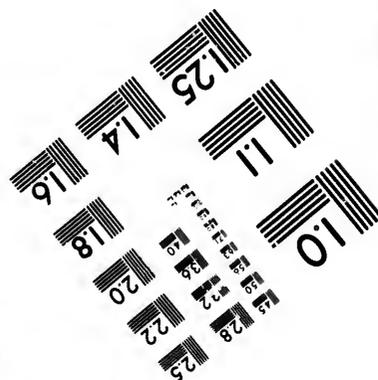
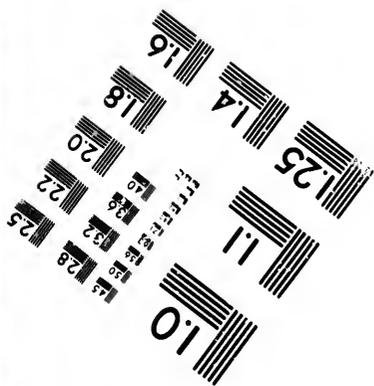
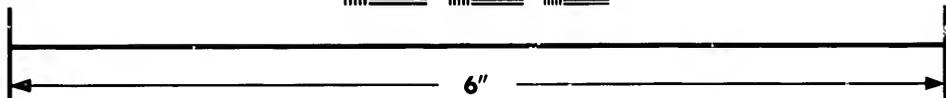
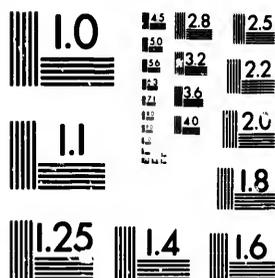


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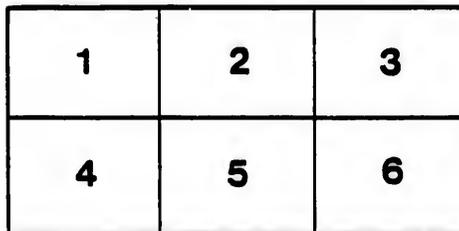
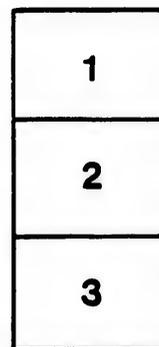
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5.

FATED TO MARRY:

BY

MRS. MAY AGNES FLEMING,

AUTHOR OF

"The Secret Sorrow." "Carried by Storm." "One Night's Mystery," etc.



TORONTO :

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY W. G. GIBSON,

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FATED TO MARRY.

CHAPTER I.

KEEPING TRYST.

I pause an instant on the threshold of this story. You will call it, perhaps, incredible, impossible. Be it so—however, it is true. Twenty years ago its principal incidents were wonderingly chronicled in every paper throughout the length and breadth of the land. Incredible it sounds—true it is. It is but one more proof of the veracity of that hackneyed axiom—"truth is stranger than fiction."

A raw and gusty March day was closing in a rawer and gustier twilight. One lurid bar of blood-red streaked the black sky where the sun had set wrathfully; all else was murky, troubled darkness. A wailing wind moaned through the gaunt trees, and sent the March dust whirling in blinding clouds before it. In the ominous sky, in the groaning blast, the coming storm heralded its approach.

The 5 p. m. train from London came thundering into the dull little station of Framlingham. The lamps flared in the numberless draughts, and the little wayside station looked so unutterably dismal and desolate in the eerie gloaming. Half a dozen stragglers lounged about, hands deep in their pockets, hats drawn far over their eyes, waiting to see the passengers alight.

There was but one. A tall young man, with a light overcoat thrown across his arm, sprang off and walked into the station.

"All right!" shouted the guard.

And, with a demoniac shriek, the train was lost in the blackening evening.

The half-dozen stragglers turned their twelve eyes upon the tall young man with an overcoat—a stranger to them, a stranger in Framlingham. A handsome and gentlemanly fellow, with dark, bright eyes, a black mustache, and a magnificent ring

blazing on his ungloved left hand. It flashed like a great eye of fire as he stood under one of the gas jets and lit a cigar.

"Nasty night, sir," suggested the station-master, rather impressed by the superb stranger. "We shall have it hot and heavy before morning."

The stranger nodded carelessly, blew a fragrant cloud of smoke in the face of the nearest straggler, walked to the door, and looked long and earnestly down the road.

The dull little village—dull at its best and brightest—was unspeakably forlorn and forsaken this black and dismal March evening. Not even a stray dog wandered through its one long, straggling street. Everybody was shut up behind those lighted windows, in square, white dwellings, with the inevitable Venetian blinds—houses as much alike as peas in a pod.

The stranger shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"A gay and festive place, this Framlingham of yours, my friend. Existence dragged out here must be a priceless boon. There's a hotel, I suppose?"

"Five of 'em," replied the station-master, triumphantly. "The Crown, the Farmers, the Wheatshcaf, the——"

"That will do. Which is the best?"

"Well, the Crown is the dearest and the neatest—and a pretty fair hotel. There it stands, sir, with them benches in front of it."

"Thanks, I'll try it. Whereabouts does Miss Hardenbrook live?"

"Miss Hardenbrook? Well, you can't see Miss Hardenbrook's from here; it's pretty nigh 'tother end of the village. Be you a friend of Miss Hardenbrook's?" with a curious stare.

The young man laughed—a peculiar, short laugh—as he flung away his cigar, and invested himself in his overcoat.

"I don't know about that. If I'm not, however, it's Miss Hardenbrook's fault. I'm not at all proud. Good evening to you."

He strode away. The stragglers watched him out of sight.

"Not proud, ain't you?" said the station-master; "maybe not, but you're pretty considerable cheeky. What's he to Miss Harbrook, I wender? She never has no visitors."

"One of her handsome niece's beaus, I expect," suggested one.

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"Miss Hardenbrook's very poorly to-day," another remarked. "She ain't expected to live the week out. Miss Isabel will drop into a good thing, when the old girl goes off the hooks. She'll be the richest and handsomest gal in Lancashire."

"And this young chap, with the black mustache, and diamond ring, comes down beforehand to make sure of his game. A fortune hunter, or a gambler, most likely. They all look like that—black mustaches, diamond rings, tall hats, and lots of cheek."

The young man, thus unflatteringly discussed, reached the hotel meantime, secured his room, ordered his supper, and ate it with an appetite. His watch pointed to six as he came from the table.

It was quite dark now—moonless and starless; a bleak, bitter night.

"Pleasant, this," the young man muttered—"an inky sky above, an inky earth below. My dear girl will hardly venture out in this March tornado; but, like a true knight, I must brave the elements, and be at the place of tryst."

He buttoned up his overcoat, drew his hat far over his eyes, and sallied out into the gusty darkness.

There were no street lamps in primitive Framlingham, and the lighted windows were so obscured by tossing trees, that they illuminated his path but little. The path was strange to him, too; but he plunged carelessly forward with an easy trust in luck and himself, that was characteristic of the man, humming the fag end of an old ballad,

"Oh, hang it!" as he stumbled over an obstruction. "Miss Hardenbrook would lock the door and keep the key, too, if she dreamed George Wildair was within a score of miles of this delectable, happy village. I hope Issie will keep tryst; one doesn't mind breaking one's shins for the girl of one's heart; but if the girl doesn't come—— This ought to be the spot, I think."

He was out on the verge of a bleak marsh, just discernible and no more. Pollard willows waved and cracked, and a low clump of furze-bushes dotted it—black spectres, this bad March night,

"This is the spot, and this is the hour," Mr. George Wildair muttered to himself; "and a more desolate spot, and a more dismal hour, my adored Isabel couldn't have chosen, if she had tried a life-time. May the gods that specially watch over fools and lovers send her soon, or I shall be found here, to-morrow morning, frozen as stiff as Lot's wife."

A step sounded on the road—baked hard as iron with black frost—a quick, light woman's step.

An instant later, and a slender female figure stood before him, dimly outlined against the gloomy night sky.

“Isabel.”

He started forward, his arms outstretched.

“George!”

A hysterical cry of delight, and the outstretched arms were empty no longer.

“Dear George—dearest George, how good it is to see you again!” she cries in the same hysterical way. “Oh! the last two months have seemed like an eternity, never to see you, never to hear from you! And Miss Hardenbrook has been so cross and so suspicious; and Ellen Rossiter has watched me as a cat watches a mouse. Oh!” clinging to him with something between a laugh and a sob, “one may even buy gold too dear, George.”

“My dear little Issie! My precious little, ill-used darling! So you are enduring daily martyrdom for my sake. Time doesn't improve Miss Hardenbrook's temper, I suppose; but as it doesn't improve her health either, there is reason to hope your martyrdom will soon end. How is she?”

“Very, very ill, and liable to die at any moment. Ellen Rossiter hardly leaves her night or day.”

“Ellen Rossiter is the toad-eating, tuft-hunting old maid cousin you told me of, who hopes to supplant you in Miss Hardenbrook's will?”

“And who will supplant me, George,” the girl said, solemnly, “as surely as Aunt Hardenbrook finds out you are here, and that we have met.”

“But she must not find it out,” Mr. Wildair said, in rather a startled tone; “and she must not know we have met. It would be a terrible thing for us, Isabel, if you lost your aunt's fortune.”

The girl looked up at him earnestly. But in the darkness the expression his face wore could not be seen.

“You would not love me less, George?”

“You foolish child! As if any loss in this lower world could make me do that.”

“Then why would its loss be terrible? I should like to be

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rich, George; to live luxuriously, to dress superbly, to have all that is beautiful and bright in life around me; but I could give all up and go forth to beggary with you, my beloved, without one pang. Nothing in this wide earth could be terrible to me, but the loss of your love, George."

Mr. Wildair laughed and kissed her. The laugh sounded cynical, and the kiss was not at all the rapturous proceeding it might have been.

"A very pretty speech, my dear, and a very flattering one. But there is a homely old adage which is as true as truth itself to my mind, 'When poverty comes in the door, love flies out of the window.' The going forth to beggary sounds nice and sentimental in theory; but when it came to practice, I should quietly steal a razor and cut my throat. The story of King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid, as told by Mr. Tennyson, is a very charming story indeed; and if I were a King Cophetua, and Miss Hardenbrook disinherited you, I should take my dark-eyed beggar-maid, and make her my queen as promptly and as romantically as he did. But, you see, being only a briefless barrister, just able to earn the bread and salt of daily life, and nothing more, beggar maids are not practicable. So my pretty Issie, if we are to be blest for life before our hair turns gray, you must become heiress to Miss Hardenbrook's thousands."

"Then it is Miss Hardenbrook's fortune you marry, not Isabel Vance?"

She spoke in a cold, constrained voice, drawing herself free from his encircling arms.

"Nonsense, Issie!" he said, impatiently. "You know better than that. I'm not a very sentimental young man, and I tell you the plain truth. I love you dearly—I would marry you without a penny to-morrow, if I could, but I can't; and if the Venus Celestis were to come alive on earth, and offer to become Mrs. Wildair out of hand, I should have to thank the radiant goddess, and respectfully decline, unless she brought several thousand pounds from Olympus with her. Don't be silly, Isabel, and don't be sentimental; Miss Hardenbrook will die shortly, and if she wasn't an unconscionable old spider she would have died long ago; and when your six months' mourning has expired, we'll be married, and live happy forever after."

He took her in his arms again, and kissed the face that, even

in the gloom, was dimly beautiful. But his words chilled her, and his careless caresses could not satisfy her troubled heart.

"But, George. Oh stop! let us look the worst in the face. She may disinherit me—who knows? She is as capricious as the wind; she has made half a dozen different wills already; and the will that leaves all to me is not yet signed. It may never be, George—and then?"

"And then," said Mr. George Wildair, in a hard, resolute voice, "we will have crow's feet under our eyes, and our heads will be beautifully silvered by the frosts of time before our honeymoon begins."

"No," cried the girl, as if with a sudden inspiration; "I know better than that. When I lose my fortune I lose you—you will go and look for another heiress; you will never grow gray waiting for me. And I——"

"And you?" the young man said, with a light laugh; "finish your prediction, my pretty Sybil."

He would hardly have laughed so easily had he seen how her face altered in the darkness. Her eyes blazed up, her hands clenched, her teeth shut convulsively together.

"Don't ask me, don't ask me, George! I grow afraid of myself when I think of it. Better for you you had never been born than to tamper with what is here!"

She struck her breast heavily as she spoke, and something in her changed voice went with a thrill to his heart. But the next instant he laughed again, and kissed the pretty, quivering lips.

"My dear little tragedy-queen! you vow vengeance like the heroine of a high-pressure novel. We won't suppose such horrid things, we'll look on the bright side. Isabel Vance will be Dorothy Hardenbrook's heiress, and George Wildair's beautiful wife. Well, where are you going?"

"It is striking seven—hear it? Miss Hardenbrook may miss me, and send Ellen Rotsiter in search. If she does, all is lost. Oh, George! George!" with a sudden, passionate cry, and clasping him in her arms, "If I lose you I shall die! Let me go—my fortune is at stake. I cannot afford to lose my fortune now—God help me!"

Something in her voice, in her clinging clasp, touched his frivolous heart—and it was a frivolous heart to the core.

"My dear little girl! I were the basest villain on earth to prove false to you. When I do, I pray that I may die!"

"Amen!"

He shuddered as the ominous word passed her lips; he opened his arms and let her go.

"When shall I see you again?"

"Not until all is over," she replied, steadily, "I will not risk again the fortune you prize so highly, George, as I have risked it this night. You will go back to London to-morrow morning."

"But I may write to you, at least? And you will answer?"

"No; my aunt's spy, Ellen Rossiter, would find it out and betray us. I am afraid of that woman. I will neither see you, nor hear from you, until I go to your the mistress of Dorothy Hardenbrook's thousands. I will lay them at your feet, George, where my heart has been for many a day. If I win, all is yours. But if I lose——"

Her voice died away. George Wildair, with a chill of ominous dread, broke the spell that followed.

"You will not lose—you will be my queen as you are my darling! Good-by, my own love, until we meet again."

"Good-by," she said, solemnly. "Good-by, my love, my darling! and may God bless you! Who knows whether I will be able to say that when we meet again."

She fluttered away with the last strange words on her lips—fluttered away, and the black night swallowed her up.

George Wildair turned very slowly, and made the best of his way back to the hotel, and with a disagreeable feeling of impending evil troubling his usually serene mind.

"It's an uncommon bad-looking piece of business, George, my boy," the young lawyer soliloquized. "If the old girl turns up trump and does the right thing by Issie, all will go on well, and George Wildair will have a wife and a fortune to be proud of. But if she doesn't—Oh! it's an ugly hitch, and I can't perform impossibilities and marry Miss Vance. And yet she is just the sort, too, Isabel Vance, to go and kill herself, or somebody else—perhaps both. She's tremendously in love with me, poor little girl; and it's flattering but not at all pleasant."

Before Mr. Wildair had come to the end of his soliloquy, and lit a consolatory cigar, there emerged a figure from behind a clump of bushes not two yards off the spot where the two lovers

had held their interview ; it was a woman. She had heard and seen all, and her sharp, sallow face was flushed with triumph.

“At last!” she said to herself, under her breath ; “at last, my lady, your hour has come ! You dread Ellen Rossiter, do you ? Ah ! if you only knew how much reason you have to dread her, my proud and handsome young heiress ! We will see what Miss Hardenbrook will say to all this ; we will see whether that unsigned will will ever be signed ; we will see what will happen when Mr. Wildair jilts his penniless lady-love.”

She hurried away. And the sobbing wind rising and falling, and the black spectral trees had the ghostly spot to themselves where the lovers kept tryst.

CHAPTER II.

“ALL FOR LOVE, AND THE WORLD WELL LOST.”

The night lamp burned low in the sick room, and the shadows couched like evil things in the dusky corners. A large room, “curtained, and close, and warm ;” a bright fire burning dimly on the hearth ; medicine-bottles and glasses strewing the table ; the old-fashioned four-post bedstead standing in the centre of the floor, and old Dorothy Hardenbrook lying upon it, never to leave it, but for her coffin.

The sick woman was all alone, and wide awake. The glittering eyes looked out of a withered, wasted, wrinkled face, like glowing coals ; her skinny hands clutched a note containing a few lines written in a big, masculine hand. Over and over again, with a fierce and wrathful glance, she had read these lines :

“MY DARLING : If by any chance you can give your sick dragon, and her sick attendant Cerberus, the slip, give it to them to-night. I will be at the place you appointed at a little past six. I am dying to see you, and see you I must, despite all the vindictive, dying old maids in Christendom.

“Devotedly,

G. W.”

The glare in the glittering old eyes that devoured this cold-blooded note was something horrible to see.

“If she does ! if she does !” she panted aloud. “The heartless, ungrateful huzzy ; a miserable, play-acting pauper, that I took from the street and the stage, and fed, and clothed, and cherished ! And this is my reward ! She knows I hate this George

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Wildair and all his race—faithless and false, and corrupt to the core of their black, bad hearts, one and all. She knows it; and if she meet him to-night—if she meets him——”

She stopped, and trembled with suppressed rage from head to foot. The room and the house were very, very still. Outside, the wind sobbed and shuddered, and the bare wintry trees rattled like dead bones; inside, the loud ticking of the clock, the monotonous dropping of lurid cinders, the sleepy purring of a big Maltese cat, made a dull, drowsy chorus of their own.

The clock struck eight. As its last beat died away the chamber door opened, and Ellen Rossiter walked into the room.

Miss Hardenbrook raised herself on her elbow by a supreme effort, and looked with wild, eager eyes into the face of her spy. She was a little, wiry body, this Ellen Rossiter—a female terrier, with lips thin as knife-blades, and pale steel-blue eyes; like the sick woman herself, a soured, and sullen, and disappointed, cross old maid.

“Well?” Miss Hardenbrook asked, with a fierce clutch at her bedclothes. “Don’t stand staring at me there, Ellen Rossiter, like a fool, but speak out. Was the note true—was it from him? Was she there?”

She made the reply with cold deliberation, removing her things and folding them up.

“I was at the place before her. I knew it well—she often met him there before. I hid behind the bushes and waited. He came first, singing and talking to himself, like the idiot that he is. She did not keep him waiting long; she came all in a hurry, and plunged into his arms, kissing him, calling him her love and her darling, in a manner that was perfectly sickening and disgusting. I saw it all, and heard every word they said.”

