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HONOURABLE MRS. VEREKER.

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BY THE "DUCHESS,"

AUTHOR OF "MOLLY BAWN," "PHYLLIS," "MARVEL," ETC., ETC.

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THE HONOURABLE MRS. VEREKER.

CHAPTER I.

“A knight there was, and that a worthy man,
That from the timē that he first began
To riden out, he lovēd chivalry,
Truth and honour, freedom and courtesy.”

It seemed to him that the old church looked quainter than ever. He had been ten years away from his native parish, so that it was natural enough that he should find most things strange—and yet familiar too. The Autumn sunshine shot a ruby bar of light across the family pew, direct from the side window, with exactly the same precision as when he was a boy, and his great-grandfather glared down upon him from the slab opposite with just as malignant, and eminently stony an eye, as when last he sat here petrified beneath the stern regard.

But something about the whole conducting of the service struck him as being ludicrous. He was not in any wise profane, he had an honest, healthy, love for his church ritual, and his belief in his God was as sound as the church bell itself; but there was a touch of old-worldism, of a comfortable drowsiness, about everything that amused him.

Certainly the churches abroad, with their florid pictures, and flower-decked altars, and dim soft lights and shades, and glittering candles that shine like stars, and music so heavenly sweet as to move the very soul within one, were a bad preparation for the calm appreciation of a country service, with its droning, out-of-tune, choir, and its windows, for the most part of plain glass, through which the light fell with a coarse whiteness that was, to say the least of it, distinctly inartistic. And yet, after all, there was a sense of rest in this quiet, dull, old building—a nearness to the desirable oblivion of the grave, that held and enchained both mind and heart, and satisfied them delicately.

When last he sat in this worm-eaten pew he was nineteen, to-day he was twenty-nine. Ten years! a terrible lapse of time! All the faces round him, with the exception of one here and there, were new to him, though some at least amongst the younger members of the congregation must have been pretty nimble on their limbs when he left home. Then, his father, the old squire, was alive—now, there was no one to keep house at the grand old place up there amongst the nodding pine trees, that even from this distance cast their shadows across the chancel, save he.

How the sunlight, wine red, sparkled on the stone flooring, shining sharply through the glorious raiment of the Beloved Apostle. August sunshines were no doubt the same everywhere; years cannot change them. He was a little glad, perhaps, when the sermon, which was about the death of Absalom, and

had been full of graphic descriptions of how that perfidious person must have looked when dangling midway between earth and sky from his treacherous locks, came to an end, and he was free to leave the sombre shadows within, and wander forth into Nature's magnificent display of light outside.

Mrs. Mardyke, the rector's wife, was waiting for him. He remembered her well, with her soft intelligent eyes, and iron-grey hair; it was scarcely greyer than when last he saw her ten years ago. Many a time and oft she had done him good service, standing between him and the rector's wrath, when that fatal Latin grammar had once again been the cause of a row royal between the modern Mentor and Telemachus.

He would have liked to stay and talk with her about old times, but a slender hand was thrust through his arm and a charming face was uplifted to his.

Both belonged to his cousin Dorothy Aylmer. He had renewed acquaintance with her a fortnight ago in town, so that her greeting was empty of the solemnity that marked the other.

"So you have really come!" said she, with a little, pretty, affected air of astonishment. "In spite of your assurance in Berkeley Square, and the interest with which I have watched the idling of that army of workmen up at the Chase for the last ten days, I never *really* believed you would condemn yourself to a solitary confinement of this kind."

"I can't be solitary. I shall have you—occasionally," said he.

“True! Even in the direst cases I have heard there is always consolation to be found, if one only knows the right way to look for it. You evidently *do*. Well? and when do you start again?”

“My dear girl! what an uncivil question. Here have I been a homeless wanderer for the last ten years, doing my duty nobly, and yet, when I *do* descend upon the parental nest—worn and foot-sore—I am at once commanded to move on. It isn’t fair. The proverbial forty winks might at least be conceded to me.”

“Make them fifty,” said she. “What I want to know is about the afterwards. My own conviction is that you will find the forty long, and—what is your next destination? Wagga-wagga? The plains of Tartary? Or ‘the place where the Bong-tree grows?’”

“Not the latter certainly. From all I have read it would be useless to go there without a companion. Perhaps, however, *you* will come.”

“I’m afraid I can’t,” regretfully. “I would do a great deal for you—but—I must draw the line there.”

“At the present moment you can do something for me at all events. Tell me who is the old lady with the white ringlets, bowing to me so graciously from behind that monument?”

“That is Mrs. Mackenzie of Grange. She is one of the most affording people I know, always excepting Aunt Jemima. Now go over and make your very best bow if you want to know even one peaceful hour in this deserted village. Tell her you

remember perfectly what a grower of roses she is, and give her to understand that you know she has rheumatic gout in her left hand. She is tremendously proud of *that*."

With the word roses, it all came back to him, and he could see himself again wandering amongst a very garden of sweets made up of roses only, yellow and white and red. He could see his father, too, moving from tree to tree, admiring the one flower that was his own special hobby, and scarcely heeding the endless cackle of the old lady who hobbled after him, volubly discoursing on the rival virtues of this treatment and that for the beloved plant.

He pressed her hands very warmly, and quite won her heart by the two or three judicious remarks he made. He was very like his father, she said, but perhaps not quite so handsome, not *quite*—but good enough to look at, in spite of all. The cackle was of the same order as he remembered, and amused him in part. He gave her his arm, and took her down to where her carriage waited for her at a small side gate, and refused her pressing invitation to luncheon, because he felt there must still be some of the old folk who would expect to shake him by the hand.

As the huge and ancient barouche rolled away, he turned and looked back up the churchyard path, and so looking met two earnest eyes—half-smiling, half unsure—that were his undoing!

It was all over in a moment. He stood, and stared at her, and as he stared, defenceless, thoughtless of armour, she walked, albeit unconsciously, into

his heart. She stood just a little way from him, full of a lovely indecision, and then her body swayed a little and she came to him and very shyly held out her hand.

"Everyone seems to be claiming you as an old friend. Why not I?" said she softly, she was looking at him in a gentle friendly fashion. Her face was entirely colourless, except for her mouth, which was red as one of Mrs. Mackenzie's roses. Her eyes were dark, and so mournful as to give him even at this early moment a sharp pang of regret for her. They rested on him sombre and thoughtful even whilst the red mouth smiled.

"I expect I am the oldest acquaintance of all," went on this lovely apparition as he held her hand. "I was quite a baby when last we met, and parted. Moreover," with a little low laugh, "I am afraid I must confess that I remember nothing at all about it."

"A baby!" repeated he, amused and fascinated. "So young! Surely then I may be excused if I too declare I have forgotten."

Who was she, this beautiful girl? He tormented his brain to try and recall something that might lead to the solution of the mystery.

"No; you will not guess it," she said, as if reading his dilemma.

She shook her head slightly; she seemed very young, barely twenty, yet there was an air about her that puzzled him.

"I was one of the Rowtons of Ryelands; and I *know* that I know you, because the boys have so

often told me about you, and talked of you, and, indeed, made me quite friendly with your *name* at least."

"Why, of course," cried he, brightening. "And you are like your father, too. And Charlie, Tom, they were school-fellows of mine. And you must be the little sister who came so long afterwards, when they, indeed, were great boys grown. Yes, I do remember. It almost seems to me, indeed, that your very name comes back to me. Cis—was it? or Cissy? or——"

"Cecil *now*, an' it please you! The old Cis has faded out of all remembrance!" Did she sigh as she said it? Surely the faintest shadow deepened the already too mournful curves of the young lips.

"Why, what matters that," said he, eagerly, "if the world has gained a new Cecil?"

"Ah! I don't know that," she said, quickly. "Old days, believe me, have their charm."

"But," said he, as if puzzled, "when last I was at home, ten years ago, where were you then? Not here."

"In Brighton, with an aunt of mine. I lived with her for a long time. Then I came home, and——"

She paused abruptly.

"They are all gone," she went on again presently, speaking nervously. "Charlie is in India, Tom in Africa, and dad—dad is dead. I only am left."

She spoke with indescribable melancholy. To St. John, indeed, it seemed more than that. The low delicate accents were suggestive of despair. But in

a moment she had shaken off her depression, and once more turned her eyes on his.

“And so, as a fact, you had forgotten our past friendship,” she said.

She was smiling again ; she had apparently entirely flung off the touch of dejection that had caught her, and was looking at him with a glance that was brilliant.

“And if I have,” said he boldly ; “and if I even declare that I do not so much as regret it, can you wonder, when I see before me the chance of a fresh friendship before which that earlier one sinks into insignificance !”

The words in themselves were sufficiently impressive to attract her, but the look that accompanied them, though altogether respectful, was so ardent, so undeniably admiring, that it startled her. As if displeased by it, and surprised, she moved back a step or two, and a touch of hauteur grew upon her face.

With a last courteous word or two, that were, however, entirely devoid of that first friendliness that had charmed him, she turned aside and slipped into a group near her, and presently he could see that she had gone down the central path, and had stepped into a perfectly appointed carriage that stood outside the entrance gate.

