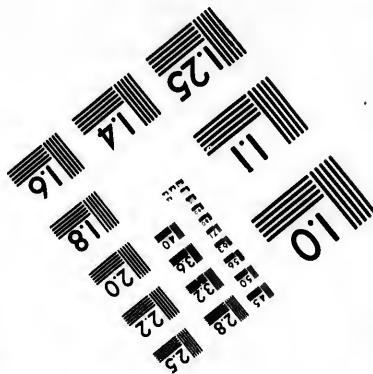
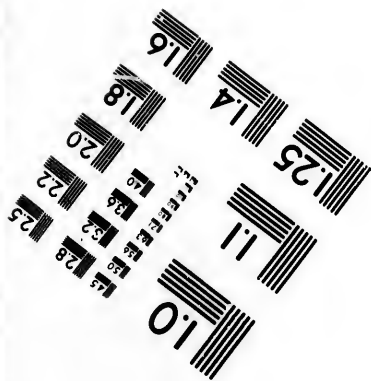
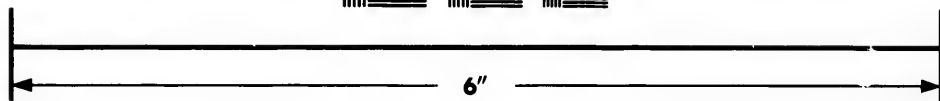
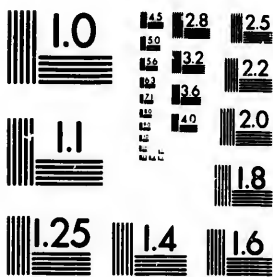


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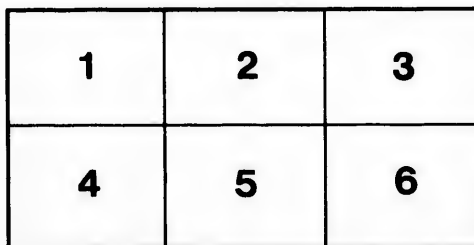
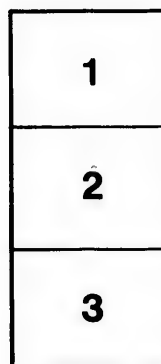
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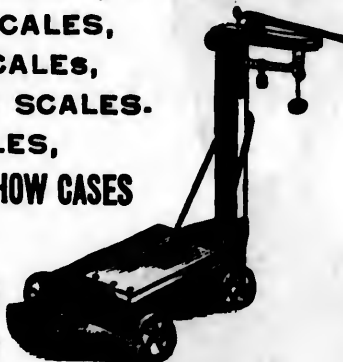
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BY

MRS. EDWARD KENNARD,

AUTHOR OF "THE GIRL IN THE BROWN HABIT," "A REAL GOOD THING,"

"KILLED IN THE OPEN," "STRAIGHT AS A DIE,"

"LANDING A PRIZE," ETC., ETC.



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MATRON OR MAID.

CHAPTER I.

AFTER FIVE YEARS.

It was a raw, dull day, early in October. The sky overhead looked dark and leaden, whilst a fine, continuous rain gave to the London streets an extremely deserted appearance. Pedestrians were few, and glided along under dripping umbrellas. Cabs, on the contrary, were in high demand, and rattled noisily over the granite pavement, making windows shake as they jolted by.

A woman was pacing restlessly up and down a shabbily-furnished room belonging to one of those numerous private hotels that abound in the narrow thoroughfares branching off Piccadilly. She might have been some five or six-and-thirty years of age, and was in many respects a remarkable-looking woman.

Her beauty, though on the wane, was still striking, in spite of a certain undefinable coarseness and voluptuous maturity, which, in fastidious eyes, detracted somewhat from its charm. She was tall and of commanding appearance, with a full bust and pillar-like throat. Her well-shaped head was covered by a profusion of black hair; not greasy and glossy, as black hair so often is, but dead and lustreless. It formed an ebony frame to her oval face, with its pale, but clear complexion. The features were good, though marked; the brows being strongly defined, and the nose prominent. Yet an acute observer might have detected that in her large, dark eyes, and in the ripe curves of her full mouth, there lurked an expression of fierce unrest, which told of stormy passions, and a vehement nature. A nature apt to battle and

struggle, and hurl itself, like a prisoned bird, against the thin crust of decorous reserve imposed by society, and ready to flash out with volcanic flame, whenever its slumbering fires were heated to a certain pitch of intensity.

Not a woman to be lightly trifled with, still less to be lightly cast off; especially if her affections were engaged. There was an intenseness, a concentration, about her whole aspect, which denoted nervous force, and an almost tragical capacity of suffering emotion. An impetuous creature, full of ardent impulses, whose love might easily prove a curse, rather than a blessing, to its object; and yet possessing a depth of feeling, a passionate self abandonment, that contained many elements of nobility. Happily married, she would probably have been an angel—but how few women have the good fortune to find their most amiable qualities developed in so delightful and simple a manner? Most marriages occasion friction, and where there is friction, the temper invariably suffers, no matter whether the fault lie with husband or with wife.

Up and down, up and down the dingy room this woman paced, like some magnificent wild beast of the desert panting for liberty. The flush on her pale cheek, although highly becoming, betrayed that she was a prey to unworied emotion, as did also an involuntary twitching of the facial muscles, which recurred at regular intervals.

Every two or three minutes she paused in her perambulations, and, going to the window, looked anxiously out on to the street, as if impatiently expecting an arrival. As time glided by, the nervous tension from which she was suffering increased. Once, a cab pulled up with a great clatter of wheels before the door of the house opposite. A shiver ran through all her frame. She pressed her hot face eagerly against the moist window pane, but she turned away with a gesture of disappointment, when a smartly-dressed young lady jumped out on to the pavement, and tendered the cabman his fare. How intolerable this waiting was.

The gilt clock on the mantelpiece struck four. Its thin strokes sounded with metallic harshness on the air. She went close up to it, and then, as if seized by a sudden impulse, gazed with hungry, critical scrutiny at her own reflection in the mirror behind.

She sighed. Five long years had passed since they had last met. Would he think her very much changed? Would he see the furrows which constant thought of him had stamped upon her brow, or notice the silvery threads that here and there shone amid her raven tresses? Even as she looked, an obtrusively white hair forced its presence upon her attention. With a species of savage defiance she separated it from its dusky companions, and plucked it out. Oh! how she longed to be young again for his sake; to recall the years of her youth, in order to find favour in his eyes. Very soon she would be quite a middle-aged woman. Horrible thought to dwell upon!

"Ah!" she murmured pathetically, twisting the white offender round her forefinger, "I am getting old—getting old. It is useless trying to disguise the truth, but the process is not pleasant; those wrinkles round my eyes are deepening, my skin is losing its smoothness—my very hair betrays my age. Nothing is sadder for a woman than to feel her beauty going from her, and day by day mine is leaving me. I shouldn't mind, if only he would love me still. But ah! Good God! if he should cease to care for me. His letters are not what they were; they have grown colder and more constrained. Looks count for so much in this world; we are judged almost entirely by them. If our exterior is pleasing to the eye, men like us; if not, we are simply ignored. I could not bear to be ignored, especially by him. I think," and she clenched her strong, white teeth together, "that I would sooner murder him, and myself too, than see him take up with some pink-and-white chit in her teens. He loved me once, but all the same, five years is a long time—a very long time—for one man to remain faithful to one woman." She paused, then added fiercely, as if combating an obnoxious thought—"And yet why not? He has everything to gain, nothing to lose. I am rich and handsome enough still to please many, and if he lives to be a hundred, he will never find anybody to love him as I do. Oh! Beau, my darling, my darling, make haste and come back to me, for I do want to see you so badly. These five years have been like a bad dream in your absence."

As she uttered the concluding words, she stretched out her arms with an infinitely yearning gesture, which threw her fine, if rather massive figure into high relief. There

was something touchingly unrestrained in her attitude, calculated to inspire compassion. She was a nice study for the physiologist, bent on probing to what heights and what depths that strange passion called love will lead a woman of ardent temperament and unbalanced mind, yet substantially pure.

Just then there came the sound of wheels outside, accompanied by a sharp pull at the door bell. The blood rushed to her face in one hot wave of colour; then ebbing, left it deadly pale. Her heart beat so tempestuously, that she could almost hear its pulsations. Her form grew tense and rigid; all power of movement seemed suddenly to have left her. Expectation, joy, fear, kept her paralysed.

Footsteps made themselves audible, tramping up the stairs, then the door was thrown wide open, and a young man entered the room, with the quiet assurance of an expected visitor.

A flood of rapturous delight swept over her spirit; she held out both her hands towards him, and with an hysterical sob, cried:

"Beau! Beau! So you have come at last! Oh! how glad I am to see you again, after this long and weary separation. I began to think it would never end."

It was not easy to tell from his manner whether he felt pleased or embarrassed by the warmth of the welcome accorded him. Perhaps he experienced something of both sentiments. Anyhow, he took her two hands in his, and shook them with much seeming cordiality. But even as he did so, he thought to himself:

"Good heavens! how she has aged. I could not have believed five years would make such a difference. She has grown quite fat and coarse-looking. What did I ever see to admire in her?"

He kept his reflections secret, however, and as she continued to gaze at him, with a rapt expression of mingled tenderness and delight, he seemed to realise that something more was expected of him than a mere handshake, such as he would have vouchsafed to any ordinary acquaintance. Stooping slightly—for she was very tall, almost as tall as himself—he brushed his fair moustache against her brow, and exclaimed carelessly:

"Yes, here I am, and jolly glad to get back to Old England. India is all very well in its way, but it is a poor

sort of place in comparison. One gets desperately home-sick after a while."

At the mere touch of his lips she quivered like a ship caught by the breeze, so great was her love for this young and good-looking soldier, eight years her junior.

"I thought you were never coming. Let me look at you, Beau!" she said, feasting her greedy eyes on his fair beauty. "Ah! how nice it is to be able to talk, instead of having to wait weeks and weeks for a letter!"

He changed colour under her searching gaze, which seemed to reach to the very depths of his soul.

"Haven't you looked at me enough?" he asked, trying to speak lightly. "Surely you might find some more pleasing object than a sallow invalid."

"I can never look at you enough; you know that, Beau. All the time you have been away my life has been a miserable burden to me. I have tried to live as other people live, to amuse myself as they do, and take an interest in things; but the attempt has proved a ghastly failure. Don't be angry with me if I cannot hide my delight at your home-coming."

He remained silent. It was awkward to feel that this woman loved him so much more than he loved her. Even while she was pouring forth her passionate protestations of affection, the thought kept recurring, "Dear me, dear me, how very much your appearance has altered for the worse!" As she looked into his sleepy blue eyes, with their long lashes, she could not refrain from expressing her admiration.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "you are handsomer than ever. What have you been doing to yourself, Beau?"

Beaumont Dornay possessed that soft, fair, almost feminine beauty, which when found in conjunction with a splendid physique, appeals so surely to women of a certain order of sensibility. He stood six feet high in his stockings, had a straight, flat back, a broad chest, spare limbs and well-developed muscles. His hair was flaxen, his eyes a limpid blue, and clear as water on a summer's day. The complexion was fresh as a girl's in spite of recent illness; and his silky moustache was tinged with strands of auburn. It was full enough, and long enough to conceal the principal defect of his handsome face, namely, a small, characterless and receding chin, which seemed to indicate a certain want of decision, possibly of moral courage.

This dull, autumnal afternoon, as he stood there, clad in

a light checked travelling suit, he looked very bright and goodly, and his mere presence illumined the dingy room, and appeared to fill it with sunshine. He laughed on hearing the remark made by his companion, and pretended to disdain it, although, at the same time, his masculine vanity was decidedly tickled.

"You flatter me, Lydia," he said, with a smile. "How can a poor devil possibly look well, who has been travelling incessantly for nearly four weeks, and who has only just recovered from a bad attack of dysentery into the bargain? The sea voyage did me a world of good. Before that I was a perfect wreck. My best friend could hardly have recognised me."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with a shudder; "don't talk of it. I can't bear even to think of the danger you were in. But surely, Beau," glancing anxiously up at him, "after so sharp an experience, you will never dream of going back to that wretched climate? There can be no occasion for it."

"I don't know. That remains to be seen. Anyhow, it's too soon yet to make plans. The thing is, I can not only live comfortably out there, but even put by money; whilst in England I seem to have an unhappy knack of always running into debt. Most young fellows race, bet, and gamble a great deal more at home than they do in India." As he finished speaking, he seated himself on a crimson velvet couch, and stretched out his long legs, with the air of a man who feels at his ease."

"How much leave have you got, Beau? though," she added, flushing crimson, "I suppose that signifies little now you mean to settle down."

"They've given me a year. The authorities have been generous, so there's no need to think of going back just yet."

She sat down beside him, and timidly put one hand on his sleeve. Something in his manner checked her confidences, even made her feel a little afraid of him. She was aware of an indefinable barrier that had not existed hitherto. It rendered the first overtures difficult, and caused a strange sense of shyness and apprehension, which checked all fluency of speech.

"Beau," she said hesitatingly, "you need never think of going back, and in future can give up troubling about money. I told you so in vain when you left England, and I tell you so again now. I have saved enough to give us a fair, if not

an extravagant income," and she shot a tentative glance at her companion.

He gave a short laugh.

"I *must* trouble about money. Perhaps my tastes are too luxurious, but I can't make two ends meet in this country on eight hundred a year."

"There is no occasion. Oh! Beau, surely you need not stand on ceremony with me. I have plenty of money—more than I know what to do with. If at any time you are in want, make me happy by looking upon me as your banker. I am saying this selfishly, asking you to confer a favour."

He gnawed at the end of his moustache. Possibly he remembered former kindnesses; debts paid, gifts received, etc. Such reminiscences were awkward, for absence had distinctly shown him, that so long as he continued to accept benefits at her hands his personal liberty was endangered.

"Thank you, Lydia," he said, after a momentary hesitation, not without emotion, for the sincerity of her offer impressed him deeply. "You are very kind, far kinder than I deserve, but I can no longer presume upon your generosity. It places me in a false position."

A gleam of terror shot into her dark eyes. They had been very intimate, and now he was treating her like a stranger.

"Presume upon my generosity! How formally you speak. Why not! has anything happened since you went to India? Have you," dropping her voice almost to a whisper, "have you changed? You promised faithfully to tell me if you did."

He looked away, and stared absently at the flower-covered carpet at his feet, scarce knowing what reply to make. When he went abroad, he had been a mere boy, who took life lightly and easily, without ever dwelling on its serious side. Many things which seemed right to him then, did not seem right to him now. Advancing years had brought with them clearer perceptions. As a youth, his conscience troubled him very little, if at all. As a man of ripe understanding, and with an increased share of worldly wisdom, his honour found a difficulty in reconciling itself to the notion of subsisting on the bounty of a woman.

"No," he answered evasively. "I am not changed in the manner that you mean—at least I don't think so."

She breathed a deep sigh of relief. Thank Heaven! her worst fears were not realised.

"Have you not fallen in love, Beau? Answer me truly."

"That is a somewhat difficult question to answer. I admire pretty women, as you know—what man does not? But when I choose a wife, I shall take care not to select her from amongst any of the Indian ladies of my acquaintance. Besides—," and he stopped short, smothering a sigh.

"Why not? Are they not nice?" Her face had once more grown bright. He was true to her still.

"Yes, exceedingly nice in their way. Charming to flirt with, and ride with, and dance with, but nothing more."

"Beau, on your honour, nothing more? Oh! tell me the truth. It makes me so happy to think that I am not forgotten." Almost unconsciously she drew nearer to his side, as if he were a magnet impossible to resist. "Then," she added in tones of soft interrogation, "you really do care for me a little bit?"

Her handsome, glowing countenance smiled upon his. Years ago, she had exercised a certain supremacy over him. He thought it at an end; but now, as they sat there side by side, he began to feel the old, mysterious influence stealing over him again. He could not account for it, but the fact remained.

"Beau, I am waiting. You have not answered my question. Do you care for me still, as you did when we were first engaged?"

It was as if he were under the spell of some baleful sorceress, who, against his will, forced him to utter certain words. If it is true, that human intercourse is shaped by the magnetic power of the individual, she possessed that strange electric current in a larger degree than he; or else her passion was truer, stronger, more imperious, and swept the weaker one along in its train.

He moved uneasily, as if to avoid the luminous focus of her eyes, and answered with curious reluctance.

"Yes, I—I suppose so. At all events, I haven't fallen in love with anybody else."

She was satisfied—nay, more than satisfied—overjoyed at this declaration, grudging and ungracious as it was. Her courage returned. She no longer felt oppressed by a sense of her age and her fading looks. The future once more seemed painted in the bright colours with which

many a time during the last five years her exuberant fancy had decked it. She was a woman of quick impulses, given to jumping from the depths of despair to the very topmost pinnacle of hope, and often without any substantial reason.

"Ah!" she cried with a glad catch in her voice, "why need anything be altered? Why can't we be just as good friends, and meet as often as we did before you went to India? You let me help you then, let me continue to help you now. You yourself must admit there is no reason why this pleasure should be denied me."

"You are making a mistake there, Lydia." And with a strong effort he looked her full in the face. "You—you do not understand."

"I don't want to understand," she exclaimed petulantly.

"But you must, whether you like it or not. You see I have grown older and wiser since—since—well, since the time you paid my debts for me. It was awfully good of you. I shall never forget it; but all the same I can't place myself under such obligations any more. Even as it is, I feel ashamed."

He was a man of a very sensitive and, in the main, honourable nature, and in speaking these words, he spoke the truth, and gave expression to thoughts that had long been weighing on his mind. She realised this, and respected him for his decision, though she determined to combat it, for she was clever enough to see how greatly, by declining pecuniary assistance, his independence would increase. So long as she helped him, he was more or less her slave, and could not very well escape. This firm and manly tone filled her with vague alarms. The iron was already entering into her soul. Instinct told her his affection had cooled, and to a passionate woman, no knowledge is more terrible. The mere suspicion sent a thrill of intolerable anguish through her frame.

"Ashamed!" she cried, with a mirthless laugh. "Ashamed of what? Do you deprive me of anything? Have not I enough for myself and you too? Oh, you have grown horribly strait-laced and severe. What is life given us for, but to enjoy it whilst we can?"

"I don't know, Lydia. Life is a mystery beyond our comprehension. But I fancy sometimes in my better moments that personal amusement and indulgence are not the highest aims we should attain to."

"Pooh! Nonsense! There need be no ceremony between you and me. We are too well acquainted to deceive each other by high-sounding sentiment, which, when you come to analyse it, means nothing whatever."

"Perhaps not; but a man is none the worse for entertaining serious thoughts now and again."

"Serious or light, what does it matter? They all come to the same in the end. Nobody knows anything. The only true philosophy is that which bids us 'eat, drink, and be merry.' But to return to our subject. You must positively retract this absurd decision of yours. It is not as if I were a stranger. All I have belongs to you. You yourself have said many a time, when we talked the matter over, that had it not been for the cruel terms of Mr. Stapleton's will, we should have been married long ago. These alone have prevented our being husband and wife at this moment. And now," she added softly, "the obstacle is removed which in former days hindered our marriage."

"Yes, yes, Lydia; I know all that. There's no need to rake up the past."

"You force me to do so by withdrawing your confidence," and the tears rushed to her eyes.

He shrugged his shoulders a trifle impatiently. She irritated him by reminding him of his engagement.

"Did I say anything of the sort? I only said that, on mature consideration, it seems to me unmanly to accept money at your hands."

"You have grown very proud, and exceedingly high-minded all of a sudden, Captain Lornay."

He flushed up to the roots of his fair hair.

"You do well to taunt me, Mrs. Stapleton, for you possess the right. I am only too conscious that I have given it you."

His quiet, gentlemanly bearing disarmed her wrath.

"Beau, Beau," she exclaimed imploringly, "don't let us quarrel when we have not met for so long. I love you—I love you. Ah, you great, dear, foolish boy, why can't you accept the fact, since it is unalterable, and instead of standing on your dignity, realize that if you were kneeling, a beggar at my feet, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to hand you over my entire fortune."

He was touched by the genuineness of her devotion. Was it his fault that the chains which had bound him of

old now galled him a little? What had these five years, spent in soldiering in India, done to him? He had gone away, believing Lydia Stapleton to be the most lovely and lovable woman in the world, and he had come back to find flaws in his idol, to discover that the siren was stouter, older, and altogether less captivating than his boyish imagination had pictured. He remembered the pangs with which he had torn himself away from her presence, and could not help confessing that his sentiments had undergone a change.

And yet she loved him just as much as ever. Without undue vanity, this fact was perfectly evident, and it added to the awkwardness of the situation. Then, too, he was not sure of himself. In his desire to avoid giving pain, he had already been led into making certain assurances which were not strictly true. He had repudiated the idea of any alteration having taken place in his feelings, and had even declared that, after a fashion, he returned Mrs. Stapleton's affection.

"Was it true? Was it honest?"

His baser nature might answer "yes," say, "Don't be squeamish, take what you can get!" but his heart said no, told him he was a hypocrite to feign a passion that, rightly or wrongly, had died away to nothing. A secret voice urged him to speak the truth at whatever cost. It whispered that honour, and even his future peace, both demanded a clear explanation.

But the great fault of Beaumont Dornay's character lay in his inability to do disagreeable things. He liked to be liked, and could not say no at the right time. He preferred yielding to circumstances, rather than making a brave fight against them. No doubt his chin was in fault. If it had been larger, squarer, more masculine, he would probably have possessed superior moral tone. And yet it was precisely this suavity and graciousness, this ease and adaptability of manner, which rendered him so popular, and so greatly beloved by women.

He had that rare gift—suitability; which alone makes human intercourse pleasant, but he lacked certain qualities which prevent it from degenerating into weakness. As he sat in the darkening twilight and saw Lydia Stapleton's beautiful eyes shining on him like two stars—as he felt her warm breath kissing his brow, and inhaled the subtle odour

of sweet perfumes that emanated from her person—he found good resolutions welling away, and old ties, old associations asserting themselves with fresh force.

The time for shaking them off was already past. He had failed to seize the favourable moment, and the man who in life lets them go by, lives to repent his procrastination. Besides, it would not have been decent to tell her the very moment he came home that he was tired of her, and that their engagement must be broken off.

So he argued, not without reason. Nevertheless he saw difficulties ahead.

CHAPTER II.

BEAU DORNAY SUCCUMBS TO TEMPTATION.

“MAMMA, Mamma, may I go out to tea with Thomson’s sister? She has called to ask if we can——” The speaker, suddenly perceiving that her mother was not alone, stopped short and looked confused.

She was a very tall, lanky, angular girl of fourteen, who, in spite of her scanty frock, thin legs, and flowing hair, did not look a day younger than her age. Her dress, in fact, was much too juvenile for her appearance.

“Why, who is this?” exclaimed Beau, rising and examining the new-comer with an air of doubtful recognition. “Surely it’s not my little friend Amy, who I used to dandle on my knee in the olden days?”

“Yes, it is, though,” she answered, taking possession of his hand, and squeezing it with child-like effusion. “And you are Captain Dornay. I knew you at once, only your moustache is much bigger than it used to be. When you went away it was a little fluffy thing, which you were awfully proud of, but now it is quite beautiful. I like gentlemen to have big moustachios.”

“Thank you, Amy. I feel very much flattered by your remarks. But what a tall girl you have grown, to be sure. Why, you are almost a young lady.”

“I shall be a young lady very soon. It’s delightful to think of. I can wear long frocks then, and hide my legs, which I know are horrid. Mamma says when I’m eighteen she will be obliged to let me come out, as I shall have out-

grown the society of Thomson and Mademoiselle Latouche. I hate Mademoiselle Latouche. She's such a nasty, cross old thing. You've no idea how unkind she is to me."

"Amy," said Mrs. Stapleton, in angry voice, "I do wish you'd hold your tongue, and not go gabbling on in that forward fashion to Captain Dornay about things in which he takes no interest. What business have you to come here without my permission? Did I not tell you at luncheon that I should be engaged this afternoon, and desired no interruption? You are really most disobedient."

"Ah, I forgot. I'm so sorry, Mamma. Please don't scold," looking furtively at her mother, with an expression not lost upon Beau, who adored children and animals. "I only wanted to know if Thomson and I might go out to tea at Mrs. Brinsmead's. It's her birthday."

Thomson was the lady's-maid, with whom Amy, on her rare visits to town, principally associated. It was with the greatest reluctance that Lydia Stapleton had allowed her daughter to accompany her on the present occasion, but the sudden discovery of defective drainage in her country house, coupled with threatenings of serious indisposition, had necessitated the girl's immediate departure from home. There was no time to make plans, so Mrs. Stapleton brought Amy to London, firmly intending to keep her invisible. But on the very first afternoon of Captain Dornay's return, she had disobeyed orders. Lydia was intensely provoked, but could not show her annoyance. Unfortunately, Amy was not a daughter to be proud of.

She had passed the age when a pretty little dressed-up doll, with golden hair and azure eyes, rather enhances than detracts from the fair mother's fascinations, affording telling opportunities of displaying an adorable, maternal solicitude, certain to find favour with the sterner sex.

She was too old, and too ugly. Her pale, thin face, flat figure, and obtrusively long arms and legs were the reverse of attractive, and reflected no credit on her maternal parent. In truth, the poor child inherited none of her mother's good looks, but took exclusively after her deceased father; and as Mrs. Stapleton had disliked him, she disliked his offspring.

Not but what the girl was harmless enough, and easily suppressed, only the continual presence of such a great, growing, gawky thing, reminded the elder lady in an

extremely unpleasant fashion of the passage of Time. And Old Time and she waged bitter wars. Mrs. Stapleton had an intuitive conviction on this particular afternoon that the sight of Amy, sprung from a child of nine to a big girl of fourteen, would produce a profound impression upon Captain Dornay, and tell against her—the mother. It was bringing the fact home forcibly that her youth had gone, and she was no longer as young as she was. A beautiful woman finds it even harder than a plain one to grow old with grace. She has been so accustomed to be petted and made much of, that age is the enemy, above all others, whose advent she dreads. Mrs. Stapleton looked at her daughter with anything but an amiable expression of countenance, and anxious to get her out of the room as quickly as possible, replied :

“May you go to tea at Mrs. Brinsmead’s? Oh! yes, most certainly. You can start at once. Here is a shilling to pay for your cab home, and tell Thomson I shall expect her back at nine o’clock.”

“Yes, mamma,” said Amy joyously, for in spite of the cold treatment she received, she was a child of exuberant feeling, easily pleased and rendered happy; “we won’t be late. And now I’m off. Good-bye, Captain Dornay,” bestowing a frankly affectionate look upon the young man. “I am sorry to be going out to tea, just when you are here, but you see mamma does not want me to stay, so you must come and have a nice long talk with me some other time.”

“Very well, Amy,” he answered laughingly. “Fix your own day, and I’ll not forget the engagement.”

“That child is becoming a nuisance,” said Mrs. Stapleton, as soon as the girl had disappeared.

“Why, what’s the matter with her, Lydia? It seems to me she’s delightfully fresh and outspoken.”

“A little too outspoken. She rattles on in the most absurd fashion, and has not an atom of tact.”

“That will come all in good time. As often as not, what passes for tact is dissimulation.”

“Well, we need not talk about Amy any more. She’s not such a very interesting subject as all that. I want to hear about yourself, Beau. What are your plans? Do you intend remaining in London this winter?”

Oh, if he would only tell her when he contemplated

getting married! But, woman of the world as she was, she had not the courage to put the question plainly.

"No, certainly not, if I can help it. London is a beastly place this time of the year. Nothing but smuts and fogs."

"You get used to the smuts, and the fogs are greatly exaggerated."

"Perhaps so. All the same, I shall keep out of them if I can."

Her face fell, and a look of intense disappointment stole over it.

"I—I made sure you would make London your headquarters. I wish I had known, for I have just taken a house for six months, until Briarton Hall is thoroughly overhauled. We have had our drains all wrong, and narrowly escaped typhoid fever. At least, so the doctor declared. He insisted on my taking Amy away, and said he would not answer for the consequences if she remained."

"Everybody's drains go wrong now-a-days. I believe people were better off when there were none. And so you have actually forsaken dear old Briarton, and are going in for the dissipations of town?"

"I don't think I shall enjoy them much, if you mean to be away," she answered dolefully.

"Oh! yes you will. You must cheer up, Lydia. You ought to have grown accustomed to my absence by this time."

"Ah! Beau, how can you speak so? I shall never get accustomed to it. But I still remain in ignorance of your plans, and am most anxious to hear them." Why did he resolutely shirk all mention of their marriage?

"You remember Grimshaw, don't you?"

"What! that little, fat, good-natured man who used to be your captain?" And her heart sank.

"Yes, he's my Major now, and a rattling good one, too. Well, Grimshaw and I put our heads together on the homeward voyage."

"Oh! he came back with you, did he?"

"Yes, the dear old fellow caught fever on purpose, I believe, to be invalided the same time as myself, and to fuss after me, as if he were quite well and sound. Anyway, we came to the conclusion on board ship, that as we were both poor, miserable creatures, suffering from the ills of

the flesh, the very best thing we could possibly do would be to go in for a season's hunting."

"Hunting! Good gracious! What a mad project. Do you wish to break your neck?"

"No, but I wish to regain my health before—well, before settling down."

"Beau, are you really bad? You don't look ill. I can't realise that you have been at death's door."

"Perhaps not; but I've had rather a squeak for it, nevertheless. If it had not been for Grimshaw, I often think I should never have pulled through. Our regimental doctor, directly he heard we were coming to England, advised us both to go in for horse exercise."

"Indeed! And what did you say? Did you tell him there was a person at home who asked for nothing better than to nurse you?"

"No; we told him there was only one sort of horse-exercise for us, namely, hunting."

"I'm sure that doctor is wrong," said Lydia, to whom the whole project was eminently distasteful. Besides, what did Beau mean by rushing off in this manner with Major Grimshaw? He had not said a word about their engagement. Did he propose to ignore it altogether? Evidently he did not intend to get married just at present. Her heart throbbed with a dull ache. This suspense was terrible.

"I don't think so," rejoined Beau coolly. "But there! I know you are not a sportswoman, and can't enter into our feelings."

She felt hurt by this observation, for she told herself she could enter into any of his feelings, if only he would give her the chance; but since his return he had steadily repelled sentiment on her part. A kind of chill was stealing over her. A horrible numbness and fear, that reduced her strength to weakness, and which made the words she would have uttered freeze on her lips.

"Where are you going?" she asked faintly, after a pause so long, that she wondered if it would ever end.

"Ah? there lies the difficulty. It is not easy to make up one's mind, or rather, two minds. Personally, I had a great hankering after Melton, but Grimshaw assured me that it is a frightfully expensive place, so we had to give the project up, and have now pretty well settled to go to Fieldborough.

It's not quite such a fashionable centre, but it is very get-at-able, and situated in the midst of a real good sporting country. Grimshaw has an uncle living close by, a Sir Hector Dalrymple, which was another inducement in favour of Fieldborough, at least as far as he is concerned."

"And what about horses? You haven't got any."

"Not at present; and unfortunately it's by no means easy to pick up good hunters, even when you are prepared to pay a tolerably long price; but it is the hardest thing in the world to find decent gees when you can only afford to give some fifty or sixty pounds a-piece for them."

"Shall you live in the hotel, or take a house?" inquired Lydia, feeling thoroughly wretched.

"Neither; both are too expensive. Grimshaw proposes lodgings. He intends paying a flying visit to his uncle one day very soon, and will profit by the opportunity to take a look round."

Lydia Stapleton sighed. This hunting project had felled all her castles in the air to the ground. She had pictured to herself a delightful winter in London, with Beau as her acknowledged *fiancé*, and a happy marriage in the early spring. Now, any such termination seemed as far off as if he had remained in India. He had never once alluded to it; and from pride, soreness, wounded feeling, she could not be the first to do so.

She hung with eager hope on every word that fell from his mouth, and each one in turn disappointed her. His utterances were commonplace, devoid of any semblance of affection, and, to her ears, egotistical. If he had not been so maddeningly handsome, she could almost have hated him.

"It seems to me I shan't see much of you," she said sullenly. "I appear to be left quite out of the programme."

He changed colour, and his blue eyes dropped before hers.

"Oh yes, you will. One naturally feels a little unsettled just at first, after being away so long. But things will tumble into shape after a bit. Besides, we shall run up to town whenever there is a frost; then we can do some of the theatres together. It's an age since I've seen a real good pantomime."

She smiled faintly, and tried to derive meagre consolation

from the prospect thus held out. It was all so different from what she had anticipated. The joy in her heart gave place to despair. He was friendly enough, and pleasant enough. It was not easy to find any particular fault with his conduct, and yet he was very far from being the same Beau from whom she had parted with such tears and lamentations five years ago. The difference consisted in this. He cared for her then, and he did not care for her now. He had found other interests in life, and thought a good deal more of his amusements, of L.'s hunting, and his friend Grimshaw than he did of her. Instinct seldom plays a woman false.

It was simply insufferable of him to talk so gaily of going to Fieldborough, directly he set foot in England. And the worst of it was, she could not take up her residence in that town. She was already tied to her house in London. Besides, she knew nothing of field sports, and had never been on a horse in her life. Even if she had had the will, she was too old now to take to hunting. And he might meet girls—pretty girls. The thought drove her frantic. Ever since they parted, she had always feared some rival, and an unreasoning jealousy consumed her.

"If you are bent on going, of course you must go. I have no power to prevent you," she said sadly, thinking that once upon a time her slightest word would have been law. And then, as the old memories rushed to her mind, her eyes grew dim and moist, and ashamed to let him see the emotion from which she suffered, she moved away, and walking to a writing-table near the window, remained there for several seconds. Fool that she was to help him, but in spite of all, her love was stronger than her common sense.

Captain Dornay rose to take his leave. The interview had grown constrained, and therefore disagreeable. To tell the truth, he had greatly dreaded it, and was relieved at its coming to an end.

"Good-bye," he said. "I must be off now. Grimshaw arranged to dine at seven, and go to bed early. We shall both appreciate a night's rest after our long journey, for neither of us slept much in the train."

"Are you really going already," she returned, hastily drying her eyes. "You only seem to have been here a few minutes."

"Yes; but I was wrong to say good-bye. *Au revoir* sounds so much better."

"And when shall I see you again?"

"Oh, very soon. I don't quite know when. To-morrow perhaps, or the next day."

She advanced a step nearer, and looked at him very lovingly and regretfully. He was as a god in her eyes.

"Beau," she said, and hesitated, "if I ask a—a favour of you—just one, on your first home-coming, you won't refuse me, will you?"

"I should not like to appear ungracious. What is it?"

"Nothing; only I want you to take this." And turning away her face, so that he should not see the vivid blush that burnt thereon, she thrust an envelope into his hand.

He opened it, and inside found a folded cheque for five hundred pounds, with the writer's signature still wet. He started back in amazement. A feeling of repugnance crept over him.

"No, no, Lydia, I cannot, indeed I cannot accept such a present. Thank you all the same."

"It is to buy horses with," she faltered almost inarticulately. "It makes me miserable to think of your not being well-mounted. People meet with such dreadful accidents through riding bad animals that can't jump."

The temptation was great. Beau Dornay was very poor. This money would just prevent his being uneasy about financial matters during the forthcoming season. Nevertheless, he shrank from accepting Lydia Stapleton's cheque. It seemed to him that to take it would put a stain upon his manhood, and render his position even more difficult than it already was.

Seeing refusal written on his face, she burst into tears. They had been gathering for some time past, and could no longer be restrained. Her whole system was over-wrought.

"Ah!" she sobbed convulsively. "You have grown tired of me—you have grown tired of me. Is it my fault that I am older than you? Did I attempt to conceal my age when we were first engaged? You were eager enough to marry me then, and it was I who said that for your sake, and in order not to injure your prospects, we had better wait. Oh, Beau, Beau, you are very unkind."

"Indeed, Lydia, I have no wish to be so."

"But you are—*very*. If you weren't, you would not refuse me a simple thing like this. It is all your wretched pride. Why don't you say at once that you hate me?" And she wept passionately.

Captain Dornay was a man easily affected by the sight of feminine grief. He went down before it like grass before a scythe. What did he do? Why, he put his arm round this stormy, unhappy woman's waist, and tried to comfort her. But she, feeling he was yielding, refused to be comforted unless he acceded to her desire, and only wept the more.

His pity grew greater. As each sob revealed her love, his resolutions became less firm, and the reasons that a few minutes ago had appeared of such paramount importance, dwindled away one by one.

After all, the money would prove very acceptable. It would be awfully nice to have a few good horses instead of tumble-down screws, and when he had his sale in the spring he could pay it back again. Honour might permit of his accepting a loan, even whilst it refused a gift. They would call it a loan, at any rate, if only to please Lydia. Her generosity deserved some slight concession in return. His conscience accused him of having been unduly cold. He had gone out of his way to wound her feelings, and she had returned good for evil. Was it her fault, as she truly remarked, that he was eight years her junior? He had known it all along, and, knowing it, had begged her to be his wife. If during his absence he had learnt to look upon this rash act with regret, she was not answerable for the fact. Yes, he was a brute, a regular downright brute. His conscience told him so, most unmistakably.

Thus he reasoned with himself, as he stood silent, striving to suppress her sobs.

"You—you kill me with pain," she exclaimed passionately. "I—I wish to God that you had never come back. I—w—was happy enough thinking of you, and n—now I am miserable. You have spoilt my life."

There was truth enough in her words to strike home. His fortitude and powers of resistance suddenly gave way. He felt that he was surrendering his liberty, and once more placing himself at her mercy, but he could not help it. It takes a strong man to resist a woman's tears, especially when she cries for love of him. Beau succumbed,

although against his better judgment and pre-formed determination.

"Lydia," he whispered, in his soft, caressing voice, taking one of her hands in his, and imprinting a kiss upon it. "I cannot bear to see you in this state. It makes me miserable too. You talk as if I were a perfect beast, but I hope I am not one really. As a proof, I will take the money, only you must let me pay it back at some future date. I should not like to marry a wife to whom I am in debt. Everybody has his peculiarities, and that is mine."

She pushed back her heavy hair from her brow, and looked at him with luminous eyes.

"Ah! Beau, Beau! those are the first words you have uttered respecting our engagement. I thought that you had forgotten it. Darling! It was my fault. I fancied you no longer cared for me, and desired to be free. But now, you have made me very happy, and I can wait patiently until the winter is over. All I want is a little love, a little affection. Then I am quickly satisfied."

"That's right, Lydia. We will settle everything when the fine weather comes, and meanwhile, thank you awfully for your kindness. A fellow naturally feels a trifle flurried on first coming home, after an absence of five years."

He was not quite comfortable in his mind, but he had gained a reprieve, and six months was a long time to look forward to. Nobody knew what might happen in that time. Reader, do not judge him too harshly.

Remember how often we ourselves have failed in moments of temptation. It is so easy to form good resolutions, so hard to stick to them. Right and wrong become curiously confused when inclination sides with the latter.

Human nature is pitifully weak. Perhaps the great Deity, who created all things, intended that it should be so. Anyhow, it is not for us to pass sentence on each other. We all stumble, grope, and fall along the difficult path of life, until death the deliverer appears, and frees us from its snares and perplexities.

Through our fathers and forefathers, we inherit a strange medley of qualities, good and bad, for many of which we are not responsible.

We do not blame the fly that struggles in the spider's

web ; and yet what a strong, close net Fate weaves around mortal men and women ! Circumstance draws them into it, against their will, against their reason and their better instincts ; and events scoff at the impotent efforts which they make after liberty of action. Destiny is more powerful than they. She holds them in her cruel grasp, and sternly cries : " I must be fulfilled, no matter how you suffer. You are mere puppets, but I rule the world, and God rules me."

CHAPTER III.

A BITTER EXPERIENCE.

At the age of eighteen, Lydia Warren had been a singularly handsome girl. Her beauty then possessed the captivating charm of youth and freshness, which it no longer retained.

Her father was a clergyman, living in a remote village in the north of England. Lydia's mother died a few days after her baby's birth, and the bright young girl, as she grew up, fretted against the dulness, the narrow restrictions and seclusion of her humble home. The colours in which her childhood was painted were grey and neutral, and ill in accordance with the fierce desire that possessed her to see something of the outer world. Those beautiful purple hills, which surrounded the little peaceful village, seemed like prison walls ; she hated the very sight of them, for she wanted to look beyond. In her yearning for change, and increased experience, she grew impatient. But she had not to wait long. An event took place which completely altered the tenor of her existence.

One cold wintry day, her grey-haired kindly old father, whose only fault was that he could not think as Lydia did, was brought back to his home a corpse.

He had gone out that morning in order to take the duty at a neighbouring village, and whilst thus engaged, succumbed to an acute attack of heart-disease, from which malady he had long suffered in silence, being unwilling to occasion his young daughter any alarm.

Unfortunately his private fortune was so small, that after certain outstanding debts were paid of, Lydia found herself unprovided for. At eighteen she was forced to

commence the struggle of life in earnest, and gain her own living. For this she was little fitted, both by temperament and education. She had not the smallest vocation for teaching, and was not even naturally fond of children; but like most destitute young ladies, the profession of governess seemed the only one opened to her. She could play and sing as well as the majority of amateurs, and spoke a little French, and still less German, with a very pronounced English accent. Advanced pupils were out of the question, but backward ones might perhaps find her services useful. At all events, she did not know what else to try, and to live was imperative. Her little stock of ready money was rapidly diminishing.

Good fortune attended her endeavours at self support. Through the kindness and personal recommendation of some friends, she obtained an interview with a wealthy north-country banker, whose wife had recently died. This gentleman, being in some perplexity as to what to do with his little invalid girl, was looking out for a young lady to amuse and teach her.

Miss Warren's good looks and distinguished appearance decided her fate. They impressed the worthy Mr. Stapleton with a belief, that, if he were to search the whole world over, he could not possibly find for his daughter a more charming or suitable companion.

Before a month had gone by, he made a somewhat startling discovery, namely, that he was beginning to take remarkable delight in the new governess's society, and frequented the nursery much more often than mere parental solicitude required.

Thus a year passed away, at the end of which time poor little Lucy Stapleton caught a violent cold, which brought on inflammation of the lungs, and died. Lydia had been very strictly and virtuously brought up. She gave her employer warning, informing him that she was unable to remain in a bachelor establishment, her occupation being gone. Possibly she wished to hurry events.

Mr. Stapleton besought his fair charmer to reconsider her decision, for he was very much enamoured; but the young lady displayed surprising firmness. As a matter of fact, she knew how to play her cards too well to yield to her elderly admirer's importunities. He passed two miserable days making up his mind, and then, the die being

cast, took the bull by the horns and proposed marriage. This was the crisis to which Miss Warren had skilfully led up. And yet, when it came, our friend Lydia experienced a strange repulsion. Mr. Stapleton was sixty years of age, tall, thin, wizened, unattractive. He wore blue spectacles, had a nasty habit of snuffing, and bored her to death. It was with the greatest difficulty she could bring herself to attend when he talked. Those evenings in the nursery had been inexpressibly tedious, when he came to inquire after Amy, and remained to chat. She always dreaded his appearance. On the other hand, he was eminently respectable, had a fine place in the country, and seven thousand a year. How can a poor girl listen to the dictates of her heart? She simply can't afford it. Lydia loved ease and comfort just as much as she abhorred drumming the rudiments of music, arithmetic, and grammar into infantine heads. She was deadly tired of being a governess already; and if she refused Mr. Stapleton's offer, she saw nothing before her but a long, dreary vista of uncertain, uphill toil, calculated to rob her prematurely of both youth and beauty. After all, it was only selling herself. Quite a common affair. Lots of girls did it who had not to work for their living. Surely in her case it would be folly not to provide for the future when she got the chance. And love! Well, plenty of women went through their lives and never even know what it meant. If they did, why shouldn't she? So she persuaded herself, and her choice was quickly made. It may not have been a wise, but under the circumstances, it was an excusable one. The battle of life is too hard for a delicate, pretty young creature when she has to fight it alone. Her health may break down at any moment, and then, what has she to look forward to? That horrible torturer—the body, will conquer even the most fearless spirit.

Forty-one years existed between Lydia and her wealthy suitor, but she accepted him, nevertheless. A year after the marriage a child was born, who, to Mr. Stapleton's great grief, died before he was three months old. Then followed Amy, whose sex disappointed both parents, and who, from her first entry into the world, was left almost entirely to the care of nurses. Lydia could not endure girls. She had set her heart on having another boy, and Mr. Stapleton ardently desired a son, and heir. From this date his wife led a gay life. She persuaded him to take a

house in town; and here, night after night, and sorely against his will, the failing old gentleman was dragged out to balls and parties. He achieved a higher social status, but he lost his health, which had never been robust. His malady was merely nervous, and on that account, all the more difficult to combat. The heat, the glare, the noise and bad air of rooms, crowded to an unendurable point, increased it. He grew fanciful, nay worse, jealous; and could not be brought to fill the modern rôle of negative husband to the brilliant wife.

This was the season of Lydia's triumph, but like most triumphs it proved fleeting. Even whilst she dressed her finest, talked her smartest, smiled her sweetest, the skeleton in the home cupboard grew more and more difficult to conceal. She was pure, she was innocent. She only loved admiration like all pretty women, before some bitter experience teaches them its worthlessness; but Mr. Stapleton's suspicions became positively insulting. They wounded her pride, outraged her virtue. To convince him of the latter, she withdrew from society altogether. But the man was unreasonable. Nothing could satisfy him. He appeared haunted by a horrible idea that had no foundation except in his diseased imagination. Lydia learnt to her cost how little real pleasure is to be derived from fashionable frivolity. She regretted having been foolish enough to plunge into it, although her conscience acquitted her of anything worse than folly. Still, it bore bitter fruits. Her husband, who had once been manageable, and not actively antipathetic, now broke loose. His temper became unbearable. He suffered from fits of ungovernable passion, followed by long periods of depression.

All this time he displayed an invincible dislike to his wife. It was useless trying to overcome his repugnance, for the truth could no longer be concealed. There was madness in the family, and, through some unknown cause, or possibly through the mysterious influences of hereditary transmission, the unhappy man's mind was totally unhinged. For any youthful imprudences Lydia paid with her heart's blood. And they were only imprudences, nothing more. The result of female vanity, high spirits, and a natural love of amusement.

The knot of this ill-assorted marriage was cut in a tragical manner.

One fine day Mr. Stapleton blew out his brains, leaving Lydia a young and lovely widow. For a long time she scarcely knew what to do with her freedom. The blow had stunned her, and although she had not loved her husband, she was deeply shocked by his death and the manner of it.

Perhaps if she had acted differently, they might have lived more happily together; and yet it is very hard to pretend to be old, and lead a dull, sober, monotonous life, when you are hardly out of your teens. A good dinner, a comfortable arm-chair, and blazing fire, contented Mr. Stapleton, whereas she pined to see the world, to spread her wings like a pretty butterfly and fly from flower to flower. And now they were smirched and stained. So whispered pride. Although not culpable, her name was bandied about from club to club, a proceeding which seldom improves a woman's reputation.

Consequently, Lydia sold her house in town, and retired to Briarton Hall. By the terms of her husband's will she had seven thousand a year at her disposal. He left her absolute guardian over the child. She was glad of this, for it proved conclusively to the world that she had done nothing to forfeit his esteem. And yet his unconquerable jealousy still dogged her footsteps, and threatened to embitter her life. For if she married again, he had decreed that the great bulk of his fortune should pass to Amy, leaving to his wife only a miserable pittance of five hundred a year.

Lydia felt aggrieved, but she was disgusted with matrimony, and did not desire to take another husband. One had been enough—more than enough. Her youthful longing for experience was more or less satisfied, and she professed a total disbelief in love. During the first months of her widowhood she saw no cause to alter this decision. She lived very quietly, and made few fresh acquaintances; but by degrees she began to give little parties, and to be asked to some in return. She could not shut herself up for ever because an unfortunate old man had gone out of his mind. Hers was scarcely a nature to indulge in more than a temporary calm. At this time she was twenty-nine years old, and had reached the most critical age of womanhood. Her understanding was ripe, her knowledge extended, but her heart remained untouched. It had never known what

love was, and yet it needed only a spark to fire the flame. Combustible material had long been accumulating, unknown to its possessor. Day by day her need of affection grew greater.

The—Hussars came to Northington, a town within three miles of Briarton Hall, and there for the first time she met Beaumont Dornay, then a cornet, who had just attained his majority. Her hospitable doors were soon thrown open to the officers, and they became more intimately acquainted.

The colonel of the regiment was a man of position, whose laurels had been earned in active service. He fell desperately in love with the handsome widow, and proposed; but she refused him. By one of those strange, capricious freaks of fortune, she preferred the tall, good-looking subaltern, in spite of the disparity in age existing between them. Perhaps the idea of cutting out his commanding officer flattered Beau's vanity; anyhow he entertained for the beautiful Lydia, then in the zenith of her beauty, one of those ardent passions which youths frequently nourish for women several years older than themselves. In a moment of exaltation he asked her to be his wife, and she agreed to become Mrs. Dornay. Explanations ensued of a somewhat embarrassing nature.

Until now he had not been aware that his lady-love would lose the greater part of her fortune if she committed the imprudence of marrying again. He hardly liked to admit the fact, but it made a difference—not exactly in his feelings, but in the prospect of a speedy marriage.

Beau was very poor. He had little save his pay, and at that time his father was still alive. The lovers ultimately decided that it would be unwise in the highest degree to make over six thousand five hundred a year to little pale faced Amy. Besides, were they to be guilty of so great an act of folly, they had not enough to live upon. Both possessed somewhat extravagant tastes; therefore they determined to keep their engagement secret. Lydia, in her blind adoration, was ready for any self-sacrifice short of parting altogether, and made a truly generous proposition.

"Let us wait, Beau," she said. "It would ruin your prospects to marry a pauper, however much she might love you. I can live on nothing at all, and put by five or six thousand every year. It will not take me long to save thirty or forty thousand pounds. When we have secured an income, when

I can feel that I am not dragging you down, and hindering you from rising in your profession, then we will become man and wife. Meanwhile," forcing back a sob, "we may be very good friends—very good friends—but nothing more."

Her lover, after some persuasion, acquiesced in this arrangement, which indeed appeared the only one they could make. She had everything to lose by waiting, he nothing. She ran an enormous risk, of which she could not help being dimly aware. But she was very strong and very loving, and, moreover, believed in Beau with the touching belief of a virgin heart thoroughly roused after long slumbering.

When his regiment went to India, she began to save like the veriest miser. The most affectionate letters passed between them. She looked upon herself as his promised wife, and counted the days till his return. It was a strange engagement, but from first to last she never wavered in her devotion, and remained absolutely true to him. The admiration of other men produced no impression. She might be infatuated, but whatever her faults, she was a single-hearted woman, capable of deep affection. Beau's easy, facile nature, so different from her own, endeared him to her, even whilst she dreaded that her love might prove stronger and more tenacious than his. She judged him after the instinctive fashion of her sex.

And now he was home again, and at last they were in a position to marry. Thanks to investments, savings and speculations, she had contrived to amass no less a sum than forty thousand pounds. They would not perhaps be rich, but they could live very happily and comfortably, especially as, during his absence, she had contracted many habits of frugality and self-denial. Sixpence would go as far now as a shilling in former days. As already seen, Lydia awaited her lover's coming with tremulous expectation. Her heart beat like that of a young girl. In spite of her years, she was young in feeling still.

Alas! alas! Beau had come and gone, and although she had told him that he made her very happy, he was no sooner out of the room than she knew it was not the case. The mysterious change that had taken place in his manner damped the poor woman's joy. It clung about her like a depressing and unwholesome mist. She failed to shake off its effects. He might be changed, but it was her fate to love

him with the some desperate tenacity as formerly. She almost wished it were otherwise, but she could not thus easily give up the idol at whose shrine she had worshipped so long. Happy, indeed! Ah, no! She suffered cruelly from an agony of apprehension. For in spite of Beau's last words, in spite of his having accepted the money which, after a fashion, continued to give her a certain hold over him, her womanly quickness told her that his love was a dead and lifeless thing—a thing belonging to the past, never to be resuscitated. After years of waiting, of striving and hoping, when she put forth her hand to pluck the fruit, it crumbled into dust.

What she feared, what she dreaded, had come to pass. Beau, in the glory and prime of his manhood, looked upon her as an old woman. It might be natural, but the pain was none the less intense on that account. Her heart rebelled against its presence, for by rights it should have been filled with joy. She sat there in the gathering darkness alone, and sorely stricken, rocking herself to and fro in dry-eyed misery. She had looked forward to this meeting with such eager anticipation, had hoped so much from it, counting every day, every hour as they went by, with feverish impatience. And now, and now— A great sob almost choked her. She no longer retained any power of pleasing him, that was evident.

The slender threads of beauty, charm, fascination, by which she once had held him, were snapped in twain. Time and absence had done the cruel work only too surely. They were every fond woman's worst enemies. Eight long years lay stretched like a black gulf between her and Beau. Oh! that she could span it. To have purchased back her youth, like Faust, she would have sold her soul.

Poor, passionate Lydia! As the rain pattered softly to the wet ground, and the flaring gaslights mocking pitilessly at her grief, reflected their flickering gleams in the pavement beneath, and the stars came out one by one in the grey sky overhead, she suffered such suffering as is the portion of many a mortal who loves not wisely but too well.

Love could not satisfy her. She expected too much from it. Like most other things on which we count, it brought in its wake a rich harvest of disappointment. And so is it ever. Man cannot render woman wholly content, nor woman man. The needs of their nature are higher, and even the truest affection fails to still every yearning.

It is all very sad, from the point of view of the poor puppets, for they have to dance to the wire, even when they are heart-sick and weary. Destiny pulls the ropes, and they must go hither and thither, uphill and down, until they sink from fatigue, when another puppet at once takes their place, and wipes out all recollection of their suffering and striving.

Strange that the puppets have so little sympathy with each other. On, on they crowd along the narrow pathway of life, tramping over the green graves of those that were nearest and dearest, as if to die and be forgotten is a glorious motto for the survivors.

CHAPTER IV.

HUNTING QUARTERS FOR THE WINTER.

FOR the next week or ten days, Captain Dornay and Major Grimshaw positively lived at Tattersall's. They spent all their spare time there, visiting the various stalls and boxes, constantly on the look-out for a bargain, and endeavouring to pick up information that might prove useful. It was pleasant work, idling about, meeting old friends they had not seen for years, punching horses in the ribs, and feeling their fore-legs with a knowing air. Both Beau and Harry Grimshaw thoroughly enjoyed it. At last, by dint of much patience and perseverance, they succeeded in purchasing some half-dozen animals at fairly moderate prices. How they would turn out, of course, remained to be seen.

Major Grimshaw, though extremely fond of hunting, did not profess to be much of a rider, but his companion appeared to great advantage in the pigskin, and was celebrated all over India for the number of races he had won. In truth, Beau was a remarkably fine horseman, and excelled in all manly sports. His brother officers simply idolized him; and wherever he went he was a universal favourite. He combined, in a rare degree, great physical strength with extreme gentleness of manner.

The horses were no sooner bought, than our pair of friends were in a perfect fever to try their capabilities. It was now the middle of October, and for the last fortnight cub-hunting had been in full swing, the hounds not meeting until ten o'clock.

Beau and Harry therefore determined to leave London as soon as their preparations were complete, and establish themselves at Fieldborough before the regular season began. It was a good long time since either of them had sat a horse over an English fence, and they both agreed that a little preliminary practice would be highly desirable.

So one gaudy autumnal morning, when the country, though decked in all the bright colours that herald decay, was looking its fairest, they took a glad leave of the metropolis, feeling their spirits rise as they saw the pall of smoke which overhung the city fade away in the distance.

On the previous day, Beau had gone through a somewhat trying scene with his lady-love. Although she knew it to be unwise, Lydia could not refrain from reproaching him for his neglect. Indeed, she had some cause; for, what with the excitement of buying the horses, engaging a groom, and trying on breeches, he had only called twice. He expressed his penitence, and declared he had been uncommonly busy; but she knew in her heart that this plea was a shabby excuse. Busy or not busy, had he really cared for her, he would have come to see her. This conviction gained ground since his return, and afforded acute agony. But she dared not press him beyond a certain point; she was too afraid of his turning round and repudiating the engagement altogether. So Lydia was left disconsolate, while her upbraidings had no other effect save that of rendering Beau extremely glad to effect his escape. He knew he was treating her badly, and yet, for the life of him, he could not pretend to be desperately in love, knowing that his passion had pretty well cooled altogether. When he thought the matter over—which he did as seldom as possible, for it was no longer a pleasant subject of cogitation—he admitted that he was bound in honour to marry Lydia Stapleton. He wished she would release him. The sensation of being a captive irritated him, but from what he had seen since his stay in town, he felt morally convinced that the strongest pressure would be required to make her give him up. And strong pressure was just what Beau could never exercise. The nuisance was, this woman was so infernally fond of him. Things might have arranged themselves quite easily if only she had not been such a firebrand. No doubt her affection was highly flattering, at the same time it contained many decidedly embarrassing elements.

He would have to marry her some day, but it need not be just at present. The longer he could put it off the better.

He congratulated himself now on their having kept the engagement such an absolute secret that even Grimshaw, his best friend, did not know of it. This fact rejoiced him for he experienced an uneasy consciousness, that he would not have enjoyed Grimshaw's society throughout the winter half so much, had the vivacious little Major been aware of the situation. He was not in a mood to stand any "chaff" on the subject of his forthcoming marriage. He no longer saw it with the same eyes as formerly, and to marry a woman eight years older than himself, a widow into the bargain, with a daughter almost grown up, appeared to him ridiculous. Even the forty thousand pounds could not weaken this impression. A larger bait than that was required. Luckily for Beau, he possessed a happy knack of not dwelling long on disagreeable thoughts. He had the whole winter before him, in which to enjoy his bachelor independence, and being an enthusiast of the Chase, looked forward to a real good time. As he gazed out on the green fields, covered in parts with a dust-coloured bloom, arising from the withered stalks of the tall spare-grass, his mental serenity returned, whilst the temporary depression from which he had been suffering vanished.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "What a country! There's scarcely a ploughed field to be seen anywhere. How jolly green it all looks too, after India."

"Glorious!" responded the little Major, with laconic, but corresponding approval.

"After all, there's no place like Old England," returned Beau, giving vent to a trite reflection.

"None. I've never seen the country yet that can beat it, though we're getting a bit over-crowded, and shall soon want thinning out."

Exactly two hours and three-quarters after leaving London, the train glided into a neat country station covered with a glass dome, and supported by elegant iron pillars of the newest and slenderest construction. A door of their compartment was thrown open, and the two young men stepped out on to the platform. An active porter lost no time in securing their luggage, and piling it up on the top of a fly. After administering a *douceur*, Beau and

Harry got inside, first telling the driver to drive to number forty-five Prince's Street, where Major Grimshaw had been fortunate enough to secure excellent lodgings and stables, belonging to a respectable married couple.

Beau's first impressions of Fieldborough were distinctly favourable. The mid-day sun shone full upon the clean broad streets of the town, that were bordered on either side by a row of lime trees, after the Continental fashion. The wind was whirling the pretty red and yellow leaves about in every direction, sending them in showers to the ground, and stripping the branches bare. Overhead a long procession of snow-white clouds sailed swiftly across a vast background of vivid blue sky, against which the grey steeples of two or three churches were outlined with great distinctness. The gilt weather-cock on the Town Hall swung to and fro, and glittered in the clear sunshine. The shops were gay, and wore a prosperous appearance. Autumn asserted itself in the air, which was sharp and invigorating as a tonic. Fieldborough lay like a white jewel set in an emerald frame. On all sides undulating stretches of pasture met the eye, crossed and recrossed by long lines of dark hedgerows, with here and there a stout ash paling, gleaming bright, as the level rays of the sun poured down upon it.

A very short drive brought our friends to Prince's Street where they halted before quite an imposing-looking semi-detached villa, and were immediately greeted by a smiling middle-aged landlady, whose honest rosy face was extremely prepossessing. A pretty little girl of about five clung to her petticoats, and looked shyly out at the strangers from behind the substantial bulwark of her mother's person.

"Glad to see you, gentlemen," said Mrs. Tyler cordially. "Major Grimshaw wrote that I might expect you to-day, and everything is in readiness. Me and my 'usband 'opes as how we shall be able to make you cumferable."

"You are sure to do that," said Beau gallantly. "Do you happen to know if the horses have arrived all right?"

"Yes, sir, I believe so, sir," responded Mrs. Tyler, casting an approving eye on the tall, handsome young man, with his fair face and muscular form, for, like all women, she was a great admirer of masculine beauty.

"I heard this morning that the 'ounds 'ave been 'aving some capital good sport lately."

"Ah! so much the better. I'm glad to hear it. And now, Mrs. Tyler, what about luncheon? Can you give us anything to eat? We are desperately hungry after our journey, though it was not a very long one; but this frosty air gives one an appetite."

"Yes, sir, I made so bold as to order in a couple of pounds of rump steak from the butcher, and there's a nice piece of Stilton cheese in the 'ouse—you must know we are very celebrated for our cheeses about here. The farmers bring 'em into market. I am not acquainted with your taste yet, gentlemen, but I 'opes you will tell me what you likes, and what you doesn't, for I always endeavours to study my lodgers' wishes as much as possible."

So saying Mrs. Tyler mounted the stairs with her little girl still clinging to her side. The child suddenly slipped, and would have had a nasty fall, had not Beau, who was just behind, caught her in his arms. She puckered up her little rosy face for a moment, and looked about to cry; then as she caught his blue eyes smiling fully upon her, she altered her mind, and smiled back in return.

"You are a very pretty little girl. Will you give me a kiss, my dear?" said Beau in his soft, winning way.

She put up her sweet mouth without hesitation, and nestling close to him, lisped,

"I like 'oo. 'Oo nice."

They all laughed; from that moment Mrs. Tyler's heart was won. She thoroughly endorsed her daughter's opinion. Beau was one of those lucky people who disarm suspicion, and who make friends without any special desire to please. Mrs. Tyler now showed them their apartments, which consisted of a capital sitting-room, and two neatly-furnished bedrooms, not large, but very snug.

"Well, Beau, what do you say? Do you think you can manage here?" inquired Major Grimshaw of his companion, for he had had to act entirely on his own responsibility.

"Rather! We shall live like two fighting cocks. It's an awfully jolly little crib, and I've quite lost my heart to the old woman. She's a real good sort."

Mrs. Tyler had retired to prepare for luncheon.

"Ah, you scoundrel! you must not lose your heart to anybody till you've seen Dolly."

Major Grimshaw loved Beau like a brother, and in his

kindly little head had formed a plan, by which he considered that young gentleman might greatly profit.

"Dolly! Who's Dolly? Oh! ah! yes, I remember. She's the cousin of whom you used to talk so much once upon a time, isn't she?"

"Yes, Dolly is Sir Hector's only child, and will be a tremendous catch one of these days. Bear that in mind, Master Beau, and make hay while the sun shines. Dolly is sure to like you."

"That by no means follows."

"All girls do. You've got a way they can't resist. See how many hearts you broke in India. The rest of us were nowhere—never had a chance. Do you remember poor Mrs. Greigson at Umballa, and Miss Swift at Delhi?"

"Shut up, Harry, none of your chaff. How many times have I told you that I'm not a marrying man."

"That has nothing to do with it."

"Excuse me, it has everything to do with it. If you are so determined to find a husband for Dolly, why don't you make up to her yourself? It's precious easy to give other people advice."

Harry Grimshaw heaved a theatrical sigh, and for a moment his good-natured countenance assumed an unusually and unnaturally solemn expression. They had got upon a sore subject.

"I have done so. I was madly in love with her before I went to India, and proposed. She was only seventeen then, and I thought I had a chance. But she soon showed me I was mistaken. She vowed she adored me as a cousin, but felt convinced we should quarrel like cat and dog if we assumed any nearer relationship. It has taken me a long time to get over it, but I think I'm tolerably sound again now, and as she won't look at me, why Beau, old boy, I should like her to have you, as the next best thing. Don't you understand?"

"Thanks, Harry, you're awfully kind. But the flame may leap up afresh when you see your divinity."

"I *have* seen her. She was looking tremendously pretty—prettier than ever; but somehow or other, I don't know how it was, I did not feel quite the same. I think I realised it was hopeless."

So saying, Harry helped himself to a large helping of

steak, and proceeded to console his woes with carnivorous food, accompanied by a hearty draught of foaming ale.

Beau had listened indifferently. His curiosity was not much excited by Miss Dolly Dalrymple, being far too much exercised in his mind about the horses, and the near prospects of hunting. It had been arranged between him and Major Grimshaw, that he should take entire charge of the equine department, whilst Harry catered for the house. Numerous articles were of course found wanting.

Immediately after luncheon they adjourned to the stables, where they had the satisfaction of finding their small stud of six hunters comfortably domiciled. Mr. Tyler was present, and imparted much useful information as to forage, and where to buy it at a reasonable price. As it was necessary to order some in at once, they repaired to the corn-chandler's, where they surveyed critically several samples of home and foreign oats.

After this, Major Grimshaw kept popping into all sorts of shops, and re-appeared, laden with multitudinous paper packages. The cares of housekeeping were weighing heavily upon him, and he astonished Beau by the number of their requirements—tea, sugar, candles, soap—there seemed no end to the list. Harry was a man of detail, exactly calculated to fill the position he had assumed.

"What a head you have got, to be sure," his companion exclaimed in admiration. "I could no more remember all those little fiddling things than fly. Why don't you leave it to Mrs. Tyler?"

"It won't be so bad after to-day," rejoined the Major with a laugh. "There always seems a lot to buy just at first, and you have had no experience of lodging-houses, whereas I have. I believe Mrs. Tyler to be a thoroughly honest and respectable woman, but I make it a rule always to begin by looking upon my landlady as a thief, until the contrary fact is proved. It saves a lot of trouble, and if you don't trust people too much, you are far more independent of them."

With which sentiment Major Grimshaw suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to buy some Worcester sauce for the chops that were coming for dinner, and darted into a grocer's shop, leaving Beau outside to admire certain flat boxes, containing preserved fruits.

Captain Dornay had never seen this phase of his friend's

character, and was greatly amused. Harry as a house-keeper, Harry purchasing sixpennorth of salt, and two pennorth of pepper, and carrying his purchases home in paper parcels, appeared to him infinitely grotesque. Surely it was better to be robbed—not that he believed Mrs. Tyler capable of so bad an action—than to be worried by such ludicrously small trifles. Fond as he was of his brother officer, he could almost forgive a girl for refusing him. And yet no better fellow stepped. Only his qualities were scarcely of a nature to appeal to the female sex. Beau caught himself vaguely wondering what Miss Dolly Dalrymple was like.

CHAPTER V.

A FAIR DAMSEL IN DISTRESS.

WHILE our young Hussar was standing waiting for Harry to join him, his attention was arrested by a young lady on horseback who approached at an easy trot from the other end of the street.

As she came nearer, he first ascertained that she possessed a charming figure, and sat her horse extremely well; and next, that she was remarkably pretty in a fair English style which he particularly admired. This discovery prompted him to regard her movements with increased interest. Exactly opposite where he had taken up his position, she drew rein, and as she did so a very strange thing happened. All of a sudden her well-shaped brown mare tossed up her head with an expression of acute pain, lurched first to one side, then the other, and without any further warning, fell heavily on to the pavement, throwing her rider with considerable violence. The whole affair was the work of an instant.

Beau rushed forward to the girl's assistance, and in a second had his strong arms round her, helping her to rise. It required some little effort to free her from the fallen animal.

"Are you hurt?" he inquired anxiously. "I am afraid you must be, for your horse came down all of a heap. I never saw such a thing in my life; it was almost instantaneous."

She was very pale, and appeared a little stunned. At all

events she did not respond to the question, but involuntarily, as it were, leant against him for support. Whilst he held her like a piece of rare and very precious china, with which he did not quite know what to do, Beau had every opportunity granted him of noticing what lovely grey eyes she had, what long lashes, and glorious golden-brown hair. The small, oval face that peeped out from under her felt hat was very winning and beautiful. He saw this, and his solicitude became augmented. It appeared to him necessary to clasp the fair stranger a little tighter.

"I hope you are not much hurt," he repeated in his most caressing tones, and Beau's voice could be curiously soft and sympathetic on occasions; it had a peculiar "timbre" which most women appreciated, and which, somehow or other, went straight to their hearts.

The colour began to return to her smooth cheeks, and slowly deepened.

"No," she said, "I don't think I'm much hurt; only a little shaken. My right foot has got a bit of a twist, but I daresay I can ride home again all right. At any rate I'll try."

"Have you far to go?" he inquired, with great interest.

"Oh, no; only about three miles. I wonder what made Pearlina come down like that. She is uncommonly sure-footed as a rule, and never stumbles by any chance. She must be out of her senses."

"Perhaps she crossed her legs," suggested Beau, "or trod upon a bit of granite."

"I don't know. I hope she is not ill. I had a kind of an idea that she was less bright to-day than usual."

At this juncture Harry came out of the shop, and was not a little surprised to see Beau conversing on apparent terms of intimacy with a young lady whose back view seemed not unfamiliar.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," he began; then breaking off short, exclaimed, "Hullo! Dolly, is it you? Why! what's the matter? You don't mean to say you've had a fall."

"Yes, Harry, and rather a nasty one too. I was trotting quite quietly down the street, and was just pulling up to leave a message at Figman, the grocer's, when Pearlina tumbled down, without any apparent reason."

"By Jingo! she ought to have known better. Get up, you brute."

And Harry vented his indignation, by giving the prostrate mare a contemptuous kick with the toe of his boot.

But to the great glee of a crowd of idlers, who by this time had collected round the spot, she showed no signs of life. The worse the accident, the better they were pleased. It gave them something to talk about.

"Upon my word, I believe she's dead!" ejaculated Harry. "If not, she looks uncommonly like it."

"Impossible!" said Dolly, turning pale again, and gently disengaging herself from Beau's arms.

"You'd say so, wouldn't you! Only such funny things happen. Perhaps I'd better go and fetch a vet. She may have had a fit. Have you anyone with you, Dolly?"