“What did they say?”

Ellen Rossiter compressed her thin lips until her mouth was only a pale streak across her face.

“You had better not ask me—you won’t like it.”

“Tell me, I command you!” Miss Hardenbrook passionately cried. “Tell me, for I will know; tell me, for I have a perfect right to know!”

“Very well.”

She sat down by the bedside, her hands folded in her lap, her steel-blue eyes looking stolidly into the burning black eyes of the

sick woman; and then, word for word, with diabolical precision, repeated the whole conversation of the lovers.

Dorothy Hardenbrook covered her face with both hands, with a convulsive sob.

"And I loved this girl," she cried. "Oh, my God! better than I ever loved Thee!"

"Not more than she loves your money. She will wait six months after you are dead, and then Mr. Wildair will take possession of it and her, and scatter it to the four winds of heaven."

"Never!" The hands dropped, and the eyes blazed. "Never, Ellen Rossiter—never, never! Thank Heaven, it is not too late! Give me that box."

She took a key from under her pillow. Ellen handed her a square iron box, which she knew contained two unsigned wills. Miss Hardenbrook opened the box, took out one of the wills, read it slowly through, and tore it into atoms.

"So perish the hopes of George Wildair and Isabel Vance! So are ingratitude and falsehood punished! Send for Mr. Benson, and call Susan."

Mr. Benson was her lawyer, Susan was her cook. Ellen Rossiter disappeared, and returned in half an hour with both. The second will was spread out before Miss Hardenbrook; her face had grown hard and rigid as iron.

"I am going to sign my will, Mr. Benson," she said; "the other I have destroyed. I have sent for you two to witness the proceeding."

She took a pen, and signed the will with a firm, unflinching hand. The other two affixed their signatures. Then, with the same rigid composure, she locked up the document, and handed the key to the lawyer.

"You will keep this, my friend. The day I am buried, you will read the will aloud, in this room, to those that attend my funeral. Now leave me—I am tired and wish to sleep."

She turned away her face to the wall. The lawyer and Susan crept away on tiptoe. Ellen Rossiter lingered an instant, with an anxious look on her face.

"The doctor said she was liable to die at any moment; that any excitement would be fatal—and surely she has had excitement to-night."

Miss Rossiter did not retire; she descended to the parlor, and

paced up and down. Ten, eleven, twelve struck. How awfully still the house was in its midnight hush! how awfully clamorous sounded the storm without! The wind had risen, and the rain fell—wind and rain wailed and sobbed, like cries of mutual agony.

“A fearful night!” the lone watcher said, with a shudder; “and she is afraid of night and tempest. I will go and see how she sleeps, Susan!”

She shook and roused the sleepy cook—she was afraid to enter the room alone. Together they ascended, together they entered, The air of the room struck cold upon them. The raging of the midnight tempest sounded appallingly loud up there. On the bed the sick woman lay, as they had left—she had never moved.

“Sleeping still,” the cook said in a low whisper.

Ellen Rossiter crossed the room and bent over her a second, and she recoiled with a loud cry.

Yes, sleeping still; but the everlasting sleep. Miss Hardenbrook lay before them cold and dead.

* * * * *

It was a very long procession that wended its way from the prim, white mansion, following Dorothy Hardenbrook to her last home.

A miserable March day; the rain falling ceaselessly; the wind sobbing; the sky a leaden pall; the earth black and sodden. A bad, bitter day; and the funeral-train shivered in their wraps and splashed forlornly through the mire of the wretched country roads.

The dull afternoon was half over ere the grave was closed and the gloomy procession back in the old-fashioned mansion. Ghastly looked the rooms, hung in the sombre trappings of the grave; deadly was the chill and the silence that prevailed it, in the dismal light of the wet afternoon.

The staid parlor, never used but on state occasions, was almost filled with curious, expectant listeners. With a flush very foreign to her usual sallow complexion, hot in her face, with a glittering light rarely seen in the dull, steel-blue eyes, Ellen Rossiter folded her hands to listen to the reading of the will. The hour of her triumph had come—the hour for which she had watched, and waited, and played the spy. She, and not that tall, imperious young woman, who had queened it so long, would be heir-ess to Dorothy Hardenbrook's thousands.

Miss Vance, looking very handsome and stately in trailing crape and sables, sat by the window, gazing steadfastly out at the ceaseless rain. She was deathly white, and the hands lying in her lap, were convulsively locked together. A sickening presentment of what was to come filled her heart and soul; the flashing fire in Ellen Rossiter's triumphant eyes; the pitying glances of Benson, the lawyer, had gone thrilling with an awful fear to her heart. She had staked all that life held of bliss, love, and hope, and happiness, on one throw of the dice, and she had lost. She knew it as surely sitting there, staring blankly out at the wretched rain, as she knew it an hour after.

Mr. Benson slowly unlocked the box, drew forth the will, and began to read. Dead silence reigned. The document was brief and to the point. There was a legacy to Susan Turner, the cook, of one hundred pounds; two hundred to Mr. Benson, to buy a mourning ring; and two hundred to Ellen Rossiter, in return for her secret services faithfully rendered.

There was a shrill cry. Ellen Rossiter rose, wildly excited, from her seat.

"There is some awful mistake! There must be a mistake; Miss Hardenbrook never would insult me like that! Mr. Benson, you have read the wrong name."

"I have done nothing of the sort, Miss Rossiter—be good enough not to interrupt. The remainder of her property, landed and personal, amounting in all to forty thousand pounds, Miss Hardenbrook has bequeathed, absolutely and without condition, to"—a breathless pause—"to her third cousin, Miss Amy Hardenbrook Earle, of London."

There was a simultaneous exclamation from every one present, a gasping cry of rage and despair from Ellen Rossiter, and all eyes turned upon the stately figure by the window. But Miss Vance sat like a stone, the face white and rigid, the dark eyes staring straight before her with an awful, fixed, blind stare.

Mr. Benson folded up the will, relocked the box, and prepared to depart. The short, stormy March day was already darkening fast, and every one rose to follow his example, and spread the astounding news through Framlingham, Isabel Vance disinherited, not even named in the will; and an unknown young lady, in London, left sole heiress of Miss Hardenbrook's wealth! Framlingham had not received so astounding a shock for ages.

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And the figure by the window was left alone. No one had approached her; no one had spoken to her; there was that in her face that held them off. One by one they dropped silently away—friends who were sorry for her, enemies who exulted over her. Ellen Rossiter rushed up to her own room, and was crying her spiteful, disappointed heart out in a passion or bitter, raging tears. But Isabel Vance shed no tears, uttered no cry; her dumb despair was far too deep for that. With the loss of wealth she had lost all—love, life. For George Wildair's sake she had risked the glory of the world; for his sake she had lost, and he would be the very first to turn from her in her downfall.

The rainy twilight fell. The night wind, salt from the sea, rose and beat the rain clamorously against the glass. Isabel stood up, her face looking awfully corpse-like in the desolate gloaming, and with a steady step walked out of the room and out of the house.

She went straight to the village—to the Crown Hotel. Rain and wind tore at her and buffeted her; but she heeded them no more than if she had been made of wood or stone. The proprietor of the hotel, standing in his own door-way, looking out at the stormy evening, recoiled with a blank stare at the sight of her, as he might at seeing an apparition.

"Is Mr. Wildair in?"

That voice, hollow and strange, was not the melodious voice of Isabel Vance. The man's face softened into a gaze of unspeakable pity.

"Yes, Miss Vance; this way, if you please."

He ushered her up stairs, and into the private parlor, sacred to Mr. Wildair's learned leisure.

"Miss Vance, sir," he said, and disappeared.

Mr. George Wildair, seated before the window, his chair tipped back, his boots on the sill, a cigar in his mouth, and his eyes fixed moodily on the darkening prospect, got up with a spring. He flung away his cigar, and came forward with a face that was anything but the radiant face of a lover.

"You here, Isabel! This is an astonisher! You surely have not walked all the way in this pouring rain!"

She glanced down at her drenched garments, as if conscious for the first time of the wet.

"I do not know—it does not matter! I wanted to see you before you left."

"Who told you I was going to leave! Sit down, pray, while I light the gas."

"We need no light for what we have to say. Thanks, I will not be seated. I only come to say good-by."

"You need not have come through this pouring rain to-night for that," Mr. Wildair remarked rather sulkily. "You did not suppose I was going to leave Framlingham without calling to see you, Isabel?"

"I did. You would not have come, George."

"Thanks for your good opinion, Miss Vance. Think so by all means, if it suits you."

"You never would have come, George," she repeated, steadily. "It was Miss Hardenbrook's heiress you courted--and I am not that."

"Confound the cantankerous old cat!" burst forth Mr. Wildair, furiously. "Why the duse did she disinherit you, Isabel?"

"Do you need to ask? Because I met you that night."

"Who told her?"

"Ellen Rossiter, I presume. Don't talk of that—it is too late now. I have lost all you care for; there is nothing left for us but to shake hands and part forever."

"Not forever, I hope." But the voice in which he said it, was a very hesitating one. "Don't think me altogether heartless, Isabel. I wanted Miss Hardenbrook's money, I don't deny; but I loved you as well. I would marry you to-morrow, if I could; but I can't. I am a poor fellow, as you know, living from hand to mouth. I cannot afford the luxury of a penniless wife."

"I know it." The voice had fallen to a dull calm without one trace of emotion. "You cannot afford to marry me now, and you never can. You have deceived me from first to last. There is nothing left but to say farewell, and go our different ways through life."

The unnatural calm deceived him. He had expected tears, reproaches, hysterics, a stormy and passionate scene. His face flushed, and he drew a long breath of relief.

"I have no wish to say farewell forever, Isabel," he said, gently, "but you have and you know best. It would be selfish in me, I dare say, to keep you bound by an engagement that cannot be fulfilled for half a life-time. I love you, but I will not

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be selfish. I release you, Isabel, though heaven knows how bitter it is to say those words. I set you free, Isabel; and when I hear you are married to a better and a richer man, I will try and rejoice for your sake. It is destiny, I suppose, but it is very hard."

He turned hastily away to the window, and for the instant, the self-deceiver believed he felt what he said. The young girl stood regarding him with a fixed, steady glance, reading all his falseness and baseness, yet loving him despite it all. The friendly darkness hid from him the gleaming light in her eyes, the unearthly expression of her face. He only heard that low, monotonous voice and that deceived him.

"And you, George," she said, after a little pause, "you will woo and wed another heiress, I suppose? This Miss Amy Earle, for instance. She is young and pretty, no doubt; if not, what does it signify, since she inherits Miss Hardenbrook's fortune? There will be a Mrs. George Wildair, will there not, before this year ends?"

Mr. Wildair wheeled round from the window, wrapped in his dignity as in a mantle.

"You might have spared me that taunt, Miss Vance. I am not altogether the mercenary wretch you take me to be. But we will not recriminate—we'll part friends."

"Yes, we will part friends."

Her voice rose, her eyes flashed. But she held out her hand and looked him steadily in the face.

"We will part friends. Farewell, George Wildair. You have deceived me more cruelly than man ever deceived woman before. You have blighted my life, you have broken my heart; but as you say, let us part friends. Farewell, George—but not forever. *We shall meet once more!*"

She wrung his hand, dropped it suddenly, turned, and was gone like a flash—lost in the black, wet night; and Mr. Wildair was left alone staring aghast.

"Dused odd!" he muttered, at last, recovering from his stupor. "Has the loss of her fortune and the loss of her lover turned her brain? 'We shall meet once more,' shall we? I hope not. Did she mean that as a threat, I wonder? By Jove! I'll keep out of your way, Miss Vance, for the remainder of my mortal span, if I can."

Through darkness, through falling rain, through driving rain, Isabel Vance hurried home. "For the last time," she said, between her locked teeth. "My old life ends to-night, my new life dawns to-morrow. Isabel Vance is dead and buried; a fierce and pitiless avenger shall rise in her place. From this hour, let all who have wronged me beware!"

She reached the house soaked to the skin. She ascended to her own room, but not to change her saturated garments. Deliberately she set to work. She drew forth her trunks, collected her clothes and valuables, packed them rapidly, wrote her name and address on cards, and tacked them securely on. Then she sat down by the table, dropped her head on her folded arms, and lay there as though she never cared to lift it again.

All night long she never moved. The rain beat and the wind blew; but the storm in her burning brain and bitter heart, raged more fiercely still. Morning came, and with the first pale glimmer of the new day she lifted her head, and showed a face so haggard and worn, eyes so wild and unearthly, that every trace of her bright beauty was gone.

Two hours later, Miss Rossiter, descending to breakfast, found Isabel despatching her trunks to the station, and she herself, in travelling array, waiting to follow. The haggard face and hollow eyes made Ellen Rossiter recoil with a cry of dismay.

"Going!" she exclaimed. "So soon!"

"The sooner the better. Good-by, Miss Rossiter. If ever it is in my power to repay the many good turns you have done me, believe me, I shall repay you with interest."

She turned and walked out of the house.

Ellen Rossiter looked out after her with a shudder.

"And if ever the arch-demon himself looked out of two human eyes," said Miss Rossiter, in a violent tremor, "he looked out of Isabel Vance's just now. That girl has some awful deed in her mind, or I'm no judge of faces."

CHAPTER III.

MISS AMY EARLE.

The July day had been intensely warm. All day long the London pavements had baked and blistered under the sun. Noise and war, rush and rattle over stony streets, under that blazing

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ky, since early morning, until one's head throbbed, and eyes and ears ached from uproar and glare.

As the temple clock pointed to five, George Wildair pushed away his chair from the table, where he had sat busily writing for the past three hours, and rose up with an impatient oath. It was in dingy little chambers where the young lawyer sat alone, and the ceaseless turmoil without was like the roar of the angry sea.

"Confound the luck!" growled George Wildair, with a savage frown. "Is this infernal treadmill life to go on forever? Drudge, drudge, slave, slave! Better to be born a blackamoor, bought and sold at once! From morning till night, week in and week out, the same horrible slavery for daily bread and salt, and all hope of the unendurable drudgery ending soon lost now. If that old spiteful cat had only made Isabel Vance her heiress, how different all might be. Life in that dazzling fairy-land, whose highways are all paved with gold, a handsome and stately wife, all the glory of the world might be mine. And now—and now——"

He looked round his dingy little den, with a wrathful glare on his handsome face, and flung the parchment in his hand fiercely to the other end of the room.

"I was never born for this life, and I'll not endure it much longer! Who is that, who says, 'All things are possible to the man who believes in himself?' There should be rich women in plenty, in these days of money-making and speculating, ready to exchange their yellow treasure for a young and handsome husband. Old or young, handsome or hideous, what does it matter, so that there is enough gold to gild the ugliness. By the way," he broke off, suddenly, "I wonder what became of poor Isabel!"

He walked to the grimy window, and gazed out moodily at the passers-by.

"No one has seen her; no one has heard of her; she has disappeared as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed her up. Poor Isa! I acted like a cold-blooded scoundrel to her, I dare say; and yet I don't know. I couldn't marry her; it was simply impossible. Bachelor pauperism, with a dry crust to-day in a dingy restaurant, and a *petit souper* to-morrow night at the Albion or the Criterion, is a very different thing

from matrimonial pauperism, with a sickly wife and crying children, and the cut direct from one's friends in Bohemia. No, no! It was better for Isabel, better for myself, to act as I did. Nothing but weary waiting could have come of continuing the engagement; nothing but misery from a marriage. And yet, Heaven knows, I loved that girl!"

Mr. Wildair put on his hat and coat, closed his door and walked out. He walked moodily along the crowded street for some way, then sprang into a passing 'bus, and rode up to Hyde Park. He was in the habit of going there evenings to kill time and smoke a dreamy cigar among the trees.

This bright July afternoon the drives and walks were crowded. Brilliant equipages flashed by, filled with fair faces; dashing equestrians pranced gayly after; well dressed men and women rambled through the cool paths, and loiterers reclined on the benches. Over all a sky of cloudless blue shone, and in the west the sun was setting in a gorgeous flame of splendor,

George Wildair leaned against a tree, smoking his cigar, and looking with lazy eyes at that splendid sunset. He was contrasting his own hard fate, bitterly and curiously, with that of those fortunate people in the gay carriages that rolled by, when a voice startled him out of his discontented reverie.

"Don't tell me that this is George Inglis Wildair, growing so big, and so brown, and so bearded, and all in ten years! Don't tell me so; because I used to know him when a great awkward hobbledehoy—and it isn't possible, you know!"

The voice was girlish and silvery, and the laugh which followed was sweet as a peal of musical bells. Mr. Wildair wheeled round, and stood staring blankly at the pretty speaker.

She sat in the daintiest of little phaetons, that was drawn by two spirited, cream-white horses. She looked the prettiest of fair-haired fairies in her bewitching carriage-costume. The blue eyes sparkled like stars, and enchanting dimples chased one another over the rosy, laughing face. By her side sat an elderly lady, as upright, and stiff, and prim as the virtue of Prudence embodied.

"He doesn't know me!" cried the little speaker with a second musical laugh. "See how he stares! I declare, if the horrid creature has not gone and forgotten me, in ten years, as completely, as though I had never existed. And we used to be so

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intimate—Damon and what's-his-name, and all that—brothers-in-arms, you know, Mrs. Sterling."

And then, like a flash, it all dawned upon George Wildair. Ten years ago—a little wax doll of a girl, with china-blue eyes, and tomboyish ways—six years younger than himself, and his pet, and *protegee*, and next door neighbor.

"Miss Amy Earle, surely!" he said, doffing his hat and coming up to the pony-carriage. "Can I believe my eyes? How stupid of me not to recognize you at once; for, except that you have grown taller, you are exactly the same as of old. This is a delightful surprise; I should as soon have thought of seeing the Empress Eugenie in the park."

Miss Earle laughed once more. She had glittering white teeth, and an exquisitely musical laugh, and evidently made the most of them both.