A carriage in connection with the Rowtons—in *his* time a sadly deficient race, so far as money was concerned—struck St. John as strange. They had always been poor—nay, ever on the verge of bankruptcy ; but, perhaps, that old aunt in Brighton had

done the correct thing by her, and had left her her money at her death.

He stood staring after the carriage as it rolled away, lost in thought, until a gentle tap on his arm roused him.

CHAPTER II.

“That fairer was to seen
Than is the lily upon his stalkē green,
And fresher than the May with flowers new
(For with the rosē colour strove her hue
I n’ot which was the finer of them two).”

“BEWILDERED, sweet cousin?” asked Miss Aylmer, saucily. He smiled at her in turn, throwing off the touch of glamour that was holding him, and told himself, as he had often told himself during the last fortnight, that she was indeed very pretty. Her face was piquante, original, delicious; more decidedly lovely perhaps than the one that though beyond his sight, still stood out in a bold, if soft light before his mental vision; but to him there could be no comparison.

“Are you losing your head amongst all the intricate windings of these new old friends?” she went on. “You should have trusted more to my guidance. I launched you safely when I sent you to Mrs. Mackenzie, but I fear since that, you have gone hopelessly to wreck. To judge by your face, you are quite lost, it—Oh! how d’yē *do*, Captain Farquhar,” with a brilliant smile and a glance, that said plainly this smile was meant for him alone.

The young man thus favoured drew up by her side, and looked distrustfully at St. John. That he had accepted that charming greeting as specially his own, one could see at a glance by his undisguised delight. Misguided youth!

“What I was going to say,” continued Miss Aylmer blithely, addressing herself again to her cousin, “is, that to avoid the social shoals and quicksands that abound in this benighted neighbourhood, would take a Stanley. The unwary traveller undoubtedly gets—Ah! so glad to see you, Mr. Vesey,” beaming on a tall callow young man, and giving him a smile the very fac-simile of that just bestowed on Farquhar. That the new-comer regarded it as a tribute to his own charms was beyond question. He too ranged up alongside, and glowered with equal politeness on Farquhar and St. John.

“I thought you were still in town,” said he.

“I’m never still anywhere,” returned she; which was the literal truth, though she didn’t mean it. “I’ve an aunt, as”—with a swiftly comprehensive glance at him—“you have good reason to know, and she draws me whithersoever she listeth. At present she is determined I shall vegetate down here, and muse upon my sins, so that—What! *you*, Mr. Sunderland! Why I quite thought you were in the Isle of Wight, or the Sandwich Isles, or—*somewhere*. What has kept you here?”

This speech was accompanied by a glance and smile every bit as delicious as those given to the others. Mr. Sunderland, a huge young man, with a

fluffy face and herculean shoulders, grows crimson beneath them, and a trifle confused.

"Well—er—you see, I—I," full-stop. "You see the fact is that I hadn't an opportunity of saying good-bye to you last Friday, and as I knew you would be safe to be in church, I thought—that—er—I'd wait until to-day. You've been—er—so extremely kind to me, that I—I—didn't quite like to go without saying——"

"Now, how *sweet* of you," said Miss Aylmer, with the slightest suspicion of laughter in her tone. "I quite wondered *would* you go——Do you know," frankly, and with another charming glance, "that I should have been very much disappointed if you *hadn't* waited."

"You seem to be the essence of good nature," said her cousin to her, in a low tone. He was feeling intensely amused. The three strange young men stood round her, whilst she conversed with *him*, and seemed not to think it at all derogatory to their dignity to wait upon her moods. It was evident that she had them in very good training. He would have liked to say so, but it would have been impossible with those six watchful eyes.

"Ah! you will see later on," said she, answering his last remark. "Good-natured doesn't express it. I simply seem to live for others. A perfect saint I am, if, only I get my due. I *do*—sometimes! Well," with a vague, friendly, sweeping glance around her, that includes all her attendant satellites. "It's getting late, isn't it? There is something suggestive of luncheon in the air, and I don't fancy

the rector will like us to bivouac amongst the tombs, so I'll say good—What! are you coming with me? *All* of you going to see me home? How very, *very* kind."

"If you will allow us!" exclaimed Vesey and Sunderland in a breath. Farquhar looked black.

"I shall be only too glad. *Need* I say it? Good-bye, Hilary, if you can come down to-morrow, I will give you a lesson or two in deportment."

"Why shouldn't I come now?" said St. John. "I can't come under the head of trumpery, as there are three already."

"Another!" cried she tragically. And then changing her tone to one of the utmost suavity, "*Four!* How nice! Auntie *will* be pleased!"

Here she caught Farquhar's eye, and that gallant Hussar, overcome by whatever he saw in hers, gave way to sudden mirth.

"It is so many years since I have seen our mutual aunt," said St. John, "that I can hardly flatter myself I have still a place in her regard; but——"

"Hope for nothing," said Dorothy calmly. "She remembers you perfectly. Now—are you ready?"

"I think if you were to introduce me to your friends I should feel more at home," said St. John graciously. And the ceremony having been gone through, they all crossed the stile into the deep woods beyond, and strolled leisurely towards the tiny mansion over which Miss Aylmer senior lorded it triumphantly.

* * * * *

After all, auntie *wasn't* pleased! As they walked

up the trim, short avenue that led to the pretty little house, half smothered in roses—Dorothy flanked bravely by her attendant cavaliers—a blind was suddenly jerked up in one of the lower windows, and a tall, gaunt woman, colossal in proportions, and armed with a binocular, presented herself. There was something apparently terrifying in this figure, because St. John found that the three other men stopped dead short in the middle of the avenue, and that Dorothy stopped with them.

Meantime, the binocular had been laid aside and the sash flung upwards. Across the mild August air a voice that would not have disgraced a drill-sergeant rang with a startling force :

“Dorothy! what means this indecent display? Have you forgotten that this is the *sabbath*?”

She took no notice whatever of the stricken men. Her steady glare seemed to go right through them, as though they were not. This they all felt to be trying.

“Why, no, Auntie,” said Dorothy meekly. “You see we’ve all just come from church. It was there I met——”

She paused, and by an eloquent gesture pointed out the trembling young men around her.

“I shall countenance no such ungodly thing as callers on the Day of Rest,” said Miss Aylmer, senior, in enormous capitals. “Whoever those persons may be, I refuse to receive them in *my* house. Go home!” waving her mittened hand majestically. “Go home at once! Quit my premises!”

With this, and without more ado, she slammed

down the window-sash with a resounding bang, lowered the blind indignantly, and retired from view.

Dead silence ensued. St. John, who was conscious of having grown exceedingly red, looked nervously at Dorothy to see how she was bearing up under this most unfortunate *contretemps*. If he expected to find her writhing in the throes of shame and embarrassment he was soon extraordinarily enlightened; he was quite prepared to pity her, to help her, so far as lay in his power, out of her painful dilemma, but one glance at her was sufficient to dispel all thought of a necessity for such kindly intervention.

Miss Aylmer was bending slightly forward and had given herself up a prey to silent but agonizing mirth. There was not so much as one sign of chagrin or shame about her, and, as his eyes travelled still farther, he could see that her three companions were following her example and were choking with suppressed mirth.

After a surprised contemplation of them all, St. John, to his further astonishment, found that he too was laughing, immoderately, but in the same noiseless fashion, and was beginning to consider whether it was a disease of an infectious order belonging alone to the avenue of the Aylmers, and whether he had not caught it, when Dorothy once more found her breath.

“Let us run!” said she. “There is the side walk, let us get to it without loss of time; she might draw up that blind again, and if so, I, for one, would not answer for the consequences. I have *heard* of an old

blunderbuss of my grandfather's that is hidden away somewhere in one of her secret recesses."

She caught up her skirts, and led the way to a secluded walk hedged in by laurels, where safety might indeed be supposed to dwell.

"She must have been reading her Bible," said Dorothy, when she had wiped her eyes. "She is always specially bad when full of Holy Writ."

"Why on earth doesn't she go to church and hear it read there?" asked St. John with some just indignation.

"The Rector is young. She doesn't approve of him. Crabbed age and youth you know *cannot* dwell together without sanguinary engagements taking place every now and then."

"At that rate, poor you!" said her cousin compassionately.

"Oh, as for me, I'm temper-proof. I defy her," complacently, "to rouse *me*. All this astonishes you because you are new to it. But," with a little sapient nod at the other three young men, "*these* all know, and now nothing surprises them. You can't imagine what a comfort that is, when it comes to a passage of arms such as took place just now. We are all quite aware that there are certain days when Auntie will not have us at any price. This," with another low, irrepressible laugh, "is one of them. Unfortunately, we never know when the attack is coming on, or I should have been able to warn you. I am sorry," with a pretty contrite smile, "that she should have been 'taken bad,' as Betty calls it, on this, your first day, but, believe me, you

have gained something by getting rid of her so easily. And now go away, *do*, all of you, or I shall get a lecture the length of all your arms put together."

Obedient to her command, they dwindled away slowly one by one. St. John remained to the last. He had a question to ask that he felt he could not take home with him unanswered.


"You told me you would be my Mentor," he said. "Instruct me before I go in one small matter. I met Miss Rowton to-day. Where does she live now? Alone, at Ryelands?"