"Yes, Lawrence is in the town. I left him at the fish-monger's, and told him to catch me up on the way home. He ought to be somewhere close behind."

"In the meantime, you can't stay here. We shall have quite a mob round us before long. Jump into a cab with Captain Dornay, there's a good girl, and let him take you to our lodgings. They are close by, and you are as white as a sheet. Beau, old man, you'll look after her, won't you?"

"Rather," responded that gentleman, placing a very decided emphasis on the word.

"That's settled, then, and I will go and find Lawrence and the vet., and find out what's wrong with Pearlina."

Before Dolly could protest, she found herself bundled into a fly, and handsome Captain Dornay by her side. The whole thing was a little awkward, and she felt it incumbent upon her to apologise for the situation.

"I am afraid, I am giving you a great deal of trouble," she said prettily. "It is really too bad of me."

"Not at all," he answered, with evident sincerity. "It was most fortunate that Harry and I happened to be so close at hand when the accident occurred. Although we have never met until to-day, I do not feel the least as if we were strangers, Miss Dalrymple. Your cousin has spoken to me very often of you."

"And all his letters from India were full of Beau Dornay, Beau Dornay, until I had quite made up my mind that Captain Beau Dornay must be a most objectionable individual," responded Dolly, mischievously.

"I'm sorry to hear I was doomed to incur your displeasure, before being seen. It hardly gives me a chance."

"Ah! but I've altered my opinion already, so you need not feel hurt. I shouldn't have told you if I hadn't," and she smiled at him with charming naïveté. "Of course you and I don't seem like strangers. How could we, when we have heard so much of each other from Harry?"

"As long as you don't hate me, I'm content," said Beau, jestingly, "even although I still remain an objectionable individual."

"Now you're fishing for compliments, and shall catch nothing. Men are quite as vain as women."

"Vainer; only their vanity proceeds from a laudable desire to stand well with your delightful sex."

"Ah, Captain Dornay, I'm afraid you are a sad flirt. It's a fashion you contract in India, isn't it?—at least, so I have been told. A few second-hand stories make their way to our ears now and again."

"We soldiers are a much-maligned race, Miss Dalrymple, and are not half as black as we are painted. Do you consider a man any the worse for being fond of ladies' society? If so, I plead guilty."

"Certainly not. Your regular woman-hater is an atrocious specimen of humanity, who does nothing but grumble and growl, and tries to make everybody miserable, because he is so himself. Besides, to inveigh against such an authorized institution of nature as the female sex is no sign of superiority."

"There I am with you; but don't look at me, Miss Dalrymple, as if you thought I were that deluded being, a misogynist. I assure you I am nothing of the sort."

Dolly laughed. Her laugh was full of innocent mirth, and very infectious.

"I can quite believe that, without any assurances on your part. And now, where are you taking me to? I feel like a captive princess. Harry said your lodgings were close by."

"He spoke truly, for here we are. Let me help you to get down."

So saying, Beau opened the door of the fly, which had pulled up before No. 45, and held out his hand to his companion. The drive had been much too short. He would have liked it prolonged for another hour.

The girl tried to alight without assistance, but she was more hurt than she imagined whilst sitting still. Uttering

a slight exclamation of pain, she accepted Captain Dornay's proffered arm, and even leant somewhat heavily upon it. To her dismay, she found that she could not walk.

"I—I don't know what's the matter," she said, in tones of vexation. "It's awfully stupid of me, but I can hardly put my right foot to the ground. The mare fell on it, and squeezed it rather badly, though I did not feel it so much then as I do now."

"Dear! dear! how are we to get you upstairs?" he said with great concern, seeing that she suffered more than she chose to admit. "Unfortunately, the stairs are rather steep. Do you think you can manage to mount them? Our sitting-room is on the first floor."

"I'll try my very utmost. It's really too silly to be such a cripple." And she prepared for action quite heroically.

Beau held her little hand tightly clasped in his, and half-lifted, half-dragged her into the passage. But the pain was so great that all at once the tears rushed to her eyes, and she sank down on to a little mahogany bench placed against the wall.

"I—I don't think I can go any further," she said, looking up at him in a deprecating manner. "Please don't mind me, Captain Dornay; I can wait here quite well till Lawrence comes. It's horrible to trouble you in this fashion."

A queer kind of thrill went through Beau's frame. Although he hardly knew her, there was something about this girl that stirred his pulses strangely. He felt possessed by the influence of her beauty, but he felt still more possessed by a nameless, indefinable charm, too potent to be resisted, and which had caused many men, quite apart from her wealth and good looks, to fall desperately in love with Dolly Dalrymple. Perhaps her fascination was increased by her intense feminineness. Unlike the girls of the period, she was totally devoid of masculine attributes, and did not endeavour to attract men by aping them. Indeed, she had even been heard to say that she would rather be a woman than a man, an absurd sign of weakness in the eyes of her own sex, but one calculated to endear her in those of the sterner.

"You can't stay here; it is much too cold and draughty," said Beau, in those soft, yet authoritative tones that had a

strange power of enforcing the speaker's wish. "Besides, there is a nice, comfortable sofa upstairs in our sitting-room, on which you could lie until Harry comes. Remember, we don't know how long he may be."

"Surely he won't leave me here and forget all about me," exclaimed Dolly, a trifle discontented at the suggestion, and by no means convinced of the propriety of her conduct in coming to lodgings, occupied by two young men, even although one of them *was* her cousin. "That would be mean."

Beau smiled indulgently. He could guess at her alarms, and thought them natural enough; nevertheless they nettled him a little.

"She doesn't trust me much," he muttered to himself. "That's quite evident."

But he gave no expression to his thoughts, and said seriously:

"Harry is not likely to forget you, but at the same time, he may not meet either your groom or the vet. as quickly as we anticipate. Under these circumstances," drawing a step nearer, "you had much better wait in our sitting-room, which is snug and warm, rather than stay here in the draughty passage."

"That's all very well, but how am I to get there? I can't walk," said poor Dolly, almost reduced to tears.

"May I remind you of certain words you were good enough to use a short while ago? You said you did not look upon me as a stranger. Why not prove them, by letting me carry you upstairs? You're not very heavy, I'll be bound, and I'm as strong as a horse. Consider that I am Pearlina for the time being."

She blushed, and peeped furtively up into his face to see if he were in earnest. He looked very grave, and quite determined. There was nothing the least flirty about him at that moment. It was a relief to find him so composed, and his composure enabled her to treat the suggestion as a possible, instead of an impossible, one. And whilst she looked, she told herself that Captain Dornay's was a very good face—frank, and fair, and handsome, such as might inspire any woman with confidence. Moreover, his great size and strength afforded an agreeable sense of protection. Their eyes met. His seemed to look at hers with a gentle reproach, and their magnetic quality numbed and com-

manded her will. Surely she need not fear him. He appeared so kind and so honest. She did not speak, but the colour deepened and deepened in her rose-tinted cheek.

With masculine audacity, Beau took her silence to mean consent; perhaps he read it in her clear grey eyes. Anyhow, he lifted her up in his muscular arms, and carried her upstairs as easily and tenderly as if she had been a baby. Neither of them spoke a single word during the operation. Only their hearts beat with a conscious irregularity that was mutual, and occasioned a feeling of bashfulness on either side. Strangers a few minutes ago, they now appeared curiously near together, and yet they experienced no surprise. It all seemed quite natural, and as if something ordained in their lives—something which no efforts on their part could prevent—were about to take place. They simply drifted with the tide, scarce realising whither it bore them. The spell did not last. What enchantment ever does? To dreams, hopes, love, there is always an awaking. Nothing endures. Illusions, fancies, no matter how sweet, all go; and Reality leaves life like a bare stalk, stripped of its flowers and verdure, to bear the blast as best it can.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DAWN OF LOVE.

As Dolly lay in Beau's arms, she was filled with a delicious sense of her own weakness and of his superior strength. She thought it would be very restful always to have those arms to creep to in moments of emergency. For the first time in her happy girlhood she felt that a void existed in her heart. But when he laid her down on the sofa, and tucked a travelling rug round her little feet, a sudden reaction set in, and she was downright angry with herself for thinking of "such rubbish," as she apostrophised her thoughts.

She liked him, however, for not taking an unfair advantage of the situation, as a good many men might have done in the circumstances. It proved that, whatever his faults, he was a thorough gentleman. Soon she began to regain confidence, and to feel more at ease, particularly when

Beau withdrew, in order to give instructions about tea. This conduct she considered most delicate, if a wee bit disappointing. Even if his presence were a trifle embarrassing, it was pleasant all the same.

Now it must not be supposed that Dolly was a girl to take a fancy to the first man who happened to pay her a little attention. She had arrived at the age of twenty-three, and, strange to say, had never been in love, and this in spite of numerous offers. Her heart remained untouched. But, oddly enough, as she lay there on the sofa, taking in all the details of the little homely room, with its horse-hair furniture and cheap coloured prints, she could conceive that Captain Dornay might make a woman an admirable husband. He was so kind and manly, *and*—so good-looking. Perhaps Dolly hardly knew how much the latter fact influenced her in his favour. Beauty gives to its possessor, male or female, an enormous start in the race. We cannot help feeling prepossessed by a comely exterior.

Harry had spoken of his friend in vague, enthusiastic terms, but to Dolly's way of thinking he had not nearly praised Captain Dornay sufficiently. Her meditations were interrupted by Mrs. Tyler bearing a tea-tray, and shortly afterwards Beau re-entered the room, looking slightly flushed, as if he had been taking some very active exercise.

"There!" he said, "I thought you seemed a little faint, and would rather be left alone for a few minutes, so I went round to the chemist's and got you this."

"This" proved to be a very pretty glass bottle, containing smelling-salts. Dolly felt excessively touched by so spontaneous an act of consideration. It made quite an impression on her.

"You are very good," she said gratefully, "but indeed I feel much better now. My head is not a bit dizzy when I keep still, and I fully expect to be out hunting in a week's time."

"Oh! you hunt, do you?" and Beau's face brightened at the prospect of meeting her frequently.

"Yes, I hope you don't think it very unfeminine. I hate seeing the poor fox killed, and all that part of the business. I should always like to let him off, but I do love the riding."

"So do I, Miss Dalrymple. We have one taste in

common at any rate; to my mind there is no prettier sight in the world than to see a woman ride well across country. I am not one of those who would wish to debar the fair sex from so healthy and innocent a recreation. Besides, to be quite candid, I thoroughly enjoy ladies' society in the hunting-field. We want your presence, if only to emulate us to deeds of prowess. Half of us would be terrible cowards, save for the example you set."

"I'm glad you don't disapprove of hunting-girls, Captain Dornay. So many people do, but the real truth is, we country folk are quite different from town ones. They like dress, we like sport; they care only for parties and admirers; we prefer out-door amusements, and a natural life to one full of rivalry and unwholesome excitement. In fact, our tastes are so opposed, that we often find it difficult to sympathise with each other."

"Yours is the better part. Our big towns are by no means a good school for women, or, for the matter of that, for anyone. But I hope you don't wholly set your face against admirers, Miss Dolly—I beg pardon, I mean, Miss Dalrymple—for men as a body would be desperately badly off, if all the nicest, freshest girls, refused to have anything to say to them, and took horses and dogs to their hearts, rather than husbands. Not but what," he added lightly, "I daresay the former are preferable and give less trouble."

She coloured rosy red, and looked sweetly pretty with her little golden-brown head—she had taken off her hat—resting against a many-coloured cretonne cushion. A bantering reply was on her lips, but the entry of Major Grimshaw created a diversion.

"Here I am at last!" he said, putting down his cane and gloves. "I had some little difficulty in finding the 'Vet.!' he was out when I arrived at his house."

"Well!" exclaimed the girl anxiously. "And how is Pearlina?"

He shook his head, and looked grave.

"My dear, I hardly know how to tell you, but—Pearlina is dead."

"Dead!" ejaculated Dolly in consternation, for the mare was an old favourite, though her hunting days were done some couple of years ago.

"Yes, she died of heart disease. Tipton said there was

no doubt about it, and that it was a most merciful thing you were not seriously injured."

The tears gathered in Dolly's beautiful grey eyes, and their long lashes grew moist. Presently she said very softly, as if talking of some dearly-loved friend :

"Poor Pealina! She was getting very old. Perhaps it is better so. She may have been spared much suffering, but—but," and her face began to work, "I shall miss her sadly. One can't get over the shock all at once."

"Come Dolly, have some tea," said Harry, making a great clattering among the cups, and seeking to divert her thoughts. "It's nice and hot, and will do you good. Here, Beau, give her some sugar."

Captain Dornay smiled tenderly down at her, as he obeyed this injunction, and she could not help smiling faintly back in return, at seeing how clumsily he manipulated the sugar tongs.

"What has become of Lawrence," she inquired of her cousin, after she had made heroic efforts to swallow the boiling beverage, and had eaten a piece of bread and butter, entirely as a matter of form.

"I sent him home," answered Harry, "so that your father might not be alarmed if you were rather late."

"How am I to get back? Has that consideration presented itself to your great mind?"

"As soon as you are ready, I'll take you off in a fly. You place little reliance on 'my great mind,' as you are pleased to call it."

"In that case I am ready now, but, oh! Harry, I do feel so sorry to have spoilt your and Captain Dornay's afternoon in this manner."

"Nonsense, Dolly. May I ask how we could possibly spend it more agreeably than in entertaining you? Come, come, a truce to pretty speeches. We are too old friends to be so horribly polite to each other."

"Then I'll be rude, and say I want to leave your hospitable roof at once, in spite of all the kindness I have received there."

So saying, she rose from the sofa, but only to find the pain return directly she set her right foot to the ground.

"You had better not be too ambitious, Miss Dalrymple," said Beau warningly. "Resign yourself to the inevitable, and let Harry and me make a bandy chair for you with our

clumsy paws, unless," he added with a significant look, "you prefer your former mode of conveyance."

"No, no, certainly not," she answered hastily, feeling she should die of shame if her cousin were to become aware of the indiscretion she had committed. "I love bandy chairs."

So the two young men clasped hands, and Dolly put one arm around the neck of either—or rather she encircled Harry's in a most loving embrace, but simply rested her hand on Beau's shoulder, in consequence of which act of extreme propriety she experienced a considerable difficulty in retaining her seat. For the one man was very tall; the other very short, and an immense incline resulted.

"Good-bye, Captain Dornay," she said, when at length they had succeeded in depositing their fair burden inside the fly. "You must come and see us at Woodford Chase very soon, when I shall hope to prove my gratitude for your services better than I can at present."

"Please don't mention them, Miss Dalrymple," he replied, squeezing her little hand with quite unnecessary fervour. "I have never spent a pleasanter afternoon in my life."

When the cab rolled off, he stood and gazed after it with a curious sentiment of regret, which filled him with vague dread for what the future might bring forth. Somehow he distrusted himself. He would have liked to have been Dolly's cousin, in order to have enjoyed the sweet privilege of a *tête-à-tête* drive. Then the thought of Lydia sent a dull ache to his heart. What was the use? What was the use? Had he been free, things might have been different. Now, he could no longer afford to indulge in sentiment. By dinner time, Harry returned with a fine appetite and excellent spirits.

"Sir Hector has asked us both to gormandize at his expense to-morrow night," he said, "and Dolly's last words were, that you must not forget to bring your banjo."

"My banjo!" exclaimed Beau. "How did she know I played it?"

"I told her, of course. She's dying to hear you sing one of your comic songs."

When dinner was over, the young men dragged a couple of arm-chairs before the fire, lit their pipes, and proceeded to smoke them. Beau had been unusually silent all the

evening, and Harry had found the effort of masticating Mrs. Tyler's mutton-chops too great to promote conversation. Besides, his thoughts were busy.

But now, the warmth and the comfort of the snug little room made him feel garrulously inclined.

"Well," he said suddenly, "what do you think of Dolly? Did she disappoint you?"

Beau flushed up to the roots of his flaxen hair. The question took him by surprise.

"I think her the prettiest girl I have ever seen," he answered, completely thrown off his guard.

"Ah, but she's not only pretty. She's nice as well."

"So I should imagine. Her face tells you that."

"The fact is, Beau, because she won't take me, there's no reason why she shouldn't take you; and next to marrying her myself, I'd like to see her married to my best friend."

"You're very good, I'm sure. But these plans seldom come to anything. It's best to leave people alone."

"I was a fool ever to think myself a match for her," resumed Harry. "I'm a little, insignificant under-sized chap, that no girl ever fancies, but you are quite different. All the women like you."

Beau sighed, and moved restlessly in his arm-chair. The conversation affected him painfully.

"My dear old man," he said, with a forced smile. "You have an absurdly good opinion of me. You don't know me as I am; if you did——" breaking off short.

"I know you well enough to know that you'd make Dolly a first-rate husband."

"Nonsense, Harry, your cousin Dolly is worth a hundred such fellows as I am."

Major Grimshaw nodded his sleek, dark head approvingly.

"That's right, Beau. I like to see a young chap modest. When a man declares he is not worthy of a girl, it is a sure sign that he has begun to think a good deal about her."

Beau frowned, and looked away. His friend was too sharp by half, and allowed an exuberant fancy to run away with him.

"Harry," he said seriously, "I wish you'd oblige me by holding your tongue, at least on this particular subject."

The other glanced at him in surprise. Beau's gravity was quite unusual. As a rule, he had no objection to being bantered about the fair sex.

"Why, dear me, what's the matter? Anything wrong?" he exclaimed.

"No, nothing; only I don't see the good of talking nonsense, and if your conversation were repeated to Miss Dolly, I feel sure she would be very far from approving of it. A poor devil like myself has no business even to think of such a girl." He stopped, sighed, then added hurriedly, "I wish to God I had, for those are the sort of women who exercise a good influence over a man's life."

CHAPTER VII.

CUB HUNTING.

IT was all very well for Beau to tell Harry that he had no business to think of Dolly Dalrymple. He found to his cost that he could not help thinking of her, and during the night, his slumbers were rendered fitful and uneasy by the faces of two women, bearing no resemblance to each other; for the one was very dark and pale, lit up by large lurid eyes, possessing a species of concentrated flame that made his flesh creep, whilst the fair and gentle features of Dolly seemed to smile at him through his dreams, and proved eminently attractive.

Beau was no saint; he was neither better nor worse than his neighbours, and since arriving at man's estate he had danced and flirted with a variety of different girls, some plain; but none of them inspired the same wish to cultivate their acquaintance that Dolly had done. He found it difficult to account for his strange longing to see more of Miss Dalrymple. Had she bewitched him? It seemed like it, and the very idea rendered him uneasy; for what would be the result if he yielded to the enchantress's fascinations?

As he went through the operation of dressing on the following morning, he told himself that the wisest thing he could do would be to leave Fieldborough at once, and flee from temptation before any permanent mischief was inflicted on either side. Such, no doubt, was the prudent course, and the one best calculated to avoid complications; but how could he adopt it without throwing Grimshaw over, and making a clean breast of his engagement to Lydia Stapleton?

And this, somehow or other, he felt more than ever disinclined to do. With a sigh of perplexity he looked over his letters, which, for precaution's sake he had told his soldier servant always to bring to his room. As usual, there was one from Lydia. How that woman persecuted him with her long, tiresome scrawls! Gradually during the last few years he had grown to dread the very sight of his *fiancée's* handwriting. This morning it irritated him intensely, and appeared to give rise to a whole train of unpleasant reflections. He could make a tolerably shrewd guess what the letter contained.

Doubtless it was a fac-simile of many others already in his possession, and of which he made a periodical bonfire. Undying protestations of affection, accompanied by covert reproaches for his coldness and neglect, figured largely in these voluminous epistles. They were all alike, and lately each one had grown more unwelcome than its predecessor. Possibly Captain Dornay's conscience upbraided him a little. Argue as he might as to the folly of marrying Lydia Stapleton, he could not help remembering that there had been a time when he had ardently looked forward to making her his wife. If, since those days, his feelings had undergone an alteration, it was scarcely fair to lay the blame entirely at her door. He admitted this fact, but it did not render him any the happier, perhaps rather less so; for a sense of behaving ill is not generally conducive to one's moral peace. Beau was too much of a gentleman to treat a woman dishonourably with indifference. Some men care nothing for public opinion, whereas he was peculiarly sensitive to it. To be abused by his immediate circle would have rendered him miserable. There was that in his nature which made the approval and applause of his fellows a necessity.

Beau was too much troubled in his mind to read Lydia's letter. He thrust it into the pocket of his hunting coat, and treated it like a draught of nasty medicine, which the patient has not courage to take on first presentation.

Alas! poor Lydia. What would she have said could she have seen the reception accorded to this missive, which had cost her such numerous tears, and so sharp a heartache to write? People, constituted like Beau, who are so greatly afraid of giving pain that it is almost a physical impossibility to them to go straight to the point, and speak out once for

all the thoughts dwelling in their brain, are unable to conceive of the slow torture they inflict. Theirs is cruel kindness. It approaches almost to cowardice. Better a sharp, short agony, than a lingering ache, which keeps both body and spirit in an unnatural state of tension.

Lydia's effusions inspired Beau with a feeling of weariness and aversion. They reminded him of events which he would much rather forget, especially in his present mood.

He realised that her character was wholly unsuited to his; that they were, in fact, dissimilar, and could never live happily together. Her fierceness and intensity were antipathetic to him. They jarred upon his bright, facile nature. He had no aptitude for tearing passions to pieces, and his dramatic instinct was not sufficiently strongly developed to make him appreciate scenes. Life, with Lydia, meant a life of unrest. There could be no repose or sense of security about it. She was too unquiet, too emotional, too tragic. He preferred the dove to the eagle; the mild-eyed gazelle to the infuriated tigress. Lydia was an impossible woman for a man to spend his days with. He did not wonder that that poor devil Stapleton had committed suicide. So Beau mused, very frequently and sorrowfully. He had long since ceased to disguise from himself that, in asking her to be his wife, he had made a terrible mistake, which nothing but his youth and inexperience could excuse. It threatened now to embitter his whole future, and force him into an alliance eminently distasteful. His eyes were opened wide. He foresaw the consequences quite plainly. An inward voice told him that he could never satisfy such exacting love as Lydia's. She asked of him more than it was in his power to give. And do what he would, he could not respond. He marvelled at the infatuation which had led him into his present dilemma. At this distance of time it appeared sheer lunacy.

Any woman possessing ordinary pride would surely give up a man who treated her with growing indifference.

But Lydia puzzled him. In some things, as he had reason to know, she was as proud as Lucifer; but yet she clung to their engagement like ivy to an oak tree, and took no notice of several very decided hints which he had summoned up courage to throw out in his letters from India. She studiously ignored them.

What was to be done with a woman so obstinate of dis

position that she refused to be cast off, simply because her lover, less faithful than herself, had altered his mind? It was a knotty point, and Beau, whichever way he looked at it, failed to arrive at a satisfactory solution of the difficulty. He felt like a rabbit caught by a ferret in a hole, from which there is no escape. He was even afraid of squeaking too loudly, for fear of being heard by the world at large. One thing alone was clear.

As long as Lydia abstained from restoring to him his liberty, he was bound in honour to fulfil the rash promise given her long years ago, even although he could only do so at the expense of his own happiness. Beau admitted this, and realised that, to a certain extent, he had been fairly fortunate, for until now he had never fallen in love, or felt his chains heavily; but, since yesterday, his whole mental condition seemed to have undergone a sudden revolution. A chaos of seething thought revolved in his usually tranquil brain, and filled it with apprehensions hitherto unknown. Why, oh! why did the good things of this life always come too late? How was it that you plucked the sour fruit before meeting with the ripe; snatched at the faded flower, and failing to perceive the fair, unfolding bud, marched heedlessly along the fateful path of destiny, only to find yourself confronted by a black pit-fall at the end of it? Poor Beau! He did not like solemn thoughts, or the deeper problems of existence; nevertheless, they would force themselves upon him occasionally. Every fresh year made it harder to flee from the shadows that threatened to encompass him, and to bask undisturbed in the bright and cheering sunshine. And he loved the sunshine so! It was essential to his well-being! He and gloom seemed to have nothing in common, and yet, he had no sooner set foot in his native land than here was gloom pursuing him. No wonder he both felt and looked melancholy. That letter of Lydia weighed like a ton of lead in his pocket. How astonished Grimshaw would be if he knew its contents.

"Hulloa, Beau, old man, here you are at last! I began to wonder if you ever intended putting in an appearance. Had a bad night?" exclaimed the Major, on his friend's entry into the sitting-room.

"Yes," growled Beau in reply, "an infernally bad night. The bed was so deuced hard."

"The bed! why, bless my soul, a young fellow like you

ought not to know the difference between a hard one and a soft one. When we used to go pig sticking together, we were not half so particular."

"Very likely not, but that was different. Anyhow, when people can't sleep, they are always glad to find fault with something or other. It's a relief to the feelings. But I hope I have not kept you waiting for breakfast, Harry? You ought to have begun."

"Though hungry, I was not voracious, and could afford to wait a few minutes, but I say, old fellow, are you ready to start in a quarter of an hour's time? It's now twenty past nine, we have some way to go, and hounds meet punctually at ten."

"Never fear," answered Beau, helping himself to a couple of poached eggs. "I'll be ready."

And he was as good as his word. As the clock struck half-past nine, the two young men sallied forth from Mr. Tyler's back-yard, mounted on their new steeds which they were dying to try. Each had selected the animal he most fancied, being anxious to make a creditable *début* in the field. Major Grimshaw, who weighed something under ten stone, was on a corky chestnut mare, very nearly thoroughbred, whilst Beau, who rode considerably over thirteen stone, bestrode a handsome brown five-year-old horse, purchased with Lydia Stapleton's money. He regretted having taken it now, but, at the time, the temptation had been too great to be resisted.

The keen morning air, however, and the elastic movements of his steed, soon went far to dissipate his low spirits. The mountain conjured up by a wakeful night dwindled down into a mole-hill.

Love! The mischievous sprite in whose honour so many incantations were daily being sung. What was he, after all? Only a creature of fancy, easily chased away by a good run and a good horse. His imagination had been running riot in a ridiculous manner. On horseback he felt himself again—a strong man able to laugh at sentiment and women. Let them go. The fox and the hound were surer, truer friends, from whom a much larger share of amusement was to be derived. Amusement, too, of a healthy, honest nature, that contained no fevered, hot-house element in it. Dolly Dalrymple, with all her charms, could not compete with the pleasures of the chase. Thus he mused in the first

enthusiasm occasioned by seeing hounds again after so long a time.

He spent a most enjoyable forenoon. The "young un" proved a great success; he met several old friends, all of whom were delighted to see him, and, to crown everything, the pack got on to the line of a well-grown fox, who gave his pursuers a rattling twenty minutes. The country rode awfully blind, but who minded that, with the beautiful white and tan hounds racing ahead, and disappearing like silver streaks over the fences. Men, worthy of the name, don't stop much to think of danger at such times as these. On, on, the feeling approaches almost to madness and, while it lasts, dwarfs every other sentiment. At whatever cost, they must be in front, and in a position to see those sleek extended forms and vanishing sterns. There is no pleasure to compare with keeping the racing hounds well in sight.

Beau's new purchase behaved right gallantly, and delighted his rider by jumping enormously big, so that the ditches proved no hindrance to him; but he was in very middling condition, and after the first quarter of an hour, began to hold out signals of distress. Indeed, Beau had not spared him. In the saddle he was almost invincible, and his clear blue eye seemed to take in at one glance the shortest and most practicable way across country. The fox ran to ground none too soon for his steed, who was sorely in need of a pull. He stood, meek as a lamb, with heaving flanks and jerking tail, painfully gasping at the fresh air through his inflated lungs.

Beau, now the fun was over, jumped off him at once. His fair face was flushed and heated. A warm glow pervaded his whole being, lending animation to every feature. If Dolly had been there to see him at that moment, no doubt she would have considered him gloriously handsome. He certainly looked a fine specimen of the genus homo, in his white breeches and well-fitting coat. The line had been too big for most of the field whose hearts, so early in the season, required a considerable amount of hardening. They now streamed in one by one, and Harry turned up with the ruck, highly delighted with himself and his mare, and making out that they had performed prodigies of valour.

After this auspicious commencement to the day's proceedings, a brace of nimble cubs kept them on the move

till late in the afternoon, and towards three o'clock our friends wended their way home, very much pleased with their first experiences of the Fieldborough country; for, strange to say, although Harry's uncle lived near, he had never been out with the hounds until to-day.

Being somewhat fatigued, tea and fried eggs proved very acceptable on their return to Prince's Street. After this they attired their persons in loose flannel smoking-suits, and gave themselves up unreservedly to the comforts of pipes and arm-chairs until it was time to dress in orthodox evening costume for their dinner at Woodford Chase.

"That chestnut of mine is a regular ripper," observed Harry, with intense content. "I wouldn't take two hundred for her if it were offered me to-morrow."

"Nor would I for the brown," responded Beau. "He carried me like a bird; and when he gets fit, will be a nailing good horse. Just a trifle too eager, perhaps, at his fences, but that's a fault on the right side; and in the meantime there's no fear of his leaving his hind legs in any of the ditches. He means getting over."

"So does his rider," said Harry, who entertained a profound admiration for his companion's horsemanship. "It takes an uncommon good man to beat you, Beau. You're a devil of a fellow to go. By Jove! though, what funk-sticks some of the fellows are. A whole lot of them got tinkering at a gap and blocked up the road, so, being in a hurry, I valiantly charged the fence."

"Well done you," laughed Beau, knowing that the Major was not much given, as a rule, to such feats of daring. "Did you get over all right?"

"Yes, wonderful to say, I did; for there was a regular yawner the other side. I'd no idea the ditch was so wide, or I doubt if I should have gone at it."

"As it was, your pluck landed you safely. Capital, old man!"

Beau was much too good natured not to humour his comrade's self-satisfaction. He was well aware that Harry had not seen a yard of the run, but what did it matter, so long as he was content, and it pleased him to talk as if he had been in the van throughout? Beau's tact and amiability rendered him an agreeable companion, and won many hearts. He made it a rule never to tread on people's corns, or expose their little weaknesses if he could help it, and no

doubt the rule was a good one. Besides this, he was very modest whenever his own performances were alluded to, and treated them quite as a matter of course. Riding as hard as he did, this silence on his part possessed a decided charm. Thus, although Beau was a first flight man, and Harry only a degree removed from the roadsters, the two friends did not quarrel when talking over the adventures of the day, as is frequently the case where pride and contempt on one side are greeted with envy and mortification on the other.

After a time, even the fruitful subject of the morning's run could afford no more topics of conversation. Every incident was discussed threadbare. At last Harry said, as if struck by a sudden thought:

"I wonder where my uncle was to-day. I did not see him out. Perhaps he stopped at home to look after Dolly. He never half enjoys his hunting when she is not there."

"You—you don't think she was badly hurt, do you?" enquired Beau, knocking the ash from his pipe, and staring intently at the burning coals in front of him.

"Oh, dear, no, she was as gay as a lark when I left her yesterday evening. Besides, if anything had been seriously amiss, they would have put us off. Sir Hector is quite wrapped up in Dolly, and, since my aunt died, can hardly bear her out of his sight. I can't think what he'll do when she marries, as, of course, she is sure to do sooner or later."

"How is it that she still remains Miss Dalrymple?" asked Beau, striving hard to conceal any show of interest. "A girl with her good looks and fortune must have had any number of men after her."

Harry reddened consciously. Nevertheless his love for his cousin had been perfectly sincere, and quite independent of pecuniary considerations.

"So she has. Dolly's admirers are too numerous to be counted. There's hardly a young man in the county who has not proposed to her. They've all had their turn."

"Then why has she not taken one of them?"

"Probably for the same reason that she would not take me. Because she did not care enough about them. For one thing, she is so comfortable at home that a pretty

strong inducement would be required to get her to leave it."

"Perhaps she's the kind of girl who never would fall in love. Cold, I mean, and self-sufficient."

Harry rose from his seat, and took one or two strides up and down the room.

"Cold!" he exclaimed indignantly. "You have only to look in Dolly's face, and the absurdity of that supposition becomes patent. She is the sweetest, dearest girl in the world."

"Very likely, only she refuses to marry. Well, maybe she is right. Matrimony is a very doubtful pleasure, even when things go well, and a hateful institution when they don't."

"Beau, how cynical you have grown lately! I can't bear to hear you talk in that *blasé* sort of way, just as if you had exhausted every passion, and found nothing in anything. Why should you find fault with Dolly because she has been wise enough not to throw herself away on the first jackanapes who asks her to be his wife? What makes you so frightfully censorious?"

"I don't find fault with her. I should not presume to do such a thing. Only I think a girl who pretends she doesn't care for young men is generally more or less of a hypocrite. It's against human nature."

Harry remained thoughtful for a few seconds, then he said:

"Well, Beau, perhaps you are right. Who knows what may happen now Dolly has seen you? It is quite on the cards that she may fall desperately in love with your *beaux yeux*."

CHAPTER VIII.

"YOU OUGHT TO KNOW BETTER."

THAT last half-playful, half-serious observation of Harry was too much for Beau's natural modesty. He blushed like a schoolgirl, got up, looked at his watch, and exclaimed :

"By Jingo ! how the time flies. We must go and dress, else we shall be late ; and if I remember rightly, I think you said your uncle was a very punctual man."

Half an hour afterwards they were driving up the broad avenue leading to Woodford Chase. The house was situated in a fine park, that presented a series of undulating and well-timbered billows of grass. A herd of deer standing on the crest of one of them, with their antlers clearly defined against the frosty evening sky, and the cold moon shining down on their russet bodies, looked picturesque in the extreme. Beau was struck by the beauty of the drive. Its splendid row of double elms was indeed celebrated throughout the county, and was said to have been flourishing in the days of Charles the Second.

The Chase itself wore a venerable appearance. Nothing new or modern-looking disfigured its stately piles of architecture. No fiery red bricks, woodwork ornaments, and flimsy decorations, such as are so much in vogue in modern days, were to be seen. Everything was grave, grand, and harmonious, from the massive old stunted oaks, that stretched their twisted arms to the sky, to the finely-wrought iron gates, which led from the park to the mansion. As Beau caught sight of the grey, castellated house, with its mullioned windows, and lofty, irregular gables, he was distinctly impressed. It is all very fine to pretend that the riches and wealth of this world produce no effect upon us. They do ; and the majority of men and women are so meanly constituted that they can't abstain from thinking favourably of their owners. Beau could not help realizing

that the heiress of such an estate was a personage of more importance than he had hitherto conceived Dolly Dalrymple to be. And this without being specially worldly or calculating.

"What a jolly place!" he exclaimed, though to his mind the chief glory of Woodford Chase consisted not so much in its antiquarian merits as in being situated in the midst of such a magnificent hunting country. Personally, he would not have cared to own a ducal habitation, had it been out of reach of hounds. To be near the kennels was his idea of bliss.

"Yes," answered Harry, almost sentimentally, "I've a great affection for the Chase. When I was a boy, I used to spend part of my holidays here; and somehow or other, when one grows up, one generally looks back upon one's boyish days as the happiest in one's life."

And he stifled a sigh, thinking perhaps, of the love which had been part of his youth, but which, alas! had not prospered. Although he fought against it bravely, he nevertheless suffered from periods of depression.

"I wish to goodness I could be twenty-one again," said Beau fervently. "Youth is God's greatest gift, and we are such idiots that we never half appreciate it till it's gone."

"Why do you talk like that?" asked his companion. "You never used to. Now you are turning as grave as a judge, and take quite gloomy views of life."

Beau looked out of the window at the clear, crescent moon riding so serenely in the darkling sky, and gave a little forced laugh. Somehow he felt in an unusually serious mood.

"The result of age," he said. "You seem to forget, my dear fellow, that man develops. It's not exactly a pleasant process, but he can't help it. According to our finite way of thinking, the one great pity in this world is, that nothing and nobody stands still. That horrid old Time pushes us on and on against our will, until he forces us over into the pit. No doubt it's to make room for others—to give the hundreds and thousands of unborn souls their little span of life, but, individually, it renders matters rather uncomfortable."

"Come, come, Beau, moralising is the greatest mistake in the world. *Never think*, that's my motto, but more

especially about abstruse subjects. If you do, you only addle your head, and are no wiser at the end than at the beginning. To nine ordinary mortals out of ten, thought is but a source of unhappiness. It requires a deuced stout brain to think deeply."

"Sound philosophy, but hard practice," answered his companion. "though I fully admit the truth of what you say. To my notion, the world would be a most delightful place if it were not for the people. But they do bother one so dreadfully." And his thoughts reverted to Mrs. Stapleton and her uncomfortable passion.

"All the same, we should find it very dull if we had it entirely to ourselves," rejoined practical Harry.

"Oh," said Beau, "I except congenial spirits. Unfortunately they are so few and far between."

He had a queer sort of feeling hanging about him this evening, that he would willingly give half his income to be able to meet Dolly as a free man. She had raised strange, new longings within his breast.

As the fly pulled up beneath the handsome stone portico of Woodford Chase, these feelings were curiously, almost unpleasantly, strong upon him. Do what he would, he could not drive them away.

The young men now entered a magnificent hall, extremely lofty, round three sides of which ran a carved oak gallery. An enormous wood fire, piled high with huge crackling logs, burnt on the hearth, and spread a delicious warmth around. Every now and again its cheery flames shot out, and surpassing the brilliancy of two softly-shaded lamps, illumined with their vivid flashes the various suits of old chain armour, inlaid helmets, and curiously fashioned bucklers, which were ranged at intervals against the walls. Shields, swords, scabbards, implements of war, and trophies of the chase further adorned them, whilst books, newspapers, needlework, littered about on the tables, accompanied by a sweet perfume of hothouse flowers, showed that this noble hall also served as a family sitting-room. But to-night the guests assembled elsewhere.

A tall, stout butler, who looked as if he did full justice to Sir Hector's good cheer, preceded Harry and Beau down a long, richly-carpeted corridor, and past several doors, all hung with gorgeously-tinted Eastern fabrics, whose bright yet subdued colouring no European manu-

factory can imitate. Before one of these doors this solemn functionary stopped, and, in a stentorian voice, announced "Major Grimshaw and Captain Dornay."

In another minute, Sir Hector was shaking them both by the hand, and politely expressing his pleasure at making Beau's acquaintance.

"Very glad to see you, my dear sir, very glad indeed," he declared, smiling at him in a manner which won our hero's heart on the spot. "I hope that now you have come to Fieldborough, we shall often meet, both here and in the hunting-field."

"I hope so too," responded Beau cordially, trying, as he spoke, to trace a likeness between Dolly and her father, but he failed to detect the smallest resemblance.

Sir Hector was tall and dark, with brown hair slightly grizzled; bushy eyebrows, and keen brown eyes, which gave the impression that their owner might be somewhat choleric on occasions when things did not go quite to his mind. To-night, however, there was a very kindly light in them, and they shone with genuine good-will upon his visitors.

Where was Dolly though?

A pang of bitter disappointment shot through Beau's frame, as for the first moment or so, on finding she did not come forward to greet them, he fancied that she was not in the room. Then he took a comprehensive glance around, and to his inexpressible relief, saw her lying on a couch near the fire, dressed in a very pale blue and highly becoming tea-gown. He advanced, and she held out her hand with a smile of welcome, greeting him as a friend rather than as a stranger.

"Forgive my not getting up," she said apologetically, "but the doctor has forbidden me to put my foot to the ground for a day or two."

"I hope there is nothing serious the matter." And Beau profited by Harry's making a remark to his uncle, to occupy an empty seat by her side.

"Not much, only my foot is rather badly crushed, and so swollen that I can't wear any of my shoes at present. But if I obey orders, and keep quiet, I am assured it will not be a very long job. You must forgive our being quite alone, Captain Dornay, and not asking anyone to meet you."

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"I am supremely happy as I am, Miss Dalrymple. Small parties are always much nicer than large ones."

"Ah! but we are not even a small party. I wanted to put you off, or at least to send word what you had to expect, so that you might not be brought here under false pretences, but papa would not hear of such a thing, and said it was absurd to stand on ceremony with Harry, or Harry's friend."

"Sir Hector was quite right, and we should have been deprived of a great pleasure, if we had not been allowed to come to-night. Personally, I was most anxious to hear how you were after your accident."

"You are very kind, Captain Dornay," and Dolly's long eyelashes swept her fair cheek.

"Moreover," continued Beau impressively, as if anxious to carry conviction to his listener's ears. "I would infinitely rather come when you are alone, because then, you see, I get a chance of talking to you, which I shouldn't if half-a-dozen young fellows were hanging about, all wanting a word."

Dolly made a charming little *moue*, and gave an expressive shrug of her shoulders."

"Young men!" she exclaimed, with a saucy glance at her companion. "What do I care about young men? They don't interest me, I can assure you. I'm quite tired of them. They're so horribly self-satisfied."

"Indeed, Miss Dalrymple, I'm sorry to hear that." And he gazed at her fixedly.

She coloured, and drooped her eyes. It was horrid, ridiculous, not being able to meet his.

"Why should they have any fascination for me?" she rejoined, with an air of petulance more assumed than real. "Most of them are too abominably selfish, and too absurdly taken up with themselves. They think of nothing but their own pleasures and amusements, and are not fit to be entrusted with the difficult and dangerous charge of a woman. I, for one, am hard to keep in order."

"You give us a bad character," said Beau, not altogether approving of her sentiments.

"Be honest. Is it worse than you deserve? Do you really admire the modern masher, with his beautiful body and empty head?"

"I don't know. You can hardly expect me to join with

you in abusing my sex. But one thing is certain, all men are not alike. The masher only represents a small section."

"Granted. We will admit there are a few white sheep among the flock. And for that reason," looking up at him with a charmingly roguish smile, "I make some reservations."

"I am relieved to hear it. Are they many? I see you are very severe in your judgments."

"The fact is, Captain Dornay," she continued, "we women are so foolishly constituted, that we are only too glad and too thankful to bow down and worship you men as demigods, *if—we—can.*"

"Ha, ha!" laughed Beau, "what tremendous sarcasm is hidden behind that, 'if we can.' It possesses a whole world of untold meaning, almost crueller than actual words. I never heard a more absolutely crushing speech."

"You don't understand. Unless a girl is a downright fool, how can she possibly be expected to prostrate herself at the shrine of a divinity, who does nothing from morning till night but think of self. Women are weak. We all know that. They wouldn't be women if they weren't, and what's more, you never like the strong ones, capable of steering their own course, independent of masculine assistance. But just because they are so constituted, they require protection. There is none to be derived from the beautiful youth, who has no ideas beyond satisfying his palate, and attiring his lovely person in wonderful clothes, and who indulges in the comical delusion that every female thing he comes across must necessarily admire him."

Beau was piqued, and kept looking at her as she spoke. In fact, he could hardly take his eyes off her sweet, girlish face, beaming with fun and mischief. Nevertheless he felt that there was an under current of seriousness in her speech. If she did not mean quite all, she meant part of what she said.

"I presume," he rejoined rather stiffly, "that these very peculiar views of yours, about men in general, have made you forswear matrimony. Under these circumstances, allow me to congratulate you on your wisdom."

She flushed up, till her brow and little shell-like ears were crimson tinted. It was as good as saying that he pitied the unfortunate destined some day to become her husband.

"Why should I marry?" she said, in quick staccato tones, as if combating some inward inclination. "I have everything I want. Papa and I are perfectly happy together. He would be dreadfully lonely all by himself, and wish me back again as soon as I had gone."

"I can quite understand that. So should I if I were in his place, and you didn't favour me to your dreadfully provoking ideas."

"We two are all alone in the world," she went on, casting an affectionate glance in the direction of her father, who was standing with his back to the fireplace, talking in an animated fashion to his nephew; "and although it may sound conceited, I am sure he would miss me a good bit. Besides," she added, with a sudden blush, "there is only one thing that would ever induce me to commit matrimony, and, so far, that thing has not happened to come in my way. Some people are fated to fall a victim to it, others are not, and get through their lives quite comfortably without it. I belong to the latter class, luckily for my peace of mind."

"What is this mysterious 'it'?" said Beau smiling, though he could make a pretty good guess without being told. "You have aroused my curiosity. Come, confess."

Dolly twitched at a dainty lace pocket-handkerchief lying on her lap.

"I really don't know why I should. If I do, will you promise not to laugh at me, Captain Dornay?"

"Yes, most solemnly. How could I possibly be guilty of so great an act of rudeness?"

"Well, then," and she lowered her voice and spoke very shyly and softly, "it's love. There! remember your promise."

Beau felt his heart give a sudden bound. Ah! how good it was to be young, and to find one's blood quicken, and one's pulses throb in the presence of a fair, sweet girl, whose purity and innocence revealed themselves at every word she uttered. Beau was seized by a mad longing to rouse Dolly's sleeping passions, and make her whole being vibrate to a caress of his, like a fine-strung musical instrument. He hardly knew what possessed him, but a kind of intoxication stole over his senses, rendering him oblivious to every other consideration. He experienced an imperative need to gain this girl's love—a

craving fiercer than he had the force to subdue. To do him justice, he never dwelt on the consequences. His nature was too emotional not to give itself up entirely to the influences of the hour. Lowering his voice almost to a whisper, he let his full-lidded, blue eyes rest with unconscious yearning on her flower-like face.

"Love," he said. "Ah! love is a blessed thing. Perhaps it will come to you, although you do try so hard to steel yourself against it. Nevertheless, I predict that you are not as impervious to its influence as you seek to appear."

She moved uneasily. It was indeed a novel experience to find any man's voice and looks stir her to the very foundations of her being as did this man's. Already he exercised a kind of magnetic power over her. His eyes seemed charged with electricity, and under their disturbing influence a whole host of tumultuous thoughts flashed through her brain, vague and confused, it is true, yet not altogether devoid of shape. There were times when she had told herself that even her father's love, deep and genuine as it was, might not always prove all-sufficient; times when she fancied how sweet it must be to live in close community of spirit with one still dearer and nearer, and to clasp in her arms lispng, rosy children who would call her by the sacred name of mother. Such visions came now and again."

"Perhaps not," she murmured. Then, in quite a different tone, and as if trying to shake off a spell, she added lightly. "But what sentimental rubbish we are talking! and before dinner, too, which makes it a thousand times worse. We have not even the excuse of not being in our sober senses. Papa," turning to her father, "the gong has sounded. Did you not hear it, or are none of you hungry?"

"I am extremely so," answered Harry promptly. "May I give you my arm, fair cousin?"

"No, Sir Forgetful. Have I not already told you that I am doomed to lie here until my stupid foot gets well?"

"Ah, Dolly, how I wish I could stop with you!"

"No, you don't. The creature man prefers eating to—well, most things."

"Won't you be dull?" asked Beau, in a tone only meant for her ears. "What shall you do with yourself?"

She gave a little, mocking laugh, and quite ignored his desire to establish secret communications.

"Do? Why, pine until you come back, of course. Does not the female bird always languish in the absence of the male? I shall cry my eyes out. If they are very red on your return, you will know what to attribute it to."

"Dolly, Dolly!" put in Harry, who happened to have overheard the remark, which was uttered aloud; "you are perfectly incorrigible. Always jesting, and always seizing every opportunity of running down our unfortunate sex."

"Be off with you!" she answered. "Papa, take them under your wing, for I want my dinner even if they don't and am quite prepared to eat it first, and weep after."

"Shall we find you here on our return?" inquired Beau, not to be defeated by the jesting tone she chose to assume.

"That depends, Captain Dornay, entirely on the quantity of wine you drink, and the number of long cigars you get through. I don't propose to sit up till the small hours of the morning, so I give you fair warning that if you stay beyond a certain time, your humble servant will have gone to roost. That does not sound a very hospitable speech, does it? but I claim the privileges of an invalid!"

"Please don't go to bed early," pleaded Beau.

"Why not?" she enquired, with an affectation of unconsciousness.

She was far too proud a little lady to let the enemy see what a breach he had made in the citadel already, or how the battery of his fine eyes, good looks, and soft, caressing manliness had lamentably weakened her defences.

"Because we have not half had our talk out about love and matrimony. It was excessively interesting; don't you think so?"

"H'm! rather; only such conversations lose a great deal by being one-sided. If I undertake to sit up, will you promise to favour me to some of your views? So far, you have only heard mine."

"Yes, on that condition, but no other. My views are worthless. You see I have not had your experience."

"Then it is a bargain," said Dolly gaily. "And now make haste; papa and Harry are half-way to the dining-room and will wonder what has become of you."

She waited till he had left the room, and then tossed

her little toes so restlessly about, that the rug by which they were covered rolled to the ground. Her mood had changed; it was no longer tranquil; the sleeping Princess was waking up.

"Pshaw!" she exclaimed. "What a fool I am, to be sure! No better than a chit in her teens, who goes raving mad about the first good-looking man who pays her a few compliments. Dolly Dalrymple, you ought to know better at your time of life. Remember the old saying, 'Handsome is as handsome does,' and don't lose your heart to a stranger."

She laughed uneasily. Perhaps, like Beau, she was not altogether sure of herself.

CHAPTER IX.

DOLLY BECOMES DISTURBED.

IN spite of Dolly's absence, dinner passed off very pleasantly. To begin with, Sir Hector kept a first-rate *chef*; and secondly, he was one of those fortunately constituted individuals who, in spite of advancing years, still remain fresh and boyish in feeling. He was a favourite with all young men. They felt no restraint in his presence, and forgot that, properly speaking, he belonged to an older generation than themselves. He represented a good type of the stay-at-home country squire, who takes an immense interest in everything appertaining to his particular county—its sport, its politics, its local concerns—and who does not trouble his head much about the rest of the world, except perhaps now and again when something particularly startling occurs. But in ordinary seasons, the universe is to him Flatshire, or Huntshire, or any other shire in which he may happen to reside. He is limited, but content, and perfectly unaware of the mental wall which bounds his horizon.

Sir Hector, perhaps not altogether without cause, thought there was no place like Old England. He was a staunch Conservative, and regarded the advanced Radicals and Socialists of the day with profound suspicion. Neither did he at all approve of the insidious encroachments made by science on religion. They were to him blasphemous in the

extreme. He did not want Adam and Eve done away with, or the Garden of Eden abolished. He liked them as they were, and clung with simple tenacity to the faith learnt at his mother's knee. How much her sweet smiles and soft words had served to establish this belief was not a matter for investigation. As for the religions of other countries, they inspired him with pity and contempt, in nicely balanced proportions. His mind could not reach beyond Christianity, and no doubt he was far happier than if it had. Sir Hector's theological convictions did not prevent him from flying into a passion on occasion, neither did they interfere with his doing a multitude of naughty things; but, all the same, they formed a very convenient little reserve stock on which to fall back. They comforted him in a variety of different ways; and although he did not fear death any the less, because he was a good Christian and a devoted church-goer, he was enabled to apply sundry small salves to his conscience. So he lived and flourished; a model and respectable gentleman, slightly bigoted, but in the main a very wholesome and creditable specimen of the class to which he belonged. If not highly gifted, he nevertheless was far from being stupid, and could converse well on his own range of topics, such as hunting, farming, crops, weather, cooking and wine. His manners were courtly, and he made a most agreeable host, especially when, as in the present instance, he liked his society. Harry was the son of a favourite sister, now dead, and he had always been partial to him. Indeed, had Dolly proved willing, he would have given his consent to their marriage. But, as they were cousins, he did not press the matter, and left his daughter perfectly free to choose or reject him as she pleased. He was now, if possible, even kinder to Harry than formerly, though the Major considered his uncle's affability aright, and did not derive any encouragement from it. He knew too well what it meant—consolation delicately offered, but nothing more. For, to Sir Hector, nothing more was possible. Dolly's wishes were law. He loved her with an almost blind devotion. Before her death, Lady Dalrymple had been dreadfully jealous of what she called "his infatuation" for the girl, and ever since that it had gone on increasing. Dolly was indisputable mistress of Woodford Chase, and reigned supreme.

During dinner, the conversation became almost exclu-

sively confined to the genial subject of sport. Sir Hector was eager to hear detailed particulars of the pig-sticking and big game shooting to be obtained in India. Beau, whilst relating some of his experiences, made a favourable impression upon his host, which was heightened later on by the evident interest with which he listened to Sir Hector's account of the Fieldborough Hunt. That gentleman was a great authority, and knew its history since it first began to exist.

"There's some talk of our master, Lord de la Fobbe, giving up after this season," he remarked incidentally. "Times are as bad with him as they are with everybody else; and I know it pretty well for a fact, that his income has been cut down from about thirty, to something under twelve thousand a year. Instead of being a wealthy man, he is reduced to a comparative pauper, obliged to screw and pinch in every direction. Those infernal Irish estates of his pay next to nothing. Thank God, I have got no land in Ireland. If I had, I really think I should hand it over to the people as the cheapest thing in the long run."

"Since his lordship is giving up, why don't you come forward uncle?" asked Harry.

"Not I, my dear boy. I look upon being Master of Hounds as just about the most thankless office in the world. You lose your liberty, your hunting is converted from a pleasure to a task; in addition to which, you spend your substance on a set of people who do nothing but abuse you, and growl at you from morning to night. No, it's not good enough, especially at my time of life. Besides which, I am in the same boat as poor De la Fobbe, though luckily my craft is not quite so riddled with holes as his. You know how much I have done for my tenants. Well, would you believe it, Harry, I have been obliged in the last year to give them a reduction of five-and-twenty per cent.?"

"Indeed! that seems a good deal."

"It does: but if I hadn't I should have got no rents at all. Some of these confounded agitators have been about the place and done no end of harm. The better class of labourers have the sense to detect the fallacies of their arguments. They see that ruining the landlords won't benefit them much in reality, and that land will simply lie idle, and go out of cultivation; but the poorer ones listen

to this nonsense as if it were gospel, and have not brains enough to reason the matter out for themselves. As for us, our incomes are seriously reduced, and yet our expenditure goes on pretty much the same. An estate like this for instance, must be kept up, at whatever cost. Therefore, what with one thing and another, I should not dream of taking the hounds at present, though I have been asked to do so repeatedly."

"The Fieldborough is a subscription pack, is it not?" enquired Beau.

"Yes," answered Sir Hector, "but, for all that, they do not pay their way. The expenses of hunting a country like this four days a week are very heavy, and, although we have large fields, it is really astonishing how shabby many people are. They come out hunting time after time, and never subscribe a sixpence. I am one of those who maintain that there ought to be a law passed to catch all those fellows who can pay but won't. If folk are rich enough to have horses, they are rich enough to contribute something towards keeping up the sport of the country. Those are my sentiments."

"And mine too," assented Beau. "I quite agree with you, Sir Hector. They over-ride hounds, incense the farmers, and are a nuisance all round. The real thing is, not one in ten of these so-called gentlemen is a sportsman in the true sense of the word. They construe the word sport egotistically."

"That's precisely it," returned his host. "You've hit the right nail on the head, Captain Dornay. If they took the least thought for the general amusement, they would act very differently. Have a cigar?" And so saying, Sir Hector handed Beau a box of long, light-coloured, and delicately-fragrant Havanas, that were something very special, as their odour betrayed.

The already smitten young man made a rapid calculation. Such a cigar as the one now offered him would take at least twenty minutes to smoke. Twenty minutes more was a desperate long time to remain away from Dolly. He was dying to renew the conversation begun before dinner, and had been inwardly fuming the whole while they sat over their wine, longing for his host to make a move.

"No thank you," he replied, fervently hoping that Harry also would refuse, and suggest an adjournment to the draw-

ing-room. But Harry did no such thing. He knew the quality of his uncle's tobacco of old. With great deliberation he selected a choice cigar, and holding it up between his forefinger and thumb, made it crackle, and then proceeded to strike a light. Sir Hector followed suit. He was a great smoker, and never so happy as when puffing airy rings from his lips.

Beau, although not usually troubled with shyness, on this occasion was much too bashful to join Dolly. He could not summon up sufficient courage to make the proposition. And now he had denied himself the soothing influences of a cigar all to no purpose, since he was doomed to sit by and see his companions smoke. The sacrifice had been vain. That alone was irritating, especially when you were conscious of having performed a very meritorious action, above the level of your ordinary ones, and yet obtained no result from it. Three or four minutes elapsed, during which he fidgetted in his chair. At last he could bear the tension no longer, especially as a most fragrant odour began to fill the apartment, and to tickle his nostrils.

"If you don't consider me very changeable, Sir Hector," he said, with a deprecating smile, "I think I'll alter my mind, and take a weed after all."

"That's right, my dear fellow, it's poor work looking on."

"Wait till you try Uncle Hector's cigars," remarked Harry. "You'll not say no to them in a hurry."

They sat there smoking and talking until the clock struck ten. The two friends had ordered their fly at half-past. Time was getting on. Under ordinary circumstances Beau would have been perfectly happy. A good cigar, a comfortable arm-chair, and an agreeable host were, in his opinion, sufficient to satisfy most men; but to-night he was literally on tenter-hooks, and watched the minute hand of the clock glide on with ever increasing impatience. At length Sir Hector adjourned to the drawing-room, where his daughter was reclining in solitary state.

"Well, Dolly," he exclaimed, "you must have thought we were never coming; but Harry and Captain Dornay made themselves so agreeable, I positively forgot the hour, and somehow or other we seemed to have such a lot to say. It only shows what a selfish old fellow I am to

leave you alone so long, particularly when you are more or less laid up."

"Oh! never mind me, papa," she answered brightly. "I have been quite happy, reading a most interesting book."

Little puss! she did not mention that for the last hour she had held it upside down, whilst she listened anxiously to the sounds proceeding from the dining-room. That was quite a detail, and one of which she felt ashamed.

"Harry, my boy, are you prepared to fight me at piquet?" asked Sir Hector, after he had stood for two or three minutes, warming his coat-tails before the fire. "It's an age since you and I have tried our skill."

"Yes, if you do not think it too late to make a start," answered his nephew, glancing at the clock.

"We might play a couple of games or so, just to see if we are as equal as we used to be."

Whereupon the piquet table was cleared, and Harry and Sir Hector sat down to it behind a Japanese screen which effectually concealed them from vision.

To all intents and purposes Beau and Dolly were alone. Our hero was not slow to perceive the advantages of the situation, and at once drew up a chair close to her side, determined to profit by the fortunate chance which left him master of the field.

"Are you very tired?" he asked, in his soft, smooth voice, whose even tones were singularly winning.

"Yes, rather," she replied, "but I have taken a new lease of wakefulness, and don't feel as sleepy as I did."

"I thought we were never coming. I can't tell you how I longed to get away, but your father did not offer to stir, and I had not the face to do so. Besides, I was not quite sure how you would receive me."

"I am sorry you have been bored," said Dolly demurely. "I felt certain you would be."

"Excuse me, I did not wish to convey such an impression, but I should have infinitely preferred your society, and that's the truth."

"Well, papa has enjoyed himself, at any rate, which is something. His face beamed when Harry agreed to a game of piquet."

"How fond you are of your father! I wish to goodness I had somebody to be as fond of me."

"Haven't you?" and she gave an arch to her delicately-pencilled eyebrows.

"No. I am not so fortunate." But he knew he was not speaking the truth. In her vehement, uncomfortable way Lydia was infinitely devoted to him.

"Forgive me for asking, but are your father and mother both dead?"

"Yes, my mother died many years ago, and my father was carried to his grave last winter. I am the solitary representative of our family."

"But you have brothers and sisters? Young ones, I mean."

"None. I wish I had. It was my misfortune to be an only son."

"Why do you say misfortune? A good many men nowadays would not consider it one. They want all they can get for themselves."

"They don't feel the isolation of the position, then, as I do. After all, blood is thicker than water."

Dolly did not speak for a few moments, then she said, softly and compassionately:

"I think you are right. It is a dreadful thing to be all alone in the world, and I am afraid you must feel terribly lonely every now and again."

"Yes, a fit of depression occasionally comes over me, though it's awfully idiotic."

"I don't agree with you there. My father is still alive, and yet I sometimes suffer from the blues."

"That is, you are dull. Do you know, I often wonder how fine ladies manage to get through their days. Most of them seem to suffer woefully from a lack of any real occupation."

"Perhaps so; and yet I have enough to do in looking after this big house, and keeping it in order. To begin with, the correspondence entailed by a large establishment is always great, and I make it a rule to see to things myself. But to go back to what we were saying. I should dearly like to have a brother. The relationship always appear to me delightful."

"Yes, by Jove! If I had a sister, I should not be half such a lonely beggar as I am."

"And yet you have a remedy in your power," she said, seriously.

"A remedy! What remedy?"

"You asked me a question before dinner. May I make so bold as to put the same one in return, even at the risk of appearing inquisitive?"

"Why, certainly. That's only fair play."

"Well, then, Captain Dornay, why don't you marry? The deed once done, you would never be at a loss for a companion."

The colour flew to his face. Her evident interest and kindly solicitude made him lose his head. They possessed a dangerously stimulating effect. Without pausing to consider, he blurted out impulsively:

"I should like immensely to marry, if only I could get the girl I fancy. But there lies the difficulty."

If it had not been for the manner in which he uttered the words, no personal construction need have been put upon them; yet, oddly enough, for the life of her, Dolly could not help applying his remarks to herself. Why did Captain Dornay look at her so strangely, and what did he mean? Her heart beat faster than its wont.

"Ah!" she said lightly, trying hard to maintain an aspect of complete indifference. "I am delighted to hear that there is a someone in the case. Have you known each other long?"

The boldest lovers are those who succeed the best. Beau was no backward wooer, and Dolly's beauty, and innocent, girlish charm rendered him more than commonly audacious.

"No," he said, looking her full in the face. "I met her for the first time yesterday. Since then I have felt like a different being."

With the best will in the world, there was no mistaking his meaning. She turned as red as a rose, and drew herself up with a little air of stately dignity. But the strange part of it all was, she did not feel very angry—not nearly so angry as the circumstances warranted. On the contrary, a species of exultation took possession of her. Nevertheless, if only for decency's sake, appearances must be maintained. She liked, and didn't like, being taken by storm in this impetuous fashion. It set her pure little heart a-fluttering, and filled it with inward trepidation.

"Really, Captain Dornay," she said, with that reserve which modest girls know so well how to assume on occa-

sion, "your language is as incomprehensible as it is extraordinary. I must remind you that you are no longer in India, and that however you may talk to young ladies over there, English ones are not accustomed to quite the same free and easy style of conversation."

Beau changed countenance. He had sufficient gentlemanly feeling to admit that the snub was fully deserved. What was there about this girl that made him capable of committing any folly when in her presence, and that swept into the background all those ugly facts, which ought, in honour, to have prevented him from trying to gain her affections. He meant no wrong, only he did not pause to think, and after his usual fashion, floated with the stream. The respect which he was beginning to conceive for Dolly's character increased a thousand-fold the admiration he already entertained for her person.

"Pray forgive me," he said, frankly and contritely. "You are perfectly right, Miss Dalrymple, in bringing me to book. I am dreadfully grieved at having offended you, and had no business to speak as I did. On so short an acquaintance, I can quite understand that my words appeared impertinent. Yet nothing could have been further from my intentions."

"You frightened me," said Dolly plaintively. The poor little thing was all of a tremble.

"What a beast I must be; and yet I was quite sincere, only, of course, I can't expect you to believe it."

His penitence mollified her wrath and restored her courage; at the same time she fully recognised that, if she were to unbuckle her armour, the risk would be tremendous. He had already contrived to pierce through its joints, and the barb of love lay quivering in her heart. But pride bade her hide the hurt, and not yield tamely, as long as she could continue to show fight.

"To be perfectly frank with you, Captain Dornay," she replied, after a lengthened pause, "such extreme sincerity does not please me. There is no occasion for it, and I should much prefer a reticence, which I trust my conduct has done nothing to forfeit."

"You are awfully down upon a fellow," he said dejectedly. "Do you utterly disbelieve in love at first sight?"

She flushed crimson. The interrogation partook of too personal a nature.

"That is a very foolish question, and I decline to answer it." Then she stopped short, and relenting, looked kindly at him.

"There! there! let us allude no more to the matter. Only take warning, and don't misbehave again, or I shall consider you an offender in earnest. And I should be sorry to do that." If the words were severe, the smile which accompanied them went far to destroy their effect.

His pulses thrilled with a delirious triumph. If she did not already return his love, he felt convinced that she would very shortly. In his blue eyes shone a conquering light, which she saw and recognised. Ah! gentle maidens, guileless and ignorant of the masculine nature, though flattering yourselves you know all about it, what chance have you? The wolf comes in sheep's clothing, with brave looks and soft speeches, and you yield yourselves up, willing victims. By and bye he shows his claws, and his sharp teeth meet in your delicate flesh, but it is too late, too late! Oh! those dreadful words, charged with bitterer suffering than any in our native language. By a single act—not reprehensible, because it is purely natural—you may be rendered miserable for life. Poor trusting maidens.

"I am not so much to blame as you pretend," rejoined Beau, with all the unrestrainable fervour and imprudence of his twenty-eight summers. "And," he went on, glancing mischievously at his companion, "I would rather not make any rash promises as to my future conduct, for I am certain to break them."

Dolly turned away her head. She was quivering with suppressed emotion. Why wasn't she furious with him? She ought to be. If any other man had made her such a speech as that, she would have quarrelled irrevocably. And yet this one conquered her, and, worse than all, she could assign no reasons for his doing so.

"You—you are very naughty," she said at last, in reproachful tones. "I really don't know what to say to you."

Beau laughed outright. He was conscious of his advantage, and meanly sought to press it home.

"Say nothing then. You were the person who declared all men were wicked. Why should I prove an exception to the rule?" and he moved his chair an inch or two nearer.

"For my part, I like being wicked, if this is what you call being wicked."

Dolly made no reply. She could not. She was too confused and overwhelmed. This irrepressible admirer quite took away her breath. He was so handsome—so masterful, and—so nice.

CHAPTER X.

"POOR HUMAN NATURE."

AFTER a while, the piquet came to an end, and Sir Hector and Major Grimshaw reappeared from behind their screen, the former in an extra good humour, having been victorious over his opponent at cards.

"Well, Beau," said Harry, "I suppose we must be taking our departure. Our four-in-hand has been at the door some time, and it's a shame to keep that miserable old horse waiting any longer."

"Yes, I suppose we ought to make a move," answered Beau, very reluctantly vacating his seat by Dolly's side.

"And you have never sung us a song, nor played the banjo!" she exclaimed reproachfully, finding her tongue directly their *tête-à-tête* came to an end. "That is really too bad of you, Captain Dornay."

"What! is our guest a performer?" said Sir Hector. "My dear sir, the night is still young. Pray give us a little music, that is to say unless you are in a great hurry to get to your bed."

"But I shall be keeping you up—Miss Dalrymple, too, who is not well, and must be tired."

"Not at all, not at all. My daughter is passionately fond of singing, and sings uncommonly well herself, though I say it, who shouldn't."

"Papa," said Dolly, "all your geese are swans. My performances are very poor in other people's eyes."

"Not a bit of it, my dear. I'd rather listen to you than to the finest prima donna in the world. Have you brought your instrument, Captain Dornay?" addressing himself to Beau.

Our hero confessed that it was in the hall; whereupon Sir Hector immediately rang for a servant to fetch the banjo.

Beau opened the case, and seated himself on a high stool, from which point of vantage he could obtain a full view of Miss Dalrymple's countenance. He then commenced to tune the strings, and, when all was in readiness, struck a few chords in a masterly manner, and dashed without further prelude into a popular comic song, that for some months past had been greeted with nightly applause at the Gaiety. He possessed a fine tenor voice—clear, true, and singularly sympathetic in quality; added to which, his humorous conception was great. He sang with so much spirit and vivacity, that Sir Hector laughed till his sides ached, and, when Beau came to an end, begged earnestly for a repetition of the performance.

But that gentleman entertained a thorough artist's dislike to encores. He had sung a comic song to please his host, whose musical tastes he had made a pretty shrewd guess at, and he was now determined to sing something that would appeal to Dolly. Instinct told him that she preferred a higher style of art. Therefore he played a few plaintive notes by way of introduction, and then began one of those passionate, Spanish love songs, which possess so great a power of going straight to the heart. His tones now were soft and wailing, the music flowing on in dirge-like rhythm, until the end of each verse was reached, when it suddenly changed its character, and burst into rapturous melody, finishing up with a long-sustained high note, full of yearning and intensity. The penetrating quality of Beau's voice made itself apparent as it went quivering through the room, filling every portion of it with wild, sweet harmony.

When he left off singing, no one spoke for a moment or two, so great was the impression produced on his hearers. He sung as he had never sung before, for to-night there was *soul* in his rendering of the Southern ditty. A new emotion lent him fire. It was as if the slumbering depths of his nature had been awakened.

The tears stood in Dolly's eyes. Everything beautiful affected her, and this was real talent of a high order.

"How well you sing!" she said softly. "I think I could lie here and listen to you for ever. The pity is that it should leave off."

Beau looked gratified. Her praise was very sweet to him, and he felt that he had gained the reward to which he had aspired. Every moment added to his desire of pleasing her.

himself on a high stool, obtain a full view of when commenced to readiness, struck a and dashed without song, that for some rightly applause at the voice—clear, true, and added to which, his sang with so much laughed till his sides and, begged earnestly

"You're no end of a swell in the musical way," said Sir Hector. "You and Dolly should try some duets together. I am sure your voices would agree splendidly. Hers is a mezzo-soprano, and she delights in sentimental sort of tunes. It may be shocking bad taste, but for my part, I honestly confess I prefer a real good comic song to anything else. But then I don't set up for being an authority."

Beau dashed off a rattling negro melody, which met with the host's fullest approval, and, as a final performance, gave "John Peel," in whose chorus all the assembled company joined with right good will. He then returned his banjo to its case, and declared that they were perfect heathens to display so little compassion for the poor, long-suffering cab-horse and driver waiting outside.

He now only wanted a few minutes to twelve o'clock, so, after an exchange of compliments on either side, the party broke up. Dolly's sleepiness had entirely vanished. No trace of it remained.

"May I come some non-hunting day, Miss Dalrymple, and have a practice with you?" Beau asked of his hostess and she crushed her little hand in his, with an energy that was almost painful to the girl.

"Yes, she said, "if you will promise to sing at our village concert on the thirtieth of this month. I am getting it up in aid of the Woodford Church Restoration Fund, and you would prove a most valuable acquisition, if only your services can be secured. Excuse the demand, but in these cases can't help being an infliction to one's neighbours."