"I have been in London a month; and I have been looking for you ever since, and asking for you, but no one seemed to know anything about the matter. I thought you had got married, or turned Diogenes, and lived in a tub. Let me present you to Mrs. Sterling, my friend and chaperon, who has been tormented with me for the past three years, and is likely to be for three times three to come. My old friend and playmate, Mr. George Wildair, dear Mrs. Sterling."

Mrs. Sterling bowed stiffly, not relaxing into the faintest smile. But Mr. Wildair was not to be rebuffed.

"The name is a very familiar one. I knew a John Sterling once; he was my most intimate friend at college. He became a doctor and settled down in the country somewhere. Perhaps you know him?"

The frigid face of the elder lady brightened at once.

"John Sterling is my son," she said—"my only son. Now that you recall it, I do remember his speaking of you very often. I am glad to make your acquaintance, sir. My son's friends are always mine."

"How nice!" cried Miss Earle, with sparkling effusion. "It's exactly like a play, where everybody turns out to be the brother, or wife, or father of everybody else! Won't you take a seat, George? Oh! I beg pardon, I suppose I must say Mr. Wildair, now."

"If you do, I will never forgive you! Think it is the old days over again, and permit me to call you Amy."

He took a seat by her side, and the high-stepping ponies rattled off.

"And you have left the country for good, I suppose," he remarked, "and have pitched your tent in London permanently?"

"Oh, dear, no!" exclaimed the young lady. "I am only here a month, and don't intend to remain. We came on business—I've had a fortune left me. I have been living in Cumberland for the last three years."

George Wildair started violently, and turned very pale.

"What!" he said, "are you the Amy Earle to whom Miss Dorothy Hardendrook left her fortune?"

Miss Earle bowed and smiled radiantly. "I have that happiness! But, good gracious me! How aghast you look! If I had told you I had murdered somebody, you could not wear a paler or more horrified face; What's the matter? Did you know Miss Hardenbrook?"

"Slightly." He drew a long, hard breath of intense surprise.

"That is more than I ever did, then. But, if you knew her, you must have heard the name of the person to whom she left her wealth, I presume."

"I did," said Mr. Wildair, still struggling with his surprise. "but I never dreamed that Miss Amy Earle, of Cumberland, was the little Amy I knew in London. And you were Miss Hardenbrook's cousin?"

"So it appears, although I knew nothing of the matter—hardly ever heard her name, in fact, until she was good enough to make me her heiress. Isn't it romantic? But it wasn't altogether fair, either; for there was another young lady, a nearer relative, who lived with her, and who certainly had a better right to it than I."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; a Miss Vance. She was disinherited at the last moment, through some caprice of the old lady's. She has disappeared, it seems, and no one knows anything of her whereabouts. I have tried every means, advertised, and all, but I cannot find her."

Mr. Wildair was looking straight before him at the yellow light dying out of the western sky.

"And why do you wish to find her, pray?" he asked.

Miss Earle glanced at him in reproachful surprise.

"Can you ask? She had a much better right to this money than I. She was a nearer relative; she had lived with Miss Hardenbrook for years, and had been brought up to expect it all at her death. If Miss Hardenbrook chose to be unjust and whimsical at the last moment, that does not alter my obligation. John Sterling told me my duty plainly; he said I should be wrong, and cruel, and unjust, not to share with her—to give her half. I would, too, if I could find her."

"John Sterling was always a trifle Quixotic," said George, with his cynical laugh. "Very few people inheriting this fortune, would take this view of the case. However, it does you honor, Miss Earle."

"My son is not Quixotic, Mr. Wildair," said Mrs. Sterling, with cold asperity, "He is the most noble and high-minded of men."

Mr. Wildair bowed with his most cynical smile.

"Not a doubt of it," he thought. "It is so easy to be magnanimous and noble where other people's money is concerned." But, aloud, he blandly said: "Your pardon, madam—I should know that. But, in these days of selfishness, that kind of thing is very apt to be mistaken, by a very unappreciative world, for the wildest sort of Quixotism. And so you have failed in your search, Miss Earle, for this disinherited damsel—Miss, how do you call her?"

"Miss Isabel Vance; and so very handsome a damsel, Mr. George Wildair, that I don't think you would forget the name so easily if you saw her once. She was an actress before Miss Hardenbrook adopted her. Most probably she has returned to her old profession. It is odd she is not to be found; perhaps she has changed her name; but I dare say she will turn up promiscuously some day, as you did this afternoon. I searched for you, you know, and couldn't find find you."

Mr. Wildair bowed. "It is too much honor to be remembered all these years."

"Ah! no doubt; but you see I have a good memory for my old friends, particularly one I used to quarrel with every day. Look at that sunset sky—did you ever see anything more lovely?"

The steppers pranced gaily through the broad drives; the phaeton rolled as if on velvet; the luminous dusk of the delicious spring twilight hung over the earth like a veil of silver haze.

The young moon trembled on the verge of an opal-tinted sky ; and the noise of the city came far and faint.

George Wildair sat beside the fairy heiress, with the starry blue eyes and pale aureole of golden hair, like a man in a delightful dream. Bedridden Hassan, falling asleep at the gates of Damascus, and awakening in the princess' palace, with that royal beauty bending over him, could scarcely have been more delightfully dazed. An hour ago, alone and disconsolate, he had been cursing his fate, and lo ! with one touch of some magic wand, he sat in the princess' carriage, with the pretty princess herself chatting delicious nonsense familiarly by his side.

"And of course we shall expect to see you often—shall we not, Mrs. Sterling?" were the words that aroused him from his dream. "And to-night, if you drop into the Adelphi, I daresay you will see us there. It is my old pet play. 'The Lady of Lyons ;' old as the hills, you know, but ever new. That dear, sweet Claude Melnotte ! Oh, how I wish some delightfully handsome and learned and eloquent gardener's son would fall in love with me, and marry me, as dear Claude did Pauline ! It must be so nice to be loved like that, and have pale-faced heroes going mad for one's sake !"

"Amy, my dear !" rebuked Mrs. Sterling, in her most stately manner.

"It's not proper, is it, Mrs. Sterling? But then it's true, and I don't mind George ; we're such old friends, you know. And one likes to say what one thinks, sometimes."

"I can quite comprehend the possibility of going mad for Miss Amy Earle's sake," Mr. Wildair said, in a low tone—and the pretty little heiress shrugged her dainty shoulders.

"Oh, of course ! You couldn't help saying that, could you ? and then I'm rich ; and men have gone mad before now for less gold than my money-bags hold. I quite understand all that ; I've had scores of offers ; but to be loved as Claude Melnotte loved Miss Deschappelles, that's quite another thing, you understand. I shall look for you at the theatre to-night, Mr. Wildair."

George alighted at the corner of Fleet street, and the pony carriage rolled away. He went to his chambers and made a most elaborate toilet, and issued forth under the summer starlight, an irresistible Adonis, in a dress coat, and pale, tightly-fitting kids.

The first act was nearly over when Mr. Wildair strolled into the theatre, and swept the house with his *lorgnette*. Yes, there she was, so brightly pretty, that it was a pleasure only to look at her; the sparkling face, and the pale, rose-hued silk, and the pearls, and the waxen-white flowers she wore, all less fresh and exquisite than herself. Many glasses were levelled at their box, some at the great heiress, but more at the sweet, pure face, and dainty little statuesque head.

The curtain fell. Mr. Wildair made his way to the box, and was greeted with an enchanting smile. He took his stand behind Miss Earle's chair, and whispered sentimental small talk, under favor of the music, to his heart's content. And Miss Earle deigned to listen graciously to it all, and fluttered her fan, and played with her bouquet, and laughed, and sparkled, and was rather silly, if the truth must out; and Mrs. Sterling, dignified and frigid, looked on in chilling disapproval.

The play ended—Pauline was happy in the arms of her Claude, and Miss Earle was satisfied. Mr. Wildair gave her his arm to her carriage, and left her, with a promise to call upon the morrow, and with one of the waxy japonicas from her hair in his button-hole.

Miss Earle's dreams were usually bright, but they were unusually bright to-night; and Mrs. Sterling sat up into the small hours, writing to her son.

"He is a shallow, heartless fortune-hunter; and he will win her, and marry her and neglect her, and break her heart, poor, silly, frivolous child. Romance-reading is turning her brain. She is pretty and she is sweet, and innocent, and trustful as a child of three. It is a shame, it is a pity, and all your fault, you ungrateful, headstrong boy! Why didn't you marry her? You might, when we were at Blackwood, if you chose. But no, you would be Quixotic—Mr. George Wildair's cynical name, for it is the right one. 'She must see the world; she must know her own value; you would not entrap her confiding youth and innocence; you would not be called a fortune-hunter!' Ridiculous, romantic twaddle! She will marry this George Wildair, and be miserable all the rest of her life!"

George Wildair walked home through the misty moonlight with the air of a conqueror, and a smile of triumph on his face.

“How oddly things come about in this world, after all,” he soliloquized. “Who says the romance is all in three-volume novels, five-act melodramas? To think that I should become master of Dorothy Hardenbrook’s thousands, in spite of Dorothy Hardenbrook’s will!”

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE WEDDING EVE.

Through a long vista of gorgeous rooms, athwart the glitter of gas, and the gleam of jewels, and the wild, sweet music of a German waltz, Mr. Wildair went to meet his fairy princess. He had seen her several times since the night at the play, but he was now to meet her at a West-end party; a magnificent affair, where the *creme de la creme* of the West-end assembled in dazzling toilets, and where the young lawyer was almost unknown. “But any friend of dear Miss Earle’s,” quoth Mrs. Goldham, the giver of the feast, when asked for an invitation, “must needs be welcome;” and so Mr. Wildair received a card, and went in all the purple and fine linen the nobler sex dare don, and looked the handsomest man in the rooms.

Miss Amy Earle thought so as she glanced his way under cover of her fan, while flirting animatedly with the son of the house. She was looking wonderfully pretty herself—a very sea nymph, in pale green silk, under misty white, and with emeralds glimmering on the exquisite neck and arms. So enchantingly pretty, and so delightfully rich, what wonder if the bright little heiress was the triumphant queen of the night, ever surrounded by the handsomest and most eligible men of the room and receiving flattery enough to turn forever a dozen such silly little heads.

George Wildair’s heart sank all at once, as he watched her receiving her perpetual incense, as a princess might; and his high hopes suddenly fell.

“What if I should miss again?” he thought, with a sickening feeling of apprehension, “What chance has a poor fellow, such as I am, among those millionaires, and sons of millionaires? And yet little Amy isn’t the sort of girl to marry for money. She is of the sentimental kind, that elope with the coachman, and think love in a cottage the height of earthy bliss. What is

it the grand, old cardinal says in the play? 'In the vocabulary of great men there is no such word as fail!' Courage, *mon ami!* You'll win the heiress yet! Victory sits at my helm."

Mr. Wildair paid his respects to his hostess, and then sought out the belle of the ball. She received him with her brightest glance and most bewitching smile.

"Too late, monsieur," she said, gayly, in answer to his request for the honor of her hand. "Engaged for this waltz and for the redowa; but after that—there!"

She scribbled his name with a mite of a gold pencil, and flashed her ivory tablets in his eyes.

"You're to have a waltz and a quadrille, and you're to take me to supper. Our waltz, Captain Fraser? *Au revoir*, George."

She glided away, and the young man's heart throbbed high with hope.

"She calls me George, and she favors me as I see she favors none other here. If she is not the veriest coquette that ever flirted a fan, and made playthings of men's hearts, the game is already mine."

Mr. Wildair strolled through the rooms carelessly while waiting for his turn to be blessed. He didn't care to dance since he could not dance with her, so he watched the others, leaning idly against a pillar, and weaving rose-hued dreams of the golden future to come.

Miss Earle let her favored cavalier take her into supper, and sparkled more brightly than the champagne and Moselle. And after supper they had a waltz, the music whereof was as the music of the spheres, and they seemed to float, not on vulgar waxed floor, but on impalpable air. And George Wildair, with his arm encircling the taper waist, his eyes alight, his face radiantly handsome as the darling of the gods, whirled her out of the glaring ball-room into the green dusk and sylvan quiet of a cool conservatory. Far and faint, and unutterably sweet, came the music from the ball-room; soft and silvery floated in the bright moonlight through the open window; tinkling fountains plashed in their marble basins, watched over by pale goddesses and tropical plants, and tropical perfume transformed the place from the dull earth to the realms of fairy-land.

"Oh, how nice!" the little heiress cried. "Moonlight and music, flowers and fragrance, and fountains, and everything

charming ! I suppose it's vulgar and so on—as Mrs. Sterling says—to go off into raptures about things as I do, but I can't help it. She calls it gushing and ill-bred ; but I do love pretty things—music and flowers, and lovely dresses, and brilliant balls ; and I can't help saying so, let people think what they please. Life is one long, delightful dream, and I would not be any one else than Amy Earle, the heiress, for all the world. What do you think of me, after that confession, Mr. George Wildair ?”

“ If I only dared say what I think,” the young man murmured. “ But no—you would call me mad, presumptuous, and impertinent. I must not forget that it is not the little Amy of by-gone days, but Miss Earle, the heiress, I stand beside, and that I am a penniless lawyer, obliged to drudge for my daily bread.”

Miss Earle's blue eyes dropped, and the rosy light tinted the rounded cheeks. But it was not the flush of displeasure ; and her voice, timid and fluttering, had nothing of anger in it when she spoke.

“ You are unjust, Mr. Wildair. Amy Earle, the heiress, is in no way different from the Amy Earle of former days. I don't think I ever gave you grounds for that reproach.”

“ No,” he said, bitterly. “ You have been all generosity, all gracious condescension. But though you may stoop, I cannot presume.”

“ Gracious condescension ! What nonsense are you talking ? Do you want to make me angry, Mr. Wildair ?”

“ Oh, forgive me ! But if you can forget, in your great kindness, the difference between us, I cannot ; I cannot forget that you are Dorothy Hardenbrook's heiress, and that I am a penniless lawyer. I cannot forget that I love you, and that I am mad for my pains !”

“ George !”

“ Dearest Amy, my love, my darling, let me tell you all my madness now, then banish me forever from your bright presence, if you will. I loved you in those days long ago when you were no heiress, but my dear little playmate. Your image, pure and bright as those shining stars up yonder, has been with me ever since. And now when I meet you in your dazzling beauty, in your unutterable kindness, is it any wonder that the old love grows, even at first sight, too much for one heart to hold ? Amy,

Amy, see me at your feet, not daring to ask for your love, but to implore your forgiveness for telling you mine. Pardon my mad presumption, my love, my queen, and then banish me forever."

The eloquent voice died out; he knelt on one knee before her, his head bowed to receive his doom, his face divinely handsome in the pale moonlight. Amy's whole face flushed with rapture as she looked. This was love, this was devotion, this was the dream of her life! Claude Melnotte, raving mad for love of beautiful Pauline, could not have wooed more romantically than this! And he was so handsome, too, with the face of a Greek Apollo, and the tongue of a masculine siren! Miss Earle stretched out one tiny hand a-glitter with rings, and lifted her lover up.

"Rise, George; just think if anybody came in and caught you, you know. And, oh! please don't say such dreadful things! I—I don't want you to go away forever."

"Amy! Oh! for Heaven's sake, don't deceive me with false hopes now! Be merciful, and bid me go."

The pretty lips pouted.

"It seems to me you are very anxious to go, Mr. Wildair. Of course you must if you insist upon it; but mind, I didn't bid you."

"Amy!"

The ringed white hand fluttered out again and nestled into his.

"You great silly, George! to think that my foolish fortune could make any difference in me. Ah! don't go, George. I don't want you to leave me forever."

And then the pretty head, "summing over with curls," dropped on his shoulder, and George Wildair, half delirious with delight, clasped her in his arms, and held her there—a triumphant conqueror.

Miss Earle and Mr. Wildair were long in returning to the ball room; so long that people were smiling significantly, and whispering prophetically when they did return,

"See what radiant faces they wear!" some one said to Mrs. Sterling. "They 'tread on thrones' just now, instead of dull earth. No one ever looks like that except young ladies and gentlemen in the first ecstasy of engagement. My dear madam, your occupation, like Othello's, will soon be gone."

Mrs. Sterling frowned angrily. Yes, there was no mistaking the meaning of those rapturous faces. "He has reason to congratulate himself, no doubt," she thought, bitterly. "He has secured the heiress and her money; but she, poor, silly, sentimental child, she will pay a life-long penance for this mad folly. He is not a good man—he is selfish and false, and mean to the core of his heart. Heaven knows I love the child dearly, and would save her if I could; but one might as well talk to the wind that blows, and hope to change it, as to a romantic girl in love."

Mrs. Sterling was wise in her penetration. That night, or rather next morning, in the gray and dismal day dawn, when they reached home, Amy came peeping timidly into her room. The elder lady sat quietly disrobing herself for bed, very grave, very grim.

"Please may I come in?" the little girl said, falteringly.

Mrs. Sterling looked at her. How fresh, how sweet, how innocent, how young she was, in her fresh, dainty ball-dress, with that timid flush on her cheek, and that wistful, humid light in the starry eyes. All the mother's heart within her went out in infinite compassion to the orphaned heiress.

"Yes, my little one, come in, and tell me all about it. Ah, my Amy, do you think I am quite blind?"

Amy hid her hot face in the matronly lap.

"Dear Mrs. Sterling, how good you are! I didn't know how to tell you. Yes," very falteringly, "I am engaged."

"To George Wildair?"

"Yes, to George. Oh! you don't know how dearly he loves me—you don't know how bitterly he feels the difference between my wealth and his poverty. As if it mattered, you know, which of us had the money, so that we have it. If he had the throne of the universe he would lay it at my feet. And John—dear old John, he will be pleased, will he not, Mrs. Sterling? They were such old, old friends, George and he."

Mrs. Sterling smiled, then she sighed.

"I hope so, dear—poor John! But tell me, my child, do you love this man?—really love him, as a woman should love the man she is to marry?"

Miss Earle gave a hysterical little laugh, keeping her flushed face persistently hidden.

"Of course I do. Would I accept him else? He is so delight-

fully handsome, you know; and he waltzes divinely; and he talks like the hero of a novel. What more could any reasonable girl desire?"

Mrs. Sterling sighed heavily. She lifted the hidden face and kissed it tenderly.