"Miss Rowton?" Dorothy stared at him as if only half understanding. "There is no Miss Rowton now, and Ryelands is a thing of the past save for four gaunt walls." Then a light broke in upon her. "*Cecil!* you mean," she said. "But you are all wrong there. She is no longer Miss Anything. She is the Hon. Mrs. Vereker!"

CHAPTER III.

"And saidē, 'Cousin mine what aileth thee
That art so pale and deadly for to see?
Why cried'st thou? Who hath thee done offence?'"

MRS. MACKENZIE'S roses were looking their loveliest on the splendid afternoon she had chosen to re-introduce to the county her new-old friend, as she insisted on calling St. John, who hardly cared for the appellation; she seemed, indeed, to throw a touch of



sarcasm into it. He was on the brink of thirty, and it was as though she would perpetually remind him that youth would not last for ever, and that he was standing on the borderland that divided it from middle age, from that stage of life when one becomes conscious that there is a past!

With youth there is naught but the present, except it be a mysterious, delicious thought or two about an ideal future. With age *all* is past (in every sense of the word), and there is nothing reliable, not even the future, which, even if obtained, holds out no prospect of pleasure.

Mrs. Mackenzie was a clever, perhaps a rather unpleasant old lady, but she certainly liked St. John, and believed him an acquisition to the rather mawkish society around, and deemed it high time that he should settle down amongst them, and marry, and have heirs, as all respectable people do.

She had two nieces—"The Mackenzie girls" as they were universally called—who were glad enough to stay with her the greater part of every year, their father's parsonage holding high rank amongst the uncomfortable places on the earth. They were what rude people called "terrible girls." Tall, ugly—plain, at all events (I believe there is no such thing as an ugly woman now-a-days), with two of the most remarkable noses it could be your luckless fate to see—sandy hair, and a thin veneer of kindness and charity that was quite insufficient for the concealment of the bitterness that lurked beneath. To one of these nieces it was Mrs. Mackenzie's dream to see St. John wedded. If the laws of the country had

permitted of his espousing both, she would have regarded him with even a more loving eye.

There was quite a goodly gathering at the Grange on this particular day. There was Colonel Scott, a confirmed old bachelor, beaming away amongst the girls, with a face as red as a sunbeam, and a smile that stretched his kindly mouth from ear to ear. There was Bobby Blair, a friend and cousin of St. John's, who had come down with him, and who ran the colonel very close with the girls, and, indeed, at the present moment, was distinguishing himself, and utterly routing that fascinating veteran by the extreme delicacy with which he balanced himself on the edge of the fountain, and thrummed "Old Bob Ridley" on a real and original banjo. They were a little depressed, perhaps, because he hadn't been able to blacken his face, but, so far as it went, the performance was a great success.

There were more girls than surrounded Bobby and the colonel, and through the openings in the shrubberies, and amongst the roses, and in all the private walks, pretty figures could be seen, flitting here and there, generally with a taller, less graceful form beside them, whilst on the several tennis courts momentous battles were being fought, and victories lost and won.

To the right there were tents that gleamed like conical sugar loaves in the rays of the autumn sun, in which tea, iced claret, and other cups, and, indeed, anything you might desire was to be found. To do Mrs. Mackenzie justice, lack of hospitality was not one of her failings.

St. John, as was but natural, was the hero of the hour. All the girls, attached or unattached (except a few benighted beings who were very far gone indeed in other directions), gravitated towards him, and angled for, or openly asked for, introductions to him. Dorothy Aylmer, who held a little court of her own, and was independent of stray admirers, whispered to him softly, as he stood by her side for a moment, that she hoped he would not lose sight of the fact that a haughty spirit went before a fall, and *try* to keep humble. She insinuated, too, that it behoved him to walk circumspectly, and with his eyes upon the ground, as, in the present backward state of the laws in England, harems were not openly acknowledged.

He had laughed at her, and was quite aware that all her saucy whisperings were only meant to bring that scowl to Farquhar's dark face; but in truth he had hardly heard her. Just then he had seen someone sitting over there beneath the barberry bushes, that were weighed down with their wealth of yellow bloom, and he had thought for nothing else.

It was Mrs. Vereker. They had met once or twice since that first Sunday in the churchyard, and he had become accustomed to see her in many colours; but never until now without them. She was dressed in a plain white cambric gown, without a suspicion of blue or pink, or maize anywhere. It seemed the simplest of gowns, yet the experienced eye could see at a glance that it never was made out of Paris, and that the few little scraps of lace that lay in it here and there were priceless. This charming

costume was crowned by a big white hat, rather of the coal-scuttle type.

It struck St. John, as he moved nearer to her, that she was singularly pale to-day, paler even than was her wont. Her eyes looked larger, darker, and—though the idea seemed absurd to him—*frightened*. The red lips, too, betrayed more openly that suspicion of melancholy that had suggested itself to him on first seeing her, and that had somehow fascinated him more than all the radiance of her beauty. He was a man, indeed, strangely alive to impressions of this sort—tender-hearted, honest, and ever ready to be touched by real distress in man or child or woman.

He could hardly fail to see that she looked nervous, restless, and anticipatory. From time to time she turned her head from right to left and back again, as though expecting, but not desiring, the approach of someone. St. John was still a good way from her when he saw this expectancy die, and the dark, troubled eyes concentrate themselves upon some object that to him as yet was unknown.

Her pallor died too, and a hot and almost cruel colour flamed into her face. It dyed cheek and throat and brow and gave him the idea that for the moment she was suffocating. She seemed, too, to shrink a little; and yet she bent deliberately forward, and compelled her unwilling features to form themselves into a smile, the saddest St. John thought he had ever seen.

What could it mean? He had paused somewhat in his easy stride towards her, and now looked in the

direction her eyes had taken. There he saw a man emerging from one of the tents, who, with a rather indifferent air, was walking direct towards Mrs. Vereker. That it might be *Mr. Vereker* never for a moment suggested itself to St. John. It was stupid of him if you will, but so it was.

He was a middle-sized man, powerfully built, with a remarkably repulsive expression. It was not so much the thick, soddened features that displeased you, or the dark and hideous hair, that was fast disappearing from the bald, prominent forehead, or the cunning malice of the small light-blue eyes, but the air of insolent mastery that distinguished the entire figure and shone most conspicuously in the slow walk, which was odiously aggressive.

Just now, added to all these other charms, a dash of sullenness was thrown in that heightened each. As he reached Mrs. Vereker, he paused and bent slightly over her, and muttered something to which she apparently made no answer.

He waited a moment and then went on, much to St. John's unacknowledged relief. He was some disagreeable acquaintance no doubt, some fellow belonging to the county, whom it was impossible quite to ignore. He was glad the stranger had seen the wisdom of not continuing the conversation with her, as, if he *had*, he, St. John, would have felt it his duty to interfere, considering the very unpleasant condition in which it had seemed to him that the repulsive-looking guest decidedly was.

Who could he be? St. John felt an intuitive hatred towards him, yet he could hardly have

explained why. And one thing that should have been in his favour seemed only to militate the more against him. In spite of his brutish appearance, it was impossible for one in St. John's position not to see that the man was—or at all events was originally meant to be—a gentleman!

"How d'ye do, Mrs. Vereker?" said St. John, coming up a little from behind, and therefore bending over her chair to make his presence known.

She started sharply, as if still a little unstrung, and then turned a pale but distinctly relieved face towards him. It was more than relieved, it was pleased.

St. John was doubly glad, first, in that she was so unmistakably sincere in her welcome of him; and secondly, because he hoped to be able to combat for a while at least the trouble that seemed to lie heavy on her. It was, as I say, stupid, but he did not as yet connect that trouble with the man who had addressed her in passing by.

"Is that you?" she said, moving her skirts to one side so as to make room for him beside her on the broad garden chair. "I quite thought you weren't here to-day, as I hadn't seen you—until—now!" Was there a suspicion of reproach in her tone? There was none in her smile certainly, which was soft and friendly.

"You should not hide yourself away like this," responded he, gaily. "How could one hope to see you, shut up in such a leafy bower? What a place to choose! Did you really want to escape us all, or was there some particular ogre——?"

He stopped dead short, feeling as if, innocently, he had made some *bêtise*. He was conscious that she had glanced quickly at him, and that her pale face had flushed crimson.

“I came here—I sat here,” she began confusedly, “not, as you think, to escape anyone—but to—because sometimes I like to sit and think, and besides to-day I was tired—I——”

Her whole air was full of an almost childish distress. It was plain that his absurd remark, with the word “escape” in it, had touched some grievously sore spot in her nervous nature. How painfully anxious she was to do away with the impression that she believed he had formed. The sudden hurt colour in her cheeks reminded him instantly of the flush he had noticed just before the coming of that unpleasant fellow who had said a word or two to her before he, St. John, had joined her. Somehow this remembrance caused a connection to arise in his mind, and he vaguely wondered if she had indeed felt fear at the approach of that man. It seemed impertinent the very idea, and yet he could not divest himself of it, and somehow he hated himself in that he, too, by his injudicious, ill-chosen remark, had brought that cruel colour to her brow. It annoyed him, too, that she should seek to make excuses for herself in that nervous, miserable way. It seemed to put him outside the pale of her friendship, and yet surely—though he did not as yet know why—yet surely instinct told him that she wanted friends. But—*could* he be her friend?