"Bravo! Dolly. That's a capital idea of yours," exclaimed Sir Hector approvingly. "Captain Dornay's nigger songs will create quite a sensation among the rustics, and fetch them tremendously. And to render the entertainment even more attractive, you and he might sing a duet."

"By all means," assented Beau, thankful for any proposal which would enable him to see more of Dolly. "We must settle further details at our next meeting."

"When is that likely to be?" she inquired, "for the programmes should get printed almost immediately."

"Whenever you please." Then, in a tone meant only for her ears, he added, "The sooner the better, as far as I am concerned. Pray fix an early date."

"Remember," she said archly, "you are coming in order to further a good work, not to see me. I wish to give you

thorough artist's disc-
ic song to please his
made a pretty shrewd
to sing something that
him that she preferred
played a few plaintive

in began one of those
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His tones now were
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he was very sweet to him
he reward to which he
his desire of pleasing her

every credit for your actions, and will not believe they result from self-interested motives."

"You may believe what you like, Miss Dalrymple. All I ask is to be allowed the opportunity of meeting you, and the Church Restoration Fund will achieve that end, I shall regard it with the deepest gratitude."

And so saying, he took her hand in his for the second time, and whilst she was yet all rosy and confused, bade her a final farewell. Once more she experienced that strange sensation of being dominated, which deprived her of the use of her tongue. Luckily, Major Grimshaw was exceedingly chatty on the way home, and did not notice the complete absorption of his companion, whose answers were laconic in the extreme. Nevertheless, he was somewhat taken aback when, about a mile from the town, Beau suddenly said :

"I think I'll get out and walk home. This old rattletin is most awfully stuffy."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow," he exclaimed. "Why, it is past midnight. Time to be in bed, if you would retain that impaired that nerve for which you are so distinguished."

"No matter. I've got the deuce of a headache, and as if the air would do me good. Sir Hector's rooms are rather hot. Ta, ta. I shall be at Prince's Street almost as soon as you."

Before Harry could protest, Beau turned the handle of the door, and jumped with one light bound from the carriage to the road. The Major realised he was in earnest, and wondered what was the reason of this strange freak.

He himself infinitely preferred driving to tramping along the highway, but he was a thoroughly good creature, and would have stuck to his friend through thick and thin, had he taken it into his head to go to the Antipodes. Therefore, he looked out of the window and said :

"I say, Beau, shall I come with you? I will if you like."

"No, thanks, old man," was the not altogether graceful reply, but they were too great cronies to stand on ceremony with each other. "I'd rather be alone, and I know you are not much of a pedestrian at any time."

So saying, Beau strode off with great long strides, and for a while almost kept pace with the fly.

He was glad of the solitude. He could not exactly

but believe they res- why, but Harry's society and continuous flow of small talk
 ss Dalrymple. All proved irksome to him to-night. The strange rhapsody
 meeting you, and Dalrymple's presence, and which suddenly and swiftly
 eve that end, I sh descended upon his spirit with an irresistible force, was
 already beginning to give place to thoughts of an uneasy
 nature.

n his for the seco- What had he done? Had he been mad, irresponsible?
 d confused, bade It seemed to him that he had yielded himself up to a sweet
 rieved that stran- yet dangerous delirium, which had completely conquered
 eprived her of the his rectitude and subjugated his senses. He was enthralled,
 haw was exceeding enchanted. His brain glowed with passion-laden fancies.
 notice the compl- The blood in his veins coursed like quicksilver. Every
 answers were laco- nerve was in a state of tension and of abnormal excitation.

was somewhat tak- How charming she was, how fair and fascinating. Who
 town, Beau sudden- could resist her? She was his ideal woman. He had never
 found her hitherto. All other girls appeared coarse, rude

e. This old rattlet- in comparison. She possessed a refinement and spirituality
 that exactly embodied his highest notions of the feminine

exclaimed. "Why, sex- And Lydia? Ah! good God. If he had never come
 f you would retain- to Fieldborough it would have been difficult, but still it
 e so distinguished- night have been possible for him to fulfil his promise to
 f a headache, and her- But now, how could he do so? As far as she was

Hector's rooms w- concerned, he had gone through many stages of emotion.
 rince's Street almos- First, in his youth, active love, or rather desire; then passive
 affection; then torpid dislike, which was rapidly assuming
 the culminating point of positive hatred. He told himself

turned the handle- he, if it had not been for his wretched entanglement with
 bound from the fil- the Stapleton, he might have gone to Dolly with clean
 as in earnest, and v- hands and an open conscience. The widow was a clog and
 ange freak. fetter upon his life. He could not forgive her for the

ving to tramping a- why which, all unconsciously, she was doing him. If only
 nly good creature, be- were dead, then he might be happy.

gh thick and thin, Perhaps he reasoned selfishly. Most of us do when we
 the Antipodes. Th- re- very much in earnest, and can see only one side of the
 nd said: action. It is the old story of the child crying for the

h you? I will if moon. The child thinks it terribly hard that he cannot get
 not altogether grad- what he wants, especially when he roars very loudly about it.
 s to stand on cerem- now, was roaring now—raging—only he was wise enough to
 one, and I know you- age in solitude.

e." Very bitter thoughts passed through his mind as he walked
 reat long strides, along the white road. He was both angry and impatient,
 e fly. and in this mood did injustice to the woman whose fault

He could not exactl-

was that she loved him too well—who had waited for him and saved for him many years, and who had heap'd numerous benefits upon his head.

Benefits! Who ever values them a month after the time they are conferred? Beau could not bear to recall the benefits for, alas! they made him despise himself, and filled him with a conscious sense of dark ingratitude. He loathed the grateful people, and yet what a return he was making to Lydia for all her kindness! If only it were possible to detect some flaw in her virtue which might rid him of his responsibility towards her. It was a mean thought—a dastardly thought—unworthy in every way; and yet he was glad he should be if, through any lapse on her part, he could regain his lost liberty. Why did she not realise that a union between a man of twenty-eight, young, moreover, for his years, and a woman of thirty-six, who had buried one husband under mysterious circumstances, who was the mother of a daughter nearly grown up, and who possessed no experience, was altogether opposed to the fitness of things. He liked her well enough in her way. They might be very good friends until the end of time, but to take that swarthy creature in his arms, caress her, and call her his own peculiar property—no, he could not do it. That was just the truth. In Lydia's absence he shrank from the contemplation of such a step. One objection after another occurred to him.

And Dolly, with her luminous grey eyes, and little golden brown head, her stately carriage, like that of a young lady, and sweet, smiling lips, what a wife she would make to a man! Betwixt him and her, sympathy existed—that closest and subtlest of all bonds. He quailed before Lydia's passionate ardour. He was one of those men who dislike exaggerated emotions. They disturbed and revolted him, calling forth his baser nature into play; whereas, Dolly's little and gentle dignity produced a feeling of superiority on her part, which, strange to say, possessed no irritating effect. The qualities lacking in his character seemed to find their complement in hers. If his were the grace, the brightness, the winning charm, she owned the stability and moral strength. He did not tell himself this in actual words, but he was conscious of it all the same. It would ensure his welfare; he would be guided and controlled—even scolded by such a woman. Dear little Dolly! Once married, she could do what

had waited for him with him—mould him into any shape she pleased. and who had heard felt certain they were formed for one another. But what was the good of that unless it were possible to get rid of a month after the time?

Get rid of Lydia! His heart gave a great bound at the notion. Why not? It would be difficult, no doubt, but not wholly impossible. Courage and determination might effect his ardently-desired deliverance. He was not at all in the hunting field. He did not mind leading the way over a big fence, even with the certainty of a fall on the other side. When under fire in Burmah he had not shown the white feather; neither did he quail when the wounded woman on her part, he considered which he had walked up on foot through a dense jungle, charged right home and almost sent him to another and a better world.

Why should he fear this woman, with her dark brows, her sparkling eyes, and fiery love? Was he a coward? Yes, as far as she was concerned. Standing there that night under the dark, rolling heavens, looking up into the unfathomable vault of immensity, with the blue glancing stars above him, and the green sleeping earth at his feet, he admitted the fact. A coward! Afraid of a woman—a weak woman, infinitely his inferior in strength.

Oh! the shame of it, the shame of it! He blushed in the darkness. How good the darkness was to hide those miserable blushes, which, even when he was quite alone, made his manhood seem like a thing of naught. Lydia's passions were stronger than his. They gave her an ascendancy over him. He only escaped from their influence when absent. She enchained and mesmerized him to such an extent that, in any conflict or warring of wills, he realised how surely he would succumb before her superior mental force.

Call him if you like. Call him weak, vacillating, despicable. He called himself all these names, for he was fully conscious of his shortcomings, and did not attempt to disguise them; therein lay the sting. To the world he appeared a polished and gifted gentleman, full of fine qualities, and with a career of distinction before him; but in his heart of hearts he was a miserable man, battling feebly and wearily against the instincts implanted within him at birth.

Poor Beau ! Are not many of us similarly situated ? I we not fight with some fatal weakness, some inherent defect of which we are conscious but cannot subdue. He had much good in him, was so kindly and attractive, and meant so well.

It was not his fault that nature, whilst endowing him with great physical courage, had not bestowed an equal amount of moral fortitude. He was—what he was. He did not make himself. Numerous ancestors were answerable for his qualities and his defects. Had he possessed a better heart, or an evil disposition, he could not have suffered so keenly in loving one woman, and being bound to another.

Egotism we all have, and—he was masculine.

But listen to what Carlyle says, ye who are ever ready to judge your fellow-creatures, and who have no sympathy with human weakness and infirmity.

“Faults ! The greatest of faults, I should say, is to be conscious of none !” And again—“What are Faults ? Struggle often baffled, sore baffled, down as into entire wreck, yet a struggle never ended ; ever, with tears, repentance, true unconquerable purpose begun anew. Poor human nature ! Is not a man’s walking in truth, always that a succession of falls ! Man can do no other. In this weak element of a life, he has to struggle onwards, now fallen deep abased ; and ever, with tears, repentance, with bleeding heart, he has to rise again, struggle again !”

Noble words ! written by a noble man who, with the divine impress of genius stamped strong upon him, writes of heroes as a hero. He, too, had faults,—even the Michael Angelo of literature, with his rolling, thunderous words, and great, grand thoughts that lifted him far above the common herd.

Does not such a passage — one out of many similar composition — teach us how far better it is to help than to criticise, to pity than to blame.

Poor human nature ! Therein lies the pith and kernel of the whole thing.

All are weak, erring, sinful.

To what purpose we were created so, God only knows, but certain it is, that in judging each other, we presume to judge Him.

CHAPTER XI.

BEAU BRINGS DOWN THE HOUSE.

UNTIL the thirtieth of the month, the days not taken up by fox-hunting were devoted to practising. Surely never did a duet require going over so many times as did the one which Beau and Dolly had arranged to sing together at the Woodford village concert.

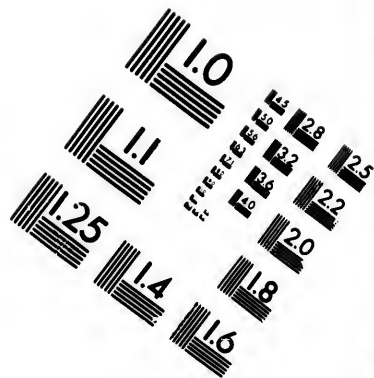
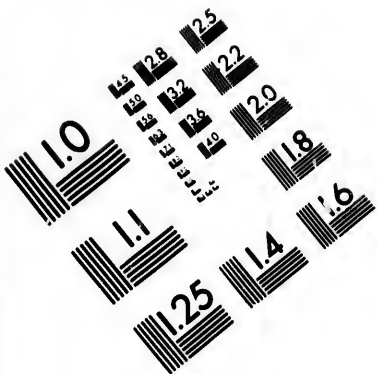
Dolly's voice was as charming as herself, not strong, but of fine *timbre*, and it had been extremely well cultivated by Italian masters of the first rank. Of music proper she knew a great deal more than Beau, and the artful young man, on discovering this, pretended that he could not get on at all if left to his own devices, and stoutly maintained that he would be certain to break down when the eventful night arrived, unless his fair preceptress consented to give him frequent lessons.

What could Dolly do but comply, especially when no good reason existed for saying no?

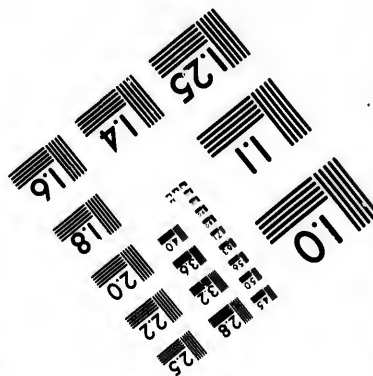
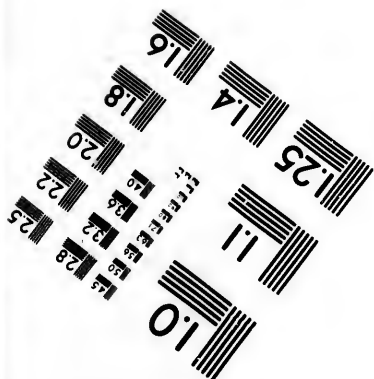
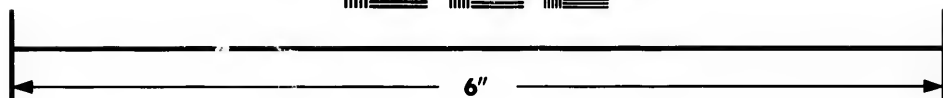
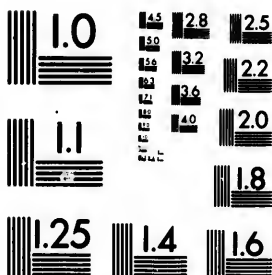
Moreover, her heart was set on this particular concert proving a success. It was the first thing of the sort she had undertaken, and in her zeal she had even done violence to her feelings, and gone about trying to dispose of tickets to her friends and acquaintances. Unconsciously, too, she was bent on Beau creating a favourable impression, and appearing to full advantage. If he were not to do himself justice on the auspicious occasion, she should be infinitely vexed, more particularly if he failed through any want of pains on her part. Yet for one duet to require so much study seemed a little surprising, especially as he possessed an excellent ear, and learned the actual notes very quickly; but as he declared much practice was absolutely essential to an efficient performance, Dolly acquiesced.

Consequently, when Captain Dornay walked over to Woodford Chase regularly twice a week, if not oftener, she expressed no surprise, and always greeted him with a cordial welcome. To tell the truth, she was right glad to see him,





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and before many days had gone past began to find herself looking forward to the lessons with a strange eagerness. Indeed, it would have been hard to say which of the two young people enjoyed them the most. Had Dolly not been confined to the house, it is just possible that Beau's good looks and pleasant manners might have failed to produce as great an effect upon her as they did; but the injury to her foot still kept her within doors, and prevented her indulging in her favourite pastime of hunting. Nevertheless, want of fresh air and exercise did not altogether account for the remarkable pleasure she took in the handsome hussar's society; nor was she able to give any satisfactory reason why she so greatly preferred it to that of her cousin Harry, who was the best and dearest creature in the world, but not interesting like his friend. It certainly seemed very ungrateful to entertain this partiality for the company of a comparative stranger, but she did, there was no doubt about the matter. Harry's footstep in the hall did not make her pulses throb one iota quicker than their wont, neither did her heart beat distressfully at the sound of his voice. She could look him straight in the face without blushing, and his eyes failed to send a thrill of delight through her frame. No; he was a good, excellent creature, but nothing more, whereas Captain Dornay—well! he was just Harry's opposite in every way, except that she felt he also was good, and even more excellent than his superior officer.

To do Dolly justice, she tried her utmost to confine the lessons to their legitimate channel, but it was by no means easy; for her pupil, *as a pupil*, was not always all that could be desired. His worst fault consisted in inattention and a rooted aversion to serious study. She would play the introduction to their duet a dozen times over with the praiseworthy intention of reminding him that he had come there to sing not talk, but such delicate hints were quite thrown away. He displayed little or no taste for musical instruction, but exhibited a distinct preference for sentimental whispering.

Dolly felt this to be very wrong. But she did not like to appear too strict, and thought it wiser not to display her displeasure by making a fuss. At least, so she told herself, and perhaps she believed it, for in the preliminary stages of love, people are capable of very wonderful self-deception.

After the first week, it came to seem quite natural that Captain Dornay should spend a considerable portion of his time in her boudoir, and make love to its mistress in his own irresistible fashion. She liked it. She knew, in her innermost consciousness, when the time arrived for him to ask her to be his wife, what answer she should give. A different answer from any vouchsafed to her other wooers.

One day this impetuous young man startled her tremendously by saying :

"Do you think you could ever bring yourself to marry a poor soldier, Miss Dalrymple?"

Oh, how her pulses throbbed. She thought the crucial moment was at hand, and felt almost sorry it should come thus early. For she was so happy, so very, *very* happy, and wished for no change in their relations at present. It seemed impossible that the future could have in store any much greater bliss. Love was still young with them both, and in the first delicious stage, when each day adds to its growing ecstasy, and words are not wanted to heighten the tremulous consciousness from whose shy anticipations certainty takes away as much as it gives. To love, and to feel oneself loved in return, is indeed enough for most women. They need not possession, as do men. The ideal contents them better than the reality very often.

Dolly was too much agitated by this unexpected question to make any immediate reply. Beau stood over her, and looked at her with a wistful expression which spoke volumes. She turned away her sweet, blushing face, and after a long pause, said almost inaudibly :

"Yes, I could marry a poor man if I cared for him."

"What! and leave all the riches to which you are accustomed? He would have to be a bold fellow to ask you."

"Riches do not always mean happiness. I know I have been luxuriously brought up, but——" and she kept her pretty bronze head obstinately averted, "it is all so different when you care for a person."

"God bless you, darling," murmured Beau under his breath; but though he spoke softly, she overheard the words, and they filled her whole being with secret rapture. Nevertheless, she felt afraid of what his next speech might be, and it was a real relief when he opened the piano, and said, with a sudden change to his ordinary tone :

"Come, shall we try our duet over?"

Dolly's voice soared very high and clear that afternoon. Its pure, birdlike notes showered forth in passionate joy—trill after trill of melody. Even Beau, who had now heard her sing pretty frequently, was fairly amazed. She attacked each roulade in turn with a lightness and precision which would have done credit to any professional. Her heart sang; that was the reason. It only asked for some method of expressing its great gladness.

"Bravo!" he exclaimed. "If you sing like that on the thirtieth you will bring the house down, and La Signorina Dalrympino will create quite a sensation."

"Not when you are there to eclipse her," answered the girl, with a soft light in her grey eyes. "The public are tolerably discerning as a rule, and know how to appreciate good music, including comic songs, when they get the chance. See how you delighted papa the other evening."

"Others may be harder to please," said Beau modestly.

"No, I think not. Papa's criticisms are generally more or less correct. He knows what takes, even although he does not profess to have had much of a musical education."

After this fashion did the lessons progress, greatly to the satisfaction of both pupil and teacher.

Harry Grimshaw got quite cross over the concert. He heard of nothing else, and vowed that it was a "deuced bore," since it deprived him so frequently of his friend's society; whilst on one occasion, to his unutterable amazement, Beau actually gave up a day's hunting in order to go over to Woodford Chase, and pretended that he had nothing to ride. Poor Harry could not help feeling aggrieved. In spite of the matrimonial plans he had formed for Beau, he devoutly hoped that the young gentleman would soon be restored to his senses. To tell the truth, he had not bargained for his catching the love-fever quite so fiercely and quickly, and perhaps was just a little, wee bit jealous at discovering how slight a hold he retained on Beau's affections in comparison with Dolly.

At last the night of the concert arrived, to Harry's great relief, for, when it was over, he looked forward to a lucid interval. At any rate, there could be no further excuse for those abominable practisings which took up so much of

Beau's time, and appeared to occupy his entire thoughts to the exclusion of everything else. Sir Hector gave a large dinner party prior to the entertainment, and a huge covered omnibus conveyed the assembled company from the hospitable doors to the village Institute, where the concert was to take place. It was an unusually fine room, having been built by the baronet in seasons of prosperity, and capable of containing over five hundred people. Every seat was occupied, and even the passages were blocked by sturdy workmen, who would have stood all night rather than miss an opportunity of hearing "Miss Dolly" sing one or two of their favourite songs. The company were somewhat mixed; for whilst the back benches were devoted to the villagers and their families, the front rows were occupied by some very smart country people, who, partly out of good nature, partly out of curiosity, had paid five shillings a-piece for their tickets.

"A great bore, my dear," said old Lady Fuzziwig to her nearest neighbour. "But what can you do when you're asked? The restoration of Woodford Church has nothing on earth to do with me, only it's so difficult to say no with a good grace, and the girl," meaning Dolly, "is a nice little thing in her way. Rather too fresh and impulsive, perhaps, and given to taking up every charity without much rhyme or reason, but still, on the whole, a nice little thing. Yes," nodding her old head with its curly yellow wig, "quite a nice little thing. It's a wonder she does not marry, for I'm told she has lots of proposals."

Lady Fuzziwig had been a great beauty in her day, and was a kindly, gossipy, worldly old woman, who occupied a very prominent position in the county as a leader of fashion.

All the forenoon, Dolly, assisted by Miss Browning, the clergyman's daughter, had been hard at work decorating the room, and the stage or platform did her great credit. It was charmingly arranged with crimson draperies, Japanese fans, strings of tiny coloured lanterns, and leathery palms, whose fresh, green fronds contrasted pleasantly with their bright back-ground of red cloth. Altogether, the effect was exceedingly good, and predisposed the more fashionable portion of the audience in favour of what was to follow.

The programme opened with a glee, sung by the village

choir, and a recitation given by a hired professional, who rolled his eyes, and pronounced his words admirably, but whose choice of a piece was not felicitous. It was dull, and very long; and both faults were inexcusable. The audience were bored, and showed the fact by subdued murmurings. Then came one of Beau's negro melodies. Lady Fuzziwig bent her flaxen head graciously when she saw a tall well-proportioned young man, evidently a gentleman, step forward.

Beau was attired in a very long tail-coat of blue cloth, an abnormally high collar, baggy chintz trousers of a bright, flowery pattern, a battered chimney-pot perched on one side, and a black curly wig, whilst, to complete all, he had darkened his face with some sort of preparation sold for the purpose.

Dolly was dreadfully nervous, though not so much for herself as for him. If he were to fail, she should never get over it; for somehow, before these stiff, strait-laced county folk, who were as censorious as they were narrow-minded, she felt as if her lover was being put on his trial.

"What's the matter with you?" whispered Beau, as he stood tuning his banjo, preparatory to making a start. "You are positively trembling."

"I don't know. I'm so horribly afraid things won't go off well. They've begun badly as it is, and the audience seem inclined to be critical. One never quite knows what will please them."

"Never fear," he answered confidently. "We'll soon alter all that. They like to be amused, not bored."

Although the words might sound conceited, Beau had performed in public too often not to know, pretty well, the effect which his comic songs generally produced. In India, in Ireland, wherever he had been quartered, they had always met with an enthusiastic reception, so that he did not share Dolly's fears. To-night proved no exception to the rule. After the first verse, his listeners became convulsed with laughter, and when he ended up with a breakdown and a double shuffle, flying his long coat-tails about in a fashion peculiarly his own, cries of "Bravo, bravo!" "Encore, encore!" filled the room on every side. His success was enormous. Even old Lady Fuzziwig clapped so loudly that she split her kid gloves. True, they were rather tight, and in spite of their twelve buttons, had only

cost one shilling and elevenpence halfpenny, at Powell and Frame's summer sale.

"Dornay, Dornay," she whispered to her companion, "I wonder whether he belongs to Lord Dummyshire's family. They're all clever, those boys, but this young man is something quite out of the way. I must make Sir Hector introduce him, for I understand he is a *protégé* of his."

Three times was Beau called for, and three times had he to tack on another verse, each one more successful than the last. When at length he was allowed to make his exit, the best reward was still in store for him, for Dolly came up with both hands outstretched, her charming face all flushed and beaming with joy, and cried:

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Oh! I am so glad. It really was too idiotic of me, but I had a kind of nervous dread that they might not appreciate your talents as they ought."

He laughed. Her speech was sweet incense to him. It betrayed so much that the speaker thought concealed. But he could read between the lines, and a glow of triumph pervaded all his frame.

"What do I care for the good opinion of the multitude, so long as I am fortunate enough to secure yours? If *you* are pleased, Miss Dalrymple, that is enough. I ask for no other recompense."

She only smiled up into his face by way of an answer; but he wanted none. That look of pure, girlish tenderness sent a thrill to the innermost depths of his being.

Beau proved the lion of the concert. Dolly's charming rendering of "Home sweet Home," "Robin Gray," and the duet, was loudly applauded; but the comic songs carried all before them. The common men stood up and waved their handkerchiefs in wild delight, and huzzaed like mad when one or two delicate allusions, sympathetic to their political convictions, were artfully introduced.

When the proceedings came to an end, a graceful speech was made by Sir Hector, thanking his talented young friend, Captain Dornay, for the very valuable aid he had rendered to their Woodford Restoration Concert. Beau modestly bowed his acknowledgments, and in a few simple, but well-chosen words, stated that the company were entirely indebted for their evening's amusement to Miss Dalrymple.

Lady Fuzziwig, who now saw him divested of his paint

and powder, and who, although nearly seventy years of age, still retained a decided partiality for good-looking men, said to Dolly in a loud aside, after first having surveyed him critically through her gold-rimmed eye-glass :

"But he is charming, quite charming. Where does he come from? And why don't I know him, my dear?"

"Take care, or he will hear," answered blushing Dolly.

"It won't matter if he does. Nobody ever takes offence at hearing themselves praised. Hulloo! what's made you turn so red all of a sudden? Child, child!" and she wagged her wrinkled forefinger with playful archness. "Don't attempt to deceive me. You're in love with this handsome soldier."

"Oh! Lady Fuzziwig, please—please be quiet," answered the girl, in an agony of shame.

Nevertheless, she was glad that Lady Fuzziwig should recognise Beau's merits. She, a woman of the world, knew a king amongst men—a hero, a Paladin when she saw him. Whatever her faults, she was no fool.

"And how could I have been so silly as to feel afraid for him?" thought Dolly. "Just as if he is not certain to shine wherever he is. What matters his being poor? I am glad of it; he would have too much otherwise. The girl who marries him may count herself rich. As for me, I am not half good enough for him. That is the only thing that makes me unhappy; he is so far, far above me."

She did not speak her thoughts; they would have been much too unmaidenly and immodest for utterance; but she looked at him, and her shining eyes revealed her secret, at all events to the principal person concerned in it.

Beau also was very happy to-night. For the time being he resolutely put away all recollection of Lydia, and yielded himself up to enjoyment of the present.

Emotion is curiously contagious. He knew almost as well as if Dolly had told him, that her nervousness had been entirely on his account, and he loved her all the better for it. Throughout the evening, a subtle, sympathetic current had existed between them, which now seemed to have reached its culminating point. This, come what might, was a real red letter day in his life, never to be forgotten. Until to-night, although he had suspected it, he had not been absolutely certain that she cared for him as he cared for her. Every consideration paled before

seventy years of good-looking men, having surveyed e-glass :

"Where does he, my dear?"

"Blushing Dolly. Never takes offence what's made you child!" and she playful archness. In love with this

"Be quiet," answered

ly Fuzziwig should of the world, knew when she saw him.

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the joyful intoxication of this knowledge. He would see Lydia, and confess the whole truth—tell her that he was madly in love, and must break off his engagement.

Dolly! Dolly! Dolly! His brain was alive with her image; he could think of nothing else. As he handed her into the carriage, he said regretfully :

"And so our concert is over, worse luck! No more practisings on happy afternoons in your boudoir for me, I suppose?" And his eyes devoured her face.

There was no one within earshot. Her father at that moment was hunting for Lady Fuzziwig's footman, and Harry had gone in search of the fly chartered to convey him and Beau back to Fieldborough; for the latter young gentleman was not in a condition to attend to such trivial matters.

Only the gleaming stars, and the bright moon, and the tall, shadowy elms standing black and straight against the evening sky, could see. A wave of love flooded her heart. She put out her little hand, and letting it rest on his coat sleeve for just one second, murmured timidly :

"Why not?"

Then suddenly, as she saw her father advancing, a crimson glow spread over her fair, delicate face, and without another word she shrank away into the darkest corner of the carriage. What could Captain Dornay think of her? Had she been terribly forward and indecorous? Was it such a very, very outrageous thing for a girl to consciously encourage a man with whom she was desperately in love, and whose attentions alone emboldened her to show it?

That was a terribly perplexing question, and her ears tingled and her cheeks burnt all the way home. Dear little Dolly! What it is to be pure and innocent! She could hardly believe but that she had done wrong, and allowed her feelings to overcome her modesty. The thought rendered her miserable. For supposing she were to suffer in his estimation? Men never liked girls who made up to them.

CHAPTER XII.

A GOOD RUN ON A FROSTY DAY.

A FORTNIGHT passed away without any particular event taking place, except that every day Beau and Dolly became more engrossed in each other. Hunting progressed merrily. The Fieldborough began their season well, and showed astonishingly good sport, considering the number of foxes, the blindness of the country, and the time of year. Our friends in Prince's Street were delighted, and fortunately for Beau he no longer had to forsake the chase, in order to contrive opportunities of seeing his lady-love. Dolly had now quite recovered from her recent accident, and she and Sir Hector hunted regularly three times a week.

The girl rode very straight and well, much harder, indeed than did her father. When hounds ran, there was no stopping her, so that she and Beau were frequently together, and discovered that, besides music, they had at least one taste in common. Both were equally fond of sport, he in his masculine line, she in her feminine fashion; for Dolly never could be content to see the poor fox killed, and however well she was upon the finish, always turned away whilst the final obsequies were being performed.

People began to couple their names together, and to his mysterious that Miss Dalrymple, the great heiress, who, for several consecutive seasons, had refused all overtures made her by the nobler sex, had at length succumbed to the hands of some hussar. They wished him well, for even in this short space of time Beau, by his gallant riding and pleasant manners, had won all hearts.

Matters stood thus, when one morning towards the end of November, Beau and Harry were disgusted, on waking up to find it had frozen so hard during the night, that it was a very moot point whether hounds would go out or not. The puddles were covered with ice, and the roads were exceedingly slippery. Major Grimshaw had been somewhat

unfortunate of late, and two out of his small stud of three horses were on the sick list. He therefore affirmed that it was perfect folly to think of hunting, and stated his intention of running up to town, trying to persuade Beau to do likewise. But his comrade, for reasons we know, found the country so much more attractive than the metropolis that he decided to remain and ride to the meet, promising, however, to join Harry on the following forenoon should the frost increase in severity. He, however, took an optimistic view of the weather, and declared a thaw would shortly set in.

The truth was, as long as Dolly stayed at Woodford Chase, and he could see her three or four times a week, he experienced no desire to participate in any other form of dissipation, and could not bear to leave Fieldborough, even for four-and-twenty hours. Yet each day he told himself that he was bound to come to some explanation with Lydia. He was playing a double part, and things could not go on as they were. But, curiously enough, the more he felt the necessity for a decisive interview, the more did he shrink from taking any steps towards seeking it. He had a man's horror of scenes, and to tell the woman who wanted to marry him, and who held him bound by a foolish, boyish promise, that he had neither the wish nor the intention of fulfilling it was not exactly pleasant. It seemed easy enough to knock off his chains when in Dolly's presence, but this desirable result was not to be accomplished without a good hard rap, as he fully realised directly he left the girl's side. Then his difficulties confronted him like an ugly nightmare, from which there was no escaping. Between Lydia on the one hand, and Dolly on the other, he felt like a fly between a pair of scissors, momentarily expecting some sharp and horrible nip. According to his usual practice, he deferred the evil day, determining to avoid it as long as possible. Had he possessed a less sensitive disposition, he would have been happy, but, unfortunately for him, his conscience was tender, and left him no peace. He did not read one of Lydia's letters without that small inward monitor giving him a prick. Nevertheless he sent back short replies, full of transparent excuses and evasive promises, whose unsubstantiality was patent even to himself. His sole desire was to put away the past, with all its unpleasant memories, and so become white-washed, and start afresh in the present. Many men think to do likewise. The old *roué* who offers his hand to some

beautiful, unsullied young creature of eighteen, firmly believes that his bad, dissipated life can be wiped clean as easily as a slate, simply because he wishes it. Beau was not *roué*, but he had got into a sad scrape, and did not see his way out of it.

We do not say that he acted either wisely or well at this period of his career, but he acted in accordance with the instincts of his facile and easy-going nature. Had he been born with the strong, resolute will of a Cromwell, the inflexible purpose of a Napoleon, no doubt he might have done differently, but past generations of ancestors have brought him into the world a genial, charming, fascinating fellow, with a weakness for being liked, instead of moulding him in a cast of iron. They were responsible for the handiwork, not the outward structure of flesh and bone called Beau Dornay, in which their qualities and defects were stored. He was as much a mechanical instrument as the toy doll that lisps out papa and mamma on the pulling of a string. It was less trouble to float with the stream than to swim against it, even although, by employing a vigorous effort, the bank might be sooner reached. But effort—strong effort—how many of us are capable of making it. To nerve ourselves to do an unpleasant thing against our inclinations, requires such a grim, determined struggle, that we would rather procrastinate until the moment has passed and events compel us to act, whether we like it or not. Besides, inertia saves trouble; and trouble counts for much in this world.

Beau saw Harry depart, and then he told himself about the twentieth time, that if a frost was really coming bad enough to stop hunting, he should *have* to go and see Lydia. It would be impossible to invent an excuse, to-day—well! he would enjoy to-day whilst he got the chance. If the worst came to the worst, and hounds did not meet, Woodford Chase was not very far off, and Hector and Dolly were certain to welcome him whenever he put in an appearance.

Consequently he mounted his horse, and arrived at the rendezvous about half-past eleven, feeling quite jubilant when he found a small but select gathering already congregated, who greeted him with the reassuring intelligence that a messenger had been sent on from the kennels to say that the hounds would turn up at a quarter to twelve.

Beau pitied Harry for having so hastily decided to leave Fieldborough. "The old silly."

To still further improve matters, the sun suddenly broke out from behind a bank of pale grey cloud, which it quickly dispersed. It shone so brightly, that before long the silvery rime decorating the fields could everywhere be seen twinkling like so many gems, and dissolving into glistening moisture, except just on the shady side of the hedges. The going might be bad, dangerous even in places, but still no real cause existed why hounds should not hunt.

This was the unanimous opinion of all those present, nor did it prove incorrect. Punctually at the appointed time, the hounds and hunt servants arrived, followed shortly afterwards by Lord de la Fobbe and a considerable contingent, amongst whose ranks Beau, to his great joy, spied Sir Hector and Dolly. The latter looked unusually fresh and pretty, for the frosty air, combined with a brisk trot to covert, had brought a beautiful pink colour to her cheeks, which recalled the delicate bloom of a wild rose.

Beau had already made acquaintance with his horses, and had pretty well ascertained their merits and demerits. To-day he happened to be mounted on the one he liked least—a somewhat underbred grey mare, of a sluggish disposition, who required a disagreeable amount of rousing at her fences. It is always much easier to ride a free than an indolent animal, added to which constitutional defect, the mare in question was young, and by no means an experienced huntress. She did not atone by cunning for what she wanted in courage, and had a particularly nasty habit of stopping suddenly in the last stride, and when persuaded to jump, landing very nearly where she took off. In short, she did not inspire confidence; but she had a good man on her back, and already showed symptoms of improvement. Although Beau knew she would never prove quite to his mind, not being quick or sharp enough to come up to his notions of a trustworthy hunter, he yet hoped to sell her at a profit when the season came to an end, seeing that she was sound in wind and limb, and up to a considerable amount of weight.

A few minutes after twelve, hounds were trotted off to draw Larkton Holt, about three miles distant. The going, by this time, although hard and slippery in places, had now very much improved, and, on the whole, was fairly good

Moreover, the sharp, keen air proclaimed a scent. The rate, expectation ran high. The very fact of half-comrades being absent, caused those present to sport.

"Have you ever noticed how frequently hounds run just before a frost?" remarked Sir Hector to Beau as usual, was not very far away. "Their noses are as any barometer. You can always tell by them which glass is rising."

"I do hope we shall have some fun to-day," answered Beau. "How I shall crow over Harry."

"Ah, Harry always was rather a half-hearted sportsman. It's the worst fault I have to find with him; but take my advice, Captain Dornay, and ride carefully, if for the occasion only. You young fellows go so desperately fast nowadays; but really it's tempting Providence to go more than you can help, with the ground in its present condition. The sun has moistened it just enough to make it greasy."

"Thanks, Sir Hector. I'll bear your advice in mind, and intend to be most discreet to-day, and to avoid all unnecessary obstacles, if not for my own sake, at all events for my gee's."

Beau spoke with the prudence common to hard riders, whilst hounds are jogging quietly along the road, which vanishes immediately they give tongue. It is not so easy to exercise caution then.

His good resolutions were clean forgotten five minutes later, when a simultaneous outburst from the eagerness proclaimed the joyous fact that reynard was at home, and disturbed in his haunts.

There were days when it was comparatively safe for Master Pug to linger among the snug gorse of the Holt, but not on this one. Hounds raged around like so many demons, and, defying thorns, forced their sleek bodies through the prickly undergrowth, and blood-stained sterns above it. Whichever way he turned and twisted, they seemed to take up the fresh, hot, and with ravenous zest. A very few seconds sufficed to convince him conclusively that skulking in covert meant certain capture.

To his heels, therefore, did this brave fox take flight, meaning to make a gallant bid for his life. He was not grown, but small and nimble, coming of a wild hound

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and he travelled at such a rate that before the mortal
 enemies in his rear could fairly pick up the line, he had
 placed a large hundred acre field between them. And now
 the frosty air rang with music that came booming from
 deep canine throats, whilst the huntsman's blast, clear and
 melodious, informed the field that their prey was a-foot.

A few minutes ago there had been plenty of people who,
 like Beau, declared they did not mean to jump. Now
 none, save the habitual shirkers, appeared to remember
 their resolves. The pace, which was simply tremendous,
 soon swept away all considerations of danger. You had
 just to make up your mind, and that without loss of time,
 whether you intended to follow hounds, or whether you
 did not; and if so, there was no shilly-shallying, but you
 were obliged to harden your heart, and jump every fence
 as it came in your stride.

It was a regular steeplechase, intensely exhilarating, and
 gloriously exciting. Black care and brooding anxiety put
 on the white wings of temporary oblivion, and flew away,
 banished for the time being by keen sensations of physical
 enjoyment. Alas! that those sensations are fleeting, and
 do not endure; but, nevertheless, they are good to re-
 member.

It is wonderful too, what horses will do when their blood
 is up. They seem to like the pace quite as much, if not
 better, than their riders—that is, as long as wind holds. At
 all events, they never go so well, nor fence so perfectly, as
 when hounds run really hard. They catch the enthusiasm,
 and strain every nerve. Nine times out of ten, the slow,
 pottering runs, not the fast ones, are those productive
 of most grief. Horses and riders also, then look and
 hesitate. It is far better for both not to have time to think.
 Thinking nearly always means indecision, and indecision
 is fatal.

If the pursuers were few in number to-day, to do them
 justice, their hearts were in the right place. They were a
 little band; and after the first fence, hard ground,
 stony forelegs, and slippery roads were equally forgotten.
 A scent there was as had not been seen for seasons.
 Hounds simply flew, running mute and hard, with heads
 carried high, and straight, extended sterns. Over the
 green pastures they glided like a streak of silver
 gleaming in the sunlight, and disappearing almost as soon

as seen. Several hundred yards separated them from the foremost horsemen, who had to ride all they knew to keep them in sight. The huntsman, who was mounted on a powerful blood bay, cut out the work. Beau, a little to the right, was almost level with him. The light going favoured his mare, but she was outpaced. He had to urge her to her topmost speed, and felt that a very few more minutes would settle her pretensions.

Oh! the odiousness of such knowledge, when you have got a start and a place in a good run, and are forced little by little to sink to the rear, owing to the slowness of your steed! How you anathematize the poor animal sobbing and toiling beneath you, in spite of the brutality of such conduct. Disappointment so severe *must* vent itself on some object. The best-tempered man in the world feels an inclination to make use of forcible language.

Close behind Beau, although he was not conscious of his proximity, came Dolly, followed by a cluster of some dozen or fifteen hard-riding men. The rest of the field were nowhere. Dolly's brilliant, brown hunter flew each fence in succession with marvellous ease and dexterity. He was a clean thoroughbred, decidedly over her weight, and he had the advantage of being left pretty well to his own devices. Seldom, indeed, did he give his mistress a fall, and the confidence between the pair was perfect. Each knew the nicety of the other's capabilities—a great source of comic and success.

Forward, ever forward, raced the fox, setting his mare straight for a very stiff line of country, where unyielding binders and great yawning ditches were the rule. Still, good horses got over them, though twice Beau's mare dropped her hind legs badly, and landed right on her heels. But he was a very powerful rider, with an uncommonly firm seat, and on each occasion managed to recover her, thus averting a roll. At every fresh obstacle, however, he expected a fall, and kept the point of his toes firmly balanced in the stirrups. But he was losing ground. He who always took a delight in charging the fences first, had his pride of place wrested from him. His mare was nearly beaten, and it would require the most careful nursing to enable her to get to the end of the run, even if it lasted a very few minutes longer. He was in a measure consoled for dropping a few yards to the rear, by find-

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himself close to Dolly—Dolly, with her sweet, flushed face, sparkling eyes, and graceful figure.

"How well you have been going," she exclaimed, for she had got to that stage when she admired his every action. "I thought we were never to see your face again."

"It will be a case of the tables turned very soon," he said. "My brute is regularly cooked."

"Is she, poor thing? Oh! Captain Dornay, do pull up. People get such dreadful bad falls when they will go on riding a beaten horse. What can one run more or less signify in comparison with breaking bones?"

"It does not do to dwell on the danger, Miss Dalrymple. You would be the first to think me a poor sportsman if I did. Ha! I believe they're checking. Thank goodness, as far as my mare is concerned."

As he spoke, hounds, for the first time for five and twenty minutes, threw up their heads close to a great, black bullfinch, with a wide ditch on the far side, and an oxer in addition.

Gladly the sobbing horses came to a halt. They had reached the point when, with many, pleasure was fast merging into pain. A flock of sheep had foiled the line, and for a few seconds the pack, who were a bit blown by the pace they had travelled, scattered and divided, drooping their haughty noses to the ground. Not for long, however. The scent was too good to admit of prolonged indecision. One by one they bored their way through the bullfinch, and recovered the line. The pursuers hesitated. It was not a very encouraging-looking place, and the huntsman trotted off to find a weaker one that might be doubled. He knew the fence of old, and remembered the exact spot, a few yards to the right, where it was comparatively easy. But Beau the daring, Beau the brave—shall we say it? Beau the foolhardy, in spite of the weary animal he bestrode, charged the bullfinch as gallantly as if he were mounted on the very finest hunter that ever looked through a bridle. With what result? Why, with the result that might have been expected.

The mare made a very indifferent bound, and caught the oxer hard with both toes, her hind legs landing with a terrific crash in the midst of the thorns. Then she turned a complete somersault, and lay like a dead thing on the top of her rider. . . .

For some little time afterwards, Beau entertained no recollection of what happened. The first thing he could remember was finding himself supported by a couple of good-natured farmers, whilst a third poured a liberal draught of brandy down his throat. The warm liqueur caused the fog to clear that somehow had gathered over his senses. Upon which he perceived a lovable feminine face, full of concern and undisguised anxiety, looking fixedly down at him.

"Ah!" cried Dolly, for it was she, "how glad I am to see you open your eyes. Are you feeling any better?"

He made an effort. Man-like, he felt ashamed of his weakness, and could not bear to own to it.

"Better? Yes. I—I'm all right. There's nothing the matter with me. A bit of a spill, that's all."

"Oh, Captain Dornay, are you quite sure?"

"Yes, quite. I'll get on please, my good friends, addressing the farmers, "hounds will slip us if we don't look sharp."

"Lord bless you, sir," answered a stout, hale man. "They're miles away by this time. They swept over the brow of yon hill at least ten minutes ago. You've been insensible."

"You don't say so. Have I lain here like a log all the time?"

"Yes," said Dolly compassionately. "I think you must have had slight concussion, for you fell right on the crown of your head. Your hat is battered to pieces."

"I hope you did not lose the run on my account?"

"Oh, the run is nothing. I did not care to continue after I saw you fall. I was so frightened, so dreadfully afraid that you were badly hurt, and might never speak again." And she shuddered.

He stretched out his hand, and laid it on her horse's glossy neck. He was deeply affected by her evident concern.

"Dolly," he said, in a low voice, for the first time calling her by her Christian name. "If anything had happened to me, should you—should you have minded?"

Her under lip began to quiver. She glanced at him hastily, then withdrew her eyes so that he should not see the moisture that sprang to them.

"You know that I should," she said passionately; then

reddening, kept silent. Her heart was too full for further speech, and to tell the truth, so also was his. Both realised that their intimacy was rapidly reaching a point when it could not well be maintained on precisely the same footing as heretofore. The time was coming for him to speak, and for her to answer.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TIGRESS ROUSED.

WHILST Beau was thus disporting himself in the shires, and earning honours and distinction on the horses purchased with Lydia Stapleton's money, that lady passed her days in a very miserable and unsatisfactory manner. She derived but little comfort from the laconic epistles, received at rare intervals, in answer to her own frequent and voluminous communications. Beau's letters were disappointingly short, cold in tone, and gave no information whatever as to his doings. She did not care to hear how hounds found at such and such a place, and had a glorious twenty minutes, or a grand hunting run of over an hour. What she wanted was something to still the ever-growing pain at her heart, and that she did not get. The weeks went by slowly—wearisomely; each one reducing her stock of hope, and adding to the feeling of utter despair gradually creeping up within her. Hunting did not occupy *all* his time. He might so easily have come to town had he chosen. Ah! *had he chosen.* There lay the sting that pierced to the innermost depths of her being, and which left a festering sore behind. Once upon a time there would have been no occasion to beg him to visit her; but that time was over. Alas! alas! she bitterly repented now, the magnanimous spirit which had made her put off their marriage so long in order to be able to bestow upon him a goodly dowry. Women were fools who trusted to the fidelity of men. They were creatures of passion—nothing more. If you did not strike when the iron was hot, then your chance was gone for ever. She saw, when it was too late, how terribly she had managed matters. Her eyes were opened to her own folly, but the past could never be recalled. Beau was weary of her. She sought to fight against the hateful conviction,

but in vain. Like an invidious poison, its effects made themselves felt with cruel, relentless strength, feeding on the very sap of life. For her whole soul was wrapt up in this man. She loved him with a love so intense that it was almost akin to ferocity. To lose him appeared worse than death. And yet, such was the prospect that stared her in the face. But to live idly on in town, eating her great, wild heart out with suspense, feeling him day by day slip farther and farther away from her, was more than this woman could endure. She possessed not the feminine virtues of meekness and patience. She would not yield without a struggle—ay, and a bitter one. Her nature was stronger than his. Whenever they were together, she could always exercise influence over him. Even at their last meeting, when, against his will, as it were, he had accepted her money, she knew that the old power and ascendancy remained. It was this absence that undid her. Let him only come to town, and she would fear nothing. Gradually, imperceptibly, she could bring him back to his allegiance. What was keeping him? That puzzled her sorely. Her feminine instinct told her there must be some reason other than the hunting. In one of his letters, he had distinctly mentioned that he only hunted four days a week. How did he pass the remaining three?

She had already held out a variety of baits to lure him from Fieldborough. Theatres, dinner-parties, dances at the New Club. But all her invitations were met by excuses so paltry, that they made her furiously angry.

And now she was at her wits' end. See him she must. She was growing thin and pale with anxiety. Every one remarked upon her altered appearance, and, with the usual delicacy of acquaintances, wished to probe into the cause. Such comments irritated her beyond measure. Few women like to be *told* they are not looking well, especially when, in their heart of hearts, they recognise the truth of the statement. Vanity likes to keep up its little illusions, and not have them struck to the ground by coarse, plain-spoken speech.

Every kind of suspicion lurked, meanwhile, in Lydia Stapleton's mind, and jealousy only required some object on which to fasten itself in order to flare out into a raging flame.

Oh! the restlessness and disquietude of those solitary days. She shut herself up, shrank especially from Amy

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and resolutely refused to see any of her friends. She had a considerable number, for friends have the happy knack of congregating round persons known to possess handsome fortunes.

But no, she did not want them. They only bothered her; and so, in spite of the notes, and the messages, and the kind inquiries, they had to retire discomfited. The truest of all instincts is that which causes the wounded animal to separate from its kind. She only wished to be alone. Away from the tattle and talk of the world, and to feed upon her grief in silence, until the fierce spirit within her could mature some plan of action. What was she to do? That was the question she asked herself night and day. By what means would it be possible to bring him back? Strange fancies and ideas entered her tortured mind, which at any other time her good sense would have discarded with contempt. But she was rapidly sinking into a dangerous phase. Even in her gayest days—the days when she had mixed nightly in society, there was one thing she had never done. She had never painted her face, nor stooped to any species of artificial adornment. But now, poor soul, in her frenzied desire to win back Beau's affection, and to appear lovely and lovable in his eyes, she went out secretly and bought rouge, blanc de perle, and sundry other adjuncts to the toilette. Old? If she were old, she must try to hide the ravages of time—to make the pale cheeks bright, the blue lips red, the tear-stained, heavy lidded eyes lustrous.

She only put on a very little colour. She would have died with shame could Beau have guessed how low she was descending for his sake. But her motives were pure; she did not wish to attract other men, only him; her one absorbing passion rendered her indifferent to their admiration; and there was no doubt the rouge, when artistically applied, —just a little delicate touch here and there, marvellously improved her appearance. It made her look quite five years younger. Nearer to Beau, nearer to Beau. That was always her ruling thought.

She waited feverishly from day to day, ever expecting him, and ever disappointed. Her nerves became unstrung. The slightest noise made her flush up suddenly, and caused her heart to beat with painful distinctness. During the long hours of the night, she could hear nothing save its

steady thumping against her ribs, and in her great weariness, she longed for another side on which to turn. Right and left, right and left—there never seemed any variety, only the same old, cramped, and sleepless positions, which, instead of coaxing slumber, rendered her wider awake than ever. And the post too? That hateful post. Always carrying expectancy to the extremest point, and always disappointing it. There was the distant rat-tat, and advancing rat-tat, and the near rat-tat; then the brisk footstep striking firmly and regularly on the pavement, followed by the click of the letter-box, the momentary hope, and the long, sullen despair. People would think her mad were she to describe her sensations. Ah! well, lucky for them that they had never experienced similar ones. She would not have wished her worst enemy to suffer the torture which she daily underwent. And all with closed lips. She had not a real friend or confidant in the world.

But as before stated, she was not the woman to yield her position without a determined effort. She resembled a stricken tigress, mortally hurt, crouching, crawling, but fiercely gathering her forces for a spring. The time would come for revenge, if for nothing else. No man should slight her lightly, but yet—how fair he was, how strong and comely! His image was graven on her heart. Why, ah! why could she not blot it out, and marry some steady, middle-aged man, nearer her own age? That was the course pointed out by wisdom, but wisdom makes at all times but a feeble fight when opposed by passion. And because a woman has arrived at thirty-six years, must she necessarily have lived her life, and said good-bye to all strong emotion? May it not be that the capacity of loving implanted within her breast, has gone on accumulating for lack of the right object on which to vent itself, and breaks forth like a torrent from a dam directly that object so long waited for, so constantly dreamt of, is found? A woman whose youth has fled may still have feeling, may still yearn for sympathy and affection, especially when in her girlhood they have been denied her. She realises that she has been cheated out of something which ought to have been hers, and which leaves her days barren and unfruitful. Why should she not seek to satisfy the cravings of her being? Is she for ever cut off from love and happiness because, to the outward eye, her cheek has lost its smoothness, her

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complexion its brightness? Is she not the same woman,
 with the same longings and the same aspirations, intensified
 by their non-fulfilment? Ah! it is hard, it is hard, that
 because she is thirty-six, and not twenty-six, her days of
 witchery should be for ever gone. She sees her kingdom
 falling away, those who were once her slaves no longer
 obedient at her call, and she herself left desolate and alone.
 And all this because of the relentless hand of time. Thief!
 Robber! Of what does it not rob us? It takes youth,
 health, beauty, happiness, one by one, and finally steals the
 love which we hold most precious. Grim, relentless, we
 cannot fight him. None can escape from his slow and
 stealthy pursuit.

Sometimes of an evening Lydia would try to gain com-
 fort by reading Beau's old letters—letters full of endear-
 ment and youthful ardour. One in particular, written a few
 days before he sailed for India, she perused many times.
 How could a man prove false to a woman, who of his own
 accord had pledged himself by such solemn vows? Even in
 a court of law—though she knew little or nothing of legal
 matters—she believed they must prove binding. With
 such a hold over him, it would be well nigh impossible for
 him to repudiate her claim? Thus Lydia tried to reason;
 but reasoning is of little avail when the heart aches. It
 does not still the pain, or fill the hungering void that
 clamours for reciprocal affection. The head and the heart
 are never so far apart as when love divides them. Lydia
 felt that the conditions were sadly altered since those
 letters were written, and then she would put them away, and
 weep and weep in the silent watches of the night when
 her grief was safe from surprise. Only in the dark-
 ness and the silence could she let herself go. At other
 times she was afraid, and had it not been for these mo-
 ments of abandonment must have gone mad. To keep
 strong passions like hers under control, to let none guess
 their existence or see them break loose, was a herculean
 task for a woman constituted as she was. So far she
 had succeeded but the tension was rapidly becoming
 unbearable.
 One day—it was the very day that Harry came to town
 —her hopes soared higher than they had done for a long
 time past. She too, on waking, saw the frost, for even in
 London the roads were frozen up into little, firm, dry

ridges. He would come now, at last, after all the wear waiting. And if he came, well! *if* he came, she would forgive him everything, greet him, not with reproaches, but with smiles.

Animated by fresh spirit, after luncheon she put on her bonnet and cloak, and feeling that the exercise would soothe her strained nerves, walked to Bond Street, intending to take theatre tickets for the next night. This done she would telegraph to Beau, telling him that she expected him to escort her. The very thought of meeting so soon lent a lustre to her eye, a buoyancy to her step, which caused more than one elderly gentleman to turn round and gaze admiringly after the magnificent creature clad in fur and velvet. She heeded them not. She saw nothing, nobody, until turning a corner by Piccadilly, she ran right up against a gentleman just issuing from a hairdresser's shop.

"Mrs. Stapleton!" he exclaimed in astonishment.

"What! Major Grimshaw!" she ejaculated on her side, jumping at the joyous conclusion that Beau was sure to be in town. "I'm so delighted to see you. Where did you arrive?"

"Only this morning. There was a deuce of a frost at Fieldborough. Very early to set in, ain't it? But upon my word, Mrs. Stapleton, how well you are looking!" For the walk, the sudden excitement, and a subtle touch of rouge had rendered her rosy as a child, lending a pomegranate-glow to her dark cheek.

"Am I?" she answered, with a pleased smile.

Oh! how different everything seemed all of a sudden! She must hurry back, however, for Beau might call in her absence, and the man-servant stupidly say, "Not home." Then, making certain of his being in town, she added brightly:

"What are you going to do this evening, Mrs. Grimshaw? Will you and Captain Dornay dine with me at a quarter to eight? You know where I am. No. 12, Wilton Crescent."

"Thanks," he responded. "You are very kind, and I shall be delighted, but that beggar Beau has not come up."

"Not come up?" and her face dropped in a manner quite piteous to behold.

"No, the old rascal. He wouldn't leave Fieldborough. He's too much *Epris*."

"*Epris!* With what? With whom?" panted Lydia, turning ghastly pale under her rouge.

"Good gracious, Mrs. Stapleton, what's the matter? Are you ill?" For his companion had staggered to a lamp-post, and was leaning against it heavily, while her breath came and went in short, flurried gasps.

"N—no. It's no—nothing—heart. I—I've been subject to these spasms lately."

"You don't say so. Come into this confectioner's shop" (there was one close by) "and sit down until you feel better. I will fetch you a glass of wine, or wiser still, brandy. Suffering as you do, you should never be without it."

Lydia, dazed and trembling, permitted herself to be led inside, where she sat down at a marble table, whilst Harry went to the counter and asked for some brandy. Her brain felt on fire. She panted for air, and with nervous fingers loosened the fur boa round her throat. The blow had fallen, her worst fears were realised. Whilst she had been writing and pouring out her heart to Beau, he had been flirting away in the country with some little smooth-faced chit. No, not flirting. Major Grimshaw had given her to understand that he was desperately in love. There and then, a diabolical jealousy entered into her soul. Without even knowing who her rival was she hated her with a fierce, relentless hatred. Now the riddle was solved, and Beau's desertion and neglect were accounted for. He not only did not love her, Lydia, but he wanted to marry somebody else. But it should not be—Beau was hers—hers. No other woman should steal him from her. She would sooner kill him, aye, see him lying cold and dead at her feet, than let him find happiness in the arms of a pink-and-white school-girl.

Her strong teeth closed over her nether lip until they drew blood. She turned faint, dizzy. The walls and tables danced before her eyes with a quivering, delusive motion. For a moment life itself seemed slipping away, and everything was as an evil dream, full of exceeding pain and misery.

"Here is the brandy, Mrs. Stapleton. Will you not try and drink it?"

Major Grimshaw's voice roused her. Those five years of concealed love had taught her how to act, if they had taught her nothing else. The Major knew nothing of the relation existing between herself and Beau. On no account must she betray them. It might serve her purpose to do so later on, but she would make no move in the game until she had had an interview with her faithless lover. She took the brandy and gulped it down. Her senses grew clearer.

"Thanks," she said, handing him back the glass with forced smile. "I—I feel better now."

Then she leant her elbows on the table, and began to laugh hysterically.

"What is amusing you?" asked Harry, surprised at the sudden change of mood.

"The idea of Captain Dornay being in love. Oh! how funny!"

"I don't see anything so very funny about it. Most men fall in love sooner or later."

"Do they? I call it an excellent joke. Pray give me some more particulars. Who is the fair enchantress?"

"She happens to be my first cousin, Dolly Dalrymple."

Harry spoke stiffly. He did not altogether approve Mrs. Stapleton's tone.

"Dolly! What a babyish name! Is she young?"

"Yes; about two or three-and-twenty."

"Pretty?"

"Sweetly pretty. At least, all men think so."

"Fair or dark? though I need not ask. She's sure to be fair."

"You seem interested, Mrs. Stapleton. If you like, I will show you Dolly's portrait."

So saying, Harry, with rather a conscious look, detached a locket from his watch chain, and handed it to his companion.

She gazed eagerly, nay, greedily, at the girl's picture. An involuntary groan escaped from her. Major Grimshaw had spoken the truth. This Miss Dalrymple was better than beautiful. She was charming.

"Your cousin has a good face," she said faintly. "It is a sort of face men like, especially when they are bad for themselves."

"I knew you would admire it. Pretty women

always so much more generous to each other than ugly ones."

"Has she any money? Is she rich?" continued Lydia, hoping that poverty might prevent Beau from proposing.

"Very, and at my uncle's death she inherits all his fortune. It will be a capital match for Beau in every respect."

"One more question, Major Grimshaw, and I have done my cross-examination. Did I understand you to say that your cousin and Captain Dornay were engaged?"

"Not yet, but people are talking a good bit, and I dare say they will be before long."

"Thank you. Will you write and let me know directly that happy event comes off? He is an old friend of mine, and I—I," with a tremor in her voice, "should like to congratulate him."

"Most certainly. Beau is tremendously spoony, so I feel convinced you won't have to wait long."

She tottered to her feet. She could endure this torture no longer. It was more than frail womanhood could stand.

"I th—think I'll go home now, please, Major Grimshaw. I feel as if another attack were coming on. Would you be so good as to call me a hansom?"

"By all means. May I not see you to your own house, Mrs. Stapleton?"

"Thanks, but I am sufficiently recovered not to require an escort."

"I sha'n't come to dinner to-night," said Harry decidedly.

"You're not well enough. I'll wait till another time, and bring Beau along."

She gave a wan and weary smile. A pang, as of death, shot through her heart.

"Yes, bring Beau along. You and he are always welcome. You know that."

Harry shut the doors of the hansom, told the driver where to drive, and waved a final good-bye. He was no sooner out of sight than all Lydia's fortitude gave way. She hid her face in her hands and burst into a passion of tears. Her whole nervous system was in a state of frenzy. One thing alone was clear. She must see Beau immediately. He must be made to understand that he was engaged to her, and could not throw her over at his will; that she possessed

letters which, if shown to society, would publicly brand him as a scoundrel and a blackguard. He was not the man to face an exposure of this sort. He was far too sensitive to the world's opinion. She would sooner have won him by love than by force, but she would not hesitate to use force rather than lose him altogether. All the worst faults of her stormy, ill-regulated nature rose to the surface. Anger, jealousy, and revenge mastered every softer feeling.

Directly she got home, without giving her wrath time to cool, she sat down and wrote to Beau, not meekly and imploringly, as she had so often done of late, but imperiously, like an incensed sovereign summoning a traitorous subject to her queenly presence.

CHAPTER XIV.

FACING THE SITUATION.

This is what Lydia wrote to her unfaithful lover :

“I know all. I met Major Grimshaw to-day in Piccadilly, and he told me the reason that is keeping you at Fieldborough, and that has caused you to respond to my prayers and entreaties with base falsehoods and subtrefuges, wholly unworthy of one professing to call himself a gentleman. Coward! Traitor! You have deceived me too long, but you cannot continue to do so. Don't flatter yourself that I shall put up with so gross an insult, and remain mute and quiescent. No, Beau, not for one moment. It is not my nature to bear wrong patiently, especially wrong so cruel as this, for it is the foulest and deadliest hurt a man can possibly inflict upon a loving woman. If you are honest and true—if you have a spark of honourable feeling left in you—come and clear your good name. I shall be at home all to-morrow afternoon, and will give orders for no one else to be admitted. My position is false. It kills me with uncertainty, and I cannot live as I have lived since your return to England. After all that has passed between us, after your vows and protestations, and after these weary years of waiting, I refuse to believe, save from your own lips, that you are wicked enough to throw me over. Oh, Beau, I love you! You know this ;

and my love, instead of being, as it once was, a joy, is rapidly becoming converted into a curse. The change is entirely owing to your instrumentality. I doubt whether you are worthy of the strong passion you inspire. You cannot feel as I do. You are cold, with the coldness of a glittering crystal, which sparkles brightly in the sunlight, but which contains no real element of warmth. Who is this girl, this Dolly Dalrymple, who has taken your fancy? Bad man! Are you deceiving her, even as you deceived me? Do you whisper caressingly into her ear as once you whispered into mine, and swear that your affection is unalterable? The thought sets my blood aflame. *Can* men forget their past so utterly, and ignore their former declarations in this shameless manner? But the poor fool shall be spared from suffering as I have suffered. I will take care to open her eyes in time, and let her know what a brave, true lover she has got. If your craven heart shrinks from meeting me to-morrow afternoon, I swear to write her a full account of our engagement. Ha! ha! my fair, false Beau. How will you like that? I can see you wince in my mind's eye. Moreover, you know that I am not the woman to stick at threats. The world will take my part, and reserve all blame for you. You, who care so much for the good opinion of others, will be shunned and avoided by every right-thinking person. Therefore, if you retain the slightest regard for your reputation as a man of honour and a gentleman, don't seek to put me off with any more excuses—the time is past—but come to town immediately. Otherwise it will be the worse for you, since I give you full warning that I am in no mood for trifling."

Lydia stamped this letter, rang the bell, gave it to the footman to post, and despatched it without allowing herself a second in which to consider. She yielded unhesitatingly to the impulse of the moment, and acted in the impetuous way customary with her when powerfully moved. But reaction followed soon, as it does on most actions prompted by fierce personal indignation.

Towards nightfall doubts began to assail her. The conviction grew with unpleasant force, that her letter had not been altogether wisely worded. It contained exactly what she felt—the rage, the love, the despair; but her sentiments might have been put more diplomatically, and in a fashion less calculated to give offence. To call a man a coward and

a traitor, and to menace him with threats, was scarcely the way to win back his love. And then, if the whole story were a fabrication, or if not a fabrication, rested on a slender basis of truth! In such a case, the expressions of which she had made use would naturally rankle in Beau's mind, and drive them still further apart. Harry Grimshaw might have been deceived. Beau might not be so much to blame, as in the first shock of hearing he was smitten by Miss Dalrymple she had taken for granted. Men were men. Some allowance was due to the masculine nature. It was not his fault that all women liked him so much, and fell victims to his handsome, smiling face, his manly figure, and singularly soft, smooth voice. She herself had not been able to resist him, even against her better judgment. Very likely this Dolly Dalrymple was an outrageous flirt, who, captivated by his good looks, had set her cap at him with embarrassing effrontery. Nineteenth century damsels were not remarkable for their modesty or manners. Beau was one of those men who yielded easily to the influences of women. With all his charm, he was not strong-minded. If the impudent girl had got hold of him, and made open love to him, he was quite capable of lazily suffering himself to be worshipped without, in reality, entertaining any corresponding sentiment. It might flatter his vanity, but nothing more serious would result.

Thus Lydia endeavoured to reason, and she told herself, as the wintry evening set in, that she would have acted more wisely had she waited to hear Captain Dornay's explanation before hastily jumping at the conclusion that he deliberately intended to throw her over. People, when apart, were so apt to fall out about things which, once they were united, proved mere trifles. Knowing Beau as well as she did, she should have thought of all this, and not made a false move by taking it for granted that he contemplated repudiating his promises.

But it was too late now for regrets. The letter had gone, and she must abide by the consequences. Besides, looking at the situation even from an absurdly hopeful light, much cause for dissatisfaction remained. It was impossible to get over the fact that he never came near her, and that the tone of his letters was studiously cold and formal. There was no fancy in this, for she took the last note received, now nearly a fortnight old, and compared it with one written

some six years ago. The difference was so great that her heart swelled to bursting. Those letters represented a tangible fact, and revived all her worst fears. What was the use of combating them. Instinct told her the truth in all its plain, unvarnished misery. Every attempt to refute it was but a sham. Too well she knew it, in the innermost depths of her woman's nature, and yet, like a vanquished gladiator, fighting a losing fight, she contested every inch. Failure must not be acknowledged, though it loomed ahead.

Next morning she felt wretchedly nervous; nevertheless, she determined to place a strict control over her feelings, and on no account to lose her temper. Almost unconsciously, she nourished a passionate hope that, when she and Beau met, he would once more succumb to the physical attraction which she still believed she retained for him. For this reason she attired herself carefully in a most becoming costume, and took extra pains with her toilette.

Lydia's letter spurred Beau to action as she intended that it should do. The general tone of it told him pretty well what he had to expect, but he admitted that the time had come, when, in fairness to both her and to Dolly, an explanation could no longer be delayed. He experienced almost a relief at such being the case. He, too, was in a false position, and it had become easier to throw down the gauntlet than to continue inactive. Circumstances demanded some step on his part.

Yes! he would go to London, and get the horrible business over; and then, please God, he would be free to propose to Dolly. He knew that she expected it, and he had already paid her such marked attentions, and the supposition was only natural. What he should say to Lydia, or how excuse his conduct, he hardly knew. There was no excuse for it, except that the laws of nature were not immutable, and he was subject to them. But how could she be brought to understand this, and to see that in great measure he was not to blame for the revolution which had taken place in his sentiments. She was certain to make a tremendous scene, and forgive him only on the condition of his giving Dolly up. And that he could not do. For the first time in his life he was genuinely in love, and felt prepared to make any sacrifice, short of being compelled to marry the woman he no longer regarded with affection. Better some temporary unpleasantness than a life's misery.

After seeing and knowing Dolly, he could never be happy with Lydia. Her restless, emotional character was not suited to his, and inspired a vague sense of discomfort, not far removed from repulsion.

That very day he was engaged to lunch at Woodford Chase. Sir Hector himself had asked him, and he augured from the manner in which the invitation had been given, that that gentleman was favourable to his suit. Now, Beau sat down and wrote the worthy baronet a note, saying how sorry he was to prove faithless to his engagement, but that urgent business called him to town for a day or two.

Then he ate his breakfast, and was just beginning to pack a bag with a few necessaries, when little Tottie, the landlady's child, stole softly into the room. She and he were great friends. There was something about this tall, stalwart hussar which proved irresistibly fascinating to children, and the little girl frequently crept from her mother's side, in order to pay him a surreptitious visit.

"Where 'oo dooin?" she enquired curiously, and with a certain amount of distrust, for the preparations did not please her, and announced a new departure.

"Hulloa! Tottie!" he cried, looking up with a smile. "Is that you? I'm going to London town."

She put her chubby forefinger into the small, round aperture formed by her rosy lips, and said persuasively:

"Don't do 'way long. Tum back soon. Tottie no like you do 'way."

"Don't you, little woman. Come, come, you must not cry. I'll be home by to-morrow or next day, and I tell you what, Tottie, if you're a good girl, I'll bring you back a box of chocolates."

"Yes. Tottie like tokolate."

"That's all right. Good-bye, my dear."

And so saying, Beau placed his hand on her little, rough, curly head, and patted it quite tenderly. A wave of paternal feeling flooded his heart. It occurred to him that he should like some day to have a Tottie of his own.

She looked up at him with two glistening brown eyes, and lisped out:

"Tottie like tokolates, but Tottie like 'oo better. 'Oo nice man; not cross."

Beau gave a pleasant laugh and hurried out of the room,

leaving his infantine admirer to gaze after him with a very woe-begone expression of countenance. Somehow this child's affection restored his self-esteem. He could not be wholly bad, so long as he excited such kindly feelings in one so young and innocent. Children had a wonderful knack of discovering the soul's blackness. It comforted him to find that Tottie did not shrink from him, and that, on the contrary, he inspired her with confidence. This little incident, slight as it was, gave him fortitude, and appeared of good omen.