"It is almost five o'clock, my pet, and high time you were in bed. Go, and may heaven bless you and make you happy!"

"You don't like poor George," Amy said, clinging round her. "Ah! how cruel that is, Mrs. Sterling, when you don't know any evil about him."

"Not any good, my poor Amy! But I will try and like him for your sake. Now go to bed and let me go. I'm not in love, you know, Amy, and I really should prefer a comfortable sleep to half a dozen young lawyers."

Mr. Wildair dutifully called in the course of the day, and had a long, delicious, lover-like talk with his Amy. And from that time forward all went on velvet. There was no hard-hearted father or flinty guardian to lash the smooth flow of love's tide to frenzy—Miss Earle was her own mistress. Mrs. Sterling might disapprove, but she had no authority to forbid the wooing.

The engagement was announced, and the young barrister was envied and hated by half the young men in London. Eclipsed belles lifted their drooping heads now; the heiress had retired from the ranks, and there was balm of Gilead for their bruised hearts once more.

July wore away. London became insupportable, of course, and Miss Earle fluttered away with the other butterflies to Scarborough. Mr. Wildair followed faithfully.

The marriage was fixed for October the fifth. There was to be a magnificent wedding, a gorgeous breakfast, and a trip to the Continent. The wedded pair would spend the winter and spring abroad, and return with the June roses to their London mansion.

September passed. October came. On the fourth of the month, the "night before the bridal," everything was ready. In the heiress' dressing-room lay spread out, in splendid array, the magnificent wedding-robe, the veil, the wreath, the orange blossoms. In the heiress' drawing-room Mr. Wildair sat, bending devotedly over her, and talking as men do talk on their wedding-eve. Both were radiantly happy and hopeful. No shadow of the awful doom hovering over them darkened that blissful hour.

It was late when Mr. Wildair departed. He lingered, lovingly clasping the little hands, and kissing the sweet, girlish face.

"Good-night," he said, "for the last time, my love, my darling, my bride!"

It was a cloudy, overcast night, the moon, pale and watery, the scudding clouds and raw wind threatening rain. George Wildair walked briskly away in the direction of his chambers. The cabs that rattled past him were filled with people from the theatres; he preferred the brisk walk to the crush and discomfort of an omnibus. He seemed to walk on air.

"At last!" he said, drawing a long breath; "at last wealth, and ease, and luxury, and every delight this world has to give, will be mine. At last, after bitter disappointment, after dismal drudgery, after dull despair—at last, in spite of Dorothy Harndenbrook!"

He stopped suddenly; like a flash came the memory of Isabel Vance. He had forgotten her as completely of late as though she had never existed. Now she arose before him as she had stood that night, long ago, when she had risked a fortune to meet him, pale and menacing.

"When I prove false to you, I pray God that I may die!"

He had uttered the terrible invocation himself, and solemn and awful came the memory of that stern "Amen!" which had responded. The cold drops started out on George Wildair's brow.

"Great Heaven!" he thought, "what a false, forsworn wretch I am! I deserve the doom I invoked; and if Isabel Vance is still living, Isabel Vance is just the woman to stab me to the heart for my perjury."

He was near the Temple. He had turned the corner of the street, and was searching in his pockets for his latch-key, when the figure of a man started out of the shadow of the houses and confronted him. The light of the lamp shone full upon George Wildair's face.

"To-morrow is your wedding-day, George Wildair," said a deep, stern voice; "but to-morrow's sun will surely rise on a widowed bride! Traitor! Perjurer! take your doom!"

The sharp report of a pistol rang out on the midnight air. Policeman X777, strolling leisurely along the next street, sprang his rattle and rushed for the spot.

Under the gas lamp a man lay extended, stiff, and cold, and still, the life-blood pumping out at every breath.

No living creature beside was to be seen along the whole length of the silent street.

X777 lifted up the wounded man. The dulled eyes turned upon the policeman's face, the dying tongue uttered one word :

“ Isabel !”

No more. The head fell back, one last convulsive throe, and George Wildair was a cold corpse.

CHAPTER V.

NEW HOPE MAY BLOOM.

“ I wonder if I shall see him to-night ?”

The August roses were all in scarlet bloom around that fair northern mansion, deep in the heart of the most beautiful part of that beautiful county, Cumberland. It stood quite alone, an imposing structure of red brick, buried in a wilderness of trees. So high, so dark, towered those oaks, and gloomy elms, and grand old firs, that the green gloom of the woods was duskily cool in the most blazing noontide. It had been called “ Fir-Tree Hollow” once upon a time ; but, when it passed into the hands of Miss Amy Earle, that romantic little lady had rechristened it immediately as “ Blackwood Grange.”

“ It is as isolated and lonely as poor, dear Mariana's ‘ Moated Grange,’” the young lady said. “ A murder might be done in the depth of yonder woodland by a second Eugene Aram, and no one be the wiser. It's a dear, delightful, dismal old place, and I mean to make it my permanent home.”

This sultry August evening Miss Earle stands alone at the drawing-room window, gazing out, with dreamy blue eyes, at the exquisite summer prospect. A velvet lawn, a brilliant flower-garden, with a splashing fountain, and bees and butterflies blooming in roses and lily-bells; swelling meadows, rich with golden harvest, and dense black slopes of woodland down to the shore of the Dove. A lovely prospect, in the hush of the summer sunset, the sky all pearl and azure, and in the far west a gorgeous oriflame of lurid glory.

The golden-haired heiress stood looking at this splendor of earth and sky, with eyes that saw nothing of its radiance. Very

pretty she was looking, in her summery-white muslin, with blush-roses in her breast, and the nimbus of amber hair rippling down to her slender little waist.

“I wonder if I shall see him this evening? He is always there in the twilight, playing. Oh, how he does play! No mortal hand ever made such heavenly music before!”

Yes, it had come to that. George Wildair was nearly a year in the cold grave, and another man was the “him” of Amy Earle’s thoughts this August sunset. She had been very sorry, unutterably shocked, at her betrothed’s tragic death; there had been womanly weeping and hysterics—but she had never loved the dead man with any very passionate devotion after all. The hysterics passed, and Mr. Wildair was buried, and Miss Earle retired into crape and bombazine and the seclusion of the great Cumberland mansion, and became a most hopeless prey to *ennui* and sensation novels. They had buried him, and no clew had been found to the mysterious and awful death; and now, scarce a year after, he was forgotten. He had been a selfish Sybarite all his life, and there were few to regret his tragic end.

Amy Earle had spent a very dreary winter. The snow had fallen thick and high around Blackwood Grange, and the wild winds had howled through the leafless trees. The roads were utterly impassable. Society became a memory of the past. Mrs. Sterling and her ward found life as hopelessly dull as ever did Mariana in her Grange. Their only visitor was the clergyman of St. Jude’s, and occasionally a flying visitation from John Sterling. Dr. John Sterling, with his cheery face and hearty voice, and loud, hearty laugh and genial good-humor, came like a sunburst in upon their darkness; and Amy grew to count the days of his absence drearily, and wish “dear old Jack” would only come and live with them for good. And Mrs. Sterling listened in secret exultation.

“All will come right in the end,” she thought. “She will marry John yet, and both will be happy. He loves her, I know, and she is learning every day to love him.”

But “man proposes——” You know the proverb. John Sterling himself dashed all these hopes to the ground.

It was a tempestuous March night; the wind howled and the snow fell, and the darkness was as the darkness of Erebus. The young doctor was plunging along the blockaded road from St.

Jude's, in fur cap and overcoat, and armed with a stout stick. He knew every step of the way, and no tempest that ever shrieked through the earth was fierce enough to keep him prisoner. He plunged along resolutely, with the sleet slashing in his face, and was within a quarter of a mile of Blackwood Grange, when a belated wayfarer started out from the shelter of a tree and faced him.

"I have lost my way," said a peculiarly clear and melodious voice. "I want to go to St. Jude's. I am almost perished—will you kindly direct me?"

John Sterling stopped and tried to see the man's face, but the darkness baffled him.

"It is three miles from here to St. Jude's—too far for any man on such a night. You had better come with me; I think I can insure you a supper and a bed."

"You are very good," the stranger answered. "I accept your offer with thanks, indeed, Dr. Sterling."

"Hallo!" cried John; "you know me, do you! By Jove! I wish you joy of your eyesight, for it would puzzle a cat to see in this gloom."

"I have heard your voice before," said his companion, quietly; "and I have a good memory for voices."

"And who are you, my friend!" inquired Dr. Sterling.

"My name is Victor Latour—the new organist of St. Jude's."

"Oh, indeed! I have seen you, then, and heard you play. Very happy to make your acquaintance, Mr. Latour, and I shall be happier when we get out of this confounded snow-storm. How came you belated so far from the village?"

"Miss Hotton, of Mount Hotton, is one of my pupils. I lingered over her lesson, rather late, and set out to return, despite the entreaties of the family. I think I should have paid for my folly by perishing in the snow-drifts, if I had not had the good fortune to encounter you. Your destination is Blackwood Grange, I presume?"

"It is, and I may safely promise you a cordial welcome on the part of its fair mistress."

"Hospitality is a paramount virtue among you here," said the organist. "I have seen Miss Earle at church."

"And a very pretty girl she is," said John Sterling, "and as good as she is pretty. She is devotedly fond of music, too, so

you have it in your power to make her very happy this evening."

No more was said. They reached the house, divested themselves of their hats and great-coats, stamped the snow from their top-boots, and were ushered by a fair damsel into a pretty amber drawing-room.

Mrs. Sterling sat before the fire knitting, Miss Earle on a lounge yawning over a book. Even sensation novels, when one has had a surfeit of them, will pall upon the youthful intellect. Both started up eagerly to welcome Dr. John.

"How do, mother? How do, Amy? Horrid weather, isn't it? Allow me to present Mr. Victor Latour, the new organist of St. Jude's. I found him like one of the babes in the wood, nearly buried alive, and rescued him from an untimely end, like the good Samaritan that I am."

Mr. Latour bowed to the ladies with easy grace, took a seat, and was at home at once. Miss Earle stole a second glance at him under her eyelashes. How very handsome he was! Dark and pale, and interesting—just Miss Earle's style, with raven hair and mustache, and slow, sleepy, wonderful black eyes.

"If he had a Greek cap and a crimson sash, and a scimitar by his side, he would look like a Corsair," Amy thought. "I never saw a more perfect nose; and I always did admire those creamy complexions. Victor Latour! Such a dear, romantic name, too! I really think he is the handsomest man I ever saw."

Supper came in—a supper for Sybarites or the gods. Mr. Latour was delightful; he talked with an easy grace, and a general knowledge of everything under the sun. Miss Earle listened entranced. The slow, sleepy black eyes wandered very often to the pretty, rose-hued face, thrilling her through with mesmeric power. It was the hero of her dreams at last—Count Lara in the flesh.

Mr. Latour played. The superb piano, under those slender, white fingers, gave forth grand, grateful tones—the room was filled with heavenly melody. Mr. Latour had the soul of a Beethoven or Mozart, and the magnificent strains held his hearers entranced for hours. It was a charming evening, one to be remembered long after; and before it was over Miss Amy Earle was deeply, and romantically, and hopelessly in love.

She sat up late that night, quite into the small hours, nestling

over the fire, listening to the wild beating of the wintry storm, and dreaming delicious dreams.

"How divinely handsome he is! How magnificently he plays! How beautifully he talks!" So ran the burden of her thoughts. "I never saw such eyes, and I never heard a prettier name. How glad I am John Sterling brought him here to-night."

That was the beginning of the end. Mr. Latour departed next day, but only to come again and again to Blackwood Grange. Miss Earle was seized with a sudden passion for improving herself in music, and began taking lessons immediately. March, April, May flew by like swift dreams. Summer came, golden, glowing—the most glorious summer in Amy's life. She was in love—passionately, ridiculously; a romantic girl's first love—and the world was Eden, and she the happiest Eve that ever danced in the sunshine.

And Victor Latour—was he in love, too, with the bright little heiress? Mr. Latour was a puzzle and a mystery. There were times when no lover could be more lover-like, more devoted, when smiles lit up the dark, creamy face, and every look was love. Then Amy's bliss was complete.

"He loves me, I know," her foolish heart would flutter. "He will propose the very next time we meet. Oh, my darling, if you only knew how much I love you!"

The next time would come, and lo! Mr. Latour came with it, dark, cold, moody, wrapped in gloom and mystery—grim and unsmiling as doom. Amy trembled before those sombre, black eyes. He was more like the Corsair, perhaps, than ever. But poor Amy began to think that moody and mysterious beings were pleasanter in Lord Byron's poem than in actual life.

"I wonder if he ever committed a murder, like Eugene Aram; or lost an idolized Medora, as Conrad did?" Miss Earle thought. "Oh! why doesn't he speak out, when he knows,—he must know—I adore him?"

This sultry August evening she stood wistfully gazing at the sunset, and thinking despondently of her idol.

"He was positively rude to me last evening," Miss Earle reflected. "Mr. Rochester was never more grumpy to Jane Eyre. I wonder if I shall see him to-night? He is always playing the organ in the church at this hour. I think I'll take a walk up to the village."

She took her hat and tripped away, walking swiftly considering the heat. Blackwood lay behind her; she was out in the dusty high-road alone, under the opal-tinted sky. No, not alone! Her heart gave a great plunge. There, coming toward her, was the solemn figure she knew so well. That slow, graceful walk—ah! further off, she would have known her handsome lover!

Mr. Latour was in his brightest mood this sultry twilight. He drew Amy's arm through his own, as one who had the right, bending his stately head over her, and mesmerizing her with the witchery of those glorious, black eyes. Very slowly they sauntered along. Amy was in no hurry now—she had got all she wanted.

John Sterling had chosen this evening to pay a visit to his mother and her ward. Half an hour after, he strode over the dusty highway, whistling cheerily, and looking up at the round, white August moon. He had entered Blackwood, and was approaching the house at a rapid pace, when he suddenly stopped,

There, before him, walking as lovers walk, bending, whispering, loitering, were two forms he knew well. All flashed upon him at the sight.

"Lost!" he said, turning very pale. "Lost, for the second time! My mother was right—I have lingered too long! And I love her as that man never can!"

CHAPTER VI.

AMY'S WEDDING DAY.

Mr. Latour did not enter the house with Amy. He parted with her under the waving trees, with a long, lingering, lover's kiss. Dr. Sterling and he met face to face in the silvery moonlight. He touched his hat and passed rapidly on, but not before John had seen his face. How deathly pale he was! what a wild gleam there was in his weird black eyes! The light of those spectral eyes made the young doctor recoil.

"Good heaven!" he thought, "he looks now like the Miltonian Lucifer with that livid face, those flaming eyes, and that dark, demoniac beauty. Who is he? What is he? He is not a good man; we know no more of him than if he had dropped from the moon, although he has been among us half a year. And that

romantic child is ready to die, or go mad for his sake. My friend Latour, I think I'll turn amateur detective, and hunt up your antecedents."

Dr. John met with rather a cool reception, on this particular evening, at the hospitable mansion. Mrs. Sterling was decidedly cross and out of sorts; perhaps she suspected, or had seen the parting embrace under the hemlocks. She had no patience with her son's tardiness and delicate scruples of conscience about marrying heiresses. And Miss Earle, wrapped in bliss too intense for smiles or words, sat by the window, and gazed on the bright, silvery moonlight.

Dr. Sterling departed early, with a farewell reproach to the ladies.

"You are both so entertaining this evening that it is hard to tear one's self away; but I have an interesting case up in the village, and business before pleasure, you know. Good-by, and I trust the next time I come to Blackwood you'll be able to make a remark about the weather, at least."

"We are rather silent to-night," she said.

"A penny for your thoughts, *ma mere*."

"I can read your thoughts without a penny, retorted the elder lady, with some asperity. "Victor Latour, of course! Where were you this evening, Miss Earle?"

Miss Earle blushed celestially in the shimmering dusk.

"Up at the village."

"It appears to me you are very fond of twilight rambles up to the village of late. Mr. Latour was with you, of course?"

"Yes," very falteringly. "Mr. Latour was with me."

"And parted with you out yonder with a most affectionate embrace! You don't choose to make me your confidant, Miss Earle; but if you want to kiss gentlemen, *sub rosa*, pray take a more retired spot than the avenue."

Amy's golden head had dropped lower. She was a timid, clinging little creature, in whose nature it was not to be haughty or angry. She was very fond of this severe matron; and the starry blue eyes filled with tears now.

"Dear Mrs. Sterling, she said, "my second mother, don't be angry with poor Amy. I couldn't help it. I—I—love him, I love him—oh, so dearly!"

"And he!" said Mrs. Sterling bitterly. "Is it you or your

fortune he loves? Oh! Amy Earle! You foolish, sentimental child, what madness is this? This man does not love you; but he will marry you, and will break your heart."

"No, no, no!" Amy cried shrilly. "Ho loves me—he is true as heaven! Say what you please to me, Mrs. Sterling, but not one word against him! I will not hear it!"

The little head reared itself, the blue eyes quite flashed.

"No!" cried the angry matron; "you will not hear it; no need to tell me that! I know what it is to talk to a girl in love. but tell me, what do you know of this man beyond his romantic name, beyond his effeminate, handsome face? What! you will marry him for his black eyes, and his Grecian nose, and his sensation-novel name; and if he turns out to be a London pick-pocket or gambler, you will have no right to complain."

"Mrs. Sterling!"

"I repeat it, Amy—what do you know of him? He may be a thief or a murderer, for what you can tell to the contrary. My own opinion is, he has come here purposely to entrap you into this mad marriage. Pray, Miss Earle, when is it to take place?"

The blue eyes flashed defiance for the first time in Amy's gentle life, the slender little form quite towered in its indignation.

"I don't know, Mrs. Sterling; but very soon. Victor loves me and there is no need to wait. I will marry him as soon as he pleases."

"Not a doubt of it! I wish you joy of your bargain! I have no no more to say; but remember in the future that I have warned you. He is not a good man; there is guilt and mystery in his life; I am as certain of it as that I live. As his wife, your existence will be one of misery—destitution, perhaps, when he has squandered what he marries you for—your fortune. I wish you good-night."

Mrs. Sterling swept stormily out of the room, yet "more in sorrow than in anger." And Amy, left alone, threw herself on a sofa, and, all unused to these stormy scenes, wept as she had never wept before in her life.

