give him a hunter and pocket-money, and shall he not rough-ride over all the other boys at Ravenshill, who at present are better off than himself?

But his pleasant, though somewhat spiteful anticipations are broken into by his sister's hurried and trembling accents:—

'I want you to do me a *very* great favour, Gus, and you— you must be sure and not let Maud or anyone else know about it. Mr Trevelyian—Beast, you know—will be *there*,' and she points with a shaking finger to the ridge, 'near the church, at six o'clock this evening. I want you to go and give him this. It's only the name of a song I faithfully promised to send him.'

Tearing off a slip of the telegram, she writes upon it, and Gus, the astute, who has an old head upon young shoulders, and is wonderfully up to a thing or two, sapiently nods his head and pops the paper into his pocket.

'Nest,' Lord Elmsdale calls impatiently once more, and once more she shudders and turns very pale.

'Gus, dear, you will be sure and write to me very soon, and mind and tell me if Mr Trevelyian came for the name of that song. I know he is very anxious about it,' she murmurs hastily, her cheek now flushing scarlet. Then she goes up to the window where the Dutch honeysuckle stems show up dry and brown and withered, and gazes once more longingly—yearningly—at the dear old green ridge lying under the wintry sky.

Her heart gives a great leap as she gazes, then it seems to settle down in a leaden lump, and with a cold, set face, she walks in a slow and stately fashion, that is born *not* of her new dignity, but of a mighty despair, to the carriage, waves her hand to Dad, who stands at the door, æsthetically lopsided from exertion and exhaustion from the excitement of the day, and to the little mother, down whose cheeks the tears rain fast, while Maud and Gus and Jack and Jill and Pop and Mop fling rice and old slippers at the departing pair, with a reckless extravagance and an energy befitting a better cause.

When the Vicarage is fairly out of sight, Lady Elmsdale

squeezes herself into her corner of the carriage, taking up less space than she has ever done before, for she feels that a touch of her husband will be a culminating point, and she will scream!

Elmsdale, whose temper is not good at the best, and which has been considerably ruffled by the delay in starting, glances at her once or twice. but all that he sees is an exquisite little profile, which, however, in the pale light, looks dreadfully hard and cold.

His vanity, and his vanity is his predominating characteristic, is horribly wounded. All her reserve and lack of demonstration he has put down before to maidenly shyness—a belief which rather increased than decreased the fancy he had for her—but *now!*

Surely his wife might relax a little, and allow some of the admiration and adoration which she naturally feels for such a man as himself to appear.

Not a bit of it! The carriage rolls on swiftly and smoothly, and still the newly-made marchioness stares out of *her* window rather vacantly, and seems unconscious that a couple of large tears glisten on her long lashes, that look infinitely more like drops of regret than drops of joy.

He grows silent and sullen, and lighting a cigar, puffs out of *his* window, leaving his bride to pass the first hour of her married life in bitter and unavailing regret for another man.

Elmsdale's nature is vindictive and unforgiving, and these passions once roused are not likely to slumber again.

And in this moment probably is laid the germs of unhappiness in two human lives.

.....

Though the sun shows a blood-red disc low down on the horizon, the grey tinted sky looks wonderfully dull and dreary, and the wind sweeps in keen gusts through the leafless boughs of oaks that crown the green ridge near Ravenshill church, when Gus, a trifle 'swaggery,' to use a not very refined word, struts up to Guy Trevylian.

Guy, who stands oblivious of keen blasts or dull grey skies, with his heart throbbing wildly in eager anticipation of seeing the slender form and sweet young face of his own dear love.

What indeed has he *not* pictured while he has stood on this spot, the spot where he first held his darling in his arms and planted passionate kisses on her lips.

And now Providence has been merciful and given her to him.

Heaven has taken pity and removed the barrier that stood 'twixt him and Paradise, and henceforth all will go well and smoothly as a marriage bell.

In another moment or two he will clasp her once more, and before a few more suns rise and set, she will be his—*wife!* It is not an occasion to pause for conventional mourning. Nay, so that no other thing shall arise to wrench Nest from his clasp, they must be 'one,'—at once in heart and form. Guy is thirty-two years of age, but no boy-lover surely felt the mad rapturous feeling that comes over him as he waits—waits and yearns for her who is dearer to his eyes than light, who circulates through all his veins, mingles with his life and forms his very soul.

'Nest asked me to give you this, Mr Trevylian. It is the name of a song she promised you,' Gus says, with extraordinary affability, for in his young heart he does not affect Guy, whose usually grave, almost stern, face seems to check the gladness of a boyish heart's full glow.

Guy takes the tiny slip of folded paper in his hand with a radiant smile that has not left his lips since he heard of the burning of the Andalusian Theatre, and glances at it eagerly. Of course it is only a line to say she is detained, but will be here anon.

'*Too late.*'

This is all.

The shock is so gigantic that it paralyses his figure into rigidity, and fixes the radiant smile, as it were, to his mouth, on the grey pallor of which it looks fearfully weird and strange. One moment—one horrible moment—in which he realises that he has staked all his hopes of happiness on a die, and *lost*—one moment, in which the blood in his veins curdles and ices, and his heart stands still—one moment, in which he could meet death face to face and be grateful to God.

Then he says,—

'Thank you, my boy,' in a voice so studied, that Gus in his unripe judgment hears nothing unnatural in the tone. 'And how did the wedding go off?'

'First-rate!' cries Gus, with enthusiasm. 'Everything went off swimmingly. Nest and Elmsdale make such a stunning couple, you know!'

Guy winces at this thrust, and staggers just a little; but he has marvellous powers of self-control.

'I suppose you are all delighted at home with the marriage?' he says to the boy, who is evidently bubbling over with elation, and who thoroughly appreciates the rhyme,—

- 'It's an excellent thing to be brother-in-law
To a magnificent three-tailed Bashaw!

'I should think so, *rather!*' Gus answers, too young and inexperienced in the world to hide the snobbish gratification he feels in hanging on to the skirts of the aristocracy. 'We shouldn't have minded Nest marrying Dal Wentworth, but you see she did not care for *him!*'

'And she *does* care very much for her—*husband?*' Guy asks, driving the dagger well into his own heart.

'Awfully! Nest is jolly obstinate, you know, and if she had not *wanted* to marry Elmsdale, she would have drowned herself first.'

'Ah!' replies Guy drearily. 'Well, good-bye!'

'Good-bye,' echoes Gus, staring hard at the man's dazed face and odd manner. 'Rum sort of chap that,' he soliloquises, as he watches Guy's receding figure in the wintry gloom. 'And isn't he plain-headed, just! No wonder we called him Beast! He can't hold a candle to my brother—the Marquis of Elmsdale!' he ends pompously.

Then he pulls up his collar and runs home, and tumbles headlong against Maud.

'How awkward you are, Gus! I hate hobble-de-hoys,' she says crossly. 'I wonder what's the good of them?'

'More good than old maids are!' retorts Gus, bristling up with aggressed dignity. 'At anyrate, *I* may be able to get a wife later on; but you will never get anyone to take you for better for worse—not if he knows how much more it will be for *worse!* Nest now, *she* has had lots of offers, and has landed her big fish high and dry, whereas that old sandy-haired Duncan Macpherson—'

But Maud, irritated beyond control, slaps his face, and slams the door as she goes out.

Left alone with an excellent supper, the *debris* of the wedding feast, Gus falls to eating heartily and pondering deeply.

'I wonder if Beast was one of Nest's lovers? She looked uncommonly queer this morning when she gave me that paper for him, and he looked uncommonly queer when he received it. The name of some paltry song does not generally cause such a fuss in most people. Nest has been throwing dust in my eyes, I believe.'

So when Maud comes back, a little later, he ignores the little breeze between them, and questions innocently,—

'Do you happen to know a song called "Too Late," Maud?'

'No!' she snaps—still sore at his impertinent allusion to Duncan.

'Does Nest know a song called "Too Late"?' Guy persists.

Upon this, Maud, who is tired and sleepy, faces him, and replies impatiently.—

'No! she does *not*!'

'Nest *did* throw dust in my eyes,' Gus says to himself on the eve of getting into bed—'but I'll be even with her! Two can play at the same game. I'll write to her to-morrow!'

So he writes—and this is what he says:—

'I gave the name of the song to Trevylian—but he didn't seem to care very much about it.—"Sentimental rubbish," I daresay! "It doesn't much matter being too late for anything, does it, Gus?—so long as one is not too late for one's dinner," he said—and he thought you had done jolly well in becoming Lady Elmsdale.'

But Nest reads this with unbelieving mind.

She could lay her life on Guy's steadfast love,—'*Treu und fest.*'

This is the motto of the Trevylians, and she knows he will act up to it till the end of his days.

Putting Gus's blotted scrawl to her lips, the foolish little woman kisses one word—it is the name of the man whom she still loves—spite of wrong—with all the might and main of her loving young heart. Then she hastily throws the note into the fire, lest her husband shall see it.

Shame at her deceit brings a vivid blush to her cheeks, and the now ever-ready tears to the bonnie brown eyes of other days—and she breathes a vow that henceforth she will try and thrust away all the old thoughts—all the old hopes and longings—and let the dead past bury its dead.

But even as she registers her vow, there is a sad refrain in her heart—

Too late!—Too late!

CHAPTER XXIII.

TWELVE MONTHS OF MATRIMONY

'Where, when the gods would be cruel,
Do they go for a torture, where
Plant thorns, set pain like a jewel?
Ah! not in the flesh—not there!
The racks of earth and the rods
Are weak as foam on the sands—
In the heart is the prey of the Gods
Who crucify hearts, not hands!'

AN apartment that lacks all superfluous luxury, and that is typical of the discomfort often felt in continental life. The locality, however, is thoroughly aristocratic, being within the four walls of the imposing structure on the Place Vendôme known as the Hôtel Bristol.

The *salle à manger* is furnished in the stereotyped fashion of Parisian rooms, with a pair of stiff ormolu candelabra staring you in the face from the high and narrow mantel-shelf, and serving as flanks to a showy gilt time-piece surmounted by an equestrian figure of the first Napoleon. The usual number of sofas and chairs in dingy claret-coloured velvet, with the ordinary amount of hardness about their seats and backs, a marble-topped *escritoire* or two, a cheerless stove, and a great deal of polished floor round a square of carpet. These comprise the inventory of upholstery, but the pleasures of gastronomy are not disregarded; indeed the refectations are admirable.

There is just the proper quantity of black and savoury truffles scattered by a true artiste's hand on the delicate little lamb cutlets. The omelette is faultless, the coffee excellent, and Lady Elmsdale, who presides at this Epicurean repast, in a charming *peignoir* all frilled and furbelowed with rare Mechlin, looks the incarnation of youth and beauty, though her face has lost its '*riante*' cast, and is somewhat *penserosa* in expression.

Lord Elmsdale does not appear to pay much attention, however, to the attraction at the head of the table.

Twelve months of matrimony loitered away in an aimless, objectless sort of fashion in the principal cities abroad, have either brought him that demon of marriage, satiety, or else he has never forgiven and forgotten the undemonstrative white-

facéd girl who sat by his side on the grey wintry day on which he did her the honour of making her his wife.

Anyway it is palpable that his liking for her (if he ever really liked her) has very little sparkle or brightness about it now. It might in fact be pleasanter for her if it even bubbled up occasionally with the effervescence of champagne, instead of presenting a hopelessly sluggish aspect, like the famous waters of Acheron, that are said to kill slowly but surely the foolhardy who approach them, and though depressing and homely aphorisms are unpalatable things to the inveterate novel reader, it may just be remarked that Shakspeare never showed a keener insight to masculine human nature than when he said, 'men are April when they woo, and December when they wed,' and Lord Elmsdale, carrying out his nature this morning, is quite regardless of Nest, though mindful enough of himself.

He has done ample justice to the well-cooked viands, but he still nibbles in a provocative way little atoms of crisp brown toast, while he pores over a sheet of *Galignani*.

Once, when Lady Elmsdale hands him a second cup of coffee, he vouchsafes a silent recognition of her civility by a slight bend of his head, but never so much as notices the laudable attempt at a smile which accompanies her action.

After a little while, he glances carelessly across the table and remarks, in a careless tone,—

'Dennistoun is really quite a tame cat here. I suppose he is making love to you! At any rate you seemed awfully interested in his conversation yesterday!'

Lady Elmsdale in spite of dignity, of *convenance*, is guilty of the rustic crime of blushing, blushing so deeply too that the blush is quite a painful one. She remembers the time perfectly to which her lord and master alludes. It was when Dennistoun was speaking of—Guy.

'Trevylian has gone off to America,' he had said, 'Mrs Lorimer—hateful old woman!—has bowled him over, because he would not marry Mrs Moreton, I suppose. He's regularly down in his luck, poor old Tre! and looked a shadow of himself when I saw him last!'

But though she blushes, a great rush of indignation and surprise makes her answer, in the old wilful defiant fashion of Nest Wylmer :—

'Elmsdale! how *dare* you say such horrid—horrid things! Upon this he looks up, sweeping an eye of astonishment at her vehemence over her.

'I simply observed that Dennistoun was making love to you,'

he repeats slowly, in his habitual drawl, without changing a muscle of his countenance and with his gaze now fixed on a broken egg-shell; 'I did not say you were a responsive party *yet*, Lady Elmsdale! so you need not glare like a tigress!'

Having delivered himself of this, he takes another atom of toast, butters it carefully, and dips once more into his newspaper for little bits of fashionable and sporting gossip, which interest him infinitely more than a good debate or cleverly-penned article. Nest has learned by this time the policy of holding her tongue. Dad has often read out in the shabby old pulpit at Ravenshill that 'a soft answer turneth away wrath,' but up to the time of her ill-starred marriage she has never really marked, learned, and inwardly digested the truth of the golden words.

Not that Elmsdale ever forgets himself and rants and raves like a costermonger, his bluest of blue blood would freeze at such an infringement of dignity; but nasty little waspish things said with patrician languor are quite allowable, and he seldom loses a chance of carrying out his prerogative.

Perhaps, after all, Nest does not care very much in her heart of hearts. She has never loved him, though when the first violence of her feelings regarding her severance from Guy had expended itself, she had tried to love her husband, simply because he *was* her husband.

'I try awfully hard,' she says to herself sometimes with tears in her eyes, and her mouth twitching like a child's, 'but somehow he *won't* let me!'

And it is true, he *won't* let her. Ingratiating and pleasant as he is to most women, Lord Elmsdale is selfish, vain, arrogant, aggressive, and provoking in his home.

But his wife tries to make the best of it. She does not laugh with the sweet, ringing laughter that echoed through the Vicarage walls, making Dad cork his ears, Maud scold angrily, Gus join in chorus, while to the little mother's heart the rippling harmony of it was music of the spheres. Sometimes Nest thinks she has forgotten even how to smile.

She sits now as silent as a mouse, chewing the cud of very little sweet and a very great deal of bitter fancy. It would not be truthful to say that she sits as meek as the traditional lamb, or that she is not feeling hotly rebellious with her husband and her destiny and herself, as she leans back in her chair, toying with a tea-spoon, and making believe that she is as cool as a cucumber; but after a little quiet reflection and one or two uncomfortable sobs that threaten to choke her for swallowing

them, she battles valiantly with her temper, and resolves to conquer it.

'For children you should never let
Your angry passions rise,
Your little hands were never made
To tear each other's eyes.'

How well she recollects the halcyon time when she heard Jack and Jill and Pop and Mop repeating this in a sing-song, snuffly voice, with their fat, fussy hands folded behind them, their pinafores treaclely, and their insignificant little noses uplifted towards the little mother.

But when Nest cools down, she begins to wonder how Elmsdale, if he ever really cared for her, can allude so quietly and indifferently to another man making love to her.

Guy would never have done this.

But she has an unfortunate habit of contrasting Guy with her husband, a habit she rebukes herself for, simply because Elmsdale does not always come out undamaged from the contrast.

Presently she heaves a sigh, which arises from a painful conviction that her praiseworthy desire to adore Elmsdale has a mortal enemy in *himself*.

During her short but triumphant career in Tophet, she had grown accustomed to consider herself the primary object in several men's lives, and it seems unquestionably hard to be treated now like those horrid, stiff-looking candelabra or the marble-topped *escritoire*. Elmsdale certainly pays her no more attention than he does them.

She really *wants* to persuade herself that he cares for her a little, but he is so cold and callous, so aggravating, that she cannot catch hold of one single mental peg about him on which to hang her affection.

His drawing voice reading 'bits' audibly and disjointedly, breaks in upon her cheerless meditations.

'Arrival's at Meurice's—Mr—Mr and Mrs— Oh, Lord and Lady Underhill. I think I'll look them up.'

His tone as he says the last words is the tone of a man truly thankful for a 'break,' an uplifting as it were from a condition of intense boredom, as he pushes back his chair, gives his thin form a stretch, and evinces other premonitory signs of departure.

Lady Elmsdale pricks up her little pink ears.

Underhill—Underhill!

This is surely the name of the tall, handsome woman who wore the lovely dress, like water shimmering under moonbeams, and had wild dew-laden roses trailing all over her! She remembers perfectly now, with the attraction which fine raiment has for the female mind, and then she remembers that it was for the wearer of this dress that Elmsdale had forgotten his engagement for two dances with herself.

But Nest is not jealous—she rather wishes she were. It would at any rate argue an amount of love for him.

She is simply young, inclined for society and society's pleasures, and she exceedingly objects to being left to her own thoughts, which are often traitorous to her notions of wifely duty.

Added to this, she is resolved not to be abandoned to the solitude and general stuffiness of the hotel *salon*.

Stepping swiftly but noiselessly round the table, she pulls *Galignani*, which Elmsdale is looking at again, out of his hand, and seats herself beside him. Her bad temper has vanished, and her eyes and lips have a suspicion of tears and trembling about them.

He does not in the least understand that perfect amicability is meant, and puts down the unshed drops and babyish twitchings at once to bad signs of the times—precursors, in fact of a matrimonial breeze—and prepares to weather it, and to show the weaker vessel that if William and Mary considered it the correct thing to reign conjointly, *Lady* Elmsdale is a very inferior consideration to *Lord* Elmsdale.

He yawns languidly, but she is determined not to notice this little show of indifference.

'You did not mean what you said about Mr Dennistoun, did you, Elmsdale? Surely you could not stand any man making love to me, and all that sort of thing, for, of course, if you *can*, you must be quite indifferent to me.'

She says it quite pathetically, and she *means* to be pathetic too, for she knows that the man whose nature has turned out to be so shallow and cold is her husband, whom she has sworn to hold to for better, for worse.

Elmsdale, leaning back in his chair, regards her not admiringly but wonderingly.

This sort of thing, after twelve months of marriage, is absolutely antediluvian, and will grow into a positive nuisance if not nipped in the bud.

'For goodness' sake, don't be ridiculous, Nest! and don't be a tragedy queen; I abominate it!' he answers fractiously. 'We have been married a deal too long for billing and

cooing. Please do not make me repent having married a school-girl !'

Nest, who a year ago was as proud as Lucifer, and wilful and passionate, and who would have died sooner than submit quietly, does not fly out or take umbrage at these words.

She is only thinking that she deserves it all, for has she not married him, knowing that her whole heart and soul were another man's ?

This grievous wrong towards Elmsdale is for ever in her mind and memory, and it is this that keeps her meek and forbearing under the mortification it pleases him to inflict.

'The fact is that you expect too much attention, Nest. You were spoilt, I believe, by all the highly-flavoured, passionate nonsense that idiot Trevylian regaled you with !'

She starts at his sudden utterance of the name, and flushes crimson as she notes that Elmsdale has seen her start ; and yet she should be accustomed to hearing Guy's name mentioned jeeringly, for, as has been said before, Elmsdale is of a very unforgiving character, and he remembers but too well, now, several occasions on which Nest, in her maiden days, showed a preference for Guy's society.