Meanwhile the fly stood at the front door, and there was no time to lose. Not many people were travelling this cold, wintry day, and at the station he got into a first-class carriage, which was entirely unoccupied. He had bought the *Sportsman*, *Morning Post*, and sundry other papers to while away the time, but he was quite unable to fix his attention on either sporting, fashionable, or political intelligence. The nearer he got to London the more did his courage ebb. As he approached the Metropolis, Dolly seemed to recede from him, and to vanish beyond his grasp. The past reasserted itself, and held him in a species of moral bondage which filled him with alarm, lest its chains might prove too strong to break, in spite of the most strenuous efforts. A numbness stole over his senses. Which of the two was unreal—the present, or the olden life? He was so much unhinged, that, when he reached the Naval and Military Club, he ordered a stiff tumbler of brandy-and-water in order to pull himself together, and drank it off at one gulp. His heart beat as if he were going into action, and his fresh-coloured face was several shades paler than usual, when, somewhere between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, he rang the bell of No. 110 Wilton Crescent, and in a curiously unsteady voice, inquired of the footman if Mrs. Stapleton were at home. He would have given half a year's income to have been answered in the negative. But no such luck awaited him. Upon the hall door shutting behind him, he felt as if he had entered a prison, and this impression became increased when, on mounting the stairs, he fancied he could detect the faint, languorous perfume which Lydia affected, and which now appeared to him intolerably sickly and unhealthy. He was shown into a drawing-room so draped and ornamented, that, by the scanty light of three windows entirely

covered with yellow muslin, he imagined to his intense relief that he was alone. Thus thinking, he stood on the hearthrug, with his back to the fire, and a great, deep sigh escaped from him.

CHAPTER XV.

WHEN LOVE COOLS.

SUDDENLY a tall, commanding figure rose up from a dark recess near one of the windows, and said tremulously :

“Good morning, Beau. So you have come at last.”

Lydia Stapleton stood before him, clad in a sweeping robe of black velvet, which fitted her magnificent form to perfection, and seemed to add both to her height and dignity. A piece of soft, old lace was round her neck. On her cheeks burnt a dull flush, and her wonderful, dark eyes shone with suppressed excitement. It no longer struck Beau, as it had done on his former visit, that she looked old and haggard. The strength of her emotions gave her back her youth, and he found himself forced to admit that she was a superb creature. After her first greeting, a kind of defiant pause prevailed, during which each measured the other, like foes before a contest. Her attitude, as she stood looking at him, was full of a feline grace, and once more he felt the spell of her personal attractions beginning to exercise an influence over him. This woman fascinated him in one way, Dolly in another. Mrs. Stapleton represented the material, Miss Dalrymple the spiritual, side of love.

He gave a forced laugh, and pulled nervously at the ends of his moustache.

“Yes,” he said, “I have come at last. I was bound to come after getting your letter.”

“I am glad you think so. It shows that your conscience is not completely hardened. May I ask if you left Miss Dalrymple well?” And she shot a glance at him expressive of love, hatred, and sarcasm combined.

At mention of Dolly's name, coming from her lips, he blushed to the roots of his fair hair. Somehow he did not like Lydia's manner. It was too quiet, too concentrated to be natural.

"I really don't know," he replied, with a not very successful attempt at indifference. "I have not seen the young lady of whom you speak since yesterday, when she and Sir Hector were both out hunting."

"Oh! indeed; not since yesterday!" giving a mocking laugh. "What a tremendous long time. I wonder you manage to exist. Do you know, by any chance, how many weeks it is since you have seen me; though I suppose you do not keep *quite* such an accurate record in my case as in Miss Dalrymple's?"

"Is it necessary to introduce that lady's name into our conversation?"

This demand incensed Lydia beyond measure. There was a coolness about it which proved particularly irritating.

"Yes," she retorted angrily, "it *is* necessary, and for this reason. You can no longer play fast and loose with me, as if I were a toy to be cast aside when tired of. Whether you like it or not, you must speak the truth. Had you done so from the first, your desertion," and the muscles round her mouth twitched, "would have been less hard to bear."

"I don't understand you. To what truth do you refer?" he asked lamely.

This attempt at equivocation was too patent. She lost patience. Her eyes flashed fire, and she turned upon him with a magnificent gesture of disdain. To its object the effect was withering. A feeling of guilty shame stole over Beau, accompanied by a sense of oppression. He could not meet those scornful eyes, which seemed to emit a blasting, electric current. They made him feel infinitely small.

"What truth!" she cried, with ever-growing contempt. "Oh, God! is it possible for creatures calling themselves men to be so mean and dastardly? Must you for ever take refuge in evasion? Why can't you speak out? Beau, Beau, for Heaven's sake be honest to somebody; if not to me, at all events to yourself." Her deep voice quivered. It thrilled him through and through. Up to the present moment everything had gone against him. Her intensity, however, had an opposite effect to that intended. It paralysed his will.

"I don't know what you mean, Lydia," he said unsteadily. "I would not willingly treat anyone dishonestly."

"So you say. Yet how are you treating me?"

"I have been away—hunting."

"Yes, I know. Hunting is an excellent excuse for neglect. Better than a good many you have stooped to lately. The thing is this, Captain Dornay, are we, or are we not, engaged? I shall be much obliged if you will answer that question, without having recourse to your usual prevarication."

Her force and impetuosity sent a chill of despair through his veins. How could he possibly contend with her? She was no ordinary woman, as he realised not altogether for the first time, and was capable of *making* him marry her, whether he liked it or not. The whirlwind of her passions resembled a hot and poisonous sirocco, against which no living thing could stand upright.

He looked away. Her eyes seemed to penetrate into his very soul.

"We—were—engaged," he said reluctantly, the words coming as if they were dragged from him.

"We were! We are! What has happened, pray, to break off our engagement? I insist upon a reply!"

He was as a creature, mild and peaceable by nature, goaded beyond its endurance. He could stand her taunts no longer. His manhood rose up in revolt, roused at last by very shame.

"Very well; you shall have one," he said, in his agitation beginning to pace restlessly up and down the room like a caged beast. Then, making a desperate effort to cast off the evil web which this woman never failed to weave around him, causing him to appear weak and despicable even to himself, he continued, "Lydia, you are quite right. It is better to be frank, and you have every cause to abuse me. I know that I have behaved badly to you, without being told, and don't attempt to defend my conduct in any way. I ought to have known my own mind, but remember, I was a mere boy when I first met you and proposed. You were then, and are still, a beautiful woman, but alas! everything in this world changes. We cannot remain in a state of *statu quo*. Nature has so ordained it. Everywhere in life you see variety, and man is no more exempt from the mysterious law which governs the universe than are the birds and the beasts. Am I dishonest? I really don't know. Ask God. Once upon a time, I thought I loved

you as you deserve to be loved. If you had not given me too much liberty, if you had not trusted me too generously, all might have been well. But the years brought new thoughts, and fresh ideas of married life. I could not help it. They came gradually, unconsciously, even as the summer is an inevitable outcome of the spring. Then I began to think that we had made a mistake, that we were born with dissimilar tastes and temperaments; and, in short, were not suited to become man and wife. Matrimony appeared a frightfully solemn institution, not to be undertaken lightly, or where the least doubt existed. These reflections often occurred to me during my stay in India. Perhaps I should have written to you, and told you all that was disturbing my mind, but I was not sure of your sympathy, and to tell the truth, I did not become fully aware of the alteration in my feelings until I returned to England, saw you after an absence of several years, and went to Fieldborough."

"And then——" said Lydia.

She had grown deathly pale, and was clutching hold of the mantelpiece for support.

"And then," he went on slowly, conscious of the intense pain his words were inflicting, "I met Dolly Dalrymple, and all my past seemed suddenly swept into the background——"

He stopped short, as if unable to continue.

"Go on. Now you have begun, I must hear all," she groaned, seeking vainly to conceal her anguish.

"Something stronger than myself took possession of me on the spot. Lydia, it was Kismet. I thought of you, and, on my honour, tried to fight against the love which stole into my heart at the first sight of that slight, fair girl——"

"Spare all panegyric, if you please. There is no occasion to ring Miss Dalrymple's praises to me."

"God only knows," resumed Beau, "how miserable I have been all this time, torn between duty and honour. Oh! Lydia, have you no pity? Surely, if you care for me as much as you profess to do, you must feel some compassion for one so unhappily situated. This thing came upon me unawares. It was none of my seeking. For years I had loyally sought to be true to you. Can you not forgive?"

She was moved by his appeal. Her haughty face softened, and its expression changed. He felt in that moment, that a bond of mutual misfortune united them, for which some unseen power, to which they both were subject, was responsible. His heart grew big with a sentiment of pity, inspired by their joint misery, and by the intricacy of human affection.

"Lydia," he said, putting his hand on her sleeve. "My dear, my poor dear, you must know that I do not pain you willingly. Nothing could give me greater pleasure than to see you happy."

She trembled beneath his touch. His mere proximity thrilled her whole being with passionate delight. A spasm passed over her face, and her eyes grew soft and dim. Lower and lower drooped her stately head, until it rested against his shoulder. The movement embarrassed him. It was like treason to Dolly, but he could not treat her roughly at a time when instinct told him a crisis was at hand for good or evil in both their lives. Scarce knowing what he did, his arm stole round her waist. Ah! Beau, did that make the parting easier? They stood thus for a few seconds, speechless; then he gently tried to put her from him. The action maddened her. Suddenly she straightened herself: the hard, stern look came back to her dark face, and seizing his hand in hers, and gripping it with strong, nervous fingers, she cried hysterically:

"How dare you talk to me so. I show sorrow for you, when you have deliberately blighted my whole life, crushed every hope within my breast, and rendered the future black and void. Why should I? What have you done to deserve my compassion? Listen to what I say, Beaumont Dornay. You do not understand me. You are not capable of understanding the sort of woman that I am. I cannot give you up and forget you just because you wish it. Mine is no milk-and-water love, destitute of strength and tenacity; and I tell you to your face, that sooner than see you married to Dolly Dalrymple, I would—I would—*murder* you."

She hissed out the two last words with a vehemence that alarmed him. He shuddered. In her great flashing eyes there seemed to lurk traces of insanity, and as her fingers tightened about his, he realized that she was indeed capable of putting her threat into execution. A stormy, dangerous

woman in her present mood, to be treated like a child, calmed and soothed, else there was no knowing what might happen.

He could feel her hot breath upon his brow, and read violence in her set, determined countenance, now clouded with ugly passions, which she no longer sought to control.

He neither wished to be murdered himself, nor did he wish her to frighten Dolly. Other tactics must be pursued. The policy of frankness had failed. Temporizing might perhaps succeed better. He released his hand with a wrench. She had left her mark upon it.

"Lydia," he said, trying to speak lightly, "what fools we are to quarrel. And what is our quarrel about?"

She breathed hard. His altered tone disconcerted her.

"What is it about? Why, about Dolly Dalrymple, of course."

"Pray be reasonable, and look at matters as they are, not as you fancy them. I have not asked Miss Dalrymple to be my wife; and even were I to do so, it is quite on the cards she might refuse. She is said to have rejected dozens of men. Why should my fate be different?"

Her eyes dilated. This aspect of affairs was novel, and yet her uneasiness remained. Was he fooling her?

"She—she does not care for you, then?"

What fatal instinct prompted him to conceal the truth?

"I do not know. It is impossible to say."

"Beau, tell me one thing. Do you—do you—love her?"

"Yes. Have not I already told you so?"

Her bosom rose and fell. This confession was a death-blow to every hope.

"You can't love two women at once," she said bitterly. "You are my affianced husband."

"Ah, Lydia, don't remind me of the fact. I can only throw myself upon your generosity. Our engagement has fortunately never been made public. It will do you no great harm to break it off."

"Do me no great harm to break it off!" she interrupted, indignantly. "Good heavens! Beau, do you think I am made of stone? Is my affection, my love, my blind, mad idolization to count for nothing? It will kill me to part, but perhaps you wouldn't reckon my death any great harm."

And two long, slow tears rolled down her cheeks. He had wounded her to the quick.

"Don't talk in that way, Lydia. You know quite well that your death would affect me. I care for you a very great deal. As friends we may be extremely dear to each other, but—pardon me for my plain speaking—we run but a poor chance of happiness in forming nearer ties. Lay all the blame on me. It is my fault. As you said just now, I don't understand you. I am too cold, too calm and phlegmatic. I admire you immensely—I always did, but your spirit and mine are cast in different moulds. We do not exert a good influence over one another. I rouse your stormiest passions, and you create in me a sense of unrest and of shortcoming. If we feel this before marriage, what should we do after? Lydia, there is enough affinity between us for you to know that I speak the truth. Be wise, be merciful, be generous, and give me back my liberty. If you refuse, we shall both live to rue the day, as surely as I stand here."

She listened attentively, but her face grew rigid. It resembled a marble mask in its cold stillness.

"You ask a hard thing of me, Beau Dornay." Then, with a sudden burst of emotion, she added, "an impossible thing for a woman to grant, loving you as I do."

"It would not be impossible if your love were of that better kind which induces sympathy. I ask you, how would you feel, married to me, knowing that my heart was not yours, but Dolly's?"

"I should feel miserable, though perhaps not more so than I am at present. To know you were mine, and could not escape from me—ah! that would be something. You used to love me, Beau; I believe that, given the opportunity, you would still do so. At all events, I am willing to try the experiment."

"You will find it a most hazardous one. I am no longer a boy, and my ideas have changed, as I have already told you."

"I answer you in your own words. Man is subject to the same law of progress and retrogression which governs all nature. Why should your love for Dolly Dalrymple prove more indestructible than was your passion for me? What has been gained once may be gained again. Men are fickle, and, according to you, they cannot help themselves.

Well, the wise woman knows how to take advantage of their fickleness. You have taught me a lesson, Beau, by which I shall endeavour to profit."

Her words confounded him. He could not conceive of his proving faithless to Dolly.

"You are under a delusion," he said coldly. "Clever as you are, I wonder that you do not see things in their right light. The flame of love is not easy to re-kindle, and especially in my case. Once more I implore you to set me free. I will be grateful to you all my life."

"Grateful to me! As if I wanted your gratitude when you rob me of everything that makes existence endurable. You talk of my being deficient in sympathy; you yourself have none. You cannot enter into a woman's feelings, or you would never torture me in this cruel manner. I give you up! I release you from your promise! Ha! ha! you make me laugh! What if I refuse?"

"If you refuse," he said sadly, "then I must remain as I am."

"You will not marry this miserable girl?"

"No. How can I?"

A flash of triumph illuminated her features. She put her two hands on his shoulders, and looked him full in the face.

"No, you can't, of course. Beau, dear Beau, you will come back to me. You don't really care for Miss Dalrymple. You thought you did when you were away, and could not see me. Say what you will, there is something in my spirit which attracts yours. A subtle and mysterious affinity exists between us. Do we not feel it every time we are together? An irresistible magnetic bond unites us. Absence alone weakens it. Your Dolly may be very sweet and fair, but she is inane compared to me. I am sure of it, although I have never seen her. My love would shield and support you all your days. You possess the qualities which I lack—the sunny brightness of disposition, the capacity of enjoyment, the serene and tranquil spirit; but mine is the force and the energy. Your nature, Beau, requires a prop on which to lean, and I—I will be that prop. Beloved! tell me. Shall it not be so? Ah, give up fighting against the inevitable."

Little by little, as she spoke, she advanced her impas-

sioned face to his, and her luminous eyes held him spell-bound. Was it true, this horrible thing that she was saying? Had she indeed the power to render his will impotent, to dwarf his judgment, and silence his better instincts? A sickening dread seized him. She possessed charm, but of a baleful and unhealthy kind, like the upas tree, that poisons those who rest beneath its shade. He shut his eyes in order to blot out the sight of that tragic, beautiful countenance, so near his own. She reminded him of a vampire, ready to suck his life's blood. If he yielded, he was lost. Henceforth, the power of evil would rule triumphant over him. And then into his mind crept the image of Dolly, fair, and feminine and gentle. Dolly, with her dove-like eyes, and sweet, sudden blush. The thought of her broke down the sorcery of Lydia's presence, and gave him strength in this moment of surpassing peril. Sternly and resolutely he put the temptation from him, colouring to find that he was still liable to be tempted. Lydia's lips were within an inch of his own. A stray lock of her perfumed hair brushed against his cheek. With an instinct akin to self-preservation, he pushed her back; and held her at arm's length. She uttered a cry of rage, like a lioness balked of her prey, and sank sullenly into the nearest chair. Her soul acknowledged defeat, and the consciousness was terrible.

"Lydia," he said, gathering himself to his full height; "you are making a great mistake. I want no woman to prop me up as you affirm; and a wife should not take the husband's place. Marriages very seldom turn out well where such is the case. Admitted that you are stronger and more resolute than I. I only ask for a quiet life, and am satisfied we are not suited to each other. If, after what I have said, you still persist in holding me to this miserable engagement, God only knows the wretchedness that will result. Think the matter over fairly. Do not decide hastily, and let me hear your decision later on. Meanwhile, no good can be gained by wrangling, and I wish you good bye."

So saying he hurried out of the room before she realised that he intended to take leave.

She rose to her feet, and, for a second, stood aghast; feeling that, in uttering these words, he meant to convey a final farewell; and there were so many things yet that she wanted to say to him, that she *must* say to him.

"Beau," she called out wildly; "come back. We cannot part like this. It is impossible. Oh! how cruel you have been to me. If I did not love you so much I could almost hate you for being so cold and indifferent. For heaven's sake come back."

He must have made wonderful haste to escape, for almost immediately, as if in mocking answer to her prayer, the hall door slammed.

Beau drew a long breath when he stepped out into the fresh air. He felt as if a ton of lead had suddenly been removed from his brain. Thank goodness, he had had the courage to tell her that he was not going to marry her. After what had passed, surely she could not affect to misunderstand his meaning. It had been terribly painful. He would rather give up ten years of his life than go through such a scene again. But, on the whole, Lydia might have behaved worse, and he comforted himself for all he had endured by reflecting that he was now more or less free to propose to Dolly. Dear Dolly! who only waited for him to speak, and who had long ago betrayed her love by soft looks and happy smiles. What a contrast the two women presented! Lydia was a perfect fiend, capable of any crime! If she had had a convenient weapon at hand when she threatened to murder him, he might not have come off quite so easily. She looked like a tragic muse—handsome, stately, mature, but not his style.

Poor soul! He was sorry for her too, in a way. The powerful passions to which she was a prey must render her life hideous. Just fancy being chained to a wife with such a temper! What a time a man would have of it!

On the whole, as Beau walked down Piccadilly, he was fairly satisfied with the results of the afternoon. His visit certainly left a disagreeable impression, but no doubt time would succeed in effacing it. There was one point which he should have preferred more clearly defined.

How did Lydia intend to behave in the future? Did she, or did she not, acquiesce in their engagement being completely broken off? He hoped so, and consequently concluded that the affair was settled. If Lydia tried to make herself disagreeable, why, the only plan would be to marry Dolly straight off. Then they could defy her, and she might do her worst.

He was behaving very badly, of course; but then every-

body behaves badly at some period of their career, and in his case so many extenuating circumstances existed.

Could he have seen Lydia pacing up and down the room which he had recently left, with knit brow, clenched teeth, and angry eyes, he might not have felt altogether so content. As it was, he ate an excellent dinner at his club, went to the theatre with a friend, and cheered Mademoiselle Toppitourie to the echo in her celebrated kicking step, which nightly attracted all the flower of England.

And Dolly, just about the same time, was kneeling by the side of her little white bed, offering up innocent prayers for the welfare and speedy return of her darling Beau.

Where is the man worthy of a pure young girl's devotion?

The wild winds sweep over the rose, and rejoice in its freshness and fragrance, little recking what they take from the bloom of the delicate flower that offers its soft petals to their embraces.

Ah, Nature! how cruel thou art! since even love is but a subtle form of the strong preying upon the weak.

CHAPTER XVI.

TWO GOOD FRIENDS NEARLY FALL OUT.

THE following day, although the frost still continued very severe, and hunting was totally out of the question, Beau hurried back to Fieldborough, in spite of a great deal of banter from Harry, who, not being a victim to Eros, remained in town. Arrived at his destination, however, he met with a very considerable disappointment; for in calling at Woodford Chase that same afternoon, he was informed, much to his disgust, that Sir Hector and Miss Dalrymple had left home a few hours ago on a visit to some relations, and were not expected back for at least a week or ten days.

Beau's journey had been performed in vain; for to dawdle about Fieldborough, with nothing to do from morning till night save look at the shop windows, and with Dolly away, was out of the question. He paid a hurried visit to the stables, put himself into the first express train, and returned to London, a sadder if not a wiser man. He had not taken

into consideration the possibility of his lady-love's departure, and felt uncommonly aggrieved at being deprived of the delightful *tête-à-têtes* of which he had made so sure. At his club he found a little pink note awaiting him that set his pulses throbbing, and gave him something to look forward to. He had grown to know the handwriting. It belonged to Dolly, and, like herself, was essentially feminine. This note contained an invitation to a dance at the Chase on the fifteenth of December.

"I hope you will come," concluded the writer, "for it is my birthday, and I wish all my friends to be present. If you and Harry don't grace the festivity with your company, I shall be dreadfully disappointed."

Beau sat down there and then, and indited an answer, in which he artfully hinted that, personally, he should count the days to the fifteenth with feverish impatience; and contrived to let Dolly know his despair at finding her absent, when he had done himself the pleasure of calling.

A whole week passed away, and still the elements proved unpropitious. The papers were full of bad weather on the Continent, and predicted an unusually severe winter. Scores of frozen-out fox-hunters were to be seen at the various clubs, looking the picture of misery. Cut off from their favourite sport, they did not know what to do with themselves, or how to kill their mortal enemy—time. It hung so heavy on their hands, that even growling was but a partial relief to their feelings. Nevertheless, they growled plentifully. Poor things! It was the one occupation of which they were capable, under the grievous circumstances. Beau and Harry joined in the general outcry against the abominable British climate, and strove to check any tendency to increase of weight by taking long constitucionals, calculated to keep them in condition.

One day, when they were walking arm in arm together along Regent Street, a well-appointed victoria dashed up, in which was seated Mrs. Stapleton. She had seen them from a distance, and could not resist the opportunity of exchanging a few words with the man she so ardently loved, and who had left her in such an unsatisfactory manner. For several days she had driven up and down the most populous streets, in hopes of a chance meeting.

"How do you do?" she cried, addressing herself chiefly

to Major Grimshaw, though her eyes sought those of his companion. "Why have you never been to see me. You seem to have forgotten all about your promise to dine; but young men are proverbially faithless. What night will you come?"

Harry glanced at Beau, and said:

"Well, old man, what night shall it be, since Mrs. Stapleton is good enough to give us our choice?"

Beau was intensely annoyed at this meeting, and the more so because, in Harry's presence, he could not show his vexation without giving rise to remark. He was growing frightfully sensitive about himself and Lydia.

"I don't know," he answered ungraciously, looking up at the dull, grey sky overhead. "The wind has veered round to the south, and my belief is we are going to have a change of weather. The frost has already begun to give a little."

Mrs. Stapleton frowned. With her quick woman's perceptions she divined at once that he did not wish to accept her hospitality, or afford any chance of renewing their conference. It was one insult the more, to be garnered up in her memory, and repaid with interest at no very future date.

"Nonsense," she said, trying to speak lightly. "You are as mad about hunting as ever, but even I, ignoramus as I am in all matters connected with sport, know there is no chance of hounds coming out before the day after to-morrow. So I shall expect you both to-night." And she looked Beau straight in the face with a pair of bright, defiant eyes, which seemed to say, "Your reasons are quite clear to me, and they are horribly mean and cowardly."

"Thanks, Mrs. Stapleton," responded Harry. "You are very good, and, for my own part, I shall be delighted to accept your kind invitation for this evening. I remember your little dinners of old. Eh! Beau, don't you?"

That gentleman thus appealed to drew himself up to his full height, and replied:

"Yes, quite well, but I am sorry to say you must pronounce alone on the merits of Mrs. Stapleton's present *chêf*, for I have already an engagement which will prevent my accompanying you to-night."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Harry sceptically, and struck by

the coldness of Beau's manner. "You never told me you were engaged to dine out."

These two were so familiar that, to use a common saying, they nearly always hunted in couples.

Beau smiled sarcastically.

"My dear fellow, the matter was so unimportant that I did not consider it obligatory to mention it."

"Where are you going, if it is not an impertinent question?"

Beau coloured. Harry's curiosity was highly irritating, especially in the presence of a third party.

"It *is* an impertinent question," he said, letting his exasperation appear in his voice, "and under those circumstances I must decline to answer it."

Harry stared at him in amazement. He thought Beau must have taken leave of his senses; for it was the first time in his life that he had heard him make so discourteous a speech. And that he should do so before such a charming lady as Mrs. Stapleton grieved him for his friend's sake more than his own. He wondered whether Beau's liver were out of order, or if he and Dolly had quarrelled.

But Lydia understood what ailed him only too well. Indirectly he was speaking to her, and trying to convey a sharp, horrid lesson. The tears glistened in her dark eyes, and she looked away. If he had planned it, her mortification and sense of cruel overthrow could not have been more complete. She was far too proud to let him see how deeply his refusal pained her. Only, in her heart she registered an inward vow to revenge herself for all the indignities to which he had seen fit to subject her. Hatred was rapidly beginning to encroach on the domain of love, and had reached the borderland in which the two passions become so fused that it is difficult to recognise one from the other. She adored him, and she detested him by turns; her soul being the arena in which a mighty conflict raged, now Ormuzd, now Ahriman, gaining the victory.

"Major Grimshaw," she said cuttingly, "you want to know too much. Such a *very* gay Lothario as Captain Dornay doubtless finds it awkward to give a categorical account of his movements. You must be indulgent, and not expect information on such a delicate point. Look at me. I take his refusal quite as a matter of course, feeling

that so universal an admirer of the fair sex cannot be expected to remember an old friend, or give up an evening for her sake."

"Oh, but indeed, Mrs. Stapleton," interposed good, kind Harry, "you are maligning Beau. He's not at all that sort, I can assure you. He's the last man in the world to behave badly towards his old friends."

"So it seems. Captain Dornay is lucky in possessing so generous an ally. I wish we all were equally fortunate. However," and she turned to Harry with a brilliant, but artificial smile, "I have no doubt we shall manage to enjoy ourselves very well in his absence."

"Yes, the old idiot, he's depriving himself of a most charming evening, that's very certain."

"I shall quite enjoy a quiet talk with you, Major Grimshaw, and want to hear all about Fieldborough; for, later on, I am thinking of running down there for a few days, and going to one or two of the hunt balls." And she cast a malicious glance at Beau, to see how he would receive the intelligence.

He started. Her words opened out a whole vista of horrible complications. What purpose could she have in coming to Fieldborough, except to make mischief between him and Dolly? He set his jaw, and scowled at her. She laughed. It was pleasant to make him feel some small portion of the torture he had already caused her to endure. Why should she bear it all alone?

"That's first-rate," said Harry, quite unconscious of the emotions agitating his companions. "A hunt ball is always a very pretty sight, and the Fieldborough one is about the best in England. Do you know many people in our part of the world, Mrs. Stapleton?"

"No, very few. I shall look to you, Major Grimshaw, to point me out the most notable personages, and particularly wish to make the acquaintance of your cousin, Miss Dalrymple."

"I shall be charmed to introduce you to each other. I'm sure you and Dolly will hit it off. You're both such a good sort. Eh, Beau, what do you say?" appealing mischievously to his companion.

"I'm sure I don't know. I don't know what you're talking about," responded that gentleman, looking very glum indeed. "I wasn't listening."

"His thoughts are elsewhere. That's quite evident," said Lydia mockingly.

"A penny for them," exclaimed Harry, giving Beau a playful dig in the ribs. "Come, old man, wake up. What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing," he answered shortly.

"It strikes me that our English air does not agree with Captain Dornay," said Lydia, addressing Harry, but talking *at* Beau. "Or else the Indian ladies have spoilt him. He used to be much nicer than he is now."

"Aha!" said the Major jocularly. "His temper is not as sweet as it was, is it? But there are a good many excuses to be made for the poor, young man. He's in love."

She laughed discordantly.

"Of course, I was forgetting. That pleasing state generally renders people odious to their acquaintances, and Captain Dornay is no exception to the rule. When he and his wife take to quarrelling, then, no doubt, his manners will improve towards the rest of the world. Meantime, they are not quite what they might be. Thank Heaven! Major Grimshaw, you are not one of Cupid's victims, and rejoice in the full possession of your senses."

"I must not boast," said Harry gallantly, "for if I had the good fortune to see much of you, Mrs. Stapleton, I doubt whether I should retain them very long. A man's sense soon disappears in such very charming company."

Her short, upper lip curled disdainfully. Did this little cock sparrow of a creature imagine that she cared twopence about his society? She would have placed a greater value on one kindly word or look from Beau, than on all Harry's pretty speeches put together. She was only using him as a tool, to try and excite Beau's jealousy, and felt sorely piqued at the non-success of her endeavour. To-day her age weighed heavily upon her, and she realised more keenly than ever, that her power over the man she loved, was gone. Standing there, with his gloomy face and downcast eyes, he defied her.

Well! If he wished for war, it should be war to the knife.

"I am bound for a musical afternoon at Lady Belgravia's," she said, with a smothered sigh, "and must be moving on. Really, one's friends are more bother than they are worth.

I have not been going anywhere lately, but the troublesome old woman happened to meet me at the Stores the other morning, and left me no peace until I promised to attend this stupid party of hers. She seemed to have it on the brain, and could talk of nothing else, just as if it were an event of national importance."

Her tone rather jarred upon Harry. He happened to know Lady Belgravia, and was too good-natured to enjoy hearing her abused.

"I wonder what nine out of ten London hostesses would say, if they could hear the way in which their guests comment upon their entertainments. To receive so poor a return for your time your money, and your trouble, seems rather hard, especially when nobody derives any pleasure from the sacrifices made to amuse."

"What would you have?" rejoined Lydia, with a shrug of her shoulders. "It's the way of the world. It may not be a very nice world, and many of us are not very nice people who live in it, but we are not responsible for that fact. Good-bye, Major Grimshaw, I must positively be going, else we might argue the matter out."

And she gave him her hand. He wrung it heartily, and being at that moment assailed by a flower-girl, bethought him of presenting Mrs. Stapleton with a bouquet. As he turned round to inspect the stock offered, Beau's eyes met Lydia's.

"Do you remember our conversation?" he asked, in a low voice.

"Yes, perfectly," she replied. "It was not so pleasant that I am likely to forget it very easily."

"And have you come to any decision?"

"No. How could I? You want me voluntarily to throw away every chance of happiness that I possess. You are selfish, and see things only from your own point of view, and not mine. Ah, Beau!" and she shot a reproachful glance at him, "why do you refuse to come to dinner to-night? Even your friend Major Grimshaw thinks your behaviour odd. How cruel must it appear to me?"

"Our relations are too full of pain," he said in agitated tones. "When we can meet as friends, and friends only, then I will come as often as you like."

"I sha'n't want you then. How strange and rude you

are. You treat me as if I had no feeling whatever. But you make a great mistake. It is dangerous policy for a man to slight and insult a woman as you have slighted and insulted me. Ah!" and her eyes narrowed, "I shall be even with you yet. You and your Dolly shan't be happy at my expense. What!" turning with a sudden change of manner to Major Grimshaw, who had just placed a bunch of sweet-smelling flowers on her lap; "all these for me? Really, you are quite too nice. A thousand thanks."

Harry flushed red with pleasure. He never could resist a good-looking woman, and always lost his heart on the spot. He had been accustomed to play second fiddle to his handsome comrade, and Mrs. Stapleton's unwonted graciousness proved highly flattering to his masculine vanity. Perhaps, too, he rejoiced at finding himself preferred to Beau. The experience bore all the charm of novelty, and he looked forward with secret delight to his *tête-à-tête* dinner with the fair widow. He even asked himself seriously if she would do as Mrs. G. He thoroughly enjoyed his bachelor independence, but whenever he met a pretty woman he could not help feeling that he was a good husband wasted.

"What a charming creature!" he ejaculated, as Lydia's carriage rolled rapidly out of sight.

The exclamation awoke Beau from the brown study into which he had fallen.

"Eh? What? Charming! What do you mean?"

"Mrs. Stapleton, of course. She's perfectly delightful!"

"Indeed! I'm glad you think so."

"Don't you? You used to hold the same opinion once upon a time. What's the matter with you to-day, Beau? You're as savage as a bear; and why the deuce you won't go and dine in Wilton Crescent to-night, I can't make out. Because a man happens to be in love with one woman, there is no reason why he should be rude to every member of her sex."

"I wasn't rude."

"If you weren't rude, you were very far from being polite, and that's the honest truth. I felt quite sorry for Mrs. Stapleton, and could see that she did not believe a bit in your having an engagement."

"Both you and she are at liberty to believe exactly what you like," said Beau sulkily. "Is there anything so very

remarkable in a man refusing an invitation because he has already accepted another?"

"Certainly not, were the case really as you state it."

"What the deuce are you driving at, Harry? Do you wish to quarrel?"

"Heaven forbid! But I can't bear to see you, of all people in the world, ungrateful."

"Why me more than anybody else?"

"First and foremost, because I am foolish enough to entertain a sneaking regard for you, and don't like to see you make a bad impression, as you did to-day on Mrs. Stapleton; and secondly, because at one time you thought more of that lady than of anybody else in the world."

Beau coloured. He imagined that the partiality he had once entertained was a profound secret.

"How do you know what I thought of her?" he asked sharply.

"For a very simple reason. I had, and have still, eyes in my head. Before the regiment went to India, every officer in it was aware that Mrs. Stapleton had refused Colonel Barrington for you. To be quite frank, old man, I always thought there was some sort of secret understanding between you."

"Then you thought wrong," answered his companion, determined to put an end to the conversation, even at the cost of an untruth. "Your imagination is too lively. Mrs. Stapleton and I are nothing to each other, and, for my own part, I dislike the woman excessively. Didn't you see how she was rouged this afternoon?"

"Tut! That's nothing. Nearly every fashionable lady in London paints more or less nowadays."

"Your ideas are not so strict as mine. I detest your painted Jezebels. They repel me."

Beau spoke so irritably that Harry held his peace, and the two friends continued their walk in solemn silence. A spirit of estrangement seemed latterly to have grown up between them, which grieved the warm-hearted major greatly. He tried to recall in what way he could possibly have given offence, but his conscience was free, and did not accuse him. Reluctantly he arrived at the conclusion that, since his friend's Indian illness, the sweetness of temper for which he had always been remarkable had become slightly impaired. Being in love did not agree with him—it didn't with every-

body—and the sooner he and Dolly arranged matters the better. Then, perhaps, Beau might once more become a cheerful and amiable companion.

As it was, their relations were decidedly strained.

And Beau, walking beside him, felt that he was a beast. A beast to Harry, a beast to Dolly, and more especially a beast to Lydia. Self-approbation was necessary to his happiness, and of late days he had lost that valuable accompaniment to human existence. Why was he who hated pain forced to inflict it? It seemed very hard. He was in that state of nervous tension when people are ready to quarrel with everything or anybody. Moreover, he both regretted and was ashamed at having behaved so impolitely to Mrs. Stapleton. He owed her much more than he cared to acknowledge, and instinct told him that from a friend he had converted her into a relentless enemy. Yet he could not sit at her table, laugh and smile, and allow her tacitly to renew their engagement. Fate was very unkind to him. She ought never to have placed him in a position in which he was forced to do violence to his better impulses. He felt this with a species of savage resentment. He was not formed for scenes and squabbles, high words and dramatic situations. Some folk might appreciate them, but he didn't. He liked the bright side of life, not the seamy, yet here he was, surrounded by complications that threatened to lead to some hideous catastrophe. A sense of impending evil oppressed his spirit, and mentally he was ill at ease.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN EVENTFUL BALL.

A FEW days before the date fixed for the ball at Woodford Chase, to the heartfelt joy of all hunting men, the frost broke up, and it was once more possible for them to recommence their favourite pursuit. Horses, of course, were abominably fresh, and required a new set of nerves on the part of timid riders, who, having once already in fear and trembling screwed up their courage, found it rather hard to begin that process over again. Hounds also had grown fat, and lost just a trifle of their condition; but to compensate for

these disadvantages, the country rode considerably less blind than it had done a fortnight previously. At the bottom of each ditch lay a layer of crackling, dead leaves, that one by one had fluttered from the hedges above, and the fences themselves looked much more jumpable than at quite the commencement of the season. As for the trees, they were pretty well shorn of their autumnal foliage, and stood with bare black branches sharply outlined against the wintry sky.

Harry and Beau were among the first to return to Fieldborough, and very glad they were to leave London, and once more settle down in their snug lodgings in Prince's Street. The latter gentleman felt uncommonly keen—his physical nerve being at all times better than his mental—and he rode harder than ever. Perhaps, too, a certain sense of worry and desperation rendered him more than usually callous as to the safety of his person, and prompted him to pick out the very biggest and most breakneck-looking places. Anyhow, he spared neither himself nor his horses, and the gallant way in which he went to hounds inspired envy in the few, admiration in the many. Dolly and Sir Hector were not long, after the conclusion of the frost, before they returned to Woodford Chase, and appeared as usual in the hunting field, being gladly welcomed by their numerous friends.

It seemed to Beau, when he first saw the girl after an absence of so many days, that she looked fairer and more lovable than ever. Her charm asserted itself with even a stronger force than heretofore; but some undefinable instinct prevented him from paying her quite such marked attention as he had done previous to his visit to town. He had a notion that whenever he took the decisive step, trouble in some shape or form would result. The thought of Lydia was ever present in his mind, disturbing it like a dark nightmare, and the recollection of her, accompanied by an uneasy doubt as to their relative positions, rendered his manners to Dolly just a trifle formal and constrained. No one noticed this fact save Dolly herself; but she had not been five minutes in his company before she realized the alteration intuitively. With the aptitude of a modest and sensitive girl for self-torture, she immediately fancied that she must have been precipitate in showing the warmth of her feelings, and that Captain Dornay did not reciprocate them. This hypothesis rendered her extremely unhappy;

but it was an unhappiness which she must bear alone. Angry with herself, and disappointed in him, she also grew colder and more reserved, sticking closer to her father's side when out hunting, and not riding so hard as usual. Thus insensibly a slight estrangement sprang up between them. Dolly was very proud, with the kind of almost savage pride that is part of a maiden's armour, and she would have died rather than make up to a man, however much she loved him, when once she imagined he was only amusing himself at her expense. She took to chatting with Harry, and tried, without arousing his suspicions, to glean some information as to the character of his friend.

"Is Captain Dornay a flirt?" she asked of him one day, after he had been recounting some of Beau's Indian successes in his usual light-hearted, good-natured fashion.

"No, why? Would you say that he was?"

"Oh! I don't know. I only asked. It struck me he might be."

"He likes female society, of course. So does every man worth anything, and the ladies return the compliment by being uncommonly fond of Beau; but I should not say he was a flirt exactly. That sort of easy, pleasant way is natural to him. He always makes friends wherever he goes, but quite as many among the men as among the women. All the young fellows in the regiment swear by him."

"According to you, he appears a kind of Admirable Crichton," rejoined Dolly, trying to conceal her gratification by a somewhat lame attempt at a sneer. "Apart from his looks, wherein does his special charm consist?"

"Beau's the best fellow I know anywhere, Dolly," said Harry, warmly. "So don't you attempt to say anything against him in my hearing. Why, I thought you and he were tremendous pals. Have you been quarrelling?"

She gave a little nervous laugh.

"I don't know exactly what you mean by 'tremendous pals.' We saw a good deal of each other just before the concert, but then there was the duet to practise. Now that that excitement is over, Captain Dornay very naturally does not come to Woodford Chase quite so often as he did. The inducement has ceased to exist."

"Perhaps you've snubbed him," said Harry, beginning to have an inkling of the real state of the case.

"No, I haven't. Why should I? Papa likes him, and says he's a most agreeable companion."

"Oh! papa says that, does he? And what do you say?" asked her companion, with a broad smile.

She looked at him, and a comical, uncertain expression stole over her countenance. First cousin as he was, did he imagine that it was possible for her to confide in him? How little he knew of women!

"I say nothing. My opinion is of no importance, one way or the other."

"Dolly," said Harry, gravely, "do you know why Beau has given up spending his afternoons at the Chase?"

"No; how should I? I am not capable of divining the secret motives which govern Captain Dornay's actions."

"You won't be angry, will you, if I tell you the reason?"

"Of course not. How silly of you to ask."

"Well, then, young woman, my belief is that Beau is desperately in love with you."

"Rubbish!" she interrupted, colouring red with pleasure. "You're always taking ridiculous fancies into your head."

"Not rubbish at all, if you will only deign to listen. As I said before, I feel certain Beau loves you. He is a poor man, but an honourable one, and no doubt thinks that he is not rich enough to propose to Miss Dalrymple, the wealthy heiress. Having discovered the real nature of his sentiments, and deeming his passion hopeless, he does not desire to embarrass you with his attentions. The thing is self-evident—at least, to my mind."

This simple and highly plausible theory had not occurred to Dolly. Her whole face broke up into smiles. From that moment she treated Beau with the old frank familiarity but was intensely mortified to find that he still clung to his reserve, although every now and then he thawed for a little.

Matters were in this state when the night of the ball arrived.

All the county had been invited to do honour to Dolly's birthday, and a very large gathering assembled on the appointed evening. Beau and Harry were somewhat late in reaching Woodford Chase, much to the secret irritation of

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the former. They had gone out hunting, had an excellent run, which took them right out of their country, and left off twenty miles from home. In consequence of this long jog back to Fieldborough, our sportsmen were tired, and Harry slumbered so profoundly after dinner, that it was a work of the greatest difficulty to get him to go and dress. In truth, he felt much more inclined to retire to bed than to skip about till the small hours of the morning. He had not such a powerful motive as Beau for keeping awake. Once he had struggled into his black coat, however, he revived, and they reached the Chase a few minutes before eleven. Dancing had already commenced in the library, a magnificent room over a hundred feet in length, and proportionately high and broad. The carpet had been removed, and countless wax candles reflected their soft light in the polished parquet floor, which shone like a mirror. Sundry spaces on the walls, left by the fine carved bookcases, were filled up with palms, flowers, and cleverly-arranged draperies of Eastern silks, whose subdued tones harmonised admirably with those of the rare old bindings occupying the various shelves. An oaken gallery at the further end of the room was set apart for a band of Hungarian musicians celebrated for their spirited playing. This gallery was brilliantly illuminated with twinkling rows of coloured lanterns that looked like so many strings of jewels imperceptibly swayed to and fro by the already heated atmosphere. It was an ideal ball-room, and on all sides exclamations of admiring approval were to be heard. The mistress of the mansion, young as she was, knew how to do things well.

She stood at the door, and received her guests with an easy grace peculiarly her own.

Dolly looked charming. Her dress was simplicity itself, and in perfect taste, being composed entirely of white tulle that floated out behind her like a cloud. Moreover, it was modestly cut, and in that respect bore favourable comparison with a good many of the indecent frocks to be seen, not only on young and pretty women, for whose hardihood there was some excuse, but also on old, ugly, scraggy ones who displayed their yellow, ill-formed backs, hideous shoulder-blades, and lean bosoms with disgusting liberality. So much for Fashion. A modern Drawing-room is a sight to make one shudder. The wholesale spectacle of human

flesh, without regard to colour, form, or texture, has a sadly materialistic, not to say repulsive effect, especially when beauty and feminine modesty are both wanting. But Dolly's dress could not offend the most severe eye. Besides which, her arms and neck were white as alabaster, and beautifully smooth and polished. Her sweet face was lit up by a glow of pleasurable excitement; her almond-shaped grey eyes sparkled beneath their full lids, and her glorious golden-brown hair formed a natural and lovely coronet to the little shapely head which she carried so proudly.

As he advanced through the inner hall Beau saw her long before she saw him, and immediately he set eyes on her, some subtle presentiment warned him that this night would decide his fate. He was certain of it. A force, stronger than he could resist, took possession of him, and goaded him on to declare his love.

All of a sudden she blushed as red as a rose, and became conscious of his presence.

The next moment, in an exaggeratedly indifferent tone, she said:

"Good evening, Captain Dornay. You are late. I counted upon you and Harry as two energetic dancing men on whom I could rely. The old saying 'Deceivers ever,' has proved true again, as usual. Put not thy faith in princes, or rather in men. You promised to come early, and have kept your word nobly."

So saying, she looked him full in the face, with quite a severe expression of countenance.

"I am the culprit, Dolly," said Harry. "Don't blame Beau. It was not his fault. He wanted to start a good hour sooner than we did; but the fact was, I fell asleep after dinner, and kept the fly waiting no end of a time. We had a desperate long way to come home to-day, and were both very tired. However, I am sorry to have displeased you. Tell me, how can we make our peace?"

Dolly's countenance relaxed. It was clear that Beau had not offended.

"How can you make your peace? Why! Very easily. Pay forfeit by dancing with all the ugliest girls in the room. They are sure to be badly off for partners, poor things, and it goes to my heart to see them sitting out, especially in my own house. I feel responsible for them in a way."

"Am I not to be allowed to dance with you, Miss

Dalrymple?" said Beau, insinuatingly. "You must not make my punishment too hard, even if I have transgressed. I accept the penalty, provided I may look for some reward later on."

Dolly was still hurt with him for having treated her so coldly during the last few days, and now that he was at her feet, so to speak, she did not feel disposed to forgive him, without first making her forgiveness appreciated. The consciousness of being well dressed, and looking her best, gives a woman little coquettish ways that are by no means unpleasing, especially if they do not form part of her ordinary character, but are merely the outcome of youthful spirits and excitement. So, in answer to this appeal, she gave her pretty little head a toss, and said:

"Dance! Bless me, how can I dance, when I have to stand here, hour after hour, and receive my guests as they arrive? It would look funny if there were no hostess to greet them."

"But they won't arrive for ever. Sooner or later, a turn must come in the tide."

"Yes, thank goodness. I've only been at it an hour and a half, and already my 'How do you do's,' and 'So glad to see you's,' are pretty well exhausted. It's a sad thing to possess such a limited flow of small-talk, especially on an occasion like the present, when so continuous a supply is required. I can't tell you what hard work it is."

"So I should imagine," said Beau sympathetically. "But you only prove to me the necessity of enjoying yourself later on. Come now, let us strike a bargain. I promise to dance with all the very plainest girls you choose to introduce me to, and in return—well, in return you shall give me the first waltz after supper. Surely your duties, onerous as they are, will have come to an end by then."

The grey, long-lashed eyes looked up into his handsome face with a smile. It was impossible to feel angry with him for long; besides, she had an idea that on this evening he would tell her something which she was ashamed to confess even to herself, how anxious she was to hear.

Whence came a certain charming, little horse-shoe brooch, that had been sent that morning anonymously among her other birthday presents? She did not know, but she had elected to wear it this evening, and she had her own theory about the matter. It was such an agreeable one, that it

caused the dimple on her round, white chin to show itself whenever she reflected thereon. If this theory were correct, it proved absolutely and conclusively that there was no one in the world to compare with the giver.

So Dolly, having played her little part of dignified beauty, and being already thoroughly tired of it, dropped the mask, and no longer sought to disguise the happiness produced by Beau's friendly demeanour. Why should she do violence to her feelings? From this moment, she knew as well as if he had told her so in words, that he loved her honestly and truly. The little cloud that had risen on the horizon of their affection was rapidly disappearing. Indeed, it might never have existed, save in her too lively imagination. Their eyes met in a long, lingering glance. The colour mounted little by little to her fair cheeks. Both felt that a confession had been made. What matter if she did blush? Since Beau loved her, it was mock modesty on her part to be ashamed of letting him see how much she loved him in return. True, she had heard and read that it was bad policy for a woman ever to allow a man to perceive that she cared for him, but Dolly's nature was too candid, too pure to believe in such false doctrines. Love was to her a beautiful thing, an ideal and sacred thing, and she could not conceive of its being desecrated by any petty artifices. She judged her lover entirely by herself, and gave him credit for the same freshness and holiness of feeling.

"The first waltz after supper?" she murmured softly, as in a trance. "Very well; it shall be yours."

She looked so sweetly pretty, there was such an air of exalted, yet tender spirituality about her as she stood there, leaning against the dark, oak doorway, with her white polished neck and throat rising above the soft folds of her snowy gown, she formed so perfect a picture of Youth, Beauty, and Innocence, that Beau felt his head go from him, and a subtle intoxication stole through his whole being.

"Keep me another dance after our waltz," he whispered earnestly. "There's something I want—something I *must* say to you this evening. I can remain silent no longer."

Before Dolly could make any reply, Lord and Lady Fuzziwig were announced, and she advanced to meet them, leaving Beau with a sense of happy elation quickening the pulsations of his heart. The die was cast. The period of suspense at an end. In another hour he would have proposed to the

sweetest woman upon earth. What a darling she was, to be sure! He might consider himself a lucky fellow to be loved by such a girl. They were scarce enough in his experience. He had sense enough to know that.

Thus thinking, he moved on a few steps, and took up a position inside the ball-room, from which he could still keep his eyes fixed upon Dolly. He had never seen her in full evening dress until to-night, and her beauty captivated his senses. Nevertheless, he was mindful of his promise, and perceiving a forlorn little girl, very young, and with no pretensions to good looks, sitting jammed up between her mother and another old dowager, whilst she watched the dances with a pathetically eager expression of countenance, he obtained an introduction, and rendered the poor child supremely happy, by soliciting the honour of the next quadrille.

Short as had been Beau's stay in Fieldborough, he already knew a good many of the county people, and experienced no difficulty in finding partners. He was glad to get his duty dances over, whilst the young ladies were only too delighted to be trotted out by such a tall, handsome young man, and by one, moreover, who was a perfectly divine waltzer.

Once or twice, as he glided round, his light, easy step seeming to skim over the floor, Dolly's eyes followed him admiringly, and she thought to herself with pride, "Ah! there isn't any one in the room who can compare with him. How ugly and insignificant all the other men appear by his side. He has such a straight back, such an air, such a figure. What a lucky girl I am, to be sure!"

If Beau was fascinated by her appearance, she was equally so with his. To her mind, the scarlet hunt coat, with its cream facings and gilt buttons, had never looked well. For a time, she felt quite content just watching him, but when she noticed that he danced two dances running with the same young lady, she did not get jealous, oh! dear no, but she became somewhat impatient, and longed for the stream of visitors to come to an end. It seemed very hard that she, in whose honour the party was given, could not enjoy herself like the rest. Aggravating to have the cup raised to your lips, and yet be debarred from tasting its contents. Added to which, she was getting tired, desperately tired, of standing still shaking hands with people in a ridiculously

effusive manner, whether she liked them or not, knew them or didn't, and making little, stereotyped speeches. It annoyed her to find that, after a time, her imagination was not sufficiently fertile to invent any new ones. There was such an odious sameness about "How good of you to come. So pleased to see you. Hope you are not very cold after your drive. What luck to have such a fine night," etc., etc. And not only a sameness, but a hypocrisy as well. The whole thing was humbug. She wasn't a bit pleased to see half of them, and the majority would have been perfectly satisfied to push their way into the ball-room without taking any notice of the hostess at all. The handshakes were just as much a sham and a nuisance to them as to her. They came to dance, to flirt, to eat, to drink, to criticise, and to pick holes in their neighbours; not to sympathise with the crude reflections and boredom of a weary girl, whose duty it was to wreath her face in set smiles, and pour forth commonplace after commonplace with the chirpiness of a bird.

But an end comes to everything. What an intolerable place the world would be, were it not for the law of finality to which our human miseries, both great and small, are equally subject. The arrivals grew more and more scarce, until at length they ceased altogether. Looking down the long corridor that led to the library, Dolly could see groups of hurrying waiters, bearing numberless dishes suggestive of supper. She saw a prospect of deliverance, and really it was time; for what with the fatigue and the *ennui* combined she felt quite faint, and sank listlessly down into the nearest chair. It was such a relief to indulge in the luxury of silence, and have no more civil platitudes to deliver. So far, the evening had been productive of very little pleasure, and it left her just a trifle irritable and disappointed. There was no occasion for Captain Dornay to construe her words quite so literally. She naturally only meant them in fun, and if he had asked her again, she might have been persuaded to leave her post earlier. But no doubt he was too happy to think much of her. He seemed to be enjoying himself very fairly well, upon the whole. In five minutes she worked herself up into a most miserable condition, but her ill-humour and her lassitude soon vanished. Looking round, she saw Beau, who had only just discovered her retreat, drop his partner hurriedly, and

advance towards her with such a joyful countenance that, all at once, the world seemed quite bright again.

Her heart beat fast as he approached, and a trembling expectancy took possession of her being.

"Ah! here you are," he exclaimed; "I missed you from your post at the door, and wondered what had become of you."

So he had been thinking of her, even whilst dancing with another girl!

Dolly's spirits rose like quicksilver.

"I was tired," she replied, "and sat down to rest for a little while. Have you been amusing yourself?" glancing shyly up at him.

"No, not at all. How could I? I have simply been counting the minutes till I dared approach you."

"Am I so very formidable?" she inquired playfully.

"It's not that you are so formidable, but that I am afraid."

"Afraid of what? Surely not of me?"

"Yes; for my fate is in your hands."

She twitched nervously at her pocket-handkerchief. A strange desire for procrastination seized her. She knew what was coming, but the pleasure was so great, so intense, that she wished to prolong it. After all, she was a true woman. Now that there appeared no longer any doubt about his affection, she could afford to be coy.

"I saw you dancing twice with Miss Thornton. She's rather a pretty girl, don't you think so?" said the little puss, wishing to test her own power.

"I'm sure I don't know. I hardly looked at her. I was thinking of someone else."

"How very ungallant! The good people about here consider her quite a beauty."

"Do they? There's only one beauty in the world for me, and you know who she is."

Dolly blushed vividly, and looked pensively down at the point of one of her little slippered feet.

"You are tired," he went on, noticing that when the colour faded it left her rather pale; "and I'm sure I don't wonder at it. Nothing is such hard work as doing one's duty, as I found to my cost when twirling about with Miss This and Miss That. But now," gazing tenderly down at her, "we have both earned our reward, don't you think?"

"Yes," she murmured under her breath; how was it that

all his words to night appeared to possess a special significance ?

"Then come along and have some supper. I am certain a glass of wine will do you good, and after that we can have our dance, and end up with a real nice talk."

"I don't think the supper-room is open yet, Captain Dornay."

"Oh ! never mind ; so much the better. They are sure to let you in, and we shall escape the crowd."

So saying he offered her his arm, and she, nothing loth, allowed him to bear her away.

They found the dining-room filled with waiters, who at first seemed disposed to oppose their entrance ; but Beau had spied a couple of seats in a quiet corner, and getting hold of Sir Hector's valet, he told him that Miss Dalrymple was feeling rather tired, and required some refreshment.

Upon this, hot soup, champagne, lobster-salad, and a variety of delicacies appeared as if by magic, and the two young people made a very excellent supper. In fact, Dolly had no idea how hungry she was till she began, and all sense of fatigue soon vanished, chased away by Beau's soft blue eyes and caressing smiles.

For twenty minutes they were as happy as it is given to mortals to be, their hearts filled with the joyful consciousness that each loved the other.

Then the dining-room doors were thrown wide open, and a host of noisy chattering people came flocking in to supper. The strains of a melodious waltz reached their ears, vibrating with sweet, sad pathos on the air, now rising, now falling, with rhythmical precision.

It was their dance—the dance so patiently waited for, so anxiously looked forward to.

They gazed deep into each other's eyes, rose as if by one accord, and, without a word, passed arm and arm into the ball-room. For the moment speech was impossible. They were happier without it.

Ah ! what a beautiful thing is love while it lasts. It can convert even this hard, work-a-day world into a paradise, and fill men and women with god-like impulses. Both Beau and Dolly were in a state of exultation. Their souls were stirred by true and deep emotion, divine in its origin.

And Lydia Stapleton was forgotten, as if she had never been.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE CONSERVATORY.

DANCE music possesses a subtle charm, hard to resist, especially when the limbs are supple, the spirits light and youthful. The soft, swaying melody of a good waltz appeals quite peculiarly to people impressionable either by nature or the force of circumstances. The lights, the warmth, the music, the languorous scent of hot-house flowers, and the steady hum of conversation, all tend to lift folk out of their common-place, every-day groove, and to render them for the time being, unlike their ordinary selves.

As Beau's arm stole round Dolly's slender waist, and her head rested lightly on his shoulder, an electric current passed between them, and they entered into a state of enchantment, against which they had neither the power nor the wish to contend. The mere fact of personal contact produced a delirious effect upon these two persons, so deeply in love with each other.

Dream-like they glided round and round the room together. The pressure of Beau's encircling arm increased almost unconsciously as he strained Dolly's beloved form nearer to him—whilst the colour in her rose-tinted cheeks deepened and deepened, and the light in her clear eyes grew brighter and more intense, until they shone like stars, and appeared invested with an almost unearthly radiance.

Little recked they that people were looking at them, and closely observing their movements with the significant glances always freely bestowed upon an engaged couple. Even the musicians, attracted by the graceful movements of this handsome pair, played with extra spirit, and as if for them alone.

Round and round they sped. Dolly's white bosom began to heave. Beau almost fancied he could feel her heart beat against his own. A wave of passionate joy went thrilling through his frame. What wonder if at this supreme moment all else was forgotten? Henceforth, reserve was impossible to maintain.

"Dolly," he murmured under his breath, "isn't this heavenly? Don't you wish it could last for ever?"

"Ah! yes!" she sighed back in return, with half-closed eyes. "But it's too nice to last. Nice things never do."

He stooped his head, seized by a fit of uncontrollable emotion, until his silky moustache brushed against her little, pink ear. Somehow it seemed quite natural that he should call her by her Christian name; she only quivered in response, as does a fair, young bud when caressed by a balmy breeze.

"Oh! Dolly darling," he said, in tones rendered tremulous by passion. "I love you so. You haven't an idea how much I love you. Everything about you is sacred to me. I worship the very ground you tread on. I know I am presumptuous. I know I have no right to speak as I am doing, but—ah! Dolly, can you, do you care for me a little bit in return? If not, for Heaven's sake put me out of my misery as quickly as possible."

She raised her soft eyes to his. They glistened with a light so true and clear that no answer was necessary. Her sweet, flushed face wore an expression of ineffable tenderness, which rendered it wonderfully womanly and beautiful. His heart grew big, stirred by a sudden sense of his own unworthiness.

"God bless you, my beloved," he said reverently. "I do not deserve such great happiness."

"What have I done to deserve it either? Ah! Beau, God is very, very good to us."

"He is indeed; but let us get away from all this crowd and bustle, and go somewhere where we can be alone."

As he spoke, the music suddenly ceased with a few loud, triumphant chords, and a rush was at once made for the supper room, which was discovered to be open, by the warm and panting dancers. Beau bore Dolly off in a contrary direction, through the now deserted drawing-room, past her own little boudoir, with its suggestively-arranged chairs, and on into the conservatory beyond.

Throughout the evening it had been greatly patronized by flirtatious couples; but now they had forsaken it for the more substantial pleasures of chicken and champagne, and it was quite deserted. Escaping from the heated ball-room, the conservatory with its cool, moist atmosphere,

dim light, shining palm leaves, and delicately-tinted flowers, offered a delightful refuge for lovers. The stillness and fragrance which possessed it seemed as much a part of the silent night as did the glittering stars that pierced with their steely radiance the dark-blue dome overhead. In the midst of a rocky grotto, green with many ferns, plashed a clear fountain, whose steady drip, drip acted like some soothing lullaby upon the ear, charming into tranquillity the sur-excited brain. Close to this grotto an aviary had been erected, which was full of birds—Dolly's especial pets, that she was never weary of tending. One golden-coloured canary, more wakeful than his companions, who slumbered peacefully, with their tiny heads beneath their wings, or else resting motionless on their plump yellow breasts, occasionally uttered a little mournful chirrup, that sounded like a plaintive protest against the gay revellers who turned night into day. A couple of turtle doves hung high in a wicker cage half overgrown by a luxurious creeper, cooed their annoyance with pleasing but monotonous persistence. They recalled the spring, tangled copses with bursting buds above, and bluebells, primroses, and wild anemones beneath. A vision of green fields, waving grasses, and blue, cloud-flecked skies arose to the mind.

Beau and Dolly seated themselves in two easy chairs, hidden behind a gigantic palm, whose spreading fronds completely concealed them from vision. The beauty of their surroundings harmonised with the love in their hearts, and seemed to sanctify it, by lifting it up above all worldly and sordid influences. For a few minutes they sat quite silent. Both were deeply, powerfully moved, and words were inadequate to express the mysterious workings of their thoughts. Alas! that such moments are so rare, so fleeting; that the god-like elements in man should flash out only at long intervals, and even then, merely leap, flutter, and sink back into darkness like a dying flame. The good, the noble, the spiritual can only be obtained after infinite striving. They have to be laboriously acquired, whereas evil appears a naturally implanted instinct, handed down from father to son, and steadily transmitted from one generation to another.

Dolly looked stealthily at Beau, and she saw that there were tears in his eyes. Her own grew moist at the sight.

"What is the matter?" she asked gently.

"Nothing, my darling; only I am so happy—so happy, that I can hardly realise my happiness. Do you indeed love me?—you, who are rich and beautiful, and my superior in every way?"

"Beau, please don't say such a foolish thing; it makes me feel ashamed. It is you who are above me."

"Ah! Dolly, you do not appreciate yourself at your true value; but Sir Hector will never give his consent."

"Never? Never is a dreadful word. Why shouldn't he? Papa has quite decided that I ought to marry some day. Why, he would not have objected to my taking Ha——" She checked herself suddenly, remembering just in time that it was hardly fair to mention her cousin's defeat.

"Never mind," said Beau, guessing at the cause of her confusion. "I know all about it already. Harry confided to me the whole story of his discomfiture. I pity him from my heart; but he bears his rejection bravely and unselfishly."

"Well, if I might marry him, surely I may marry you."

"That does not follow. Harry is better off than I. Sir Hector does not know what a small fortune I have got." And Beau looked at Dolly, as if to find out what effect this piece of intelligence produced upon her.

"Are you poor?" she asked quite cheerfully, a smile of content curving the delicate lines round her pretty mouth.

"Yes, very, I regret to say."

"I'm glad of that."

"Glad! Dolly; why?"

"Because, then, no one can say I am marrying you for money, or for anything but your own dear self. I knew you were not rich. Nice men never are. Only the nasty ones have money, and it's my belief that very often being too well off makes them so horrid."

"It won't make me horrid, that's very certain," said Beau with a laugh.

"No, because nothing could. I like you just as you are; rich or poor is all one to me. Please understand that fact; it will save such a lot of repetition if once you can get it into your head. As for papa," and she shrugged her dimpled shoulders, "it is possible he may object at first;

out leave him to me. I know how to manage him. Besides, when he sees——" breaking off short.

"When he sees what, Dolly?"

"I don't think I shall say," she answered, with a captivating pout.

"You must. It's a downright shame to excite my curiosity on so important a matter, and then not gratify it."

"You are right, Beau. Concealments between you and me are ridiculous. I was going to say that, when papa sees how much in earnest I am, then he is sure to consent to our engagement. Do you know, sir," she went on with charming candour, "that I am twenty-three, to-day, and during all these long years of my life, have never cared about any man till I met you. There! what do you think of that?"

The frankness with which she acknowledged her affection sent a pang through Beau's heart. He could not help feeling that whilst this beautiful young girl had no secrets from him, and her soul was as clear and transparent as a lake on a brilliant summer's day, his was full of dark depths which it would be impossible ever to reveal. Ah! how he wished that he had led a better life. According to a masculine code, he had done nothing specially wrong; yet when he listened to Dolly's loving assurances he was heartily and thoroughly ashamed of his past.

"My dear one," he said brokenly, "I am not worthy of you. If you knew me as I am, you would not love me any longer."

His words, and the solemnity of the manner in which he uttered them, gave her a sudden shock. She turned pale, frozen, as it were, by a ghastly and horrible suspicion.

"Beau, for heaven's sake don't trifle with me. Do you mean that you are m—married already?"

He laughed a mirthless laugh, and flushed red to the very temples.

"No, it's not quite as bad as that. But, Dolly, you said just now that there should be no concealments between us. Are you strong? Can you bear to hear the truth?"

She clenched her little hands together, with all the fingers interlacing.

"Yes; I would rather. Anything is better than uncertainty. You do not know me as well yet, Beau, as you will some day; but indeed—indeed I am to be trusted."

"My darling! I know that without being told. Did you say you were twenty-three to-day, Dolly?"

"Yes. I am no longer so very young. I am aware of what goes on in the world."

"You think so, perhaps; but, Dolly, what would you say if—if you heard that there was ~~a~~—woman—in—the—case?"

For a few moments absolute silence prevailed. Nothing could be heard, save the cool splashing of the fountain, and the melancholy twittering of the little bird. Out of doors, the wind sighed softly, and gently stirred a clump of tall poplars that stood out spectral against the darkling sky. A silvery moonbeam poured in at one of the side windows and rested lovingly on Dolly's brown-gold head. She sighed and shivered.

"It is a horrid affair," he continued slowly, after a pause that appeared never-ending; "but, my darling, if I attempted to deceive you I should be a worse brute than ever. If you take me, you must take me knowing all my faults. There is still time to change your mind."

To speak thus cost him much. His face was set and rigid, and it had grown strangely white in the last few minutes. His purpose, his intention, was to tell her the truth. He only hoped that he might have the strength to do so in its entirety, for, soften it as he might, the tale he had to relate was not a pretty one. Never had his conduct appeared in so bad a light. He despised and hated himself.

Her lip trembled. She was dreadfully agitated. The confession he had just made wounded her modesty to the very quick. It was as if a barrier were raised up between them, which stained their love with a loathsome and unwholesome element, robbing it of its purity and holiness. To a fond girl, the experience was sharp indeed.

"Do you—do you *love* this woman?" she asked hoarsely, twisting her pocket handkerchief up into a little hard ball.

"No; I hate her."

He spoke with such vehemence that Dolly could not choose but believe him.

"Beau, tell me truly. Has she—any—claim upon you? Are you bound to her in any way?"

He hesitated. Her pallor, her distress, her maidenly

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confusion at touching upon the subject, all overwhelmed him. Unless he softened matters somewhat, he might lose her altogether. The thought rendered him frantic, and put his resolutions to flight. Truth looked so stern, prevarication comparatively easy.

"No, I think not. She knows that I care no more for her than I do for this chair," touching the one on which he was seated. "We have nothing—absolutely nothing—in common."

Dolly leant back, and crossed her little gloved hands on her lap with a gesture of relief. Things were not so very bad after all.

"Tell me about it, Beau. I can bear to hear it now—now that I know you don't care for her."

"Long ago," he said, speaking in a curiously subdued voice, for make what self-excuses he might, he felt like a cur, "when our regiment was quartered in a North Country town, and I was a mere boy of one or two-and-twenty, I made the acquaintance of a rich widow, eight years older than myself. She was then a marvellously handsome woman, in the very prime of her beauty. To make a long story short, like a young fool I fancied myself in love with her, and proposed. No doubt I was flattered by the preference which, from the first, she showed for me. Boys at that age are susceptible, and given to admiring women older than themselves. She accepted me, somewhat I own, to my astonishment. By the terms of her deceased husband's will, she lost all her fortune if she re-married. In those days my father was still alive, and I had nothing, or next to nothing. We could not set up house on love alone. After some discussion, it was finally agreed that our engagement should be kept secret, and the marriage indefinitely postponed, whilst she laid by a fortune out of her income. Meantime I went to India, and in the course of four or five years, discovered that my sentiments had undergone an entire alteration. I perceived, with dismay, that the passion I had foolishly mistaken for love was nothing but a boyish infatuation. Then I returned to England, saw you, and knew that it had become impossible for me to keep my word."

"You should have told her so," said Dolly, who had listened breathlessly to the above narration. "It was your only chance."

"I did. I went to town the other day on purpose."

"Well! And what happened then? For God's sake, do not keep anything back from me."

"It was not an easy thing to do. I begged her forgiveness. I tried to explain that I was the victim of circumstances, and wound up by distinctly stating that our engagement must be considered at an end."

Dolly stirred uneasily. A sense of oppression was creeping over her. Against her will she found herself sympathising with this woman, who had received such ungenerous treatment, and who was being put aside to make room for a newer and more youthful love. She hated her, and yet she pitied her.

"You have behaved badly," she said, with a quickly suppressed sigh. "At the same time, I scarcely know how you could have acted differently, but the poor widow is very much to be compassionated."

It was a miserable business altogether; nevertheless, looking at the matter impartially, it seemed to her that Beau was not so very much to blame. He had been guilty of folly, but of nothing worse, and how many people go through their lives without making some such mistake? She, herself, when she was seventeen, had been very nearly falling in love with a man, owing to investing him with ideal virtues, which, in the nick of time, chance fortunately revealed he did not possess. She could understand how easily people fell into similar errors, and not judge them too harshly. Whilst life lasted, but more especially in youth, cross influences seemed always at work, dragging their hapless victim first in one direction, then another. It required extraordinary fortitude to resist them. A man, handsome as Beau, had many temptations. Thus Dolly reasoned, possessing, in no ordinary degree, the excellent gifts of charity and common sense.

"I don't attempt to defend my conduct," said Beau moodily; "I know that it is inexcusable. I am, nevertheless, placed in a position when I must do wrong of some sort. If I marry a woman without having any affection for her, I commit a sinful act, sure to end in misery on either side; on the other hand, if I claim my liberty, I render her almost equally unhappy. Every now and then, occasions occur in life when it is compulsory of two evils to choose the lesser."

"Yes, I suppose so," assented Dolly, somewhat doubtfully; for, although she admitted the truth of Beau's reasoning, it was not altogether to her mind.

"What I am most afraid of," he resumed, "is that the woman may give trouble."

Throughout, he had been careful to make no mention of Lydia's name. An undercurrent of caution influenced all his speech.

"You mean, that although you don't love her, she loves you," said Dolly, with feminine quickness of perception.

Then she looked at him, and added softly:

"Poor thing; poor thing! it's only natural. I'm sure I don't wonder at it."