"How cruel, how unjust she is!" the little heiress sobbed; "and all because she wants me to marry John. I know she does; though John doesn't want me, nor I him. But she shall

not shake my faith in Victor ; no one on earth shall shake it. And I will marry him as soon as he likes ; and I don't care whether he ever tells me anything about his own antecedents or not."

The elder and younger lady met very coolly at breakfast. Mrs. Sterling was sullenly dignified and Amy was offended. Had she not called her idol a thief and a pickpocket ? Miss Earle could forgive the grossest insult to herself, but not an insult to her dark-eyed hero.

Mr. Latour called early in the forenoon. Amy was on the watch, and met him in the grounds. There was a lone, long ramble through the sunlit, leafy arcades, and Miss Earle, after the fashion of young ladies, retailed every word of last night's conversation. Mr. Latour's black brows contracted in a swarth frown, and his dark face whitened with anger.

"Mr. Sterling calls me a thief or a murderer, does she ? Really, Amy, your elderly dragon is of a horribly suspicious turn, isn't she ? Is it for your sake or for her son's, I wonder ?"

"Mrs. Sterling has always been very good to me, Victor Latour," Amy said, deprecatingly ; "and I am sure she has my welfare at heart. And you see, dear, we *don't* know anything of you except your name, and—and that I love you with all my heart."

The frown deepened under the broad brim of his summer hat.

"And you are a little suspicious, too, my Amy. You must have my biography from the hour of my birth, I presume, before you commit yourself further. And if the history proves unsatisfactory, it is not too late to draw back yet, is it ?"

"Victor, how unjust you are ! No, tell me nothing, since you can doubt me ; tell me nothing, and you will see how perfect love casteth out fear."

"And you will marry me blindfolded ? take me as I am ?"

He looked laughing down in her face with a bright look, all the clouds gone.

"My darling !" she clasped his arm rapturously with both hands, and looked up into his handsome face. "I know that I love you dearly, dearly—that I would die for your sake. What more do I need to know ?"

"What indeed, my little enthusiast ? Nevertheless, I had better make a clean breast of it, for Mrs. Sterling's peace of mind.

Unfortunately, there is very little to tell, and that little not in the least out of the ordinary humdrum way. I never was a pick-pocket. never a blackleg ; I can safely say that. I am of French extraction, born in Canada, taught music as a profession. Came over to this country, and, through friends, was recommended here as organist. There you have it ; let Mrs. Sterling and her son make the most of it."

Amy was satisfied—it was a little vague, but it sufficed for her. Their ramble through the grounds was a very long one, and before it came to an end the wedding day was fixed.

"The middle of September is very soon," Amy murmured, deprecatingly ; "but anything to please you, Victor ; and Mrs. Sterling is disagreeable of late. Won't you come in to luncheon ?"

"Not to-day. Tell your duenna by yourself, and I will ride over this evening, and see if the shock has proved fatal. Good-by, my own. Soon good-by will be an unknown word between us."

Mrs. Sterling heard the news of the approaching marriage with cold scorn.

"As well this moment as the next," she said, frigidly, "since it is to be at all. I wash my hands of the whole business."

All the glittering array of bridal finery, procured in London for that other wedding, lay packed up stairs in great boxes still. Amy revolted a little from using it. The odor of death and the grave seemed to hang around it ; but the time was so short there was no alternative. Glistening robe, misty veil, orange wreath, jeweled fan, dainty Parisian gloves and slippers, saw the light once more ; and the summer days flew by, and brought around Amy Earle's second bridal-eve.

The September afternoon had been lowering and overcast. Sullen clouds darkened the summer sky ; an ominous hush lay over the earth ; the trees shivered in the stillness with the prescience of the coming storm. Through the ominous twilight Victor Latour rode over from the village to spend his bridal-eve with his bride.

How white he was—white to the lips ! and what a strange fire that was burning duskiy in his great, sombre eyes. What an unnatural expression his face wore when he looked at his fair bride elect. Surely never bridegroom looked like that in the world before.

"We are going to have a storm," he said, in a voice as unnatural as his face. "Lightning, and thunder, and rain will usher in our wedding-day, Amy."

They were alone together in the pretty amber drawing-room. Mrs. Sterling always swept away haughtily when the man she disliked entered. Amy looked up at her lover, trembling with vague terror.

"How strangely you look, Victor!" she faltered. "What is it?"

Mr. Latour tried to laugh, but the laugh was a miserable failure.

"The weather, I suppose. Thunder-storms always give me the horrors; and superstitious people would call it an evil omen on our bridal-eve. But we are not superstitious, my Amy; so draw the curtains and light the lamp, and let the avenging elements have their fling."

Mr. Latour lingered until past ten, listening to the music of his obedient little slave. He stood behind her chair; she could not see him; and it was well for her she could not. The rigid, white face—white to ghastliness; those burning black eyes; Lucifer hurled from Heaven might have looked like that.

Amy accompanied her lover to the portico. The storm had not yet burst, but the night was inky dark. The darkness, or the thought of that other tragic wedding-eve, made her tremble from head to foot as she bade her betrothed good-by.

"Oh, my love, be careful," she whispered. "If anything happens to you I shall die."

"Nothing will happen!" He set his teeth fiercely in the darkness. "I defy Fate itself to separate us two. Good-night, my Amy; look your prettiest to-morrow, my sweet, fairy bride."

The storm broke at midnight. The lightning flashed the thunder rolled, the rain fell in torrents. Amy, cowering and frightened, huddled under the bed-clothes in an agony of terror, and longed unutterably for morning and sunshine.

Morning came, but no sunshine. The sky was still of lead, the rain still fell sullenly, ceaselessly. The hours wore on; ten, the time for the ceremony, arrived; the guests were assembled, shivering in the parlor. The bride, lovely in her bridal robes, stood ready and waiting in the midst of her bride-maids; but the hour had struck before the bridegroom came.

He came. The fate that had struck down George Wildair spared Victor Latour. He was there, pale as a dead man, with a look in his wild eyes that made people recoil in terror; but there he was, and the ceremony went on.

It was over—Amy was a bride. There was embracing and congratulating. Breakfast was eaten; the wedding-dress was changed for the traveling-suit; the happy pair were in the carriage and away.

They reached London that evening, and drove to the Grosvenor Hotel. And all through that day's journey Victor Latour's lips had not opened half a dozen times. Silent, sullen, moody mysterious, he sat wrapped in gloom; and the light of his weird black eyes made Amy shiver like an aspen leaf. Oh! what was this that had come upon him on his wedding-day?

"I have something to tell you, Amy. A secret to tell you—a terrible secret, that you must swear to keep."

They were alone in a spacious chamber, and these were the first words he had spoken to her. His face looked livid in the gaslight, his eyes were blazing like coals of fire.

"Victor!"

"You must swear, Amy! Never, to your dying day, must you breathe to a living mortal the secret I shall reveal to you now. Here is a Bible, lay your hand upon it and swear."

The spectral black eyes held her with their horrible, irresistible light. She could no more have refused than she could have fallen at his feet and died. She laid her hand upon the sacred volume, and repeated after him a terrible oath of secrecy.

"And now listen to the secret of my life."

There was a secret then. Even in this supreme moment the old leaven of romance thrilled Amy with a little tremor of romantic delight. She sat down at his feet, and listened to the few slowly-spoken words that he uttered.

Ten minutes later Mr. Latour left the room hurriedly, ringing the bell as he left. He met a chamber maid on the landing, hastening to answer the summons.

"My wife is ill," he said. "You had better try cold water and sal volatile; I am afraid she is going to faint."

He hurried away. The girl looked after him aghast; then opened the chamber door, and entered. And there, in a white heap on the carpet, lay the bride, in a swoon.

CHAPTER VII.

POST-NUPTIAL BLISS.

The waving trees around Blackwood Grange were arrayed in the sere and yellow leaf long before Mr. and Mrs. Latour returned from their bridal tour. The chill winds of October had blown themselves bleakly out in the green glades and leafy arcades around that stately mansion; and the ides of November had come when the happy pair returned home.

During the two months of her absence, Mrs. Latour, for the first time in her life, proved herself a bad correspondent. She had written but one letter, and that of the briefest and brusquest, to Mrs. Sterling. It was a polite notice to quit.

“Dear Mrs. Sterling,” the bride wrote, “my husband thinks newly-married people are always better entirely by themselves. I shall regret your loss, but of course it must be as he says, Nurse Carry is quite competent; tell her to take charge and have everything prepared for our arrival. We shall return by the middle of November.”

Mrs. Sterling smiled bitterly over this effusion.

“You might have spared yourself the trouble of ordering me out, Mr. Victor Latour, if that be your name. I would not have dwelt under the same roof with you for a kingdom. Oh, my poor little Amy! You are the veriest puppet that ever danced helplessly in its master’s hand.”

Mrs. Sterling departed to St. Jude’s, and took up her abode in the bachelor apartments of her son. There came no more letters, and Amy had always been addicted to note-scribbling.

“But what can you expect,” said Mrs. Sterling, with a bitter laugh, “wrapped as she is in post-nuptial bliss? The scheme of the universe holds but Mr. Victor Latour just at present. It is to be hoped the illusion will have worn off before her return.”

“It is to be hoped the illusion will never wear off,” said John Sterling, gravely, “if the illusion makes her happier. Don’t be so bitter, mother; the poor little girl will pay dearly enough for her folly, I dare say. Heaven knows! I wish I could save her.”

His mother looked at him almost contemptuously.

“I don’t believe you ever loved her, John Sterling.”

“That is your mistake, my good mother. I love Amy so well that if I could see her happy, with the husband of her choice, I

should be almost happy myself. You love her mother, and so do I, but in a different way, I think."

The November day that brought the bridal pair came swiftly round. The house was all in order; fires burned in every room; the dinner table was spread, and the servants, in gala attire, were waiting to welcome their young mistress home.

The short November afternoon was darkening down into a cold, raw twilight, when the carriage came rattling up the avenue. It had been a dull day, threatening snow; a few flakes had fluttered now through the opaque air, and the wailing wind was desolation itself. In the cold, bleak gloaming the little bride's teeth chattered as her husband handed her out, and her face looked woefully pallid, as she passed in, leaning upon his arm. Mr. Latour looked much the same—dark, and cold, and sombre, and wrapped in his dignified gloom, as in a toga.

Mr. and Mrs. Latour dined *tete a-tete*, waited upon by Nurse Carry and her understrappers. The bride scarce touched the tempting viands; but Mr. Latour ate and drank with the relish of a hungry traveler.

The quiet little village of St. Jude was on the *qui vive* the following Sunday to see the happy pair at church. Mr. Latour had resigned his office of organist, of course; and he and his bride walked up the aisle, the cynosure of scores of eyes. Mrs. Latour shone resplendent in all the glory of London millinery; her dress was exquisite, her mantle a miracle, her bonnet a perfect love, but—St. Jude stared with all its eyes. What was the matter with Amy? The Christmas snow-drifts were not whiter nor colder than her face. Those gay, smiling blue eyes, once so sparkling and starry, looked out of that pallid face with a fixed look of unutterable fear; she stood before them the wan shadow of the radiant little Amy of ten months ago.

"She has awakened," said Mrs. Sterling, with a momentary thrill of spirit, notwithstanding her compassion. "The delusion is over; her idol of gold has turned out potter's clay."

Dr. John looked at the altered face of the girl he had loved; then at the dark, impenetrable face of the man beside her, and his heart hardened.

"He is a greater villain than even I gave him credit for," he said. "He begins the work of breaking her heart betimes. I would have spared him for her sake if I saw he made her happy; now I will hunt him down as I would a dog."

The numerous friends of Miss Amy Earle began at once to call upon Mrs. Latour. Mrs. Latour received them in her spacious parlors, exquisitely dressed; and Mr. Latour was there to assist her. Call when they might, the ladies of St. Jude could never find her alone. Near her, bending over her chair, the dark, handsome face and fathomless black eyes of Victor Latour shone, freezing every attempt at confidential conversation. He was scrupulously polite, but these ladies went away with no courteous request to repeat their calls. And Amy sat like a white automaton, and talked in monosyllables; she, who had been the most inveterate of chatter-boxes, now looked up at her husband with the wild, wide eyes of a frightened child.

Mrs. Sterling and her son were among Mrs. Latour's callers. The lady was too strong minded, and too fond of her charge to be frightened away by the bridegroom's black looks.

"I'll go there now, and I'll go there again, and still again," she said, grimly. "I don't think Mr. Victor Latour will open the door and order me out, and nothing less shall affront me. I'm not going to give up my poor little girl altogether, to be eaten alive by this black-eyed ghoul."

The scared face and scared blue eyes of the little bride lit eagerly up, for the first time, at sight of her old friends. She sprang up to meet them with a low cry, but a hand fell lightly on her shoulder from behind. Its touch was light as down, but a mailed grasp could not have checked her quicker.

"My dear Amy," the soft voice of Victor Latour murmured, "pray, don't excite yourself; be calm! You are glad to see Mrs. Sterling, no doubt. Tell her so, by all means; but don't make a scene."

The black eyes looked down into the blue eyes, and the bride cowered before the bridegroom, as a whipped hound before its master. She held out her hand to her old friends, with a few very coldly murmured words of greeting.

The interview was short, and eminently unsatisfactory. Strong-minded as Mrs. Sterling was, conversation was impossible with that frigid face, and those weird, dark eyes staring her out of countenance behind Amy's chair.

"I shall call and see you again, Amy," she said, pointedly, as she arose to go, "when the honey-moon ends, and there is a prospect of being able to see you alone."

Amy looked at her with a startled face, but Mr. Latour answered for her with a short, mocking laugh,

"Tell your kind old friend, Amy, that our honey-moon has not yet commenced. As to seeing you alone, tell her you have no secrets from your husband, nor he from you, and that he really cannot separate himself long enough from his charming bride, even for a confidential gossip with Mrs. Sterling."

He bowed her blandly out as he spoke; and, wonderful to relate, Mrs. Sterling went without a word. She looked up into his face defiantly, but the black eyes had met her with so strange a light in their sinister depths that she absolutely quailed before it.

"He looked like a demon!" she burst out, to her son. "The light of those fierce, black eyes was absolutely horrible. Good Heavens! I don't believe the wretch is human!"

"He is a bad man," answered Dr. Sterling, "and a mysterious man. There are dark and deadly secrets in his life I am sure. There is a look in his face that repels me with absolute horror, at times. I have doubted——" then he paused.

"Doubted what?"

"It is a terrible suspicion, mother; but I have doubted whether Victor Latour is really sane. There is a wild, unnatural light in those great black eyes of his, on occasions, that never shines in the eyes of a sane man."

"There appears to be method in his madness at all events," retorted his mother, "He was sane enough to secure for himself the little heiress."

"The subtle cunning of partial insanity is a very good substitute for a sane man's worldly wisdom. But it is a revolting subject, mother,—let us drop it. Poor little Amy!"

"Poor little Amy, indeed! You may thank yourself for it. The game was in your own hands before this man came along. She might have been your wife now, instead of Victor Latour's, if you liked." Dr. Sterling made no reply. His face wore a look of pain, almost remorse. Poor little Amy! How unhappy she looked! And he had loved her, and might have made her his happy wife.

There was a round of dinner-parties given in honor of the bridal pair, and Dr. Sterling and his mother often met Mr. and Mrs. Latour in society—Mr. Latour always dark, cold, politely

frigid and impenetrable, as if that handsome face of his were an iron mask; and Mrs. Latour always the same pale, scared, silent shadow. And last of all there was a grand party at Blackwood Grange, to wind up these entertainments—a very superb affair, indeed; and, after that, society saw little of the newly married couple. Further invitations they declined—Mrs. Latour's health, Mr. Latour said, precluded the possibility of gay society.

December came with high winds and snow, and Amy ceased to appear even at church. Mrs. Sterling grew seriously uneasy, and rode over to Blackwood. Mr. Latour met her in the hall, and told her his wife was suffering from a chronic headache, and could see no one; and absolutely froze the blood in her veins with the glare of his back eyes—and, cowed and conquered, Mrs. Sterling left to call no more.

Christmas came, and the New Year came, with their festivities. It was Christmas Eve, and Mrs. Sterling sat alone in her little parlor, waiting for her son. Outside, the snow fell thick and fast, and the winter wind wailed. Inside, firelight and lamp-light, and a bright little supper-table, made a charming picture of home-like comfort.

The door-bell rang. "John at last," said Mrs. Sterling, and rising, she opened the door.

But it was not John. A little figure, up from the storm, glided in. It threw back the hood of its cloak, and Mrs. Sterling dropped into a chair, with a shriek.

"Amy!"

Yes, Amy; but so unlike herself, so like a spirit, that for an instant the matron recoiled.

"Have I frightened you?" said the sweet voice. "You did not expect a visit from me, did you? But it is so long, oh! so long, since I saw you, that I could not resist the temptation."

"And Mr. Latour?" Mrs. Sterling gasped, "where is he?"

"Gone to meet the captains at the Citadel; I mean to dine at Major Mallory's; and I took advantage of his absence, and stole out. I have but a moment to stay; I don't wish him to discover this visit."

"He plays the tyrant well!" said Mrs. Sterling, bitterly. "And you the submissive slave. Oh, Amy Earle! pluck up a little spirit—defy him! Don't let him trample you under his feet!"

Amy covered her face with both hands, and burst out crying convulsively.

"You don't know! You don't know! And I dare not tell you! Oh, Mrs. Sterling, I wish I were dead."

"Amy, for Heaven's sake, tell me! What is the secret of this man's power over you? Something more than a wife's fear of a cruel husband. Tell me; it is not too late to save you yet."

"Too late! too late! too late!" cried Amy, wringing her hands. "I have sworn, and I dare not break my oath. His wife? I am no wife! Oh! what am I saying. I must go, Mrs. Sterling. I shall betray myself. I have seen you for a moment—that is all I wanted. Good-by! Good-by!"

She rushed from the room like one insane. Mrs. Sterling followed in a panic of fright.

"Amy! Amy! for Heaven's sake, come back! You will perish in the storm!"