There is nothing in her married life that hurts her more than these sneering allusions to the man whom she has never really ceased to love, with the first passionate love of her life.

Already, alas ! repentance that she did not live on in solitary blessedness, begins often to rear its snaky crest, and she weeps bitterly over her rashness in linking herself as she has done ; but before they have arrived at one score women are more mercurial than hypochondriacal, and are apt to accept life as cheerfully as they can.

Elmsdale's taunt has gone home to her heart and hurt her ; but she chases away the feeling of resentment it has created, and says pleasantly,—

'I don't know about billing and cooing, but I do want you to care a little about me, and I *don't* want to be left to myself for hours and hours while you go and talk to *that* Lady Underhill !'

'Why what on earth has she done to provoke your wrath ?' he asks, looking at her in amazement, and colouring a little, in case she, as well as the rest of the world, knows that among the chronicles of Elmsdale many pages are devoted to the name of Gladys Lady Underhill.

'She made you forget the waltzes that you were engaged to me !' Nest says haughtily.

'Pshaw !'

‘Well, never mind about that. Don’t go out, Elmsdale, or, if you do, take me with you. I want to see a lot of pictures in the Louvre which we had not time to look at the other day, and this hotel is so dull, I shall die if I stay here all day alone!’ Lady Elmsdale cries, *les larmes au voix*.

‘Send for Dennistoun to enliven you, my dear child,’ her husband replies carelessly. ‘He will do for a *pis aller* since you can’t get Trevylian!’ and taking his hat he saunters from the room.

Nest flings herself on an uncomfortably hard sofa, and burying her face in a cushion, gives way to childish tears. Then she sits up, and wipes her eyes, and looks round hopelessly.

The room is quite oppressive in its loneliness, and formality, and silence. Outside, the sun is shining down brightly on the white houses, and the streets are thronged with people, all more or less with cheerful faces. The very contrast between internals and externals makes the former unbearable.

Nest walks up and down the room for a few minutes, then she stands still, clasping her hands above her head.

‘I can’t bear it! I can’t bear it!’ she says, with a little sob. ‘What *is* to become of me? If Elmsdale would only let me love him a little, just a very little, so that I might forget—*Guy!* But *why* should I forget *Guy?*’ she goes on passionately. ‘After all, the only happiness I have is in remembering him—in recalling his words, and looks, and—kisses! No, no, *I dare not think of them!* the thoughts would make me thrust aside everything—*everything!*—just to feel them once more—only once more! Ah!’ she starts, and her hands drop nervelessly down, ‘I must try and make Elmsdale care for me, it is only to keep me out of temptation, out of—*sin*, perhaps!’

CHAPTER XXIV.

LADY UNDERHILL.

'O, la belle statue! Oh, le beau pedestal!
Les vertus sont à pied, le vice est à cheval!'

No imagination, be it ever so fertile and glowing, can picture this nineteenth century as the golden days of Astræa.

If the resuscitation of that renowned virgin was within the limits of possibility, there is very little doubt but that she would be quickly driven up again to the happy hunting fields, by the infinity of evil which she would find in this world of ours.

It sounds rather like a homily, the commencement of this chapter, and homilies have a dull sound in them which makes them unacceptable in light fiction, so *revenons à nos moutons*, and it is a matter of regret that some of them are black ones.

If the imp Curiosity makes bold to peep into a room in another hotel in Paris, its Argus eyes may note two forms, male and female, seated side by side, and if an astronomical expression *can* be used in such a case, 'cycle and epicycle,' or orb in orb.

These two are Gladys—Lady Underhill—and her quasi-admirer, Lord Elmsdale.

Her tongue wags swiftly, and her glance expresses eloquently that the object she addresses owns a corner still in her heart—*i. e.*, if women of the world have hearts—but the bright eyes of her companion rest more reflectively than warmly on the face beside him.

Elmsdale is thinking that grim old Father Time, so often cruel, even ruthless in his ravages, has dealt very gently on this woman's face, leaving no wrinkles or furrows to speak of on cheek and brow.

She is still wonderfully fair to look upon, although 'Burke' might reveal the fact that the first flush of youth is over, and a good many summers and winters have rolled their course since she first opened her great eyes on this earth.

To say that Lady Underhill is what the French call *très bien conservée*, would be a libel on her, for that phrase at once suggests the crime of being *passée*.

Hers is just the peculiar style of loveliness that inflamed the brain of Rubens, and would have driven Lely into lunacy.

A very tall woman, with a form like a rich column of beauty—everything about her gives an idea of massiveness, commencing from the crown of her head, wreathed round with cable-like coils of lustrous brown hair, her marble pillar of a throat, her magnificent shoulders, down to the rather ponderous foot that shows from under her trailing skirt. Her eyes are well open, her lips are ruby and full, and her whole countenance, when in repose, is a splendid 'blank.'

She is a big soft woman, and marvellously to the taste of those few (happily) who are lovers of the base material, and to whom flesh and blood in redundancy, and a healthy, strong, well-developed *physique*, are all in all; but she is also a woman whose features display no gleam of mind, and whose anatomy is deficient, since it lacks a soul and a heart.

She is charming to look at, of course, but in the very contemplation of her beauty there is a certain dissatisfaction, as if something is terribly wanting; and all her attractions are purely physical, without a vestige of that spiritualism which, after all, is the sole and *true* beauty in woman, and without which, even a sensualist tires after a little while.

'This is our first *rencontre* since you married, Elm—Lord Elmsdale,' she corrects herself hastily. 'Do you know that I have had a sort of presentiment that we should never—*never* be alone again together!'

And Lady Underhill fays enormous stress on the tautological 'never,' and piles on the pathos with a master hand, while her resonant voice softens, and she calls up as much expression as she can into her uplifted eyes. Then she looks downward at the patent leather tip of her perfect boot, and sighs just a little.

Elmsdale is quite accustomed to this sort of thing. He knows all the tricks and shams of coquetry *au bout des ongles*, and he is as great an adept in the game of prettily put cross-questions and crooked answers, defined by the name of flirtation, as she is.

Paris is dull to extinction. The fashionables are still lounging and bathing and gossiping at Trouville and Deauville. The autumnal weather is gloomy and hopelessly wet, and the hours drag.

After all, even if he *is* married, a little platonic love-making is no harm. So he takes a plump white hand and murmurs quite deprecatingly,—

'And why should you have imagined for one moment that our long-trying friendship should have any break?'

'I don't know. Perhaps it was foolish of me to think so, or to think about it at all in fact,' she answers, with studied *naïveté*. 'It may be that I feared a great obstacle to our friendship would be your wife. Tell me, are you still in love with Lady Elmsdale?'

It is rather a startling query, and he shrinks a little from replying. He is not only rather puzzled at the answer he should give, but he is annoyed that she should have put him to the obligation of answering her.

Besides this, it appears to him that the question verges on impertinence, and he is more tenacious than most men of any remarks that border on a familiar character of himself and his feelings, but above all he feels that Lady Underhill has raised a question in his own mind that he cannot answer satisfactorily.

Does he, or does he not, love his wife?

He could not solve his own doubts on this really momentous subject, and come to a just conclusion so easily as he could solve an abstruse problem in Euclid, and yet he is not an able mathematician by any means.

It seems very early days to repudiate love for Nest, even though his liking for her may have been a mushroom in its birth, and have come to an untimely end. In fact it would be bad form to do so, though at the same time he objects to own to anything half so absurd as a passion for his own wife.

This latter feeling of false sentiment conquers.

'In love with Lady Elmsdale! How can you, with all your boasted knowledge of *our* world, image me to be guilty of such ridiculous folly, even vulgarity. We leave Darbys and Joans to our grocers and butchers, don't you know! You really deserve a retort, by the right of "*lex talionis*." Shall I accuse you of such a crime against the *convenances* as being enamoured of Underhill?'

His lip curls a little, and though she knows no more than a babe unborn the meaning of his scrap of Latin, she quite understands his sarcasm, and has the grace to colour a little.

'Am I to make Lady Elmsdale's acquaintance?' she asks suddenly, taking him aback.

But only for a second, then he says, carelessly,—

'Perhaps it would be better not, don't you know! She is rather peculiar in her likes and dislikes.'

'Which means to say—'

'That she does not like *you*!' he murmurs languidly.

'Really! and—why?'

'Because she has heard that you like *me!*' he answers, with quiet conceit.

'By-the-way, was there not some scandal about her and Guy Trevelyian? I forget, was the affair before or *after* her marriage? I have been absent from England, you know, and am not well up in town gossip.'

She says it all so innocently—looking up at him with her big eyes, and with a hypocritical frankness on her face.

The fact is she has put on her (mental) boxing-gloves. And, as she sees the frown on his forehead, she feels an inexpressibly comforting little thrill that she has hit him hard—given him one for the many she owes him.

'Gladys!' he cries wrathfully, dropping her title and his own languid drawl, 'I came here to see you with perfectly amicable feelings. It depends entirely on you whether I leave here in the same spirit, or if our acquaintance ends. If you care to see me, Lady Elmsdale must be a forbidden subject between us! She is a great deal too good to be discussed between us, don't you know! and to have her name soiled by the dirt which we are accustomed to have flung at us! And even if she was not what she is—she is *my* wife, and must be respected accordingly. A shaft at her strikes me, and you must surely know me well enough to be aware that I don't brook insult or injury quietly. Now, Gladys, I've had my say. It is for you to decide whether it is war between us or peace!'

Even *her* courage, and she has lived too long in the world to be easily frightened, quails at the unusual glitter in his eyes, and the dark red spot that burns on his cheek. She is a little bit afraid of this man, whom she still likes, but of whose forbearance and chivalry she has not much opinion, and Lady Underhill lives for 'Society'—Society, that ruthless Juggernaut, that tramples under it its most obsequious slaves.

As for the man's sense of honour preventing him from betraying the secrets of the prison house—she laughs bitterly within herself as she thinks how vain would be her trust in such a broken reed—men of Lord Elmsdale's rank are so often minus the fine sense of honour that characterises many of a lower status in Society.

It may be that aristocrats are bred up to live so much for themselves that they lose the attributes of high birth, chivalry, and refinement, in the feelings of egotism and undue opinion of themselves and their elevated position.

Lady Underhill, in fact, likes Lord Elmsdale, but she has

no respect for him, and without 'respect' the feelings of a woman for a man are worthless. She thinks a great deal of the world too, and of what her world says, so she puts her pride into her pocket and answers sweetly,—

'Peace, of course, Elmsdale! You cannot doubt that I feel kindly towards you, if it's only for the sake of "Auld lang syne!" Don't you know that I would never do anything intentionally to vex you? If I have said a word you dislike, forgive me, and I'll never do so any more! Lady Elmsdale is very likely an angel of purity and goodness, and I ought to have remembered that this naughty world might scandalise her as it does most of us!'

Elmsdale unmistakably winces as she says 'us.'

He may not care for his wife, but there are very few Englishmen who will not uphold their wives even while they hate them. And he resents Nest being put into the same category as this woman, dear as she has been to him—fair as she still may be—but he holds his tongue, out of discretion, and allows her to continue glibly,—

'We will talk only of our two selves, and of the old days; that is *sure* to be a pleasant theme! And, Elmsdale, *do* let us forget that you have a wife, even if she be perfection!'

'Yes!' he replies, not altogether loth to accept the flag of truce from so charming an enemy. Lady Underhill is certainly very attractive, and a short armistice will not be amiss after all this skirmishing and sharp-shooting; 'I quite agree with you, let us talk of the dear old days, and forget everything unpleasant, don't you know!'

Just at this moment Lady Elmsdale, lying in her white *peignoir*, and with long dishevelled hair, on the hard sofa in the Hôtel Bristol, wonders—with a hopeless little face—what she can do to make her husband care for her, if it's ever so little!

CHAPTER XXV.

MONACO.

'Gold—gold—gold!
Bright and yellow, hard and cold!'

WHO does not know Monaco? with its chambers of rack and torture, its gaming saloons, with their elaborately gilded and porphyried walls and ceilings, with semi-draped Cupids and Venuses, and 'cherubs sitting up aloft,' and who is not more or less familiar with the physiognomies of the *habitués* that swarm like greedy and hungry flies over the *tapis vert*?

There is a broken-down, out-at-elbows British M.P. or J.P., or a shabby-looking luminary of the Church of England, considerably the worse in appearance and morals for evil associates and unhealthy occupation.

And here are unwashed, unkempt professors of '*trente et quarante*,' and '*roulette*,' with their well-thumbed cards and monster marking pins; sallow Poles, and olive-skinned Spaniards with hungry eyes; Israelites *with* guile and a deal of hirsute adornment; a few pompous Russians, rich in bank-notes and glittering *rouleaux*; and a sprinkling of that very unmistakable type—'tourist,' tweed-suited and rosy-faced—'Brown, Jones, and Robinson doing the Continent.'

It is not an inviting sketch of the company, and one that is far from the surroundings our insular notions of propriety would choose for a lady—but, notwithstanding, it is here that Lord Elmsdale has elected to locate his wife.

He had wearied of Paris very soon after his first meeting with the Underhills, and, in spite of her efforts to enchain him, Lady Underhill's attractions had proved futile to detain him.

So she has followed him.

Elmsdale is so thoroughly *blasé* in all his tastes and feelings, and so devoid of honest and healthy aspirations, that, although eternally in pursuit of some new excitement, nothing seems potent enough to pull him up to 'the mark,' a result for which he perpetually craves. He is dreadfully disappointed in his wife, and disappointment renders him morose; his temper grows more arrogant and aggravating daily, and is in strange contrast to the nonchalance that distinguished him when a bachelor.

It may be that he is no longer absolutely master of his own

movements, and it chafes his imperious spirit to be forced to sacrifice his own inclinations to circumstances.

Before he married, he had no one to study. Self was the god to whom he bowed down, so now the most trivial contrariety tries him, and nothing had irritated him more than having to linger on in Paris just because—in the name of all that was unlucky and ill-timed—the advent of his first-born was at hand.

The event once over, and Lady Elmsdale partially reinstated in health and strength, he made a rush to Monaco, leaving her to follow.

Truth to say, Lady Elmsdale did not hurry her movements.

Through the long days she lay—white and prostrate, but ever so much happier than she had been all through her married life, with a great well of pleasure in her full heart, and incessant work for her eyes in watching the precious atom of humanity that had recently put in an appearance in this vale of tears.

She had not had much sympathy from her husband. Just for a minute or two, for the sake of 'appearances,' he had sauntered into the room, but barely noticed the important occupant of the cradle, enshrouded in all the finery of azure and lace.

But, fortunately, Nest seemed to have no leisure at this time to fret about his indifference.

When she and baby were sufficiently up to travelling, she came to Monaco to find Elmsdale plunged headlong into a vortex of play, and, from the hour when the game begins, to the time when the rooms close for the night, he rarely quits the fascinating tables, except to snatch a hurried meal, and even to this he goes reluctantly, though, up to this period, he has been a bit of a *bon vivant*.

Meanwhile, Lady Elmsdale leads as dull and monotonous a life as if Fate had deposited her in Sahara, instead of in an exceptionally gay and fashionable spot. But, with her child to amuse her and occupy her time, she never dreams of demurring, and submits good-temperedly to her husband's mandate that she should refrain from entering the gambling rooms.

She never guesses that his motive for this is an unwillingness that she should be an eye-witness of the immense sums of money he daily loses.

Three whole weeks Nest obeys him implicitly, and confines herself to the lovely gardens of the hotel, but, one day, her anxious eyes detect an unwonted flush on the puffy little cheek of baby, and his small palms seem to burn like molten fire. So,

forgetful of Elmsdale's injunctions, she flies in search of him as the legitimate partner in her joys and woes.

The game is high, and the crowd intense. A Pole who has gained unenviable notoriety by his success in other days at the German Bads, is staking the maximum on the table with appalling *sang froid*, and the exciting sight has collected together the visitors from Nice and its environs, intent on watching the desperate struggle between a foolhardy mortal and fickle Dame Fortune.

Breathless and rather nervous, Lady Elmsdale creeps noiselessly into the door of the huge *salle*, and glides through the mass of people. Her slight and symmetrical figure is garbed in a quiet dress of the hue of a dead leaf, and a black lace hat droops over her large roving eyes, and over cheeks flushed into damask roses.

She glances hither and thither, trying to discover the whereabouts of her husband through the triple, nay, the quadruple row of spectators, that, like a human wall, conceal the players from her view, and she is on the point of turning away hopelessly, when a voice in English pronounces her name.

Looking up, she sees Oswald Dennistoun, with a very unmistakable expression of pleasure in his eyes at the meeting.

But Nest feels much too miserable and anxious about the child, to notice his look, or to respond heartily to his greeting, and Dennistoun, mortified at her manner, moves away, when she suddenly lays her hand on his arm.

'Find Elmsdale for me!' she says hurriedly.

Almost before her words are spoken, Dennistoun spies over the heads of the bystanders Elmsdale's face, and discovers, at the same time, that Elmsdale's right-hand neighbour is Lady Underhill.

He hardly likes to pilot Nest, whom he has placed on a pedestal of purity, towards the pair, but, under the circumstances, it seems unavoidable, so he wades with his charge through the crowd. Elmsdale sits between Lady Underhill and an old professor of the game. Lady Underhill presents a very full-blown appearance, that certainly detracts from her beauty, and Nest, staring at her, mutters audibly, in her old wilful way,—

'I hate that woman!'

Lady Underhill, however, unconscious of the scorn in the big brown eyes, puts forth her greatest power of fascination on her *voisin*, but her efforts are wasted, for Elmsdale undisguisedly regards her and all the rest of the motley crew with supreme indifference.

He sits well forward in his chair, eschewing elegance, and resting both elbows on the table; altogether, he is far less *soigné* than is his wont.

As a rule, he is almost too particular in the minutiae of toilette, but now his fair hair is all ruffled and pushed carelessly off his hot forehead, his lips are nearly colourless, and set angrily together, and his eyes are riveted on a mass of glittering louis that lie on the cloth just before him.

He has been losing both his money and his temper all the morning, and hoping each moment to retrieve the former, but each successive deal has turned up worse than the last, for the 'system' he is pertinaciously playing, and the pile of gold on the table is in a fair way to be swallowed up by the rapacious bank.

He is so completely absorbed in the game, that his wife's proximity remains unnoticed. Besides, he would as soon think of looking for a needle in a bundle of hay, as for Lady Elmsdale's presence anywhere that he has forbidden her coming. Petruccio has taught Katherine obedience too well for this.

'How often has the black won?' he asks, in a vague and general sort of way.

'Eight times the black made us win, but the *serie* last no more, no more!' answers the shabby old professor on his left, shaking his grizzly head over his well-thumbed card.

'Then, by Jove, I'll go in for a ninth black! There's luck in odd numbers!'

And Elmsdale nods an affirmative as a sleek-faced croupier near him touches the gold with,—

'Tout va à la masse.'

'Elmsdale, don't be so foolish,' Nest whispers, over his shoulder. 'It's positively wicked to risk such a sum!'

He looks up at her, with intense surprise and annoyance written on his features.

'Be quiet, will you?' is the rough and muttered response she receives, and with an impatient gesture he turns away his head.

'Quarante!'

A low and hoarse murmur of discontent rises up from the backers of the black.

'Quarante après!'

And the dealer glances round with an affable smile at the disappointed partisans of the red.

'The devil!' ejaculates Elmsdale.

He leans right over the table, eagerly scanning the cards as they turn up one by one. Then he hastily pulls another *rouleau*

of louis from his pocket and adds it to the stake already before him.

He feels perfectly certain of winning this time, and a bright exultant expression rapidly crosses his face as he eyes the heap of bank-notes that the usually lucky Pole has placed on the black.