Beau was horribly dissatisfied with himself. In his innermost mind he felt conscious of many reservations. He had told the truth, but not the whole truth. In denying that Lydia Stapleton had any claim upon him, he was aware that he had been guilty of equivocation, if not of falsehood.

"If all this came to your father's ears, what on earth would he say, Dolly? We should never gain his consent."

"I don't know. Is there any particular reason why he should be told this unpleasant piece of news? If I am satisfied, surely that is enough. 'Least said soonest mended,' in cases of this kind."

"Do you really love me still? I like to be assured of the fact."

"Yes, how could I do otherwise? Since you have done nothing actually wrong or dishonourable, why should all this make any difference between us? I am sorry for *her*—very sorry, but somehow or other, in this world, whenever two people are particularly happy, somebody else always seem to have to pay for their happiness."

Beau winced. Was it so certain that he had done nothing wrong or dishonourable? A sudden fear seized him. Dolly trusted him now. Would she always trust him with the same perfect love and confidence? When the story reached her through some other source, as sooner or later it was bound to do, might not her mind become poisoned? The present was his own. He could read it in her steadfast eyes, that looked at him so frankly and tenderly, in the sweet curves of her full lips, in all the delicate lines of her mobile countenance. But the Future! Ah, he dared not

count upon it; dared not look forward to it. A dark shadow seemed to dwell upon him, and his soul was filled with black apprehension. She loved him. He must put her love to the test.

"My darling," he said, taking her little passive hand in his; "I am going to make a strange request."

"What is it, Beau?" she inquired, with an expression of ill-concealed anxiety.

"I am tormented by a sense of impending misfortune. This woman's image rises up before me like an accusing spirit. I shall know no rest until we are husband and wife, and can defy her to do her worst. Oh, Dolly, my dear, my love. Promise to marry me in a month from now. For any sake, let there be no delay."

She looked very grave at this proposition. There was a great deal about it she did not like, and did not fully understand. It disturbed so many preconceived ideas, and yet, what an opportunity of proving to her lover how much she cared for him, and what sacrifices she was prepared to make to please him.

"Well," he said impatiently, "what is your answer?" Dolly, Dolly, don't allow any scruples to stand in your way."

His impetuosity mastered every rising objection, and reduced her will to a state of submission.

She raised her eyes to his, and once again their glances met in one of those long, enthralling glances which seem to knit soul to soul. For good or for evil, she recognised that he was her lord, her king; and that she no longer retained the power of saying no to any wish of his. He dominated her with the sweet, yet tyrannical, force of true love, to which women, even the strongest, yield so gladly.

"It is frightfully hurried," she murmured. "You give me no time to think." Then with a sudden burst of passion, she added, "Beau, I don't know what is the matter. I have a strange feeling on me to-night; but whatever happens—whatever troubles we may have to bear together, never *doubt* my love. You have had an unpleasant confession to make this evening. I regret that it was necessary; but you might have concealed the truth instead of trusting me. You have acted nobly; and as you have been true to me, so, please God, will I be true to you."

Her face was glowing radiant. She had risen from her

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seat, and looked like the very incarnation of truth and love in their highest form, as she stood clad in snowy white, her graceful figure and impassioned countenance thrown up in high relief against a background of dark, shining leaves. Her image was photographed upon his brain through all time. He never forgot it. Fair, white and virginal, she impressed him like a being from another world.

How mean and how despicable he appeared beside her! How could he ever be worthy of such an angel. Scarce knowing what he did, he strained her to his heart. Dolly shivered. His passion frightened, even whilst it thrilled her. Such stormy emotions were new to her gentle nature, and stirred it to its very depths.

"Come," she said abruptly, "we must be going back, or people will notice my absence."

"And I may speak to Sir Hector to-morrow? I have your permission, sweet one?"

"I will tell him, It will be better for me to break the news, and seize a favourable moment."

"But I must see you; I cannot live in suspense."

"Meet me then at three o'clock, in the Wilderness. If papa consents, you can see him afterwards."

"Dolly, I shall be so anxious. You will be sure to come?"

"Yes, without fail. Wait at the old beech tree by the Mere until I appear. You know the spot. We have been there before."

She spoke very quietly and gravely. It seemed to her as if she had just assumed a terribly serious responsibility, without time being granted her to look it fairly in the face. She did not like the idea of being rushed into matrimony so suddenly. It detracted from her love something of its sacredness.

But it was all for Beau's sake—for Beau's sake. In time he would get to realise how much she cared for him.

Everything was strange to them both as yet.

She looked round regretfully at the cool, glossy palms, the sweet-smelling flowers, the splashing fountain, and the little, motionless birds. Her heart swelled with emotion. What would this new life be like, of which she had dreamed in her maiden slumbers? Would it be as happy as the old? She put her hand on Beau's arm and smiled. But even as she smiled, a shadow swept over the tender, girlish face.

"That woman" seemed to stand like a dark, forbidding foe between her and her lover, and at the very moment when her joy should have been most perfect cast a tinge of melancholy over it.

CHAPTER XIX.

I WANT TO GET MARRIED.

BREAKFAST at Woodford Chase next morning was very late. Everybody slumbered; for guests and servants were equally tired after their exertions of the previous evening. It was past mid-day before the last set of visitors staying in the house took their departure, not without considerable reluctance at leaving such comfortable quarters. Dolly felt no hospitable inclinations on this particular morning, and took care not to extend her invitations. She longed to be alone with her father, and to unburden herself of her secret. As long as she had to sit and talk a little gossip and society prattle she was consumed with impatience. What had come to her? She used to like these people, and even derived a certain pleasure from their conversation. Now they appeared insufferable bores, dull and tedious to a degree past endurance.

At length the last hand-shake was given, the last cordial farewell exchanged, and Sir Hector, thankful beyond measure to return to his accustomed ways after all the bustle and excitement to which he had recently been forced to submit, immediately retired to his study. With the feeling of a man who has done his duty, but who can't help rejoicing that the occasion for self-sacrifice is at an end, he sank into a capacious arm-chair before the fire, and in order to delude himself into the idea that he was not idle, made an attempt to read the newspaper.

It was only an attempt, not very heroically persevered in. Five minutes later, he was just dozing gently off, when an imperious tap came at the door. He straightened himself hastily, pushed his spectacles into place, and called out somewhat irritably:

"Who's there?"

"It's me, papa. May I come in?"

And without waiting for an answer, his daughter entered the room. Had it been anyone else, Sir Hector would

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probably have made use of the choice expletives already quivering on the tip of his tongue; but Dolly was a privileged person, who invaded his private sanctum with the greatest effrontery at all hours and seasons. His brow cleared. Though stern at times to others, he never could be so to her.

"Oh, it's you, is it? And pray, child, what do you want? If you are as tired as I am, you must be thankful to have the house to yourself again. Those old dowagers are terribly heavy to entertain. They have so few ideas, that it is downright hard work keeping up a conversation. Dolly, dear," looking at the girl with a paternal smile, "I wonder, when you get old, if you will degenerate into one of these appallingly fat and stupid women."

"I hope not, papa; but there's no saying. Never mind about that, however, just now. I want to discuss a most serious affair with you."

"Eh! What?" exclaimed Sir Hector, pricking up his ears. "Nothing the matter, I trust? Or has that damned fool Richardson been getting drunk again? If so, he must go. My mind is quite made up. I'll not overlook such conduct a second time. Order is order in an establishment, and when a man drinks, it sets such a confoundedly bad example to the rest of the household. Don't try to make any excuses for him, Dolly, for I won't listen to them."

"Fortunately there is no occasion, since your fears are unfounded. Richardson is not the offender who destroys your serenity. Guess who is."

"Tut, child, how can I?"

"Well, then, I sadly fear I am the culprit."

"You! Why, what have you done?" And Sir Hector sat bolt upright, and looked his daughter straight in the face, with his bright, penetrating brown eyes.

Dolly smiled, but the colour began to mantle in her cheeks. She was more nervous than she chose to admit, even to herself.

"What have I been doing?" she said, speaking with an artificial ease. "Nothing very dreadful, I hope; but—but—well, the fact of the matter is, papa, I want to get married."

Sir Hector almost jumped from his seat. He was totally unprepared for the intelligence

"Married, indeed! And pray who to?"

Dolly threw herself on her knees by her father's side.

"Ah!" she cried, clasping one of his big, hairy hands in hers. "That's just the point. You won't be angry, will you, if I tell you?"

"That depends on circumstances. You have taken me completely by surprise."

"Or disappointed if he has not got any money?" she continued. "He isn't rich; in fact, he has already told me that he is very poor; but," and her whole face became illuminated, "he's awfully nice, and quite different from anybody else I have ever met, except you. Indeed, he reminds me of you in his ways."

Sir Hector blinked his eyes repeatedly. A certain moisture was gathering in them, and he could not bear that she should perceive it, or guess that already, in his parental heart, lurked a fierce, unreasoning jealousy against the unknown individual, who had not only stolen his daughter's affections from him, but who proposed to rob him of her for ever. They had been so happy together since the death of his wife. Why could not the girl rest satisfied? She had everything she wanted. Money, freedom, position, and yet she must needs throw them all away for the sake of a husband, forsooth. He could not bear the idea of handing his dear, little delicate Dolly over to the tender mercies of some selfish young man he knew nothing, or next to nothing, about. It was gall and wormwood to him. Why could she not be content? Why could she not be content? This thought rose uppermost in his mind. The next minute he suppressed it as egotistical and unworthy. Was not Dolly's petition natural, and but the voice of nature crying out for wifehood and motherhood. How could he hope, and what right had he to desire, to stifle such divinely implanted instincts. He was getting old. He looked at life from the sober standpoint of middle age, and already found difficulty in sympathising with the warm impulses and aspirations of youth. Alas! alas! After all, youth was best, and happier those governed by the heart than the head. With an effort he pulled himself together, whilst a flickering smile passed over his bronzed and healthy countenance.

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successful attempt at playfulness. "Why, Dolly, in your enthusiasm you have forgotten even to tell me his name. Who is this fairy prince of yours?"

"Don't you know without being told?" she asked shyly, caressing the hand which she still retained with her soft white fingers.

"No; how should I?" Then, as a light broke in upon him, he added, "It isn't that tall, strapping soldier friend of Harry's by any chance, is it? He's the sort of young fellow to catch a romantic girl's eye."

For all answer she flung her arms around his neck, and laid her smooth, pink cheek against his. The pale, noon-day sun gleamed in from a high oriel window close by, and its rays, resting upon her head, caused the little bright curls that adorned her temples to shine like rings of gold.

"Is it?" he asked again, taking her round chin between his forefinger and thumb, and lifting it to a level with his own. Her eyes dropped before the steady gaze they encountered.

"Yes, papa," she said in an almost inaudible voice.

"Phew! I had no idea of this. What a blind old bat I am, to be sure. A woman would have ferreted it out in no time, but I fancied you two were friends, and nothing more. When did it all happen? Come, Dolly, make a clean breast of the business now you have begun."

She reddened a little. Perhaps her blush was caused by the consciousness that already between her lover and herself there existed a secret which they did not consider it desirable to reveal. The knowledge rendered her a trifle more constrained and less frank than usual.

"Captain Dornay proposed to me last night, papa, and I accepted him. I have been wishing to tell you of it all the morning, but had no opportunity of doing so as long as our visitors were here."

"And you really want to leave your poor old father, Dolly? Heigho! It seems hard, but I suppose that sooner or later the time was bound to come. My fool's Paradise could not last for ever," sighing regretfully.

A certain bitterness in his tone touched her to the quick. She knew better than anyone else, that if she married and went far away, how totally it would upset his life. During the last few years they had been so dependent on one another, and had got so used to each other's ways. To

leave him desolate in his old age was not what she intended. They had been too near and too dear to part lightly.

"Papa," she said gently, "why should I go far away, as you appear to take for granted? If I wanted to marry a rich man, with a large fortune of his own, things might and would have been different; but as it is, could not Beau and I live with you in the dear old house? Instead of losing a daughter, how nice it would be if you could gain a son. Won't you think of it? You will be so lonely all by yourself."

Truly had Dolly said that she knew how to manage her father. No plea could have been more artfully worded. He caught eagerly at her suggestion. If only he might keep his daughter, he felt himself prepared to make many sacrifices, even to admitting a third inmate into the household.

"It is all very well talking," he said, "but will Captain Dornay consent to such an arrangement? The ordinary run of young men like their liberty, and prefer having their wives all to themselves. They don't care to have an old father-in-law always pottering about after them."

"Perhaps so," she answered, with proud confidence; "but Beau does not belong to the ordinary run of young men. He is quite exceptional, both as regards his thoughts and his feelings. I should not have fallen in love with him otherwise."

Sir Hector smiled sadly. Somehow, to hear her talk made him wish himself young again, and with his courtship just beginning. What a lucky fellow this Dornay was, to have secured the affections of such a girl as Dolly! Though she was his own daughter, he envied him his good-fortune.

"Have you spoken to your 'exceptional' lover on the subject, child?" he asked, with the faintest touch of satire.

"No, not yet, papa; but I feel quite sure that Beau will throw no obstacles in the way. I've got it all mapped out in my own head. Directly we are married, he shall retire from the army, and settle down here. You know how large the estate is, and that you were only saying the other day how glad you would be to find someone to take part of the management off your hands. You could not possibly have a better person than Beau. A stranger might rob you whereas Beau's interests would be identical with your own."

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"I don't suppose he knows anything of farming," objected Sir Hector; "it's hardly likely, in his position."

"If he doesn't, he can easily learn. Everybody can learn things if they have a mind to be taught, and are gifted with a certain amount of intelligence. And Beau is so clever. He rides, and sings, and does everything well. Under your tuition, it will not take him very long to master the difficulties of farming."

Dolly's eloquence was extremely persuasive. Her father found it hard to resist, yet at the same time, he felt that it was his duty not to yield too easily. There were certain points which it behoved him to ascertain before sanctioning a formal engagement.

"I cannot give you any decided answer, my dear," he said, "until I have had a talk with Captain Dornay, and questioned Harry as regards his friend——"

"I don't see what Harry has got to do with the matter," she interrupted, a trifle indignantly.

"Ah! Dolly, Dolly, you are like all girls when they are in love — utterly foolish and unpractical. Granted that Captain Dornay is a pleasant, good-looking young fellow, that he rides like a centaur, waltzes divinely, and has a very pretty talent for music. Do such accomplishments, charming as they undoubtedly are, frank his morals, or guarantee his character? For all we know to the contrary, he may be a regular blackleg."

"Papa!" she cried, flushing up angrily, "how can you speak in such a heartless cold-blooded manner? After seeing Beau, and talking to him, it is astonishing to me that you should have any doubts as to his character. You must be blind indeed, if you fail to read it in his honest blue eyes." And she seated herself on the arm of her father's chair, and began beating the carpet with one restless little foot.

"That's all very well, Dolly. You see with the orbs of love, and no doubt it's quite natural and quite proper that you should; but I, as your father, should consider myself very much to blame if I did not make certain necessary inquiries. We neither know who Captain Dornay is, nor to what family he belongs. Are his connections respectable or not, and has he sufficient means to support a wife? These are matters that require to be ascertained, however much you may affect to despise them."

There was good, sound common sense in what Sir Hector said, but it was sense of a kind not calculated to make any very serious impression upon Dolly in her present mood.

"I don't see what it signifies who Captain Dornay's *people* are," she retorted, with a little proud uplifting of the head. "He himself is a gentleman, as anyone can tell; and as, for his means, the best thing you can do is to see him, papa, and settle all that part of the business to your own satisfaction."

"And supposing the young man has nothing?"

"It will not make any difference to me, or alter my decision, as far as I am concerned."

"Do you really mean that I am to let you marry a pauper? Really, Dolly, I flatter myself that I am not more worldly than my neighbours, but I do think that *my daughter*," laying a strong emphasis on the words, "is entitled to wed a man of some standing and position."

She gave a light, little laugh. Instinct told her that his scruples were already conquered.

"Ah! papa, your daughter may be an obedient enough young woman in some ways, but in others she is rather obstinate, as you have already had occasion to discover; and when she once takes an idea into her head, it is no easy task to dislodge it. I often think there must be a vein of mulishness running through my nature. However that may be, one thing is certain. You may, of course, refuse your consent to my marrying Beau Dornay, in which case I should feel myself bound to obey you; but if you do, I shall remain an old maid all my life, for I could never—never marry anyone else. He is the only man I have ever loved, or will ever love."

Her voice quivered with emotion, and its clear, vibrating tones penetrated to Sir Hector's heart. He realized with a pang that her affections were seriously engaged. Do what he would, he could not help owing Beau a grudge. And yet he liked the gallant hussar. He thought him a fine, upstanding young fellow, and well calculated, judging from appearances, to render any woman happy.

"Dolly, dearest," he said, smoothing back the rebellious curls from her brow, "do not think me harsh or unjust. All I want is to ensure your ultimate welfare."

Her momentary petulance vanished. She felt the truth

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of his words, and was ashamed of any irritation she might have shown. How wonderful was the way in which this great, new love swallowed up the old, which had endured for years. It did not seem right, and made her very conscience-stricken, very humble and abashed.

"Papa, dear," she said persuasively, "if you want to make me happy, you must let me marry Beau. Don't allow that horrible money to stand in the road. I have some of my own, and you are a rich man who can afford to be generous. If Beau is poor, it is not his fault. He has everything else—everything, except wealth, in his favour. Most parents are so miserably worldly nowadays, they think only of what people have got, not of what they *are*. They would welcome a fiend as a son-in-law, if he possessed so many thousands a year. The fact is, we of the richer class are too luxurious. Our better feelings get blunted through too much comfort and over-indulgence. We end by thinking that there is nothing in the world to live for but eating, drinking, excitement, show, and personal amusement. No doubt our friends and acquaintances consider I ought to make a good marriage; but their idea of a good marriage is securing a husband with so much cash at his banker's. Mine is quite different. I hold that a girl can only make a good marriage when she is thoroughly in love, and is lucky enough to marry the man of her choice. Papa, you have a kind heart—you know that money does not count for everything. Never mind what the world will say. Refuse to be bound down by its narrow, mean-spirited, conventional doctrines, and in so doing, prove your own nobility of soul. Why should you and I listen to the hateful voice of society, and allow it to divide us?"

Sir Hector was deeply affected by this appeal. He certainly *did* consider that Dolly had every right to make a far more brilliant match than the one in contemplation; but, on the other hand, there appeared no very urgent reason why he should refuse his consent. It all resolved itself into this. Could he, and should he pocket his pride in order to gratify his inclinations? He put a kindly hand on Dolly's shoulder, and kissed her with considerable agitation.

"There, there, my dear child," he said, "don't make yourself unhappy, if any little inevitable delay arises. No doubt everything will come right in the end. Meantime,

you can write a note to your friend, Beau, and tell him he may come and see me whenever he likes."

"I scarcely think it will be necessary to write the note," she said demurely.

Sir Hector laughed out loud. The shame-faced gesture which accompanied these words was infinitely diverting.

"What! have you been making assignations already? Upon my word that's too bad. You rush along at railway speed."

"Beau said he would call this afternoon about three o'clock," she confessed, blushing red as a rose.

"Oh! did he? Very kind of the young gentleman, I'm sure. Did you make this nice little arrangement last night, when you apparently settled so many other important matters to your satisfaction?"

"He vowed he couldn't live in suspense, and—and——" she said, with a sudden smile, "perhaps I couldn't either."

"And now you consider all the suspense at an end, eh? Dolly, you are a regular witch. Be off with you."

"Do you want me, papa? I mean," mischievously, "towards three o'clock?"

"No, what's the use, when henceforth you are slave of the ring to somebody else? I suppose it's all right, but you have given me enough to think of for many a long day to come."

So saying, Sir Hector rose from his seat, and began slowly pacing up and down the room. The question of Dolly marrying had burst upon him like a bombshell. Of course, he had frequently entertained it, but always rather as a remote contingent of the future than as a near and actual possibility. He had received a severe shock; and yet the girl was right in what she said, as usual. He could not bear to lose her. It would be death to him. The great, big house would resemble a prison if deprived of her cheerful presence; and he himself, when shorn of a legitimate object on which to bestow his affections, would sink down into a selfish, peevish, solitary old man. In his heart of hearts, he realized that Dolly was as indispensable to his welfare as the food he ate, or the air he breathed. To him she meant sunshine, movement, continued interest in life. And after all, this Captain Dornay seemed a nice, gentlemanly young fellow, who had already made friends with pretty nearly the whole of the county. Lady Fuzziwig approved of him, called him quite charming, and asked him

to dinner. Sir Hector could not help feeling comforted by the recollection of her ladyship's cordiality. It was a sort of moral support; for everyone round Fieldborough bowed down before the vivacious, yellow-wigged old woman, who gave out her opinions so freely, and with such a fine disregard for other people's feelings. That, however, is a peculiarity which, when combined with a title, generally gains for the owner a reputation of possessing great wit and originality. At all events, those people whose feelings have not yet been trampled upon, and who enjoy a joke at their neighbours' expense, are ever ready to applaud social tyrants like Lady Fuzziwig.

There was another point in Beau's favour.

Sir Hector entertained a pleasing conviction that if he sanctioned Captain Dornay's engagement to Dolly, the young man's will was never likely to clash with his own. He would remain master as heretofore. The belief that Beau was amiable, peaceably inclined, unambitious, was an agreeable one. Sir Hector recognised that his future son-in-law would be quite content to shoot, hunt, and play the country squire for the remainder of his days without being stirred by any of those restless and extravagant impulses which so often bring young men into collision with their seniors. By and bye, if he got tired of inaction, he might go into Parliament, and represent the Conservative interest at his—Sir Hector's—command.

Yes, Dolly was wise and far-seeing. There appeared very little doubt that it was much more to his advantage to let her marry a comparatively poor man, rather than a rich one who could afford to dispense with a father-in-law's assistance. As long as the young couple were dependent upon him financially, he would continue to hold the reins of government. Such reasoning was selfish enough. It had an egotistical strain running through it, of which Sir Hector could not help being conscious; but man is so constituted that he cannot refrain from considering his own interests of paramount importance, and allowing them to influence all his decisions. He accepts with almost childish eagerness, any argument that happens to fall in with his wishes, whilst exhibiting a peculiar inability to reconcile himself to those that are opposed to them. To do Sir Hector justice, he was sincere in one respect. He honestly desired to secure Dolly's happiness; and, from the tone of her voice and the

decision of her manner, he felt convinced that her affection was genuine, and not merely a girlish fancy possessing an ephemeral existence. In short, if Captain Dornay were not an absolute pauper, he resolved to receive him favourably.

This was the sum and substance of Sir Hector's cogitations, arrived at after much conscientious debating.

He was not wholly satisfied with the contemplated match—he did not think it nearly good enough for his Dolly, the belle of the county, and a veritable queen among girls—yet, on the other hand, there were certain points which recommended it to his favour. If he could but extract a promise from Captain Dornay that he would not rob him of his daughter, he—Sir Hector—would have much—very much—to be thankful for. In short, the good man's parental attachment ended by completely conquering his ancestral pride.

CHAPTER XX.

UNDER THE BEECH TREE.

A FEW minutes before three, Dolly put on her hat and jacket, and went out.

It was a dull, vaporous afternoon, singularly mild for the time of year. Nature seemed in a depressed and quiescent mood. Wreaths of white mist rested on the undulating ridges of the grassy park, and from its smoke-like surface the tall trees rose weirdly, their black trunks shining with moisture, and their bare branches shedding tear-drops to the ground. The air was still, and penetrated by a humid warmth that seemed to extract from the wet, brown earth, with its covering of decayed vegetation, a faint and somewhat oppressive odour.

Overhead spread a sullen sky, dark-grey in tint, its monotony relieved by an occasional woolly cloud, behind which peeped a blue, so pale, so tender, that it appeared inexpressibly far away, and seemed, indeed, to belong to another and a fairer world. The silence was unbroken, save for a crew of busy rooks, who had taken up their residence in some tall, old elms at the end of the terrace, which bounded the house on its south side.

Along this terrace Dolly passed swiftly, and opening a

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little iron gate, turned down a path to the right, bordered on either side by a well-kept hedge of laurels, whose bright, green leaves contrasted vividly with their immediate background of darker tinted holly. Beyond, the woods were filled with tawny undergrowth, wilting and withering in the shadow of the tall, straight-stemmed pines that reared their noble crowns on high. To day they were black and sombre, lending a certain uniformity to the scene. They lacked the golden sunshine that in the summer time lit them up with such subtle effects of light and shade, and probed with vivid shafts into the darkest recesses of the woods. Then, their great trunks took on a pinkish-grey hue, and the whole air was scented with the pungent, aromatic odour of their small, brown needles.

As Dolly walked along, the path gradually grew wilder, and owed more to nature, less to the gardener's care. The prim laurels disappeared, and were replaced by yellowing bramble, sharp-pointed gorse, and by a wilderness of ochre-coloured bracken, dry and crackly in spite of the moisture that clothed it with quivering drops. It was a place in which to seek refuge on a broiling hot day, when the sky was cloudless, the earth parched; but even at this time of year it possessed a restful and austere beauty, although a beauty too suggestive of decay to produce an exhilarating effect upon the spirits. Nevertheless, reward awaited those who trod the solitary path, for a sudden turn revealed the Mere, a large sheet of water, over a mile in length, and nearly a quarter of a mile broad, which formed the glory of Woodford Chase, and rendered it almost as agreeable a residence in the dog-days as during the hunting season.

This afternoon, not a breath of wind disturbed its glass-like surface. It lay like a crystal mirror embedded in green woods. Each slender reed and rush, poised upon the verdure-clad banks, was reproduced with marvellous fidelity in its translucent depths. A little longer, a little less firm of outline, otherwise these reflections might have been taken for the originals, so bright and pure was their colouring, so faithful the water's rendering. Flags grew along the sides, or sprang from the sandy soil, moistened by tiny wavelets; tall tufted grasses, too, burstin with gossamer seedlets, that at each tremulous breath of air floated lightly from the parent pod. Bulrushes there were in numbers, with long, pointed leaves hanging faded and

discoloured after the early frost; and thistles, white with down, and large, woolly tufts of the cotton plant, and here and there a head of red sorrel, crumbling slowly away as if loth to disappear altogether. The opposite shore was fringed by a line of yellow sand, broken up into charming little bays and indentations, where the water-wagtails plumed themselves in the spring, and moor-hens built their nests. A few yards further back; the fir-clad banks rose steeply, their dark, irregular outlines clearly defined, as a rule, against a range of rounded hills that bounded the view in this direction. To-day the latter were not to be seen; the mist hung too heavy o'er the surrounding country, and wrapped them round in a mantle of grey.

The path which Dolly trod led to a rustic boathouse, and there ended abruptly. A little removed from this boathouse grew a gigantic beech. Its smooth, grey trunk was covered in places with the close-clinging patches of lichen, in others it was cracked and fissured, leaving long red scars exposed. The knotted roots travelled along the earth for many yards, reminding one of some monster of the deep throwing out tentacle after tentacle to support existence. This grand tree, said to be many centuries old, was still clothed with a mass of faded brown leaves, whose russet glory was reflected far out in the Mere, forming a spot of sober colour agreeable to the eyes to rest upon. Beneath the beech, and apparently equally ancient, was a roughly-constructed bench, known far and wide by the name of the Lover's Seat.

According to tradition, several hundred years ago, one of the beautiful daughters of the noble house of Woodford was engaged to be married to a youth of quality and distinction, who she ardently loved. But civil war had brought the fortunes of the family to a low ebb. The suitor was poor, as also was the maiden, and the maiden's father. Consequently, the latter desired that his daughter should wed with a wealthy neighbour, rich and powerful, but over three score years in age. Lady Isobel proved refractory, but none the less did her elderly swain persecute her with his unwelcome attentions. By some unlucky chance, he found out that the lovers were in the habit of secretly meeting by the Mere. Mad with disappointed love and jealousy, he followed them there, and one day shot poor Archie Lovell through the heart, even whilst the lad

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still held his mistress in his arms. He fell dead at her feet, without a sigh, without a groan. The murderer had intended to retreat, and not betray his presence; but at the sight, he could no longer contain his joy, and gave vent to a wild shout of exultation. Now, at last, Lady Isobel must yield to his desires. Thus he reasoned, but he reckoned without his host. The beautiful girl shot one glance of terror and disgust at him. Hatred distorted every feature of her face—that fair face, which only a moment before had been wreathed in happy smiles, then—as he advanced with the evident intention of bearing off his prize, she uttered a loud cry of “Archie, Archie,” and flung herself head foremost into the Mere. It was very deep, quite out of her depth, and she could not swim. When Sir Herewald reached the spot, a dead boy lying straight and rigid on the ground, a few bubbles, and some floating article of female attire were the only vestiges left of two fond lovers, who had played such a sad part in this human tragedy.

So much for the romance of the old beech tree. No doubt it had witnessed many others in its time.

Owing to the beauty of the Mere and its peaceful surroundings, Dolly frequently went there. In fact, it was her favourite resort whenever she felt at all weary or out of temper. The soft lapping of the water, the sighing of the wind as it rustled through the tall rushes, the chirping of the birds, and the soothing influences of nature, never failed to act like a charm and a sedative upon her spirit.

Beau and she had already visited the boat-house on several previous occasions, so that he knew the trysting-place well. As Dolly advanced, treading noiselessly over the velvety mass, she perceived that her lover was punctual to their appointment. Her heart beat several strokes faster than its wont, as she recognised his spare, muscular frame, well set-on head, and soldierly carriage. She paused for a minute, in order to indulge in the luxury of admiring him. He was so splendidly handsome, according to her girlish standard of masculine good looks. Presently she advanced again, and in doing so, put her foot accidentally upon a fallen twig, which noisily snapped in two. He turned hastily at the sound, and welcomed her with glad, blue eyes.

“Dolly, darling, is that you? How was it I never heard you come?”

"Because I suppose your own thoughts proved too engrossing," she replied, saucily. "I have been standing gazing at you for ever so long. Did you think I was keeping you waiting?"

"Well, perhaps I *did* think something of the sort. The fact is, I could not help feeling anxious and impatient, and got here considerably before my time. And now, tell me what sort of news do you bring—bad or good?"

She held out her two hands with a reassuring smile.

"Guess."

"Good?"

"Yes, Beau, on the whole very good, even better than I expected."

"Thank heaven!" he ejaculated, fervently.

"Papa was somewhat surprised," she went on, "at my taking what he calls the matrimonial epidemic so violently. He would not believe it at first, but when once he began to realise that the mischief inflicted was permanent and real, he offered singularly few objections. At any rate, he is prepared to discuss the matter with you in a far from unfriendly spirit."

"That's capital. But, oh, Dolly dear, do you suppose he has the least idea how small my means are?"

"Yes, I told him you were not rich. I thought it best. He did not seem to mind so much. What disturbs papa most is—fancy what!" And she smiled up at him mischievously.

"Well, what?" he asked, with an answering smile.

"Your *character*! He appears to entertain a profound distrust of all young men, and looks upon them as monsters of iniquity. Beau, that's not the case, is it? You're not all bad, surely?"

He reddened. The stock of worldly wisdom on which she prided herself so much was evidently small.

"No, no, of course not; but I say, Dolly, you did not mention what we were talking about last night, did you?" And he stared straight out at the Mere, so that she should not see his embarrassment. It was hateful to him having to discuss this disagreeable subject with her, but he must know how the land lay.

"No. I felt an awful traitor, but I said nothing about it."

"That was right."

"Do you call it right? It seemed to me very wrong not to give my own dear father all my confidence."

"More mischief is done by unnecessary confidences, Dolly, than by anything else in this world."

"Ah, I am quite relieved to hear you use the word unnecessary. Do you know, Beau dear, I have been rather unhappy since our conversation of last night. I know I ought not to be—that it sounds as if I did not love you as you deserve to be loved—but I cannot help it. What disturbs me is this. You half hinted that the—woman—I do not know her name, nor do I wish to know it—had some claim upon you——"

"You are torturing yourself without any sufficient reason," he interrupted, tugging at his moustache, as he always did when annoyed. "Once married, she can do us no harm. Even as it is, we are strong enough to defy her."

Some tone of equivocation, new to her in his voice, increased instead of allaying her uneasiness. She put her hand on his sleeve, and looked earnestly up into his half-averted face. Against her will, a horrid suspicion rose to her mind.

"Beau, dear Beau, are you quite sure? Are you telling me the whole truth? Don't conceal it, simply because it is unpleasant. I am strong, and I love you, and—and——" beginning to falter, "I could bear a great deal from your lips. Perhaps I may be foolish in wishing it, but if this person has the slightest hold over you, which either troubles your conscience now, or can render our future life disturbed, go and see her again, and make everything right between you. Tell her all, have no concealments. It will save much unhappiness in the end. Beau, dear, it is an unpleasant subject; please God we may never be forced to allude to it after to-day; but for my sake, for your sake, for my father's sake, do as I ask you to do."

She paused, breathless with emotion too powerful to conceal. Was it a presentiment of evil that hung so heavy o'er her spirit this afternoon, or did the close atmosphere account for her oppression?

Beau made no immediate reply. He kicked away a pebble lying at his feet, with an energy that seemed wholly uncalled for. A tumult raged within him. He knew, without being told, that what Dolly asked was not only

reasonable, but right. No one could realise this more strongly than he, and he admired and respected her for the part she played in the matter. But—when is there not a but?—the remembrance of his last visit to Lydia, of the draped and scented room, of her fierce, glowing beauty, and the sense of moral subjugation which it never failed to produce upon him—strive against such weakness as he might—rendered him singularly reluctant to expose himself once more to temptation. If she were to catch him in a weak mood, instead of in a strong, what might be the result? Bondage worse even than at present, and emancipation further off than ever. Absence was his best, his only friend. He could remain firm when not subjected to her influence; but whenever they met, by some subtle and superior quality of will, she seemed to direct his actions—nay, even his thoughts. To explain all this to Dolly was impossible; besides, she could hardly be expected to understand the curious state of mind produced in him by Mrs. Stapleton. Never had he felt so conscious of the strange limitations of his nature as at this moment, when he found himself, by some kind of mental barrier which he could not overleap, totally unable to pursue a straightforward course, that simply entailed a certain amount of disagreeable personal effort.

Dolly's clear eyes scorched into the very depths of his soul. Ah! if she should ever know him as he was! How she would despise him! But she must never be allowed to discover the weakness underlying his character. His six feet of stature, his magnificent physique, his brawny muscles befriended him. Nobody—not even Harry, had found him out. The fatal secret was shared only by himself and Lydia. She knew it, and it was that in part which gave her such strength, and made her love so hard to resist.

“Well! Beau,” said Dolly anxiously, after waiting in vain for an answer. “Will you take my advice?”

“I would take any advice of yours, but, in this case, it scarcely applies. You seem to forget that I have already had an interview with—with the lady in question.”

“Yes, but from what I gathered, the result was not wholly satisfactory.”

“A hundred interviews would not render it more so, of that I am convinced.”

"Beau, you don't know how strict papa is in some ways. If this affair ever comes to his ears, he is quite capable of breaking off our engagement altogether. A few words of explanation now, might save a great deal of misery later on. I really think papa ought to be told. He has a good head, and might help you out of the difficulty."

"I cannot speak to your father on the subject. He would not take it as you have done, my angel."

"Well! if you won't, you won't, but at anyrate, see the principal party interested, and make matters smooth before our marriage. This, surely, I have a right to demand."

"And supposing they can't be made smooth?" he rejoined, shooting a tentative glance at his companion.

"They will; they must. There's always a way out of every difficulty, if people will only face them honestly and bravely."

The consciousness that she was altogether in the right rendered him irritable. Oh! if he could but get clear out of this mess.

"Dolly, Dolly!" he cried bitterly. "Cannot you trust me? It is hard indeed to be met with suspicion on the very first day of our betrothal. I thought I had fully explained to you last night, that the best and surest means of escaping unpleasantness was for us to get married as soon as possible. When you are my wife, Lyd—the woman must hold her tongue. In the meantime, how can I tell what stories she may spread, what slanders set in circulation against me? If she does not hear of our engagement, we are safe. Shame will make her keep silent later on. Few women like to proclaim to the world that they have been jilted." So saying, he tried to put his arm round Dolly's waist, with an air of fond appropriation.

But the girl drew herself away; a sick feeling stealing into her heart. She did not approve of his argument.

"It is an unfortunate business at best," she said sadly. "My only comfort in it all is, that no one can accuse you of anything worse than folly. It would break my heart if I really thought you had behaved badly or dishonourably."

"Look here, Dolly," he answered, with unusual sternness, "if you and I are ever to have any peace, we must give up talking about this miserable affair. It can do no good, and only creates a feeling of soreness between us. If we keep

our own counsel, and stick to each other for a few weeks, things are bound to come right. Why cannot you believe me? Do you suppose I should begin by wilfully deceiving you?" He spoke rapidly, and with heat. Then his whole face softened, and turning towards her with a tender reproachful look, he added, "Oh! my darling, my darling! Have you so little faith in my love, as not to be able to realise that henceforth my only aim and object in life is to make you happy, and shield you from trouble or pain?"

She was conquered. What woman would not have suffered defeat in her place? She felt ready to go down on her knees, and humbly ask pardon for having dared to set up her judgment against his. Of course he knew best; it was presumptuous to have endeavoured for one moment to dictate to him. And just now she had repulsed him, and treated him coldly! Ah! what a wicked girl she was, to be sure. Her eyes swam with tears.

"Beau," she said contritely, "forgive me. You are right, and I am wrong. In future we will discuss this matter no more; but I shall always feel grateful to you for having told me of it when you did, because it showed you had confidence in me. And now, Beau dear, settle everything just as you please. I am yours to do what you like with."

Her pride and generosity were both aroused. It seemed to her that she could not make sufficient redress for the unworthiness of her recent conduct, and the suspicions she had entertained against him.

"Darling!" he murmured passionately.

And then he caught her in his arms—she did not repulse him this time—and kissed her fair face again and again, until it blushed with virgin shame.

"To-day month, Dolly," he said at last. "You will not keep me waiting longer, will you?"

It was impossible to answer this bold demand. She nestled against him like a little fluttering bird who, to its great joy, at length has found a safe retreat. A gleam of triumph lit up his eyes with an azure radiance. She was his at last.

"My own, my very own!" he whispered caressingly. "How good you are to me! Please God, in the years to come, it may be in my power to repay you." . . .

The water splashed and gurgled at their feet in tiny,

dancing wavelets, the tall grasses nodded their feathery heads, as the tremulous breeze passed through their serried ranks, the leaves of the water-lilies heaved gently up and down on the shining surface of the Mere, and over all the soft, white mist rested like a ghostly shroud. Dolly and Beau had eyes only for each other. Their hearts were full of love, and for a few exquisite moments refused to admit any less exalted sensation. The whole world seemed to them flooded with sunshine. They never noticed that nature's mood was not harmonious with their own, or that the clouds were grey and leaden, the atmosphere heavy and oppressive. The blue-green firs looked black as night against the dull, colourless sky, whilst the old beech tree, with its forest of dead leaves, rained tear after tear to the ground. It had seen many lovers; was it weeping for these by any chance? Grieving because illusions vanish, and even love, governed by the same restless law of progression which rules the world, cannot long remain in its first and most blissful phase?—that phase which opens the gates of Paradise.

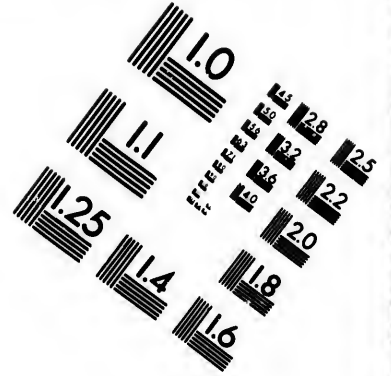
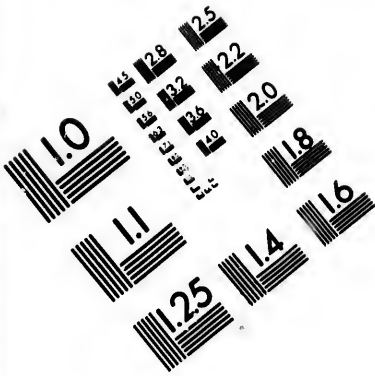
Ah! if only old Time would stand still now and again! But he never does; he is as relentless, as inexorable as death. So the struggle called Life goes on to the bitter end; passion fighting against passion, will acting and reacting upon will, until destiny triumphs over human endeavour, and proves to man how invincible she is, how powerless and insignificant he. And the purpose of it all? Ah! who knows? That lies behind the veil. Maybe our mortal eyes are dimmed by a divine mist. Anyhow, we cannot see.

CHAPTER XXL

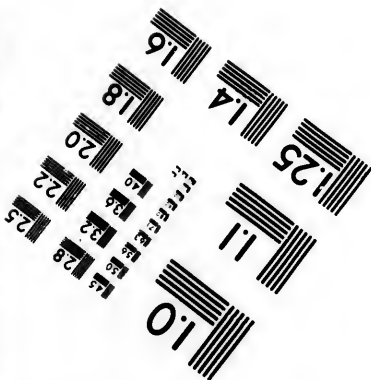
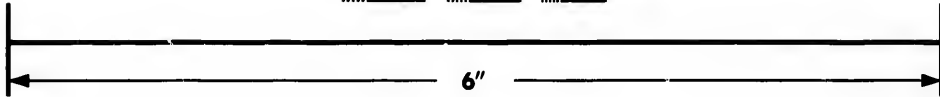
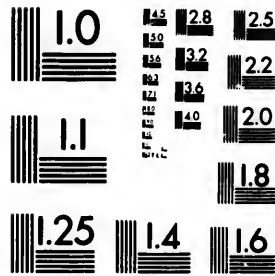
IN LUCK.

BEAU'S interview with Sir Hector passed off well; much better, in fact, than he anticipated. On thinking it over afterwards, he confessed to himself that the baronet had treated him handsomely in the extreme. To his no small surprise, the slenderness of his income proved not to be a serious obstacle. On informing Sir Hector that he possessed very little over eight hundred a year, including his





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pay, the elder gentleman replied, that his daughter, when she came of age, had inherited from her grandmother, on the maternal side, a fortune of twenty-five thousand pounds, over which she now had absolute control. With the interest of this sum, added to what he intended settling upon her on her marriage, there need exist no apprehension as to means. The income of the young couple at starting would amount to three thousand a year at the very least. On this, Sir Hector opined they might live quite comfortably, although, as times went, they could not be reckoned rich.

"I have but one stipulation to make," he concluded, after having entered minutely into every detail. "Henceforth you must consent to look upon Woodford Chase as your home. The fact is, Captain Dornay, I'm getting an old man, and can't make up my mind to losing Dolly altogether. She is my only one," and he smiled pathetically. "Don't you think you might manage to live with me?"

Beau had no objection whatever to the plan. On the contrary, he highly approved of it. Woodford Chase was situated in the very heart of one of the best hunting counties in England; there was plenty of good shooting attached to it, and in addition, the establishment possessed those advantages of luxury and material comfort which most young men know how to appreciate now-a-days.

As for giving up his profession, Beau felt little or no regret on that score. He was dead tired of India, and hated the idea of going back there. Added to which, the climate did not suit him, and he had already had a very narrow squeak for his life. In these times of peace, soldiering was a most over-rated profession. Neither glory nor promotion could be gained. In short, the prospect of settling down in real, snug quarters, with a charming little wife, was eminently agreeable. Therefore, he told Sir Hector that he should be perfectly ready to send in his papers at once, and altogether behaved with so much tact, docility, and amiability, that his future father-in-law was completely won, and ended by being almost as much in love with him as Dolly herself. Half-an-hour's conversation quite reconciled him to the marriage. He flattered himself that here was a young man after his own heart, well-mannered, and a gentleman; not too clever and conceited, and yet by no means a fool, or likely to give him trouble.

He no longer regretted his daughter's choice, and believed the chances were in favour of her wedded happiness. Beau easily satisfied Sir Hector as to the respectability of his family, parentage, and so forth. He gave the fullest information on these points, and was frankness itself. At the same time, he carefully avoided all mention of Mrs. Stapleton's name, and when his interviewer jokingly alluded to the follies of youth, immediately changed the subject, as much as to say he had never had anything to do with them. Sir Hector came to the conclusion that he was a most upright and virtuous gentleman, whose morals were above suspicion. Perceiving the favourable impression he had made, Beau pressed for an early marriage, alleging that he had an intense dislike to long engagements, and always considered them unlucky. Little did the good baronet suspect that he spoke from bitter personal experience. He put his impatience down to the very excusable ardour of a fervent lover, and smilingly demurred. When, however, Dolly joined her entreaties to Beau's, he gave way altogether, and, blowing his nose exceedingly noisily, told them they were a pair of young fools, who, he supposed, must not be thwarted in their wishes, although they were ridiculous and preposterous to a degree.

"Surely you can wait till the spring. There's no such desperate hurry," he said, with feeble protest.

But Dolly and Beau appeared to hold a contrary opinion, which finally carried the day.

It was ultimately settled that they should be married as soon as it was possible to arrange certain indispensable legal formalities; and after a short honeymoon of a couple of days or so, return to Woodford Chase for the remainder of the hunting season. This programme suited Beau's ideas exactly. He considered it simply perfect. He had succeeded beyond his fondest expectations. The personal charm which was one of his chief characteristics had served him in good stead, and quite gained over Sir Hector. When at length he took leave, and walked rapidly back towards Fieldborough, his mind was more at ease than for many weeks past. He saw an exceedingly pleasant way out of the difficulties that beset him. Provided for for life; Dolly—dear, darling little Dolly!—his wife; and Lydia silenced by the sheer force of circumstances. What could possibly be better?

It was nearly seven o'clock, and quite dark out of doors. The mist still hung heavy o'er the land, covering the fields like a grey pall, and through its moist density neither moon nor stars could pierce. The cattle lying down chewing the cud, or tossing the fences about with their strong horns, were magnified to twice their natural size, and looked ghost-like and unreal. The night was very still; not a breath stirred the few remaining leaves on the trees, or disturbed the withered grasses that hung their faded heads in the wide ditches. The profound serenity penetrated to the soul of this man, who travelled along the road of Life with such a jaunty grace, and who had tasted so little of its bitterness. Love, Content, Prosperity—all seemed to lie within his grasp. He offered up a silent prayer of thankfulness to the Great Power that caused these good things to be put in his way, and secretly vowed, when once he was married to Dolly, never more to have recourse to subterfuge and deceit. It was so much pleasanter, so much easier, to speak the truth, if only you were fortunate enough not to find yourself in a mess to begin with. No one hated hypocrisy and equivocation more than he did. His sense of honour was highly developed. It was only when absolutely driven to do so that he disregarded it. But the first stain should be the last. His mind was quite made up on this point. Dolly should never have cause to feel ashamed of her husband, or regret the step she had taken. Dolly, dear Dolly! Ah! how his pulses thrilled at the thought of her. He had not believed himself capable of so deep or true a passion, and he could never care for any other woman as he did for her. Henceforth he was steeled against female blandishments. Even Lydia, he believed, he could now behold without any emotion. Nevertheless, he felt no anxiety to try the experiment. Besides, it made him miserable to associate her with his darling—his bright-haired, sweet-faced girl.

No doubt Beau's meditations were of the sort customary to lovers, so it is unnecessary to give them in full. Suffice it, when he reached Prince's Street, his countenance wore such a joyous and animated expression, that Harry, who had not seen his friend looking so bright since his return to England, exclaimed:

"Hulloa, Beau, old man! what have you been doing? Has some well-intentioned and short-lived maiden aunt

died since you started on your walk, and left you a colossal fortune?"

"Better than that," he replied, joyously. "Your cousin, Dolly, has accepted me. By Jove, I can hardly believe in my luck!" And he took off his hat and threw it down on the table. "Such a pauper as I am, too."

"Has Sir Hector consented to the match?" inquired Harry, much moved by the news.

"Yes; he has behaved like a brick, and allowed us to be formally engaged."

Whereupon Beau recounted all that had taken place that afternoon.

A pang shot through Harry's heart just for a moment when he first heard the announcement. Ugh! what a beast he was, to be sure! Since the girl he loved wouldn't have anything to say to him, why should he grudge the prize being won by his dearest friend? With a resolute effort, he conquered the selfish regrets rising within his breast, and, in a somewhat unsteady but honest voice, said:

"Beau, old fellow, I'm glad of this; upon my soul, I'm glad of this. Dear old man! you and I have been awfully good pals in our time. May I ask one thing of you? Make her happy; for, by Heaven, she deserves it!"

And with this he turned away, as if ashamed of having given utterance to the emotion he could not altogether succeed in concealing.

Beau not only understood, but respected it. A very soft look crept over his face, but he was too much agitated to make a long speech in reply.

"Please God," he said gravely, "I'll do my best. I'm a careless, happy-go-lucky fellow in many ways, as you know, but I mean to set to work in earnest now, and cure all my faults."

He held out his strong, right hand—that hand which would control the hardest-mouthed brute ever foaled—and Harry gripped it in silence. His little, deep-set eyes were glistening. The two men felt at this moment as if nothing could ever disturb their friendship. He who had renounced his love, and he who had gained the heart of the girl they both cared for, were henceforth united by no ordinary bond.

The one gave, the other accepted, a solemn trust. To Beau's credit, he fully appreciated Harry's generosity. Few disappointed swains would have behaved so well under the

circumstances, or given such staunch proofs of friendship. He was conscious that, by various unobtrusive acts, of kindness and self-abnegation, the good little Major, with his warm heart and plain-featured face, had furthered his suit. Knowing what he did as to the state of Harry's affections, he could not help feeling very, very sorry for him.

Whilst his friend laughed and chatted away, trying to appear wholly light-hearted, Beau treated him with a peculiar deference, amounting almost to tenderness, which caused the other once or twice to gulp away at an uncomfortable lump that *would* rise in his throat. In Beau's eyes, Harry was a hero, maintaining a gallant fight with a smile on his brave face long after he had received his death-wound.

"Poor Harry," he said to himself. "Poor, dear old chap, how well he takes it. I wonder how Dolly could refuse him, knowing all his good points and excellent qualities as she does, and I wonder—I wonder whatever she saw in me to prefer. I'm not fit to hold a candle to him. He is the truest, kindest, nicest fellow that ever stepped this earth, whereas I—but there, it does not do to think. The world's too much of a jumble."

In a few days, all the county knew that Dolly Dalrymple was engaged to be married to Captain Dornay, and the event called forth comments and criticisms customary on such occasions. Some said the girl had done well, others badly; but Lady Fuzziwig expressed her entire approval of the match. Beau's fine soldierly figure and taking manners had quite captivated the old coquette, who, even at seventy years of age, still retained her partiality for handsome young men, and she congratulated Dolly with great effusion.

"So glad, my dear, so glad. If you remember, I lways liked him from the first. He's what the French call '*un bel homme*.' I can't bear your little, insignificant, undersized creatures—never could. A man should be something to look at, else what's the good of him? You and he will make quite an ornamental couple. Ah! well, so much the better for the improvement of the race. It's a downright sin to bring a tribe of hideous children into the world. What! blushing, my dear, and at my remarks? I'm sure you needn't. I only speak the truth. Eh? What did you say? Not very well off? No, of course not. Nice men never are. I shouldn't have been Lady Fuzziwig if they

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had; but plain Mrs. John Dixon, wife of Captain Dixon in the Black Watch."

All this at the top of her voice, and before a room full of people, much to Dolly's confusion. Sir Hector, however, was completely reassured as to the wisdom of his conduct. Her Ladyship's approval carried great weight with him. At the same time he could not help thinking that Dolly ought to have been a duchess at the very least. Where was the woman who could compare with her, either for sense, beauty, or anything else?

Meanwhile Harry bethought him of the promise made to Mrs. Stapleton. That lady's charms still lingered in his mind, and he was by no means sorry of an excuse to begin a correspondence with the fascinating widow. So one non-hunting day, when Beau was away courting at Woodford Chase—an operation which Harry could not yet school himself to witness with calmness—he sat down, and penned the following letter in his very best style:

"MY DEAR MRS. STAPLETON—When we last met, you asked me to inform you whenever a certain interesting event came off. I have much pleasure in keeping my word. Our mutual friend, Beau Dornay, proposed last week to my cousin Dolly, at a ball given by Sir Hector, and the lucky dog was accepted. (I wish somebody would accept me.) The lovers are formally engaged with my uncle's sanction, and it appears the marriage is to take place very soon. The reason of this haste? Well, as far as I can gather, and have seen with my own eyes, these foolish young people are furiously in love—no other word adequately describes their state, so you must forgive the adjective, or is it an adverb? I really don't know—being strong. They cannot wait, like decent Christian people, until the end of the hunting season, and actually propose that the ceremony should come off next month. Beau seems in a perfect fever to hurry things on, though why such haste is necessary I do not exactly understand. It is to be hoped he will cool down a bit after matrimony, for really, just at present, he is simply insufferable. You showed so kind an interest in his little love affair, that I feel sure that you will be pleased to hear of its coming to this happy conclusion. By-the-way, are you still thinking of running down to Fieldborough? Our hunt ball is fixed for this day three weeks, and I

shall be delighted to secure you a room, either in the principal hotel or in the town. An unfortunate bachelor like myself is, I suppose, precluded from entertaining so charming a lady, and offering her the hospitality of his modest lodgings. Trusting that your health is restored, and that you no longer suffer from those distressing spasms—Believe me, my dear Mrs. Stapleton, yours very sincerely.

“HARRY P. GRIMSHAW.”

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TANGLE OF FATE.

WHEN this letter reached its destination it was evening, and Amy and her mother were sitting together in the back drawing-room. The girl was poring over certain vexatious and difficult lessons left her to prepare by the daily governess, who, since their installation in Wilton Crescent, superintended her education. She looked pale and plain. Her hair was touzled, her eyes dull, and her thin, young face wore that wistful and pathetic expression only seen on the countenances of certain unfortunate children, endowed with extreme sensibility, and who feel acutely that they are both disliked and misunderstood by those in authority over them. Occasionally, as she tried to commit her task to memory, Amy would stifle a sigh, and shyly raising her dark eyes, cast a furtive glance in the direction of her beautiful mother, who sat brooding, with knit brows, over the fire. Ah! if she would only love her. Why was she born so very ugly that even her own mamma could not bear the sight of her? It was not her fault. She could not help it. So the poor child mused, as she turned with blurred eyes and aching heart to her books. All her life, sympathy and affection had been denied her, and now, as she grew older, she began to long for them, with an intolerable yearning. In some way she must be to blame, else surely her mamma would be kinder. She envied the children in the streets, whose mothers spoke soft words to them. She could not remember ever having been petted or caressed. Her lot was always to be scolded, ordered out of the way, and treated with crushing indifference. Every year, every month, she

felt it more. The sense of isolation increased. Presently the footman entered, bearing a letter on a silver salver, which he handed to his mistress, and after hanging about a few seconds, retired.

Amy returned with increased perseverance to her French verbs. Suddenly, she was startled almost out of her senses by hearing a cry of intense agony go quivering through the room.

"It is monstrous—monstrous!" rang out her mother's voice, in tones of fierce, indignant misery.

Amy rose, and ran to her side. She was frightened by her appearance. Mrs. Stapleton's face was deadly white, the lines of her mouth were contracted by pain, whilst her eyes shone with a concentrated flame ill to look at. A lurid light blazed from their dark pupils.

"Mamma, mamma, what is monstrous?" cried the girl in alarm. "Has anyone hurt you?"

"Go away," said Mrs. Stapleton angrily. She had forgotten Amy's presence, and was annoyed by her curiosity. "Go away," she repeated, pushing Amy back, and holding her at arm's length. "I don't want you. I never do. You know that quite well."

"Alas, yes. But you are in trouble. Oh, mamma! may I not even help you?"

"Help me! You—no, how can you, except by getting out of my sight?"

"Do you hate me so much as all that?" and Amy's voice trembled. "What have I done?"

"Hate you? No, not exactly. It's not worth while. You're too insignificant. You've done nothing except dared to exist against my wish. But if it's the least comfort to you, I can tell you this: If you had been as beautiful as an angel, I should not have liked you any better. You would always have been in my way, and made me seem old in the eyes of those younger than myself—always, always."

"But, mamma, is it such a very great fault to seem old when one *is* old?" returned Amy, with all a child's blundering simplicity and directness of speech.

"In a woman—yes, an unpardonable crime. But what can a chit like you understand about such things? Don't stand staring there at me with your great goggle eyes. It irritates me beyond measure. You haven't an atom of

tact. For God's sake, hold your tongue, and leave me alone."

She had never been as a mother to Amy, but, at the same time, she had never spoken like this. The despair and rage rending her torn heart made her not only callous, but brutal. She was as unconscious of, as she was indifferent to, the pain she inflicted. She had been wounded in her most vulnerable point. What right had others to expect better treatment? There was even a kind of savage pleasure in feeling that she was not alone in her sufferings.

The tears rose to Amy's eyes, and rolled down her sallow cheeks. Do what she would, she could not keep them back.

"What are you crying for, you idiot?" went on Mrs. Stapleton contemptuously.

There was not a single tear in her own glittering orbs. They were hard and dry as balls of fire, and the lids felt like iron bands.

The girl flushed a painful crimson, and her lip trembled. But she inherited some of her mother's pride.

"Nothing."

And without another word she gathered up her books and left the room. The love, the longing, the pity, springing up in her young heart like some beautiful flower, were blighted in their birth. The precious gifts she offered were rejected with scorn. Silently and sadly she took back the treasures that apparently were of so little value, and tried to hide her bitter disappointment in a mantle of reserve. Ah, how ruthlessly do grown-up people wound the feelings of the young! and what indelible scars they inflict!

When her daughter was gone, Mrs. Stapleton breathed more freely. Her first act was to lock the door, so as to be ensured against interruption, then, with a cry of exceeding anguish, she threw herself, face downwards, upon the sofa. So it had come to this. All her love, all her patience and devotion counted for nothing. He forgot them for the first pretty face that happened to cross his path. What signified it that her life was maimed, nay, ruined? He did not care. He cast her aside with as little ceremony as he would toss away an old, worn-out glove. The blow so greatly dreaded had fallen at last. She knew the full extent of her misery, and henceforth might sit down and contemplate the dreary, dreary future. That was to be her

lot. Well! And why need she complain? It was the lot of hundreds of other women. Yes, but other women were not like her. She had life, strength, vitality in her veins, and was not one to turn her cheek to the smiter, or bear insult and desertion with meek resignation. No, thank God, she was made of stronger elements, and if she could do nothing more, could at least battle for her rights. A man ought not to be allowed to escape scot free who had treated a woman as Beau had treated her. Why should he expect happiness when he doomed her to perpetual misery? It was unjust, unnatural. "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," that was the good old Biblical saying, and legislation had never much improved upon it. Then once more her mind reverted to the future. The sting lay in its utter hopelessness. Henceforth she had nothing to live for, nothing to look forward to. During these past years her love had become a part of herself. It was incorporated with her being, so to speak. To lose it was to be left with a void so profound, an ache so cruel, that Death appeared merciful in comparison. But 'Death would not come to her easily, or just because she sought him. She was too strong, too odiously healthy. For a moment softer thoughts prevailed.

Should she accept the misery thrust upon her, and sacrifice herself in order that Beau might be happy? She could never regain her lost youth; every day would make the difference in their age more apparent. She would be an old woman when he was still quite a young man, and if he flirted after their marriage, she felt capable of some most desperate action. Her brain reeled. It was a fiery chaos of confused thought. Little by little, however, her strong, jealous nature gained the mastery over every kindlier impulse. Sacrifice; Pshaw! He should be made to feel and suffer, even as she felt and suffered. The Dalrymples should have their eyes opened, at any rate. A sarcastic smile curled her lips when she pictured Dolly's horror on learning that her lover belonged to another. The blind, brute instincts which civilization has never yet been able to overcome, were aroused within this woman. She no longer attempted to struggle with the evil inclinations rising to the surface of her nature. There was even a fierce pleasure in giving way to them, and in following them with wild unreflecting haste.

She rose to her feet, and going to her bureau close by, took from a secret drawer a packet of old, faded letters. She selected one, wrote a hurried note, and enclosing the chosen paper, which was yellowed by age, unlocked the door and rang the bell. To her fevered imagination, an eternity seemed to elapse before it was answered.

"Post that immediately," she said to the man-servant when he appeared.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, glancing at the letter, "but the country post has gone out. It's nearly ten o'clock."

"Let it go to-morrow morning, then. See that it goes first thing."

When the man had retired, she sat down wearily, hid her face in her hands, and, with a swift revulsion of feeling, wept hot, passionate tears, that forced their way through her white, bejewelled fingers.

Poor fool! What was the use of it all, since she had lost Beau's love? That gone, beyond recall, even revenge seemed inexpressibly paltry and unsatisfying. It could not bring rest to her wounded heart. She was as a creature stricken unto death, knowing that its hour has come, yet wildly clinging to certain poor remnants of life. Over her stole a passionate longing for solitude, a hatred of human voices and human society. She could not bear the thought of anyone witnessing her agony. With head bent, and fingers interlaced, she sat there until the smouldering fire turned to weightless ashes, and the lamp sputtered, hissed, and finally went out, leaving an unsavoury odour of oil behind. What was the darkness to her, since in her heart reigned perpetual night? It soothed her in her present condition, affording a sense of security from prying eyes, and leaving her free to weep, and writhe, and moan. But when the grey dawn came creeping into the room like a thief, and the gas in the Crescent gleamed fainter, ever fainter, and once more the roar of traffic began to make itself heard, a horror seized her of being discovered by one of the servants. Then, slowly and wearily, she dragged herself to bed. To bed, but not to sleep. Fierce darts of flame shot up before her tired eyes whenever she attempted to close them, and lost themselves in a quivering abyss of red space. Thought after thought flashed across the fiery furnace of her overwrought brain, only to vanish without assuming definite shape. They mocked at her despair and

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added to its poignancy. Meantime, there descended upon her senses a strange numbness and torpor, which made everything appear dream-like and unreal.

The many days of suspense, followed by long, wakeful nights, which she had spent since Beau's return to England, living in a constant state of anxiety and of hope deferred, had told upon her nervous system. The tension was too great not to lead to a climax. It seemed as if she had now reached a point when the depths of human misery have been touched, and apathy of all the faculties results. Unfortunately this apathy brings but partial relief. The pain is ever there, pressing like a ton of lead upon the spirits, and giving birth to every kind of morbid fancy. Thus the early morning passed away. When Lydia's maid, who was alarmed at not hearing her mistress's bell ring as usual, entered her room towards nine o'clock, she received quite a shock. In one night, Mrs. Stapleton seemed to have grown ten years older. Her face was lined with pain, and her eyes wore a dull uncomprehending look, that told of a wandering mind.

"Oh! ma'am!" cried the frightened woman. "Are you ill?"

Lydia put her hand to her brow with a weary gesture. How hot it was, and how her head ached.

Ill! Yes, indeed. She was very ill, struck down by an illness from which there was no recovery. The barb had entered her heart, and it bled drops of blood.

"I suppose I'm not very well," she answered impatiently. "It's the weather. It feels so close and stuffy. Open the window, Simson, and then fetch me a cup of tea. Tell Miss Amy not to wait breakfast."

She passed the day as in a trance. That remorseless weight pressed heavy on her brain, and imperfect thought bewildered it. Yet ever present was the dull consciousness which, in a voice of agony, cried out, "Beau has left me, oh! good God, Beau has left me. Do not let me live very long, for I cannot, *cannot*, bear my life." Then a fierce paroxysm of rage would overtake the unfortunate woman, and the powers of evil held her in bondage. It was as if a horrible force were goading her on to commit some fearful wickedness, and she was powerless to oppose it. Poor, unhappy Lydia! The tangle of fate held her captive.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A GREAT RUN.

THE following day was a red letter day in the annals of the Fieldborough Hunt. There was such a scent as had not been seen that season. Hounds simply flew. In the forenoon, what bid fair to develop into a very fine run was partly spoilt by a superabundance of foxes. Nevertheless, the fun proved fast and furious, and fences were thick enough to satisfy the greatest glutton. Good, however, as was the sport, it lacked any special character, owing to the reason above stated. But about half-past one o'clock, just when sandwich cases were being produced, and flasks gratefully drained, the pack came upon a magnificent, grey-masked old fellow. He was stealing away from a very crack covert, to which they were about to apply, in the hopes of making good his departure unnoticed.

In an instant a dozen tally-ho's, issuing from stentorian lungs, made the air ring with the joyful intelligence. Thickleberry Gorse was true to its traditions, and furnished the required article. Whilst men were shouting, gesticulating, and pushing to the front, hounds flung themselves on the fresh, hot scent with clamorous music. Soon they ceased throwing their tongues; the pace was too good, and in a very few minutes they settled down into a stern and deadly silence, that boded ill for the stout fugitive ahead. Murder they meant, as they raced over the green pastures with heads carried high, and straight, extended sterns. Not a laggard disfigured their ranks; all were animated by the same blood-thirsty spirit, that meant death to the foe.

Reynard was as gallant as he was fleet of foot. He disdained the snug shelter on the left, of Moredale Spinney, possibly because he already felt himself too hard pressed, and turning sharp to the right, made straight for Nettlecrop Big Wood, a point, as the crow flies, of close

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upon ten miles, over a magnificent line of country, nearly every yard of it grass.

The hearts of the pursuers swelled large with hope; they settled themselves in their saddles, crammed down their hats, and prepared to ride in grim earnest. For horse and man to reach Nettlecrop without a fall was no child's play, and required courage on the one hand, skill on the other. Many of the fences had to be doubled, and it took a perfect hunter to negotiate them; whilst only a real big fly could land one in safety over the formidable ditches and oxers which formed both the delight and the danger of Nettlecrop Vale.

With white coats glancing through the pastures like a silver stream, hounds sped onwards. After them came the Field, already sadly diminished in numbers, and resembling an attenuated comet. The green fields were dotted with red coats and black—a mass of struggling human beings, all striving to get to the front. Only a limited proportion succeeded; fate was not favourable to the many. They took wrong turns, their horses refused, their own hearts failed them. Fences, in truth, were very big—regular “raspers,” and much grief resulted. Riderless horses could be seen galloping about in every direction, some careering wildly after the pack, others pulling up short to nibble at the tempting grass, leaving their gallant riders to plod laboriously over the stiff ridge and furrow, and curse the unhappy destiny which caused them to take pedestrian exercise in tight top-boots. Such disasters, however, only increased the sense of pride and elation glowing in the breasts of the fortunate minority who were lucky enough to be anywhere within sight of hounds.

Beau led every yard of the way. He had been one of the first to espy the fox, and consequently secured an excellent start, of which he promptly took every conceivable advantage. He was on his best horse (the animal purchased with Lydia's money), and kept a good hundred yards in front of his nearest pursuers, who never could catch him. As it was, he only just managed to keep within sight of the pack, whose vanishing sterns invariably greeted him leaving the field at the precise moment when he landed into it. He had no time to pick and choose his place, and rode absolutely straight across country, taking fence after fence in his animal's stride, and trusting to Providence what might be

on the other side. The horse on which he was mounted was young, and an unusually bold, free jumper. He revelled in the big flies out of grass into grass, but the doubles were not quite so much to his mind, and once or twice he blundered rather badly. An extra good pair of shoulders, however, enabled him to recover himself. Some men possess an inborn faculty of finding their way to hounds, and Beau was one of them. His eye was unerring, and in the pig-skin his judgment never failed him. Nowhere did he appear to more advantage than when leading a division out hunting. His nerve, his strong seat, and fine horsemanship were worthy of all admiration. Seagull carried him like an experienced hunter, barring two or three mistakes, natural and excusable in a youngster, whilst his staying powers and uncommon turn of speed made him worth his weight in gold. Until to-day, Beau had had no idea how good he was, and he resolved, now that this marriage was a settled affair, not to part with him at the end of the season. Meantime, Dolly was close behind, riding in her best brilliant form, and although her heart went into her mouth every time she saw Beau gallantly charge what looked like some extra big fence, she never once thought of shirking it when her own turn came. The fair, gentle-looking girl did not want for courage; besides, her lover inspired her with a feeling of protection that was wonderfully sweet to her feminine nature. She thought to herself, "I am quite safe as long as Beau is anywhere near. The closer I keep to him the safer I am. No harm is likely to happen to me when he is by."

So Dolly rode her hardest, and went better than she had ever done in her life. Would she have been as brave, and felt so confident, had she known that Beau was not even aware of her proximity? He kept his eyes steadily fixed on the flying pack, and never once looked back. Both the pace and the excitement were too great. He was conscious of being absolutely first, and strained every nerve to maintain his pride of place. He had clean forgotten Lydia—even Dolly for the time being, and gave himself completely over to the enthusiasm of the hour. Who could possibly feel worried, with a generous young horse under him, and twenty-two couples of finely-bred fox-hounds ahead? Hurrah for the chase! There is nothing to compare with it for defying trouble and banishing vexation. A de-

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licious physical glow pervaded Beau's whole being. At length, after a glorious three quarters of an hour, the eager pack pulled their fox handsomely down in the open. Then Beau leapt from his horse and looked round. There, within fifty yards, was the huntsman, spurring his jade animal along, and with him Dolly, accompanied by a remarkably select division. Her charming face beamed with delight.

"Beau!" she cried triumphantly, though a little out of breath; "here I am!"

"So I perceive!" he answered, with a smile. "Pray, how did you come?"

"How did I come? That is a nice question. We mayn't all go first, but still we do show some little valour when we are put to it. I followed you, of course. You didn't jump a single fence that I didn't jump too."

She was unusually elated, and proud of her own performances, perhaps because they had been more than commonly good.

"Well, I never! I say, Dolly, this won't do. You'll be breaking your neck if you ride in this desperate fashion. Thank goodness! I did not know that you were close behind me, or I should have felt downright nervous."

"That's all very fine, sir," she retorted, with a glance which made Beau's pulses leap. "But what business have you to endanger your precious limbs in the way you did? Do you forget that you belong to me now, and are my own peculiar property? I felt awfully proud of you, Beau, but, nevertheless, I must positively set to work and teach you caution."

"We shall have to teach each other, then. Look round, Dolly. There are but six of us up, so you need not preach, young lady."