But there was no reply. The little figure had fluttered away into the chill blast, and there was nothing to be seen but the black night, that was falling, falling.

CHAPTER VIII.

ELLEN ROSSITER'S LETTER.

Facing the falling snow and the bitter blast, with the sturdy defiance of strong, young manhood, Dr. John Sterling plunged his homeward way through the drifts, whistling cheerily a Christmas anthem. The red light from the curtained windows of his home flared out brightly athwart the fluttering flakes.

"No place like home," thought Dr. John, "particularly on a stormy winter night, and after a hard day's work. I hope none of my patients will be so unreasonable as to call me out again in this tempest. My good mother has about given me up for lost, I dare say."

He opened the door with his latch-key, and stamped the snow off his boots and overcoat. The parlor door opened, and his mother's pale and anxious face looked out.

"You, John? How late you are! You must be nearly frozen and famished."

"Both, mother; and ready to do wonders among your Christmas dainties. But what's the matter? Have you seen a ghost, that you wear that scared face?"

"Something very much like it, John," his mother said, gravely; "come in. Oh, you will do as you are! Sit down here and get warm. Did you meet any one on your way coming home?"

"Did I meet any one! And this Christmas eve! There's a question! Did I meet whom, mother?"

"Amy Earle."

"Mrs. Latour? My dear mother, what would bring an invalid out on such a night?"

"Misery—madness, perhaps. She has been here."

"Mother!"

"It is quite true; she left not a quarter of an hour ago. She came like a ghost and vanished like one."

"Alone?"

"Alone, and on foot. Was ever such madness heard of? The tyrant was away, for a wonder, dining at Major Mallory's, and the imprisoned slave broke her bars and came here."

"Good Heaves! on such a night! It is enough, with her constitution, to give her her death."

"I don't think that we need to lament that, if it be so. Death is sometimes a merciful relief. I would rather see her at rest in her coffin than that villain's wife."

"Mother, you exaggerate, I think. What brought her here? What did she say?"

"Nothing that I can repeat—all was incoherent and wild. She wished she was dead; it was too late for mutual help; she was not his wife; she had sworn to keep his secret and dare not break her oath. And then she broke out with a wild storm of hysterical sobbing, and said she would betray herself if she lingered longer, and rushed out of the house like a mad thing. I followed, but she was already out of sight. John, I think misery is turning her brain."

"Heaven forbid!" said her son. He had turned very pale, and sat looking into the glowing coals. "Mother, I must go over to Blackwood Grange to-night."

"Impossible, John, in this storm."

"The storm will not hurt me, mother! and I would brave ten thousand such storms for poor Amy's sake. How do we know

what may have befallen her on such a night. I will go now at once."

"Not until after supper," said his mother, resolutely. "I will not hear of it, John. Here, draw up your chair; it is quite ready, and quite spoiled by waiting."

Dr. Sterling obeyed. He had been hungry enough a moment before; but now he manched his toast and drank his tea mechanically. Pale and moody he sat. What if that little pale creature had never reached home? What if they should find her white and cold, among the pitiless snow-drifts? He pushed away his cup and plate, and arose.

"Already?" said Mrs. Sterling, reproachfully; "and you said you were hungry."

"I cannot eat, mother. Good Heavens! she may be lying frozen to death by the way-side, while I loiter here. Poor child! Poor Amy! I wish Victor Latour had frozen to an icicle in the winter's storm, the night I first brought him to Blackwood Grange."

He seized his overcoat savagely, and put it on. Thrusting his hands into his pockets, in search of his fur glove, he brought forth a letter.

"Hollo! I quite forgot this. A letter for you, mother."

He threw the letter in her lap. Mrs. Sterling eyed the superscription in somewhat great surprise.

"A woman's hand, and an unknown one to me. Post-marked Framlingham. Why, John, that is the Lancashire village where Miss Dorothy Hardenbrook died. Whom can it be from?"

"You had better open it, and see."

Mrs. Sterling opened the envelope, and drew forth a closely-written sheet. As she unfolded it a card fell out upon the carpet. Her son stooped and picked it up.

"A *carte de visite*! It can't be a love letter with the gentleman's picture inclosed therein. Why——"

He stopped and stared. The picture was not a gentleman's. It was a vignette; the dark face of a young girl of more than common beauty. Two great, dark eyes lit up a handsome gipsy face—a bold, bright, dauntless face that could not fail to impress.

But it was not the beauty of that pictured face that held Dr. John spell-bound. It was its unaccountable familiarity. It was

as familiar to him, that gipsy face, as his own in the glass, and yet he could not place it.

"Where have I seen this woman?" he thought. "It is a face not easily forgotten. Those big black eyes; that determined chin; that square, bold brow; that compressed mouth. Great Heaven! it is the face of Victor Latour!"

John Sterling absolutely recoiled from the picture and his own discovery. But in an instant he had recovered.

"It cannot be Victor Latour, of course. But if Victor Latour had a twin sister on earth this is her portrait."

He turned the picture over. On the back was written, in a bold decided hand: "Truly yours, Isabel Vance, Framlingham, May 4th, 18—,"

"Isabel Vance! Isabel Vance!" repeated the young doctor. "I have heard that name before, too. Ah! I recollect. Isabel Vance was the young lady Miss Hardenbrook disinherited. What does she mean by sending her picture here; and what does she mean, also, by being the living image of Amy Earle's villainous husband?"

He was interrupted by his mother. Mrs. Sterling rose up very pale, and placed the letter in his hands.

"Read that, John. It is a dying woman's warning, but I fear it comes to us too late."

John took the letter, and looked first at the signature. It was not "Isabel Vance," but "Ellen Rossiter," and the letter ran thus:

"MRS. STERLING: *Madam*—Although personally a stranger to you, I know that you are the guardian and nearest female friend of Miss Amy Earle, of Blackwood Grange, the young lady to whom Dorothy Hardenbrook left her fortune. It is on Amy Earle's account that I write this letter.

"I am a woman lying on my death-bed, and before you receive this I shall be in my grave. Accept it as a voice from the grave—a voice raised to warn your ward. Pray Heaven it come not too late.

"Dorothy Hardenbrook had adopted a young relative, a Miss Isabel Vance, with the resolution of making her her heiress some years before she died. She took this Isabel Vance off the stage, for she was a play-actor, and shut her up in the house at Framlingham. She was very severe with her, and the girl needed it,

for she was bold, and bad, and headstrong, and unscrupulous. She was engaged to a young man she had known in the city, Mr. George Wildair, and he used to follow her secretly and meet her in the village. Miss Hardenbrook hated him, and forbade Isabel seeing him on the pain of disinheritance. Isabel promised and disobeyed—lying came natural to her. She met him again and again, by night and by stealth. Miss Hardenbrook discovered it, and the result was she disinherited Isabel, and left her fortune to Amy Earle.

“Isabel’s many troubles came all at once as troubles do come. Mr. Wildair jilted her immediately—it was her fortune he wanted, not herself. He jilted her, and she left the village and disappeared. If ever woman looked possessed of a demon, Isabel Vance did the last time I saw her. I knew then she would do something desperate, and I know she has done it.

“The next I heard of Mr. George Wildair he was engaged to Miss Earle; the next I heard he had been foully murdered the night before his wedding. Madam, Isabel Vance did that deed! I am dying and I say it—Isabel Vance shot her false lover just as surely as I shall be judged.

“I have not seen her since. I don’t know what has become of her; but I do know that that is not likely to be her first and last crime. She will wreak her vengeance on Miss Earle, too, if you do not take care. She is subtle as a serpent, cunning as a fox, and unscrupulous enough and daring enough for any deed under heaven. I send you her picture that you may recognize her, if you ever meet; and there is a specimen of her handwriting on the reverse. Beware of her! I say it solemnly and warningly—a dying woman—beware of Isabel Vance.

“ELLEN ROSSITER.”

Abruptly and startlingly the letter closed. Dr. John looked up from it to see his mother staring at the picture much as he had stared.

“Who is it?” she said, with a bewildered look. “Surely I have seen that face before! “John, who is it?”

“Try again, mother—think over the people you know in this vicinity. Imagine that splendid crop of hair, cut short; imagine a mustache on that dainty upper lip, and I think you will have it.”

Mrs. Sterling dropped the picture, as if it burnt her, and staggered backward with a loud cry.

"It is Victor Latour. Isabel Vance is Victor Latour!"

"Good gracious, mother!" exclaimed the doctor, startled by a supposition that had never struck him, "what a preposterous idea! For Victor Latour to be one and the same person is the wildest of wild impossibilities."

"I don't care!" cried Mrs. Sterling, hysterically; "it may be impossible, but it is true. Oh, my poor little dove! in the claws of that hawk! I understand all now; she said she was not his wife. That is the secret he made her swear to keep; he had to tell, and made her swear not to betray him. Oh, John, he will murder that child."

Dr. John stood gazing at his mother with an awful blank face. It seemed such a mad supposition, such an utterly incredible idea—and yet——

"I don't know what to do, mother," he said; "I never thought of this."

"Go up to Blackwood Grange, at once!" exclaimed his mother, frantically, "and tear the mask off that horrible wretch's face. Have Isabel Vance *alias* Victor Latour, lodged in jail before morning, for the wilful murder of Mr. George Wildair. Go!"

"No, no, no!" said Dr. John, "not so fast! There is no hurry—we will do nothing rash. I couldn't get Victor Latour arrested on the baseless supposition of an old dead woman. We will be slow—we will match strategy with strategy, cunning with cunning. Trust me, mother, I will save Amy yet."

"What do you mean to do?" said Mrs. Sterling.

"Give me this picture. I will go at once to Blackwood and endeavor to see Amy. Heaven grant she may have reached home in safety. Once there, I will know what to do. Don't sit up for me, mother, I may return late."

"As if I could sleep. And, John, for Heaven's sake, take care of that wretch. If Victor Latour or Isabel Vance suspects that you know the secret of her life, your life will not be worth an hour's purchase. You will be found like poor George Wildair."

"I am not afraid of Victor Latour," said Dr. John, coolly; "forewarned is forearmed; good-by, mother; I beg you'll not sit up for me."

Dr. Sterling mounted his nag and set off. As may be imag-

ined, the young doctor's reflections were not of the most lively description as he rode along through the night air. He could not help feeling that he had already twice lost the heiress through his own over-scrupulous sense of honor; and he was not at all certain that he would be able to win and wear her after all.

He had a sort of misgiving within himself that, even should he be successful in rescuing Amy from the thralldom in which she was held by Victor Latour, after all the romance with which her life had been invested, she would consider a union with him too prosaic and commonplace.

He was one of those strong, deep, and self-sacrificing natures which will do as conscience dictates as the right, even at the sacrifice of the dearest wishes of the heart, and he was now more than ever determined to do what he considered his duty both to Amy and to himself.

His love for her was all-absorbing, and would last his whole life long, but it was undemonstrative and in perfect accord with the rest of his character. Until he could see that she returned it he had made up his mind that not one word of passion should escape his lips.

But there was one thing he had resolved with all his heart and all his soul. She should no longer be subjected to the vile tyranny of the scoundrel to whom, in a moment of infatuation, she had linked her fate forever. Mr. Victor Latour would, no doubt, be as relentless a foe as he had proved himself a worthless husband; but, come what may, the truth should be dragged from him, and the whole mystery of his life be rendered as clear as the noon-day sun. Dr. Sterling compressed his lips firmly as he thought of the daily—nay, hourly—torture his darling was suffering, and involuntarily put spurs to his horse, as if the action would quicken her release.

He had fully determined on the morrow to make his way over to Framlingham and probe the affair of the letter to the bottom; but first he must try what could be done at Blackwood Grange. He reached his destination after about an hour's disagreeable riding. A footman answered his thundering knock.

“Is your mistress at home, Hunter?”

“Yes, sir; just arrived out of the storm. Come in, Dr. Sterling; missus is in the drawing room.”

He threw open the door of the cozy, crimson-draped room—unutterably cozy after the wild white tempest without. Carpet, curtains, sofas, chairs, all were of rich glowing crimson, upon which the fire-light and lamp-light glowed with flashing brightness.

Seated on a low footstool, crouched over the fire in a strange, distorted attitude of misery, was the little mistress of all this splendour. Her hood had fallen back, her pale yellow hair hung loose and disheveled, and the face turned to the fire was colorless as the winter snow,

She started up at sight of her visitor with a cry.

“Dr. Sterling! I thought it was Mr. Latour.”

She laid her hand on her heart, as if to still its tumultuous beating. Dr. John advanced and took both her hands in his, and looked down with infinite tenderness and compassion on that poor, thin face.

“My pale little Amy! You are whiter than the drifts outside, this stormy night. Thank Heaven, I find you here safe! What madness, Amy, for you to face this bitter storm!”

She covered her face with her hands, and tearless sobs shook her from head to foot.

“I was so miserable, so lonely, so desolate, so forsaken, so heart-broken! Oh, John! You don't know. You can't know! I am the most wretched creature in all this wide earth.”

“Victor Latour is a villain, a cold-blooded tyrant and villain; but it is not too late to save you from him yet. Amy, I think I know the secret of his life—the secret he made you swear to keep.”

She looked up at him in blank, speechless terror.

“It is impossible,” she said, slowly. “No creature on this earth knows it but himself and me; and I have not broken my oath.”

“We will see,” said Dr. John. “You would be glad to have your chains broken, would you not? To be freed from this horrible union?”

“Glad!” Her whole face lit up at the thought. “It would be new life—it would be heaven on earth. But it is impossible; I am his wife; I cannot desert him for what is his misfortune, not his fault. No human law can give me a divorce for an infirmity he cannot help.”

Dr. John stared at her bewildered. What did she mean? "His wife!" "Infirmity he could not help!" Surely they were at cross purposes. The secret he knew, or thought he knew, was not the secret she had sworn to keep. Was his wild supposition only a wild delusion after all?

"Where is Mr. Latour?" he asked, presently.

"At Major Mallory's; he has not yet returned. I expect him every moment; and, John, don't be angry, please—but I had rather he did not find you here."

"I shall not remain long," replied the doctor, quietly; "but before I go, Amy, have you any letters or notes of Mr. Latour's in the house? I have a particular reason for wishing to identify his writing."

Amy looked at him in surprise.

"Victor's writing? Why, John?"

"I will tell you presently. Oblige me in this matter, if you can."

"I can easily—wait a moment," she said.

She opened a volume on a table near, and produced a copy of manuscript verses. It was Tennyson's "Break, Break," beautifully written; and Dr. John started at sight of the faultless chirography, as if it had been a death's head. It was the handwriting of Isabel Vance.

"You will permit me to retain this, Amy? Thank Heaven! Your freedom is near at hand."

He folded the paper and put it in his pocket. Amy gazed at him in wonder—he was pale even to the lips. He started up to go, holding out his hand.

"Good-by, Amy, and good-night. Keep up a good heart, I think your troubles are almost over."

Amy's answer was a low cry of terror. Her eyes were fixed on the door-way in a wild, dilated stare. Dr. John wheeled round and confronted Victor Latour.

CHAPTER IX.

ILL UNTO DEATH.

There was an instant's dead silence, during which the two gazed steadfastly at each other. Dr. John's pale face and fearless grey eyes met the wolfish glare in the black orbs of Victor Latour unflinchingly.

"So!" cried the latter, hissing his words, and turning suddenly upon Amy—"so, madam, this is how you amuse yourself in my absence, is it? You send word to your old lovers, and they face the howling tempest, and spend the long winter evening cozily by your side. A thousand pities, is it not, that I should come in at this early hour and spoil your *tete-a-tete*? My dear Dr. Sterling, pray don't hurry on my account; conduct yourself precisely as though I were still at Major Mallory's."

"I intend to," said Dr. John, coolly. "I was taking my departure when you appeared so unceremoniously—I shall take it now. Good-night, Amy; my mother will be relieved to hear you are so well."

He bowed to trembling Amy, and stalked past Victor Latour, towering above him by a head. An instant later and the house door closed heavily behind him. Mr. and Mrs. Latour were alone.

An artist, wishing to paint a living embodiment of terror, might have taken Amy for his subject at that moment. She stood clinging to the back of a chair, her face utterly colorless, the blue eyes dilated until they were almost black, the lips quivering, the slender form trembling from head to foot. Those wild wide eyes were fixed upon the face Victor Latour as if fascinated; the white lips strove to speak, but no sound came. He stood confronting her, dark as doom. Only for a second! Then, with one stride, he was beside her, grasping her arm in a cruel grip.

"Traitor!" he hissed; "perjured traitress! And this is how you keep your oath?"

"I have kept it, Victor—truly, faithfully, so help me, Heaven" Oh! don't, don't! As truly as I live, I have not betrayed you."

"Then what brings that meddling interloper here to-night?"

How came he to know I was absent from home? You, madam, sent him word."

"No, no, no! I knew nothing of his coming—I never sent him word. He was the last person I expected to see to-night."

"Or wished to see; eh, Mrs. Latour?" with a sneer. "He was a lover of yours, you know, in the days gone by."

"He never was!" Amy cried with spirit. "John Sterling was always like a brother to me, always my good, kind friend. Never anything more."

"Indeed! And pray what brought your good, kind friend all the way from St. Jude's this stormy night? Tell me the truth, mistress, or it will be worse for you! He had some purpose in coming. What was that purpose?"

"Let go my arm, Victor. You hurt me."

"I will hurt you still more if you do not answer me at once, and truthfully. What brought John Sterling to Blackwood Grange to-night?"

"No earthly harm, Victor—I am sure of it. He came to see me and a—specimen of your handwriting."

"My handwriting!" He dropped her arm, and stood staring at her aghast. "My handwriting! What could Dr. Sterling want with that?"

"He did not say. Some question of identity, I think, he mentioned; but there could have been no particular purpose."

"Couldn't there? Much you know about it. Did you gratify his whim?"

"Certainly, Victor; I never dreamed you would object. There was a copy of verses in a book on the table. I gave him that."

"And he kept it, I'll be sworn?"

"He kept it, I think—yes. If I had thought you would object, Victor, indeed I never would have shown it."

"You're a little fool, Amy, and John Sterling is a meddling knave! But let him take care; I have risked too much to lose lightly now. If I find him prying into my private affairs, by Heaven! I'll treat him as I treated——"

He stopped short. His face was livid. His eyes blazing. In that moment he looked like a madman.