'Quarante!—Trois—Rouge gagne et la couleur!'

And Elmsdale's mass is quickly swept away.

'Curse it!' he hisses from between his teeth, and then he turns to the first legitimate object he can find upon whom to pour out the vials of his wrath.

'I believe *you* brought this confounded ill luck,' he says, glaring round, and forgetting in his irritation that there are witnesses. 'What are you doing here, Lady Elmsdale, when I have expressly forbidden you to enter this room?'

Nest trembles and grows red and pale alternately as she hearkens, and sees smiles on one or two women's faces. They are such dreadful faces, too, she thinks, so painted and so bold. It is the first time she has been in such a sink of iniquity in her young life, and she resolves it shall be the last.

'Elmsdale, do take me out of this horrible place,' she whispers imploringly. 'These people are laughing at me!'

'No, I can't. The place suits *me* well enough, and you need not put yourself into the way of insolence if you don't like it. I told you not to come here. You had better go home!'

And utterly callous, according to his nature, he turns his back on her, and taking out a purse begins a fresh contest with fortune.

'I cannot go home without you,' Nest murmurs, with tears in her pretty eyes, although she contrives not to let them fall, out of pride and shame. 'I only came to fetch you because baby is so ill, and I am frightened to death about him. *Please* come with me, Elmsdale.'

Not a feature of his cold face softens as she speaks, and there is nothing but an expression of annoyance to be traced on it.

'I *cannot* come! The child is right enough; but your ridiculous fears exaggerate every paltry ailment into a dangerous one. Now go home, there's a good girl,' and he begins playing in a small way.

She stands very pale and irresolute, inclined to leave a place at once where she is subjected to insult and vexation. She is in reality rather in awe of her husband, although she hardly knows it herself, and the sight of his puckered brow and glittering eyes makes her heart sink and her pulse beat

quicker than is pleasant. And somehow since her marriage she has lost a great deal of the 'pluck' which was Gus's especial admiration.

Suddenly looking up she catches Lady Underhill's glance with a wicked little gleam of triumph in it, and this at once goads her on to another effort to have her own way.

'The child *is* ill, Elmsdale, and you *must* come home!' she says hastily, but with all the determination she can call up, and Elmsdale, at once taking in the unusually imperious accents, loses all patience.

By all that is absurd, he wonders, is this quiet, submissive little creature he has prided himself on having tamed so completely, beginning to show spirit and—henpeck?

The game has left off the zig-zag tendency it has shown all day, and is apparently going evenly at last—an opportunity for regaining his severe losses, and even for revenging himself on the bank, seems to present itself—and he is expected to sacrifice the good the gods are holding out to him, just for the sole purpose of soothing a silly little school-girl's ridiculous fears, and watching like a monthly nurse over a peevish infant. It is really too much.

'I shall not move from this at present, and it is useless your waiting for me,' is all he answers; but there is a certain concentration in his voice that speaks volumes, and a peculiar pallor that wrath always imparts to his face, and Lady Elmsdale has learnt to know it and to dread it.

It is not that she is actually frightened of him, for he is not brutal, though he is unkind; but it all makes her life so very unpleasant.

For a moment he bends over his card as if examining it, the next instant he raises his head, and with a forced smile says quite pleasantly,—

'I say, Dennistoun, you are not playing, just pilot Lady Elmsdale through this confounded room, there's a good fellow!'

And Nest, sick with mortification, quietly takes the arm Dennistoun offers and walks to her hotel in silence, never so much as thanking him for his escort—she scarcely recollects the man's proximity even. Her heart sinks horribly at her husband's treatment, and her cheeks burn with shame as she thinks how pitifully small she must have looked in the eyes of that woman—Lady Underhill! Reaching the hotel she disengages her arm from Dennistoun, and with a slight inclination of her head by way of adieu, runs upstairs to her child.

Dennistoun stands still for a minute or two watching her slender figure, then he looks round furtively to note if there

are witnesses to any folly he may perpetrate. But finding himself master of all he surveys, this stalwart young guardsman of six-feet-two in his stockings, blushing like a girl, raises his coat-sleeve just where Lady Elmsdale's little hand has rested, and kisses the insensate cloth reverentially. Then he stoops, and picking up a sprig of scarlet geranium she has dropped from her bosom, he places it as carefully in his pocket-book as though it were a *billet de banque* worth having. He is not only madly in love, but for the first time in his life passion is subservient to love, and though he commits one of the sins in the Decalogue, and covets his neighbour's wife, it is with as pure a feeling as he would have for his sister.

CHAPTER XXVI.

L'AMOUR ET LA FUMÉE NE PEUVENT SE CACHER.

' Mised by fancy's meteor ray,
By passion driven,
But yet the light that led astray
Was light from Heaven !'

BABY' grows no worse, but neither does he grow any better, as the days fly past, yet seem to lag wearily to Lady Elmsdale in her anxiety.

It seems as if the child, without suffering from any especial ailment that the best medical talent can discover, is yet determined not to thrive, in spite of the love and care lavished upon it; the tiny face grows tinier, and over it his mother sheds floods of tears. She does not care for her husband, principally because he will not let her, but 'Baby' has crept into her very life. He had come to her like a ray of sunshine just in the very time when, sorely disappointed in Elmsdale, her soul, with a sad aching void within, craved for something on which she could legitimately pour out its tenderness—something that would smile and be happy, fostered by her deep love—something that would not fling back her feelings on herself as coldly and carelessly as her husband always did.

These 'baby fingers—waxen touches,' as someone has

prettily called them, have been balm to her wounded spirit many a time, and she has turned away weary and hopeless after one of Elmsdale's cutting speeches to find comfort and happiness in the clinging clasp of two little weak arms, and now she sits and watches her child by the hour, forgetting physical fatigue and food.

While her mind is racked by anxiety, she fancies she sees her little ray of sunshine fading gradually away further and further, until soon it will be quite out of sight and reach.

There is inexpressible agony in this thought, and often catching him up from the cradle, she holds him tightly to her, and dropping on her knees, her pale lips send up a fervent prayer that God will spare this little life, an unspeakable boon to her!

While he sleeps, she bends over him, scanning his features one by one, with eager eyes. This tiny atom, which is of no account to anyone else, is her whole existence, and she clings to it with all the tenacity that a drowning man clings to a straw. Even Guy Trevelyian's image has been partially erased by the small fussy face and insignificant form of—*Baby!*

A whole month at Monte Carlo. She has scarcely ventured out of her own private apartments at the hotel, or spoken to a human creature save the French *bonne*, or a word or two exchanged with Elmsdale, late at night on his return home, or in the early morning before he sallies out to the Kursaal.

And Nest, who used to declare to Dal Wentworth that she had not had a bit her proper share in the pomps and vanities and sinful lusts, is in point of society as well off as if she were in a convent; but, taken up with maternal anxieties, she has no desire to see or be seen.

Only a little more than eighteen, the sweet but solemn burthen of 'mother-love' has come to her in weightier measure than it comes often to women of riper years, and it has sobered her before her time. She has lost a good deal of that 'sparkle' that to some people had constituted her chief charm. Her face is thin and pale, and her figure slighter than ever; but it is a long time before Elmsdale's selfish eyes perceive the alteration, and even when they do, it does not appear as if his heart suffers any remorse for his daily neglect. The truth is, alas! that he only married her to satisfy an ephemeral liking, mingled with a petty desire to carry her off from her other admirers.

It is impossible for him, with the feelings he has now for

his wife, to sacrifice himself on her account. He knows that, born and bred as she has been in the country, fresh air and exercise are essentials to her. Yet he never thinks of giving up his diurnal pursuits for the sake of bringing back the wild-rose bloom to the cheeks of the poor little lonely woman, pining in her grand luxurious apartments for want of common care and attention.

All the time he has from gambling he devotes to Lady Underhill, whose husband, never too fond of his wife's society, has left her at Monaco, satisfied with her excuse of some imaginary ailment, with a Latin name, for which this especial climate is necessary.

It is just in the full swing of the season, and Monte Carlo is thronged by beauties of the *grande monde* and *demi monde* and notoriety from all quarters of the globe, but, casting into the shade much younger women, Lady Underhill holds her own as the 'Belle,' with her massive good looks, and a series of exquisite toilettes which Worth and Pingat have furnished.

To none of her worshippers is she so amiable as to Elmsdale, probably because he shows no particular ardour in the attention he pays her. His feelings, as a fact, are not really interested, although he is undeniably flattered at being singled out as the favourite among a host. He never seeks a place by her side, but he lets himself be installed there by her diplomacy, while in his heart he really holds her somewhat in contempt, for, being a thorough worldling himself, he fully understands a mind akin to his own.

It is, however, to say the least, derogatory to his wife, to *afficher* himself as he does with Lady Underhill, and if he had a spark of wholesome or moral sentiment about him he would recognise the error of his ways. As it is, it never enters his brain to do anything but what pleases him for the moment.

After awhile, however, Nest's impaired health forces on him a pang of compunction. Brute as he may be—and though brute is a strong word it is often applicable to the aristocracy—he would be more than mortal man if he shut his eyes obstinately to the fact that he is in a fair way to commit 'woman-slaughter,' so he makes a compromise between his conscience and his inclination.

He knows that the wife he neglects and bullies—as much, though in more polite terms—as any costermonger, is as good as gold and as pure as a pearl; and that though she may not adore him to the extent he considers him entitled to be adored,

that she will never by word or look or deed dishonour the patrician name he has deigned to bestow on her.

But with this conviction, he also knows that Oswald Dennistoun admires her immensely, and that possibly, even probably, according to the manners and customs of the century, he will let that admiration find speech at the first favourable opportunity.

The compact then that Elmsdale makes with himself is a dishonourable one ; for instead of sacrificing himself to guard his wife from a breath of evil, he prefers throwing her into danger, and letting her ears be sullied by a declaration of love from another man.

He forgets or chooses to ignore that 'he comes too near who comes to be denied,' so from him emanates the proposition that Dennistoun, who professes at this time a wholesome horror of gambling, shall become Lady Elmsdale's cavalier when she goes out to take the air, and Dennistoun, but too well content at the prospect, takes care to throw no obstacle in the way.

The feelings with which Nest has inspired him are a curious mixture.

Up to this time he has run through more feverish fancies than most of his sex. He has never rightly understood even the meaning of that divine folly that men call 'love.' But a short while back he would have laughed at the notion of his falling prone under the influence of a strong attachment to a good and pure woman, in whose presence he feels he would rather die than utter a word that could offend the most fastidious delicacy.

And now it quite suffices for this good-looking young guardsman to be let look at Lady Elmsdale, and to speak to her alone and unfettered by the eyes or ears of other people. He knows that if a casual glance from her, or an accidental touch of her hand brings the hot blood flaming in his cheek, that at any rate there will be no one by to sneer at his weakness or laugh at his folly. He is dreadfully afraid of the world's laugh, and like many of his sex looks upon the world's laugh as a much more important thing than it really is.

It may be wrong for him to yield himself up to a passion for a married woman, but it has worked him good to a certain extent, for it has changed his nature as a serpent changes his skin. In the far healthier atmosphere he breathes in Lady Elmsdale's society, the noxious one in which he has lived fast loses its influence over him. He already begins to see more clearly right from wrong, and ceases to palliate evil with false reasoning.

He is not even ashamed now to own to the possession of that which is so unfashionable—a *conscience*.

In fact he has become a thinking man, lifted out of the old self of foppery, conceit, and egregious folly by the mighty power of a genuine love, which, flanked by honour and guarded by delicacy, scarcely deserves the name of sin.

Lady Elmsdale, who is young and innocent, and still very girlish in her tastes and feelings, and who has as much idea of evil as the babe unborn, agrees willingly to anything that may 'distract' her for a little while.

Lulled in security, for no one could keep a greater guard over eyes and tongue than Dennistoun does just now—though how long this will last is slightly problematical—Nest's spirits grow lighter and her face sparkles up now and then as of old, though matrimony with its knocks and brunts has taken the ringing laughter away from her lips. And under this change, which Dennistoun at once attributes to his society, instead of the sunshine and flowers and all other things of the sort that women of her kind care for, he longs to learn, if by any possible chance, she has begun to like him. Not as he cares for her—that would be impossible, the impulsive young lover believes—but still *just a little*.

Of course it is not within the limits of probability that a man of his calibre should keep up the deference and reserve he had sketched out for himself, so one day he escorts Lady Elmsdale to Nice, and when she has done her shopping—a work which seems to him interminable, what with the frocks and wraps and sashes and toys, that belong to the kingdom of babyhood—they stroll along side by side.

Right away to westward the pale red beams of the setting sun cast a pink flush on her cheek, and she looks once more like the girl with whom he had waltzed time after time in those halcyon days of her—freedom.

She was not Lady Elmsdale then, she had not secured the match of the season, and become a peeress of the realm. No, she was only Miss Wylmer—'little Wylmer' according to the sobriquet Mrs Lorimer had given her—yet there and then he had learnt to look upon her as the jolliest, loveliest girl he had ever met. It wouldn't have mattered in those days to have told her how much he loved her—but *now!*

Well, he rather shrinks from the experiment, for he knows a rebuff will hurt him awfully.

Still, as the daybeams decline, and shadows come slanting across their path, Dennistoun's courage seems to lift its crest

higher. He turns and looks at her, and feels his hardihood certainly waver as the frank, dark eyes return his gaze pleasantly and with childlike innocence.

But an evil spirit tempts him on, so suddenly he seizes her hand, regarding her steadily for a moment in silence, while she stares back at him in wonderment, but with no suspicion in her look—flirtation, much less sin, is far from her thoughts. Her whole soul is—Guy's—her fealty and honour—her husband's. And it never strikes her that she has reached the prologue of a thrilling drama of pathos and passion.

She lets him retain his clasp, and does not even try and shake it off. But before, in her amazement at his manner, she has time to question him, he begins to speak, and the words that fall volubly from him come on her like a thunderbolt.

'Fast' she has never been in her young life—'Flirt,' she undoubtedly was—but since that last bitter farewell to Guy Trevylian on the dear old familiar ridge, all the levity, if such a word can be used, is gone out of her.

So now, this young fellow's passion or pathos do not move her even to pity, and she shivers and shrinks away from him in undisguised annoyance.

There is no affectation in this. Those women who have loved as Lady Elmsdale loved Guy Trevylian, will understand at once the feeling that makes her experience positive pain at the words of passion from another man's lips. Has she so wickedly displayed her lack of affection for her husband, she wonders, that Dennistoun should presume to talk to her thus—not only avowing his love, but asking for a return! She feels indignant and ashamed, and longs to run away before she hears all it is his pleasure to say.

'Lady Elmsdale!—*Nest!*'

She flashes an angry look at him as he utters her Christian name, but in the torrent of his feelings Dennistoun does not notice this.

'We may not be alone again for ages. Forgive me if I am wrong—if I vex you—but I cannot help it! I *must* tell you that I love you—that I never loved anyone till I met you—that I shall never love anyone but you while I live!'

And he, with both her hands held tightly in his, breathless and frightened at his own temerity, bends imploring eyes on her sweet face and tries to find some compassion, some relenting in the features that look so proud and white in the shimmering dusk—but in vain. There is no sign of softening, no single line of indecision to be read in the scornful curl of the pretty red lips, and in the gleam of anger in the brown, startled

eyes, while the small hands wrench themselves out of his grasp as if it stung like a serpent.

There is not a scrap of acting, not the veriest attempt at prudery, and he feels at once that his touch is hateful to her, and his words an insult she will not easily forgive or forget.

'You are angry with me! you hate me!' he cries bitterly. 'I know now that I have been a dolt—an idiot! that you have only regarded me as an acquaintance—a useful one!'

His heart swells with mortification and vexation, but all the same he loves her more even in her virtue and disdain than he did before. One conciliatory word, one coquettish glance would at once cure him. It would place her on a level with most women of his class, but now he thinks he would give half his life for the guerdon of one forgiving look, for an assurance, ever so slight, that though he has behaved like a madman, he has not quite forfeited her liking or respect.

'Do speak to me, Lady Elmsdale! I implore you! Tell me if I have offended you beyond recall! Speak my pardon, if you can bring yourself to say nothing kinder. You don't know how awfully mean and pitiful I feel at having taken advantage of your goodness in entrusting yourself to my care! I swear, by my love for you, that I will never breathe another word that all the world may not hear!'

She draws a deep breath and regards him quietly.

She is not much of a judge of human nature, but somehow the conviction is carried home to her, that this man has not been so bad as to presume upon a *l'le-à-l'le*, but rather he has been led away by a foolish impulse. His real contrition can be traced on his frank, Saxon face, and in the increased respect of his manner.

She cannot help feeling a little sorry that he has been so impulsive—both for his sake and her own—and with an innate feeling of delicacy, that revolts from treating as serious a subject she shrinks from touching on, she tries to take it all as a mistake.

'I forgive you, Mr Dennistoun! You have been joking I am sure,' she falters, forcing a little laugh to hide her embarrassment, but she catches sight of his pained face, and her attempt at hilarity goes to the wall.

'It is I who am to blame in the matter and not you, I am afraid,' she goes on gently; 'you see, I must have been very foolish and indiscreet for you to imagine that flirtation, however harmless, is in my line! Any encouragement you may have fancied has been quite involuntary on my part, for indeed I have never dreamt of doing or saying anything to mislead you.'

I am an old married woman now !' continues Nest gravely, really feeling as if she were as old as Mount Horeb, 'and I am quite countrified and unfashionable enough to confess that I don't think married women ought to flirt—the very slightest in the world ! We will forget all about this evening and be careful to avoid dangerous conversation in future—I think !'

'Forget my folly, my insanity, if you will, but please, Lady Elmsdale, do not be relentless ; let me see you sometimes. Don't deny me a chance of trying to reinstate myself in your good opinion !' he pleads, with tears in his eyes.

But Lady Elmsdale, though only eighteen, is not to be persuaded into dallying with danger.

'No ! it is better not,' she answers, firmly enough to quench any hope he may have of softening her. 'But we will be good friends still, although you have wounded my pride and my self-respect dreadfully, and made me feel very small in my own eyes !' and she gives him the tips of her cold fingers as she reaches home.

She flings herself into an easy-chair in her own room and tries to think, but her thoughts are not pleasant ones. She wonders what she has said or done that could make Dennistoun fancy her a woman like—Lady Underhill for instance ! True, she does not love her husband as she ought to, perhaps, but she knows that neither in action nor word has she broken the faith she swore to him, or the loyalty she owes as a wife.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CASINO GARDEN.

'Shall we not laugh—shall we not weep?—

Not we !—though this be as it is !

For love awake, or love asleep,

Ends in a laugh—a dream—a kiss—

A song like this !'

LADY ELMSDALE passes rather a wakeful night, in meditating on the wisest course of avoiding any further declaration of Dennistoun's sentiments, without creating any surprise in their

mutual acquaintance; but towards morning she drops into a sound sleep—from which she is aroused by a touch on her arm.

Opening her eyes in alarm, she finds the dark face of the French nurse bending over her.

Lisette is a Marseillaise, and when excited, she grows voluble; and volubility in her native *patois*, is quite beyond English comprehension. But Nest's intelligence, sharpened by anxiety, arrives at the pith of her story in the twinkling of an eye; and before the woman reaches the end of her tale, she is beside her child, feeling his brow and pulse, while her own heart throbs fast with fear and anxiety.

All the day long she sits in her lonely room at the hotel, with 'Baby' in her arms, rocking him gently backwards and forwards, trying to soothe him, and to take comfort unto herself from the medical verdict, that he ails nothing—that, in fact, the only crisis to be dreaded are—*convulsions*.

Convulsions!

It is a most dreadful word to young and inexperienced maternity—and already, in imagination, Nest beholds her little one's tiny form distorted, and dews of agony starting on his face, until she can scarcely restrain herself from that feminine resort for ultimate composure and consolation—hysterics.