"Well, I will leave the preaching alone. Do you know, Beau, I rather like being lectured by you. It makes me feel as if I had gone back to the days of my childhood." And she gave a happy laugh.

People now began to pour in from every side. By-and-bye Sir Hector appeared, flushed and radiant, as indeed were most of the company. It had been a brilliant run, and the Fieldboroughites were legitimately proud of the achievements of their hunt, and rejoiced greatly in the thought that they had triumphed over a neighbouring pack,

between whom and themselves a good deal of friendly rivalry existed.

Hounds and horses were alike blown, and by the time the obsequies were performed, and they slowly began to recover from their recent exertions, it wanted only a few minutes to half-past three o'clock.

Sir Hector, who was always afraid of Dolly overtiring herself, insisted on carrying her off home. So she enjoined Beau to be sure and come to luncheon on the morrow, in order that they might talk over the run in all its bearings, and bidding him farewell, reluctantly turned Snapdragon's head away from the hounds. The horse, good as he was, was no longer young, and showed but little of his matutinal ardour. His joints had become stiff whilst waiting, and he did not move with any great elasticity. Dolly patted his neck, and let him go at his own pace—a slow amble, somewhat fatiguing to the rider, but which nevertheless got over the ground with deceptive speed. Snapdragon, like many another good hunter, had seen life, and had arrived at an age when he considered enough as good as a feast, in which respect he sometimes proved wiser than his mistress who, as long as hounds ran, would own to no fatigue.

They were now about seven miles from home, and did not reach the Chase until nearly half-past four o'clock, stopping on their way to give the horses some chilled water.

Dolly entered the front hall first, and spied a letter lying on the marble-topped table. She took it up and, seeing it was addressed to her father, handed it on to the rightful owner, saying :

"Here is a letter for you, papa, that has come by the afternoon post. Who is your fair correspondent?"

Sir Hector glanced carelessly at the handwriting, which was unfamiliar to him.

"I don't know, my dear. Probably some philanthropic dame dunning me for a charity. No doubt the contents are not of very great importance. Anyhow, they must wait until I am dressed."

And he went into the study close by, and threw the letter down on his writing-table.

Dolly proceeded to mount the stairs, and Sir Hector followed suit.

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"Do you feel knocked up after your gallop, child?" he asked.

"No, papa, not in the least. I never do feel knocked up when I enjoy myself, and to-day's run was simply glorious. I'm longing to talk it over with Beau, and wish he could have come to dinner to-night, but he is engaged to dine at the Fuzziwigs. If that venerable dame weren't so old, I declare I should feel positively jealous of her. As it is, she sets her cap at Beau in the most audacious manner. Considering her age, she's really a quite disgraceful flirt. I wonder Lord F. does not remonstrate, in spite of the order he is kept in."

"Ah! Dolly, this Beau of yours has completely turned your foolish, little head. It would require but very small provocation, I can see, to render you a regular victim to the 'green-eyed monster.' And now take off your things, and we'll have a nice, warm cup of tea together in the library, and some poached eggs, for I am hungry, even if you are too hopelessly in love to possess an honest, healthy appetite."

"I beg leave to state that my appetite is outrageous, and quite unaffected by the condition of my heart," laughed the happy girl in reply, disappearing within her bedroom.

Sir Hector's toilet did not take so long as did his daughter's, he soon descended to the study, where, after warming himself thoroughly before the fire, he bethought him of the letter he had left on his writing-table. He now took it up and opened it. The contents were apparently of more importance than he had conjectured. Whatever they might be, it was not difficult to tell that their nature was unpleasant. As he read, Sir Hector changed countenance; his cheeks, from a wholesome red, turned purple in colour, his eyebrows contracted until they almost met, and finally he walked up and down the room, with every appearance of extreme agitation.

"Damned scoundrel!" he kept muttering to himself. "I wish to goodness I could pommel his rascally head into a jelly. Nothing on earth would give me greater pleasure."

Whoever the offender was, Sir Hector was in no mood to deal tenderly with him. His wrath appeared fully aroused, and showed no symptoms of being easily appeased. He was naturally a man of quick temper, prone

to resent any insult or fancied slight. By-and-bye the rustle of a woman's skirts became audible, and Dolly entered the room, clad in a soft grey tea-gown, which harmonised admirably with her delicate, rose-pink complexion, and sunny hair.

"What!" she exclaimed. "Haven't they brought tea yet? How stupid of them to keep you waiting so long. I'll ring the bell." Then catching sight of her father's face, she added, in an altered tone, "Oh! papa, what is the matter? Have you had bad news?"

"Read that," he said brusquely, and, without any preliminary, thrusting the letter into his daughter's hand; "it concerns you, so you had better judge for yourself."

"Why," she exclaimed, with a sudden contraction of the heart; "this letter is in Beau's handwriting."

"You recognise it? However, read the strange letter first. They will be easier to understand if you take them in their proper order, though, perhaps, one may suffice."

Dolly already suspected some terrible revelation. With trembling fingers she unfolded Lydia's note. It ran as follows:—

"TO SIR HECTOR DALRYMPLE.

"DEAR SIR,—It is with profound surprise I have just received the intelligence that your daughter is engaged to be married to Captain Dornay. I cannot think that you know what his character is, and in what manner he is behaving. For several years past he has been my affianced husband. I feel it my duty to inform you of this fact, which, doubtless, he has not seen fit to reveal. After reading the enclosed, if you still doubt my statement, please refer to Captain Dornay himself, and see if he can deny the truth of what I say. Long ago, it was settled we should be married immediately on his return from India. As a gentleman, and as a man of honour, he is bound to me, and has no right to propose to any other woman. That he should have done so is preposterous, and he has behaved disgracefully, not only to me, but also to Miss Dalrymple, who, when she accepted him, could not have been aware of the real state of affairs. Captain Dornay and myself had had no quarrel, which might account for his present conduct. We have always been, and still continue, the best of friends, and only quite recently he

accepted a cheque for five hundred pounds, which I forced upon his acceptance, considering that we so soon would become husband and wife. At various times I have lent him sums, amounting in all to close upon four thousand pounds. Deduct this amount from his income, and you will find not much remains on which to keep a wife. But I hear your daughter is rich. I shall be quite willing to furnish you with further particulars, should you desire them, in which event, kindly apply to my solicitors," here an address was given, "and pardon an unhappy, much-abused woman, if she refrains from revealing her name."

When she finished reading this letter, every word of which seemed to carry conviction, Dolly put out her right hand and tottered up against the nearest chair for support. Her face was colourless; the muscles of the mouth twitched. Sir Hector had been watching her narrowly. The expression of intense pain, blended with dismay, that stole over her countenance, added fuel to the fire of his wrath. For Dolly to suffer, Dolly, whose childhood had always been so bright and happy, was intolerable. He felt, at this moment, as if he hated Beau.

"The d——d scoundrel," he broke out afresh; "the infernal, sneaking, lying blackguard. If he shows himself inside these doors, I'll horsewhip him to within an inch of his life, that I will. What the devil does he mean by coming here and insulting my daughter? Curse his confounded 'cheek.'"

When Dolly heard her lover thus roundly abused, the warm blood, which had receded from her innocent heart, rushed back to it in one strong wave. Who should defend him, if she did not? The pupils of her eyes dilated, her delicate nostril expanded. She looked at her father with a look he had never hitherto seen depicted on her gentle countenance. Involuntarily he quailed beneath it, and sought to avoid the gaze fixed so nobly and seriously upon him. He had right on his side, why should Dolly be allowed to make him appear in the wrong?

"Papa," she said, and her voice, though low, vibrated with a kind of metallic clearness through the room, "I love you very much indeed. I could bear a great deal from you; but unless we are to quarrel, you must never again talk of Beau in that way before me. I cannot allow anyone

to speak ill of him in my presence." And she drew herself up with a quiet, yet determined dignity that became her well.

Sir Hector listened to this speech in astonishment, bordering on dismay.

"What!" he cried. "You don't mean to tell me, that after a letter of this sort, you still mean to stick up for the thundering rascal?"

"Yes. I have every right to do so, and shall avail myself of that right. Why should Beau be condemned without even being heard? It is unfair, unjust, ungenerous. If all the world were to attack him, I would take his part. What can be more mean than to judge a man, refusing to listen to what he has to say in his own self-defence?" And her eyes flashed fire.

"Zounds! Dolly, have you gone stark, staring mad? Where is your pride, girl, that you can overlook such a disgraceful entanglement with another woman. I can't conceive——"

"Enough!" she interrupted, bravely striving to do battle for her love. "I know all about it. Beau made no attempt to deceive me, and told me everything. This woman, who descends so low as to write anonymous letters, to which she is ashamed to attach her name, simply persecutes him. But," she concluded, with a little air of triumph, "he does not love her—he has never loved her. I care for nothing else in comparison."

"You say Captain Dornay told you this? Are you positive?"

"Yes. He declared that, from first to last, it was a mere boyish infatuation on his part, quickly repented of. The woman appears to have gone off her head about him, and for a time he submitted to her overtures, against his better judgment."

"A pretty tale! By heaven! he is even a greater scamp than I gave him credit for being."

"Papa! don't you remember what I said?" And the severe look once more came back to her young face.

"Nonsense, Dolly. I can't hold my tongue where your life-long happiness is probably at stake. This man has deceived you—he may be deceiving you still, for aught I know. I did not wish to inflict unnecessary pain, and thought the first letter would have opened your eyes sufficiently, but now—read that."

And so saying, he thrust into the girl's hand, the faded yellow note enclosed in Mrs. Stapleton's, and which was written in Beau's handwriting. Dolly had already recognised the manly characters at a glance, and involuntarily a shiver ran cold through her veins. Things were bad enough as they were. She did not want to be convinced of Beau's guilt or treachery, as the case might be. She preferred to cherish her ideal, even although it might prove only an illusion. It was cruel to pierce through the golden haze, which glorified both present and future in her girlish imagination. She had never felt so much ill-will towards her father. Why could he not leave her alone?—alone with her happy dreams and fond, if foolish, fancies. Nevertheless, she took the letter. She had not sufficient moral courage to refuse to look at it, and read these words, each one of which was as a dagger sending a separate stab to her heart. Instinct had warned her truly. Illusions were infinitely better than this fatal knowledge, which robbed her of such a wealth of repose and confidence.

"MY OWN DARLING LYDIA,—How can I ever thank you for the money which you have so generously sent me in my distress. The duns are silenced, their claims satisfied, and once more I am lord of my small possessions, which for some time past have been seriously threatened. And all this owing to you. Dearest, I could not possibly accept so munificent a gift at your hands, were it not that, at some future date, I confidently look forward to our being united. How long the time seems, and how slowly it goes! To be separated is terrible, and I often ask myself if we should not have done better to face poverty together, rather than wait indefinitely for wealth, letting our best days go by, and forced to live apart. It is very hard; for, Lydia darling, I love you—I love you with all my heart. What more can I say to prove my lasting affection? You know it, and feel it. Good-bye, my own. I shall manage to see you once again before sailing.—Yours until death,

"BEAUMONT DORNAY."

Dolly trembled. The barb had sped home. "Yours until death." He had written those words with his own hand, and then pretended to ignore them! Her first feeling was one of intense pain; but worse even than the

pain was the bitter, underlying consciousness that Beau had deceived her. True, he might not love this woman—this Lydia—now; that only proved his inconstancy; but it was perfectly clear he had loved her very dearly once. No man could have written such a letter otherwise. There was a genuine ring about it, infinitely convincing to the reader. She put the sheet of paper down on the table without a word.

“Well,” said her father, watching the convulsive movements of her tremulous lips. “Are you satisfied now what a blackguard the man is, or do you require still more evidence?”

Her faith was shaken, but she would not let him see that such was the case. To all outward appearances she would remain loyal to her love, allowing no breath of slander to attack his good name. Her father, dear as he was, should never guess the anguish from which she suffered.

“Beau m—may be foolish,” she began unsteadily. “Most young men are; but—” and her voice grew stronger and clearer, “he is not a ‘blackguard,’ of that I will take my oath.”

“And I say he *is* a blackguard of the first water.”

“Women are often better judges than men. Anyhow, I won’t hear him abused.”

“Do you mean that I am prohibited from stating my opinions in my own house?” asked Sir Hector testily.

“I mean that I would rather not listen to them until everything is clearly proved, and even then——”

“Yes, even then? For goodness sake, Dolly, speak out, so that I may know where I am.”

“Oh! papa, do not be angry with me; but it is false kindness to try and make me believe any evil of Beau.”

“*Make* you believe evil of him, indeed! That’s a nice, twisty way of putting matters, certainly; but there! I really do believe that when once a woman is in love, she takes leave of her senses altogether. Reasoning is thrown away upon her. One might just as well attempt to argue with a shoebrush. She’s all bristles.”

Something in the look of her face made him stop short, and dropping his angry tone, say in a milder voice:

“Dolly, Dolly, darling, don’t take on so. The brute’s not worth it. No man ever is. We’re a bad lot, taking us altogether, and are not fit to hold up our heads before a tender,

innocent-hearted girl like yourself. Come back, my pet, to your old father. He has his faults, but at any rate you know what they are, and he will do his best to comfort and cherish you." The tears were glistening in his eyes. His arms were outstretched.

She could harden herself against him when he abused Beau and called him bad names, but she could not maintain a defiant attitude when he spoke to her like this, and showed such real emotion. The happy days they had spent together, the rides, the talks, the walks, rushed to her memory. They had been everything to each other until Beau came between them. Perhaps she might seem selfish and ungrateful. If so, she would make amends. And yet her love was stronger than all else. It overpowered every other feeling. With a smothered cry she threw herself on her father's breast, and the bitterness that was in her heart went out.

"Papa, papa, you are very good to me. Nobody will ever be as good to me as you are, but," forcing back a sob, "I cannot bear it. He seemed so true, so trustworthy, I would have staked my life on his honesty. There must be some mistake. Surely, oh, surely an explanation will put all right."

"I hope so devoutly, for your sake, my dear. But things look uncommonly ugly to my mind."

"Papa, you will see Beau, won't you, and hear what he has to say for himself? He is coming to-morrow. You won't jump at hasty conclusions without listening to both sides of the question?"

"No, I promise to see him. One way or the other, this matter must be sifted to the bottom."

She slid her arms round her father's neck. The lace of her sleeves fell back, and showed two white, round wrists.

"Papa, dear, I do love him so. Very likely it may seem foolish in your eyes, but I can't help myself. It is difficult to analyse Love. It comes one knows not how. Do not be too hard upon Beau, even if he has made mistakes. We are none of us perfect in this world, and if I forgive him, surely you might."

Sir Hector's heart was full of pity for his daughter, and of anger against the man who caused her to suffer.

"Captain Dornay shall have every opportunity afforded him of making a full and circumstantial explanation. Let

us hope that he may be able to disprove the charge brought by his former flame. But, Dolly dearest, one thing must be distinctly understood. If he is either unable or unwilling to prevail upon the writer of this anonymous letter to forego her claims, your marriage cannot be allowed to proceed. I could not let my daughter's name be mixed up in any such questionable business, and Captain Dornay will have to choose, once for all, between his old love and the new. This, I think, is only reasonable on my part."

Dolly sighed. Yes, it was reasonable, but lots of things were reasonable that were not satisfactory. Why had Beau sought to deceive her, instead of trusting her fully? It would have been more honest and more manly to have admitted how much, in former days, he had loved someone else, instead of seeking to depreciate that love. It clashed with her notions of honour. If he had but spoken the entire truth, she told herself, forgiveness would have come easier. As matters stood, she could not help experiencing a feeling of not being quite fairly treated. Her confidence was shaken. That night she shed bitter tears, but in the end her love triumphed. It belonged to that precious sort which "suffereth long and is kind," and she made no pretensions to being a woman of spirit.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE WEAKER VESSEL.

WHEN Captain Dornay arrived at Woodford Chase on the following day, expecting as usual to be shown into Dolly's own private sanctum, he was somewhat surprised, and a little perturbed, to hear that Sir Hector had expressed a wish to see him in his study. What did this mean? The curse of a guilty conscience made his pulses quicken with a premonition of impending evil. He felt far from tranquil as he entered the room, but his countenance underwent a very decided alteration on perceiving the two letters still lying on the table where Dolly had laid them down. He recognised the handwriting of both, and it needed not Sir Hector's solemn face, and strange, formal manner, to tell him that his worst forebodings were realised.

"Good afternoon," said the baronet stiffly, and without offering to shake hands; an omission which his visitor noticed, and construed as an exceedingly unfavourable omen. Then he paused, cleared his throat, and added, in a resolute voice, "Forgive me, Captain Dornay, but I am forced by circumstances, which have only recently come to my knowledge, to demand an explanation of you on a subject which, I may truly affirm, is as painful to me as to my daughter." And he lifted his coat tails, and stood in a position before the fire, which seemed to say, "Now, now, let us have no nonsense. You can't put me off with childish excuses." At least, this was how Beau construed his look and manner.

He bowed his head in silence, waiting for what was to come next. Truth to tell, at that particular moment, he was too greatly agitated to make any suitable reply. He felt himself at a disadvantage.

After a slight pause, Sir Hector resumed:

"Yesterday afternoon, on returning from hunting, I received an anonymous letter. The writer—who from her style and orthography is evidently a lady, and therefore all the more difficult to deal with—declares that, at the present time, you are engaged to her. Now, be so good as to answer one single question. Is this the truth, or is it not?"

Sir Hector's straightforward way of coming directly to the point was infinitely embarrassing to Beau. Uneasily he twisted the forefinger of the dogskin glove he held in his right hand, and dropped his eyes to the ground. Sir Hector had hoped that he would flare up, and indignantly deny the accusation. "Instead of which," so mused the baronet, "he looks for all the world like a whipped hound."

"Well," he exclaimed at length, "why don't you speak? Surely you can tell me whether what this lady asserts is true or not. I only ask you to deal as plainly with me as I am dealing with you."

But this was not easy. Beau felt an immense difficulty in replying. He was in a most disagreeable dilemma, and cursed Lydia from the depths of his soul for being the cause of it. What a fiend the woman was, to forward an old letter of his and make such mischief. As if men could be answerable for the vows of years ago. Ridiculous!

"Captain Dornay," said Sir Hector sternly, for he was far from pleased with the hesitation his guest displayed. "I really must insist upon an answer to my question. Are this lady's statements correct or incorrect?"

Beau realised that something he must say. The time was gone by for prevarication.

"Th—they are not exactly correct," he stammered, after a while.

These words, and the equivocation they expressed, incensed Sir Hector beyond measure. He resolved more than ever not to be baffled, but to get to the bottom of the whole affair. Captain Dornay's manner was very far from satisfactory. It was, in fact, that of a guilty man who shuffles and shirks, and has not the courage to make a clean breast of his peccadilloes. It had already produced a bad effect. Hitherto, Sir Hector, bearing Dolly's request in mind, had honestly striven to keep his temper, but now it broke down altogether. He had fulfilled his promise, and given this strapping hussar a chance. It was not his fault if he refused to avail himself of it. Now there could be no more beating about the bush. Since civility failed to extort a full confession from Captain Dornay, force must do so, aided by plain speaking, and it afforded him considerable satisfaction to make use of the latter.

"By Gad! sir," he exclaimed. "What the deuce do you mean by 'not exactly'? Do you suppose that I am going to stand quietly by and see my daughter played fast and loose with in this sort of fashion? Damnation! no. You are very much mistaken if that is your idea."

Beau flushed crimson from cheek to brow. He braced himself to the contest. There was no avoiding it.

"Sir Hector," he said, not without a certain dignity, "I love your daughter, and would not give her pain for anything in the world. I do not pretend to be immaculate. Very few men are; but I do pretend to be sincere in my affection for Miss Dalrymple. I told her of this unfortunate entanglement when I proposed, and she was good enough to accept me in spite of it. It never entered my head to win her under false pretences, as you seem to insinuate."

"But you tried to persuade her there was nothing in the affair, and coloured it according to your own fancy."

"Pardon me, Sir Hector, if I contradict you as regards the latter statement. I did not willingly or consciously

'colour' anything. It was a most disagreeable—I may say a most painful subject to discuss with Dolly, and I endeavoured not to shock her innocent mind more than could be helped."

"Pshaw! You might have thought of her 'innocent mind' before you proposed."

"Can you not conceive of a man making good resolutions, and their being overborne by circumstances? Ah! Sir Hector, you must have forgotten what it is to be young."

"When I was young, people had much stricter ideas of right and wrong than they appear to have at present. Why were you so desperately anxious to hurry on the marriage, unless you felt afraid of this affair coming to my ears? Such haste was strange, not to say indecent."

"Is it so wonderful for a fellow to wish to be married, once he is engaged to a charming girl?"

"Charming girl, indeed! Let me tell you, sir, Dolly is a great deal too charming for you——"

"I know that, without having the fact impressed upon me. She's one in a thousand."

"And what's more," continued Sir Hector, "you needn't seek to hoodwink me. I can see quite well through all your plottings and schemings. Unless you absolutely deny this charge that is brought against you, and can furnish convincing proofs of its falsity, you shall never marry Dolly; and I tell you to your face that you are a most thundering blackguard, coming to a gentleman's house and stealing away his daughter's affections, when you know perfectly well, all the time, that you are engaged to another woman. I say that it is a mean, dishonourable, rascally action, of which any man might well feel ashamed."

Beau winced. It was terrible to him to hear himself spoken of in such terms—he who had always been *flattered* and made much of wherever he went! Was this how the world would judge him? The moment was one of overpowering humiliation, for alas! Sir Hector spoke truly. His conscience told him much the same thing. He had every wish to get out of the difficulty honourably. Yet how was the desirable result to be achieved, if Lydia persisted in holding him to the fatal promise of years ago?

"I may have acted wrongly," he said, in tremulous tones. "I do not defend myself in any way, but indeed, Sir Hector,

I am not as bad as you think. If you will listen to me, I will tell you the whole story from beginning to end, and shall only be too thankful to act on any advice."

Upon which he proceeded to make a clean breast of the narrative, much as he had related it to Dolly, only with more circumstantial details. Greatly to his surprise, Sir Hector found his wrath subsiding. There was an honest ring about Beau's voice that carried weight. That gift of personal charm which he possessed so strongly, but which is too subtle and intangible for pen to describe, proved, in difficult circumstances like the present, an invaluable ally. Against his will, the baronet found himself coming under its influence, and he ceased to marvel at Dolly's infatuation. He realised that whatever Captain Dornay's faults might be, he was now heart and soul devoted to the girl. The sincerity of his affection was unmistakable, and did much to restore him to the good graces of the father. But Sir Hector's pride prevented him from showing that he had relented. Besides, he had right on his side. Any parent would approve of his proceeding.

"H'm," he said, when Beau came to an end. "A queer story—a very queer story. In my opinion, a regular case of the spider and the fly. You played into Mrs. Stapleton's hands from the first, and now, unfortunately for you, she holds the trump card. It is a fatal thing to express one's feelings in writing. Say what you like, but never put your sentiments in black and white, however pretty they may look at the time. Mischief is sure to come of it, and some women have a perfect genius for keeping every scrap of paper likely to incriminate a man. As for this Mrs. Stapleton, from all I can make out, she seems determined to hold you to your bargain."

"That's the worst of it," said Beau ruefully. "And yet I distinctly told her, some little time back, that I neither could, nor would, marry her."

"She don't appear to understand that. From this letter, it is evident that she means to stick to you like a leech."

"It's the very deuce!" rejoined Beau. "What the devil am I to do?"

"I hardly know what to advise; especially as the whole affair places me and mine in an exceedingly awkward position. Unless this business is definitely settled, it is impossible, as I said before, that Dolly should marry you. This

you must distinctly comprehend. What sort of a woman is Mrs. Stapleton? Could she not be bought off? The sex are fond of money, as a rule."

"If she were poor, there might be some chance. Unfortunately, she is far too well off for anything of that kind."

"She wouldn't accept a handsome sum down in compensation for the injury done to her feelings?"

Beau shook his head.

"No," he said gloomily, "it can't be done. Besides, I owe her money. She's got me tight, and knows that precious well. You see she refers to my debt in her letter."

"Yes, I had forgotten that. What was the amount?"

And Sir Hector began fumbling for his spectacles.

"To my shame, somewhere about four thousand pounds. I don't wish to say anything against Mrs. Stapleton, but she used almost to force cheques upon me, with the intention, I firmly believe, of getting me into her power."

"And you had not the moral courage to say no?"

"Well, there are few things less easy when you are infernally hard up, and a handsome woman declares she takes a special delight in being your banker. I am not strong-minded," he concluded apologetically.

"My dear young friend, I have discovered that fact long ago. You are too amiable and adaptable. If you had had the courage to tell Mrs. Stapleton at once of the alteration in your feelings, you would never have got into the present scrape; but moral courage is a far rarer quality than physical, and very few people possess it. They flatter themselves that they do, but they don't. What I want to know is this: How the dickens do you propose to pay off Mrs. Stapleton out of your small fortune? You will have nothing left."

"No matter. I must find the money all the same. I shall never feel free till I do."

"And, in the meantime, what are you going to marry Dolly upon?"

Beau's face lengthened. He had not yet given this view of the case his consideration.

"I suppose," went on Sir Hector, "that you look forward to living on the fortune of my daughter. A very pleasant prospect, no doubt, if only the widow did not

happen to be so uncomfortably tenacious a person. She, however, is evidently bent on sticking to what she regards her own. She must be a good deal fonder of you than you are of her."

His decidedly sarcastic tone roused Beau's pride. He did not relish Sir Hector's dry humour.

"I'm not fond of her at all," he answered, with more spirit than he had hitherto evinced. "I have told you so repeatedly. Dolly has my whole heart."

"For the moment, but you are given to change."

"I don't think so. At least, not more than other men. At one-and-twenty one is somewhat apt to mistake a spurious passion for a real."

"Your spurious passion was a very good imitation, at any rate. Perhaps you would like to read this letter. It may refresh your memory."

Partly out of curiosity, partly wishing to propitiate Sir Hector, Beau did as he was bidden. Could he actually have penned those words? It seemed impossible. The writer appeared so far away from himself — so totally unlike.

"I was a young fool in those days," he said bitterly, "and only wish I could live them over again."

"I showed that letter to Dolly," said Sir Hector. "She pooh-poohed Mrs. Stapleton's effusion, but your handwriting and ardent protestations of affection helped her to get rid of a little superabundant sentiment."

Beau groaned aloud. He could fancy Dolly's face when she read this ill-fated epistle—her disgust, her anger, her shaken faith and trust.

"You are very hard upon me, Sir Hector," he said, the lines of his brow contracting with pain.

"God forgive me, Dornay, if I am harder upon you than you deserve. I have no wish to pronounce judgment upon your actions. But to be quite frank, I feel that you have not acted altogether straightforwardly in this matter. A man who is not absolutely free has no right to make up to a beautiful young woman, and pay her the marked attention you have paid to Dolly. It's not fair on the girl."

"I swear, Sir Hector, that I never thought of it in that light. I saw your daughter, and fell in love with her."

"Very likely. You are not the first person who has done so. Perhaps my code of morality strikes you as strict and

old-fashioned; but when I look round in the world, it seems to me that many of the young men of the present day are singularly lax in their ideas about women. They have no respect for them—no reverence. In choosing a wife, money is the only consideration; purity, chasteness, feminine virtues, which in my time were highly prized, are now almost completely at a discount. For a single modest, lady-like girl, you see a dozen slangy ones. It is not for me to say to which category my daughter belongs; but in giving her to you, I don't mind admitting that I thought and hoped you were of a different stamp. As far as I can judge from your own account, you have been foolish, weak, imprudent, but not actually wicked. I do not believe that you are bad at heart, or would willingly do any woman a wrong. At the same time, until you can arrange matters definitely between yourself and Mrs. Stapleton, your engagement with Dolly must remain in abeyance. There need be no quarrel—nothing to set people talking, or give rise to gossip; only it will please me if you refrain from making quite such frequent visits, so long as your old love still considers she has any claim upon you. In fairness to Dolly, I do not think you ought to quarrel with these conditions."

Sir Hector's tone was firm, but friendly. He spoke not simply as a man of the world, but also as a father. Reasonable as were the baronet's terms, Beau listened to them in despair.

"Do you mean that I am never to see Dolly?" he exclaimed, rebelliously.

"Never is a strong word. I asked you to come here less often than you have been in the habit of doing lately. Dolly will understand the reason. If not, I shall take care to explain it to her."

"May I not even talk to her out hunting?"

"Yes, as you would talk to any other acquaintance; but if you take my advice, you will put a stop to this disagreeable state of things by at once seeking an interview with Mrs. Stapleton, and placing the matter on a satisfactory basis. If she is a lady, surely she will not insist on making a man marry her against his will."

"It's even money betting," said Beau, doubtfully. "She is one of those women whose actions are simply impossible to predict. At any rate, I will see her at once, and do all I can."

So saying, he rose to take his leave, though not without a certain visible reluctance. It was as if he were expecting someone to enter the room, and lingered unconsciously. But Sir Hector gave no sign of relenting.

"Good-bye," Beau said, at length; "you shall hear from me in a day or two. I intend going to town to-morrow by the very earliest train. No effort shall be wanting on my part to come to a final rupture with Mrs. Stapleton."

"That's right. I think your decision is wise. There is nothing to gain, but everything to lose, by procrastination."

"Is—is Dolly quite well, Sir Hector?" asked Beau, hesitatingly, still putting off his departure in the hope of seeing her.

"Yes, quite well, thank you."

"May I not speak a few words to her before I go?"

"Under the circumstances, I fail to see what good they can do. This news has naturally upset her, and she is already greatly agitated."

The two men shook hands formally, and with a sad heart Beau passed out into the hall. Oh, how different his visits had been on former occasions. It seemed to him that he had lost Dolly for ever. After reading that detestable letter, how could she believe any more in his love, or how was it possible for him to make her realise that that love was sincere? Sir Hector had neglected to ring the bell when he left, and he was alone in the hall. He turned his face towards the front-door and began struggling into his great-coat. Suddenly, a gentle hand was placed on his shoulder, whilst a soft voice cooed in his ear:

"Beau, dear Beau, I could not let you go away without seeing you. It seemed so unkind."

He strained the speaker to his breast. He was too agitated to say much.

"God bless you, Dolly, darling."

"Papa was very angry about that letter, and Beau," she resumed, turning crimson to the temples, "I was angry, too—angry and sore. Just at first I felt as if there were no truth in the whole world—no honest man to be found in it. But, after a while, I grew more reasonable, and saw that I had not any right to your past life. You loved this woman before you knew me. I could not expect to be your first and only love. It was looking at the thing purely from a

foolish girl's point of view. Beau, look into my eyes and tell me now, as we stand here by our own two selves, that you do honestly and truly care for me, and I will be satisfied. All else shall be forgotten. You and I are too dear to each other to part without good cause."

She gazed earnestly up into his face, and her fair countenance wore such a pleading, affectionate expression that it roused a perfect passion of tenderness in his breast.

"Care for you!" he exclaimed. "Oh, Dolly, my darling, my beloved, I only wish I could tell you in adequate language how *much* I care. To have brought this trouble upon you makes me miserable. Ah, why did we not meet years ago? God must always have meant us for each other and, as you say, I did not know you—I had never even seen you; and now, dearest, I am no longer worthy of such love as yours, though I can honestly swear that, until I met you, I had not the least idea what love meant."

So saying, he once more stretched out his arms, and she came to them with a low cry of gladness and content. Whatever else might be false, they felt at this moment that their affection for each other was true. She forgave him everything, for again she believed in him. The fallen idol was restored to its pedestal, and with a grateful, joyous soul she prostrated herself before it, like a very woman, asking nothing higher from Life than to love, and be loved in return. That is best. Better than beauty, better than riches, better than great talent.

She hid her sweet, shy face on his bosom.

"Beau, there was something else I wanted to say to you. You owe money. I read it in the letter. Don't allow yourself to be bothered about that. I have plenty, and what is mine is yours. No, do not refuse. It is a favour I ask of you—the first one since we have been engaged."

He kissed her dewy lips, her fair, white brow, her small, pink ears, and the heart within him grew big and soft with an overpowering thankfulness.

How good she was—how trusting and generous! Please God, never more would he deceive her. And yet, if Lydia refused to give way, how could he, after once gaining such a pearl of great price, abandon it of his own free will? The thing was impossible.

"Dolly," he said, huskily, "you are an angel. I only wish to goodness that I was a better man than I am."

"You are good enough to satisfy me," she answered, with the most loving, frankest of smiles.

Beau left the house, her influence strong upon him. It fortified and sustained his spirit. Never had he felt so ready for action, so firm or determined.

For the sake of the woman he loved, he would face the woman he wronged. Indecision, for the time being, had fled. As he walked away from Woodford Chase, he would have liked nothing better than to confront Lydia Stapleton before his courage evaporated.

He was prepared to speak out like a man, and escape, once for all, from the false position in which circumstances and a certain want of strong-mindedness had placed him. Dolly roused and stimulated all the finer qualities of his nature. Such is the power of a good woman over man. If she can produce these results, let her be content to remain the "weaker vessel," and not seek by unfeminine acts for supremacy.

CHAPTER XXV.

DRIVEN TO DESPAIR.

BEAU was as good as his word. By half-past eleven the next morning he was in London, knocking for admission at the house in Wilton Crescent. He had thought it best not to apprise Mrs. Stapleton of his visit, consequently she was unprepared to receive him. A tall footman ushered him upstairs. Once more the darkened, scented drawing-room, with its profusion of screens and draperies, palms, flowers and silken hangings, produced a certain indefinable impression on his mind, or rather senses, which inspired an almost overpowering desire to draw back the soft satin curtains, pull up the festooned blinds, open wide the windows, and admit what little daylight is to be obtained in town during the months of December and January. He looked round, and, with a start, recognised his own reflection in one of the numerous mirrors that adorned the apartment. The face that confronted him seemed decidedly whiter than usual. Although he tried to persuade himself that he felt perfectly at his ease, he was excessively nervous. Not only did his heart beat considerably faster than its

wont, but his ears strained after the slightest sound. The sensations he experienced were similar to those of some unfortunate child, who sits dreading his fate in the dentist's ante-room.

Lydia did not keep him waiting long. In a few minutes the door opened, and she swept into the room with a kind of tragic majesty, characteristic of every movement that she made. Her height and fine figure rendered her at all times a magnificent woman to look at, but to-day there was something almost royal in her carriage. Her head was thrown back, and her great, sombre eyes flashed fire. He had sinned past forgiveness.

"May I ask to what I am indebted for the honour of this visit?" she inquired, with such an outward frigidity of manner that it effectually concealed the emotion from which she was suffering.

He felt a little surprised at the coolness of her reception, and endeavoured to adopt a similar tone.

"I came," he said, "because I have a great deal to say to you."

"Oh, indeed! Are the finances not in a prosperous condition?"

And her face put on an ugly sneer.

He flushed crimson. There was no mistaking the taunt.

"The finances have nothing to do with the subject which I wish to talk to you about. It is of a far more serious nature."

"Really! I thought that was impossible, Please get to the point. If there is one thing I dislike more than another, it is beating about the bush."

"I will try to be as brief as I can."

"Thank you, Captain Dornay, Brevity confers a favour upon your listener."

So saying, she seated herself with her back to the light, and waited for him to proceed. There was a determined hostility about her manner—a covert insolence—which confused him not a little. She met him as a foe. He could not guess what wild hopes his presence raised, or how this sarcasm was but a cloak to disguise her feelings.

Wounded pride rendered her anxious, at any hazard, to keep up an appearance of indifference, that was to say, until she learnt the real object of his visit. Her hand was

not to be forced. So she crossed her arms with a demureness as exaggerated as it was exasperating, and waited.

He looked at her, and recognised how handsome she was, in the dark, glowing style of beauty which fair men generally admire. To his great relief he found that he could gaze at her quite dispassionately, taking stock of this point and that, much as he would have done of some beautiful, thoroughbred mare, but without feeling his pulses throb. Hitherto, she had never failed to produce an effect upon his senses, but now that time was over and gone. She was no more to him than a statue, and with a sudden thrill of triumph he became aware of the all-powerful nature of Dolly's influence. He had sometimes doubted whether he were capable of entertaining an absorbing passion for any one woman. Now the question was definitely settled.

The discovery that Lydia no longer held him in thrall restored his confidence, which had been somewhat shaken, and rendered him eager to begin a conflict likely to be severe on both sides.

"You have chosen to write an anonymous letter to Sir Hector Dalrymple," he said, plunging straight, with nervous haste, into the matter which had brought him there that day.

"Do you presume to dictate my correspondence?" she rejoined haughtily.

"No; but I never thought you would stoop to quite so mean a trick as that."

She coloured angrily.

"*You* have no right to judge me—you, who force me to defend myself."

"I should call it exposing, rather than defending yourself. Anyhow, it is quite evident that you do not understand the situation."

"Be good enough to explain your meaning," she said defiantly. "I flatter myself I understand the situation thoroughly—a great deal better, indeed, than you do."

"Hardly, or you would never have taken the false step of writing to Sir Hector."

"And why is it false? My only error was that I concealed my name."

"He knows it. You need have no fear on that score?"

"Fear!" and her lip curled with magnificent scorn; "what a ridiculous word to employ! It is you who are

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afraid, not I. I have done nothing wrong. Listen. You say I do not understand the situation. Let me sum it up. You and I are engaged to be married, and you have no more right to propose to any other woman than I have to accept one of the numerous fortune-hunters by whom I am surrounded. Is that clear?"

"Quite, if I still considered myself engaged to you. It is a difficult subject. I do not wish to hurt your feelings, but when we last met I distinctly told you, in this very room, that things could no longer continue on their old footing."

He looked away as he finished speaking. Her eyes were hard to meet, and the light which glowed in their great, black pupils was not pleasant. They seemed to scorch him.

"Why not?" she asked, and her deep voice trembled.

"Because—because—oh! Lydia, don't you understand? I would so much rather not say it."

"I both comprehend and appreciate your delicacy. If put into vulgar words, "it" might sound a little brutal, certainly."

Then, something within her seemed to give way suddenly, and she added, with a sort of sob:

"Beau, have I done anything to displease you? Is it not possible for me to make you care for me once more as you did?"

He turned his head aside, and did not answer.

"Has not my conduct been absolutely correct?" she resumed, pleading as if for life.

"Yes, perfectly, as far as I know."

His tone was troubled.

"And do I not love you truly, wholly? Will you ever find anybody to care for you as I do?"

"I don't know," he answered reluctantly, following the pattern of the carpet with the point of his cane.

"You don't know!" she echoed, in indignant reproach. "Beaumont Dornay, after all that has passed between us, how can you give such a reply as that? Your heart must be made of stone."

"I wish it were," he said, with a sigh, whilst a feeling of despondency and oppression stole over him.

"I am unchanged," she resumed. "I wish to goodness I *could* alter, for I should be a far happier woman than I am."

I don't know what there is about you to like so much. I can see many faults in your character, faults which one would have thought would have disillusioned me completely. Strange, that it is not so—that some mysterious force, stronger than myself, compels me, against my reason, to love you, weak, unstable, vacillating, as you are—better than any human being upon the face of this earth. That is the truth. After wasting the best years of my life in saving money on your behalf, and with a view to becoming your wife, am I to give you up, simply because you have grown tired of me, and I am no longer as young as I was? Put yourself in my place, and realise what my feelings are at the present moment. Oh, it is hard, it is hard!”

“Lydia,” he said, “don't overwhelm me. I know I am a brute, and yet I, too, am possessed by a force against which I have not the strength to contend,” and he covered his face with his hands.

“What is to become of me?” she went on rapidly. “What have I to look forward to, if you cast me off—what chance of happiness? Sometimes, when I think of it, I fear I shall go mad. Ah! Beau, you do not know what it means to lose hope, love, everything.”

Her voice broke. There was no pride, no sarcasm left. The woman's soul lay bare, panting, wounded, bleeding in its fierce agony.

As he listened to her impetuous speech, Beau felt crushed and impotent. An intense compassion filled his whole being; compassion for her, as well as for himself. Cruel life! that would never let the right pieces of the puzzle come together, but, with perpetual friction, always brought the wrong, angular, unsuitable ones in contact. He and Lydia were only another instance of this cross-grainedness. Was development not obtainable, except through the warring and clashing of like and unlike? Must progress necessarily mean strife? Those were questions which flashed dimly across his poor, perplexed brain. The riddle was too great for it to solve.

“I—I had hoped to find you more reasonable,” he faltered, scarce knowing what to say, yet aware how bold and cold his words must sound. They roused her almost to a pitch of fury. Was this the way in which he treated the wild outpourings of her passionate spirit? Were her deadly despair and unsubduable yearning nothing to him? Did

they produce so little effect on his brilliant, shallow nature that the only advice, the only sympathy he could offer in return, was for her to be "reasonable"? It was not given to her to look into his heart, or to see how it also ached, almost as much as did her own. Perhaps the knowledge might have softened her anger, and made her realise that he, too, was to be pitied.

"Reasonable!" she exclaimed, with a mighty scorn; "I suppose your definition of the word reasonable is, that I should hold my tongue, say nothing likely to prove the least disagreeable, abstain from crying out when I am hurt, and when I meet your girl wife in society, open my arms to her with the utmost cordiality. No doubt it would be very nice, extremely convenient, desirable, and all that sort of thing, but, let me tell you, Captain Dornay, that I shall do nothing of the kind. Even if the game is going against me, I am not quite such a fool as to play into your hands, however much you may wish it."

She paused, panting for breath, like a fierce, wild animal, defeated, but dangerous. She was a magnificent creature. About her there was nothing small, nothing mean. Her very faults were large, and on a grand scale. Not a comfortable woman to live with, by any manner of means, yet possessing fine elements in her nature, that, under suitable conditions, might have given to the world a heroine.

"You bewilder me," he cried in despair; "speak out plainly. I, too, dislike beating about the bush. What do you want? How do you intend to act?"

"That is my secret. As for what I want, I want to marry you. You ought to know that by this time."

"But I can't—I can't. I have already told you so."

"You must; if not," clenching her strong, white teeth, "I will *make* you."

He smiled incredulously. Her soft moods were much harder to resist than her threatening ones.

"Make me! How?"

"Easily enough. By telling Miss Dalrymple the whole truth, and pointing out certain flaws in her piece of perfection."

"It would not make any difference. She knows of their existence already. Only last night she offered to lend me the money I owe you. That girl is too good for this world. She is a perfect saint."

"Saint and sinner! A nice alliance, especially for the saint; only those goody-goody young women have such a strange knack of falling in love with naughty gentlemen. And you were shabby enough to accept her offer? But I need scarcely ask. It would only be a repetition of the old story."

"No, I have had enough of borrowing. You have taught me a salutary lesson in that respect."

"But I must have the money, somehow. I insist upon it. If I can do nothing more, at least I can ruin you. There is some satisfaction in that," she said, interlacing the fingers of her nervous, white hands.

"Yes," he said bitterly, "you can ruin me, both in heart and in pocket; yet, when you have separated me from Dolly, banished me to India, where I shall probably lose my life, how shall it profit you? Your spirit has ceased to exercise an ascendancy over mine. I should escape you still."

She stifled a groan. The one chance left her was to try and carry off matters with a high hand.

"You could not. I know you too well. My influence is weakened, perhaps, but not gone. You are mine. I lead, you follow. We act and re-act upon each other. Fate has so ordained it. It is useless to struggle against one's destiny. What must be, must be. You and I, what are we? Creatures driven on by the moulding force of chance and circumstance. We ourselves are helpless. They brought us together. They will prevent our drifting apart. It is only a question of time. Sooner or later you are bound to marry me."

They were bold words, uttered as if she believed in them. Once she had done so, but of late days a different conviction had been stealing over her. Chance and circumstance were not always kind. Often very much the reverse. They had caused her and Beau to meet, but might they not equally separate them? She had spoken in this manner, wishing to test him, and the test had failed. One glance at his stern, set face told her of her non-success. The days of dominion were at an end. A sensation of utter helplessness turned her heart to stone.

"I shall never marry you," he said, slowly and weightily. "Lydia, I am a miserable man. Don't think I do not feel the wrong I am inflicting upon you; yet to make you my

wife, loving Dolly Dalrymple as I do, would be a still greater wrong. Be merciful; see in me a victim like yourself, gripped hard in the strong grasp of Fate. I am ready to kneel at your feet for forgiveness. If you refuse to pardon me, there will always be a black spot in my life. I promise to make every reparation in my power, and first and foremost, the money shall be paid back to you immediately, with interest at five per cent.; only, for God's sake, set me free."

His voice trembled. The real man, weak, faulty; yet sensitive, generous, and lovable, showed himself freed from reserve. She rose to her feet. That request for liberty drove back all the softer emotions produced by the first portion of his speech. Pride and a cruel sense of humiliation crushed every kindlier feeling. He was tired of her. No words could render the fact less bitter.

"Fool!" she cried. "Do you think I care for the wretched money, except as a means of retaining my power over you? What are a few thousands more or less to me? And as for a separation—when once a man has broken a woman's heart, when he has robbed her life of all joy, and converted her into a dead, numb thing, rendered callous and apathetic by misery, the word is a mockery, nay more, an insult. What reparation, short of giving back your best love, could you possibly make me?"

He stood silent. She spoke the truth. To that question there was no answer.

"I told you before, and I tell you again," she continued, with gathering passion, "that of my own free will I will never give you up. You might as well ask the earth to bring forth fruit and flowers without the sun. You are my sun. I will not voluntarily banish myself into perpetual darkness. As long as breath remains in my body, I will claim you before all the world as my affianced husband. She who takes you from me commits an act of robbery. But she shall meet with her punishment. If this deluded girl is rash enough to marry you, knowing your past history, and the perfidy and infidelity with which you have treated me, I shall find means to embitter her days. Little by little I will poison her mind against you—ah! don't say I am not likely to get the chance, a desperate woman can do anything, for the simple reason that she stops at nothing. Dissension shall rise up between husband and wife, discord,

distrust, suspicion. You cannot escape from me. I will follow you to the end of the world, dog your footsteps, and turn up when you least expect it. Your life shall be one long torture, like my own."

He shuddered. These prophetic utterances were terrible to listen to, when delivered by one who was evidently so much in earnest. They roused a feeling of desperation in his mind. Compassion began to give way to anger. He was easier led than driven.

"You are like a destroying spirit," he said. "Of what are you made, to be so different from other women? Have you no sympathy for the faults and frailties of human nature? This fatal love is obscuring your senses. Renounce it——"

"Never!" she interrupted passionately. "It is as much a part of me as my eyes or hands."

"Ah! Lydia, you little know what you are doing—what you are driving me to. If you refuse to set me free, and insist on separating me from Dolly, I will—I will——" stopping short.

"You will what? Don't hesitate." And she looked him straight in the face with a pair of fierce, flaming eyes.

"Commit suicide. So help me God!"

There was a moment's silence, then she burst out laughing. A cold, pitiless laugh, ill to hear.

"Bah!" she exclaimed contemptuously. "You commit suicide. Not if a hundred women claimed you as their own. You might talk about it. It sounds melodramatic, and creates a certain effect on weak minds; but when the critical moment approached, you would never have the 'pluck' to put your purpose into execution. Such threats are quite thrown away upon me." And her short upper lip curled, in a manner that was simply maddening to the unfortunate man whom she taunted.

"You shall see!" he said moodily. "Push this matter any farther, and as sure as I stand here, I will take my life. Indirectly, you will have been my murderess."

"Idle boasts, idle boasts, Captain Dornay. You are not one to do yourself any very great harm. The pleasures of this world are much too fascinating for you to desire to leave them in a hurry, especially if you happen to be in funds, owing to the mistaken kindness of Miss Dolly."

These words drove him frantic.

"Mrs. Stapleton," he said, drawing himself up to his full height, and turning to her a face white with passion. "You have no right to insult me like this."

"Excuse me, I have every right—the right of unmasking a coward, who seeks to play upon a woman's fears in order to attain the object he desires."

And again that same cold, unnatural laugh rang through the room, sending a shuddering chill along his veins. It was the laugh of a maniac. He threw up his arms with a gesture of impotent rage. Oh! if only she were a man, so that he might strike her to the ground. All the love that he had once felt for her was now turned to hate, and in her contemptuous estimate of his character and merciless incredulity, she seemed to him like a fiend.

"After such a speech as that," he said, turning on his heel, "it is time for me to leave this house. Please God we may never meet again."

"My dear friend, pray don't be so pious in your aspirations. You appear to have forgotten how anxious I am to retain your acquaintance. Would it not be better to say *au revoir*? Major Grimshaw has sent me a pressing invitation to come to Fieldborough, which I fully intend to accept."

He smothered an oath. She was looking at him with a smile that made him feel inclined to throttle her.

"Lydia," he said, "cease this trifling. It is unseemly. When I came here this morning my heart was soft and full of sorrow for you, whilst my conscience pricked me sorely. Short of abandoning Dolly, I was willing to make every amends, to be your best—your truest friend. All this is changed. Henceforth I have nothing to reproach myself with. By refusing to give me my liberty, I am cruelly doomed to bachelorhood for the remainder of my days. If, as you say, I have ruined your life, take comfort in the thought that you have ruined mine. We are quits."

Without another word he opened the drawing-room door and walked downstairs. An exceeding bitterness filled his soul. He was weary of strife and contention. He longed to fly to some quiet spot with Dolly, where they could live aloof from the busy world, with its hollow conventionalities and sickening insincerity. He pictured to himself a sequestered valley, nestling under great, purple hills, with a trout stream rushing through it, glancing like a thread of

silver along the rich, green meadows, where feeding cattle moved knee-deep among the cool, fresh grass and golden butter-cups, enjoying the gentle warmth of an April sun. He imagined a simple, wholesome existence, free from spurious excitement, and amusements that were not amusements, but only painful drudgery. A deadly weariness was on him, a yearning for the life natural as against the life social and sham. To be alone with his love. He asked for nothing more, as if hundreds and thousands of mortals did not crave for the same rarely-accorded bliss.

He was stunned, dazed. His mind refused to work in its accustomed grooves. Mechanically he hailed a hansom and drove back to the station. No good could be gained by staying in town. The noisy streets confused him, and he pined for the open country, with its wide fields and precious solitude. Harry was away. The Major had left that morning—almost at the same time as himself—to stay with a friend for a couple of balls that were to take place in the country. Beau felt thankful for his absence. He could not have sustained a part, talked, eat, smoked as usual, with the consciousness all the time weighing heavy on his brain that Sir Hector would break off his engagement. Dolly lost, he saw nothing but blackness ahead—a dark, horrible abyss into whose obscure depths no ray of sunshine penetrated.

Lydia Stapleton's taunts rankled in his mind with poisonous insistence.

Not have courage to commit suicide, indeed! She should see. If anything happened to him it would be her fault. She had goaded him to desperation, and he saw but one way out of the situation.

As he reached Fieldborough and the quiet little lodgings in Prince's Street, that way began to exercise quite an abnormal fascination. It haunted him. He could think of nothing else, and in imagination put certain plans into execution a dozen times over.

The thing was easy enough—quite simple, indeed—if you set about it without flurry, and required nothing but a little resolution. A pull of the trigger, a flash, a report—after that, rest, freedom from worry. Grateful prospect! If he must be parted from his love, better to be parted so, than in any other manner.

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CHAPTER XXVI.

THE RED THRESHOLD OF CRIME.

ARRIVED at his lodgings, Beau took care to enter the house as quietly as possible. He wished no one to know that he was back. Consequently, instead of ringing, he opened the door with his latch-key, and crept noiselessly upstairs on tiptoe, hoping to escape the sharp eyes of his landlady. In this he was successful; for, after a hard morning's work, Mrs. Tyler had retired to the kitchen.

The worthy woman had profited by the absence of the two gentlemen to indulge in the luxury of a good clean-up—a luxury dear to her housewifely heart. When Beau entered the sitting-room, it was in a state of unusual order. The chairs shone, and were placed symmetrically round the mahogany centre table; the grate had been blackened and polished until it resembled a mirror; the fire-irons literally glittered, thanks to a liberal use of emery powder, whilst newspapers were folded, letters tidied, and every trace of cigar ash removed. In short, the room no longer looked and smelt like a bachelor apartment, but would have reflected credit on a prim old maid. Everything was as bright as a new pin, nevertheless, Mrs. Tyler's labours were completely lost upon Beau. His thoughts were far away. He took off his hat and threw himself into an arm-chair. Then he leant his elbows upon his knees, buried his face in his hands, and sat immovable. Past and Present rose up before him with torturing distinctness. The former was specially vivid. He could remember so well his first meeting Lydia, the admiration she had excited, the passion, which in his youth and inexperience he had so rashly mistaken for love. Love! Why, gratified vanity had been at the bottom of it all. And here he was, regularly caught, bound in honour to marry a woman eight years older than himself, and for whom he no longer retained the slightest affection. It was monstrous, her

seeking to force him into such a marriage. No wise woman would do such a thing. His vanity refused to be gratified any more, for the simple reason that it had ceased to be in harmony with his inclinations ; and when such is the case vanity, all at once, appears but a very poor and despicable thing. Its nakedness is revealed, stripped of all adornment, and instead of the beautiful, airy vestments of Illusion and Desire, it wraps itself up in the *triste* garb of Folly.

The more our hero reflected over the situation, the more despondent did he grow. A kind of mental darkness obscured his brain. Two things only were clear. Mrs. Stapleton distinctly refused to waive her rights ; and unless she did so, Sir Hector declined to let his daughter's engagement proceed. And without Dolly, life was not worth the living. He would much sooner be dead. Indeed, Death recommended itself strongly to him in his present mood. He entertained a morbid horror of Lydia, and of what her next move in the game might be. She was capable of anything, even of coming to Fieldborough, as she had threatened, forcing herself on Sir Hector and Dolly, and making a scandal throughout the County. When once the evil passions of such a tempestuous creature were roused there was no knowing what the result might be. And being a woman, people would listen to her side of the story and turn a deaf ear to his. He was not in the right, he knew that quite well ; yet, at the same time, he could not help feeling there were some extenuating circumstances in his favour. But the opinion of the world would go against him ; and this fact carried much weight. Respectable people would avoid him in the cold, cutting manner so peculiar to well-conducted folk, who invariably constitute themselves the judges of their fellow creatures' actions. To this large proportion of proper and faultless persons he would appear as an object of detestation. No matter if they were small-minded. They all had tongues with which to censure and criticise, and a multiplicity of tongues, each individual one joining in the same chorus, created an effect not to be despised. Even if the music were false, it produced a great deal of noise, and impressed the ignorant multitude. A vista of a long, lonely, miserable life rose to his mind's eye. He saw himself shunned and deserted ; looked at coldly, even by those he liked best, and who hitherto had always thought well of him. The

prospect pictured by his excited imagination was past endurance. His spirit recoiled from it with horror.

But there was a means of escape. The soft, white wings of Death would wrap him round, and, in the cold embraces of Insensibility, all trouble came to an end.

To die! Ah! it was such a little thing, and not only such a little thing, but such a common thing. Why should men fear death so much, when its very commonness ought to render it familiar? Nobody minded, nobody missed you when once you were gone; or, if they did, their grief only lasted a short while. Time soon softened it, and brought first Resignation, then Oblivion in its wake. But for that doubtful gift of personal identity, the long, last slumber would create no fear. The idiot, who possessed it not, faced Eternity without a thought, without any of those vague, mysterious longings after a Hereafter. He passed away like the dumb beast of the field, the leaf that falls, the flower that fades; unconscious of an immortal soul, and happy in his unconsciousness. To him, Heaven and Hell were one. God, an empty name which created no passion of reverence, no storm of doubt, no chill of unbelief. He had not any terrors, because he had not any convictions, or reason wherewith to form them. And so, to him, Life seemed a meaningless farce, and Death an easy exit never to be dwelt upon, but which came at last like an ordinary accident.

Should an idiot be more courageous than he—a grown man in full possession of his senses? Aye, there lay the difference. If he had not retained his faculties, the act of self-destruction would have been comparatively easy. It was the responsibility that weighed so heavy on one's spirit; the difficulty of distinguishing between right and wrong, the feeling of outraging Nature, and an underlying sense of cowardice.

But in spite of such reasoning, Beau's mind was made up. Nobody knew he was at home. Everything favoured him, and in another half hour it would be dark. Already the grey mists were rising over the distant meadows, covering them like a shroud. The lingering glow left in the Heavens by the disappearance of the fiery, wintry sun was fading fast. Long bars of purple cloud rose up, and engulfed each rare, remaining shaft of light. The trees stood dark and sombre, gradually hiding their sharpness of

outline in a growing blackness. The cattle lost their shape and seemed to melt into the creeping twilight, stealing so wierdly o'er the earth. Duller and duller, dimmer and dimmer grew the sky; more silent the streets, more all-enshrouding the night. Now — now was the time. Opportunity, which counts for so much, and decides so many of our actions, waited on him, who desired to lay down the burden of life, and escape from the misery it entails.

Suddenly he rose from the chair in which he was seated, and went to a cupboard at the further end of the room, where he kept a revolver. He drew the weapon from its case, and with it a piece of chamois leather that lay inside. Evidently the cupboard was damp, for the barrel of the revolver had become disfigured by sundry spots of rust. They displeased him. His eye was offended by their presence. He did not pause to reflect that, since he had determined to die, the rust was entirely immaterial. So inconsequent are we, even in our gravest moments. Besides, there was no hurry. He had told Mrs. Tyler on leaving in the morning, that he would probably sleep the night in town. She was not, therefore, likely to interrupt him, and he felt tolerably secure—at least, for some little while. He had still another hour to live, and to put everything in order previous to his departure. Had he nothing to bequeath to Dolly? No parting gift wherewith to keep his memory alive? Yes, of course—his watch. It was a gold repeater that had belonged to his father, and one day, when he took it out to ascertain the time, she had admired it.

He now wrapped the watch carefully in a piece of soft paper, made it up into a neat parcel, and, with an unsteady hand, wrote the address. His actions seemed curiously precise and mechanical. No sooner, however, had he got this off his mind, than he was seized by a strong desire of writing to Dolly a few words of exculpation and farewell. He took up a pen and wrote:

“My darling, forgive me. I could not live without you, and perhaps see you married to somebody else. Mrs. Stapleton is merciless. She it is who drives me to the step I am about to take. Dolly, dear Dolly, I am dreadfully unhappy—so unhappy that I hardly seem in my right senses. Think of me as kindly as you can. The world, no doubt,

will judge me harshly; but you, oh! my darling, will be more merciful. You will understand that when a man is goaded to despair, he is not always responsible for his actions. Again I ask you to forgive me. Be happy, forget me——”

Here he broke off suddenly. Tears of self-pity were gathering in his blue eyes. Vain were his efforts to force them back. He was so young, so strong! A good horse and a good hound caused him such exquisite pleasure. The thought of never again striding over the green pastures, or feeling the glorious sensation of a flying leap, almost diverted him from his purpose. In spite of every drawback, life had its compensations. With health and youth, no one could be wholly unhappy. Thus he mused.

And then a strong re-action seized him, and, ashamed of the weakness he had felt, he took up the revolver, and began polishing its barrel with a fevered energy. Brighter and brighter it grew, under his nervous fingers, until at length the shining steel, glittering—glittering before his eyes, began to produce a strange, hypnotic effect upon him. As in a trance, he inserted cartridge after cartridge into the circular chamber, until it was fully loaded. Everything was ready. There no longer existed any reason for delay. And yet he hesitated. Coward! Ah! yes, indeed. And yet, how strange it was, that when you had quite ceased to care for a person, that person's ill opinion should continue to disturb you. Did it not prove conclusively the pettiness of human nature, and that vanity, vanity formed its foundation. When you were face to face with Death, how could it matter what other people thought of you? To care so much for their favour was surely a sign of weakness. Beau realised this at last, and suddenly he perceived that his worst errors had proceeded, not so much from innate wickedness, as from setting too great a store on the world's verdict. The man who did so lost his independence, and ended by becoming a mere slave. Now that he had such a little while to live, his vision seemed to grow clearer. He saw many things which once had been indistinct. The room was almost dark. The grey twilight filled it with a deepening obscurity. He glanced at the clock on the mantel-piece. It wanted only five minutes to five. It was later than he thought for, and he could no longer count upon solitude. Mrs. Tyler might appear at any moment. When the clock

struck five, the deed must be committed. He sat down in the arm-chair. His heart beat fast, and he tried hard to steady his nerves, vaguely wondering meantime which was best—to fire into the mouth or against the temple. In either case, he had heard it said, the brain must inevitably be reached. Some instinct made him recoil from putting the barrel inside his mouth. Therefore he chose the temple and resolutely taking up the pistol, pressed its cold muzzle to his brow. Ugh! the very touch of the steel made him shudder. It sent an icy chill through every vein. All at once his heart, that had been beating so fast, stood still. A sound as of mighty waters deafened his ears. Lydia was right. What was he but a coward? When it came to the point, how terribly difficult was this self-annihilation—this voluntary plunging into an unknown abyss.

Then a huge scorn seized him, which struggled pitifully against the strong, physical clinging to life implanted within man. Do what he would, he could not overcome it. He thought how beautiful the world was, with the warm sun shining, the green fields basking in its rays, the leaves trembling in the breeze, and the blue sky spreading overhead. Was he never to see them again, or shoot, or hunt, or fish? He was not ready to go yet: not nearly old enough. Bah! what a poor, weak fool he was, to be sure. The time had gone by for regrets. He should have considered all these things before making up his mind. Now, it was too late to go back. And if he did, nothing but a sea of troubles faced him. No; there was no way out of the affair but this. On Lydia's head be his blood. Once more he strove to execute his purpose. His finger was on the trigger. Strange that it should prove so hard to pull. When he had shot that jackal just before leaving India, he could have sworn the weapon was all right, but now—now—ah! God; what was the meaning of it all? Had he gone mad? The clock struck five, its sharp, clear strokes ringing out with fatal distinctness. The time had come—no excuse was any longer possible—he must die. Die, and by his own hand. Great drops of sweat stood on the unhappy man's brow. Yet Life and Death were too closely intermingled for the one to be lightly given up, or the other willingly courted. His brain reeled, unconsciousness descended upon his senses, and for some seconds all was blackness, vagueness, and unreality . . . Suddenly he felt

a small, soft hand placed in his, and heard a wondering child's voice say:

"What 'oo doing with dat funny ting? Tottie want know."

It was Mrs. Tyler's little girl, who, missing her favourite playfellow, had crept unperceived into his room. Whatever his faults, Beau had made a permanent impression on the child's heart, and all day long she had been restless and ill at ease, counting upon his return before nightfall.

He looked up with a start, and groaned. This innocent demand was almost more than he could bear.

"Go away," he said sternly. "Go away this minute. What business have you to come in here?"

The words were harsh—such as he had never previously used to the little thing—but the voice was still harsher. It sounded, even in his own ears, as if it must belong to somebody else.

Tottie was frightened. Poor child! she had cause. His look and manner were both wild. Nevertheless, she did not stir, but stood sturdily there by his side.

"Tottie," he repeated, but somewhat less angrily than before, "did you hear what I said?"

"Ess, I heard. But why 'oo so cross with Tottie? Tottie no been naughty."

Her glistening eyes, her heaving chest, and small, rueful countenance produced a sense of shame in the strong man, who, only a moment before, had rebelled so fiercely against the God who created him. For hours past his heart had been like a stone. Now, at the sight of her grief, it grew soft, and once more became sensitive to outward impressions.

"My poor little soul," he said gently. "Did I speak crossly to you? I did not mean to. Will you forgive me, Tottie?"

Her face brightened. Four fat, red fingers were squeezed into each round, wet eye.

"Ess."

"And, Tottie, will you leave me alone now, dear?"

"What for? 'Oo been away all day. Tottie want to stop. No want to leave 'oo alone."

So saying, and encouraged perhaps by the kindlier expression she saw stealing over his countenance, the little maiden, with the dark, tangled hair, and clear, innocent

eyes, hoisted herself up, without any ceremony whatever, on to his knees. He could not repulse her. She looked at him so timidly, and with such an air of loving concern. Her quick sympathy had told her that something was wrong, and this was how she sought to communicate her compassion. It touched him to the very quick. He tossed away the revolver. The thing burnt his hands. He was afraid of her suspecting for what purpose he held it, and was ashamed before the child, and that she should read his dark, miserable thoughts.

Her coming was highly inopportune; and yet he felt grateful for it. Perhaps God had sent her to prevent him from putting his design into execution. The matter had not struck him in this light until now, and it overcame his already shaken purpose. Weak, unstable, vacillating, Lydia had called him, and her words had roused his wrath. But were they not true? Was it not better to acknowledge one's faults, more especially to oneself, instead of living in a state of delusion? Everybody could not be strong in this world. And did self-destruction represent strength? Was it not rather a sign of weakness, and a mean way of escaping from the difficulties of life? An unmanly mode, which left a legacy of shame and sorrow to the best-loved.

Dolly! dear Dolly, with her soft eyes and pretty golden-brown head. He had not thought enough of her in all this wretched business. He had thought only of himself. His conduct was selfish from first to last, unworthy of any man wishing to place a gentle, loving woman under his protection.

Whilst these reflections rose to his mind, Tottie grew restless. This atmosphere of sadness and depression was not congenial to her young spirit. She had come to play, and be amused.

"No like sitting in the dark," she said, laying her soft, smooth cheek against his. "Not nice."

"Isn't it, Tottie?"

"No. Where 'oo keep 'oore matches?"

And with childish familiarity she began groping in the pocket of his waistcoat for the little silver case in which he usually carried his fuses.

The touch of her small fat hands wandering about his person, the sound of her sweet, lisping voice, and the sense

of artless innocence she conveyed, suddenly lifted the crushing weight from his brain. The cloud that had gathered over it dispersed, and he saw himself, a despicable being, flying weakly from troubles he had not the moral courage to face. He bent his head on the table, and his whole frame shook with strong, suppressed sobs, that seemed to shake his nature to its very foundations.

The little one looked on in silence; her heart swelling and stirring within her. For a long time she sat thus, steadying herself against his shoulder, all inclination to play gone. Presently she saw two big drops roll through the strong fingers with which he hid his face. The sight was more than she could stand. Up went her tiny arms, and round his neck they insinuated themselves, whilst in the softest, most exquisite tones of childish compassion, she said:

"Poor man! No tye. Totty love 'oo," Then a bright inspiration came to her aid, and she added, questioningly, "Have 'oo been naughty?"

What a tumult of emotion the words produced!

"Yes, Tottie," he said humbly, and after a long pause, "I have been very naughty."

"What did 'oo do?" she inquired, with friendly curiosity, and a renewed sense of fellowship.

"It was what I meant to do, not what I actually did."

"Oh! dat noting. Dood again now?"

Intentions were evidently nowhere in Tottie's estimation.

"Yes, I hope so."

How infinitely abashed his spirit felt in the presence of this bright-eyed child.

"Ah!" and she slipped hurriedly to the ground. "Moder's calling me. It's tea-time. I must do. Dood-bye, Captain Beau." She always called him by this name. "Don't tye any more. Tottie tum back again very soon—no stay away long," putting up her rosy face to be kissed.

The whole tenor of his mind was changed, thanks to the unexpected appearance of this female child of six summers. When she left, he roused himself by an effort. Henceforth, he would submit to the decrees of Providence, and not attempt to cut the Gordian knot of life. His eye fell upon a card of invitation from Lady Fuzziwig, asking him to a dance that very evening, and he remembered he had pro-

mised to dine and sleep at Dredmore Castle, if he returned from town in time. Dolly was to be at the ball. The thought of seeing her proved an irresistible attraction. His blood took fire at the prospect.

Dance! what a mockery. And yet what was existence made of, but dancing one minute, and weeping the next? It resembled a see-saw, up and down, up and down.

That night, Dolly might have been waltzing away, her white shoulders gleaming, her bright head shining beneath the wax lights, whilst he lay stark and cold, in a shabby little lodging, with a bullet through his head.

And now—now, instead of killing himself, he was going to trip the light fantastic with her. Could anything be more curious, nay, ridiculous, if it had not been so pathetic? For these sharp contrasts between grave and gay were full of pathos. A strange languor had taken possession of him. He did not feel like a living, sentient being. He felt like a machine, bound to go grinding on, on, on, until its mainspring wore out, and came to a sudden halt. The crisis so recently gone through had set its mark upon him: Hitherto, one side of his nature had been asleep. Now he knew what suffering meant. No man can step so near to the red threshold of Crime without gaining fuller knowledge and a more extended experience. But he pays for them dearly. Happy, heedless youth, so joyous and selfish, so bright and attractive is the price. He loses carelessness, and gets wisdom. He gives animal spirits, and gains staidness. He says good-bye to folly, and acquires wider sympathy with human infirmities.

But he would part with them all to buy back his vanished youth, to regain an easy conscience, and drive away harassing thought. Strife, struggle, self-conquest may mean progress, but they do not constitute happiness. Yet those natures, however faulty, which possess finer elements, cannot stagnate. They are bound to push upwards and onwards. A mysterious force impels them forward, in spite of sorrow, suffering and weariness. Ever the unknown goal incites them to higher efforts. Failure and achievement, achievement and failure, so goes the round, but for the truest spirits there is no cessation from toil. Labour they must, until the deadly struggle called Life ceases.

CHAPTER XXVII.

PLAYING THE FOOL.

BEAU rang the bell, and informed Mrs. Tyler that he proposed spending the night at Dredmore Castle.

"Dear, dear, Captain!" exclaimed the worthy landlady in apology, "I beg ten thousand pardings for not having lit your fire, but the truth was I never expected to see you back until to-morrow. You gave me to understand as much when you went to town this morning."

"You are quite right, Mrs. Tyler. I did," responded Beau. "But I found I could get away after all, and you make us too comfortable here for London to have any attractions."

"I'm sure, Captain, you're very kind. I does my best, that's all," and the gratified landlady swept her lodger a low curtsy. "It's a pleasure to wait on gentlemen like you and Major Grimshaw. As I says to my John, 'they gives no trouble—no trouble whatever.'"

"You are too flattering, Mrs. Tyler. By the way, is Donaldson downstairs?"

Donaldson was Beau's soldier servant.

"Yes, Captain, I b'lieve so, Captain. Anyhow, he was here a few minutes ago."

"Tell him I want him, if you please. I shall be back to-morrow, after hunting. Major Grimshaw does not return until the following day, but you can give me some dinner, I suppose?"