“Why make excuses about it?” said he, with an

assumption of lightness so well done that it deceived her, but which he was far from feeling. "Do you think other people have not known the charms of solitude on a heavenly evening such as this? The one great wonder that remains is, why we are *here*? Why not deep in some mystic wood, with the book most beloved of our souls between our fingers, and a silence unspeakable, and therefore delicious, to hedge us in."

"The woods would probably prove insufficient," said she, smiling again, and evidently relieved by the apparent unconcern of his manner. "We should all rub against each other after a bit—which would mean first *tête-à-têtes*, and then tiny coteries, and, as the woods thickened, societies—and—after that the Deluge, or the present state of affairs all over again."

St. John laughed.

"I'd give my vote for the *tête-à-tête*," he said, "*that* at all events; though I'm not sure that, even if one could arrange them to will, they would not in time grow monotonous. I spoke without reason a moment since. Solitude is all very well in its way, but, you know, it is possible to get too much of even a good thing." He looked at her. "You were not meant to be a recluse," he said.

"No," said she, quickly. "You are right there at least. As a child, I was the merriest creature. Do *you* remember? Well——" seeing him hesitate—he was indeed vainly striving with a fickle memory to remember anything about her youth, which now, it seems to him, must have been worthy of all recollection. "I was. I laughed all day, I

think, and held out loving arms of companionship to every other child I knew. As a girl——”

She paused.

“Yes, go on. As a girl?” asked he, gently. She had seemed so eager, so glad, in her past memories, that he was anxious to keep her mind there. But she turned to him now a face out of which all eagerness and sweet desire was gone, and only hopelessness remained.

“I don’t know. I cannot tell you. There was *no time*,” she said, “I had not realized I was a girl, when——”

She started perceptibly at this moment, and St. John, looking up, saw the repulsive-looking man who had before approached her, now crossing the grass that lay between her and one of the tents.

CHAPTER IV.

“For, God it wot, men may full often find
A lordës son do shame and villainy.
And he that will have price of his gentry
And will himselfë do no gentle deedës
Nor follow his gentle ancestry that dead is,
He is not gentle, be he duke or earl;
For villain sinful deedës make a churl.”

ST. JOHN watched him as he came; as for Mrs. Vereker, she sat quite still, and let her large pathetic eyes grow full of a sickening expectation; they never once quitted the advancing form, and she drew a breath of relief as he came closer, and she could read

his features more closely. No, he was not as bad as usual! She should not be disgraced just *yet*, before——

The heavy-looking stranger stopped beside her, and laid his hand familiarly upon her shoulder. He even shook her slightly to and fro. It was the familiarity of possession.

A sudden passionate desire to fling him backwards, to loose her at all hazards from that contaminating touch, took possession of St. John, and he half raised his arm. It was an almost imperceptible movement, but she saw it, and like a flash of lightning there came to him an entreaty from her white set face.

It was a revelation!

“Come!” said the man in a surly tone of indisputable authority. But one man on earth could have had power thus to address her! At once the truth lay bare to St. John. This—*brute*—was her husband!

His arm fell to his side powerless. Though he had of course received a formal visit from Mr. Vereker, and returned it, yet it so chanced that the two men had not found themselves face to face until this moment.

St. John was conscious of a shock that for an infinitesimal space of time—so short as hardly to be noticeable—paralyzed him. But what a world of thoughts ran through it. That this should be her husband! *Hers*. The lawful possessor of that tender, slender, refined creature! To him it seemed monstrous! It was a sacrilege, a disgrace to any decent, moral, code.

“Come! look sharp,” said Vereker gruffly. He took no more notice of St. John than if he had not been there. “If it is tea you still want, you can get plenty of that when you reach home. And a damned sight better quality too. I’m not going to waste any more of my time in this infernal hole.”

Mrs. Vereker remained speechless—in spite of her hope of a moment since, degradation had descended upon her, and before St. John. She hardly knew why exactly, but she had shrunk with a sense of sickening distaste from the moment when he should stand beside her and see the tragedy of her young life laid bare before him. A wild longing to tell him to go away had held her as she saw her husband approaching, though he was by no means so drunk as usual, but she had not had the courage to do it.

“Why don’t you get up?” said Vereker with an angry snarl. “D’ye think I’m going to stick here all day, dangling after you? Go and say good-bye to the old woman. Get through with the usual polite lies as fast as you can, and let us clear out of this.”

Perhaps she had lost her head a little, but still she made him no answer, nor did she move. An intensely anguished expression grew upon her lips.

“D’ye hear me?” continued he in a thick threatening tone, and as he spoke he gave her a little shove. It was slight, and quite unharmed, but it made St. John’s blood boil, and his very soul within him rose up in revolt.

That the man had been drinking was clear to him.

His eyes were heavy and wandering, his lips tremulous.

Mrs. Vereker rose hastily and held out her hand to St. John. She looked straight at him, and there was something in her face, a curious defiance, mingled with so strong an entreaty, that it at once restored to him his usual self-possession. He came quickly forward, smiling.

“Going so soon?” he said, pleasantly. “Well I can’t but say there is reason in the move. Once the sun fades and the evening comes on——”

He broke off abruptly. He felt unequal—with the best intentions possible—to the task of running down the delicious autumn twilight. Instead, therefore of making a finish to his hypocritical beginning, he made a friendly advance towards Vereker.

“This is Mr. Vereker I think,” he said, with the graciousness that distinguished him. He held out his hand to that deplorable gentleman with such a successful attempt at geniality as made him afterwards suspect himself of having within him the germs of a modern Machiavelli. “Pray introduce me.”

Mrs. Vereker got through the introduction, and her husband sulkily did his part.

“We have been hitherto unfortunate enough to miss each other,” went on St. John, still with amazing cordiality. He spoke rapidly, as if afraid if he once stopped he would not be able to go on again.

Vereker growled out a civil word or two that as he gave them sounded uncivil, and St. John, feeling more despicable than ever, gave his hand to the

sottish-looking brute before him. He found his reward perhaps in the glance of almost passionate gratitude that shone in Mrs. Vereker's eyes. She made him a very slight little inclination as an adieu, as she moved away with her husband, but he had the glance still in his memory to console him for so cold a farewell.

He stood staring somewhat vacantly after her, when suddenly a hand was laid upon his arm.

"Wondering about such a union as that," said a voice at his elbow, choleric yet genial. "Trying to piece it? To bring it into line? Give it up, dear boy. Call it a vile case of buying and selling, and be done with it."

It was old Colonel Scott who was speaking, one of the few residents in Brent whom change of scene and acquaintance and the general wear and tear of life, had failed to turn out of the younger man's memory. He was a rich old bachelor, living alone in a quaint and ancient barrack of a place, some miles from the Chase, and in very comfortable circumstances—so comfortable indeed, that it was not in the power of woman to induce him to alter them. He was a man hasty in word, but slow in deed, and slow to active wrath, and with a heart of gold.

"Clear matter of barter and exchange," he went on with an angry sniff. "A sweet creature; sixteen, sir, she was by Jove, an innocent, trusting child, when forced by her father into a marriage with a vicious scoundrel like that."

He kept waving his arms here and there as if Vereker and his wife, and the wife's father, were in

full view, and he was pointing them out to an appreciative audience. "Confound such fathers, say I," said he.

"Yet it hardly seems to me that old Rowton was the sort of man to force anyone into anything."

"Then call it cajoling. It comes to the same thing in the long run. That fellow Vereker virtually bought her. Rowton was hard up, and literally sold the girl. All the world knows of it. She was first commanded, then entreated, finally told that her father's ruin lay in her refusal to wed the man, and—there was the end. The murder was accomplished. For murder it was as surely as my head rests on my shoulders."

"Is his drunkenness the only thing against him?" asked St. John, abruptly.

"Against Vereker? No! He is a bad sort all through. You've heard of Black Sandy, eh?"

"A notorious poacher hereabouts? Well yes, casually."

"You'll probably form a closer acquaintance with him as the young birds disappear," said the Colonel grimly. "He is called Black Sandy—a rather peculiar sobriquet if you notice—because Nature has endowed him with red hair on his head, and black eyes and black *beard*, a rare conjunction!"

"Rare, certainly. But what of him and Vereker?"

"Black Sandy had a daughter, as handsome as the father is ugly. Vereker," he threw out his hands a bit, "admired her style. Need I go into it? And it was after the sacrifice of that pretty child too, and

she, the wife, came to know it. It is a miserable affair all through for Cecil Vereker, believe me."

"She knows?" said St. John, who had paled a little.

"Oh, yes! It was town talk; and you know how pleased one's dearest friend is to hurry home to one with ill-news. She knows it. Poor, poor child. Why, I feel for her, sir, as though she were my own. By Jove! If she were to bolt to-morrow I'd hardly lay a crumb of blame at her door."

"Don't say that to *her*," said St. John, sharply. "Such a step is always damnatory for the woman."