But she is naturally 'plucky,' to use Gus Wylmer's favourite eulogium—and she sits, very white and cold, but tearless, with her eyes fixed on, what she believes to be, 'her all' in the world.

Elmsdale puts in an appearance on the scene for a minute or two, and surveys the evident sufferings of his son and heir with an equanimity that, at any other time, would aggravate his wife—though now she is far too miserable to reply, when he says—in a cold, indifferent voice,—

'You'll kill that child by fussing over him, Nest—What human being can survive such coddling!'

It has grown into dusk, and the boy has fallen asleep on her knee, and, afraid of disturbing him, she sits as motionless as a statue through the long hours—although her poor limbs feel cramped, and a sinking, from sheer want of food, creeps on her. Not a morsel has passed her lips all day, for, in her extreme anxiety, she feels that an attempt at swallowing would choke her.

At last the child stirs, but uneasily, and opens his big eyes very wide.

There is an odd, dilated look about his pupils, and a twitching about the pretty rosebud mouth, that seems to work painfully. All of a sudden he clenches his tiny fists, draws up his

knees, a shiver runs through his frame, a dozen rainbow hues pass over his face, and his hands and feet grow icy cold.

It is enough !

Nest, wild with fear, places him in Lisette's arms, flings on her hat, and rushes to the doctor's house. He is not at home.

Wringing her hands in despair, she pauses a moment, perplexed ; then, scarcely conscious of what she is about, she runs up the steps of the Casino, and stands bewildered, almost dazed, in the entrance-hall.

In an instant, however, she recovers her senses sufficiently to accost one of the porters. She is not very proficient in French ; and in her excessive nervousness, even her English is rather halting.

'Is Lord Elmsdale in the gambling saloon?'

The servant shakes his head ; he knows no language beside his own ; and even if he did, Monaco rejoices in many gambling Milords, and he cannot distinguish one from the other.

Presently Nest is conscious of a tall, slim figure, arrayed in trailing silk and lace, rising from an adjacent seat, and of a blonde, supercilious face, with *mignonne* features and shallow blue eyes, confronting her.

'If you are looking for your husband, Lady Elmsdale, he is in the garden with Lady Underhill.'

Mrs Moreton says this in a hard, metallic tone—and there is a suspicion of *malice prepense* in her glance, which Nest detects at once.

She waits for no further parley. Without so much as a word of acknowledgment for Mrs Moreton's gratuitous information, she flies like the wind down the terrace and along the flower-planted walks—seeing no one, and feeling desperately nervous. On and on she goes, however, down the Casino garden, till a sort of orange *bosquet* is reached ; and here—she halts, and creeps noiselessly into the shadow of a large tree, within a pace or two of those of whom she is in search.

The yellow moon is at its full, shining down through the vaulted sky, and lighting up everything as clearly as if it was noonday. But Nest's slight figure, habited in black, escapes notice.

Lady Underhill looks gorgeously lovely under the bright rays. A fleecy white shawl, like a cloud, wraps her magnificent shoulders, and a Gainsborough hat with a drooping white feather is held carelessly in her hand. She has taken up a *pose*

which would drive an artist mad, and evoke an ovation if she stood on the boards.

There is certainly a good deal of poetry (florid) and elegance in the curves and bends of her form, and she looks as different as light from darkness to the figure of the little eavesdropper hard by, who, with strained eyes and indignant heart, watches her rival.

She does not love her husband; and now she believes she hates him, as he stands beside that woman—while his child fluctuates 'twixt life and death.

Although Lady Elmsdale is as innocent as a lamb, and utterly unversed in the wicked ways of the world, she possesses a certain amount of shrewdness in her character that enables her at once to recognise one fact. It is that, in spite of solitude and the unseemly hour, there is nothing really dangerous in the situation.

Elmsdale and that dreadful woman, as she invariably calls her, stand even a little apart from one another, and there is not even a hand-clasp between them.

Only two voices murmur, and murmur in such a low tone that it is with difficulty the words are caught.

The first sentence audible convinces Nest of the truth of one of her old copy book headings—

'Listeners never hear any good of themselves.'

'Why will you always speak of my wife, Lady Underhill? You know the subject wearies me excessively. It has been discussed before between us, and you promised not to give me a second edition of the same thing!' he says languidly, half yawning, and with a crushing listlessness of manner that fully corroborates his assertion.

Nest flinches from this. It is no reason because her husband does not care for her, that he should flaunt the miserable truth before that woman. It seems to her that he adds insult to injury in doing so.

She would be more satisfied, perhaps, if she could divine that Elmsdale is not really so faulty as appearances make him. If she could see into his thoughts, she would discover that although he has been drawn into the meshes of this auburn-haired syren, that his capture is far from complete, as proved by the fact that he hates to hear his wife's name on the lips that look so red and lovely and even tempting in the bright moonlight.

'Why don't you talk about yourself?' he asks. 'Surely you know by this time that *that* is the theme that interests me most—I am never tired of *you* at anyrate!'

'I can't help being jealous of Lady Elmsdale! I know that if you had not been awfully in love with her, you would never have married her!'

'Pshaw!'

Nest sickens with anger at the contempt expressed in this exclamation.

'Jealous of her! you who are so lovely, and whom all the world admires!' Elmsdale says, in his most seductive voice, though there is a queer little smile hovering on his lips which surely does not betoken sincerity. 'It is *I* who should be jealous, I think! I am only one among the million to whom you throw words and smiles. Don't I feel even when we are together as now that a distance I can't span divides us, that you are like the pretty things in a shop window, which one can look at but not touch!'

As Elmsdale indulges in this bit of sentiment, he warms with his subject and goes a little beyond the bounds he has laid down for his intercourse with his old love.

'Gladys!—I may call you so, mayn't I, like I used?—I have sworn to myself that for both our sakes I would never again speak of my feelings for you, but *c'est plus fort que moi!* I love you! I believe I love you even more than I did before my marriage!'

In his tone there is a curious struggle between pathos and laughter, but Nest, who only hears the words, is nearly beside herself with wrath.

This man—this dreadful profligate, this bad, wicked man, is her—husband!

Lady Underhill meantime experiences a delightful thrill as she hearkens. She has no brains to speak of, and it never strikes her that there is suppressed mockery in her noble lover's intonation and a cynical look on his mouth, that do not correspond with the fire of his sentiments.

It is really some time now since she has heard such words, for though men are ready enough to flirt with her, she is acute enough in perception of such matters to know that her impression on hearts has not been very deep-seated of late, though she still possesses the power to attract.

The man who addresses her so tenderly, is really the man whom she has most fancied of all her admirers, not for his good looks, for he is certainly not handsome; it may be that there is a certain glamour in his rank and wealth, and in the fact that

having been the match of the season, many women ran after him. Whatever the attraction may be which he owns for her, she gazes at him now, and there is an insidious flattery in her gaze, which Elmsdale, an essentially vain man, thoroughly appreciates. He loves being worshipped, so he gazes back at her tenderly, and presently a head, wreathed round with lustrous coils of hair, droops a shade nearer his shoulder. The moonbeams lend additional softness to two pairs of eyes, and who knows, but that he, not remarkable in qualities that constitute a Bayard, may forget his marriage vows, when—

‘Elmsdale! Elmsdale! Baby is dying!’ breaks shrilly on the silent air, and a little dusky heap lies on the grass, just at Lady Underhill’s feet.

Elmsdale raises his wife’s insensible form in his arms and places her on a neighbouring bench, and after a moment or two the fresh night air brings her back to consciousness.

Meanwhile Lady Underhill, on the principle of *sautez qui pent*, unmindful and callous to her own wrong-doing as far as Nest is concerned, flies in hot haste through the fragrant paths to her hotel. With her habitual regard for self, she is afraid that another cry from Lady Elmsdale will bring witnesses to the scene, and be the foundation of a scandal—a thing she holds in wholesome dread.

Once safe in her own apartments, and convinced that no one knows of the moonlight promenade she indulged in, she composes her mind and her superb limbs, and soon falls into the pleasant and dreamless slumber which is supposed to be one of the especial luxuries of the just.

Nest opens her eyes and stares round her as though in expectation of seeing Satan disguised in seductive woman’s form still tempting her husband, but nothing meets her gaze save the huge shadows, black and gaunt, that lie beneath the toppling trees, the wooden benches that glisten like ivory under the moon’s bright rays, and Elmsdale’s face, so severe and stern and cold that it seems to freeze her heart as she looks at it.

She is very young and childish, and nervous, and she cannot bear it.

‘Please forgive me, Elmsdale!’ she says, with tears in her eyes. ‘I did not mean to follow you, indeed I did not!’ she tries to explain through her agitation, ‘but baby was taken so ill, and in my fright about him, my first thought was naturally to have you with me!’

He ignores her conciliatory words, and answers mockingly,—
‘Well, if you choose to come prying after me, you did

not find your suspicions confirmed to a *very* great extent—did you?’

She is not wanting in proper spirit. Against all the world she might be able to hold her own bravely enough, but with this man, to whom she has sworn implicit obedience, she is as meek and gentle as a dove.

It is that she can *never* forget the injury she did him when she married him with her whole heart full of Guy.

‘I have had no suspicions, Elmsdale! I have not thought of doubting you—but now! I cannot help being a little afraid of that *person*. Why should she be jealous of me unless she loves you and wishes you to love her?’ Nest asks wistfully, thinking how full the world is of misery and wickedness and cross-purposes.

‘Don’t be a little fool,’ he answers ungraciously. ‘You have seen nothing of the world, or you wouldn’t make a mountain out of a molehill like this! I hate a fuss, and I don’t care a rap for the woman. If it will satisfy you I will never speak to her again!’

Nest stares at him amazed.

He is showing an amount of kindness and consideration which she has not dreamed of crediting him with, and she reproaches herself quite bitterly for her injustice, as she seizes his hand and says very softly,—

‘You won’t! Oh, Elmsdale, how good of you to give into my fancies. I will never doubt you again!’

And she actually presses a little grateful kiss on the hand she clasps.

‘Do you know I was under that tree ever so long and heard nearly all you said, and I thought her so bad, that I felt quite wicked—felt as if I could put a knife into her white neck and laugh if she died. But all the while I did not feel like hurting *you*. I was only sorry about *you*, sorry that you had married me if you cared for *her*! You will promise not to speak to her again, won’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘On your honour?’

‘On my honour.’

His promise is a very safe one, for he knows that Lady Underhill is leaving Monaco the following morning, and now that a few fair words have dispersed all fear of anarchy at home, he is rather glad that his wife’s sudden appearance curtailed the harrowing adieu that her *exigeante* ladyship expected.

To a certain extent the slave of fashion, he had enrolled him-

self among the adorers of Fashion's Queen, but for the 'woman' he cares no more now than he does for the worthless remnant of the cigar he flings carelessly aside.

Lady Elmsdale is still trembling with the worry and excitement of the evening as she walks back arm in arm with her husband to the hotel. Once at the threshold she forgets everything but the child whom she left so ill, and runs hastily upstairs, with dread knocking loudly at her heart.

With shaking fingers she opens the door and looks in.

The full light of the lamp falls on the figure of Lisette sitting bolt upright on a chair which occupies the centre of the room. The child lies on her lap, his pretty waxen features calm, his large blue eyes wide open, his two little hands crossed meekly on his breast, and in them a tiny bunch of pure white roses which it has been Lisette's fancy to place there.

Lady Elmsdale stands riveted to the floor, her big brown eyes dilated, her breath coming in quick gasps, as she looks and looks. Then suddenly she springs forward with a heart-rending cry and falls on her knees beside the child.

She is yearning—*yearning!* for the little smile of welcome on his rosebud mouth, she is waiting for the little arms to stretch towards her as they are wont to do.

But his pretty blue eyes look only upward—upward—his tiny mouth forgets to smile, his little arms lie motionless, and his hands clasp the bunch of white roses instead of his mother's neck.

'Baby' is—*dead!*

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DESOLATION.

'Nae longer she wept, her tears were a' spent,
Despair it was come and she thought it content—
She thought it content—but her cheek it grew pale,
And she drooped like a lily broke down by the hail.'

BABY is dead!

These three little words entirely fail to convey the blow that falls on Lady Elmsdale. Ah, God! who shall presume to measure the kneeling woman's grief? It is with no morbid emotion that she shuts herself up in this room with her dead child and her own soul. A part—the most precious part of herself—has passed into the impalpable, but no less it seems a part of her conscious existence, for she can *never* be sundered from it.

Her little one can never be less hers, less loving, less beloved. Everyone else may outlive him, forget him—but not this poor mother. Her heart will never cease to miss him, no matter what comes. And she has loved him ever 'so much more dearly, as if to make amends to him for what he never had—his father's affection or anxiety.

In this big, lonely, luxurious apartment Nest lingers hour after hour with all that 'belongs' to 'Baby.' *Belongs!* She never thinks of the putting this word in the past tense, for to her he still lives night and day. She never forgets him—*never!* He is still her first thought when she wakes, and each night before she sleeps. She never fails to whisper to herself, tearfully and wistfully, good-night to 'Baby,' and no matter what bright hour her life may yet bring, her heart will never be entirely filled by it, for some of it will always be buried in the little flower-decked grave in the lovely Riviera. Locking the door, she kneels with streaming eyes and clasped hands beside the empty cradle, still preserved tenaciously intact in all its lace and azure, and gathers to her bosom and presses to her lips Baby's tiny socks, Baby's coral and bells, everything, in fact, that reminds her of two pretty blue eyes that had learnt to

laugh at her approach, two weak little arms that yet had strength to cling tightly round her neck.

Then she remembers what her life is, and what it will be probably for all time, her loveless existence, her callous, cold husband, and with a sob deep and low she clasps again the empty cradle.

'And yet, and yet, my treasure, I would not bring you back even if I could! You are safe now, safe from this weary, wicked world!'

This is the piteous refrain of her thoughts, and then Lady Elmsdale falls to wondering, poor soul, if it is *really* sinful of her to wish to die too! And yet, cold and white, as if cut out of marble, she listens to condolence on her loss.

Condolence! what bitter mockery can be felt in this word!

But from her husband Nest hears very little, unforgiving still for the stab she had dealt his vanity on her wedding day. Even in the hour of mourning he never unbends or opens his thin lips in solace to the young heart that feels broken under the burthen laid upon it.

Elmsdale had stood and looked down at the waxen face of the dead infant, while a pang of sorrow shot through him. Just for a moment he had felt a certain remorse for his want of love for the mother—almost a child herself—crouching by in an *abandon* of grief and with a white dazed face; but the feeling soon passed away, and as soon as appearances allow, he is back in his old haunts once more.

He has certainly chafed a little inwardly at Lady Underhill's departure, for Othello's occupation is in a manner gone, and finding the time hang heavily, he settles down with redoubled vigour at the tables. Every one of the complicated systems which he has spent hours of the night and day in making out, burst like soap bubbles, and the luck which seems to attend the bank is too strong to be overturned.

If he follows the red it treacherously evades him, if he goes in for series the game grows intermittent at once. At last, continued ill-luck makes him cowardly and nervous, and he completely loses 'pluck,' without which no gambler has ever won at *Rouge et Noir*.

He begins to fear pushing the little good fortune that falls to his share, and often sits idle through a deal that might retrieve his losses to a certain extent.

Rouveau upon roulette of gold are offered up by him; but all in vain. The insatiable goddess refuses to be propitiated, and after hours and hours spent in playing, he rises from

his seat with the sick and desperately weary sensation that every gambler knows so well.

By-and-by, finding *Rouge et Noir* an *ignis fatuus* altogether, he rushes to Roulette.

Roulette has far greater fascinations than *Rouge et Noir*, and to a thorough gambler it is by far the more dangerous game of the two. The very idea that a successful raid on one of the numbers is so liberally paid, is in itself sufficient to induce excitement and assiduity to the fickle wheel.

Elmsdale throws himself heart and soul into the task of hitting off the right numbers, and before a week has elapsed finds himself absolutely cleared out of funds in hand. Nothing but sheer anger at being robbed by the bank, as he calls it, could drive him away from an amusement that bids fair to become a master passion, and he looks, and is, morose, as he tells his wife that he has made up his mind to leave Monaco.

Lady Elmsdale is not loth to leave a place in which she has known much less happiness than grief. Save for leaving 'Baby' slumbering peacefully in his little grave under the soft genial sunshine, the Riviera has no charm for her of late; her life has been more lonely and dull than ever, what with the trouble she is in, and also with the wish to avoid Dennistoun, who still hangs about, dumb of lips it is true, but with wistful, eloquent eyes.

It was a delicious autumnal morning when they whirl through the enchanting scenery of Southern France. The golden sunbeams, bereft by the lateness of the season of too great fervour, are yet quite brilliant enough to gild into deepest yellow the crests of the trees that stand arrayed in all their pride in varied hues of splendid red and brown.

The beams dance and quiver as well on the eddying ripples of the narrow and limpid streamlets that, like manifold silver threads, intersect the country on either side. Here and there, almost within hand-clutch, clusters of vivid scarlet berries, poisonous in nature but gorgeous in colour, float out amidst masses of feathery nodding ferns and the rich glossy leaves of the lauristinus, while the ambient air, free from the fogs of our seagirt isle, savours more of spring time than the near death of the year.

Elmsdale's destination is The Towers, where Elmsdale after Elmsdale have been born, and lived, and died, and as Nest finds the distance between herself and England lessen at each step, she feels lighter of heart than she has done for many months, and a slight colour now foreign to her cheek creeps over it. She has never seen her future 'home.' From the

The Match of the Season.

date of her marriage she has been on the Continent, rushing from city to city, and her English heart, always homesick, now yearns with even a stronger yearning to be among her own people once more.

If only 'Baby' was with her, she thinks, and sinking into her corner of the carriage, the pretty pink flush fades from her face, and her brown eyes fill with tears, while she studiously averts them, lest Elmsdale shall mark the drops, and sneer.

The Towers have belonged, as has been said, to the Elmsdale family for generations. It is a grand and proud-looking pile, built as far back as the year 1300, by a Hildebrand Elmsdale, who was knighted for a series of gallant services rendered to King Edward the First.

The site selected for the building had been on the ruins of an old monastery, and in spite of its being fine enough for Royalty, it has something chilling and austere about it. There is a severity about the architecture on which traces of monastic simplicity still linger, and a hard formality in the great square towers, three of them in a row, that surmount the mansion and gave it name; there is a prison-like look too in the high narrow diamond-paned windows.

A long avenue of elms leads up for more than a quarter of a league to the principal portal, with the luxuriant foliage so twined and intertwined, that, even during the brightest summer hours, long, dark, funereal-looking shadows slant on to the broad drive beneath.

A glorious old forest lies on one side of the house, and on the other, succeeding one another in richness of verdure, are fields, and dells, and slopes, and hollows.

The sun, grown low to westward, sends long lance-like rays quivering across the shrubs and flowers, forming aureoles of glory for the heads of the patriarchal elms, that stand together like so many sentinels of the place, and making a glittering nimbus about the queer old-fashioned windows of the massive towers, set amid clustering emerald ivy, and the house of the Elmsdales, always proud and stately, but sometimes severe and gloomy, wears a beaming look on this day, as if in welcome to its new mistress.

The whole aspect of the place is very attractive, but somehow, even as Lady Elmsdale gazes for the first time on it, a suffocated feeling steals over her.

A little love for her husband would transform The Towers into an earthy Eden, but failing that little bit of love, she shudders a little, and without a word to Elmsdale, who, like

the ghost in Hamlet, stalks by her side, she pulls her wraps closer round her, and goes into the house.

Triumph and elation, happiness and love, are dead letters in her life. What then has she to live for? she wonders, as she walks listlessly up the grand marble staircase.