"Most certainly, Captain. There's a real nice little loin of mutton in the house, as has been 'anging ever since last Monday. It's beautiful and tender. I allays pays the top price for my meat, so as to m^r sure of 'aving it good."

So saying, Mrs. Tyler withdrew, and Beau proceeded to dress in evening clothes, giving Donaldson instructions, meanwhile, about the packing of a portmanteau, containing his hunting kit, for the morrow; Lady Fuzziwig having

arranged with the master that a lawn meet should take place at the Castle after her ball. He then gave directions about his horse being sent on on the following morning, and when all was in readiness, hailed a fly, into which he stepped, Donaldson occupying the box seat by the driver's side.

Before long they were threading their way through the streets of the little town, and out into the quiet country lanes beyond, fenced on either side by strong, blackthorn hedges, from which sprang an occasional ash or oak, rearing its tall trunk like some silent sentinel. It was a clear, frosty night. The full, white moon rode high in the heavens, looking down on the sleeping earth with bright, but calm serenity. She shed her silvery light on the wide fields and resting cattle, throwing such sharp, black shadows on the clear road, that once or twice the staid animal between the shafts stopped and shied. How peaceful and still it all looked. The quiet restfulness of the wintry evening, and of the open, homely landscape lying shimmering in the moonlight, sank into Beau's over-charged heart, and exercised a soothing influence upon it. From a state of wild excitement, he gradually settled down into one of comparative repose. And yet that curious numbness still hung about him, and blunted his keener senses. He could not shake it off. It required a strong effort to realise where he was going, what he was doing, why he was seated there in a fly, rumbling along the roads. When he looked out of the window, the jaws of death still seemed to gape wide open before him, ready to swallow him up at a moment's notice. They mocked at polite society, threatening it, pursuing it, with the same relentlessness that a bloodhound displays when following up his prey.

Beau wondered vaguely how he should ever get through the evening, and laugh and talk in his usual convivial manner. The task appeared herculean. By-and-by he found himself shaking hands with Lady Fuzziwig quite mechanically, and stammering out little common-place replies in answer to her sprightly sallies. They conveyed no meaning to his ears. If anyone had asked him, he could not have told what she was talking about. Her ladyship's most sparkling remarks were only so many empty words. Apparently she became aware of this defective appreciation on the part of her listener, for after a time, she called him to

account. He had thrice said yes when he ought to have said no, and no, when he should have said yes.

"Why, what is the matter with you to-night?" exclaimed the old coquette, wagging her blonde head, and giving him a playful tap on the arm with the handle of her exquisite feather fan, "You are positively dull."

She was dressed in a gorgeous gown of white satin, and what with tulle, lace, rouge, diamonds, false hair, and pearl powder, really looked a magnificent ruin of a woman.

"Am I?" he responded. "That is an unpardonable sin."

"I agree with you. A man ought always to be amusing, else he can claim but little superiority over my own estimable sex. We women of the world like to be amused. Have you no good story to tell me?"

"No, none. My repertory is exhausted."

"Nonsense; I don't believe that. But you're out of form this evening. Has your best hunter tumbled and broken his knees? If so, I can understand your solemn looks."

"No, Lady Fuzziwig, I have only just returned from town, and have not been out hunting to-day."

"Ah! from town. Delightful, wicked town! Surely you bring some news? Is there no scandal going on?"

"Probably a thousand; but I did not happen to hear of them."

"I give you up. Dolly has made you turn ridiculously virtuous. I always do say I hate an engaged man, at least when he is in love; and I am told you are horribly, desperately in love. Is that true?"

"Yes; I am not ashamed to admit the fact."

"Ah, well! you'll come to your senses after a bit; everybody does. It is impossible to go on living at such high pressure. People are joined together in holy matrimony, and told they are one, but they very soon discover they are two, in spite of the solemn assurances of mother church. But I won't tease you any longer. To do your Dolly justice, she's a nice little thing, and no doubt will develop into an excellent wife, as wives go nowadays. She is coming to the dance to-night, so you must make a heroic effort, and bear up for two or three hours longer."

"I will try my best," answered Beau.

His hostess's worldly tone and manner jarred upon him

intensely. It was profanation to hear Dolly talked of in this flippant way, just as if she belonged to the common herd of womankind.

"Now mind," went on the vivacious old lady, "you are to make yourself very agreeable at dinner. Attack the hillocks of conversation like a man and a Briton. Labour away. I ask it of you as a friend, for I can't have my dinner-parties dull. A dull dinner-party always reflects upon the hostess. You have an awful woman to take in, but for my sake you must make the best of her." And she ogled Beau with her faded grey eyes.

"Who is she?" he asked, forcing himself to show some interest in the matter.

"A cousin of Lord Fuzziwig's—a Miss Smith-Thompson. But there, come along and be introduced."

So saying, she dragged Beau up to a very tall, very thin, and very angular spinster, whose age was probably nearer fifty than forty. His first impressions were scarcely favourable. Miss Smith-Thompson, whose virgin charms had as yet tempted no man to commit matrimony, had a high, narrow forehead, exceedingly shining and well-polished, down either side of which her sparse but much-pomaded locks were carefully plastered. A black velvet coronet, embroidered in seed pearls, encircled her chaste head. Her nose was Roman, and held its own against any nose in the room. Her thin-lipped, tightly-compressed mouth gave the face a disagreeable expression, whilst as for Miss Smith-Thompson's figure it was so remarkably flat that had Providence chosen to put her head on the wrong way about, it really would have made very little difference in the lady's appearance. Back and front were equally straight.

Beau made this fair young woman a courtly bow, and Miss Smith-Thompson, prepossessed by his good looks, received him with unaccustomed favour. She at once began talking about the weather in a disjointed but voluble fashion. What a debt of thanks we owe our British climate! Were it not for its vagaries, how should we ever start a conversation? It precludes every interchange of ideas, and whilst we are commenting upon wind and rain, sunshine and storm, we say to ourselves, "Yes, he or she has a nice voice, a pleasant manner. I think we shall agree."

"How cold it is to-night," began the lady, with an affable smile. "I am afraid we are in for another frost almost before we have fairly got over the last one. It is very early in the season for such severe frost, but really the last few winters have been almost Arctic. Some people say that the English climate is changing, and that the heat of the sun is gradually dying out. When it has all gone, then I suppose the world will be uninhabitable. What is your opinion, Captain Dornay?"

"I really don't know. I haven't got any."

"Oh! but that's quite' inexcusable. Everybody should have an opinion on such a very interesting subject. How are the great problems of life ever to be solved if men like you decline to exert their reasoning powers?"

"Perhaps we have none to exert. That is a very simple solution of the mystery."

"Do you know, I sometimes think you're right. Fox-hunting people, as a rule, talk of nothing, and care for nothing but sport."

"Well, Miss Smith-Thompson, they might care for a good many worse things. Don't you hunt at all?"

The lady sat bolt upright, and brought her thin lips together with a snap of disapproval.

"I? Oh dear no! I wouldn't do such a thing for worlds."

"Why not?"

He felt rather irritated by this strong condemnation of a pastime in which Dolly joined.

"Why not? Because it's so unfeminine. Nothing would induce me to go flying over the hedges and ditches like a mad woman, and run the risk of breaking my neck into the bargain."

"The danger is certainly a drawback, but apart from that, I know no reason why ladies should not ride to hounds. In fact, I like to see them in the hunting-field." He continued to speak in the strange, automatic way which made him wonder if he were himself or somebody else.

"My views differ entirely from yours," said Miss Smith-Thompson acidly. "But I suppose it is useless for me to argue the point, since I hear that Miss Dalrymple is passionately fond of hunting, and rides as hard as most of the men."

"Yes, and a great deal harder than the majority. Not one man in fifty has such hands as Dolly."

"Do you mean so large?" inquired his companion, purposely feigning ignorance.

"No; I mean so fine," he responded with considerable acerbity.

Lady Fuzziwig was right. This was an "awful woman," and no mistake. Even if she had been first cousin to every peer in Christendom, she would still have remained a rude, offensive and unbearable person. In an under-hand sort of way Miss Smith-Thompson was attacking Dolly. He dimly comprehended her intention, but felt too utterly stupid to make any more brilliant reply. The lady both bored and annoyed him. He experienced an immense difficulty in being even commonly civil to her. She was one of those raw-boned, opinionated and aggressive females, who make men forget the sex to which they belong, and kill every sentiment of chivalry.

By this time the company had all assembled, and throughout the room could be heard a steady hum of voices, now rising, now falling, accentuated by an occasional peal of laughter. Beau's head went round like a teetotum. Even whilst he attempted to listen to Miss Smith-Thompson's observations, a kind of vertigo seized him. Every now and then he seemed to lose-consciousness, and only by making a desperate effort could he succeed in fixing his attention on what was going on around. The knowledge that he might break down at any moment, and yet must do his utmost to prevent such a catastrophe, rendered the situation terribly trying. Every nerve in his body was ajar, like a finely-strung musical instrument, rudely touched by a coarse and ignorant hand.

That dinner remained for ever branded upon his memory. To his dying day he never forgot what he endured, or looked back to it without a shudder. There is some agony that never passes away, but produces an indelible impression. Even time cannot efface the recollection of it, which always endures.

Hitherto, Beau had generally been rather fond, than otherwise, of a large dinner-party. He was of a convivial and gregarious nature, and liked to see his fellow-creatures gathered together. To-night he conceived a positive loathing for this popular form of entertainment

The sight of four-and-twenty civilized human beings, belonging to one of the first countries of the world, sitting down solemnly to a lengthy table for the express purpose of gorging themselves like so many vultures hovering over a dead carcase, suddenly struck him, not only as a tedious and extravagant, but also as an intolerably disgusting proceeding, which encouraged both greediness and fastidiousness. They might just as well have been a crew of apes, chattering round the board. Between these well dressed men and women, and the monkeys in the Zoological Gardens, there was really surprisingly little difference. In either case, the brute element was distinctly apparent.

After all, what did a dinner-party consist of? First, you had to listen to the interminable talk of some foolish or antipathetic woman, with whom you possessed no subjects of interest in common. The stream of conversation had to be kept rolling smoothly onwards, for a period not far short of two hours. Then you were forced to eat, as if eating were the sole object of your life; not because you either cared for, or required so many dishes, but simply because in your deadly boredom it was a means of passing the time. Finally, you were asked to mix every conceivable liquor under the sun, and went away trying to persuade yourself into the difficult belief that the whole entertainment represented an advanced and cultured enjoyment. Why, the savage, whose instinct was to retire into a cave, or behind a bush, and tear his food to pieces in solitude, unwatched and unwaited upon, was infinitely more decent. He did not make a public display of his gluttony. Such were the cynical thoughts that rose to Beau's mind.

Lady Fuzziwig's dinners were renowned for their excellence. She kept a French cook, who was quite an artist in his own particular line. Had our hero been in an ordinary mood, he would have enjoyed Monsieur Mirabeau's delicately-cooked dishes amazingly; but to-night he was *not* in an ordinary mood—far from it, and therefore he found desperate fault with the subtle creations of truffles, cocks' combs, foie-gras and mushrooms, handed round for his delectation.

The truth was, he had no appetite. The very sight of food revolted him. On the other hand, he suffered from a desperate thirst. A craving for drink possessed him, such

as he had never hitherto experienced, for he was an abstemious man by nature, not given to deep potations.

This evening, however, he tossed down glass after glass of champagne, never once refusing the butler's offers, much to Miss Smith-Thompson's horror, who, being a strict teetotaller, went about afterwards declaring, with uplifted eyes, that really she did not envy Miss Dalrymple, for Captain Dornay was no better than a regular drunkard.

As the generous wine circulated in Beau's veins, his face became flushed, and gradually the power of speech returned to him. Before the ladies left the drawing-room, he had even got the length of "chaffing" Miss Smith-Thompson as to her maiden hesitations and reserves, and brought one or two fierce blushes to her sallow virgin cheek. At last she took refuge in silence, mentally dubbing him "a most terrible young man." Beau laughed, talked, and told such witty, naughty stories after the departure of the fair sex, that every man in the room was in fits of laughter, and voted him a capital good fellow. He had just sense enough left to know that he was making a beast of himself, and even whilst the applause of his fellow-creatures rang in his ears, he felt that he was growing more and more unfit to encounter Dolly's clear penetrating eyes. But it was imperative to get through the evening somehow; and although dull care sat all the while at the board, gazing at him with a sombre visage, Lord Fuzziwig's fine vintage port to a certain degree succeeded in effacing her melancholy features.

When at length the gentlemen rose to rejoin the ladies, there was no mincing the fact that Beau had had quite as much as was good for him. Some men in this state grow maudlin, or if not maudlin, irritable and querulous; he, on the contrary, became extra brilliant. Immediately on his appearance in the drawing-room, there was a petition for a comic song, backed by the hostess, until it partook of the nature of a command. Her ladyship was not to be denied, and would take no refusal.

Consequently the banjo was called for, and Beau, seated in the midst of a numerous audience, sang ditty after ditty in his very best and most humorous style. Lady Fuzziwig was delighted. She beamed upon the performer with restored good humour, for was he not helping to pass away agreeably that awkward time before the arrival of the expected guests, during which those already in the house

demanding some form of entertainment? The old lady clapped her *protégé* on the back, and applauded him to the echo. When he audaciously introduced some *double entendres* of a slightly dubious nature, she laughed immoderately, and in a manner that would have been considered very bad style, had it not been her good fortune to belong to the peerage. But, as everybody knows, the peerage covers a multitude of sins. And now, reader, are you wholly disgusted with Beau? Do you withdraw all your affection from him, and pronounce that he is not fit to be the hero of even a second-rate novel? Oh! be charitable. Remember there is no such thing as perfection to be found in real life, and that it is real life which, however unworthily, we are endeavouring to depict. Feel as angry with him as you like, but forgive him afterwards. Because a man or a woman commits some bad action, he or she is not necessarily all evil, and to assume that they are only hardens their hearts, and prevents them from repenting of their sin. We—you and I—by our uncharitable judgments are often responsible for a good deal of the misery and the suffering with which this world abounds. What right have we to judge anyone but ourselves?

Meantime, the chorus of approval grew louder and louder, and the songster became more and more animated. The banjo kept up a rapid accompaniment to the merry verses, and Beau's fingers seemed positively to fly from one string to the other. The fun was at its height, and threatened to become uproarious, for the company, who now began to arrive, flocked into the drawing-room from whence the lively sounds proceeded, and left the ball-room quite deserted. They listened, laughed, and applauded like the rest.

Beau's triumph was complete. Never had he sung with such *verve*. His audience were carried away. It might not be high art, but it was art eminently calculated to appeal to fashionable people who had dined well, and to simple country folk, easily pleased and amused.

At last the performer, tired out by his exertions, yet anxious to make an effective finale, started up from his chair and executed a brilliant break-down round the narrow space accorded him, ending up with a loud "Yahoo!" and a very remarkable caper, which brought down a perfect volley of applause.

"Bravo! Bravo!" cried a dozen voices simultaneously. "Do it again, old man."

Hoarse, heated, with his tie awry and his banjo held aloft, at that moment Beau happened to glance towards the door. He started. Dolly was there, looking at him with a grave and puzzled expression of countenance. His flushed face and excited gestures were new to her. She did not understand what they meant. She only knew that she did not like them. Why was he capering about in this manner, and making such a noise before a room full of people? Her quick, feminine perception detected that something was amiss.

At sight of her, Beau blushed to the roots of his hair. Never had a blush caused him such exquisite pain, or occasioned so keen a sense of degradation. With a smothered oath he flung away his banjo, straightened his tie, and then stood still. For the life of him he could not have approached her at that moment. She, however, advanced through the crowd, and held out a delicately-gloved hand, whilst, as she did so, the colour on her smooth cheek deepened perceptibly.

"Beau," she said, in an anxious voice, "what's the matter? Are you ill? You look so strange."

"No, I'm not ill," he returned gloomily. "I've been making a fool of myself, that's all. It's not the first time, and I daresay it won't be the last. However, my friends seem to have enjoyed the spectacle, which is some comfort."

"Beau, how is it you are here to-night? You told me you were going to be in London, and I did not want to come, only papa said it would appear unneighbourly to stay away. When did you get back?"

"This afternoon, about half-past four o'clock. Have you had a good day's sport?"

"Yes, but do not let us talk of that—at least not just now. Beau," and her voice dropped, "did you—did you see the woman who has been giving us all this trouble?"

"Yes," he said moodily, "I did."

There was a moment's pause between them. He could hear her catch her breath, then, in tones that she strove hard to keep steady, she said:

"Beau, dear, why do you not speak? Are matters satisfactory?"

"It depends on what you call satisfactory."

"Oh! you know what I mean. Are they settled?"

He looked at her in a dazed, wistful sort of way. A mist rose up before his eyes. How fair she was in her fresh, white dress—she was quite right to wear white, it became her so wonderfully well—and with her sweet face, and dazzling neck and shoulders. Fair in mind and in body. A jewel without a flaw. Give her up! Voluntarily relinquish such a girl as this! No, never, whilst he lived. He set his teeth, and his breath came hard. A mighty struggle was going on within him. His evil spirit conquered. By-and-by he might learn to bear the separation, but not now, when her eyes sought his so lovingly and anxiously, when every fibre of his being vibrated at the mere sound of her voice, and it was all he could do not to press her to his heart in a wild embrace. Come what might, force alone should induce him to part from her. She was his—his, by the right of their common love and of their plighted troth. He would defy Sir Hector, and play a bold game.

"Yes," he said, with a forced, unnatural smile. "Everything is settled at last."

She looked up into his face and laughed. Such a soft, happy laugh, as sank deep into his heart, and filled it with an agony of shame. He reeled up against the nearest chair for support. Good God! what would he not be capable of next? He had lied—deliberately and consciously lied to his love. A week ago, he would not have believed it possible for him to descend to such depths of degradation.

The wretched man, in a paroxysm of remorse and self-abasement, turned from her with a groan, and forced his way through the now rapidly-gathering crowd. His bruised spirit cried out for solitude. She gazed after him and sighed. A horrible suspicion had darted across her mind; a suspicion so infinitely opposed to all her girlish ideas of what was honourable and admirable in a man that she blamed herself even for harbouring it. Yet, how else was it possible to account for his strange manner, and the scene which had evidently been enacted before her coming?

Could it be that she had been mistaken in him after all—that he was no hero, but only a very common-place piece of clay? No, no, no, a thousand times no. Nothing should make her believe such a thing. He was ill, worried, unlike himself, but not—*drunk*. The love incapable of trust was

an unworthy passion. Having arrived at this conclusion, she moved on in the direction he had taken. She must comfort him, soothe him. But, though she searched through all the spacious rooms, she saw him no more that night. He had fled from the bright ball-room, with its lights and its music, much as an escaped convict flees from his kind. The actor had broken down in his acting. One honest girl's soft looks and tender voice had recalled to him his better and truer self. He could not continue to deceive her, and hated and despised himself for the part he had played. Dolly! Dolly! To think of his having lied to her. He dared not face her again. He was not worthy to touch the hem of her garment. Like a guilty thing, he slunk away.

An hour afterwards, Major Grimshaw came across Dolly. She was sitting alone in a little ante-room, and refused to dance. The room was dimly lighted, but he could have sworn that there were tears in her eyes.

"Beau is here," she said to him hurriedly. "I think he has gone to his room. I cannot find him anywhere. He looked ill. Oh, Harry, you have always been a friend to me. Do go upstairs and find out what is wrong. I—I am so unhappy, I never was at such a horrid ball in my life."

Her pretty, twitching face aroused the Major's compassion. Had they been having a lovers' quarrel?

"I will go at once," he said. "Wait here. I shall be back in a minute or two."

She closed her eyes, and waited. Her soul was heavy. The noise of the music and of the dancers was hateful to her. She had stolen away, so as to escape from them. What was this ball to her, without Beau? All her life seemed bound up in him. Now that circumstances threatened to obstruct their marriage she realised how great was her love. And he might have caught some horrid illness, and be going to die. Oh! oh! oh!

"All right," said a cheery voice by her side. "Beau's gone to bed. He has a racking headache, and did not feel equal to dancing, but he says you're to be sure to enjoy yourself, and not worry about him."

"Oh, I am so glad," she answered, her whole countenance brightening. "I was afraid he might be really ill. Thank you, Harry, for setting my mind at ease."

"Will you dance now, Dolly?"

"No, I would rather not, Harry," and she looked her cousin in the face, with a little deprecatory air. "Don't think me very foolish, but in spite of Beau's message, it is impossible for me to enjoy myself in his absence. I shall go to bed too, so as to be bright and cheerful for him by the morning."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A RECKLESS WOMAN.

AFTER her last interview with Captain Dornay, Lydia's whole nature became subject to a violent revolution. Something seemed to snap and give way within her. Hitherto, in spite of her strong, unruly passions, she had always led a respectable and decorous life. Her love had not only purified, but sustained her. It taught hope, patience, submission, and endurance, all of them excellent qualities in a woman.

But when Beau left the house in the manner already described, and she realised that their rupture was final, a great despair descended upon her spirit. She was as a ship severed from its moorings, doomed henceforth to wander aimlessly about on the mighty ocean, tossed here, tossed there, but never again finding a harbour in which to rest. A sense of unutterable loneliness took possession of her. She could not even weep; she felt too hard and callous. The relief of tears was denied her. Once upon a time she had cared for the world's opinion. Now it no longer retained any influence. She was much too miserable to mind either censure or praise. Even self-respect, that strongest armour of a proud woman, disappeared, crushed beneath the weight of an overpowering grief. What did it matter if people spoke badly of her, and spread scandalous reports? What did anything matter? Pain, long borne, brings a kind of passivity, a deadening of moral obligations, a detachment from life. In robbing the latter of joy, it takes from death its sting.

In Lydia's eyes, her fair name, her reputation, were mere trifles in comparison with her love. Alas! that was over and at an end. The man, on whom for years past she had

lavished her entire affection, no longer reciprocated the sentiment, and had distinctly stated his refusal to make her his wife. A breach of promise? Pshaw! What good would that do her? She was not like a common person, to be consoled by the gift of a few hundred pounds. The largest fortune in the world could not repay her for what she had lost. To regain his love she would willingly renounce her whole income.

And now, was she to sit down tamely and let her rival win the race without any opposition? No, never! Beau had changed once, and he might change again. Anyhow, he should be made to feel the full weight of her hatred; for hate and love were nearly allied, and since he spurned the one, he should realise the meaning of the other. He had shown her no mercy; she would show him none. He had wounded her best and holiest feelings; she would pay him back in kind.

Already precious time had been wasted. From the mere fact of Beau's visit, it was quite clear that her anonymous letter had produced a very considerable effect. That effect must be enhanced, and not allowed to dwindle. To score a success it was absolutely necessary for her to be on the spot. The mistake she had made from the first consisted in giving him too much rope. If, instead of settling down for the winter in a London house before waiting to hear his plans, she had gone to Fieldborough, pretended an interest in hunting, kept him well under her eye, and insisted on their engagement being made public, all this would never have taken place. She had been foolishly confident and generous, like all loving women who judge the fidelity of the male nature by their own, only to be subjected later on to bitter disappointment. It was always the way. She might have foreseen how things would end. Now that it was too late to repair the mischief she could actually recall each mistake that she had committed, and count them from the beginning. Ah! why did knowledge of this sort always come after the period when it might have proved useful? Firstly, she should have married him when he proposed, and not been so anxious to secure him a fortune; secondly, he ought never to have been allowed to go to India; and thirdly, that joint *ménage* at Fieldborough, with a bachelor friend, should not have been tolerated. These three causes alone were

enough to account for the altered condition of affairs. The result of so much trust on her part was that she had lost everything.

A cry, almost bestial in its rage, escaped from the unhappy woman. Anger, despair, jealousy and recklessness were tearing at her heartstrings, goading her on to some mad act. All through the long afternoon and evening she sat motionless, chaos reigning in her disordered brain. Yet, though so quiet outwardly, a fever for motion was upon her. It grew more and more acute. Plan after plan presented itself, and was rejected as vague and insufficient. But when the darkness came, it befriended her tottering reason. Suddenly, like a shooting-star, an idea flashed across the sombre void of her mind. Her rigid features grew less tense, the vacant expression stole out of her fixed and straining eyes, and a dark smile curled the corners of her full, red lips. With a quick, determined movement she rose from the seat where she had been seated so long, and rang the bell.

"Bring the lamp," she said to the footman, in her old, imperious way; "and, John, fetch me a Bradshaw."

When her wishes were executed, and the soft-treading man had departed, she heaved a sigh of relief. His presence in the room, brief as it was, irritated her over-strung nerves. Then she opened the Bradshaw, and glanced eagerly down the index.

F.— And her white finger slid slowly along the margin. Yes, there it was—Fieldtown, Fieldby, Fieldshaw, Fieldborough, page 254. Hurriedly she turned over the leaves, and with considerable difficulty succeeded in making out the trains. The earliest one left St. Pancras at 6.45 in the morning, arriving at five minutes past nine. That would do nicely. By leaving in good time she should make certain of finding Beau at home, for she proposed paying him a visit. She intended making one last desperate appeal to his feelings, alone and unaccompanied by her maid, for whom she could telegraph later in the day, should circumstances necessitate her sleeping away from home.

Having arrived at this momentous decision, Lydia straightway went upstairs, but although she retired to rest at an early hour, she could not sleep. Of late she had been much troubled by insomnia, and gradually had fallen into the bad habit of taking chloral. But to-night the bottle

happened to be empty, in consequence of which she was unable to have her usual dose. She missed it sorely, for her whole nervous system was in a strained and unnaturally excited state. As the clock struck five she rose, dressed herself with care, applied some white lotion to her worn face, then a touch of red, selected a highly-becoming bonnet and veil which torred down the general effect, and when these preparations were complete, swallowed a cup of hot coffee and ate a morsel of toast.

The gaslights were yet glimmering in the deserted streets, and the wintry day had not yet dawned in the great, hushed city, when she drove to St. Pancras. Amy, her daughter, still slumbered soundly, her pale face resting peacefully on the pillow of her little white bed. Unconscious, she, of the crisis taking place in her mother's existence. Sleep effaced the girlish sorrows from which she so often suffered. At the last moment Lydia had thought of the child, and left a message saying she had been called from home on business, and might not return that evening.

The station was comparatively empty. Very few first-class passengers were travelling at this unfashionably early hour, and Lydia had no difficulty in securing a compartment to herself. She shivered. The morning was intensely cold and raw. A frosty mist rested on the grey fields as the train swept by them. Everything looked desolate, cheerless, and colourless; rows of dark hedges and black, naked trees rose weird-like out of the vaporous wreaths which curled along the surface of the ground, now gathering in a dense white cloud, now drifting upward, thin and airy as smoke. No shafts of golden light, or long bars of rose-tinted ether, heralded the approaching dawn. All was still and sullen, and a dreary silence brooded o'er the earth.

Lydia insensibly drew her fur cloak closer around her. Both hands and feet were cold as ice, but she felt no inconvenience from them. An inward fire consumed her. Once, and once only, she asked herself if this were not a wild-goose chase on which she was bent. Perhaps. The chances were that this last pitiful petition of hers might fail like its predecessors. But—and her strong teeth almost pierced through the skin of her nether lip—she was going to do her worst. She would humiliate Beau by her presence, and, if he still remained insensible to her words, degrade him in the estimation of Miss Dalrymple. Of her ability to do this she

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felt certain. No pure-minded girl could think the same of her lover after hearing what she had to tell. It would be easy to arouse her pride and work upon it. But before adopting such a course Beau should have one chance given him. Major Grimshaw's presence in the house was a little awkward, certainly. But she could pretend that she required his aid to look for rooms, and get him out of the way. If, however, he proved the least troublesome or inconveniently curious, he should hear the whole truth. In her present frame of mind she no longer felt capable of any reserve. A woman has to go through untold suffering before she reaches a pitch of such utter self abandonment as that to which Lydia now gave herself over. The one thought that sustained her was Revenge. If only she could make Beau feel what he had caused her to feel, then she would die content. As long as she remained miserable, she would never allow him to be happy.

Such was her mood as the train glided into Fieldborough Station. She glanced hastily at the clock, and saw that the hands stood at seven minutes past eight. They had kept good time, and were very fairly punctual. Supposing Beau was not up? No matter. This was not the moment for prudery. She would force her way into his room, and insist upon his listening to what she had to say. Taken by storm, he could not possibly escape. A woman driven to extremities scoffs at the proprieties which, under ordinary conditions, exercise a strong restraining influence over her. Like a ferocious beast, Lydia panted to attack her prey, to strike him to the ground, to squeeze the breath out of his body, in a deadly embrace full of cruelty and passion. Yes, she was capable of any atrocity. A host of strange, irregular forces were working within her, and she gave them play, making no effort to resist them. Jealousy whispered "Break the girl's heart." Revenge cried, "Show him up, expose him," and Love murmured, "Ah! no, ah! no; win him back, for your life is bound up in his. You and he must for ever act and re-act on each other like the waves of the sea." A curious medley of thought occupied her brain. The result was—distraction.

Still impelled by some power which she had neither the desire nor the time to analyse, she stepped out on to the platform, whilst an obsequious porter, disappointed at this fine lady having no luggage, hailed a fly.

"How far is Prince's Street from here?" she inquired of the driver, a respectable old man with scanty, grey hair, and a red muffler, which was scarcely a shade deeper in tone than his face.

"It will take you about eight minutes to drive there. The roads are a bit slippery this morning," he answered.

"Very well then. Go to No. 45. Make as much haste as you can."

Lydia got in; the porter banged the door after her, one mode of expressing his gratitude for a silver coin, and the fly rumbled slowly on its way. Hitherto she had felt no misgivings! Her mental exaltation defied all practical considerations, soaring high on fluttering wings. Blindly she had yielded to the impulse which clamoured for action; but now that her destination was almost reached, a horrible nervousness came over her, which caused every pulse to beat with quickened throbs. Afraid of wavering in her purpose at the eleventh hour, directly the fly came to a standstill, she jumped out and rang the bell of No. 45 vigorously. Mrs. Tyler was not expecting visitors, and some few minutes elapsed before she appeared in answer to the summons, during which Lydia waited, a prey to mortal impatience. At last the door opened.

"Is Captain Dornay at home?" she inquired, in a voice which trembled a little, in spite of its owner's attempt at fortitude. She made so certain of his being within, that without waiting for an answer, she pushed her way past Mrs. Tyler into the hall, which she proceeded to survey. A neat oil-cloth covered the floor. Sundry hats adorned the pegs of the iron umbrella-stand, whilst a rack, containing several hunting crops, one of which she recognised as a present given by herself many years ago to Beau, sent a wild thrill of gladness to her heart. Fool! Was she so little strong that her nerves should tingle at the mere sight of an article belonging to him, and which he had held in his hand? She tossed her head back angrily. This man was still her master, still her conqueror. And yet she professed to despise him.

Meantime, Mrs. Tyler, unprepared for the sight of such a handsome lady inquiring after her lodger at so early an hour, stood and stared at the beautiful apparition in speechless amazement. Lydia's magnificent physique invariably produced a strong impression, especially on her own sex,

who ungrudgingly admired her grandly-shaped form, and dark, picturesque style of beauty. But, as we have already seen, she was quick-tempered, and Mrs. Tyler's silence and prolonged scrutiny irritated her intensely.

"Did not you hear what I said, my good woman, or are you deaf?" she cried, with a frown. "I asked if Captain Dornay was at home. If so, pray show me to his room."

"Please, my lady"—Mrs. Tyler felt sure her visitor was a person of distinction, a Marchioness, or may be even a Duchess—"the Captain's not at 'ome."

Lydia had not reckoned on Beau's absence. She was completely taken aback by this reply, which threatened to frustrate her plans.

"Where is he, then? Surely he has not gone hunting at this hour of the morning?"

"No, my lady. Captain Dornay is at Dredmore Castle, and I do not expect him back till the evening."

"H'm! that's awkward. I wanted to see him particularly, on matters of great importance."

"Are you staying in the town, by any chance? If so, perhaps you would call again."

"No, I'm not, I only came from London a few minutes ago." Lydia paused, thought for a moment, and then added, "How far off is this Dredmore Castle?"

"A matter of four mile. It is the family seat of Lord Fuzziwig, who perhaps is familiar to you by name, and Lady Fuzziwig, she gave a ball last night, to which all the quality was invited. And Captain Dornay, 'ee stayed in the 'ouse, being a mighty pleasant, haffable gentleman, as I daresay you know, and a great favourite with all the young ladies, only that Miss Dalrymple, of Woodford Chase, she 'ave secured him, so they say—why, goodness gracious, what's the matter now?' For, without listening to Mrs. Tyler's account of Beau's doings and perfections, Lydia had hurried back into the fly, and told the man to drive as fast as he could to Dredmore Castle.

"I won't miss him this time, at any rate," she said to herself with a grim smile. "I wonder what the 'quality' will say to our paragon of a hussar? Hypocrite!" doubling up her fists angrily.

Mrs. Tyler stood and stared after her in astonishment. "Now, 'oo can she be?" she mused; "she looks like a

real lady too, which makes it all the more puzzling, but there"—giving her head a disapproving shake—"it's not the right thing, no, not the right thing, nor the proper thing, leastways in my opinion. When a gentleman has the good luck to get engaged to such a nice lady as Miss Dalrymple, and with plenty of money into the bargain, he don't want none of his old loves coming and a-philandering arter him. But the gents nowadays is a long sight too gay. One don't satisfy 'em, no, not it. They're just like so many Turks, as I often says to my John, only the Turks are a deal respectabler, because they 'as their airems all open and above board. Now, I'll be bound that that fine lady, in spite of her furs and her rich clothes, and her dark 'andsome face, was here for no good. I wonder what Miss Dolly would say if she knew. Well! well! I daresay I'm only a stupid woman, but I'm disappointed in the Captain. I *did* think his character was 'igh, else never, never would I 'ave allowed him to step a foot inside this 'ouse."

With which most moral declaration, Mrs. Tyler slammed the front door and descended to the kitchen, feeling much disturbed in mind. She was a virtuous Christian and a regular church-goer, and consequently put the very worst construction on Mrs. Stapleton's visit.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SETTLING ACCOUNTS.

A FEW minutes before ten, Beau was still asleep. Although he had disappeared at an early hour from the ball-room on the previous evening, an uneasy conscience, added to the sounds of mirth and jollity below stairs, kept him awake the greater part of the night, and it was only towards morning that he fell into a heavy slumber. Breakfast was not ordered until half-past ten, consequently he had given Donaldson instructions to bring him his hot water punctually at ten. Owing to the courtesy of the master, who had considerately consented to allow the dancers a whole hour's law, the meet was fixed for twelve, instead of at eleven o'clock, and quiet still reigned throughout the castle.

Once, twice, thrice did Donaldson knock at his master's door before he received any answer. At length Beau called out in a sleepy voice, "Hulloa! Getting-up time? Come in."

"Beg pardon, sir, for wakening you, sir," said Donaldson. "It wants a quarter to ten."

"Then what the deuce have you called me for? You know quite well that I can dress easily in half an hour."

Donaldson looked mysterious, and approached nearer to the bedside.

"There is a lady downstairs, sir, who wishes to see you immediately."

"A lady! To see me?" cried Beau, turning suddenly pale, whilst every disposition to sleep vanished on the spot.

"There must be a mistake."

He tried to put on a bold front, but the attempt was not altogether successful.

"I think not, sir. She asked very particularly after you, and said she could not go away without seeing you."

"The devil!" muttered Beau; then turning to his servant, he added, "Tell the lady that I am in bed, and consequently am unable to grant her an interview at present. If she has any business, let her state it."

Donaldson departed obediently, but returned before many minutes had gone by.

"Well?" exclaimed Beau, interrogatively. His heart was beating like a sledge-hammer.

"Please, sir, the lady says that if it is not convenient for you to receive her, she will ask for Miss Dalrymple. In fact, she refuses to leave without seeing either you or the young lady."

"Who is she? Have you any idea?" inquired Beau, pretending an ignorance he did not feel.

"A Mrs. Stapleton, sir. She bade me give you this card."

Beau jumped out of bed, and glanced at it with a groan of despair. No need to tell him the visitor's name; he knew it well enough already. Like lightning it flashed across his brain what this bold step on Lydia's part portended. He saw before him exposure, followed by the ruin of every hope. If Mrs. Stapleton once met Dolly, and confided the plain, unvarnished tale of his infidelity to her innocent ear, the chances were that, quite independently of

Sir Hector, a complete rupture would promptly ensue. The girl's very purity would make her judge him harshly. At whatever cost, it was simply imperative to prevent the two women from coming together. It would be fatal to let them compare notes. From the confusion of his brain, this thought stood out prominently. At all hazards, Dolly should be spared the pain of an interview with Lydia, and of listening to her revelations. Thus determining, he sat down there and then, undressed as he was, and scribbled the following hasty lines to Mrs. Stapleton :

"For God's sake, return to my lodgings in Fieldborough, where no doubt you have already called, else you could not have tracked me here. The family are not yet up. Go quietly, and without making any scandal. Otherwise, I swear it shall go hardly with you. My endurance is limited. You have already pushed it to the extreme, but rather than bring sorrow on those I love, I am willing to meet you once more. Leave immediately. Tell my landlady, Mrs. Tyler, at No. 45 Prince's Street, that you have an appointment with me. Wait there until I come. I promise to follow with all speed."

He slipped this note into an envelope, which he closed firmly, and then handed it over to Donaldson.

"There!" he said, with a somewhat lame assumption of unconcern. "Give the lady this letter, and when she has gone, come back here as fast as you can. It will be necessary for me to make some alteration in my plans, since I am obliged to return to Fieldborough rather unexpectedly, and if I start pretty soon, I shall just about be in time to prevent my hunter being sent out."

Donaldson, like a well-trained servant, made no comments, but went off to deliver the note, leaving Beau to commence dressing with feverish haste. This last blow well-nigh stunned him. He had an intuitive feeling that a desperate crisis was at hand, which no effort on his part could avert. His senses were dazed by so unexpected a catastrophe, and his one aim and object now was to get Lydia off the premises without making a scene before a house full of people. If it had not been for the pitiful weakness that had overtaken him, and for little Tottie's untimely entry, he might have lain dead, freed from his troubles. Never was an

unfortunate man so badgered and harassed. Unable to die, unable to live in peace, what could become of him? Should he for ever totter between a state of irresolution and despair? The prospect was appalling. It was with a very unsteady hand that he went through the operation of shaving. One gash would put him out of his misery, but his nerves were utterly unstrung, and he no longer contemplated suicide as an actual possibility, but merely hankered after it with a vain regret. What a time Donaldson was! If Lydia refused to stir, and insisted on telling her story to Dolly and to all the guests assembled at Dredmore Castle, what should he do then? The idea of this contingency brought cold drops of sweat to his brow. He wiped them away, but they gathered again immediately. At last a footstep was audible outside the door, and Donaldson re-appeared.

"Well," cried Beau, unable to conceal his anxiety, "has the lady gone?"

"Yes, sir, she has left; but she hoped as how you would not keep her waiting longer than you could help, since her time is limited, and she wishes, if possible, to catch the noon-day train to town."

"Thank God for that," murmured Beau, under his breath, with a sigh of relief. "I feel as if a load were lifted from my head. Would that the weight were for ever removed."

His sanguine nature helped him. Even to avert the danger temporarily was something gained. He quickly finished dressing; then sat down and wrote two notes, one to Dolly, the other to Lady Fuzziwig, explaining that he was unexpectedly called away on business, but hoped, nevertheless, to be able to appear at the Meet later on. This done, he left instructions with Donaldson about the packing of his luggage, and slipped out of the house like a thief, not even pausing to take a mouthful of breakfast. He was far too agitated to feel any hunger, besides, if he did not make haste, he dreaded that Lydia might retrace her footsteps. She never had much tact, and now it was quite clear that her discretion could not be counted upon.

The fly, which on the evening before had conveyed him to Dredmore Castle, had returned to Fieldborough; the arrangement being that his servant should take a mid-day train back to the little town, whilst he himself rode home after the day's hunting. Prepared, therefore, to encompass

the four miles on foot, he set out, walking with long, rapid strides, which covered the ground at an amazing pace. This last move of Lydia's had paralyzed him. He could think of no plan, short of absolute surrender to her wishes, by which to ensure her immediate absence, and when he recalled Dolly's charming face and figure, he recoiled from the memory of his first love, and felt that he was being tortured almost beyond his powers of endurance.

Presently, as he trudged swiftly on, he was passed by an honest farmer of his acquaintance, who was driving to market in a high two-wheeled dog-cart. The seat by his side was unoccupied.

"Good morning, Tomlinson," said Beau. "Could you give me a lift, by any chance? I want to be in Fieldborough as soon as possible, so as to keep an appointment before going hunting."

"Surely, Captain. Glad of your company. Jump up. Woa, Polly, old lady."

Farmer Tomlinson's strong pony, trotting slowly but steadily on at an even pace, soon brought them to their destination. Beau got down when they reached Prince's Street, opened the door of No. 45 with his latchkey, and walked upstairs. In another minute he found himself face to face with Mrs. Stapleton. The room had not been touched since he left it. She was toying with the revolver, which he had neglected to return to the cupboard, whilst a curious smile played on her face. That smile produced an irritating effect upon him, without her speaking a word. As he entered, she rose to meet him, but no greeting passed on either side. The emotion they felt was too intense to be dominated by mere conventional forms.

"Was I not right?" she exclaimed, in tones of such concentrated scorn that they galled him to the quick, for what man can brook being despised by a woman? "You tried hard to commit suicide, but your heart failed you at the last minute, as I knew it would. It takes a certain amount of courage to kill oneself, and when it came to the point, I always predicted you would find Captain Beaumont Dornay deficient in that valuable commodity. He who possesses no sense of honour is generally a coward into the bargain." And she shrugged her shoulders disdainfully. Her words and gestures simply maddened him.

"Woman or fiend," he cried hotly—"for sometimes I

think there is nothing human about you—have you come here for the sole purpose of taunting me, because I hesitated to commit a crime to which your conduct goaded me, and which, but for it, I should never have contemplated?"

"My dear Beau, pray don't excite yourself. There is no need to apologise for being still alive. Let me assure you that your premature death would have rendered me quite inconsolable."

"I don't believe it. You are egging me on now to murder either you or myself."

"Not I." Then she dropped her tone of sarcasm, and added with bitter earnestness, "Fool! don't you see that had you killed yourself you would have escaped me?"

"I may do so yet, especially if your language remains unaltered. It is more than a poor wretch can stand, as you must know."

"My language will not affect you. You have made the attempt, and failed; and are not likely to repeat it. No, no, Beau, for once in your life be a man, and realise the situation. I hold you as a spider holds a fly. You cannot escape from my web, because you *dare* not. The thing is perfectly self-evident. In future you may continue to impose upon other people, but never more upon me. Don't think I blame you for your weakness. It constitutes my strength, for I frankly avow that, had you committed suicide, I should have been baffled."

He shuddered, and yet his old fear of her had fled. She no longer subjugated him physically. That hideous thralldom was at an end. But there was an assurance about her utterances, and they displayed such an intimate acquaintance with the secret foibles of his moral nature, that they impressed him, in spite of himself.

Ah! why had he not trusted to Dolly's love and generosity, and told her the whole truth, instead of half? Through that fatal habit of refusing to face a difficulty, and of trying to soften things that were unpleasant in the telling, he had, as Lydia truly declared, given her the mastery over him.

"Let us cease this contention," he said wearily. "It leads to nothing. Granted that you can destroy my life's happiness, render enemies those who now are my friends, humble my pride, and ruin my reputation as a man of

honour. How will it benefit you? No power on earth shall force me to marry against my will. If I lose Dolly, I am as far from you as ever. I no longer love you. Is it my fault or yours, or are the changeful laws of Nature to blame? God only knows! Lydia, I am sorry for you—sorry from the bottom of my heart, but, believe me, we are both to be pitied.”

“Ah!” she cried wildly, “don’t pity me, or I shall break down altogether. From you I can accept of no compassion.” Then her face softened suddenly; the proud, angry look went out of her dark eyes, and she added, in gentler tones:

“You are right as regards one thing. We should not quarrel and waste our time in mutual recriminations when the crisis of our Fate is at hand. Beau, dear, do you know why I have come here to-day, at the risk of losing my good name, which I have hitherto guarded so zealously? I have come to make one last appeal to your better feelings. You are a kind hearted man naturally. I cannot believe that you will persist in doing me this great wrong. I refuse to realise that the love you once bore me was a sham, spurious passion, which has changed, if not to hate, at least to aversion. You are suffering from a temporary delusion that will pass away. Once you were fond of me! whatever happens I shall always stick to that belief; oh! Beau; *dear*, DEAR Beau! is it impossible for you ever to be fond of me again? See, I no longer make threats—I lay my pride aside. I come to you as a suppliant woman, whose love renders her weak as a very child. Everything shall be forgotten—everything forgiven, if only you will return to me. The Past need never be mentioned between us. I am ready to hand you over my entire fortune, amounting to forty thousand pounds. I will settle every penny of it upon you. Your interests shall be my interests; your advancement my chief care. Whatever little beauty I possess, whatever powers of fascination are still left to me, shall all be exerted in your favour. I, the proud, haughty woman, will curb my temper and correct my faults at your bidding. Never shall man have wife more humble, more loving, and submissive. You shall play Petrucio to my Katherine. Beau, are you not melted? If I am powerless to move you, you must indeed be made of stone, for this time I speak from my heart.”

She paused breathless, waiting for an answer, but none came. Then she stretched out her arms towards him with a cry of despair, and wound them round his neck before he realised what she was about.

"Beau," she sobbed. "My love, my darling. You have broken my spirit—you have broken my spirit. Do what you will with me, only don't send me away."

He was touched to the quick. He could not repulse her, though nothing that she said or did succeeded in deposing Dolly's image from his mind. But he felt such a compassion for her as he had never felt before. The pain of life seemed so needlessly, so cruelly great. For a brief moment she gathered hope. Tears gushed to her eyes.

"Beau, my beloved, it is heaven to feel you near me. Ah! say that it has all been a mistake."

He tried to speak. A lump rose in his throat, which refused to be gulped down. A deathlike silence ensued. He could feel her heart beating against his own, inhale the odour of her rich, dark hair, participate in the anguish she endured. At length, in a hoarse, unnatural voice, he said:

"God forgive me, Lydia, but—I cannot."

Her face blanched. Her form grew tense and rigid.

"What! Your love for Miss Dalrymple is not a mere infatuation? You cannot shake it off, but prefer dishonour?"

"Yes; for, God help me, I love her better than my life."

Her eyes sought the table on which the revolver still lay. With one bound she seized the weapon and pointed it at him.

"Coward! traitor! then let your life pay for your sins. Such curs as you are better out of the world than in it. You are not fit to live. Death is the one expiation you can make."

A lurid light flamed from her eyes. Her white, frantic face was contorted by passion. Murderess and maniac were stamped upon it at that moment. With sudden horror, and an instinctive effort at self-preservation, he gripped her by the arm. She laughed; a desperate laugh, that made the blood in his veins run cold. Her finger sought the trigger with unmistakable resolution. The moment had come at last for settling accounts.

"Lydia!" he exclaimed. Have you gone mad? Is it your deliberate intention to burden your soul, in this world and the next, with my death? Surely you are not in earnest."

She smiled into his eyes. He could see his own reflection in the dilated pupils that confronted him.

"Yes, I think I am very much in earnest. There is a weight upon my brain which keeps crushing it down—crushing it down. I feel as if I must kill somebody, and who better than you? You first, myself afterwards, then we can both sleep together."

The words, and the fixed stare which accompanied them, were horrible. As she spoke she endeavoured to point the revolver, and, for the first time in his life, he experienced a movement of acute physical fear. She was a tall, strong woman, and her deadly purpose apparently endowed her with supernatural strength. Big, muscular man as he was, he could not wrest the pistol from her. His fingers closed tighter round her firm arm, and insensibly their grip increased, until he put forth his full force. She clenched her white teeth, whilst her countenance resembled that of some wild animal, but no cry of pain escaped from her. It was questionable even whether she felt pain. Their tall forms swayed to and fro in a mortal struggle.

Neither spoke a word; the scuffle was as silent as it was deadly. Lydia's brain had taken fire. The whole world would not have stopped her now. If she could frighten him to such an extent as to make him feel she was his master, then he might perhaps bow his will to hers. It was her last chance.

With a savage effort she made a convulsive movement, which succeeded in partly throwing off his hold. Almost instantaneously, a loud report rang through the room, followed by a dull cry of agony.

Lydia tottered backwards. She was free. He who held her had fallen sideways into an arm-chair. His elbows rested on the table, and both hands supported the lower part of his face, from which the red blood spurted in a steady flow. Already the whole front of his shirt was stained with a bright, crimson fluid.

At the sight, Lydia stood still. A terrible reaction took place within her, and all the fierceness, the anger, and the bitterness died out of her heart, leaving it cold as stone.

An overpowering horror filled her being. All at once she realised the gravity of the deed she had committed, and a loathing of self took possession of her. For the first time, the love of which she thought so much appeared a mean and unworthy passion.

He was right not to care for her. A woman capable of such fiery impulses, such wicked, reckless actions, was no suitable companion for any man in the possession of his senses. No wonder that Beau had turned with relief from her to another. She had not understood it before, but she could understand it now. The fire of her nature had burnt up his affection, even as the hot noon-day sun burns up the tender herbage. For one poor soul to constitute the arena in which so many fierce passions raged, was cruel. During long years she had struggled against them; now they had mastered her, and reduced her to the level of a brute beast. Was she a mere machine, or a responsible being? She hardly knew, and Science had not yet thoroughly solved the problem.

CHAPTER XXX.

REACTION AND REMORSE.

ONE moment Lydia stood thus, stupefied and motionless; the next, she sank on her knees beside him, crying wildly:

"Beau, Beau, indeed I did not do it on purpose. It was not me, but some devil who pulled the trigger and made the revolver go off. The real I only meant to frighten you. On my honour, I swear it."

With an effort he looked up. The motion, slight as it was, made the blood pour with fresh force from his shattered jaw. The face above it was ghastly, deathly pale, and drawn by pain.

"I—ask—one—service—of—you," he said, hoarsely and inarticulately. "Go."

"Oh! Beau, I cannot—at least not until I know what the issue of this will be."

"The issue! You have dogged my footsteps, ruined my happiness, and now—it matters little if you have taken my life. The words were hardly distinguishable. Part of the roof of his mouth was reduced to a pulp. She sprang to her feet with a shriek.

"Oh! not your life. Surely—surely not your life. Ah! my God, he has fainted."

For Beau made no reply. His senses were leaving him. The things of this earth were fading away like a mirage. Mad with terror and mortal apprehension, Lydia rushed out on to the little landing.

"Help, help!" she called in piercing notes. "Captain Dornay has met with an accident."

Her screams rang through the house; and, in an incredibly short space of time, Mrs. Tyler came hurrying up, followed at a prolonged interval by Tottie, whose short, fat legs experienced a difficulty in waddling so fast after her mother.

"Whatever is the matter, my lady?" gasped the worthy woman. "Lor!" placing her hand on her palpitating heart, "but you have given me quite a turn. Anyone would have thought there was murder going on."

"I can't explain," said Lydia hurriedly. "There's no time. Run as fast as you can and fetch a doctor—the nearest one. Captain Dornay is very ill, and it's a question of life and death. For God's sake don't stop to ask any questions, but do as I tell you."

Thoroughly alarmed, Mrs. Tyler rushed downstairs, and ran out without even waiting to put on her bonnet. Meantime, Lydia lost not a moment in returning to Beau, leaving Miss Tottie decidedly inclined to cry, but comforting her small self with a highly consolatory thumb.

The wounded man was lying perfectly motionless, his head now resting on the table, surrounded by a pool of blood. She tried to raise him, first gently, then—as her anguish increased—more forcibly. Her experience in illness was small, and she knew not what steps to take in order to staunch that deadly flow; but, ignorant as she was, she perceived that the position in which he lay encouraged it. Going behind him, she slipped her arms beneath his, and by sheer strength succeeded in lifting him up, until his fair hair rested against her breast. An exclamation of dismay escaped from her when she saw his face; for nearly the whole of the lower jaw had been carried away, and splinters of bone protruded. In fact, the disfigurement was so great that he was scarcely recognisable. And she, Lydia Stapleton, had done this deed. Suddenly, possessed by an access of mad rage, she had killed him. Good God! how sharp

was her punishment. All her sufferings were light in comparison with the concentrated agony of that moment, for hitherto, to a great extent, the sting of remorse had been wanting.

Tenderly as a mother she pressed his drooping head still closer to her bosom, and, unaware that he was rapidly sinking into a state of coma, poured forth her over-charged feelings in despairing language.

"My darling, my darling," she faltered brokenly, "I was mad.—A devil seemed to take possession of me. I did not know what I was doing.—Why," and she bent down and kissed his damp brow, "of my own free will I would not harm a hair of your head. Oh! Beau, forgive me. I am a miserable woman.—You were quite right just now, when you said that sometimes I appeared scarcely human. That's just it. A cloud descends upon my brain every now and again, and turns me into a fiend. But I cannot prevent its coming. For weeks past I have had a feeling that something horrible was going to happen. Wild impulses seized me, yet I was powerless to resist them. A secret force goaded me on—on, ever on. It left me no peace. Neither by night nor by day could I rest. My sense of right and wrong grew obscured. I ceased to take an interest in what was going on around me. I knew your love was gone, and could never be recalled. A still, small voice whispered Resignation. But another voice spoke of Retaliation—Revenge. The latter was the sweeter of the two, and chimed in best with my mood. And so—and so—" she went on, sobbing bitterly, "I came here to-day, and this is the result. Nevertheless, as there is a God above, I solemnly protest that I only meant to frighten, not to hurt you."

It was lucky for our hero that Mrs. Tyler found the doctor at home. He was dressed to go out, and proceeded without any delay to Prince's Street. He belonged to the good old-fashioned sporting type fast dying out, and knew Beau well, having made his acquaintance in the hunting field, where he greatly admired the young hussar's dash, and superb indifference to physical fear. The worthy man was terribly shocked at the state in which he found Captain Dornay, and, perceiving the gravity of the case, wasted no precious time by putting questions. They could be asked afterwards. The first thing was to prevent the patient from

dying of exhaustion. With this end in view, he tied up the separated veins, thus stopping the flow of blood to a great extent, temporarily bandaged the wound, administered a strong dose of brandy, and, aided by the terrified woman, got the sick man to bed, and placed him in a horizontal position.

This done, he wrote out a prescription, and told Mrs. Tyler to go to the chemist's immediately, and get it made up. He glanced at Lydia's dress, which was stained with blood. Her magnificent physique, in conjunction with her white, tear-stained face, evidently struck him. He scented a mystery, perhaps a tragedy, but his manner betrayed nothing. In a professional way he felt Beau's pulse, and said, with medical dryness—"Captain Dornay's pulse is extremely feeble, though under the circumstances that is not to be wondered at. In another five minutes, he would have been a dead man." Then he took a pinch of snuff—snuffing was a bad habit of the doctor's—and added carelessly, "A case of attempted suicide, I suppose. Everything points that way." As he uttered these words, he fixed his sharp, penetrating eyes upon his companion.

Lydia changed colour beneath their gaze. Her full lids quivered, then drooped. She tried to speak; an iron hand seemed laid upon her lips. The truth refused to issue from them—the truth in all its ghastly nakedness, which for ever robbed her of repose and self-respect. Instead of answering, she burst into a storm of tears.

Doctor Corfield was a kind-hearted man. The sight of such genuine distress touched him.

"Come, come, my dear lady," he said; "you must control yourself, if not for your own sake, for the patient's."

"I would do anything in the world for his sake," she rejoined passionately. "Oh! doctor, tell me, will he die? Is there—is there any hope? In mercy, don't keep me in suspense, for I—I cannot bear it."

"To be quite frank, it will all depend upon whether compression of the brain sets in. The merest trifle in the direction of the shot often determines the question between life and death. If the injury is confined to the lower jaw, as in Captain Dornay's case I have reason to believe, then—although our poor young friend will be permanently disfigured—thanks to his temperate mode of living and naturally fine constitution, he may pull through. It is useless to

disguise the fact, however, that his system has received a very severe shock. His is one of those cases in which good nursing may achieve wonders, and is of vital importance."

Lydia listened gravely, sadly.

"Doctor," she said, when he came to an end, "you will let me nurse him, won't you? No one will obey your directions as I should, or watch so unceasingly over the patient."

He looked at her kindly. He began to feel ashamed of certain suspicions which had risen to his mind; yet, curiously enough, he could not banish them altogether. That dark, beautiful face was strangely suggestive of tragic passion, even softened by grief as it was. Some history was surely connected with it.

"My dear lady," he said, "I hope you won't think it an impertinence if I ask you a question?"

She trembled.

"What is it, doctor?"

"Are you any relation of Captain Dornay?"

The colour rushed to her throat and face.

"No, no relation; but we were to have been married."

A slight movement on the part of the patient relieved her from further embarrassment. Doctor Corfield, who had heard of Captain Dornay's engagement to Dolly, experienced a moment of surprise, but his attention was now directed elsewhere, for Beau began to exhibit signs of returning consciousness. These symptoms were hopeful. He had feared collapse, and all his efforts had been exerted to avoid it. He took Beau's hand in his. The pulse was so much stronger, that he thought he could permit himself to test how far the patient's recovery was real, and to ask a question which he was burning to put. The fact was, Lydia's answer had aroused his curiosity in the highest degree.

"My dear young friend," he said, as a gentle preliminary, "do you recognise me?"

Beau made a slight gesture of assent.

"This is a serious affair," resumed the doctor, "a very serious affair indeed. I am afraid it may be my duty to report it to the authorities, but it would pain me in the extreme to incriminate anyone wrongfully. What I want to know is this—Did you, or did you not, shoot yourself?"

Beau's eyes wandered round the room till they rested on Lydia. She was standing with her face turned towards

the light, her haughty figure bent, her lips trembling, and her hands clasped convulsively together. She might have been taken for a statue of Remorse. There was something inexpressibly pathetic in her attitude. As he glanced at her, a sudden change passed over the wounded man's countenance. His eye grew softer, and lost its look of hardness. He signed for the doctor to give him a pencil, and also the half sheet of paper left on the table after the writing of the prescription. Doctor Corfield handed him the required articles.

With trembling fingers Beau wrote,—

"Yes, I shot myself. No one else is to be blamed for what has happened."

The doctor read this note, and passed it on to Lydia. Strange that certain suspicions in connection with her still lingered in his mind. He could not account for the mingled feeling of distrust and compassion with which she inspired him.

Drawn as if by a magnet, Lydia, after reading the few words written by Beau, approached his bedside. Humbly and timidly she knelt down and raised his hand to her lips, looking at him meanwhile with the dumb, pleading eyes of a dog. A shudder passed through the injured man's frame. He drew his hand away. Contact with her was evidently distasteful to him. At least so she construed the action. In the present highly-strung state of her nerves, this slight gesture spoke volumes. His magnanimity was such that he was willing to shield her from the effects of her crime, but he could not endure her presence. She shrank behind the bed-curtains, feeling mortally wounded. Of all the bitter moments she had experienced, this was the bitterest. It made an impression never to be effaced. Her soul was probed to its very depths. Henceforth it could experience no greater pain. It seemed to her that she had reached the limits of human suffering. She removed her bonnet and cloak silently. Beau's consciousness was more terrible than his unconsciousness, and it was a relief when he once more relapsed into the latter state. That awful feeling of guilt lessened then, and she felt more competent to take charge of the sick-room. She had already telegraphed home for a few necessaries to be sent off at once.

After a while Doctor Corfield left, promising to look in again in a couple of hours. All that could spare the

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wounded man pain and restore him to health had been done. Science and experience could go no further. Before leaving, the doctor gave Lydia various instructions, impressed upon her the importance of punctuality in the administering of the restorative he had sent Mrs. Tyler to fetch, and if any unfavourable symptoms presented themselves, requested her to send for him immediately. Meanwhile Captain Dornay was to be kept as quiet as possible, for fear of hemorrhage recurring.

When Doctor Corfield disappeared from the room, Lydia stooped down, and, with unaccustomed fingers, unlaced her boots. They were a new pair, that creaked every time she moved across the shabby tapestry carpet. Then she pulled down the blind, so as to shut out the pale, wintry sun, which sent fitful gleams of light into the room. Finally, she took a chair and sat down by the bedside, in order to watch every change that took place in Beau's condition. He lay quite still, his eyes closed, breathing heavily and with evident difficulty. As she looked at his moist brow, on which the fair hair rested in unnaturally darkened streaks, and at his handsome face, now so deplorably changed, a wave of passionate fondness rushed to her heart. Perhaps Dolly would cease to care for him when she found his good looks were gone, and then she, Lydia, would teach her what true love meant. Ah! poor idiot! When he got well—if he did get well—she would be more hateful to him than ever. No need to build such false castles in the air. They were doomed to destruction. For she saw now what she had never seen before; namely, that great as was her love, it possessed no higher elements, but was mainly a selfish passion. For this reason it had proved a curse, rather than a blessing, to its object. Alas! what atonement could she make for the evil so recently committed? Her brows contracted in deep thought. By-and-by a flickering smile passed over her face. Yes, there was one atonement, and one only, within her power. She would nurse him back to health and strength, and then—make amends. Instead of loathing her very name, he should be made to feel a certain reverence for it. Burdened as she was by sin and by passion, she still felt herself capable of sacrifice. Her nature had dragged her nearly down to Hell; now it should soar to Heaven. Poor thing, she dared not contemplate a **Hereafter**. The problems of this life had proved too much.

for her. She was totally unable to dwell on those of the future. The Christian's firm belief in a merciful Christ was denied to her. In the dark gropings of her mind rose ever the cry, "I know nothing, I know nothing. What we call our religion, eyen our Deity, is only evolved from the finite consciousness of man. Given no consciousness, and Belief vanishes. What, therefore, is this airy structure of the human brain worth?"

No wonder that, during her restless, dissatisfied career, she had known little of real peace. The want, and the yearning, were always there. She fancied that love could appease them, not seeing that the love required was of a wider and more universal kind. Now, as she sat there by Beau's bedside, glimmerings of a higher truth than she had ever yet attained came to her, like fitful flashes, breaking up the murkiness of a thunderous sky. Tears, too; soft, gentle tears, streamed from her eyes. As moisture causes bright flowers to grow on the barrenest ground, so did they sink into her innermost being, and refresh it. Her repentance, like her passion, was acute. Between the two extremes of Good and Evil, Fate had ordained that she should oscillate. There was no safe, commonplace insensibility for her. God had decreed otherwise.

The sight of the man she loved, cut down by her hand in the prime of his manhood, aroused the best and holiest feelings of which she was capable. All through the long day and the still longer night, she nursed him patiently, faithfully, untiringly. Sorrowful as were her thoughts, keen as was her remorse, she experienced a kind of melancholy pleasure in having him to herself. No one came between them whilst he lay there, on the bed and she watched by his side. It could not last. By to-morrow Major Grimshaw was expected to return, but for one day and one night he had been practically hers—hers to soothe, to tend, to guard. The hours crept on. She took no count of the time, except for giving the medicine. She performed her duties with the precision of an automaton, thrilling partly with pleasure, partly with pain, whenever she fancied Beau exhibited signs of consciousness. For the most part he lay very still, but every now and again he would groan in a most distressing manner. His temperature had gradually risen throughout the night, and stood now at 102.

Delirium or coma, these were the two alternatives to be

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feared. If the brain had been reached, there was great danger of the latter resulting. Towards morning it was evident that the fever and pain were increasing. He began to toss about and to mutter disjointed sentences, the burden of which was Dolly, always Dolly. With rigid face and compressed lips, Lydia tended him assiduously; the ache at her heart growing greater as his ravings became more frequent. Who need flatter himself he has reached the lowest depths of human suffering? There is always a lower one still. Lydia went through a terrible ordeal. During that first day and night she never shut an eye or relaxed her vigilance for a moment. At times she almost fancied Beau knew who was nursing him, but this only added to her distress, for he continued to shrink from the touch of her hands when she shook up the pillows, settled the bandages, or moistened his burning brow. And ever the cry was "Dolly, Dolly."

If it is possible for human anguish to expiate human crime, she expiated hers a thousand times over. Purgatory itself could have presented no greater horrors to the unhappy woman.

At length the dawn broke, dissipating the gloom of night. She welcomed it as a friend. Daylight lessened the tension, by making Death seem more unreal and farther away. It brought comfort and renewed hope. The relief was inexpressible when Mrs. Tyler came softly up, bringing another scuttle full of coal. Her mere presence lightened the sense of responsibility, and enabled Lydia to steal away for a few minutes and indulge in the luxury of some cold water ablutions.

On returning to her post, she found that during her absence Doctor Corfield had arrived.

"Good morning," she said. "What do you think of your patient?" looking at him with eager eyes.

He had just removed the bandages and dressed the wound.

"I think," he answered, gravely returning her anxious glance, "that Captain Dornay is in a very critical state indeed."

"Is he no better, then?"

"Yes, in one way. There are no present symptoms of compression of the brain; on the other hand, fever has set in very high. Do you know, Mrs. Stapleton, that I have a kind of suspicion the poor fellow has something on his

mind. Being on such intimate terms with him, have you any reason to suppose that he has been unusually troubled of late? You and he had not quarrelled, by any chance, had you?"

Her throat grew parched. Her tongue seemed rooted to the roof of her mouth. Was she for ever to go through life trying to parry such questions as these?

Doctor Corfield watched his beautiful companion narrowly, and took note of her ill-concealed agitation. From what he knew of Beau, he did not believe him to be a man to commit suicide, unless under the strongest provocation. Why, his light-hearted laugh at the meet still rang in his ears.

"If it were possible to set Captain Dornay at ease," he resumed deliberately, eyeing Lydia much as a cat eyes a mouse, "I believe that it would very materially assist his recovery."

"But," she expostulated, turning her white face away, "he is delirious, and cannot understand what is said to him."

"Not at present. Later on, however, it is to be hoped that he will recover consciousness. Mrs. Stapleton," and again he looked at her in the same scrutinising sort of way, "I have neither the desire nor the right to pry into your private secrets, but did my ears deceive me when you told me that you were engaged to be married to Captain Dornay?"

"No, they did not. I spoke the truth."

"Then what about Miss Dalrymple? You have heard of her, of course?"

Lydia bowed her head silently. She rather resented this cross-examination, and was determined to give as little information as possible.

"H'm," mused the Doctor, stroking his clean-shaven chin. "I can imagine such a situation leading to a good many very awkward complications. Well, well! I've no wish to dictate in this unfortunate matter. No doubt you will reveal, all in good time, what passed between you and Captain Dornay prior to his attempt at suicide. Meanwhile, it is my duty to impress upon you that any mental anxiety will necessarily hinder his recovery. Mind and body are so much connected that one invariably affects the other."

"I understand you perfectly," she said, turning ashen pale. "In other words, you suspect me."

"Madam, I did not say so."

"No, but you implied it. Do you take me for a fool?"

"I take you for a very handsome lady, whom I should feel proud to serve."

She shrugged her shoulders impatiently, and faced him with an angry light flashing in her dark eyes. Did this little, dry, wizened-up specimen of humanity mean to make love to her, and at his patient's bedside, too?

"Doctor Corfield," she said, in her rich, contralto notes, that quivered with deep feeling, "you must despise me very much to talk to me in this foolish manner. The man lying there is the only man whom I have ever loved or shall ever love. All others are indifferent to me. Nothing on my part—no pains, no attention, no *sacrifice*," emphasising the word, "shall be wanting to woo him back to life. I swear it solemnly as I stand here."

"Dear lady," responded the doctor, raising her hand to his lips with old-fashioned courtesy, "I honour you."

"Honour me!" she cried fiercely, snatching away the imprisoned member as if it had been stung. "You wouldn't say so if you knew all. I am the vilest, wickedest, and most unhappy woman who ever trod this earth."

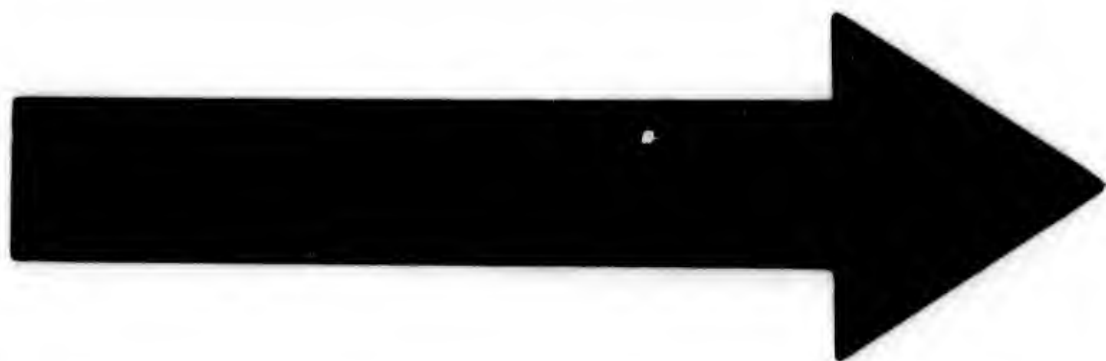
"Unhappy, possibly," he replied, "but in your present mood neither vile nor wicked. My profession makes me a close observer of character. Rare sunshine, accentuated by deep shade, is the common lot of such natures as yours—natures doomed either to rise above, or to sink below, the dead level of commonplace humanity. Dear madam, I am an old man, who perhaps has taken a liberty in expressing his commiseration with one who forms a striking figure in a living tragedy. For tragedy there has been here, of that I feel assured. Keep your own counsel. I have no desire to force confession. You repent, and in the sight of God that is enough. May He be with you."