He made a pretence of some sort, and left the colonel. He wandered listlessly for a while, pondering in a rather indefinite way on what he had just heard, with such a strange new sensation tugging at his heart, as not only astonished but distressed him.

Finally, turning a corner of a yew hedge cut into the shapes of an unlimited number of cocks, he came upon Dorothy Aylmer, sitting all alone.

He forgot to express surprise at this unprecedented event. He dropped upon the garden chair of which she was part owner, and looked fair at her.

"You were not altogether open with me about Mrs. Vereker," he said abruptly, hardly caring what she might think.

CHAPTER V.

"For in such cases women have such sorrow."

"No?" said she slowly. "What is it then I missed revealing?"

“Don’t meet me in that spirit,” said he, with some agitation. He paused, and the fact that she was staring at him came home to his notice. “What I mean is, that Colonel Scott has just enlisted my sympathies for your friend,” he said, compelling his manner to grow brighter—less particular—and yet failing to undo that first impression. “You scarcely prepared me for——”

He paused; and she still sat silent, regarding him with an increased earnestness.

“You speak of her as my friend,” she said at last, looking at the buckles on her shoes, and moving her pretty feet slowly hither and thither on the gravel, “and you speak correctly. She is that, and—I am hers. Perhaps—I thought it better not to discuss her or her concerns, even with you; I said to myself that sooner or later you would be sure to meet *him*. You would be sure to find out for yourself. And besides——”—carefully—“there was no necessity to speak.”

It was a rebuke, and he felt it. He coloured slightly.

“None, of course! But I confess curiosity has now seized upon me. You will allow me that common fault?”

“I have not regarded you as faultless,” said she with a flickering smile. She was evidently uneasy. St. John felt he was being cruel in a degree; but he felt also that he *should* know.

“Such a crime as it seems,” he said. “A satyr wedded to an angel.”

“You speak warmly,” said she.

She raised her eyes and looked curiously at him, and, as though instantly divining that in him she saw a friend of Cecil Vereker's—without waiting to go deeper *then* into the meaning of so strange and sudden a friendship, she leant forward, and gave way to the regretful thoughts that filled her.

“Is it not shameful—horrible?” she cried. “And nothing can be done for her; nothing. If you only knew her as I do, and how sweet, how charming, how childish she is, your heart would bleed for her. I can see you already feel for her, and I know I can speak openly to you, because, indeed, Hilary, to do you justice,”—with a friendly desire to allow him at least *one* good point—“you are always ready to be touched by a real grief; and besides one can be sure that you will not go about gossiping about this and that. Though, indeed, everybody knows how unhappy she is, poor little darling, so you may as well—nay, you had *better*—hear the truth from me, her friend, than trust to chance stories from another.”

“You *are* her friend?” asked he, with more earnestness in his tone than he was quite aware of.

“Why you see,” said she, “I am not a sentimental person. Nature spared me that, for which I am duly grateful. The ordinary woman friendships I am not given to; but I confess I love Cecil very warmly. Indeed”—with an irrepressible glance between the yew cocks to where, on the lawn beyond, a number of young men (and one in particular) are making themselves amiable to a number of young women—“Indeed I love *no one* as I do her.”

"I am glad of it. She wants a true friend," said St. John with a touch of melancholy.

"Ah? that is only too true. Well, she has one in me. And do you know," naïvely, "I assure you I am the greatest *comfort* to her. Yes, you mightn't think it, but I am."

St. John did not feel even inclined to smile. It was said in such good faith; and looking into his cousin's honest eyes, he felt an increased respect and regard for her make warm his heart.

"I am sure of it," he said simply. "Yes. One can understand. Poor soul! her one stroke of luck has been the finding of you."

"Well, not me in particular, but just a good *friend*. That is what she wants. One cannot go on for ever bearing things in silence. That would just end by breaking one's heart. If you are thoroughly unhappy—actually *routed* by unkind circumstances," said Miss Aylmer, shaking her pretty head profoundly, "believe me there is nothing like hearing yourself say so, *out loud!*"

"She has said so to you?"

"Am I telling too much?" asked Dorothy, drawing back a little. She examined his features, and then looked reassured. "Remember, all this is sacred," she said, "and remember too that they married her to that wretch when she was only sixteen; even now she is only nineteen, and fancy what a life there is before her!"

"People don't always reach old age," said he.

She looked at him sharply.

"Oh! you mean *him*," she said. "A hopeless hope. He isn't a day more than thirty-four, and in spite of—of everything,"—hesitating perceptibly—"I feel positively certain he won't die until he is ninety. There isn't a chance of it."

"What an awful speech! It contains the germs of murder," said he, trying, but vainly, to speak with unconcern.

"I don't care how it sounds," recklessly, "to me it seems nothing less than a sin, that all one, sweet, long life should be wasted on——"

"What?" asked St. John, slowly. She waved his question to one side.

"Why can't she get a divorce?" she said with a little frown. "Talk of law! there isn't anything of the sort worth speaking about. If I were the man at the wheel I know what *I* should do. I'd separate every couple who didn't get on beautifully with each other. I should indeed," defiantly. "I think it a shameful thing that, in this enlightened age, a poor woman is to be chained eternally to a most detestable man, without hope of escape, until kindly Death steps in."

"My dear girl, these Socialistic views are startling to a simple person like myself. If every married couple could get a divorce only because their tempers didn't agree, don't you think there would be very few undivorced people left?" He attempted a tone of lightness that ill accorded with his mood. "But come! that is not all," he said, regarding her fixedly. There was a question in his eyes, and she answered it.

"No. There is more." She turned her head away from him. "You have guessed it," she said.

"I have seen it," returned he. "He is a confirmed drunkard. That is what you do not care to tell me." He spoke with a cold self-control that left her certain of the fact that he was inwardly full of a passionate rage against the fate that had seized upon her friend.

"Ah! you have seen him, and seen him *so*? And yet you can advocate the cause of such immoral justice as would compel a woman to cleave to such as him, till death did them part? You still think a woman in her position, whose every hour is an insult, an infamy, a heart-break, should not seek for a separation?"

"She would not get it if—if there was no worse beyond."

"If *I* could not get it, I would take it," cried she, impetuously. "Are women slaves, to be destroyed like that?"

"After all I am not sure that she has been wise in her selection of you as a friend," said he gravely. "You counsel very extreme measures."

"I think only, that youth is but for a short time, and after that comes nothing worth caring for," said she, who was still so young that she believed in her own words. "So why not gain all we can now? And freedom is the first thing. If she could get a separation from that man, she might still learn the lesson of life's sweetness."

"A separation!" responded he moodily. "What

good would that do her? It would not enable her to marry again."

Dorothy raised her eyes. They rested on his for a moment, and then she coloured slowly, warmly.

"What is that to you?" she said. "Why should you think of that?"

"I hardly know. Why does one think of anything?" said he, lamely he felt, with those earnest eyes on his. "Yet the idea naturally presents itself. She is so young, almost, as you suggested, a child. It is only reasonable to suppose that she might yet love, and be loved in return."

He paused as if there was nothing left to be said, but presently belied that idea.

"What a conjunction," he broke out with a vehemence that would not be repressed. "She—and he! May God forgive the man who made that marriage."

"Amen," said Miss Aylmer. "It was her father. I saw you speaking to old Colonel Scott, so I suppose he told you so much. He is very hot on the subject. Yes; it was her own father, and he *knew*! If he is in heaven now, which I hardly dare believe, I feel I am at liberty to abuse him—if not, of course one should show leniency. But—I greatly doubt me that that one deed alone has sent him where he would not be, so surely it behoves us to be gentle towards him, here."

"Be he in Heaven or Hell, it was a cursed act," said St. John, with a bitterness that shook his frame.

"Hilary!" Her tone was startled. She turned completely round as if a little shocked, and as if the

better to see him. "Why do you speak like that? She is a stranger to you—— Hilary——" She paused, and a rather frightened expression darkened her eyes. "I do not understand. How is it with you?" she said.

"I hardly know myself. If *you* know," in a low tone, "respect the knowledge." There was a long pause between them, and then he leant towards her. "Does he ill-treat her?" he said.

"You have heard many things," said she, with a slight frown, "you can judge." She was very pale.

"You are, I know, a staunch friend; but what I would still further know is, does he ill-treat her *bodily*? Does he *hurt* her?"

He seemed to sicken as he asked the question. Yet he asked it, as if determined to probe the cruel wound that was killing him.

"You forget," a little coldly, a little troubled, "that I said I was her confidante. When she puts her trust in me, and when you know she does, you should not ask me such a question."

"I am answered; you need betray nothing," said he. "Then—then why does she not sue for the divorce you spoke of a while since?"

"Ah! you see reason for it now," said she. "A woman must be proved black and blue from ill-usage before a man will lend her a helping hand. I declare I hate *all* men!" with a second glance through the yew cocks to where Farquhar, amongst others, is disporting himself amongst the living fashion-plates upon the lawn. He is too far off for her to see with what a lugubrious face his disporting

is carried on. "Well, shall I tell you why she refrains from seeking justice for her wrongs? Because there are still women in the world (abject creatures I call them) who, rather than lay bare their private lives to the critical eyes of a prying world, would suffer *martyrdom*! She is one of them."