There is only one word in answer to her mental query,—

'Duty.'

It looks dreadfully cold, and hard, and desolate as it stares her implacably in the face, but Lady Elmsdale, not so very long ago wilful, frivolous, flirty, bows herself meekly to the fiat of Fate, and resolves to obey her vocation.

True, life holds out but the merest husks, but this has its antidote, she thinks, as she remembers that those 'whom the gods love die young,' and prays, poor little soul, that she may find favour in their sight.

• CHAPTER XXIX.

'SHE HAS DIED SINCE—TO ME!'

'Yea! Hope at highest, and all her fruit,
And Time at fullest, and all his dower
I had given you surely—and life to boot—
Were we once made one for a single hour!
But now you are twain. You are cloven apart,
Flesh of his flesh—but heart of my heart;
And deep in one is the bitter root,
And sweet for one is the life-long flower!'

NEARLY two years have gone by, and Guy Trevylian has recovered, to all outward appearance, his normal serenity. 'He is fair in calamity,' as the Persians in their flowery language apostrophise the man who bears sorrow bravely. It is old Cicero, I think, who says that not to feel misfortunes is not the part of a mortal, but not to BEAR them is unbecoming a man, and before indifferent eyes Guy bears up wonderfully.

It is only in the weary night-watches—when Guy, sleepless and restless for long hours, or else awakening hurriedly from feverish visions of her to whom his every thought still points, in spite of reason and will—that he starts up and paces up and down his room, while a weight of immeasurable unhappiness seems to crush him to the dust, and his soul revolts against all the world.

During this time he drinks deeply indeed of the waters of Marah in all their exceeding bitterness; and Time, instead of bringing him healing on its wings, neglects to bring him the only blessing he craves—oblivion. If he could but taste of the Lethean stream, even for a while, just to gather fresh strength for his struggle with his ill-fate.

He has been in America for some time now, and what the New Yorkers call their Indian summer is in full swing, and down Broadway it is somewhere about 120 in the shade, when Guy reaches one of those princely abodes that abound on the banks of the river Hudson, and is ushered into a delicious 'hot-weather' room, wherein a green stillness and coolness reigns behind the half-closed jalousies. It is very spacious, occupying the entire first-floor of one of the irregular wings of the house—the ceiling is unusually lofty, the walls are of pearly white, and the flooring of light oak is waxed and polished to ivory smoothness.

On three sides of the apartment are tall windows, opening on to a piazza that runs round the house, and is bright with the gorgeous bloom that is born of a fervid sun.

On the fourth side is a huge fireplace, whitened, and having on its marble hearth a leviathan alabaster vase of snowy lilies, the heavy fragrance of which fills the atmosphere.

The walls are adorned with large mirrors and the choicest paintings, but all wearing a cool and pleasant aspect—such as snow scenes, green forest glades, and purple mountain lakes—marble-topped tables, and tripods heaped with rare prints and costly trifles abound, and sofas, ottomans, divans, and lounging-chairs invite on every side.

Through the partially-closed venetians the lazy air comes very faint, laden with the fragrance of a myriad of flowers. There is music of water, a mysterious whisper of leaves, and the soothing monotonous voice of the little katydids from the maple and locust trees that stand on the lawn; and in the distance is seen a bend of the beautiful great river with the moon shining down full upon it.

It looks just like a fairy stream, as it flashes back the beams from its vast dark-blue bosom in rays of dazzling light. The

hour and the silence lend an air of refreshing coolness and delicious repose to the room, which also suggests *money*—dollars—hard, shiny, yellow dollars—bags and bags full, rise up vividly to the imaginative eye that looks round the palatial abode of Mr Johann Vandergutch.

He is a Dutch-American banker, and boasts connection with the Astors and Vanderbilts and Knickerbockers, and all the other tip-top New York swells.

His god is—money; his hobby—English acquaintances; his tyrant—Cordelia Vandergutch, his only child and heiress.

Guy, who has become quite an *habitué* of the place, drops on to one of the luxurious ottomans with a supreme sensation of comfort and relief. He has been broiling all day in Broadway, arranging for his departure to England the next morning, and the excitement of going back again, united to the intolerable heat, has quite knocked him over, strong though he is. He is sick of America. Two years of it have brought him an irresistible longing for Piccadilly and Pall Mall, for the society of his class, for—and this last is not least—the feeling that the same country that contains Nest, contains him also.

Lady Elmsdale's memory brings him smiles and frowns together. He never thinks of her but the resolute rather stern mouth melts into womanly tenderness, even while his brows knit at her evident interestedness of character.

But, with the ephemeral nature of most things in this sublunary sphere, solitude and thought, pleasant and otherwise, are boons vouchsafed for about ten minutes only; at the end of them a vision flutters in arrayed in grey and rose—the first below, the last above, according to the prevalent fashion of piebald costume—making the wearer look like a parokeet.

'I guess it's *you*, Mr Trevelylian!' Miss Vandergutch cries, beaming all over. 'I only ran down for a book, and nearly collided against you in the dark room. The heat is so appalling—I cannot work or write—why can't one telegraph to one's friends, "I am well—how are you?" that's all that's necessary—isn't it so?' and she opens her eyes in a peculiar infantine way.

Cordelia Vandergutch is a splendid specimen of a New York belle. Forward—foolish—vain—capital at skating, first-rate hand at ice cream and oysters—devoted to flirting, but not really a bit what we understand by the word '*fast*,' and with faults of the head and not of the heart.

'Not quite *all* that's necessary,' answers Guy, taking the

white plump hand, glittering with precious stones, which she offers with a bewitching *empressement*. 'If I heard from you I don't think I should be inclined to telegraph back a terse reply; I should be constrained to add, that I kissed your hands at least.'

'Well, I can't see what would be the sense of doing by telegraph, what you never do *in fact!*' she replies, with delicious but *nasally naïveté*.

'Then in view of telegraphic contingencies, we had better make it fact at once; only, you know, it would be very un-English on my part. But you don't like English very much, Miss Vandergutch—do you?'

'Don't I! only, you see, you are as cold-blooded as a fish,' she says, pouting her coral lips.

'Why?'

'Well! you know you *might* have kissed my hand if you liked!'

So Guy, who feels nothing but passing amusement, kisses the tips of her fingers lightly, with a careless laugh.

'You *are* an original,' she pronounces, surveying him with evident surprise; 'a thing most men do in a corner and look absurd and sentimental over, you do just off-hand, and with a laugh, as if you *didn't mean* it a bit—isn't that so?'

But while he hesitates what to reply, she exclaims shrilly,—

'I say, Mr Trevelyian, it looks downright splendid out there, doesn't it?'

'Where?' he asks indifferently, settling himself more comfortably among the soft cushions of his velvet ottoman, and fanning himself indolently with a magnificent gold and tortoise-shell fan which he has picked up from the floor where it has been carelessly tossed.

'*There*, on that seat under the locusts! See, the whole ground by it is powdered with teeny white blossoms! I doat on moonlight—don't you?' she exclaims enthusiastically, clasping her little plump, diamond-decked hands.

'To distraction,' he answers politely, hoping to goodness she purposes to doat on it from a distance, as a moonlight *tête-à-tête* with a pink and white brainless doll does not hold out much attraction.

'Wait! I'll just run and cram on my Gainsborough, and be down with a hop, step, and a jump, before you can cry "Bo!" You see, the dew takes all the frizzle out of my fringe.'

Guy laughs and sinks back contentedly into his seat. But not for long. Miss Vandergutch, whose constitution is excitable as her limbs are agile, trips airily back again,

surmounted with a huge Gainsborough that looks like an extinguisher, and armed with a large parasol.

'Dew's a thing I abominate,' she confesses apologetically, as she sees him glance at the parasol. 'An owl's handsome in comparison, when my hair flattens on my head.'

And as Guy looks at her, he observes that she has a pretty accurate notion of her type. The very round eyes and insignificant little nose, are certainly suggestive of the bird of wisdom, but with these the resemblance ceases.

'What a little idiot she is,' he thinks.

Leaving the house, she proposes to show him a far more elegant spot than the seat under the locusts.

'Let us sit down here,' she says, pointing to a bank sheltered by a group of oleanders, and he resigns himself to the situation with as much grace as most men manage to exhibit under such circumstances.

Miss Vandergutch arranges herself in an artistic attitude, unfurls the huge parasol, and lifts up two beseeching eyes.

'If you could only know what I feel!' she murmurs, with a deprecation calculated to disarm anything like harsh judgment or criticism.

'Is it absolutely necessary that I should know?' questions Guy, inclined to laugh, but afraid to indulge his inclination.

The tone of his answer is not satisfactory to her.

'Well, it is not necessary,' she replies, with a gravity calculated to check all levity, and with her eyes so wide open that he begins to speculate whether there is any possibility of her being able to shut them again. 'But *if* you knew, you would understand without my speaking. Yet I *want* to have it all out.'

'Speak on. I promise to give you my best attention and advice.'

'I guess you might do *more* than that, Mr Trevylian,' she answers, in a low voice, whereupon Guy stares at her, and feels as uncomfortable as if his rustic bench was a bed of thorns.

'Well, did you follow me?' she asks presently, putting her parasol a little aside, at the risk of her fringe, and throwing a coquettish glance at the face that looks rather cold and grave in the moonlight.

'I heard, but I didn't quite catch your meaning, Miss Vandergutch.'

'English folks are mighty hard of understanding sometimes. Isn't that so?'

'In this case Americans ought to try and sharpen their intellects then,' he answers, his curiosity aroused.

'Why, certainly. I'll be plain enough and no mistake *this* time! You are a poor man, Mr Trevylian, that's how it strikes *me*.'

'A *very* poor man, I am sorry to say, Miss Vandergutch.'

'And I'm a very rich girl, Mr Trevylian, that's straight enough, anyhow.'

'Yes.'

'Well, *can't* you understood *now* ?'

Guy colours and bites his nether lip. The situation, however poetical, what with the moonlight and the oleanders, and the perfumed locust blossoms, is decidedly awkward, and he does not exactly see how to avoid the climax looming before him.

With all due allowance for Americanism, his notions of womanhood are so fastidious that he shrinks from letting this outspoken young person lower her dignity by a declaration.

'I have always had a hankering to live in England,' she goes on demurely. 'It's got such a lot of swells and theatres, and—and I *should* like to know the Prince of Wales. Oh, my! isn't he splendid, that's all! And the boss, that's pa, you know, he has always hankered after an English son-in-law. Money's no object. Pa can't count *his*. It's downright good blood and acquaintance with nobility and all that sort of thing. Now, *couldn't* you tell us of the kind of article we are in search of, Mr Trevylian?' she asks coaxingly.

'If it was leap year, Miss Vandergutch, and I was a vain man, I should think I was the sort of article you wanted,' Guy replies lightly.

'We don't wait for leap year in America, I guess. You see it's right down plain sailing on this side the herring pond, and I don't mind saying, that you are just the sort of son-in-law Pa's been looking for. I don't see why we can't settle matters comfortably enough; I have two millions of dollars down and more to come, and miles and miles of land Manitoba way; you have the blood, and know lots of lords and ladies—we should get on first-rate, and no fear of us two colliding. Well—what do you say!'

'That I should be very ungrateful for all the kindness and hospitality Mr Vandergutch and you have shown me during my stay in New York, if I didn't fully appreciate the still greater proof of your regard—but, Miss Vandergutch, I cannot marry!'

'Why? You don't mean to say you have a wife already?' she questions, with a crestfallen face; and she has the grace to blush, as she remembers how rapidly she has gone ahead.

'No!' Guy says, in a low voice.

'Then you *must* be free anyway!' she cries, her hopes reviving.

'I am *not* free. I have sworn an oath which binds me so long as I live.'

'To some girl?'

'To *myself!* and the oath precludes my marrying any person except one, and she has died since—to *me!*'

He whispers the last two words to himself, and an expression of desperate weariness creeps over his face.

'Well, it's a pity? It would have been first-rate for you; Pa would have taken you into partnership, and given me a brown stone, high-stoop house with English basement, in Fifth Avenue; but, of course, if you decide on making tracks, you must. Pa will be cruelly upset; he has put his heart on my becoming Mrs——'

But Guy interrupts hastily; he would not let her finish her sentence for all the world. The name she is about to speak, is sacred to the memory of—Nest.

'Whosoever's wife you become, dear Miss Vandergutch. I am sure he will be a lucky fellow; but I have not told you yet, that I leave New York to-morrow for England, and came to say adieu. I must go now, for I have multifarious things to do before I sail. Good-bye! and don't think badly of Englishmen, because I happen to be one!'

'Good-bye! I guess *you* are more likely to think badly of American girls, but I thought it was good for you as well as for me,' she says, in a deprecating voice, hanging down her head.

'I know! and I shall never forget the honour you have done me! Shake hands—won't you?'

'*Rather!* You have refused my offer in a right down honest manner, and I don't bear malice for it. If there's anything I hate, it's shilly-shally men, Mr Trevelyian. Now, you have nothing circuitous, mean, or sneaky about you; and I can swallow a dose of physic as well as anybody if it is given kindly and gently. So good-bye; I am awfully sorry for Pa, though.'

'And not for *yourself?*' Guy asks, with a smile.

'Well, I don't mind saying I am sorry for myself, too; I can't say black's white, when I know it isn't. I have never liked any man so much as I like you, Mr Trevelyian, and that's flat; but if it can't be—it can't, and it's no good my worrying about it. I'll just do my best to forget the elegant time we've had together. That will be the right move in the right direc-

tion, but I don't think I shall succeed, somehow, and that's the real truth !'

'Two millions of dollars and a brown stone high-stoop house with English basement, in Fifth Avenue,' Guy murmurs to himself, regretfully—but it is in this wise,—

'If I had had these, she would not have married Elmsdale in such hot haste,' he adds, bitterly.

He is wonderfully changed since two years back; changed and aged as well, and little silver lines show up here and there out of his dark hair, and his mouth is almost stern in gravity; but when he smiles one of his rare smiles, years and years seem to lift off him, and he is again the Guy Trevelyian whose face fascinated Nest's girlish heart.

Love's eyes are keen to recognise, however, for as he is walking down one of the streets in Mayfair, a day or two after his arrival in England, a well-appointed brougham with a pair of handsome chesnuts drives up, and Mrs Moreton's voice startles him out of a brown study. He stops reluctantly; takes off his hat, but ignores the hand she extends eagerly.

Seeing that he refrains from touching the slender pearl-grey encased fingers, she bites her thin lips and flushes—but in a moment she recovers herself.

Guy is the only man she has ever loved, as well as she *can* love; and she bears from him neglect, and even rudeness, which in others she would hotly resent.

'Come here, Guy—close to the window!' she says, pleadingly. He obeys, but though her breath sweeps over him, and her blue eyes dwell softly on his face, he stands as impassive and really unconcerned as a marble statue.

'How long it is since we have met!' she murmurs tenderly; 'I did not even know you were in England, Guy!'

'You are not singular in your ignorance, Mrs Moreton,' he says carelessly. 'Very few people know that I have been in town now two days.'

'People! And do you class *me* amongst *them*? ' she questions reproachfully. 'I should have thought you accredited me with more interest in your movements than you would others?'

'Why?'

He asks it gravely. He has, unconsciously to himself, almost a dislike to this fair, supercilious woman. After all, it is through her that Mrs Lorimer cast him off, and through her that the coldest words Nest ever gave him sprang.

'Am I not a friend? I fancied you knew I had *more* than friendship for you,' she says, in a low, tremulous voice.

And Guy colours, not from appreciation, but from sheer annoyance at her look and tone.

'I haven't time to discuss the meaning of friendship or any other feeling just now,' he answers coldly; 'I have to meet Dennistoun at the club at four o'clock.'

'*A propos* of Mr Dennistoun, I wonder he can stay in town when Lady Elmsdale is in the country.'

This time Guy pales visibly, and with difficulty forces himself to speak calmly, with Mabella Moreton's pale eyes scanning him keenly.

'Lady Elmsdale! And what has Dennistoun to do with her?' he asks, so carelessly that for a moment he deceives his auditor.

'Then you are ignorant of that little flirtation?' she cries quickly, with a little leaven of spite running through her accents.

'Quite. If you will tell me what you have heard, I shall be able to form my own conclusions on the subject,' he manages to say quietly.

'I came to my own conclusions long ago. I saw them all at Monaco, you know. Of course Elmsdale deserves anything. He is a brute, and treats his wife shamefully—neglects her for Lady Underhill, and gambles and races, and all sorts of horrid things. Still, a woman who has been married such a short time, and to the man of her choice, too'—and she smiles pitilessly as she marks Guy flush at this—'must be wanting in proper feeling to flirt as she does with Oswald Dennistoun.'

'Let him who has not sinned cast the first stone,' Guy replies quietly, though he grows still whiter, and his deep grey eyes flash like steel. 'You don't know Lady Elmsdale intimately, Mrs Moreton, or you would not depreciate your own judgment of human nature by believing her to be capable of evil. If all women were like her, the world would be a paradise.'

'*Fools' paradise?*' she sneers. 'Guy, I never thought that a few babyish ways and innocent smiles would hoodwink a man with *your* mind,' she adds, in a frank voice, which is the very essence of consummate flattery; but he is impervious.

'Thanks for the compliment. It would have turned my head four years ago, coming from your pretty lips, but I am

grown old and hard as adamant. Not even *your* approbation can make my mind rise to the height of folly which would discover flaws in an angel and paint a lily black.'

'I really begin to think you hate me, Guy!' she cries, passionately, with tears actually welling up in her eyes. 'Do you?'

Guy looks at her for a moment steadily. He loved her once; since then he has thought her soul false and mercenary, and her face unattractive, insipid.

He sees it now lovely in its exquisite coral and opal tints, its azure eyes, its little chiselled features, and its frame of blonde hair, and withal, a soft and tender expression leavening the whole.

'No,' he answers slowly; 'I don't hate you, Mrs Moreton, but you have wounded my vanity, and a man seldom forgives that.'

'But how?'

'By asserting that my judgment is inferior to your own.'

'Don't make an excuse for quarrelling with me, Mr Trevylian,' she says haughtily. 'However much I may feel for one who I knew so long ago, and—'

'*Jilted*—do not forget that!' Guy puts in, with a smile.

'And whose love I was *forced* to renounce. I hope I have sufficient pride left to ensure myself security from incivility, even rudeness. Good-bye! I trust you may never regret the loss of my—liking, and the substantial benefits that would back it up!'

Guy takes off his hat in answer, and with one swift, keen scrutiny of his features to mark if there is any relenting, Mrs Moreton puts out her head, and orders 'Home!'

This is the second offer of a wealthy marriage he has received within a fortnight, and yet Guy looks very far from triumphant or elated as he strolls slowly through the streets till he reaches his club.

He finds, as usual, a crowd of men laughing and chattering. He is greeted cordially by some, courteously by others, and contrives to plunge into a knot of smokers.

As he lies back in his arm-chair, cigar in mouth, and half absorbed in thought, Dennistoun enters the room.

Looking steadily at him, Guy observes a marvellous change in the young guardsman's appearance since he saw him last. All the *debonnair* inconciant look has left him, and with it has gone the manner and smile that had characterised him to a great extent. He looks dreadfully wan and haggard,

and there is a curious dash of feverish excitement about him, like a man who is habitually under the influence of wine.

'Ah, Tre, there you are!' he says, coming over and dropping wearily into a chair next to Guy's. 'And so you have turned up like a bad shilling, old fellow. Brought home lots of dollars from Yankee land?'

'Not one!'

'What will you do then?—marry Mrs Moreton?'

'Never!' Guy says quietly, blowing a blue ring of smoke towards the ceiling, but he is startled by Dennistoun leaning over and whispering in his ear,—

'Why won't you marry her? Is it because—'

He stops dead short and flushes as he catches Guy's eye.