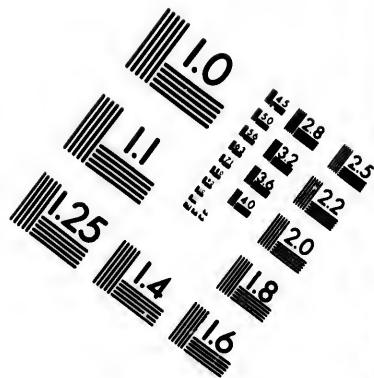
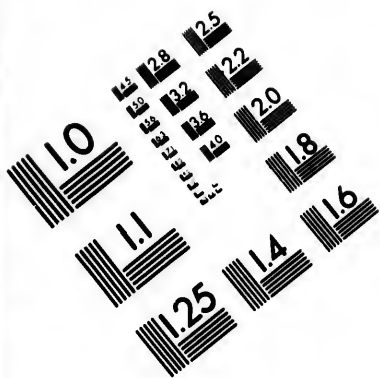
So saying, he took up his hat and walked out of the room. He was deeply moved, and—his curiosity was satisfied

Lydia hurried after him, the tears welling to her eyes.

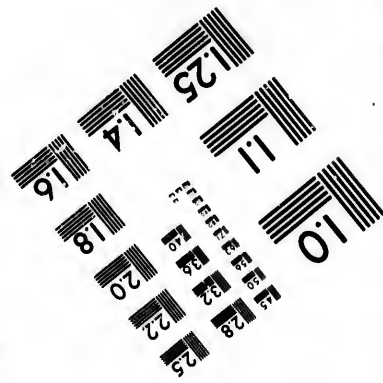
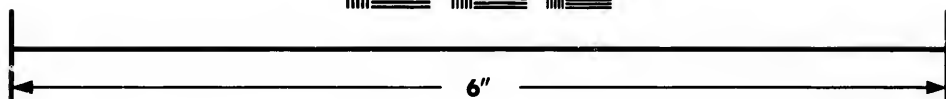
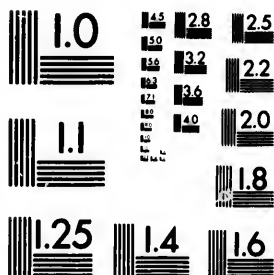
"Doctor," she cried, "doctor, don't talk to me like that, as if I were a good woman to be pitied. It was I—I who shot him. Shut me up. Take me to prison. Nothing is too bad for such a wretch as I am."

The doctor, at the foot of the stairs, wagged his head gently.





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"I knew it," he said to himself. "I had a presentiment of it from the first. A woman with that figure and those looks, even although she may be a little past her prime, would never stand being jilted."

CHAPTER XXXL

THE PLAY OF LIFE.

THROUGHOUT the day very little change took place in Beau's condition, and a kind of sullen despair settled upon Lydia's spirit. Life and Death were fighting a desperate battle, and according to present appearances, the latter seemed likely to have the best of it. The conflict was too fierce to be long prolonged. A few days, nay, a few hours, would probably decide the issue. Lydia realised, with a sinking heart, her utter powerlessness to turn the balance in Beau's favour, and she felt acutely how little human effort can avail against that mighty force which rules the universe. The consciousness of this added to her depression. Meanwhile she learnt much of the patient's mental condition, and the more intimately she became acquainted with the workings of his mind, the more clearly did she perceive how right he was in declaring that they were both to be pitied. Certainly she was not the only sufferer, as hitherto she had imagined.

Beau loved Dolly even as she—Lydia—loved him. They could not all three be happy. That was impossible. One out of the trio must sacrifice everything to the other two. This fact she recognised with a sigh, for the person to make the sacrifice was herself. Circumstances had forced it upon her.

With a generous impulse characteristic of her impetuous nature, she stooped down, and laid her cold cheek against Beau's feverish one. As she did so, a wonderful change took place in her countenance. All the pride and the hardness died away, and an expression of sad resignation stole over it.

"Beau, dear," she murmured, in moving accents, "get well, only get well, and never more shall you be troubled by me. I will disappear from your life's horizon, leaving it clear and unclouded. I have thought too much of myself."

Vain were such reassuring promises. He could not hear

them, and they conveyed no comfort to his wandering brain. For Lydia there was another ordeal in store, and one to which, since her arrival at Prince's Street, she had looked forward with ever-increasing dread. Major Grimshaw was expected that afternoon, and how was she to meet him? Yet, sooner or later, the meeting must take place. If she did not account for her presence in the house, Mrs. Tyler or Doctor Corfield would. A woman's instinct is seldom at fault. Hers hinted that Major Grimshaw was an admirer, and would probably deal with her leniently if confronted personally. Consequently when Harry returned, somewhere about six o'clock, quite ignorant of his friend's precarious condition, he found Lydia in the sitting-room, awaiting his arrival. Outwardly she appeared calm, inwardly there raged such a volcano as would have amazed him, could he have guessed its existence.

"What!" he exclaimed, giving a start of astonishment, but addressing her in his usual hearty manner. "Mrs. Stapleton, of all people in the world! Well, upon my word, this *is* an unexpected pleasure. Welcome to Fieldborough."

So cordial a greeting rendered her task more difficult. How was the truth to be told?

"When did you come to our place?" he inquired, as soon as he had recovered from his surprise.

She drew her hand across her brow with a weary gesture.

"I really forget. Was it yesterday, or the day before? I seem to have lost all count of the time."

Her dreary, dejected tones arrested his attention.

"Why!" he cried. "What is the matter? And—how ill you look, too," for once forgetting to be polite.

She smiled faintly.

"Do I? That is a matter of very little importance. I am getting old, or rather have *got* old, and must expect to betray my age. My youth is over and done, and I feel at least a hundred." All this time she was gathering courage, and steeling herself to tell him about Beau.

"Oh, nonsense!" said Harry cheerily. "You are overtired; out of sorts, or perhaps your liver is a little deranged. A pretty woman never loses her looks until she loses her admirers, and that," laying his hand on his heart, "permit me to say, the beautiful Mrs. Stapleton will never do. There will always be one left."

"Major Grimshaw," she said suddenly, "something dreadful has happened since you have been away. It is my duty to break the news to you, and I—I hardly know how to do it."

"Why! bless me, what can have happened in two days?"

"Captain Dornay is very ill; perhaps dying."

"Beau?" and his countenance assumed an incredulous expression.

"Yes. He is lying upstairs at the present moment in an unconscious condition."

"By Jove! you don't say so? Has he had a fall out hunting? I was not with the Fieldborough myself to-day, so did not see him. Poor old chap! That's it, of course. He's such a thundering hard rider."

"No," she said, locking and unlocking her fingers. "It is not a fall. In fact, Captain Dornay did not go hunting this morning."

"In that case, it's nothing very serious," he answered, with an air of relief, "for Beau was at Lady Fuzziwig's ball the night before last. Certainly, now I come to think of it, he went to bed early, and complained of a bad headache, but I'll be bound he was all right again by the next day."

"Anyhow, he is not all right now; very much the reverse, worse luck."

Harry began to feel seriously alarmed. Lydia's manner was so portentously grave.

"It seems to me there is some mystery in all this," he said. "I leave Beau two days ago in his usual health, and return to find him excessively ill, and you apparently installed here as nurse. Excuse me, Mrs. Stapleton, but may I ask what my friend's malady is?"

A painful blush burnt Lydia's cheek.

"Captain Dornay is suffering from a bad gun-shot wound," she said.

"Good Heavens! madam. Do you mean to insinuate that he shot himself?"

"No, although he will probably tell you so, for whatever his faults, he is a gentleman. But," and she cast a swift, side-long glance at her companion, "don't believe him. He is guiltless of attempting to take his own life."

Harry walked deliberately to the door, and stood with his back to it. Her lip curled. If she had wanted to effect

her escape, she might have done so without waiting for him. Oh! these men, how little they really understood women!

"I infer from your words that somebody else did," said the Major, his eyes beginning to flash angrily. Then he cleared his throat, and after a slight hesitation, added with unaccustomed sternness, "Mrs. Stapleton, I may be wrong, in which case I humbly beg your pardon, but I can't help fancying that certain passages of arms have been exchanged between you and Beau. Come, be frank, and before I go upstairs to my friend, tell me all you know of this very painful and unpleasant matter."

She rose and confronted him. The light from the lamp flashed full upon her, and again he was struck by the alteration in her features. She looked old, wrinkled, haggard; in short, a ruin of her former self.

"Major Grimshaw," she said, "you are Beau's best friend, and have a right to know why he is lying ill in his bed and I have taken possession of your house. I will tell you everything." And then, in rapid words and as briefly as possible, she told him the story already known to the reader. She concealed nothing, softened nothing of her own part of the business. One of this woman's virtues was a species of savage honesty, which, when she had committed a fault, made her scorn to conceal it. She could not practise deceit or dissimulation for more than a very short period. They went against the grain.

And Harry listened. At first indignantly, but gradually with a sentiment of compassion stirring his heart. If she was to blame so also was Beau. He could not acquit his friend, however fond he was of him, but especially in relation to Dolly did he censure his conduct. It was a rascally thing to propose, under the circumstances. And now to think of the scandal! At every old woman's tea party the matter would be eagerly discussed and enlarged upon; whilst the local papers—ever searching for startling incident—would pounce upon it as a veritable godsend. The talk, the gossip, would pretty well kill Dolly, of whose sensitiveness he was well aware. She would die of shame, wounded pride, and outraged love. Harry's mind was quickly made up. Strange to find how dear she was to him still. His first thought was to spare her pain.

"Mrs. Stapleton," he said, when at length Lydia came to an end. "What you have told me is so unexpected, so hor-

rible, that I hardly know what reply to make. I have no desire to cast stones at you. Your suffering is written on your face, and the provocation you received was undoubtedly great. Let us pass by all that. At the present moment, one thing appears to me a necessity, for the sake of everybody concerned in this most wretched business."

"What is that?" she asked faintly.

"You must leave this house and this place at once. Your presence here can only give rise to scandal, as injurious to yourself as it will be hurtful to others."

Her cheeks grew red.

"Scandal!" she cried. "What do I care for scandal? I have outraged the proprieties already, and henceforth am indifferent to them."

"Must I remind you that there is a young lady in the case, who has a right to be considered? She has done no wrong. She is young, pure, innocent. Why should she suffer for your faults and for Beau's? Do not add to her distress more than is unavoidable. Spare if possible her fair name from being dragged into the newspapers."

"Her fair name!" retorted Lydia, with a return of her former spirit. "You think of it, but who thinks of mine? Nobody. I am a woman who has dared to leave the ranks of her regiment, and who suffers in consequence. Ah! well, it is always the way with my foolish and unhappy sex. They are slaves to law, to conventionality, and to man. Fools they, who possess any originality, and who aspire to show it by treading out of the common groove. The common groove is safe, the common groove is respectable. It gives them their little frivolities, and shields them from big passions. Frocks and flirtations constitute their highest aspirations, and they are spared much. But I am wandering from the point. Major Grimshaw, you have been kind to me, and I appreciate your kindness. I would not willingly refuse any request of yours. You ask me to leave this house—to leave it, not knowing whether Beau will live or die, whether he forgives me or not, and I—I cannot."

"You must. It is monstrous for you to establish yourself here under the circumstances."

"Ah! do not be so harsh with me. Let me stay a week, only one short little week. I have done my worst; you need not fear me any longer. Henceforth I shall make no attempt to destroy Miss Dalrymple's happiness, or"—steading her

voice—"Beau's. I wish to nurse him back to life, to love. Do you imagine that any ordinary woman, hired for two or three guineas a week, would devote herself to his recovery as I should? Directly he is better, directly he becomes conscious, I promise to go. Until then, for God's sake let me remain where I am. In all probability this is the last request that I shall ever make to you. Surely, oh! surely, you will not be so hard-hearted as to refuse it. In this life we never repent of our kind actions, only of the unkind. Be generous, be merciful, and do not rob me of a chance, however small it may be, of making my peace with the man I adore, and whom I have so sorely, so grievously injured."

Harry looked at her suppliant form, her eloquent, pleading face. What was there about them both that caused his resolution to break down? Silently he held out his hand. He, who himself had felt the pangs of unrequited love, could not withhold his sympathy from a fellow-sufferer. Anyhow, she gained her point.

For eight whole days and nights these two watched by Beau's bedside. Already his illness was bruited abroad, and several callers came to inquire after the invalid; but Harry noticed that they all belonged to the male sex, whilst from Woodford Chase not a message, not a line was sent. Its inmates preserved absolute silence. Harry could make a pretty shrewd guess at the cause, for, earnest as had been his endeavours to hush up the whole affair, they had not proved very successful; and already the *Fieldborough Daily Chronicle* had devoted three columns to Captain Dornay; a large heading appearing above, styled "Romantic Episodes and Attempted Suicide in High Life."

The publicity given to his friend's illness by the press was the more irritating to Harry because he knew that Beau was being wrongfully accused, and that the peculiar circumstances of the case would prevent him from refuting all accusations. And yet he could not allow Dolly to remain under a false belief. His anger against Beau had long since vanished. Like Lydia, when he listened to his ravings, he felt nothing but compassion for him. So he wrote a letter to Dolly, begging her to suspend her judgment, and not to believe the false reports that were being circulated.

"When Beau is out of danger," he concluded, "I will ride over one day and see you."

In answer to this kindly-meant epistle, Harry was not a

little surprised to receive a formal note from Dolly, saying that a frost having set in, she and her father were going away on a visit to some friends in London. She did not say when they intended returning to the Chase, and no mention was made of Beau's name. From this fact Harry drew his own conclusions, and for the first time in his life he felt a little inclined to quarrel with Dolly. He even went the length of calling her heartless; but this was only to himself. He would have knocked the first person down who had had the audacity to hint at such a thing.

Thus matters stood when, after having spent the night by his friend's bedside, he went out for a little air and exercise, leaving Lydia in undisturbed possession of the sick-room. His heart felt lighter than for many days past. Since morning, Beau had fallen into a deep slumber, and seemed easier in every way. The wound, too, presented a healthier appearance, and both the fever and the pain were subsiding.

When Major Grimshaw had gone, Lydia seated herself close to Beau, so that she could notice his slightest movement, and taking up a book, made a pretence of reading. It was only a pretence. She was unable to collect her thoughts sufficiently to comprehend the printed matter before her eyes. An abiding sadness had settled upon her spirit, tinging Past and Present with a constant gloom. From all those things of the world in which formerly she had taken a fair amount of interest, she now experienced a curious detachment. A chasm lay between her and her former self. Was it indeed she, who in olden days had derived satisfaction from a well-fitting dress, or a becoming bonnet, and who had taken the trouble to paint her cheeks and pull out her grey hairs? How wonderful! What a foolish, drifting creature that Lydia Stapleton must have been; how different from the present one, bearing a death wound in her heart, and insensible to everything except the recovery of the man she had so nearly slain. The book fell from her hands. As these sad thoughts passed through her mind, two great, salt tears escaped from her heavy eyes. Ah! how unhappy she was, how crushed, and fallen, and degraded! Never again could she hold her head up proudly, or get rid of that haunting sense of shame.

Nights of continuous watching and of intense emotion had thoroughly worn her out. The flood-gates once opened, she leant forwards and cried like a child, unconscious that a

pair of sunken blue eyes were fixed solemnly, yet gently upon her.

"Lydia," said a voice feebly.

At last—at last, oh! thank God, he had regained consciousness, and she was not his murderess.

With a wild cry, she flung herself on her knees by the bedside. Beau put out his wasted hand as if in token of forgiveness. What a weight of guilt lay on her soul. She did not dare to take it.

"Ah!" she sobbed, in bitter self-abasement. "How you must hate me, yet not so much as I hate myself."

He looked her full in the face. His own was strangely mild.

"I did hate you once, but I don't hate you any longer. All that has passed away. A change has come over the spirit of my dream. Lydia, I have been to blame—bitterly to blame. Can you—will you forgive me?"

"Forgive you! I? Oh! Beau, you kill me with kindness. I am not worthy to forgive. My soul is as black as night."

He put out his hand again, and stroked back her soft, dark hair. The gesture was touching beyond description.

"Poor woman! Poor Lydia! How you have suffered! And I have been the cause."

His gentle tone, his pitying looks, set every fibre in her being quivering. The moment had come for her expiation. She drew down his hand, and kissed it almost reverently, just once.

"Dear," she said, "from the moment that you are restored to health, my worst sufferings cease. Don't pity me," and her voice trembled. "I have got no-nothing more than I deserve. Beau, I am going away soon, and I want to tell you something. I want to tell you that henceforth you are free. I—I renounce all claim upon your hand. Do you understand? I wish you—and Dolly to be happy. And," trying to suppress her sobs, "in the days to come—when you and she are husband and wife, and little, bright haired children playing about your knee call you—father, mother, perhaps then, you will sometimes think—kindly of the woman who, in spite of her sin—and of her many grave faults, loved you truly—if not well."

She paused, and a dead silence prevailed throughout the

room. He was too much affected to speak. Then, in a louder key, she resumed, "Oh! Beau, oh! my beloved, good-bye. We may never meet again. If we do it will be in the next world, where perhaps the great All-Father who never gives life without pain, will consider that I have made atonement for my crime. Good-bye, dear one, good-bye for ever."

Before he could make any reply, she had left the room.

That evening, when Amy lay in bed with a sore heart, thinking, as she often did, what an unloved, unnatural kind of life she led, she was startled by an apparition. Her mother stood before her, dressed in a long, loose wrapper, that fell in straight lines to the ground.

"Oh! mamma!" cried the girl, "how you frightened me. I did not even know that you had come back."

"I have only just returned. I had to go into the country unexpectedly, but was able to leave sooner than I intended. The last two hours have been spent with my solicitor in the city."

"How tired you must be."

"Yes, I am rather. Amy," she went on, seating herself on her daughter's bed, "I want to have a little talk with you." And she took the girl's thin, unformed hand in hers, and pressed it lovingly.

The colour flamed up into Amy's face. Her heart beat fast with a rarely experienced joy.

"Oh! mamma," she burst out, "why are you not always kind to me like this? I do so long to love you—I would give anything to love you, if only you would let me. I don't feel the least afraid of you to-night."

What a sad history of neglect and yearning in those few sentences. They touched Lydia to the quick.

"Poor little Amy," she said, in tones of self-reproach. "I have been a bad mother to you; selfish, indifferent, and unsympathetic, thinking only of my own troubles, never of yours. And yet it seems you are not free from them."

"Never mind, mamma," returned the girl bravely. "It was my fault. I am not the sort of daughter for a beautiful mother like you to feel proud of. But I cannot help being so ugly, and sometimes I used to fancy you wished that I had never been born. And then I did so long to tell you I would go away, anywhere, so as not to bother you, but somehow or other I never had the courage."

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Every word stabbed Lydia to the heart, and made her shortcomings more apparent.

"Don't trouble about these things in the future, Amy dear. A child of your age should not have such sorrowful thoughts; they come fast enough later on. But for a little while be happy. You will be a rich lady one of these days, Amy, and I want you to spend your money well in helping others, and doing good in the world. I have not done it, so you must make up for my deficiencies. Will you remember this?"

"Yes, mamma," answered Amy, rather awed by her mother's solemn tone.

"And, my dear, recollect also that I did love you at the last, and was sorry for having robbed your childhood of so much of its brightness. Will you give me a kiss?"

The girl's long, thin arms went forth from the bedclothes, and wound themselves round the other's neck in a passionate embrace. The dark, beautiful head of the woman bent lower and lower. Tears streamed from her eyes. A host of mingled emotions had penetrated to the most sacred recesses of her nature.

"Mamma, why are you crying?" asked Amy suddenly.

"Only because I think I never found out till this moment what a dear little warm-hearted thing you are. Oh! Amy, it was my fault, but I wish I had known it sooner."

Amy laughed. For once she knew what it was to feel joyous.

"Mamma, better late than never, as the saying goes."

"Yes, perhaps so. And now, my dear child, you must go to sleep. Good-night."

Once more she stooped and kissed her daughter's pale brow, leaving the girl with a happy smile on her young face.

Lydia went straight to her room, and lighting a pair of candles, locked the door. She was desperately tired—so tired, that everything wore an air of unreality. But her fatigue signified little. To-night, and her lips parted in a faint smile, she intended to sleep soundly. Her maid had orders not to call her in the morning. Mechanically she untwined her long, thick hair, and let it ripple in broad waves over her shoulders. How unutterably weary she felt, but rest was coming—coming—coming.

The chloral stood on the dressing-table, a fresh bottle

quite full. She laughed softly to herself, and raised it to her mouth.

Faugh! was she also a coward? If not, why did her hand shake? To die was easy, to live and to suffer hard. The latter, not the former, required courage. With grim resolution she gulped down the whole contents of the bottle, and then crept into bed. It was done. She had nothing to do now but wait.

Would Beau consider her atonement great enough? Would her sin be wiped out, or had she simply added to it? This thought had not hitherto presented itself. Her mind fastened upon it with horror. She pulled the bedclothes higher up. It was a very cold night, very cold. Beau wouldn't be able to hunt to-morrow morning. A pity; he looked so well on horseback. Ah! what was that thing on the floor—that dark thing lying motionless, and with blood on it? Ah, good God! with blood on it. . . .

Strange, how drowsy she felt. It was as if a great, strong calm were stealing over her senses. Who was it she wanted to think about? Beau? Ah! yes, of course. Why was his image so weak? Why did she experience such a curious difficulty in recalling his features? She wasn't thinking of him rightly. She must think again. Ah, merciful heavens! she could no longer think at all. . . . What was this black haze slowly descending until it fell before her brain like a curtain on the stage, and gently, painlessly shut out the Play of Life?

Yes, the play was over, and the player slumbered.

The part assigned to her had been no easy one. She had made mistakes, but her fellow-actors made them also, and she was very tired.

So let her sleep.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"I WILL NEVER SEE HIM AGAIN."

DOLLY was infinitely hurt. Her pride—and she was very proud, like most young and stainless girls whose knowledge of the world is comparatively slight—was up in arms. She told herself that she would have forgiven Beau much, almost everything in fact, if only he had spoken the truth.

But he had knowingly and wilfully deceived her. The night of Lady Fuzziwig's ball, when she had asked him in all seriousness whether matters were satisfactorily settled, he had answered in the affirmative. That answer was a lie, and he knew it to be one. After a stormy interview with Mrs. Stapleton, he had come straight to her—Dolly—and told her an untruth. Such conduct was unpardonable. How could any right-minded girl live with a man whom she neither respected nor esteemed? Respect was the foundation on which all married happiness rested. In its absence, marriage became but a miserable mockery. Dolly had seen numerous cases of this amongst her acquaintances, and had no desire to fall into a similar error. With her, Love and regard were synonymous.

No, her mind was made up. She would have nothing more to say to such a base deceiver. She never wanted to see him again; *never*—NEVER—NEVER! He was Mrs. Stapleton's property, not hers—and the mistake she had made consisted in not acknowledging this fact from the first. Consequently, when Sir Hector remarked that that lady's behaviour was shameless, she retorted with considerable spirit:

"Not at all, papa. Mrs. Stapleton and Captain Dornay have been engaged for years, and her wishing to nurse him is the most natural thing in the world. You forget," and her face grew hard, "that I was only a little diversion, *pour passer le temps*. Mrs. Stapleton is the proper person to be with Captain Dornay now he is so ill. I," with a cold inflection of the voice, "have neither the right nor the desire to claim so great a privilege."

"Bravo, Dolly," answered her father. "I am glad you take matters philosophically, and see them in such a remarkably sensible light. I confess that I was afraid you might not, which only shows how much I misjudged you. Anyway, the fellow has turned out a first-class blackguard, and you could have had nothing more to do with him, of course."

Dolly made no reply. This was exactly what she had said to herself a hundred times over, but somehow, in her father's mouth, that very decided "of course" inspired a vague feeling of irritation.

"We can't even go hunting this abominable weather," growled Sir Hector, getting up and looking out of the

window. "Snow is falling fast, and I shouldn't wonder if we were in for a devil of a frost."

"I'm sorry on your account, papa, but for my own part, I shouldn't go hunting just now even if the weather permitted," said Dolly, in a curiously subdued tone.

He glanced at her uneasily.

"Ah! no, my dear, I forgot. The talk and the condolences would drive us both wild. We don't like that sort of thing, do we, Dolly?"

"I don't. Besides, I'm not accustomed to it."

"No, I should rather think not, indeed. What do you say to our running up to town for a bit? We could stay with your Aunt Parkinson until this affair has blown over."

"Would it not look like running away?" asked Dolly dubiously.

"Scarcely. Everyone knows we never stay here during a frost. It would save you a good deal of unpleasantness, my dear. Country people are terrible gossips, and this will be a nine 'days' wonder for them."

The girl coloured, then grew pale. The publicity of the thing was odious to her.

"Yes, papa," she said, after a slight pause, "I think we had better go. Will you write to Aunt Sally and tell her we are coming, or shall I? We can hardly take her altogether by storm."

"You may as well, Dolly. Ladies generally put these things more prettily than men."

So it was settled that they should leave Woodford Chase, without affording their neighbours an opportunity of expressing their commiseration.

Lady Parkinson was a half-sister of Sir Hector. She had been left a widow at the comparatively early age of thirty-three, and being in affluent circumstances, gay, good-natured and worldly to her very finger tips, had for several years contrived to extract a fair amount of enjoyment out of life. She liked Dolly a good deal better than Dolly liked her, for she belonged to that far-seeing class of middle-aged females who, when their own charms begin to fail, find the presence of a fresh, pretty, unspoilt girl proves an attraction to members of the opposite sex. In a word, the fresh, pretty girl is used as a bait to bring men around the elderly flirt. In an ordinary way, there were few things Dolly disliked more than paying a visit to Lady Parkinson, but on the

present occasion she appeared to have overcome her usual fondness for staying at home. Just four days after Beau's mishap, she and Sir Hector packed up their things and went off to town. Dolly's heart was still very sore, and she felt thankful to escape from the neighbourhood of Fieldborough for a time.

They were met at the station by Lady Parkinson, who embraced them with much effusion.

"I'm so glad you've come, my dear," she said, patting her niece on the shoulder. "And I want you to look your very best and brightest this evening. Nothing of the maiden-all-forlorn style."

"I'm *not* a maiden all forlorn," answered Dolly indignantly, shaking herself free from her aunt's touch. "Please do not think that I am. I don't want anybody to pity me, or fancy that I'm in a lovesick condition." And she laughed a little discordantly.

Sir Hector looked at his sister.

"Hasn't she got a spirit?" he murmured under his breath. "Most girls would have been crying their eyes out."

"Most girls are fools," replied Lady Parkinson. "Dolly isn't. She has got a head on her shoulders. Your muleypuley women always go to the wall. Now Dolly belongs to the sensible division, who, when they are crossed in love—and who is not?—know how to console themselves. One man is as good as another, according to them, and that's philosophy."

"Thank you, very much, Aunt Sally," put in Dolly, with a kind of grim satire. "It is most gratifying to me to find that you have formed such an exceedingly high estimate of my character. May I ask in what manner you propose that I should console myself?"

"My dear!" and Lady Parkinson's eyes sparkled with triumph. "I've got a *Duke* for you—a real, live Duke."

"How very delightful. And pray, how did you manage to capture so great a prize?"

"You must not be too sanguine, child. He's not exactly captured as yet. In fact, you have to achieve that part of the business——"

"An achievement of which I should feel everlastingly proud," interrupted Dolly.

"I give you your opportunity. It is for you to make the

most of it," went on Lady Parkinson complacently. "His Grace is coming to dinner to-night. There! what do you say to that?"

"On purpose for me to captivate? Lucky Duke! By-the-bye, you have not even told me his name. It is as well to be posted up in these important matters beforehand."

"Of course, Dolly, you are quite right. He is," and she paused, to give proper effect to her words, the—Duke—of—Jockland—the greatest *parti* in the United Kingdom. They say a royal Duchess has her eye on him for one of her daughters, and all the mothers in London are wild to get hold of him. He has only just returned to town, after a tour in the East. By-the-way, Dolly, he has not yet attained his majority. He might be a year or two younger than you, but you would not mind that, of course, especially as he comes of age this spring."

"Of course not, Aunt Sally. Is he not *the* Duke just the same? Age cannot affect that stupendous fact."

"Good girl," exclaimed Lady Parkinson, bestowing an approving smile on her niece.

"Your bringing up does your father great credit. Well, as I was saying, or was I not saying—I really forget, but it's of very little consequence. Directly I heard of the Duke's arrival, I was determined to be first in the field, so what did I do but send a note round to his hotel, saying that his father and my husband had been great friends, and asking him, as a favour, to come and dine quietly with me to-night. Now, was not that a bold *coup*?" and she looked round triumphantly, nodding her head at Sir Hector as much as to say, "Am I not a clever woman?"

As the well-appointed brougham, with its high-stepping cobs, rattled along the streets, he smiled back at his half-sister. "My dear Sally, you ought to have been the Prime Minister. No one has so clear a head as yourself. As for Dolly, it will do her no end of good to be cheered up and taken into society. She wants change, especially just now; for although she bears herself so bravely, this unfortunate business has been a bit of an upset."

Dolly looked out of the window. Her face wore a cold and almost hard expression. She quite understood what all this hateful talk meant. Dukes were not to be got every day, even when one was young and nice-looking, and

esteemed absolutely heartless. She was to set her cap at the beardless boy, and forget Beau's existence. Heigh ho! What a cruel grinding world it was, to be sure. Nobody seemed to have any feeling in it for other people's suffering. Her father and Lady Parkinson were evidently in league. Because she did not cry out and make a great fuss, did they suppose she was cold as a stone? It wounded her beyond measure, to find that the father she so loved should lend himself to contemptible plots, and display such a slight knowledge of her real character. It was not only incomprehensible, but mortifying and humiliating past all endurance. If she had known that this was the sort of thing she would be subjected to, she would a thousand times sooner have remained at Woodford Chase, and braved the gossip and the condolences. However, she kept these thoughts to herself, and gazed steadily out of the window until the brougham stopped before Lady Parkinson's handsome house in Park Lane.

After tea she pleaded a bad headache and retired to her room. When she came down dressed for dinner, her eyes were suspiciously red, and she certainly did not look her best.

Lady Parkinson, having immediately detected that her niece had been crying, went up to her by way of administering comfort, and in a loud aside said:—

"Come come, Dolly, cheer up. He's here—in the back drawing-room. For my sake, smile and look pleasant. So much depends on the first impression."

A minute afterwards the girl found herself being introduced to a short, stout young man, with a dull eye and an unhealthy complexion, sandy hair, and an ape-like head, which betrayed a good many more animal than intellectual propensities.

Dolly just glanced at him. Fancy comparing such a creature as that to Beau. But at the thought of *him* a pang shot through her heart. Nothing is so cruel as disillusion, especially as disillusion in one's love. She suffered deeply, for do what she would, she could not banish his image from her mind.

At dinner, his Grace was seated between aunt and niece, much to the latter's disgust. A spirit of rebellion had entered into Dolly, and after hearing so much of this unprepossessing young man by her side, she did not experience

the very faintest desire to make herself agreeable to him. She was weary, and asked for nothing better than to be let alone. Apparently her mood suited the Duke; or else his conversational powers were small. He applied himself to the various dishes with an assiduity which fully accounted for his corporeal rotundity. Presently, however, he fairly took Dolly's breath away by putting the following elegant and original query to her:—

“Are you fond of dog-breeding, Miss Dalrymple?”

It transpired that this was the noble youth's particular hobby; and when Dolly informed him that her father possessed a very superior breed of fox-terriers, celebrated throughout the country for their gameness, he became positively animated, and went with such detail into the requisite points, that once or twice Dolly had to hold up her fan to hide her blushes. But to such evidences of female modesty his Grace was indifferent. He had spent a large portion of his youth among stablemen and jockeys, and his tastes were very little higher than those of the men with whom he so frequently associated. Dolly summed him up pretty quickly as “a most insufferable young cub, without two ideas in his head.” Certainly she resented his style of conversation, and made every effort to divert him from the subject of dogs. These endeavours were, however, vain. Champagne was rapidly loosening the ducal tongue. It annoyed her intensely to see the way in which her aunt made up to this hobbledohoy, simply because he happened to be a Duke. She herself was rather democratic, and did not possess the common British veneration for titles. She could not see in what way they conferred superiority over the rest of mankind. And as the dinner proceeded her thoughts again wandered off to her absent lover, and she wondered—oh! so many things. Was he really as much to blame as was said? Might she not have judged him harshly, and, in any case, had she not been wrong to reply so coldly and formally to Harry's letter? He had not written again, and now—and now—well, it broke her heart to be sitting there eating and drinking, and pretending to enjoy herself, when Beau might be dying. A cold shudder ran through her frame. Yet why was she pitying him? He did not deserve pity. He should not have it, at all events from her. A man who told stories was not a man for any woman to trust. To do the Duke justice, if he was dull, Dolly was equally so. She sat by his

side, listless and limp, listening with a forced smile to his canine remarks, and looking like a drooping white lily that has been transplanted into a thoroughly uncongenial atmosphere.

Lady Parkinson's winks and nods were completely thrown away. She remained stubbornly insensible to all such signals of encouragement freely lavished upon her. The elder lady lost patience. Dolly was a perfect idiot. Hardly a fashionable girl in the metropolis but who would have given her eyes to sit next the Duke of Jockland at dinner, and profit by an opportunity of making a favourable impression.

The evening passed slowly away. After dinner, Sir Hector and his hostess appeared to have a great deal to say to each other, in consequence of which the young people were again thrown together. As for Dolly, she had never felt so indignant or so humiliated in her life. *She* run after a masculine creature indeed, just because he happened to be born with a golden spoon in his mouth. Not she. She detested titles. Her tastes were entirely military. And ever as the little, ugly Duke uttered some platitude about his stables or his kennels—for he had already learnt the knack of making frequent use of the first personal pronoun—there rose before her mind's eye a fair, handsome face, with well-cut features and clear, blue eyes. With all her efforts to banish it she could not do so wholly, although she felt angry at her own weakness, and despised herself in consequence. At length, to her inexpressible relief, his Grace rose to go.

“Shall you be at home to-morrow, Miss Dalrymple?” he asked, his dull face reddening as he made the inquiry.

“No,” said Dolly very decidedly. “Not the least chance of it. I've no end of shopping to do.”

“Or the day after?”

“I think not. I happen to have an engagement.”

“Sunday, then? I particularly want to show you my little wire-haired terrier—the one I was telling you of at dinner, who killed so many rats and actually worried a fox.”

Her delicate nose went up in the air.

“Oh! thanks, but I'm afraid you're making a mistake. I'm not a dog fancier. At least I only care for my own dogs, and have no affection to bestow on other people's.”

It was not a remarkably polite speech. Her companion reddened, and was preparing to retire discomfited, when Lady Parkinson, who had overheard the above conversation, came to the rescue.

"Nonsense, Dolly," she said sharply. "What rubbish you do talk, to be sure! She's a naughty girl, your Grace, and only says that to tease you. I happen to know for a fact that she loves dogs. Why, when she was a little bit of a thing of five or six there was no keeping her out of the kennels. Everyone says that your terriers are quite unique, and I for one am dying to see them. Why not meet us in the Park on Sunday after church parade, and come to luncheon? And be sure and bring the dear things with you. I adore terriers."

As a matter of fact, she hated dogs of every description, as Dolly very well knew, but Lady Parkinson was what is called an adaptable woman. That is to say, she suited her conversation to her listeners with a fine disregard of truth.

The Duke of Jockland mumbled his thanks, squeezed Dolly's hand in a manner which that young lady considered the height of impertinence, and finally succeeded in effecting his escape.

"A most charming young man," exclaimed Lady Parkinson, almost before the door had closed on the ducal back. "So affable and so distinguished."

"In looks or in conversation, Aunt Sally?" asked Dolly saucily, for, in spite of her anger, her sense of the ridiculous was fairly tickled by this last observation.

"Both, child. Nothing pleases me more than to see a young man fond of animals. It proves that he has a kind heart. Now, I'll be bound the Duke of Jockland will make a most excellent husband."

Dolly shrugged her shoulders, as much as to say the matter was one of supreme indifference to her.

"He seems a quiet, inoffensive sort of fellow," remarked Sir Hector. "Not much to look at, perhaps, but," glancing at his daughter, "I, for one, don't believe in your good-looking men."

"Nor do I," responded Lady Parkinson significantly. Then, turning to her niece, she said, "At first, Dolly, I was afraid you and the Duke were not going to get on together. Fortunately matters improved when you dis-

covered that you both had doggy and horsey tastes. But you do not half understand how to play your cards. Why, if I had not interposed, I really believe you would have prevented his coming to call on Sunday."

"Such was certainly my desire," said the girl, with her face kindling.

"May I inquire why you should entertain so idiotic a wish?"

"Because," exclaimed Dolly passionately, "I hate this Duke of yours. He is nothing but a hideous, low little boy, with manners worthy of a groom or a stableman. He is not fit to associate with ladies. No, don't try to stop me," as her aunt endeavoured to interpose. "Let me have my say. It will be best for all parties. I have no wish to be ungrateful, or to vex you in any way, but I distinctly decline to hurl myself at the Duke of Jockland's remarkably plain head. Besides," and a sudden change passed over her mobile countenance, "you forget that less than one short week ago I was engaged to be married to a man whom I loved very dearly. We are p—parted now, but that is no reason why his place should be filled up immediately. I won't do it, Aunt Sally," and her voice vibrated through the room. "It's not decent to forget people you have cared so much for, in such a desperate hurry." With which conclusion she suddenly burst into tears, and marched out of the room. However angry she was with Beau, however much she might have been deceived in him, she was not going to set up a fresh idol in place of the fallen one, whose shattered pieces lay all around.

When Dolly was gone, Sir Hector and Lady Parkinson looked blankly at each other. They felt like a couple of conspirators whose schemings have been suddenly detected. The lady was the first to recover her equanimity.

"Hector," she said, "you mark my words. Unless you put your foot down, Dolly will end by marrying that odious Captain Dornay still. Her head is full of him. Anyone can see that without being told."

"Nonsense, Sally," he rejoined irritably. "She distinctly assured me everything was at an end between them, and what's more, that event shall never come off, if I can help it."

Lady Parkinson laughed.

"My dear soul, you won't be able to help it. Fathers

are proverbially powerless on these occasions; and girls in Dolly's present state of mind simply impossible. A man has no chance with them, for they refuse to listen to persuasion or common sense."

"What are we to do, then?" inquired Sir Hector, with a feeling of his own weakness stealing over him.

"We must take her into society. Let her be petted and admired, and, above all, encourage the Duke. It's very well for her to laugh at him and call him a stupid little boy, but she'll alter her opinion when she goes into the world, and finds what a lot he is thought of there. Bless me! it's not what we *are*, but what we've *got*, that counts in fashionable circles now-a-days. The actual person is more or less of a nonentity."

"It seems an odd state of things," sighed Sir Hector, "and not altogether a nice one."

"That may be, but you and I can't change it, and if you don't want to see your daughter throw herself away upon a penniless hussar, with a very indifferent reputation to boot, leave her to me. I understand girls, you don't."

Sir Hector felt rather bewildered by his half-sister's superior knowledge. It made him have an uncomfortable suspicion that he was either an old foggy or an old fool; but he promised, whilst they remained in Park Lane, not to interfere in any way with Lady Parkinson's management. Dolly was to be taken here, taken there, introduced to this one and that, so as to drive her objectionable lover out of her head. And if the fates were favourable, and the Duke actually proposed to her, she must be *made*—yes, made to say, "Thank you. I quite see the advantages of becoming a Duchess." So it was settled they were to remain for the present in town. Dolly received this announcement passively, and when, a few days afterwards, Mrs. Stapleton's death appeared in all the newspapers, she seemed to realise the impossibility of their returning to Woodford Chase for some little time to come.

The affair created a great sensation, more especially when it became known that the deceased, on the very day of her death, had added a codicil to her will, leaving Captain Dornay a sum of forty thousand pounds. She also exonerated him of all attempt to take his life, and thus, to a great extent, cleared his good name.

"Ah!" said Dolly to herself. "She forgave him. Why

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can't I? Why, oh! why am I so hard, so wicked, and so miserable? What right have I to judge him as I do—to think evil, and shut my eyes to the good. It must be because I am naturally bad."

Lydia's tragic ending made a deep impression on her, and brought about a certain revolution in her thoughts. She began to distrust her own conduct, and to feel uneasy and dissatisfied with it. As the weeks passed, slowly but surely, an unconquerable yearning sprang up within her. She grew ill, and lost her appetite. The doctor ordered her out of town, but Lady Parkinson refused to let her go. The Duke's attentions, though clumsy, were becoming marked.

CHAPTER XXXIIL

AN IDIOTIC GIRL

At length a crisis arrived. Things had been working up to it for some time past. And this was how it came about.

One fine day Dolly met the Duke of Jockland at a ball, to which nearly the whole of fashionable London was invited. His Grace did not dance, for the very simple reason that he had never learnt how; but he claimed her as his supper partner, and after eating and drinking an astonishing lot, became, as was his wont, exceedingly garrulous. The lights, the wine, the music, all tended to excite him.

"You're a very jolly girl, Miss Dalrymple," he said, when the contents of a whole bottle of champagne had begun to warm his heart. "A deuced jolly girl, fond of horses and hunting. Just the sort, in fact, that I like. I ain't afraid of you, as I am of some."

"I'm sorry I don't inspire more respect," answered Dolly, without the slightest suspicion of what was coming.

"D—n respect. What a man wants is to feel at his ease. Now, I shouldn't mind running in double harness with you. I think we'd pull along very fairly well together. Eh? what's your opinion?" And he helped himself to another bumper of "Grand Monopole."

"I'm sure I don't know," she replied indifferently "I haven't got one."

"But you ought to."

"That by no means follows. You ought to have an opinion on music, literature, and the fine arts, yet where is it?" And she smiled mischievously.

Instead of making any immediate reply, he leant his elbows on the table, and gazed sentimentally at his companion, much to her annoyance.

"What are you staring at?" she asked sharply.

"You," he hiccoughed in return.

"So I perceive. Must I remind you that to stare a lady out of countenance is scarcely good manners?"

"A fellow can't think of his manners when he's in love."

The colour flew to her face. She shook out her skirts, and prepared to rise from the table at which they were seated. She was no heartless coquette, and nothing was further from her wishes than to encourage him.

"I don't know what you mean," she said coldly. "Anyhow, I object to being made an object of such close scrutiny."

He raised his arm as if to prevent her from going.

"Don't go away just yet, Miss Dalrymple—Dolly. I—I have something to tell you."

"Your Grace can have nothing to say to me of any importance, or that will not wait till another day. After supper," looking with frigid disapproval at his watery eyes and flushed face, "is a bad time for confidences. They are apt to borrow their colour from champagne. Please take me back to the ball-room. I am engaged for the next waltz, which is now going on."

Young as he was, he had been too much courted by the sex, for her reserve not to incite an ardour which, under other circumstances, he might not have felt. It was a novel experience to find his advances snubbed.

"You must listen first to what I have got to say," he rejoined, with unusual resolution.

"Must?" she returned, in her most provoking manner.

"Must is a word that never should be used to a woman."

"All the same, I stick to it. Why do you feign to be so dense?"

"Because, your Grace, denseness is my natural condition. Have you only just discovered the fact?"

"Confound it. You know quite well what I'm driving at. I want you to be my wife. There! is that plain enough?"

She grew serious in a moment. Her jests, her fencing, had not availed to prevent him from proposing. To nine girls out of ten, this would have proved a moment of surpassing triumph. To Dolly it brought nothing save a vague sense of compassion, and of annoyance that her aunt's schemes should have succeeded. She turned her clear eyes full upon the half-inebriated youth. Would he remember in the morning what he had said overnight? This thought flashed through her mind. It would be a shame to take advantage of him in his present muddled condition. Besides, how could such an abject specimen of humanity, in spite of his ducal coronet, inspire sentiments of affection? *She*—would never sell herself for money and rank.

"You do me great honour," she said gently, but with an icy calm which betrayed how little her heart was touched, "and I am by no means insensible to the compliment you have paid me. Nevertheless, it is not in my power to accept your offer."

He staggered back a pace or two. It had never entered into his head to imagine that any girl could refuse *him*—the great Duke of Jockland, with a rent-roll of sixty thousand a year, and a large sum of ready money in hand, that had accumulated during a long minority.

"I asked you to be my *wife*," he repeated, emphasising the word.

"Thanks. I quite understood the nature of your proposition."

"Do you mean to say that you refuse me?"

"Yes, if you put it in that way."

"Why?" And the vinous flush on his young face deepened.

"You must allow me to keep my reasons to myself. Suffice it that they are good ones."

There was something convincing about her manner and determined air. He eyed her sullenly.

"Miss Dalrymple, I have a right to put one question. Answer it, and, by Jove! I will trouble you no more. Is there—is there anyone else?"

Dolly trembled. All at once a lovely rose colour rushed to her smooth cheeks.

"Yes," she murmured almost inaudibly. "There is somebody."

Without another word the Duke of Jockland offered her

his arm and conducted her back to the ball-room. He felt much as a man feels who has suddenly received a stunning and unexpected blow between the eyes. Neither of them spoke, and with a ceremonious bow they parted never to meet again, for in six years his Grace drank himself to death, and died of delirium tremens.

When the proposal came to Lady Parkinson's ears, as it did a day or two afterwards, in the most mysterious and unaccountable manner—for Dolly maintained total secrecy on the subject—she was like a mad woman. The girl bore her abuse fairly well for the first few hours, feeling, perhaps, that from her aunt's point of view a certain portion of it was merited; but her very passivity added to the sharpness of Lady Parkinson's tongue, and made her overstep the privileges of kinship. Dolly waited till her ladyship was out shopping—an occupation she frequently indulged in—and then, with tears in her eyes, sought Sir Hector. An end must be put to this hateful existence. She felt that she could endure it no longer. Both her health and temper were breaking down under the strain, and an artificial London life was simply odious to her. She had no desire to struggle into higher circles, and mount the social ladder by discarding old friends for the sake of new ones possessing handles to their names. She saw no good in it, and derived but little satisfaction from the process. According to her unsophisticated way of thinking, the fashionable ladies aye, and the men too, who belonged to Lady Parkinson's set, were infinitely snobbish and infinitely vulgar. They did and said things which, every day, clashed with her notions of true gentility. The result was a moral atmosphere thoroughly uncongenial, made up of ill-natured sayings, bickering, backbiting, flirtations, and personal gossip. In short, the worst school possible for men and women not possessing a sufficient modicum of brains to act as a steady ballast. Despite her gentle ways and soft feminine attributes, Dolly was no fool. She could see pretty well what all this party-going, dressing-up, and intense craving for excitement and admiration came to; and realised the deteriorating effect it possessed on the majority of people. She longed to return to the country, with its quietude and repose, and to indulge once more in healthier pursuits than standing about on crowded staircases, inhaling a heated

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atmosphere, and going to bed, wearied and dissatisfied, in the small hours of the morning.

It was with these thoughts in her mind that she sought her father.

"Papa," she said, impetuously, going to the root of the matter at once. "I've come to tell you that I can't stay in this house any longer. I want you to take me home."

Sir Hector also was pining to get back to Woodford Chase. He had grown thoroughly tired of Lady Parkinson, and of Lady Parkinson's insincere, restless, and frivolous ways. For some time past, moreover, his conscience had pricked him a good deal about Dolly. She was not happy, evidently, and looked ill and worn, and as this became more apparent, he felt heartily ashamed of himself for ever having allowed his ambition to master his paternal affection. In addition to which he could not disguise the fact that his Grace the Duke of Jockland was scarcely calculated to make a good husband. His tastes and habits were not such as to win the affections of a delicately nurtured and refined young lady. So, in answer to his daughter's speech, he looked up from the letter he was engaged in writing, and said, with an encouraging smile:

"Hulloa! Dolly, you want to go home, do you?"

She began to sob. The pent-up feelings of weeks suddenly broke loose, sweeping away the self-control that for a time had succeeded in holding them in check.

"Yes, yes, papa," she cried. "I want to go so badly, and you are breaking my heart by keeping me here. You may mean it well. I give you and Aunt Sally every credit for good intentions, but indeed—indeed it is mistaken kindness. I have borne things as long as I could, and now I can bear them no longer."

Sir Hector fumbled about in his pocket for his pocket handkerchief, and then blew his nose with considerable vigour.

"I think we have had about enough of town," he said, in a subdued tone. "I'm getting a bit tired of it myself."

"Everything is so different at home," continued Dolly, determined to push her advantage. "You and I are so

happy there. We are always together, and have nobody to interfere with us, or give us good advice. Whereas here, a kind of estrangement seems to have sprung up between us."

"Ah! then you have felt that?" he interrupted.

"Felt it! Of course I have felt it. How could I help feeling it when each day only served to widen the breach? From the moment we set foot inside this house, we fell under the spell of Aunt Sally's influence. That influence has not had a good effect either upon you or upon me. It has, to a great extent, divided us, and robbed us of our peace of mind. There are some things that are natural, others that are not. And I maintain it is not a natural thing or a nice thing for any girl, however much she may have been mistaken in one man, to throw herself at the head of a second in order to forget her grief. Grief is not to be overcome in that way, and if you try to crush Love, it only springs up in some fresh and unsuspected form. Matters have now reached a crisis. My aunt is thoroughly displeased with me for refusing the Duke of Jockland. She will never forgive what she considers so great an act of folly on my part. It would have raised her in her own self-esteem to have gone about talking of "my niece the Duchess." A few rays of reflected glory would no doubt have shone upon her. Now all this is not to be, and she treats me like a criminal."

"I shouldn't take any notice if I were you," said Sir Hector.

"That's easier said than done," retorted Dolly. "But," casting a reproachful glance at her father, as if she were perfectly aware that he had been guilty of the crime of conspiring against her, "I will stand being bullied no longer, because I am not conscious of having done anything wrong. I was asked to barter myself away for rank and position, and I refused, for the simple reason that the man who offered them was not only indifferent, but intensely antipathetic to me. We had, and never could have, any tastes or ideas in common."

"I do not blame you for refusing the Duke," said Sir Hector. "He was by no means an ideal lover."

"Then, for what *do* you blame me?" she rejoined with spirit. "And why am I kept here like a prisoner? You wished me to leave Woodford Chase for a time, and I

agreed, although I have never cared much for Aunt Sally, or derived any pleasure from her society. But I did not bargain for being made to drag on month after month in town in this sort of way. Had I been a free agent I should have gone home weeks ago. Any disagreeables that I might have been forced to face there would have seemed light in comparison with those endured here. Papa, I do not often speak so plainly, but you know that what I now say is the truth. No one can suffer beyond a certain point. I appeal to you to free me from my present misery."

Her eloquence was so great that it carried all before it. Sir Hector winced. He had never quite realised until this moment how extremely clear-sighted Dolly was, and now he perceived, to his no small confusion, that his plans had been patent to her from the first. Parents frequently make similar mistakes, and do not credit their sharp, young daughters and sons with sufficient perspicacity. Sir Hector, when left to himself, was a well-meaning, kind-hearted man. In his innermost consciousness he approved of every word that Dolly had uttered. Visibly affected, he got up and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Dolly, dear," he said, in an unsteady voice, "don't heap coals of fire on my head. I have been an old fool, and that's the whole truth of the matter, but, thank goodness, you've brought me to my senses. You were quite right to refuse that drunken young scoundrel. Let's say no more about it."

Her face grew suddenly bright, like a day in Spring after an April shower.

"Dear father," she said softly, "we will go away from here, for you have been no happier than I."

"That's true enough. But, Dolly——" and he stopped short.

"Yes, papa, what is it?"

"If I ask you something, will you give me an honest answer?"

A sudden blush suffused her face. She had a presentiment of what was coming.

"I will try my best. It is not always easy."

"What I want to know is this. Does our going home mean that you wish to renew your engagement with Captain Dornay? He has not behaved well, but I quite recognise that Mrs. Stapleton's death has made a considerable difference to the situation."

Instead of answering, she walked to the window, and stood there so long, with her back towards him, that he thought a reply would never be forthcoming.

At last she moved slowly away, and holding out both hands, looked up with clear, sweet eyes into her father's face.

"I don't know, papa. I've been trying to make sure of my feelings, but," suppressing a sigh, "they are difficult to analyse. It may, and it may not, mean a renewal of our engagement. This is the only answer I can give you"

"Rather an ambiguous one, certainly. Has Captain Dornay written to you since his illness?"

"No, not a word. I don't know where he is, or anything about him. Perhaps he has left Fieldborough."

"Not yet," answered Sir Hector. "I heard from Harry this morning, for the first time for weeks."

"Does he—does he say how B—Captain Dornay is?" asked Dolly faintly.

"Yes, he is still very feeble, and makes but slow progress. To do him justice, he appears terribly cut up by recent events, as well he may be. Harry writes me that he can hardly get him to move out of the house, and that although the doctor strongly recommends fresh air, there is no inducing him either to drive or walk. He has a morbid horror of meeting any of his former acquaintances, and sits all day brooding over the past. Altogether, I gather he is in a bad way."

"Poor fellow! Poor Beau!" murmured Dolly, with the tears springing to her eyes.

"It appears," continued Sir Hector, "that they have made up their minds to return to India, where Captain Dornay can avoid the unpleasant notoriety he has gained here. They sail next week, according to what Harry says in his letter."

"Next week!" gasped Dolly, seizing her father by the arm.

"Oh! papa, we must go back at once—this afternoon."

He looked at her with an air of concern. Her pale face and dilated eyes told their own tale.

"Must it be so, my dear?"

"Yes, it must. When you asked me that question a minute ago, I was not sure of my answer. Now, I am certain—quite certain of it. Don't ask me to account for this sudden change. I can't."

For all of a sudden, when she heard that Beau was leaving

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the country, her heart grew soft and warm again, and the cold band that had encircled it as in an iron grasp, melted away. All the resentment with which Lydia Stapleton had formerly inspired her, vanished. A scale seemed to fall from her eyes, and the thought of Beau suffering, Beau still ill, Beau sitting in his little room day after day, pining and unhappy, a prey to wretched, remorseful thoughts, appealed forcibly not only to her woman's love, but also to her woman's compassion. A voice within her cried, "He wants me, he wants me. Now that he is in trouble, instead of forsaking him as I have done, I should comfort and console him. Ah! make haste to do so."

Pride and anger had dictated her conduct. Now their selfishness and worthlessness became apparent. Freed from their base shackles, her spirit soared on high, and her better nature re-asserted itself. Exquisite was the joy of that moment.

Sir Hector stood and watched the smiles rippling over her tender face.

"Dolly, darling," he said, "follow the promptings of your own heart. I am growing old, and henceforth, to see you happy and contented is all I ask from life. If you still love Captain Dornay, I will not stand in your way."

"Papa, papa!" she murmured, "my own dear father, how good you are to me! If Beau has done wrong, he repents of his sin, and we have all of us something to be sorry for in this world."

Sir Hector kissed her by way of reply. What she said was true. Had he not been near sinning against his own daughter, and, influenced by the counsels of a shallow, narrow-minded woman of the world, plotted against her happiness? He, too, had been on the brink of committing a grievous fault.

"Yes, Dolly," he said gravely, "you are right. There is no such thing as perfection to be found in human nature, and only by judging each other charitably can we hope for forgiveness ourselves. If your Aunt Parkinson has taught us nothing else, she has taught us to despise the frivolities of fashion, and to seek after a purer, better life. Come, my child, pack up your things. We will go home this afternoon. I, like you, am weary of social struggles after petty, unworthy objects."

And so they went. Back to the green fields, the fresh

air, and lovely, restful country, glad to escape from the contaminating influences of a vast, overcrowded city, one half of whose population lives in abject misery, the other in that unhealthy rioting and luxury which precedes the downfall of all great nations. For where simplicity gives place to an inordinate craving for excitement, coupled with a growing love of creature comforts, some radical evil exists in a country's social system. But the Babylonians feasted, and made merry, refusing to take note of the signs of the times.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CONCLUSION.

MAJOR GRIMSHAW wrote the truth when he informed his uncle that things were not going altogether well in Prince's Street. Although Beau's wound was now healed, and Doctor Corfield had for some time past pronounced his patient convalescent, his spirits were frightfully depressed, whilst his mind appeared perfectly unable to reassume a healthy and tranquil tone.

Beau blamed himself bitterly for having directly caused Mrs. Stapleton's death. He knew that it resulted from no mere accident, as the more charitable of her acquaintances assumed. And with this knowledge implanting a sting of remorse within him, he refused to touch a penny of the money left to him in her will. He wanted to make it all over to Amy, but, after repeated letters from Lydia's solicitors, it became evident that the deceased had fully provided against this contingency, and he should only be acting in opposition to her last wishes were he to persist in his determination not to profit by the bequest. But his greatest trouble of all arose from Dolly's silence. He longed to hear of her, or from her, yet a very natural delicacy prevented him from seeking information of his companion. Once, and once only during the course of his illness did he remark with feigned indifference :

"By-the-way, Harry, do you ever have any news of the good people at Woodford Chase now-a-days?"

"No, not a word," came the discouraging reply. "I believe my uncle and cousin have gone to town, and intend

staying away a considerable time. I wrote to Dolly soon after your accident, but she appears to have taken me into her bad graces as well as somebody else. Anyhow, we have ceased corresponding."

Beau sighed, and looked dreamily out of the window in order to hide his disappointment. But there was nothing to be said. In his heart of hearts he acknowledged that Dolly's conduct was perfectly justifiable. She had had such cause of offence as very few women were likely to forgive.

Nevertheless, as week after week passed away, and the hunting season was brought to a successful termination, his yearning to see her increased to such an extent, that he felt he should go melancholy mad if he continued much longer leading the same unhappy and inactive life.

So one fine morning, when the birds were sending up a perfect rage of song to the fleecy spring sky, and everywhere the tender green buds were uncurling themselves in the sunshine, he startled his faithful friend and companion by saying :

"Harry, old man, I've often heard people talk about what they called 'The Pain of Life,' but I've never understood it until now. Since being boxed up here, however, I've taken to thinking a good bit."

"Well, Beau, and what's the result of your thinking?"

"Principally that I have become deeply impressed by the trouble and strife everywhere apparent. Happiness is a delusive word. There is no such thing in reality. We are creatures, driven onwards by a mysterious force beyond our comprehension. Call it God, First Cause, what you like, it defies our human brain, and the wish to solve this vast, relentless Power, only produces infinite sadness, perplexity and confusion. Evil seems to predominate over good, cruelty over mercy. Struggle and strife are the law of Nature. Lydia Stapleton and myself were but an instance of it. I—the strongest—survive to drag out a wretched existence, she goes to the wall. And what does it all come to, what does it all mean? That is what I would give my soul to know."

"Come, come, old man, cheer up. These are gloomy thoughts at best, and can lead to no result. When a mystery is recognised as a mystery, why not leave it alone and give over puzzling one's head about it? That's my plan, and it answers capitally."

"So it was mine, Harry, as long as things went right. But when they don't, the problems of life have an ugly knack of staring one in the face. However, I don't want to bore you with my gloomy thoughts. Do you know what I'm thinking of doing?"

"No. What?"

"I'm thinking of going back to India."

"Are you mad, Beau? The hot weather is just coming on, and the climate never suited you, even when you were in full health and spirits. I call it tempting Providence to talk of returning under the circumstances."

"No matter. I shall go to the Terai, and try and get some good tiger-shooting. My leave is not up till August, and by starting at once, I shall have a couple of months clear."

"Ridiculous! I never heard such an absurd scheme in my life. It will be your death."

"Well, and if it is? What difference would it make? There is nobody much to mourn the event."

"I hate to hear you talking like that," said Harry, and there was a quaver in his voice.

"The fact of the matter is," continued Beau, "I do not care to live now that I have forfeited Dolly's love. She is quite right to give me up as she has done. No other course was open to her, and my punishment is not worse than I deserve; only I think I could bear it better if the seas were between us, and I were not so near Woodford Chase. I keep on fancying every day that I shall meet her, and every day the ache at my heart grows sharper. There, Harry! That's the whole truth. Don't let us ever talk of it again."

"And do you propose going to India by yourself, and leaving me here?" asked the Major, stooping down to pick up a pin from the floor, in order to conceal a certain moisture in his eyes of which he felt ashamed.

"Why, yes, I suppose so."

"Bosh!" ejaculated Harry indignantly. "You're a nice kind of pal, you are. If you go, I shall go too."

"You'd much better stay here and marry Dolly," returned Beau, with an ungenerous jealousy he could not restrain.

Harry flushed up to the roots of his hair.

"Look here, old man," he replied, "I don't think you ought to have said that—just as if I were such a poor

friend as to take advantage of your misfortune the minute your back was turned. Moreover, Dolly is not the girl to chop and change in that fashion, She may have her faults, but when she loves, she loves ; and when she don't, nothing will ever make her. She's hurt and offended, and may resolve to part, but if she's what I believe her to be, she'll never forget you. If you're unhappy, you can feel sure she's the same. So we'll both say good-bye to Prince's Street, and start once more on our travels in search of adventure."

Beau pressed his companion's hand.

"You're a good fellow, Harry. I wish I were half as good. Anyhow, the world is not all blank when such a friend as you remains in it. Forgive my caddish speech."

Thus it was settled that they should rejoin their regiment in India, and Harry wrote that very day to the P. & O. Company, securing passages.

One morning, however, about a week after this momentous decision had been arrived at, the post brought Beau a letter, which caused him to utter an exclamation of joyous surprise.

"Well! what's the matter now?" asked Harry, looking up from the boiled egg whose top he was engaged in cracking. "You look as if you had had good news at last."

"It's from her—from Dolly," faltered Beau, in great agitation. He was trembling from head to foot.

"Bravo!" cried the Major, suddenly rising from the table, and executing a most remarkable caper. "She's as proud as Lucifer, but I could have staked my life that that girl's heart was in the right place. And what does she say?"

"They're back—back at Woodford Chase, and oh! Harry, she writes to ask me to meet her to-day by the Mere, at three o'clock."

Beau's whole face was irradiated with joy. He looked more like himself than he had done for weeks. The light came back to his eyes, robbing them of their dull, spiritless expression.

"What time is it?" he asked impatiently. "Only ten," glancing at the clock. "Five whole hours to wait: They will seem like an eternity." Then a thought struck him, and turning to his friend, he added, "Harry, don't mince matters. How do I look? Am I a scarecrow? Shall I frighten her? Will she know me?"

"Get along," was the jocular reply. "She'll know you fast enough. Trust her for that. You're a bit thin and pale, but Dolly will only love you and pity you all the more."

He would not damp Beau's spirits by telling him how greatly the beard he was now forced to grow altered his appearance. He was optimist enough to believe that if the meeting only took place, everything would come right.

All at once a shadow passed over Beau's face.

"Harry," he said, "it is idiotic of me to feel so happy, and to let my hopes run high. I must not allow them to take possession of me in this absurd fashion. The chances are she only wishes to say good-bye."

"As a means of saying, 'How do you do?'" laughed the other in reply. "Beau, Beau, in spite of your experience, it is really astonishing how little you know of women. I'll go now and order a fly to come round at a quarter-past two o'clock, for, thanks to your obstinacy in declining to take pedestrian exercise all this time, you're in no condition to walk the four miles between Fieldborough and Woodford Chase."

"I—I think I shall begin to get about again now," answered Beau, and Harry knew that Dolly's letter had done him more good than all the medicines and tonics in the world.

When the time arrived for keeping her appointment, Dolly grew horribly nervous. Numerous hitherto-unconsidered doubts rose to her mind. What if Beau should deem her conduct unmaidenly, or if he had ceased to care for her? This was an awful thought, which, until now, had not presented itself. It rendered her so restless that she could hardly sit through luncheon, and she feared every moment that her father would notice her anxiety. At length the meal came to an end. Then she went sottly upstairs, and put on a certain tailor-made dress which Beau had frequently admired, and tried the effect of two or three hats, to see which was the most becoming. When her preparations were complete, and the reflection given by the looking-glass proved fairly satisfactory, she crept out of the house like a guilty creature, and walked rapidly down the path that led to the Mere. Her heart thumped against her side. A sense of fluttering anticipation thrilled her pulses. She tried to make up a suitable little set speech, to deliver

on the occasion of meeting Beau, such as "How do you do? I hope you are better?" or "I am sorry you are going to India, but no doubt you will enjoy yourself!" or—if he looked ill, "I fear you have had a good deal of trouble, Captain Dornay, but I trust the worst of it is over." Such a greeting might sound a little formal, but it would pave the way to further conversation, and show that although she had expressed a desire to see him, she had no intention of jumping down his throat. And then, if he were very nice, very penitent and fond, there was no knowing how the interview might terminate. A smile broke out over Dolly's face as her imagination pictured the results of certain given circumstances.

It was a lovely spring day; beautiful with soft sky, clear sunshine, and balmy breezes. The birds were singing rapturous love songs to each other. The blue-green firs were thrusting out long, slender shoots; the larch trees were decked with fringes of the brightest, tenderest green imaginable; grasses pushed up slim blades and tufty heads, bedecked with pink-tipped daisies and glossy, yellow buttercups. The bracken was just beginning to unroll its fresh young fronds, whilst here and there, cushioned in some mossy nest, a primrose peeped out like a pale star, and scented the air with its sweet and subtle fragrance. Bees hummed, gnats danced, ants ran busily to and fro, beetles opened their glistening wings and shook them in the sunshine, butterflies chased themselves in pairs along the margin of the water. And amidst all this life and movement, the Mere lay like a silver mirror, twinkling brightly, and reflecting, in its translucent depths, the mottled sky above, and the verdant banks around.

Dolly sat down on the bench beneath the old beech tree, unconsciously drinking in the beauty of the scene, and as she listened to the love song of the birds, the love song in her heart kept up a loud chorus of, "He is coming, he is coming. Soon, very soon, I shall meet my beloved!" . . .

And then he came; softly, humbly, with bent head and drooping eyelids, like a subject entering into the presence of the Queen he has wronged. He stood before her, a picture of abasement and contrition, his arms folded, his whole mien expressive of unutterable remorse—and waited.

She looked at him, and, as she looked, an overpowering pity checked the utterance of that little set speech she had

so carefully prepared. He was indeed changed. His cheeks were thin and wan, his eyes refused to meet her own, and in spite of a short auburn beard, the lower portion of his face was sadly disfigured. He looked older, sadder, soberer. She could have cried at the sight of him.

And yet, what did it matter if he, who had been so handsome, was now no longer remarkable for his appearance? Was he not a hundred thousand times dearer to her thus, in his weakness and abasement, than in the flower of his strength? By an overmastering impulse she rose to her feet, and with a kind of vertigo descending upon her senses, held out both arms.

The next minute she was sobbing her heart out upon his breast. Nothing had been further from her intentions than to act like this, to surrender herself unconditionally, but she was only a loving woman, and when she saw him, she no longer remained mistress of the situation.

"Beau," she whispered, "*dear*, DEAR Beau, I could not let you go without telling you how hard and wicked I have been. I steeled myself against you, and yet—and yet I loved you all the time."

He was too much overcome by sudden joy to speak. Long illness had rendered him very weak. Tears gathered in his sunken eyes as she pressed her warm, young lips to his.

"I dared to judge you," she went on brokenly, "and also that poor woman who is dead. Beau, you and I have both acted wrongly. Let us forgive each other, and learn tolerance from the past."

He gazed at her in silence. He had been nigh unto death, and now this bringing back to life, to happiness, almost overwhelmed him.

"Dolly, my beloved," he said hoarsely, "God is infinitely good to me. I can scarcely realise it all. Do you mean that I am not to go to India, that—you will be my wife? It seems too wonderful to be true."

She made no immediate reply. Her eyes were fixed upon the shining Mere with a far-away expression. Presently she said, quietly and seriously:

"Yes, Beau, I will be your wife, only not just yet. It would not be decent to *her* memory," and she coloured faintly, "if we forgot her too soon. It is not for you and for me to make merry over her grave, poor thing! With

all her faults, she loved you well. People have not yet left off talking about her death. Go away, not to India, on account of your health, but somewhere else for a year——”

“A year!” he interrupted, pulling a long face. “That is a terrible time.”

She turned upon him with a smile, at once tender and reproachful.

“Is it longer for you than for me? You will find me waiting at the end of it.”

“But to part again, when we have been parted for so many weeks.”

“Ah! Beau, we must not look upon it in that way, but rather thank God we are not parted altogether. We might have been, had not the dead woman sacrificed her life for your sake. Don't let us forget what we owe her, or show any disrespect to her memory by being in too much of a hurry. Dear one, tell me, am I wrong? After all your sufferings, nothing is further from my desire than to vex you, but have you not the same kind of feeling in your heart?”

He slid his arm round her waist. How good she was, how pure!

“Dolly, Dolly darling! I can never love you enough. I am a selfish brute, not worthy to kiss the ground on which you tread. You are right, as you always are. My dear, my life, when you are my wife you will teach me to be a better man, won't you? for I am not fit to walk alone.”

“Hush, Beau; don't run yourself down. You have no faults in my eyes, and I love you as you are. I, myself, am far from perfect. I have been proud, and angry, and uncharitable, but,” and she gave a little happy sob, “henceforth we will try and improve each other.”

Under the mighty old beech tree they stood, the sun casting a golden halo on all the beautiful green world, and lighting up the dark crowns of the straight-stemmed pines till they shone with a borrowed glory.

And into their hearts stole the peace of a great and trustful love that has weathered storm and outlived suffering. Nothing but death could cast it out.

Ah! how the birds sang.

The winter was over. The spring of Youth, of Love, and Nature had succeeded to its cold, dark days, and the time for mating was at hand. Ever and ever louder piped

their clear, sweet voices, and brighter shone the golden sun until the Mere resembled molten ore, and the spaces between the tall pines were filled with patches of tremulous light and shade, that turned the woods into fairy forests, and rendered the whole earth fair.

Dolly gazed at it all with tears springing to her eyes.

"Beau," she said softly, "let us banish everything mean and paltry from our lives, and make them beautiful too. It is such a grand, such an awful thought, that "Man has but his little life with which to front Eternity." And most of us misuse our opportunities so terribly."

He kissed her reverently. A few months ago he would not have understood her earnest longings after high and noble things. Now they sank deep into his heart.

Physical and mental pain had taught him a clearer comprehension of existence and the responsibilities it entails. Instead of shirking them as formerly, henceforth he was prepared to face the world with the sober courage of a man who has been in the wars, and escaped scarred and disfigured truly, but resolute to profit by his experience, and to redeem past errors.

So we will leave him to fight anew, mayhap to fall anew, yet not to be condemned on that account, but rising, step by step, from failure to the greatest of all victories, Man's mastery over Self.

THE END.



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