"She looks like it," said St. John slowly.

"I don't know that she is wrong," said Dorothy, with a sudden swift abandonment of her position. "I daresay if I were in her place (however bad it is), I too should shrink from a scrutiny that always condemns the woman, and condones the man."

"Dorothy," said St. John, slowly, painfully. "Tell me this? Do you mean that he has uplifted his hand against her? That he has—*struck* her?" He paused and drew his breath hard. "You have almost allowed me to believe it; but—but it seems *impossible*! That gentle frail child! I must have mistaken you; but yet—she cowered before him—I saw it. She was afraid, I think. Great Heaven! that such a thing should be!" He stood up, and looked down at her with a face as white as death. "If this thought of mine is a lie, say so!" he entreated vehemently.

"I will say nothing—nothing! You should not ask me," said she nervously.

"You could deny," suggested he, regarding her with a sombre glance.

But she remained silent.

He walked up and down upon the gravel before her, as if uncertain how to proceed; and then

suddenly as it were flung his present thought from him.

"Come! a truce to sombre reflections," said he at last, stopping opposite to her. "I have some news that I would tell you. My sister, Lady Bessy Gifford, is coming to me next week."

"Oh! I *am* glad!" cried Dorothy, quickly. "She will put a little life into us, and we are so die-away down here, that we want it. Besides—do you know?—she has a special fancy for Mrs. Vereker. And——"

"Yes; she is coming, and some of her friends with her. You must help me to make her visit a pleasant one," said St. John, rather quickly, as if afraid of what her next words might be.

He turned away and thus came face to face with Captain Farquhar, who was hurrying towards him.

"I leave you a companion," said he to his cousin, smiling, and forthwith struck into a bye-path and was lost to view.

CHAPTER VI.

"I gave her all my heart and all my thought."

THERE was a wrathful cloud upon Farquhar's brow, as, with a distinct air of protest, he took St. John's vacated place next Dorothy.

"You look worried. Anything wrong?" asked Miss Aylmer, ever so sweetly. "Neuralgia?"

"No," said Farquhar shortly.

"Some of your lady friends been treating you badly perhaps? I noticed you were rather *empresé* just now with one of those Mackenzie girls. You shouldn't mind *that*, you know, it's ever so much better than a toothache, or a headache, or a——"

"I think it is so disgraceful of you to talk like that," said Farquhar indignantly. "Do I ever even *see* any girl but you? Whereas you—you——" He seemed to find a difficulty in going on for a moment or two. "It seems to me that you can't be happy for even one short five minutes without an admirer, without someone mad enough to think he can waken love in your breast."

"I haven't seen a madman to-day, I hope, unless, indeed, it be you?" with quite an anxious glance at him. "And as to admirers, who admires me now in especial, may I ask?"

"That cousin of yours. I watched him from over there," pointing to the distant lawn. "And one would imagine by his manner that life or death depended upon what you might say to him. He seemed to hang upon your words."

"Did it strike you so?" She regarded him earnestly. "Do you know that thought, too, occurred to me. Yet I would be sorry to believe it really was so."

"A coquette's speech!" bitterly. "Good Heavens! do you ever dream of the mischief you can do, with your soft looks, and soft words, and——"

"Do *you* ever think of how much folly you can cram into one sentence?" she interrupted im-

patiently. "Soft words, soft looks. After all, I don't think you can complain of a surfeit of them."

"You evade what I would ask," said he, still angry, though a little puzzled by her manner, which was not as *insouciant*e as usual. "Do you mean to tell me that St. John was not making love to you?"

She seemed to reflect awhile; her eye was on him, and she seemed to enjoy the despairing anger that was fast getting the better of him.

"Well, I don't think he was," she said at last.

"You say that honestly?"

"Should I say it dishonestly?"

"How should I know?" There was such misery in his face that she could not consider him as rude as he really was. "I can only say that there is always Vesey beside you, and if not Vesey, Sunderland, and now—your cousin. You can't exist, it seems to me, without one or the other of them."

"You should put yourself in; I'm sure I endure a good deal of you," said she, thoughtfully.

"Endure! That is a good word for *me*, nothing at all for you. *Endure!* As for the others——"

"I conclude from all this that you are accusing me of being a flirt," said she, very calmly. "It would save trouble if you said it outright, but I know it is the habit of some people to duck, and swerve, and ——"

"If you mean that I shrink from saying what I think, you are wrong," said he hotly. "If it is to be the last word between us, I declare most solemnly that I believe you to be the cruellest flirt living!"

"Ah!" She meditated a little. "Now some

girls are indignant," she said at last, "if that epithet is applied to them; some do not care. I confess I am of the latter class. It argues a want of moral tone in me, no doubt, but I confess, too, that I am quite willing to run alone without that. It is shameful of me, I suppose, but I really should not feel in the least aggrieved if you were to go even further, and try to wither me with the word 'coquette.'"

There was something in her tone that, though it increased his anger, left him without a word, save one single protest.

"Have I no reason?" he said.

"Who cares for reason?" returned she boldly. "It is an obsolete thing. You accuse me of many things that have no reason in them, so why should you argue from *that* point? I tell you," there was a rather wicked little light in her eyes as she now spoke, "that I like you, and Mr. Vesey, and Mr. Sunderland, and my cousin very much, very much *indeed*, but—though you seem to doubt it—I feel as if I could get on without you all, very well—for a time." She put in the last clause with a settled affectation, as though afraid of bringing to a head the growing wrath upon his face.

"Of course I mean only for a time," she continued prettily. "But——"

"Will you say openly that your cousin is nothing to you? Of myself I do not speak, I ask no question. I have loved you long and"—bitterly—"most *miserably*, but I do not ask you to waste a thought on me. It was my own folly from first to last. But of him——"

"Dear Arthur, *do* you think you are quite well? You know I hinted a moment since at toothache, and you took my kindly inquiry up so shortly that I could not help believing I had struck the nail—or rather the tooth—on the head."

"Answer me," said he.

"About Hilary? About my cousin? I would do a good deal to soothe a suffering man, and I feel sure your tooth is a four-pronged one, but—*how* can I say he is nothing to me?" She spoke with quite a nervous air.

"What!" cried he, springing to his feet. "Then it is true! You would tell me that——"

"That he is very closely connected with me? Why yes. Do pray sit down again and let us argue it out. Being my cousin, how could I possibly say he was nothing to me?"

"Pshaw!" angrily, "you know very well what I meant." He looked relieved, however, and presently a wistful expression filled the eyes he fixed on her. "Dorothy," said he, "I wish you would tell me honestly that you care nothing for all these fellows who are for ever dangling after you——"

"Oh! I can't. I couldn't, indeed, I like them all so much, and they are so kind to me. It would be the basest ingratitude. *Never* were there kinder people. You would not surely counsel such utter heartlessness. And—and you too! *You* dangle a good deal on your own account, don't you?"

Her eyes are innocence itself, as she makes this mild suggestion.

"Don't class me with the others," said he with

indignant reproach. "*They* all look happy, whilst I! —Do I look happy? Look at me, and see."

"How could a man with a tooth——"

"Nonsense. My tooth is as sound as your own. But I tell you I am the most miserable beggar alive. Am I to understand then, by what you say, that you still intend to continue your encouragement of all three of them?"

"If you can call it encouragement," mournfully. "Though how you *can*! And as for that, you might as well make it four when you are about it, as I am sure I like you as well as any of them."

"*As well!* Oh, Dorothy!"

"Quite as well," kindly. "Don't you believe me, then? I assure you I——"

"I don't want to hear anything more," interrupted he, brusquely. "Four in your train! and to be only one of them! No, thank you! I'll take myself out of your way at once."

"You aren't going this moment, are you?" said she.

"Oh, the sooner the better."

He had said this pretty often, and Miss Aylmer, though she sighed profoundly and managed to look aggrieved, was not terribly upset by the threat. She was a little at a loss perhaps to know what to say next, when there came an interruption from the eastern side of the garden that reduced both her and Farquhar to silence.

It consisted of a succession of piercing shrieks, that, but for the excessive heat of the day, would have frozen the blood in their veins.

Mr. Blair, overcome by the pathos of "Old Bob Ridley," and a specially high note, had over-balanced himself and fallen backwards into the fountain, banjo and all!

He was at present being extricated by his admirers, and even now, as Dorothy and Farquhar stared panic-stricken in the direction of the spot from whence the shrieks had come, he appeared, dripping indeed, but still apparently in the highest spirits, holding his banjo aloft as though in defiance of Fate, and followed by a bevy of sympathetic maidens.

Catching sight of Dorothy, he waved the streaming banjo towards her, as he was swept into the house.

"Dear Bobby," said Miss Aylmer, tenderly, who had met Mr. Blair in Town on various occasions, and who was indeed a distant connection of his. "What a misfortune! I hope they will see that he is properly dried. But what courage under adversity! How I do love him!" She spoke in low but beautifully distinct tones, clear and full of feeling.

This was the end of all things.

"That makes *five!*" said Farquhar, with a groan, not loud, but deep, and, with a last indignant glance, he turned and left her.

CHAPTER VII.