'Because what?'

'Because—I must out with it—because you are still in love with Lady Elmsdale, and because she is in love with you?' Dennistoun blurts out hurriedly.

'I did not know Lady Elmsdale *was* in love with me!' Guy contrives to answer quietly enough, though his heart beats to suffocation, and in spite of himself a thrill of exultation makes him shiver from head to foot. 'Why, what can have put such an absurd idea into your head?'

'Because she *must* be in love with somebody, and I can only think of you!' the boy—for he is nothing but a boy, and helpless to guard the innermost secrets of his heart in his vexation and mortification—says frankly, 'or she *couldn't* treat *me* so.'

Guy's pulses throb madly, and burning words, wild words, hover on his lips, trembling for utterance, to find out all he can about her—about Nest. But strong in his loyalty, he crushes down his hunger, and before he speaks again he quietly knocks off the ashes from his cigar. It seems to him a species of desecration that *her* name should even be breathed in a club-room, much more that it should be breathed in conjunction with a man's name, even though the name be his own.

'You may be sure Lady Elmsdale has no eyes or liking for any but her husband,' he says presently. 'From what I know of her, she is the last person whom I should credit with even a thought beyond her home.'

'I know she is an angel,' Dennistoun murmurs warmly, 'but she can't care for Elmsdale. It would not be possible for her to do so! You should see how he treats her. Why even when

the child died—why what ails you, Guy? You look like a ghost!

‘Nothing! it’s only the effects of American chills and fever. Go on,’ Guy answers calmly.

‘And she was like a mad woman in her grief, he punted away at the Casino all day. I could have killed him for it!’ Dennistoun flashes hotly.

‘Perhaps the gambling did it. I have seen men who were meek as lambs grow as cruel as wild beasts under the influence of play, especially if unlucky.’

‘Which Elmsdale certainly was. He is going in tremendously for steeplechasing now that they are at Elmsdale Towers, and insists on riding his own horse at Ringmer next week. Lady Elmsdale has the same dull, miserable life of it in England as she had abroad.’

‘You had better not add to her troubles by letting people talk of her, my dear fellow,’ Guy says gravely. ‘If you really care for her, the best service you can do her is to keep out of the way, but this is an act of self-sacrifice that many men would be incapable of, so I shall not be surprised if you don’t take my advice.’

‘Self-sacrifice isn’t required,’ Dennistoun replies bitterly. ‘Lady Elmsdale takes very good care that neither I nor any other man at the Towers sees anything of her. She lives the queerest, loneliest life in the world, and seems to have forgotten even how to smile.’

After this there is a short silence, while both men puff away at their cigars, and both are thinking of one woman.

Guy half closes his lids, and fancies himself once more on the green ridge near Ravenshill church. Nest’s eyes look into his own, Nest’s arms go round his neck, Nest’s heart beats against his.

Conjuring up all this, is it a marvel that he forgets all else in the world and remembers only himself and her?

For once in our lives Paradise opens for all of us out of this dull earth, and hours richly fraught and golden with the passionate light of romance, shine upon us with a thrilling and delicious radiance, like unto no other radiance of time. Does it boot to count the cost of the desolation that often follows?

Guy thinks not—he is sure not.

By-and-by, he gets up and leaves the club quietly, and no one looking at him would guess the passionate aching of his heart to see his lost love once again—but once again!

CHAPTER XXX.

'ONLY ONCE—LOVE!'

'There will no man do for your sake—I think—
What I would have done for the last word said,
I had wrung life dry for your lips to drink,
Broken it up for your daily bread!
Body for body and blood for blood,
As the flow of the full sea risen to flood,
That yearns and trembles before it sink,
I had given and lain down for you—glad and dead!'

LIFE at the Towers is no improvement on the life at Monte Carlo. Lady Elmsdale might be plain Mrs Anybody, as far as triumph may bring gratification to a woman.

Here, in the heart of the country, where she is *la crème de la crème*, there is no one to vie with, if she has a mind to vie. She is rich, but riches are only of value to her in order to bestow pleasure on the dear ones at Home.

Somehow, and this little truth reveals the most pitiable part of her existence, she always thinks of the shabby old Vicarage at Ravenshill, with its squabbles and its jars, its pinching economy and its monotonous life, as '*Home*,' even while she sits in solitary splendour within the gold embellished walls of her husband's regal residence.

She has never looked once on Dad, or on the little mother or Maud or Gus and the little ones, since that never-to-be-forgotten, dreary winter's day when she drove away as the Marchioness of Elmsdale, and Jack and Jill and Pop and Mop flung rice and old slippers—for *good luck!*—after the carriage with its four high-stepping greys and its pompous coachman and footman. Alas! how soon, like Cinderella, she found the carriage a pumpkin, the horses rats, and all connected with it a snare and a delusion!

Now, as she remembers the bright, exultant home faces, she smiles very bitterly. Her grand marriage, 'the match of the season,' as Mrs Lorimer and the rest of London had called it, has turned out a complete *fiasco* as far as her family is concerned. She cannot really be more separated from them than

she is now by the social cordon that divides class from class—not if seas and lands divided them.

She has yearned, especially since baby died, to pour out her full heart on the little mother's sympathising breast. She has even longed for a sight of Maud, unlowing, ill-natured Maud, simply because Maud would bring back to her vividly the dear old dead days, when she was not a great lady dressed up in satin sheen, with vassals and serfs by her side, but only a maiden of simple degree, whose greatest ambition was a ride on Claptrap's broad back, whose daily occupation was to give the Leghorns their food, and whose jolliest hours were passed in scouring the country amid the delicious Devonshire lanes with her faithful squire, Gus, by her side.

Maud's aspirations after Buckingham Palace and gaiety, her vision of finding a successor to Duncan M'Pherson in a Lord of Burleigh have been quashed in the bud, nor has Gus accomplished the desire of his young heart, riding after the hounds on one of Lord Elmsdale's hunters, for Lord Elmsdale sets his face against all her relatives, and makes no bones of informing her of the fact.

'Can't possibly have a confounded tribe of relations here,' he murmurs languidly. 'I couldn't stand old Wylmer's prosiness and piety, or your sister's ill-bred airs and graces, my dear Nest! Send them a lot of presents, if you like, but keep them at arm's length!'

So Nest indulges herself freely on the sole, real gratification left her in her aimless, weary life, and sends the presents, the advent of which causes infinite satisfaction to the elders and evokes yells of delight from the youngsters.

She has certainly no cause of complaint to make against Elmsdale's liberality.

With all his faults—and their name is legion—he is lavish, and has always been lavish in money to her, since a week before his marriage, when he astonished the Reverend Theodore's weak mind and upset his nerves by settling fifty thousand pounds on his bride-elect.

Tophet and its pomps and vanities having lost its charm, Nest neither thinks nor cares what tale her mirror tells her, and instead of helping to fill the coffers of Swaebé or Worth, all her pin-money is laid out in books on advanced thought for Dad's mind, and remedies, allopathic, homœopathic, and quack for his frame; on yards and yards of Brussels carpet and all sorts of luxurious furniture for the little mother; purple and fine linen for Maud; guns, fishing-rods, whips, skates, and

other requisites for the budding manhood of Gus ; and Noah's arks, squeaking dolls and poodles, puzzles, tops, etc., for the little ones ; until at periodical seasons, the homely Vicarage parlour presents the aspect of a colossal fancy bazaar and sounds like the Tower of Babel. But though she gives happiness to others, Nest is conscious that her own is a spoiled existence, and scarcely indulges in even a hope that things will ameliorate.

How can they, with two people tied firmly together and pulling different ways ?

She tries hard to persuade herself that every cloud has a silver lining, but signally fails to be sanguine and gay under the circumstances.

She grapples perpetually with dark fancies, trusting that light may break in at last, but the good time is so long in coming that she loses heart.

In her mind there is positive conviction that even if love for her husband had been born in her soul, that it would have been rejected or rebuked as childish folly, or worse still, the love would have been met with the jeers that sting her to the quick.

At this time Elmsdale has steeplechasing on the brain, and no time to waste in trying to win his wife's affection. His whole thoughts are absolutely given to 'The Chief,' an animal who has behaved creditably on several occasions and won his owner hatfuls of money.

By clever management he and his clique—all more or less well-known sporting men (with the exception of Oswald Dennistoun, whose sole idea and master passion is Lady Elmsdale)—have got the horse in at Ringmer, at the nice weight of eleven stone seven, and the wily fraternity have booked the race as a great moral as was ever known on the turf.

They have backed him to win them an enormous sum, and spare no pains to get more on.

The Towers are filled with Elmsdale's guests, and Nest, disliking the 'form,' keeps out of their way as much as is in her power. Fortunately for her, Elmsdale prefers bachelor dinners, so that she is spared the distasteful task of hostess.

Her soul positively recoils from the repetition of stable jargon, interspersed by words that are more forcible than refined, that meet her ears from time to time, and her spirit sinks within her as she marks the hot flush of excitement that burns on her husband's cheek, and the glitter in his eyes as he discusses the chances in his favour and the reverse.

She hates, in fact, with as strong a hatred as her essentially feminine nature is capable of, the horsey individuals whose society tends to debase the man she has married, and who foster and incite the passion of gambling and racing in him, who is only too prone to the vice.

The day before Ringmer races is a day of days, a day on which to be perfectly content, to enjoy to one's fullest bent that which the Italians so happily express as the *dolce far niente*.

The afternoon, though waning fast, still bears on it a brilliant crimson, the atmosphere is wonderfully mild and ambient, and full of the pungent but agreeable aromatic odour of the leaves dying under foot, and all round is a glorious sweep of country, yet clad in variegated robes, though seen through the haze of autumn.

Late as it is in the year, it feels just like a hasty snatch of golden splendour that has gone astray from Eden, an hour in which bliss seems perforce to descend from the sapphire dome above, like an angel of peace, so that the restless and yearning hearts of mortals may be satisfied.

Lady Elmsdale leans against one of the trees that form a belt down in a slight hollow at the far end of the grounds.

A ray of autumnal sunshine streams down on her, flecking her hair with a ruddy bronze. Her face is infinitely prettier than a year or two back; it has lost a great deal of its charming piquante beauty, but it has gained in character. The shady side of life has brought a chastened light that borders on the *spirituelle* into the large brown eyes, and the play of the red, childlike lips is gone, replaced by an expression of sadness, that renders them more attractive. Her tall figure, in her trailing black dress (for she still wears mourning for her child, and God and her own heart know that it is not only an outward and visible sign), is far slighter than it used to be when she forded the little river Yarl on Claptrap's back, or ran races like a tomboy, with Gus, through the old pine wood. As her glance roves over the remarkably pleasant-looking world, with its clear pellucid sky and its amber sunshine, she cares no more for the loveliness around than if she were stranded in the sandy plains of the dessert.

Her spirit is so dreadfully sore! What a future lies before this hapless wife, whose rash tongue in taking its false vow has given the lie to her heart.

A whole—whole miserable life of feigning, year after year, to wear a mask of affection or at least of duty, to display the mock-

ing semblance of a happy home, and worse—ay! infinitely worse than all—to know within herself that she is sinful enough to love another man dearer than her husband. This must be her doom, even if, still guiltless, she treads her poor heart into ashes, and walks on with a serene eye, and a dumb, smiling lip.

But if *otherwise!*

No! Nest never dreams even of *that*. Blindly she may rush to the very verge of the abyss; but with a strong purity will always live in her heart. As she stands now, she does not even recollect the wide gulf that lies between her and—Guy! for her vision seems to look across it, beyond it, right away towards the strange dream-like love, which, in the furnace it has gone through, has become so purified that the miserable taint of earthly passion does not even touch it.

'Nest!'

That voice!

It would wake her if she were dead, she has sometimes thought, and at the sudden sound of it now, Lady Elmsdale starts, and looks up, to meet the passionate gaze of Guy Trevelyian's eyes.

Her regard fixes on him, her arms involuntarily stretch out towards him, for she remembers nothing—*nothing!* save that *he* is here—close to her—with the same look of love as of old in his glance, with the same passion on his face that it wore two whole years ago, when they two parted—for ever?

But a vivid recollection swoops over her, of all that has been, that is, and that may be, and her arms fall nervously down, the fire in her eyes dies away, and, flushing deeply with shame, she draws up her figure and forces herself to speak.

'Mr Trevelyian, I hardly think our acquaintance warrants such an intrusion as this!'

'Acquaintance—you talk of acquaintance—when—'

But her expression frightens him. It has such a mingling of terror, and deprecation, and pain in it, that it stabs him like a knife.

'This is indeed an unexpected visit,' she articulates slowly, trying, poor soul, to steady the voice that betrays her heart. 'To what may I attribute this pleasure?'

For half a second, Guy flings back his head with the haughty gesture she knows so well.

'If I intrude, I had better—'

But he cannot go on, for he is in her presence—he feels the infinite spell that lies in every movement of hers, in the very

rustle of her dress. All his mighty love that many waters cannot quench, or the floods drown, rushes back in overwhelming force upon him.

'Oh, Nest! I did not think our meeting would be like this! If I have done wrong in hovering like a thief round this place, hoping against hope for a sight of you, forgive me! I felt that I could not live without looking on you just once again!'

She looks at him, this strong, proud, reserved man, as he trembles before her, and in spite of herself, a delicious thrill of triumph runs through her, but it is stilled, even in its birth, by the more potent power of *Love!*

'I will not ask you to remain!' she gasps, 'I am not well! I have suffered so much!'

'You are ill and in trouble, Nest!' he cries hastily, coming close to her, while his eyes devour the little white face that has lived beside him night and day, sleeping and waking, and that no other face can dethrone from his heart, so long as he has breath.

'It is nothing!' she answers quietly, moving further away. 'You know my trouble? I have lost my child!'

As she says this, her love for Guy seems to grow more dim beside the crushing grief of her loss, and he reads this on her mutable features with a fierce jealousy, not of the little one she mourns, but of its—father.

'And I am nothing to you now!—*nothing!*' he cries wrathfully, turning white to the lips.

'No!' she answers, in a low voice, '*nothing!*—how can you be? Married to Lord Elmsdale, my want of feeling for you surely requires no excuse!'

'Nest!'

'Mr Trevylian!' she breaks in hurriedly.

'*Nest!* if you slay me with a look, I will, I *must* still call you so!—Listen to me, Nest! Before I met you, I was only a dreamer, with the years of a man and the folly of a boy; the beauty of women spurred me on to idle fancies; men have many such, which they think—*love*—as I did, until the real feeling comes. I know *now* what it is to love—I know it to my despair!'

He pauses a moment, his heart beats so fast that he can scarcely articulate, and Nest's eyes have the look of a hunted deer as she feels that in flight alone can she avert the gathering doom. But her strength fails, and swaying a little, she leans up heavily against the tree, while Guy stands face to face, his

impetuous words once more pouring out like a flood which she can neither resist nor control.

'You must! you *shall* hear me once more, before you bid me leave you! I tell you, Nest, that I know now what Love is! Love! Love! Oh God! the word rings for ever in my brain—my senses—my soul! And who taught it me? When I had passed my youth, when my heart had grown cold with its dulled pulses of thirty-two years, who was it who put life therein, feverish, torturing, but glorious life? Oh! if heaven and hell stood between us, I should yet call out, as I do now, *I love you!—I love you!*—to fatuous madness, Lady Elmsdale!

And Guy, proud and really passionless to other women, kisses, not her, not even the hand that hangs white and cold by her side, but the sleeve of her black dress!

Lady Elmsdale neither speaks nor moves. True, her trembling lips just part, but no sound issues from them. There is a dazed expression in her eyes, and her face is white, *so* white that he might think he was worshipping a sculptured saint, as she stands, fair and pure, with a fierce love that equals his own throbbing in her breast, but outwardly calm and cold.

'Nest!' and his impetuous accents have sunk to a tone of deepest tenderness, 'my Nest! forgive me for having come here to-day! They told me you were not happy, that title and wealth have failed to bring you a bright life, a light heart! And I! I am so miserable, Nest! I seem to have no hope on earth! no ray of light since I lost you! Think what it is for a man to love like this!' and he takes her trembling fingers, but she draws them quickly away, 'yet I ask you nothing, I hope for nothing! only for mercy's sake do not tell me that I may never see you or speak to you. *Don't* drive me right away!'

She moves a step, and averts her face. She is absolutely afraid of him, afraid of the power he has over every inch of her being, and above all she is dreadfully afraid of—*herself*.

But Guy follows, a hot flush on his cheek, and a desperate pleading in his grey eyes.

And she durst not meet those eyes, not if she will keep her sense of duty intact.

'I do not ask you to love me as I love you, Nest. You do not, you *cannot*, only be merciful and good to me, for the sake of those other days. Tell me, have you forgotten them? or do you still remember?'

'Remember!' she cries, suddenly starting forward, and facing him now. 'Yes! I *do* remember! I shall remember as long as I live. Listen to *me*, now, *Guy*—though after to-day,

I swear the name shall never cross my lips—I was a foolish child when we met; I had not a sorrow in the world, not a *real* one, not one that I could not dash away in a moment and replace with a laugh. Then you came, and childhood seemed to fade away, and you made me *love you* with all the strength of a woman's heart. Oh, Guy! I tell this to you, for it is the truth, the dreadful, miserable truth. I loved you then, I have loved you all through, *I love you now!* dearly! dearly! But this is the last time we two must meet. Do you hear me, Guy?' she says passionately. 'This is the last time we two must meet! You must *swear* to me that you will never speak to me again!'

'I cannot, I will not swear,' he answers resolutely, 'for I should not keep my vow. Oh, Nest, if you have ever cared for me, recall your words!'

And he clasps her hand.

How dare you touch my hand! Don't you see *that?*' and she points to her wedding-ring, while tears rain down her cheeks.

'I see!' he replies bitterly. 'And I would I had been struck blind before I looked on that symbol of a hateful bondage. Oh, Nest! my love! my life! Is there no pity in heaven or on earth for us? I say *us*, because I see in your sweet face—in those tears—that you care for me still. Is there no way to end all this? Tell me, what must I do! *Shall I die*, Nest? That will be the only thing to keep as two apart!'

'No!' she whispers—unconsciously putting her hand on his arm—'let me think for a moment!'

Then she speaks soothingly, trying to be calm herself. But Guy is past hearing. With the touch of that little hand on him, he forgets everything—honour, duty, even *love*. For the love that would *harm*, is unworthy of the name.

'Nest! hearken to me! You are not happy. Your husband has no affection for you, and you are very young. Years and years of a lonely, loveless existence stretch before you, laying your life in ashes—making your soul old before its time! How will you bear all this? You are not of the stuff to be content with the mere tinsel and vanity of this world. Your heart will beat itself to death against the bars of your gilded cage. Your unsatisfied soul will starve. There is nothing more horrible, Nest, than to live on, when both heart and soul are dead! Nest—my own Nest! Come with *me!* Let us go to some other land—to some Eden, where our love will not be deemed a—sin, and—'

'Hush!' she whispers, with a thrill of pain. 'Oh, Guy! do you know that of all—*all* I have suffered, do suffer—nothing has hurt me more than these last words of yours! I can bear anything—*anything*, but the thought that you—whom I love—hold me so lightly, that you don't believe in my steadfastness to do right—to keep from wrong! I have never loved anyone but you—I shall never love anyone but you—but *because* I love you, because I cannot thrust away that love from me, am I fallen so low—*so low*, Guy!—that you should say such words? If you knew what my life is now, amid luxury and wealth, you would not—you *could* not add one iota to the supreme wretchedness of my lot!'

Guy answers nothing. What can he say, while he reads the truth, the whole unvarnished truth, in her poor little white face and quivering lips? and he curses himself for having been such a brute as to add to the pain she suffers.