"Don't stand there gaping like an idiot!" he cried, turning with sudden rage upon the affrighted Amy; "don't you see I'm

wet to the skin? Ring the bell, and summon your servants; let them fetch me my clothes. Do you want me to get my death? But of course you do, you little white-faced hypocrite; that is the dearest desire of your heart; and then you might marry the big hulking doctor—'John Anderson, my Jo, John'—'your brother!' your 'good, kind friend!' But I'll baffle you both yet!"

Surely Victor Latour was mad. His voice rose to a shrill cry—his eyes flamed like living coals. He strode toward her—then stopped.

His white face turned dark red. He put his hand composedly to his head, staggered blindly and fell prostrate at her feet.

Meanwhile, Dr. Sterling, in pursuance of his resolve, had started on his journey to Framlingham. He was not the man, when he had once formed a plan of action, to let the grass grow under his feet before he put it into execution. Cool, clear-sighted, and practical, he saw at once that it would be useless to challenge a crafty villain like Latour, until he had more evidence than a mere letter and a photograph, which might simply be a spiteful hoax, and by going straight to Framlingham the doubt could be at once solved: It was the day before Christmas, and, as he bade his mother good-by, he smiled sorrowfully.

"Not a very cheerful task, mother, for Christmas eve," he said, "but if your darling is to be saved, no time is to be lost."

"Heaven go with you and aid you in your task. Now don't go and be too scrupulous in asking questions. Leave not a stone unturned to learn the truth."

"Trust me, mother," he said, as he kissed her at the gate; "I am not likely to be too nice when there is so much at stake, however delicate I may feel, where only my own wishes are concerned. If this Ellen Rossiter is above ground I will find her, and shall prove her words, or I will know the reason why."

The old lady watched his stalwart figure striding off in the direction of the nearest railway station, and sighed as she thought what a wasted life his would be were his mission unsuccessful.

"I believe the girl loves him in her inmost heart," she mused; "but she is so vain and frivolous that she does not know her own mind. At least she has had a terrible lesson, and married life with Mr. Victor Latour ought to have awakened her from her silly, romantic dreams."

She turned and went into the house, as her son's figure was lost in the thickening gloom of the winter's day, to await his return on the morrow with feverish anxiety.

Dr. John himself walked briskly along the snow-clad road, and, to tell the truth, his mind was, first of all, exercised as to the manner in which he was to get across the country to Framlingham. Blackwood Grange was a goodly distance from any large town, and he had first to get to a centre whence he could get on into Lancashire. However, it had got to be done, and he calculated that he could catch the train at the little way-side station. If fortune befriended him, he thought he could get to his journey's end before the daylight had quite fled from the sky; and then, by pushing his inquiries the same night, get home by mid-day on Christmas day.

He was very lucky in catching the train which took him half way along his route at express speed, and he got out at Framlingham station, as George Wildair had on that wild March night, when he went to that fatal rendezvous with Isabel Vance, but with very different feelings, and on a very different errand. The talkative little station master, whom we have met before, seeing he was a stranger, touched his hat respectfully to him.

"Can you be of service to me?" responded Dr. Sterling to his civil question. "Well, yes; perhaps you can. Do you know anything of Miss or Mrs. Ellen Rossiter who lives here? I wish very much to see her on a matter which may be one of life or death."

The man shook his head. "You are too late, sir," he said; "the poor thing died yesterday morning. She never quite got over the shock of losing Miss Hardenbrook's money, after slaving her life out for it as she did. But if you'll step down with me, my missus can tell you all about her, for she has lived with us for the last year or so, since she had to do needle-work for a living."

Dr. Sterling thanked him, and, after he had given a few necessary directions to his subordinates, he led the way to a neat little cottage close to the station. The wife, a pleasant, comely woman, but who spoke with rather a broad north country accent, was only too ready to impart all the information she had to give, which, though not much, was quite enough to satisfy Dr. Sterling of the genuineness of the letter, and of the truth of its contents.

He left the worthy couple the richer by a five-pound note for their trouble and kindness, and with a promise on their part to give him access to the dead woman's papers, if necessary. She had neither kith nor kin and all belonged to them. He then betook himself to the Crown Hotel, where the landlord, who was a particular friend of the lawyer who had drawn Miss Hardenbrook's will, and who was perfectly well acquainted with all the circumstances connected with Isabel Vance's unhappy courtship, confirmed all that the station-master's wife had said. That night Dr. Sterling slept sounder than he had for many a week, and, when he presented himself at home on the following day, his mother saw by his face that he had succeeded.

"I have solved the mystery, I believe, mother, and to-night shall put the scoundrel fairly to the test."

But the end was to come sooner than he anticipated. The two were seated at their solitary dinner on Christmas day, when a carriage from Blackwood came over the frozen snow, and stopped at their door. A moment later and the little maid-servant ushered in the mistress of Blackwood Grange.

"Amy, what has happened?"

Both started up with the same question, for Amy was deadly pale, and the frightened expression that had grown habitual to her of late was wild alarm now.

"Oh, John! Oh, Mrs. Sterling! Victor is ill—dying, I am afraid!"

And then tender-hearted little Amy sank into a chair and burst into hysterical weeping, and told them, incoherently, how he had fallen in a fit last night; how they had got him to bed; how they had brought him to after infinite trouble; and how his first act had been to turn every one of them out of the room and double-lock the door; how they had listened in fear and trembling all night, outside his chamber-door, and heard him raving in wild delirium, and walking to and fro, talking insanely to himself; how he had raved and walked, all this long day, until he had fallen on the bed from sheer exhaustion, and lay there like a dead man. How, frightened almost to death, she, Amy, had fled hither for succor from Dr. John.

"And, oh, please come!" Amy cried, piteously, clasping her hands, "and force the door, and see what you can do for him, I know that you are not a friend of his, John, and that he dis-

likes you ; but, oh ! he is dying, and you must try and forget the past, for my sake."

" My poor little Amy," John said, with infinite love and compassion, " I would do far more than that for your sake. I will go at once, and my mother shall come, too ; you will need her services as nurse. I think I understand why Victor Latour locked the chamber door. Mother put on your bonnet and come ; I am certain you will be needed."

Half an hour later and the trio were back at the lonely old house, its western windows all ablaze with the yellow wintry sunlight. The housekeeper met them in the hall.

" He hasn't opened his door yet, ma'am," she said. " He lies there like dead. I verily believe he has gone mad."

John called upon the footman, and, obtaining the necessary tools, forced the door. " Stay here an instant, Amy," he said. " I will call you and my mother directly."

He entered and closed the door. Victor Latour lay upon the bed, still wearing the same clothes he had worn at Major Malory's dinner-party. The dark face was burning red, and the false mustache was gone, and the face was the very face of Isabel Vance.

Dr. Sterling opened the door a moment later and called his mother in.

" It is as we suspected," he said, gravely ; " Victor Latour is Isabel Vance. You will remove her masquerade, and replace it with suitable garments. The unfortunate woman is on the verge of a raging brain fever, brought on partly by mental excitement, and partly by wetting and exposure. It is ten to one if she ever rises from that bed !"

" Better so," said his mother, sternly. " And Amy ? But Amy knows !"

" No," said Dr. John, " that is the strangest part of the story ; I don't believe she does. Whatever the secret was she swore to keep, it was not the secret of this trickster's sex. You will break the deception that has been practised upon her as gently as you can. I will go now, and return with the necessary medicines in an hour or two."

He quitted the room. Amy stood waiting on the landing outside. He took both her hands in his, and looked down lovingly into her troubled face.

"My own Amy!" he said. "My pale little girl! All will be well with you soon now. There is a shock in store for you—bear it like the little heroine you are. My Amy! to think that paper walls should have held us apart so long. Go in; my mother has something to tell you."

She looked after him wonderingly; then she opened the chamber door and went slowly in.

Mrs. Sterling led her to the bedside; the light was dim, but gradually one object after another became discernible till her eyes rested on the face of her husband—smooth, pale and motionless. Slowly the truth dawned upon her, and with a strange gasp of surprise and astonishment intermingled, she sank into Mrs. Sterling's arms, burying her face in her bosom.

CHAPTER X.

SUNLIGHT AT LAST.

In that spacious chamber, hung with satin damask, carpeted in mossy green, adorned with exquisite pictures and statuettes, the mystery of Blackwood Grange was a mystery no longer. Lying in the low, French bed, whiter than the snowy pillows, lay Isabel Vance. Victor Latour, that mockery of man, was no more. Isabel Vance, in the white robes of her sex, lay tossing there, raving in delirium, or sleeping the heavy, unnatural sleep produced by drugs.

Amy knew all. The unutterable wonder with which she had first heard, her wild incredulity, her absolute inability to convince herself of the truth, are not to be described. It proved the truth of Dr. Sterling's assertion—whatever the secret she had sworn to keep, *that* was not it. Slowly the truth forced itself upon her, day by day, until she could realize it at last. She clasped her hands in indescribable thanksgiving, her whole face alight with joy.

"Thank Heaven!" she cried. "Oh, thank Heaven! thank Heaven! Better anything than be what I thought I was—a madman's wife!"

"What!" exclaimed Mrs. Sterling.

But Amy, with a frightened cry, covered her face with her hands.

"I have broken my oath—I swore not to. Oh! don't ask me questions, Mrs. Sterling—I dare not tell you!"

Mrs. Sterling smiled. She could guess pretty nearly the truth now.

They did not tell Amy that other horrible suspicion, that Isabel Vance was the murderess of George Wildair. Such ghastly horrors were not for innocent ears; they would spare her that if they could.

Mrs. Sterling, Amy, the housekeeper, and the doctor were all who were allowed to set foot in that sick-room. The amaze of the housekeeper was something ludicrous in its intensity; but there was no help for it—they were forced to take her into their confidence. And by day and by night, for two long weeks, those three women watched by the bedside of that guilty woman who had wronged one of them so deeply.

This wild January afternoon Mrs. Sterling sat by the bedside, watching her patient with a very grave face. The crisis of the fever had arrived; there was little chance of the sick woman's recovery, and they did not even hope it. Better for them, better for her, that death should release her, than that she should live to end her days in a madhouse or a prison.

Amy sat by the window, gazing dreamily at the fast-falling snow. An infinite calm had settled upon her—a deep content; a stronger, truer, more fervent love than any fantasy she had ever known, was slowly dawning in her heart. Her sorrows had been heavy, her disappointments bitter; but new hope blooms so soon in the hearts of young persons of nineteen or twenty.

As the short winter day faded into early dusk the snow ceased; but the ground was heaped high, and the bitter wind shrieked icily. Amy arose to draw the curtains and light the lamp.

"I am afraid the roads are impassable," she said. The snow is higher than the fences, and John will persist in coming the most tempestuous nights. How is she?"

She stopped short with a thrill of terror.

For two great, dark eyes looked up at her weirdly from the bed—two eyes in which the light of delirium shone no longer.

"Where am I?" said a low, faint voice. "What is it? What has happened?"

"You have been very ill," answered Mrs. Sterling—"ill of brain fever. Don't ask questions; drink this and go to sleep."

But Isabel Vance pushed away the cup with her delicate hand, and fixed her great dark eyes on the matron's face.

"What is it?" still in that faint whisper. "What has happened? What is it? Tell me!—tell me!"

She looked at Amy—memory seemed struggling back in her dull brain; she looked at Mrs. Sterling; she looked around the strange room, at her own dress—and all burst upon her like a flash. She sprang up in bed with a cry those who heard it might never forget.

"Lost!" she shrieked, "lost! lost! lost!"

She fell back; there was a fierce convulsion that seemed rending soul and body apart, and Isabel Vance lay on the pillows like one dead.

The midnight hour had struck. Through the rain, wind and high-piled snow, Dr. John had bravely made his way, and reached the Grange as the mystic hour had struck. Amy met him with a white, scared face.

"She is dying, John! Oh! if you had but come sooner! Nothing can save her now."

"Nothing could have saved her at any time. My coming sooner would have been of little use. My mother is with her. Has she spoken yet?"

Still, with that white, frightened face, Amy told of that dreadful awakening. She trembled with nervous terror from head to foot as she recalled it.

"My poor little girl!" Dr. Sterling said; "these death-bed horrors are too much for your tender heart. Go to your own room, my Amy, and lie down; you look worn out. I don't want my precious little treasure—lost so long—to wear herself to a shadow. Go and try to sleep."

"But, John——"

"Miss Earle, I insist upon being obeyed. If my patient expresses a wish to see you, you shall be called. Meantime, go to bed and go to sleep. I am not accustomed to being disobeyed; and don't you begin, mademoiselle. Go!"

He turned her toward her own room, led her to the door, and left her there with a parting threat if she dared disobey. Amy smiled to herself as she went in. It was very sweet to be taken possession of in this way by Dr. John.

In the sick room Isabel Vance lay fluttering between life and

death. Nothing could save her now. She lay, whiter than snow, still as marble, but entirely conscious, entirely calm; the great black eyes looking blankly before her at the wall.

The dark eyes turned upon the young doctor as he entered, but the old light of hate was there no more.

"Shall we send for a clergyman, Miss Vance?" he said, bending over her; "your hours on earth are numbered."

She shook her head.

"No clergyman can help me—I am long past that."

"'Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall become white as snow.' The infinite mercy of God is beyond our poor comprehension, Isabel."

She shook her head again.

"You don't know! You don't know! I have committed a greater crime than deceiving and making wretched the life of an innocent girl. John Sterling, I am a murderess!"

"I know it!"

She stared at him with wild, wide eyes.

"You shot your false lover, George Wildair, the night before he was to have married Amy Earle. You deceived her to possess yourself of the fortune Dorothy Hardenbrook should have left you. You see I know all."

"And yet you talk of forgiveness."

"Because there is forgiveness for all who repent."

"But I don't repent. I would do it again, if it were to be done. George Wildair deserved his fate; and yet I was mad the night I shot him—mad with my wrongs. I don't think my brain has ever been right since. What I told Amy, the day I married her, was the truth, after all."

"What did you tell her?"

"Do you not know? But I suppose she kept her oath. I told her I was a monomaniac—possessed of a desire to murder her. I told her the intensity of my love had begot that mad desire—that I dare not remain an instant with her alone, lest I should plunge the fatal knife into her heart. She fainted, poor little girl; and *that* secret kept my other secret. A babe could impose on that insipid little nonentity."

"Poor Amy! You have been merciless to her, Isabel Vance!"

"Well, you can console her when I am gone. I am beyond

your power and hers. You would like to have me tried for murder, I dare say. Death will save you that trouble."

Amy slept long and soundly until, when the sun was shining brilliantly on the snow, the housekeeper brought her the breakfast she had so used her to. Amy ate, refreshed by her deep sleep, and hurried to the sick-room.

It was very, very still. The shutters were still closed, the curtains still drawn. Mrs. Sterling moved softly about; Dr. John met her on the threshold.

"All is over," he said. "Isabel Vance died this morning, almost without a struggle."

He led her to the bed. Strangely quiet and white, in the solemn majesty of death, lay Isabel Vance. More beautiful in death than she had been in life, the cold features looking like those of an exquisite statue carved in marble.

It was given out that Victor Latour was dead, and, on the third day, a stately procession left the gates at Blackwood. But in some way the story leaked out, got whispered abroad, crept into the newspapers, warped and distorted, until John Sterling, for Amy's sake, felt compelled to come out with the truth. Far and wide people talked of the wonderful tale, and doubted, and were amazed. It was the most unheard of occurrence that had ever transpired.

Amy Earle left Blackwood Grange, and Mrs. Sterling with her. They took up their abode in London until spring, living very retired, and preparing for a marriage and a long tour abroad.

Early in May, Dr. John Sterling left his patients in St. Jude's for a very prolonged holiday, and joined his mother in London. And a week after there was a quiet wedding; and Amy, for the third time, wore the starry veil and orange wreath of a virgin bride, and became a blessed wife at last.

They went abroad. Three years they spent on the Continent; then, with a baby and a Swiss nurse, they returned home, and Blackwood Grange became the happiest home in the land.

Dr. John is a model and a paragon of married perfection; and Amy Sterling is the happiest little wife, the blesseddest little mother, in Merry England.

KATHLEEN.

A HOLIDAY STORY OF MERRIE ENGLAND.

It was the merry Christmas-time! Year after year had gone by, but though separated far from each other at all other times, at this annual festival we all met together in the old ancestral hall of our family. Some were rich, some were poor; but we were all *Percys*—all one family, after all. And so Sir Robert Percy, my uncle, to whom, as eldest son, the family estates had fallen, assembled all his relations yearly, young and old, rich and poor, in the old family mansion, to spend the gay season of Christmas with him. The silence and gloom that all the year round hung over it was banished then; merry voices made music through the great, dim, echoing rooms; fairy forms flitted like sunbeams up long, winding staircases, through stately galleries and grand old chambers. Such a racket and uproar as resounded through the dear old homestead those merry Christmas days! scaring even the sober old mastiff into a game of romps, and making Sir Robert's mellow laugh ring out at the gambols of us youngsters.

It was Christmas Eve! The Yule logs were piled high, and roared and crackled up the huge chimney, filling the wide hall with light and heat. The Christmas tree, loaded with gifts and bou-bons, stood on one side, glittering and flashing in the light of the tall Christmas candle above it. The windows and walls were draped with evergreens and scarlet hollyberries, while wreaths of mistletoe hung from the doors and ceiling.

It might have been a picture for an artist, the group assembled in that great hall. In his large carved oaken chair, in the chimney corner, sat the host, Sir Robert, his pleasant countenance and mellow laugh diffusing an air of home-like mirth around.

Ranged downward, in a circle before the fire, were brothers and sisters, heads of families, old maiden aunts, and antiquated uncles. There were college boys, fresh from Eton or Cambridge, with tremendous lungs and alarming appetites; awkward girls, free from the restraints of boarding-schools, and seeming determined, by their noise, to atone for the enforced silence of the school-room. Dashing guardsmen, young lawyers, and those units in the world—younger sons of impoverished fathers—roguish country lasses, finished flirts, artful coquettes—all were mingled in harmony together. Little heart-aches and family-quarrels, all were for the nonce forgotten; for this was *Christmas*, and we were all *Percys* alike.