"For Troilus full fast her soulē sought,
Withoutē word, on him alway she thought."

LADY BESSY GIFFORD was a small woman, lively and fair; and one of the most cultivated coquettes

in Europe. She was not in the least pretty, but she was that far more desirable thing, attractive. Her nose had a distinctly upward curve, her mouth was large—her teeth indeed perfection; and, as she laughed a good deal, this counted. Her hair was so light as to be almost grey, and her eyes were too dark to suit it.

Her complexion was indeed all she had to boast of, and certainly she said as much as she decently could about it, on all occasions. It was undeniably lovely, and it was her own; whether her eyebrows were——

Her hands and feet were exquisitely formed, and she had a perfect talent for dressing herself. It was whispered here and there amongst her many cronies that even the immortal Worth had once been indebted to her for a valuable hint—a “wrinkle,” as she called it—when reduced to despair over the beautifying of a hideous blonde.

She was one year younger than her brother, who was twenty-nine, but she looked at least five years his junior. Whether this was because *he* showed older than his years, or because of her maid, who belonged to the class called “priceless treasures,” let who will decide. It would be the invidious one who would give it against Lady Bessy.

She was, indeed, charming, so sympathetic, so gay. St. John, her brother, was very fond of her, though, perhaps, now and then he hardly approved of her. But what will you?

He was, in a degree, particular, without being oppressively so, whilst as for her, she said and did

exactly what she pleased. So far, providentially, she had kept within the drawn line, and had not incurred the scorching condemnation of the more serious-minded portion of her set. "This," *she* said, "proved the innate, stern virtue that distinguished her." According to the more frivolous of her acquaintance, it proved nothing, save that there is more in luck than good management, and that she was a favourite of the gods in that she had up to this escaped the lynx-eyed dragons of Society.

She had had a husband once, but fortunately his forefathers had claimed him early in her married life. It seemed quite a long time ago now—quite three years. He had been a well-bred scoundrel of the most unmitigated type, and, to do her justice, she had been a model wife to him; but she was glad when freedom once again dawned for her. The single sign of grace he had shown in his disgraceful life was to take himself out of it before he had had time to squander more than half of his huge income. The other half fell to his widow, and left her richer than most.

She held herself as having fallen low in the world when she could count less than four strings to her bow, and, indeed, she could no more help her coquetries than a bird could help flying; such captives were her social bread and cheese, her daily sustenance, she could not have existed without them; and on the whole her successes were innocent enough, and she could speak of many an aspirant to her hand who, even after rejection, was now her friend. This *proved, not only* cleverness, but a good heart; and

one other thing lay to her credit, that she never willingly sought to annex the legitimate prey of any other woman.

“There was always a lone man or two about, thank Heaven!” she would say; “a few lost, unattached creatures, and these suited her well. She would not have it on her conscience (generally a *very* elastic band) to deprive another woman of what was rightly hers.” She would, indeed, swear by all her gods, that she had never done anyone so shabby a trick as *that*. Perhaps she hadn’t!

She adored St. John, and spent a good deal of her superfluous time arranging marriages for him that should keep him at home, and put an end to his eternal wanderings. Hitherto, she had been unsuccessful. But now that he was home again, with a prospect of staying there for some considerable period, hope flowed freely in her veins again, and she was as keen about the ranging of him as ever.

This desire of hers to see him comfortably established, was the more unselfish of her, because, during his many prolonged absences, she was virtually the mistress of The Chase. She had come down there every autumn by his special wish, bringing her friends with her, and had there acted chatelaine, and entertained the county with a free hand, and on the whole, had very much enjoyed herself.

The Chase was a very desirable place in which to put in a month or two, or even three; and her reception by the gentry round was always most flatteringly cordial. She had two country seats of her own; but none, somehow, that she loved as she did

The Chase—and, of course, the coming of a wife to St. John would put an end to her reign there. Yet, for the sake of keeping her brother near her, and for the sake of his welfare, she sought most honestly to get him the woman who should oust her from a very coveted position. Beyond doubt there was good in her.

She arrived somewhat late in the afternoon, and having hurried to the room that was always kept sacred for her, and thrown aside her dusty wraps and made herself lovely in the newest tea-gown, she sent for her brother, who hurried to answer her summons.

Quite a little mass of white lace and dead-leaf satin flung itself into his arms.

“Why, how charming you look,” said he, holding her back from him, after the fifth embrace vehemently pressed upon him. “Bless me, what a get-up! Do you want to turn the heads of all our rustics? And as for the rest, why I believe time has skipped you. You look a little girl still.”

“An odious compliment!” laughing. “Why should you think me young, unless something in my appearance has suggested age! Pouf! you are no courtier.”

“I am only honest. What real courtier was ever that? Besides, you wrong me. Eternal youth seems to be your portion. Come! you should give me the receipt.”

“A quiet conscience,” says she saucily. “Dear, dear Hilary, how sweet it is to see you again. Sit down beside me here and tell me all the news. *There is plenty of time*; they cannot want their tea

yet. Well, to begin with, I *do* hope you mean staying *this* time, and that we shall not see an announcement next week in those vile Society papers saying you are off to the Sandwich Isles, or any equally civilised spot."

"I shan't go without giving you an address, certainly," said he laughing.

"What an answer! Why can't you make me happy? Why can't you settle down like other men and come to anchor?" said his sister impatiently. "So many delightful people waiting to receive you with open arms, and you hurrying hither and thither over the face of the unknown globe without a semblance of meaning in your behaviour, shooting at wild beasts, cackling over decayed remnants of animals both out of time and out of mind. Call *that* sensible conduct? Waste of valuable time I call it. Why can't you marry, Hilary, like other honest people, and drop into a possible line of life?"

"You mean yours. Is it possible?" said he, half jestingly. "Well, it seems as though I were going to please you at last. Here I am. Isn't The Chase a safe anchorage?"

"Tolerably so. If you will remain in it. But staying here isn't all. No man would stay here without an inducement."

"You mean that I must give the old place a mistress. As to marriage—I say, Bessy, who have you brought down with you? No girls on the look-out, I trust. None in their third season? Answer me honestly. From any girl so desperate as *that*, I warn you I shall turn and flee."

"I haven't brought a girl at all. Rest easy. I gave you your opportunities in that way all through the season, and now I am determined to leave you to chance. Nemesis must overtake you sooner or later. Pray the gods it be sooner. No, I shouldn't dream of bringing *girls* about with me. I don't see the use of them," said Lady Bessy naïvely. "They are neither fish, flesh, nor fowl, nor good red herring now-a-days. A shame, I call it, but the wedding-ring has thrust them all out of sight. The young married woman carries the day *now*."

"Am I to understand that you have brought a widow or two for my subjugation?"

"Don't flatter yourself," saucily. "Widows are at a premium. No getting *them* for love or money. I've brought you one or two of the women you met last June in town, and of whom you were graciously pleased to express yourself as contented with. They are quite correct, if eminently agreeable, warranted to go easy, and give no trouble, and to be up to the task of amusing *themselves*. That's a great point gained. I never permit myself to be intimate with women who require their hostess to amuse them. That's the real reading of an unconvertible bore!"

"Give me their names," said her brother, lying back with lazy contentment in a lounging chair and yawning happily. Nothing like a sister when all is told. Yawns, and stretches, and lazy poses never awake wrathful jealousy within *her* breast.

"Mrs. Dameron for one. All *she* wants is Bertie Hawtrey (he's coming), a conservatory, or a secluded corner. Then there is Lady Eustace Fenmore; give

her a pen and ink and an empty room, and she'll be happy for ever. Dear soul, she *thinks* she writes sonnets—*thinks!* Oh, *why* does she think so much? Still, she's useful sometimes, and her novels aren't bad. Besides, her husband, poor fellow," with a profound sigh—"is such a comfort! *He'll* help me through."

"Now Bessy," sternly, "I sincerely hope that——"

"My darling boy! Now why should you say anything so shocking? Not at all, not at all, I assure you," throwing out her pretty hands in plaintive protest. "On the contrary, he is, as all the world knows, perfectly *devoted* to that little leggy creature at the Cri. *You* know."

"I don't," said St. John indignantly.

"No? Where were you born? Maud Darrell she calls herself. Such presumption! George Blunt tells me her real name is Maryanne Mounsey."

St. John groaned. Not much hope to be got out of the company so far.

"Well, go on. Who else?" asked he. There was some resignation in his air.

"Only the Deverils. You know them. I gave very few invitations, because I knew you could recruit your forces from the neighbourhood, and if you intend to remain here for some time, which," with a keen glance, "I hope you *do*, it is essential that you should stand in well with the next doors. Besides you have Bobby Blair here, haven't you? and he is an unlimited number of guests in himself. Brent is rather more affording than most country

places. It positively swarms with girls, so why should I bring any? To begin with, there is Dorothy, as pretty a creature as one need look for."

"She is prettier than ever, I think."

"So? Well, there are the Mackenzie girls; they'd help to square twice as much beauty as even Dorothy can boast, and there are plenty of others. If you are thinking of giving a ball, or anything of that sort, you will find——. But I really wish you would assure me, Hilary, that you are not going abroad again."