'Lord Elmsdale! I am afraid I shall never teach myself to love *him*,' she goes on in a hopeless voice, 'and yet—'

'And yet?'

'And yet—God knows, you and I are as far removed from one another as heaven from earth. I think sometimes I am going mad, do you know? and, in these moments, I almost wish that I had never looked on your face, Guy!'

'It might have been best for *you*, Nest; but for *me*! I would not give up the memory of those past hours—not for all the joys the future could have in store. My love! my darling! do you think I can ever forget that you were mine once—your looks, your words, your lips—not even if I suffered a thousand deaths, as the price of my lost bliss! Thank God, I *cannot* undo the past! It is all I have to live for now! But *you*—if knowing me and loving me have unwittingly caused you suffering, forgive me! And, Nest, my dearest, take care of yourself, and try to be happy if you can! I will leave England again, and put seas between us two. It will be the only way to mind your behest. We may never meet again; but, after all, my love for you is not all selfish, Nest, since I would fain go away, believing that you will perchance forget me—believing that your life will still have some rifts of sunshine, that it will not be all shadow and regret!'

She listens; and, as she suddenly realises that they may never meet again, a feeling of misery makes her dizzy and faint.

'Going away from England?' she falters, with pale, quivering lips.

'What use in my staying?' he asks drearily, 'since you have bid me never to see or speak to you again!'

'True! True! What use?' she cries impetuously. '*What* use, since we are separated now as wholly as if oceans rolled between—what use, indeed! Since, of course, we are nothing to each other *now*.'

Not a word falls from him. He is ashy pale, and the quiver of pain—that she knows so well—crosses his mouth.

If it were otherwise. If he were more cold—more callous, she thinks she could bear it all better—but now—now!

'I feel as if my heart was breaking, Guy!' she cries pitifully—'as if my strength to do right was failing me! Perhaps it is best for you to leave England—for, Guy, do you know—that, I—don't—think I—*could*—say—good-bye a—*second* time!'

His courage to obey her ebbs fast—and his firm lips grow less resolute. Feeling his weakness, he makes an effort which, under the trial of this hour, is almost supernatural.

'I *must* go! You are not one to be happy in a love that would bring reproach or remorse in its train. My Nest! you are too good—too pure! But, before I go you must come to me once more—only once—Love! as you used to do. I *must* hold you in my arms—against my heart!' he cries feverishly, his love and his longing growing stronger than himself.

But she shakes her head sadly.

'No! no! Don't ask this of me, Guy! It would be ten times worse for me, if I could not think of you without being ashamed and self-reproachful!'

'But, only once, love! For God's sake don't send me away like this—hungering—thirsting! Think how the bitterness of our parting will be softened by one last caress! Nest! one kiss more can do you no harm, while I shall carry it away with me as my dearest memory, and I swear that it will be the last kiss that woman's lips shall lay on mine so long as I live!'

'No, no! Good-bye! don't tarnish our love with wrong, Guy!' she says, in a low voice, and with a face as white as a lily she moves slowly away, but before she has gone many paces, she turns and comes back to him.

'Guy!' she cries pleadingly, 'you *will* go away; you will promise that you will not try to see me again, won't you? I—cannot—bear—it! I—am—afraid—Guy!—afraid to meet you again. For pity's sake, you will spare me the trial!'

And she puts up her trembling hands in her earnest prayer. She looks so sweet and good in her avowal of weakness, that Guy catches his breath hard as he gazes on her.

She has always been a great temptation to him, and in spite of himself he feels all his courage, all his resolves to do right, melting into thin air as he recollects those other days before Fate had snatched this woman from him and left him desolate; those days fraught with delicious happiness when he had, unbidden, held her in his arms and her soft red lips had lain beneath his own.

But something, invisible, intangible, yet potent, holds him back now from even trying to clasp the little white hands, that pray him to guard her against—*herself!*

'I promise,' he replies, in a low but firm voice. 'What can I do but promise, since you ask it? Is not your slightest will my law? And oh, my Nest, may God bless and keep you! I leave my heart with you, faithful to you in every throb until it ceases to beat. *Good-bye!*'

Her lips part, but no word issues from them, and she closes her lids, and shivers.

Then for a moment their eyes meet—an eternity it seems to them, so much of misery does it contain—and Nest walks slowly back to the house which is her 'Home.'

Her heart feels like a stone, so heavy, and so dreadfully, *dreadfully* cold.

As she passes noiselessly up the stairs, the billiard-room door is slightly ajar, and loud talking strikes on her ear.

'I have no hesitation in taking three hundred to one on The Chief!' Dennistoun cries excitedly; he has been drinking and scarcely knows the gist of his own words.

'Put it down twice if you like,' a man called Jex Molyneux vociferates vehemently in answer.

Nest shudders and shrinks away, and puts her fingers in her ears to shut out the voices.

They jar so horribly on her nerves, strung to tension by the last hour.

She hurries to her own boudoir, and closing the door sinks into a chair.

She has parted with Guy for ever!

Ah! how these words toll through her brain, a requiem for the day that is dead!

Never more—never more, so long as she lives and breathes, and has her being, will she look again on Guy's face.

She has never known how much she loves him till to-night—

to-night, when, by her own decree, they two are separated for all time.

And yet, amid all her misery, she is glad that she has sent Guy away without one—*kiss!*

How long she sits here, weary, hopeless, and numbed with cold—for the fire has gone out, and she has neglected to ring for lights—she does not know, anyway it is growing into the small hours of the morning, when she is aroused by Elmsdale's entrance, with a lamp in his hand.

She just glances up at him; her whole bearing is indifferent, even icy, and in her glance there is legible dislike; nay, more—loathing. The contrast between her husband and her lover is so intense! Elmsdale has in these two years of marriage lost his *debonnaire* bearing, he has grown coarser of feature and mind, and Guy, with his passionate soul flashing in his grey eyes, his massive brow and his strong mouth, is a King of Beauty in comparison.

'Not gone to bed yet?' Elmsdale asks carelessly, and his wife, in spite of her feelings, answers gently enough,—

'No; I am not well, and felt too lazy even to go upstairs,' and she lifts up again a wan, weary face, that he stares at for a moment, while under the sweep of his fair moustache creeps an evil smile.

'Poor little Nest! you don't look very blooming, I must say!' and stooping, he pats her cheek.

The action smites her sensitive heart with remorse, and she thanks God once more that she refused that kiss to Guy.

'Elmsdale, take care of yourself to-morrow,' she says, almost softly; 'you always ride so recklessly, you know.'

'Oh, I sha'n't come to grief!' he answers, with a light laugh. 'Don't you know that nought never comes to harm, and if I did, I don't fancy it would break your heart—eh, Nest!'

She shrinks back a little as her glance meets his; there is such a curious gleam in his light eyes.

'I ought to have made you happier, Elmsdale. Forgive me if I haven't!' she says, quite humbly. 'We are not suited to one another, I am afraid. We ought not to have married, perhaps!'

'Do you think so? Well, it's rather late in the day to think of that now; we must make the best of one another,' he replies, in a voice that sounds half regretful—half bitter—as he turns away.

Nest catches his hand.

'Why are you not always kind to me, Elmsdale? I should have loved you if you had been!'

'And you don't love me now?' he questions, in a peculiar tone.

'Not so much as I ought,' she confesses, in her childish, outspoken fashion. 'But it is not my fault. You have never let me, you know. We seem to live only to make one another unhappy.'

And suddenly putting her head down on the table, she bursts into a torrent of tears.

He stands and gazes at her for a moment with the look of a demon in his face. He hates her—he has hated her ever since the first hour of her marriage, when he read her indifference, even dislike, in her face, and swore to himself never to forgive or forget it.

As he gazes at her now, lying before him in her *abandon* of grief, her slight figure quivering, her little hands trembling, he has no pity for her or for her blighted life.

And that evil smile once more crosses his mouth. Tears are his aversion, but now, instead of exhibiting his usual signs of impatience, he smooths back the long, rebellious hair that, unloosened, falls round her shoulders and far below her waist.

'Don't cry, Nest, there's a good child,' he says, quite tenderly. 'You are hipped, nervous, thoroughly upset; but cheer up, and give me your good wishes that The Chief may win, and if he does, I'll give up racing, I think. I am getting tired of it. I'll reform and become a model husband, and spend my days in looking after my wife.'

Nest ceases crying as she hearkens, and looks up at him amazed. Two red spots glow on his cheeks, and a frown is unmistakably on his brow; his eyes, too, have an unpleasant flash in them, but his lips smile and his voice is gentle. In fact he has never spoken to her so kindly since they have been married.

For a second she believes that this sudden change in him is a punishment for her, to make her reproach herself even more than she does already for her want of wifely love, and she resolves to meet his advances for a friendlier footing as warmly as she can.

She could really like him if he would only let her.

'Promise me, Elmsdale, that if all goes well to-morrow, you will give up racing and all that makes you cross and impatient. I *do* want to love you, indeed I do. I would do anything—

anything to bring a happier life to both of us. If we were alone a little—if these horrid men, who talk of nothing else but cards and horses were not here—we might learn to know one another better, and grow to like one another.'

She says it very nicely, and she feels very penitent. It even appears to her that she has wronged him by her interview with Guy, though Heaven knows it was none of her seeking, and above all, she absolutely rejoices now that she has sent Guy away for ever and ever.

'All right; I'll promise to clear out all these fellows and to become a regular Darby to your Joan. But you must promise me something too, will you?'

'Yes,' but even as she answers, the look in his eyes makes her thrill with fear.

Elmsdale, seizing both her hands, pulls her up from her chair, and stands facing her.

'Well, then, promise me that you will never go out to meet Mr Trevylian again under those trees,' and he glances in the direction she had been.

A bright crimson sweeps over her face, and an indignant, scornful look flashes from her big eyes.

'I did not go out to meet Mr Trevylian,' she replies haughtily. 'I met him by accident!'

'Well then, don't meet him by accident again, or I will really take you at your word and shut you up where we two shall be alone, so that we may learn to know one another better. And, Lady Elmsdale, as soon as you have learnt *your* lesson, you will find that if you cannot *love* me, you shall not, at any rate, play fast and loose with my name or my—honour.'

And flinging her roughly away from him, he leaves the room, shutting the door violently after him.

Lady Elmsdale, crouching on the floor where he has flung her, does not weep or wail. Her tears seem to be scorched up by the fire of indignation, and a horrible sense of injustice.

It is for this man that she has sent Guy from her, that she has doomed herself to a life which, to her young, impressionable heart, seems a living death. Then she remembers that after all she has injured her husband by marrying him without a spark of love for him in her breast, and in her self-condemnation, she forgives his treatment of her.

When Elmsdale comes downstairs, preparatory to starting for the races, it must be confessed he is rather amazed to find his wife in the breakfast-room, very pale, and with dark

bistre shades underlying her eyes, but with no sign of wrath or sullenness on her lips, as she holds them up to him.

'Kiss me, Elmsdale, before you go,' she says, very gently. 'I should not like you to leave me with anger in your heart to-day.'

So he drops a cold, careless kiss on her mouth, but never once looks up at her as she stands at the window watching him.

CHAPTER XXXI.

RINGMER RACES.

'A little sorrow, a little pleasure,
Fate metes us from the dusty measure
That holds the date of us all.'

'Death's shafts fly thick—here falls the village swain,
And there his pampered lord.'

THE day of Ringmer Races breaks with an obstinate drizzle.

No matter where the eye looks, not a speck of blue is discernible in the sky, nothing but big sullen banks of opaque cloud.

Moisture is everywhere, not honest rain drops pattering down defiantly and boldly, but a sneaking, pitiful sort of Scotch mist, more felt than seen. A little later, however, the November sunshine slants down in sickly rays, but all the exquisite brightness and radiance of yesterday are gone.

Nevertheless, fine or wet, there is a very fair attendance, and no falling-off in the usual adjuncts of gipsies, merry-go-rounds, Aunt Sallies, and so forth.

Ringmer course is first-rate for viewing a race, and the going is tolerably good, for the springy nature of the soil both summer and winter is just after the heart of old Mat Dawson.

Jex Molyneux of Kingsbury Park and Master of the Delabere hunt, a foxy-looking little man, with red hair and red lids to his sharp eyes, is on the course betimes, and regards it with complacency as being the very thing to suit to a T the speedy Miss Dolly. Already, in imagination, Lord Elmsdale's money is snugly and pleasantly in his pocket.

Elmsdale, whose habit it is to be late for everything, only reaches in time to walk over the course with his especial clique, and on a hasty survey, they pronounce it moderately satisfactory on the whole, although heavier going would in all probability suit their book better.

The place they distrust most is some double posts and rails, which, to their keen judgment in such matters, bode evil to the horse that may chance to hit them hard.

Notwithstanding this, on returning to the ring, they back The Chief for all they can get on, making him favourite at 2 to 1 taken freely.

3 to 1 is booked to money about Miss Dolly and 5 to 1 on Coxcomb.

Of the others, Middlemarch alone is supported.

The saddling-bell rings, and the jockeys quickly divested of light cover-coats, are ready for the fray.

The first to canter past is Miss Dolly, and she certainly does not belie the lavish eulogiums of her owner, as with her easy, beautiful stride, she gallops past the stand with several voices in the excited crowd shouting—

‘There’s nothing like *blood* after all?’

Next comes Coxcomb.

Coxcomb is a superb little chesnut with a coat of gold, the best of shoulders, and fine weight-carrying quarters.

In fact he would be a perfect picture were it not for his twisted fetlock joints, which although they don’t act against him, are terrible eyesores to real connoisseurs in horse-flesh.

He has been trained by a celebrated sporting son of Mars, and is ridden by Hanson, one of the best of jockeys.

Middlemarch is a good-looking hunter, but plough and more more fencing would suit him infinitely better, still there is very little doubt but that he is fit and well, and certain to stand up, for a finer fencer never went over Leicestershire.

His rider is Coleman. Slasher, Spitfire, and Will-o'-the-Wisp, beside others, follow in succession, but for what purpose they figure on the field is somewhat enigmatical, as unless all the others come to grief they can have no ghost of a chance.

Last out of the saddling enclosure, just as if it was done for luck's sake, comes the favourite, and as he walks down the course with his trainer by his side, nobody can help hoping that he will come off victor.

The Chief is a dark brown, about 15-3, with a head and eye betokening the best of tempers combined with the highest courage.

His sloping shoulders and deep girth look like both staying and going, and glancing behind the saddle, the jumping power cannot be doubted.

With his intelligent head stretched out, as he quietly champs his bit, he looks just the animal to put unlimited faith in, to carry bravely, either to the fore or to the charge.

His owner and trainer consider the race a certainty for him, and duty has been thoroughly done him, for the polish on his coat would be a credit to Danebury, and the muscle stands out all over him.

And Elmsdale, as with hands well down, he gallops past and over the hurdles, looks the right man in the right place.

They get off from the starting point at the first attempt, and Jex Molyneux, taking advantage of his light weight, goes to the front and makes the pace hot, with the remainder following in a cluster on his heels.

The first three fences are safely negotiated, but approaching the double post and rails, Slasher rushes at them and taking off too soon, comes down heavily. He rights himself quickly, but his chance—if he had one—is gone.

The rest get over safely, and Molyneux taking a pull at his mare, Middlemarch goes on with the lead, the others being well up.

All are now sailing splendidly down hill, and the excitement each moment grows more intense. The Chief, with Middlemarch by his side, clears the brook like a bird, closely followed by Coxcomb and Miss Dolly.

Spitfire goes over with a splash, but Will-o'-the-Wisp jumps right into the middle of the water.

The rest ascend the hill, the pace being still uncommonly good, and the lot keeping excellently well together.

Nearing the bank, Coxcomb races for the lead, and clears it at two lengths in front of the favourite, amid vociferous cheers from his owner and his brothers-in-arms. Middlemarch and Miss Dolly are with them, and both go strong and well.

At the post and rails, the four take close order and race for the fence that lies before the brook.

It is an uncommonly nasty drop, and if not thoroughly well cleared, is sure to harm.

The Chief, pulling hard, overpowers his rider, and rushing at the fence, he strikes the top binder and turns completely over Elmsdale, who lies in a doubled-up heap beneath him!

From this point the race is a match between Coxcomb and Miss Dolly, and so well both go that it looks like a neck-to-neck race. The riders eye one another, and know that the finish will be a very near thing.

Half-a-mile from home Hanson, mindful of the hill to end with, takes a steadier, and the mare is again slightly to the front.

At the hurdles at the foot of the hill the pair close, and run home locked together. But in the last few strides Hanson calls on the little chesnut for a final effort, and answering gamely, he lands the black and cerise hoops by a neck.

Meanwhile, Oswald Dennistoun with a few others run hastily down to the spot where Elmsdale lies.

His neck is broken!

Dennistoun stoops and looks at him. His face is very white and rigid already. The teeth press down hard on the colourless nether lip; the lithe fingers clench; the slight figure is crushed out of all symmetry, and on one temple is an ominous purple mark left by The Chief's strong hoof.

Dennistoun's hands shake as he tries to raise the body. Then he looks up and sees Guy Trevylian opposite, with startled eyes and an ashy pallor on his cheeks, and both men tacitly take up their grim burden and lay it as gently and carefully on the turf as if the life-blood still coursed in its veins, and its poor pulses were not stilled for ever.

And even at this moment, face to face with a terrible death, there is one thought in common between Oswald Dennistoun and Guy Trevylian.

Lady Elmsdale is free!

CHAPTER XXXII.

THROUGH THE GOLDEN GATE.

'A creature not too bright or good
For human nature's daily food,
For transient sorrows, simple wiles,
Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears and smiles!'

THE sun sinks royally to his rest, and the burning crimson of his mantle fades slowly out of sight behind a pile of gorgeous cloud, which will be all aflame with vermilion and purple and gold a little later on.

A warm, voluptuous breeze floats softly past, ust stirring, and no more, by its laggard touch, the emerald leaves, and bearing on its balmy wings sweet breaths of clover from the meadow hard by. A little black bat whirls its course blindly through the amber glitter of the sunset, and a solitary butterfly, a king of his species, with huge jewelled wings, lingers over his last good-night on the blushing face of a pink wild rose.

'Was I not a true prophet, love, when I saw in the future someone called *Ernestine Trevelyan*?' Guy asks, pressing a fervent kiss on Nest's red lips.

'Thank God!' she murmurs, and she creeps closer into his arms.

These arms are her world.

It is fully a year and ten months since that fatal fall at Ringmer Races, and when Lord Elmsdale's widow thinks of that day, she prays Heaven to pardon her sin of unloving wifehood, and rejoices that the man did not go to his terrible death without laying a last kiss on her lips.

A cold kiss, a mere outward symbol of affection, yet better a thousand times than frowns and bitter words to look back upon.

And sometimes Nest believes that she has no right to be happy now, when her hot, restless heart refused to obey the dictates of duty, and clung to its one passionate love in spite of everything.

She and Guy had been married just one calendar month, but it has seemed to them that to perfect their honeymoon they must revisit the dear old trysting-place—the green ridge by Ravenshill Church.

Silent with infinite love and happiness, they are content to

stand here side by side, trying to realise fully that Fate has indeed been kind enough to re-unite them for ever and ever.

'For ever and ever!'

Words so full of bliss at times—so full of woe at others! At this moment they bring to these two loving human hearts all that makes of this earth a paradise.

To say that Nest lives an enchanted life now, would be to say very little indeed. Her masculine world is as narrow as Eve's.

This Adam is all she sees and adores, while all other men are to her as if they were not.

And Guy, looking down on her, feeling her loving clasp, and remembering how nearly he has lost her, draws her quickly to him, as if afraid that even yet she may elude his grasp.

Almost a child in years, simple, tender, and girlish, she yet satisfies his passionate heart, and fills his cup of bliss to overflowing.