Among all these cousins, the only one I really cared for was Kathleen Moore. Her mother, Edith Percy, had married an Irish baronet, and had gone with him to reside in Ireland. Here Kathleen was born; and never was queen on her throne prouder of her broad realms than she was of the land of her birth.

Somewhat, from the first, I became her favorite. I know not why it was so; we were as unlike as two extremes could be, with nothing of a Percy about me, except, perhaps, a touch of the family pride. *She* was cold, stately, and haughty; *I* was the wildest, maddest elf that ever danced in the moonlight; she was reserved and thoughtful, I was wayward and impulsive; and yet some secret tie drew us together from the first.

This Christmas Eve that I am telling you about, Kathleen sat within the arch of a deep bay-window, gazing out into the cold moonlight, while I stood behind her, weaving a wreath of crimson berries amid her jetty braids, that were bound like a coronet round her proud head.

"How handsome you are to-night, Kathleen!" said I, as I finished the wreath, and turned to survey her. "Your cheeks are as red as these bright hollyberries, and your eyes are shining like stars. I wonder if this other cousin of ours, who is coming to-night, is as handsome as you?"

"I thought you had seen her?" said Kathleen, inquiringly.

"Oh, so I did once—when we were both children; but that is four or five years ago. She was a pretty little thing then."

"Tell me about her, Gypsy" (this is not my name, but I was always called so). "Why have we never met her here with the rest? I have never thought of asking before."

"Oh, there's not much to tell. She was sent to France when quite a little girl, for her education—her mother's French, you know, and thinks all the rest of the world are barbarians. But now, I suppose she is finished, and will honor us with a visit. Listen, they're calling us below."

"Kathleen, Kathleen, Kathleen!" chorused half a dozen voices at once.

"Gypsy, Gypsy! where's Gypsy?" came again to our ears, after another pause.

"Come, Kath., let us go down," said I, passing my arm around her waist, as we ran down the oaken stairs.

"Fairer than ever, *ma belle cousine*," said the voice of Randal Percy, in a whisper to Kathleen, as we entered.

I looked up, expecting to see the scornful curl of her lip, with which she always received compliments, but it was gone now. A sudden flush crimsoned her oval cheek, and a softened expression filled the usually cold, black eyes, as she looked up into his handsome face with a smile. I had often wished Randal and Kathleen might love each other; but the *hauteur* with which she had always treated him, had hitherto made the wish seem vain.

"I like cousin Randal, don't you, Kath?" said I, abruptly.

"A little," she said, starting and coloring deeply.

"Come, Kathleen—come, you must be queen of our Christmas feast," said the gay voice of Mary Percy, as she came dancing toward us. "Here, Gypsy, we'll make you first maid of honor to her majesty; you're prime favorite already."

"Where's uncle Robert?" said I, without heeding her.

"Dear knows," said Mary, indifferently. "I heard a carriage coming a minute ago, and I suppose he went down to see who had arrived. I hope no more will come. Goodness knows there is a crowd of us here already!"

As Mary spoke the door was flung open, and Uncle Robert entered, with a young lady leaning on his arm. Even now—though many a weary year has passed since—I remember her perfectly. Her dress of pale-blue satin swept the carpet, and fell in graceful folds round her slender form. Her complexion was clear and colorless, her eyes deep and blue, shaded by long, silky lashes, while a shower of golden curls fell rippling over her white neck, like waves of light.

"Beautiful! peerless!" exclaimed an enthusiastic voice behind us.

I turned and saw Randal Percy, who—so absorbed in watching the new-comer—did not notice us at all. Kathleen heard him also, as I could see by her heightened color and the sudden flash of her black eye.

"Miss Etoile Percy, girls and boys," said Sir Robert, by way of general introduction. Then, leading her over to us, he presented her to each separately, saying:

"Etoile, my dear, this is your cousin Mary, a regular, full-blooded Percy; this is Kathleen Moore, a wild Irish girl, with nothing English about her except her pride; this is Gypsy, the maddest, merriest little fairy that ever kept a household in confusion, yet she's the 'flower of the flock,' after all; this handsome fellow is your cousin Randal, whose heart you must be careful not to steal, as I want him for Gypsy here."

"Thank you for nothing, uncle," said I, tossing my head saucily. "Gypsy wouldn't have him."

Etoile lifted her cloudless blue eyes to his handsome face, with a smile that might capture a more invulnerable heart than his. As it was, I saw they were likely then and there to become very good friends. I glanced at Kathleen; the bright color had faded from her face; the old, disdainful look came back; she was once more the Kathleen of other days.

"I say, Mary Percy!" called a dashing young officer, at this moment, "haven't you selected a queen yet for our Christmas feast? Come, be quick—we are waiting."

"Randal, you name somebody; we are all so pretty, I can make no selection," said Mary. Then she added, laughingly, to me: "Perhaps, he'll name me—who knows?"

He turned to Etoile, who still stood beside him, and, taking the crown of mistletoe and hollyberries from Mary, placed it gracefully on her golden head. Then kneeling on one knee, he raised her tiny hand to his lips, saying, gallantly:

"Let me be the first to pay homage to our Christmas Queen to-night!"

"Hurrah for our Christmas Queen!" was the universal shout, as Etoile, blushing with pleasure, was led to the raised throne erected for the queen of the evening.

"Your majesty must choose a consort," said Mary Percy, taking her stand beside her as maid of honor.

She blushed, and then laughed, and, raising her wand, touched Randal on the shoulder. In an instant he was seated by her side, his stately head bent, whispering some gallant speech in her willing ear.

The music now struck up, and every one arose to their feet for the dance. Partners were quickly selected, and Etoile and Randal took their places at the head of the first quadrille.

"Where's Kath, Gypsy?" said Mary Percy's brother, approaching me.

I glanced round, and for the first time perceived that she was gone. Hurriedly turning away, I passed through the crowd, and ran up to her room. She sat at the open window, through which the cold winter air came blowing, lifting the damp braids of her black hair off her high, broad brow, and playing hide and seek amid her Christmas wreath.

"Kathleen, dear Kathleen!" I said, throwing my arms around her neck, and kissing her cold, pale forehead.

She pushed me away almost rudely.

"What do you want here?" she said, impatiently.

"May I not stay with you, Kathleen? I love you so much!" said I, pleadingly.

"No, no, leave me. Go join in the dance, Gypsy."

"I had rather stay with you, cousin."

"Methinks you should find it pleasanter staying with that pretty baby Etoile," she said, with a curl of her proud lip.

"I shall *hate* her, Kath!" I said fiercely; "she had no business coming here to make you unhappy!"

The dreary look I had seen on entering came again over her face.

"It must have come sooner or later," she said, steadily; "she only hastened it a little. It is well that I have awakened from the one dream of my life at once. You know my secret, Gypsy?"

"That you love Randal—yes," said I, gently.

"And he will love this pretty doll. I see it all," said Kathleen, calmly; "and I——"

She paused.

"And you will be miserable all your life," I broke in, passion

ately. "I shall hate this shallow-brained little Parisian. Randal, too, if he loves her."

She drew herself up and laughed scornfully.

"And I shall be *miserable*. I like that. I think I see Kathleen Moore breaking her heart for him, or any other man. No, no, Gypsy, wild Irish girls don't die so easily. Among my own dear native hills, I will soon forget England and Randal Percy, and be a free-hearted mountain lass once more."

Brave Kathleen! She spoke boldly; not once did her voice falter; and yet the cold, stony look of her large black eyes told of the dreary aching of her heart. I could only fold my arms closer around her, and *look* the sympathy I could not speak.

There came a tap at the door at this moment, and the next Mary Percy entered, exclaiming:

"Come Kath—come Gypsy, this will never do. There are a thousand and one inquiries for you down stairs, and here you sit as silent and lonely as two nuns. Come along!"

And pushing her arm through ours, she drew us down stairs.

"Come, lady fair," said her brother, approaching Kathleen, "I believe I have the promise of this set?"

"And will Gypsy do me the honor?" said Randal Percy, approaching me.

"No," said I, shortly; "I don't want to dance."

"Then I will not either," said he, gallantly, seating himself beside me.

At this moment Etoile passed us, leaning on the arm of a young officer in a splendid uniform, and listening with a smile of evident pleasure, to the graceful nothings he poured in her ear. Randal looked after them with a jealous eye.

"Did you ever see any one so lovely, Gypsy?" he said, enthusiastically.

"She's rather pretty," said I, with a disdainful shrug; "and if I mistake not, a most finished little coquette, as a certain cousin of mine will find out one of these days."

"*She* a coquette! impossible, Gypsy! I never, in all my life, saw any one so artless, so unsophisticated, so perfectly free from coquetry," he exclaimed, indignantly.

I laughed outright at this sudden burst of feeling.

"Perhaps so," said I. "Paris is a second Eden for training up girls artless, innocent, and all that. I suppose, however, I

might as well try to convince you that the moon is made of green cheese as that she is trying to ensnare you. Men *have* been fools when in love, ever since the world began, and will to the end of it—you are no better than the rest.

“And if I am,” he said, coloring painfully, “you are hardly the one to lecture me for it—you, the greatest coquette that ever stepped—you that have made fools of a score of better men than I am before this.”

“Perhaps this is the very reason that I can see so plainly Etoile Percy is trying to make a fool of you, now,” said I, coolly. “But here comes Kathleen. Do you think her handsome?”

“Handsome! no, decidedly not,” he said, quietly; “she is too dark, too proud, too supercilious—too much of the Percy in her, in a word. Too dark and fiery; too much in your own style, Gypsy.”

“And not sufficiently in the style of that wingless angel Etoile; that sweet, unsophisticated, little Parisian,” I said, with a scornful laugh. “You are deeper in love than I thought, cousin Randal. What simpletons a pretty girl can make of the best of you lords of creation!”

He flushed crimson, and rose angrily from his seat; at the same moment Etoile, radiant with smiles, came gliding up, and laying her hand on his arm, said, in the sweet, low voice in which she spoke, rendered still more musical by her strong foreign accent:

“Come, cousin Randal, we are waiting for you; they are going to play blind-man’s buff over there.” Then turning to me, she said, softly: “I am very sorry to interrupt your conversation, and take him from you, but we want him so particularly.”

She looked up into his face, half shyly, half fondly, like the artful cheat that she was. Randal’s handsome face kindled with a look of delight, while I felt inclined to laugh outright.

“Oh, take him and welcome!” said I, carelessly. “I don’t think I’ll break my heart during his absence.”

“Perhaps you will come with us,” she said, gently,

“No, thank you, I am engaged. I wish you a pleasant game. Mind, Randal, and don’t let her *catch* you,” said I, moving away.

“*Au revoir*,” then she said, with her bright smile, and passing her arm through his, she kissed her hand to me, and disappeared.

The great hall clock striking one, at last reminded the gay assembly that it was time to retire. As the company dispersed to their various chambers, Kathleen passed me, and whispered :

"Come and share my room to-night, Gypsy ; I hate to be alone."

I willingly complied, and ran with her up to her apartment. It was situated in such a manner as to command a view of the whole mansion. Kathleen seated herself by the window, while I undressed and went to bed.

"Are you going to sit there all night, Kath ?" said I, my eyes closing drowsily as I spoke.

"No, only a few minutes ; I don't feel sleepy ; never mind me," replied Kathleen, quietly.

"Gypsy, Gypsy, wake up ! I want to show you something !"

"What on earth is it, Kath ?" said I, springing up in alarm.

"Look !"

She drew me to the window, and pointed in the direction in which Etoile's chamber was situated. There was no light in the window, but the moonlight fell brilliantly over every object, rendering all around as clear as day. Under the window, a tall, slight figure, which I instantly recognized as that of Randal Percy, paced to and fro, keeping his restless watch before the chamber of her he loved. I glanced at Kathleen ; she sat, or rather cowered on a seat near the window, her face covered with her hands, as still, as motionless as a marble figure. With a sigh, I turned again to look out. As I did so, I saw Etoile's window open hastily, and a rose fell through the moonlight to his feet. It was enough ; I drew the curtain, and turned to Kathleen ; she still sat in the same attitude, in a dreary, forlorn manner.

"Dear Kathleen !" I said, softly.

She took her hands down from before her face, and looking up, said, huskily :

"You saw it all ; I knew it would be so. Oh, Gypsy, that I should have stooped to love one who cares not for me !"

In all her grief, the old pride was predominant still. I knew not what to say, and remained silent.

"I thank you for your sympathy, dear Gypsy, dearest cousin that I ever had ; and now that my dream has ended, never speak of him to me again while you live."

She rose as she spoke, and threw herself on her couch ; but not to sleep. As I lay awake, thinking of the hopes of a life-time blighted in one night, I could hear her tossing restlessly on her bed, until the red hue of coming morn tinged the eastern sky.

Time passed on ; and I learned that Kathleen and her father had started for a tour on the Continent. Of Randal I could hear nothing, save that he had accompanied Etoile to her far-off home in *la belle France*.

One day a letter was brought to me in Kathleen's writing. It was the first she had ever written me, and I tore it open eagerly. After a few preliminary remarks, she said :

“ I suppose you have heard, Gypsy, papa and I are in Paris. Such a life of gayety as we have had ; every night at balls, *soirees*, reunions, operas, concerts, *bal masques*, and so on, *ad infinitum*. I am rapidly becoming a most finished coquette ; even our pretty little cousin Etoile cannot surpass me in capturing hearts now. And *apropos* of Etoile, I see her nearly every day with Randal Percy following her everywhere like her shadow. Matters seem hardly as promising with them as on the night you and I witnessed a certain romantic little scene from my bedroom window. There is a young, white-mustached marquis here—a brainless fop he is—who seems very attentive to *la belle cousine*. Whether he or Mr. Percy will win the hand of the fickle little beauty is somewhat doubtful ; but *allons*, we shall see ! Next Christmas Eve we will meet again. Until then, dear Gypsy, adieu.

“ KATHLEEN.”

I mused long over this letter ; it seemed so strange for Kathleen Moore to write in such a strain. How she must have changed ! Was the old heart-ache all gone now ? No ; I felt sure that Kathleen was not one to forget her love of a life-time so easily. How I longed for Christmas to come, that I might see her once more !

Old Father Time moved steadily on ; month after month glided by, never to come again, bringing Christmas Eve—and all the Percys once more together in the old homestead.

That Christmas Eve I remember distinctly. Everything in the old hall looked just the same as it had done twelve months be-

fore—the familiar faces were all there, and yet many a change had taken place. It had transformed gay Mary Percy into a bride; pretty Etoile into the wife of a marquis; and I, myself, into a weary, sad girl. Randal Percy stood again beside me, paler and thinner than when I had seen him last, for he had been jilted by the fair Etoile. Kathleen was there, too; a superb woman, with the bewitching smile and languishing glance of a finished flirt, crowned with the wreath and carrying the wand of the Christmas Queen. Standing beside her, as her chosen consort, was Randal Percy.

The evening was drawing to a close, when Kathleen passed me and hurriedly whispered:

“If you wish to see a farce, Gypsy, steal into the parlor, hide yourself behind the curtains, and listen.”

Wondering what she could mean, I obeyed, and concealed myself behind the heavy curtains. Kathleen followed me and took a seat. Scarcely had she done so, when Randal Percy followed hastily, and took a seat by her side.

“Well, Mr. Percy,” said Kathleen, quietly. “you requested a private interview; may I know what you wish?”

“Dear Kathleen, do not speak so coldly; you surely know the reason,” he said, earnestly.

“I am sorry to be so dull of comprehension. I have not the remotest idea,” replied Kathleen.

“Then, dearest cousin, in three words I can tell you—*I love you, Kathleen!*”

“Do you, really? Almost as much, I suppose, as you loved Etoile, the other day. Eh, cousin Randal?”

“Kathleen, will you never cease to think of my folly? I never loved her; I only fancied so. I never loved but you, my peerless, my beautiful Kathleen!” he exclaimed, vehemently.

“A very pretty speech, sir. Did you talk to Etoile this way?” she said, quietly.

“Kathleen, you will drive me mad!” he exclaimed, passionately. “How shall I convince you that I love you only?”

“Most certainly, not by walking up and down before my window,” was the sarcastic reply. “Do you remember, you did before Etoile’s this very night, twelve months ago? How hot you must have been when you went there to cool yourself! Have you the rose Madame de Rochefort flung you that night?”

He rose from his seat by her side, and paced up and down the room with passionate vehemence.

"Once for all, Kathleen," he said, suddenly stopping before her, "will you be my wife?"

"I am sorry to be obliged to refuse you, my dear cousin, but there are two or three very good reasons that make it necessary to refuse your trifling request."

"For Heaven's sake name them!" he said.

"Well, then, the first is, that this day three weeks I am to be married to Sir John Montford; the second——"

"What! Married! Kathleen!" he gasped, convulsively.

"Yes, sir. But won't you hear the other reasons?" she inquired, in the sweetest possible voice.

"Oh, mock away!" he said, bitterly; "it well becomes you in your hour of triumph; but one thing you know—you *loved me once*. That time has passed. As Kathleen Moore I now bid you good-by—as Lady Montford you will never see me again."

In a moment he was gone, and then parting the curtains I stepped out. Kathleen sat gazing from the door through which he had gone—her face very pale, but a proud look of triumph shining in her eyes.

"Well, Gypsy," she said, with a mocking laugh, "you have heard all. Was it not a delightful little comedy?—almost as pretty as that you and I witnessed last Christmas Eve. And now my romance of life is gone forever; nothing remains for me but flirting, spending Sir John's wealth, tea and scandal. Well, I shall make the most of it. And now, the Christmas queen will be missed—so come."

Three weeks after, Kathleen Moore became the wife of Sir John Montford; and that same day Randal Percy sailed for the United States; and since that time we have never heard of him. Madame and the Marquis de Rochefort dwell in their dear Paris. the gayest of the gay; and Lady Montford flits from place to place, ever restive and dissatisfied, as I suppose she will ever be, until her weary heart is still forever. I, too, no longer the wild "Gypsy" of other days, dwell far from my own loved English home. Many a Christmas Eve has come and gone, and many more will still come, but the old faces and forms will never meet again under the roof-tree of the Percys.