The promise held out by the enbankment of cloud is brilliantly kept. Floods of yellow light float through them, touched at the edges with fringes of flame. Big opaline seas and vast lakes of grey break out from the mysterious depths, surrounded by masses of gold, and with flashes of blue and crimson shot in here and there.

But Guy and Nest fail to appreciate the exceeding beauty of the sunset, for what can draw lovers out of their ideal life!

What can silence the old, old story?—but as new now as it was in the beginning of the world, when Adam whispered it to his Eve among the sweets of Eden.

Even before the golden hues have melted away into the soft misty purple that heralds night, these two are absorbed in one another.

The past with its bitter misery and trial has become a sealed book. They speak only of their love—the love that lives now and will live for ever—of the bright years opening before them, of the long delicious life in which they will never again be parted.

'It seems too beautiful, Guy! Sometimes I feel afraid that it will melt away like that golden cloud,' she says, her head against her husband's shoulder and her large brown eyes lifted to the sky in which the vivid tumult of colour is quickly fading tint by tint into deeper, tamer shades. Her voice involuntarily falters a little, and pearly tears glisten on her long curling lashes.

He stoops and sweeps them off with his moustache, and seizes the occasion to drop a fond caress on the broad white lids.

'The earth shall pass away first, my own!' he answers. 'No one can part us now, and *together*, my Nest, we can surely meet sorrow even with a smiling face!'

But a shadow of the past—a shadow cast by a little grave, violet-crowned, where 'Baby' lies serenely sleeping under the crystal sky of the Riviera—sends a thrill to her heart, and she slightly shivers.

'Ah! there is no perfect happiness in this world, even with Guy beside me,' she thinks, with the nervous organisation of a woman; but he—all *he* thinks is that the woman he loves is his for the rest of his days. Come what may, he can show a brave front, while his eyes rest on the quaint gipsy beauty of his wife's young face, and her slender arms form a magic circle round his neck.

So as he marks her shiver he never dreams, with the egotism of man, that he shares her love with 'Baby,' and says,—

'These warm days and chilly evenings are trying for my darling! Mine now, to keep and guard from every ill!' and drawing her cloak round her, he fastens it carefully and tenderly at her slim throat.

And she, to whom such tenderness and care are indeed new and strange, nestles against his heart, and looks up into his grey eyes very wistfully.

All the *piquante* sparkle of her face is gone; but a soft light breaks over it, and there is a universe of dumb pathos and eloquence in her gaze.

In this moment, all that may be left of the capricious, coquettish girl's nature, merges entirely into true, loyal-hearted womanhood.

'What is it, my Nest?'

'I love you! I love you!' she cries eagerly, as if all her soul went out to him in the three simple words and she *could* not keep it back, and her accents tremble with earnestness.

He smiles one of his rare sweet smiles as he harkens, and in proof of his unlimited gratitude a dark moustache swoops down once more swiftly on the rosebud lips, and Nest, who is saucy and defiant no longer, but a good and obedient wife, never dreams of remonstrating or repulsing. Nay, she even renders back (with interest) to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, and thus the theme of the discourse is broken for a halcyon moment or two. Then Guy gives a short, blissful sigh, like that of a giant refreshed.

Suddenly on the still air comes the shrill treble of Gus Wylmer's voice.

'Tea! tea!' he calls from the hollow that skirts the Vicarage grounds.

'Coming!' Guy answers.

But they loiter still.

They are inexpressibly loth to leave this charmed spot, where he first told his love, and which they have both remembered so well through the lagging unhappy years that have intervened.

This little green ridge has indeed been an oasis in the desert of their sundered lives.

The twilight is coming fast, a soft mellow flush tinges the western sky, a faint young moon hangs like a baby crescent in the azure dome above, and myriads of pale stars, clustering closely, peep at one another shyly.

The foliage rustles gently as if murmuring a welcome to the caress of the wanton wind, and other sound there is none, save from a topmost oak bough, where a cuckoo wails its plaintive note.

'Listen!' Nest whispers. 'One—two—three—four—five—six—Ah! I cannot count them! but they are all years and years of happiness for us, Guy, you know!' and the past, with its shadow of remorse and regret, falling away from her, she laughs her old sweet, merry child-like laugh, that peals out like silver bells on the silent night.

Guy looks up an instant at the bright spangled heavens. They seem literally to smile down upon him and her.

'God willing, my wife!'

He answers, with the gravity of deep happiness and infinite content in his voice.

The last faint glimmer of sunset falls on them as he takes her in his arms, close to his faithful heart; and in the fragrant summer gloaming they forget all that has gone before, and living in the magic present, pass once more like happy children through the golden gate of Fancy into that fair enchanted land, where love dwells always as immortal, and where 'there's nothing half so sweet in life as Love's Young Dream!'

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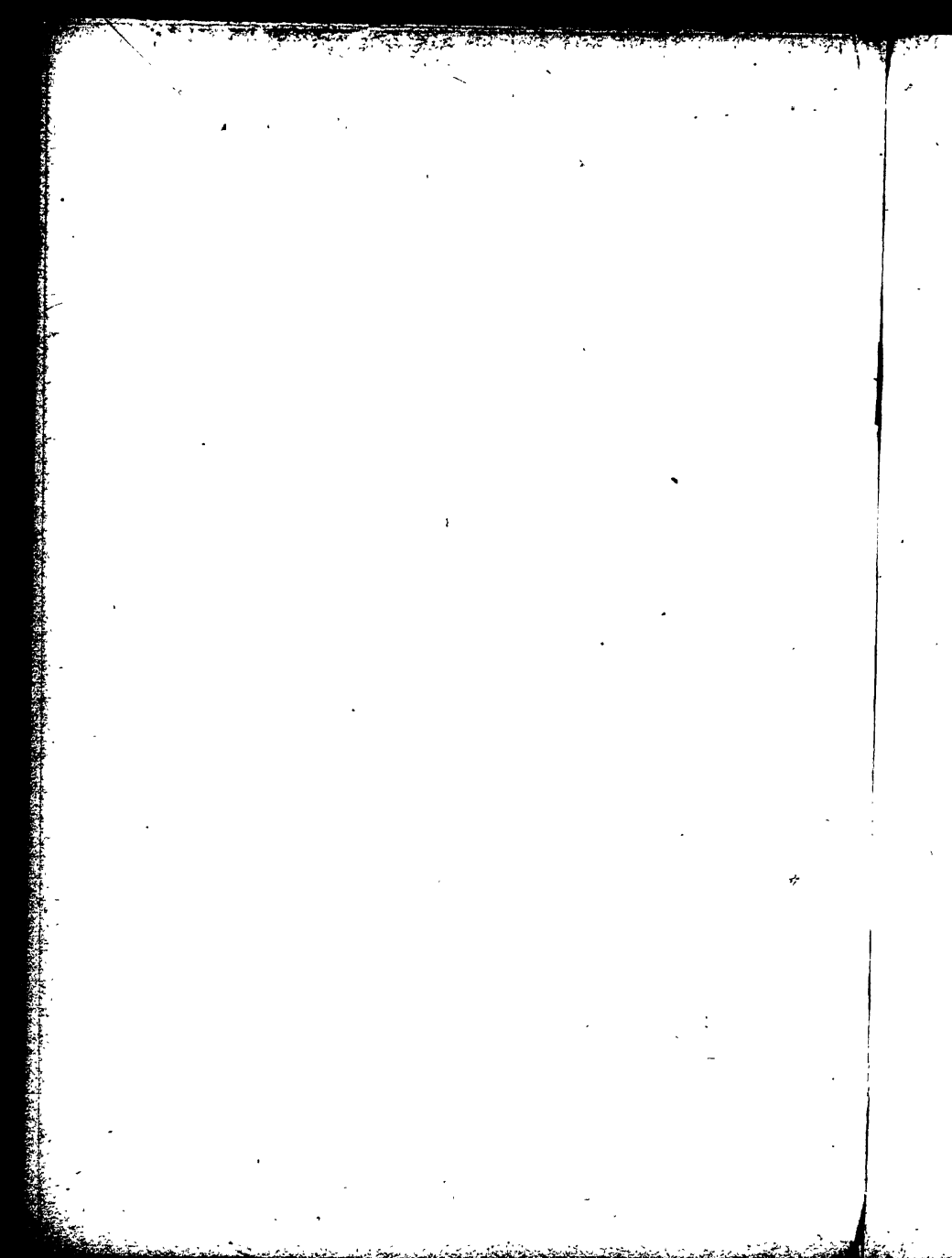
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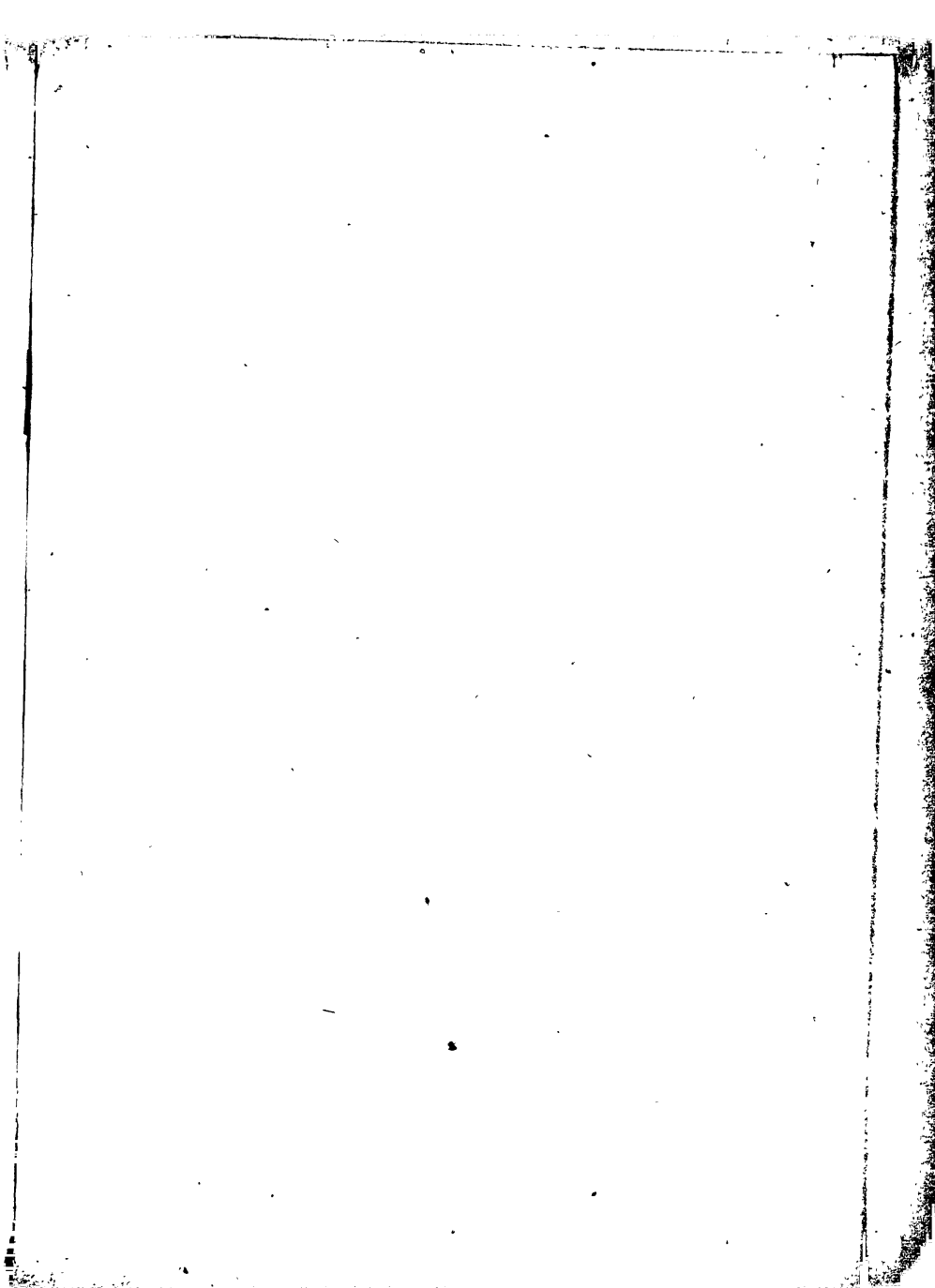
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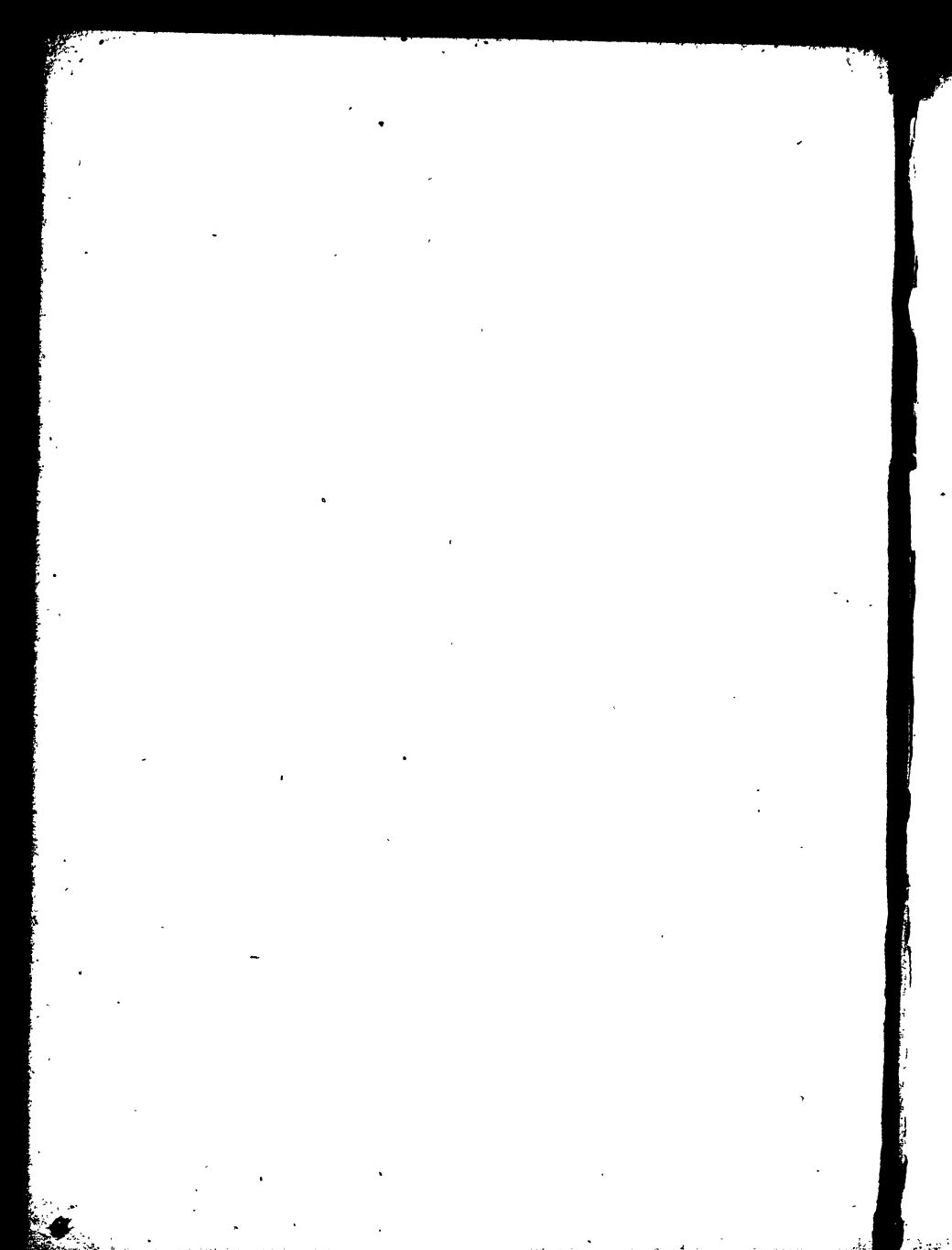
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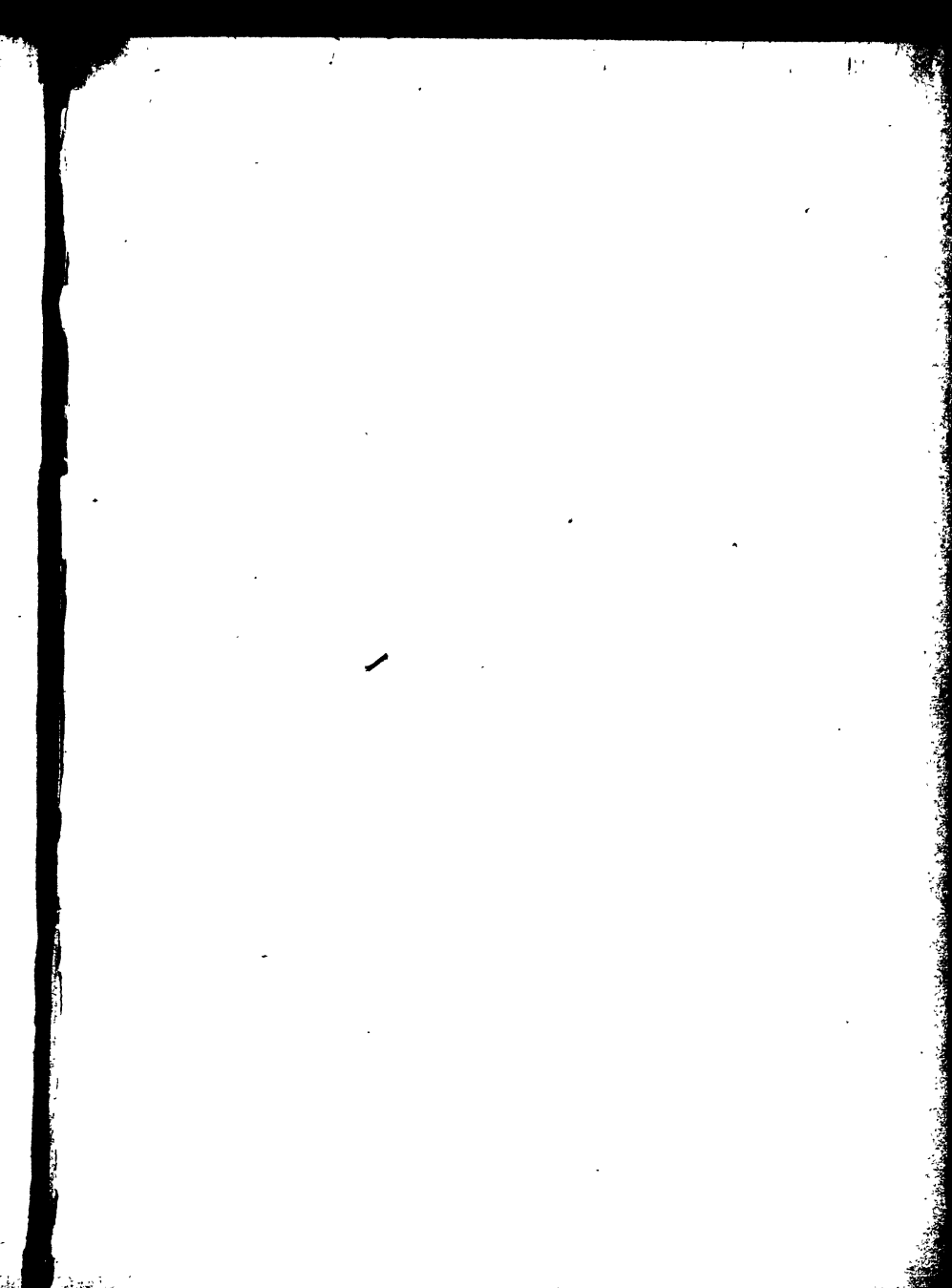
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