"*Ever* again? How could I assure you of that? Be happy on one point at least," speaking decisively, "I have no intention of leaving England at present, if at all.

"No? Really?" She sprang to her feet and clapped her hands in a pretty excitement. She looked very hard at her brother. "Who is it?" cried she; "it *must* be a woman. Dorothy? You might do worse than Dorothy. She is *chic*, all through. *Not* Rosa Mackenzie! Mrs. Morell? Mrs. Vereker? *She* is lovely, in her own melancholy way."

A pang shot through St. John's heart. "Melancholy,"—did it not indeed describe her?

"I wish you would not sit with your back to the light," went on his sister, lightly. "One can't see where the ingenuous blush comes in. But, of course, such a prude as you are would not let your well-regulated mind stray after a *married* woman! Come, be frank with me, who is it?"

"I envy you the liveliness of your imagination,"

said St. John laughing. "Why should it be anyone? Why should I not stay here for the love of the thing."

"Ah! quite so! But *what* thing? That is the lesson I would learn."

"The love of an English country, the green fields, the singing birds, the——"

"The low of the milkmaid, and the song of the swine!" interrupted she, without apology. "Pouf! What do you take me for? It is very complimentary of you, my dear, to give me the rôle of an *ingénue*, one still so young that to deceive her is simple; but, on the whole, I prefer to be treated as a rational being. If you won't tell me, why *don't*. I know myself sufficiently to be sure that I shall learn all without help. And now, what is to be the first move in your hospitable game?"

"I thought of a ball. The people round here have been unanimously kind, and——"

"A dinner party first, then a ball," said she. "Say Friday week. And who will you ask?"

"Why, everybody, I suppose. The Verekers, the ——" he went on to enumerate a good many people, but Lady Bessy was not attending. She had heard the names of the guests first mentioned, and she stopped at that.

"Yes—yes, excellent," she said presently when he paused. "Bless me! it is five o'clock. How time does run in agreeable society. There! You should be civil to me for a week for that. Run away, Hilary, and tell them I'll be down in a moment. By-the-bye—Bobby Blair *is* here?"

“Yes.”

“Very good.”

When he was gone, she stood still for a minute or so, gazing at the door as if she still could see him.

“It is Mrs. Vereker,” she said at last, in a low tone.

CHAPTER VIII.

“Approachē 'gan the fatal destiny
That Jovis hath in disposition
And to you angry Parcæ, sisters three,
Committeth to do execution.”

THAT St. John knew at this time that he was in love with Mrs. Vereker, he himself in all honesty would have been the first to strenuously deny. He admired, liked, pitied her; but that was all. There his feeling for her, as he believed, stopped. If it ever occurred to him that the strength of his liking and pity was very much out of proportion to the length of his knowledge of her, which extended over only a week or two, he would have argued, and very justly, that hers was an exceptional case, which *no* man could dwell upon untouched, and that pity from all sides, however careless, was accorded her.

What a terrible abandonment of youth, of hope, of even the faintest glimmer of joy, lay in the life to which she had been condemned—wedded to a drunkard, a man dead to all the decencies of society—without one redeeming virtue to which a gentle woman might cling, willing, because of it,

to condone the grosser faults. No, there was no light for her anywhere.

Her dark, melancholy eyes haunted him; the sad, resigned lips, actually seemed to hurt him, during those moments when he permitted himself to dwell upon them, and those moments came much too often; unconsciously, yet with a settled persistency.

He was hardly aware of them; he still believed in the integrity of the friendship that made his soul sick when his mind lingered on the details of her martyrdom.

He would not admit that he loved another man's wife, yet he was daily tortured by so strong a desire to see her, that it should have warned him. He fought with this desire fiercely, as only an honourable man would, and he persistently kept away from Vereker's Court; giving himself always as a reason for his absenting himself from it, that he detested the master on the grounds of his drunkenness and wantonness. It made his blood boil, it would make the blood of any honest man boil, he told himself, only to think of him, and so they were better apart.

He met Cecil very frequently, however, at the houses round, during this autumn, which he reluctantly felt was set apart from all the other autumns he had ever known. At the Grange, perhaps, he saw most of her, though she was oftener to be found at that modest house where Dorothy Aylmer maintained an undying warfare with her aunt.

Miss Jemima, however, was too stout a warrior to be encountered frequently, and after one or two trials of her strength, St. John was forced to confess himself a vanquished foe, and with abject cowardice drew back from battle, and refused to meet that valiant spinster again on her own ground.

From everyone, he heard tales of Vereker's brutality. Mrs. Mackenzie, who was an inveterate gossip, was never tired of reciting the last new thing in scandal where the Hon. Francis was concerned—the *dis*-honourable Francis as she called him—and Old Colonel Scott was very little behind-hand with her. He sang his dispraises from morning till night.

It was a terrible little place for gossip, as all small country sides must be, through lack of mental food to give them wider vision. The inhabitants were literally buried alive, so far as culture went, with an exception here and there, going nowhere, and learning nothing fresh from year's end to year's end. To those accustomed to travel and to the ever-changing possibilities of a life carried on in a capital, the narrow-mindedness of those eternally condemned to one small centre, and that out of the world, would hardly be conceivable.

At Brent they had grown gradually dead to the belief that there was indeed a larger existence outside and beyond the one they led. What *they* thought on such and such a point must be correct, and woe betide the rash member of their com-

munity who, in a weak moment, dared to question it. Such a one as ventured to differ with them on the subject of social right and wrong must necessarily be wanting in morality, and entirely lost to all sense of decency and order.

St. John strove hard to treat most of the stories about Francis Vereker as mere *canards*, exaggerations arising out of his miserable failing. Brutalised by drink he might be; but beyond that——. It was agony to him to believe otherwise, for *her* sake. But as he began to live his life in this dull little neighbourhood, opportunities were given him to prove the truth of most of the gossip.

It was an exceptionally fine autumn, and though now well into September, the days were warm as though they were loose fragments of July, dropped by the Clerk of the Weather, and picked up later and thrust in somehow into the bosom of the month where they should not be. There was a tennis party at Colonel Scott's, who had a special delight in gathering round him the youthful members of the society amongst which he lived. These bursts of hospitality on his part were welcomed by the elders, because, though he only desired the sons and daughters, the latter could not accept invitations unless accompanied by their chaperones.

It was a charming afternoon. The sun still rode high in heaven, and cast its rays as lovingly on the earth beneath as though its merriest days were not long overpast. St. John, striding along the road

that would lead him to Colonel Scott's home, with his mind full of a nervous hope that there he should meet Mrs. Vereker, was so far absorbed in his own meditations that when a dark form jumped over the wall that skirted one side of the road, he started visibly.

The new-comer was noticeable enough in himself to attract attention, even had his coming been foreshadowed more gently. A huge, grimy, forbidding-looking creature, with a touch of the forge about him, yet no trace of honesty which, as a rule, belongs to the village blacksmith. Shock tufts of sandy hair stuck out on every side from under a most disreputable cap, and two of the blackest, most villainous eyes, looked hard at St. John from beneath the sandy eyebrows. There was character in the face no doubt; but *bad* character, and on the whole he stood revealed as a most repulsive object. Two furry legs were sticking out of his left pocket.

"What's the time, mister, if a man might ax?" said he, in a gruff voice, would-be civil, but wholly insolent.

St. John, after a steady glance at him, took out his watch.

"Five to four," he said. He looked at the man again with a sort of secondhand interest. It was Black Sandy, the worst character in the village, the father of the girl with whom Francis Vereker's name had been so unpleasantly mixed up. A thorough-going scoundrel he decided, as he studied the man's lowering, coarse, demoralised face, in

which little of any decent humanity remained. Yet, in spite of all, he pitied the fellow! He might indeed, perhaps, have spoken to him—might have said some kindly word to this Pariah, this creature cast out even by his low associates of the village tavern, but that something happened that at this moment attracted as much the attention of the ruffian as of the gentleman.

It was the sound of horses' hoofs thundering over the stony road. Such a sound could come only from horses completely lost to all control. A second later brought into view a phaeton swaying wildly from side to side, and coming towards them with a fearful rapidity. It was apparent to anyone looking on that the two cobs in it were wild with fear, and had ceased to pay any heed to the admonitions of their driver, could that driver have been equal to an argument. But she was not. The cobs were well-known to St. John, and it needed not the second glance to tell him that Mrs. Vereker was the sole occupant of the phaeton. Whatever had frightened the poor brutes they were nearly mad with rage, and tore along at an astounding pace, that left their mistress powerless. Evidently, the groom had been flung out some time ago; but she still held on.

As the cobs in their frantic race drew nearer, St. John, whose nerve was now like iron, could see that Mrs. Vereker, though white as death, still held the reins firmly. In a minute or two they would pass where he stood, with Black Sandy beside him, and he realised that now or never was to be made

the effort that would fling them on their haunches, and reduce them to reason.

- He glanced at the man beside him and saw that he was leaning forward, a wild look of exultation on his face. It was a horrible look, and, at the time, maddened St. John. His help was necessary, and he should have it. He caught Black Sandy by the arm and swung him fiercely to and fro.

“Man! ’Tis a *woman!*” he said.

At this instant the infuriated cobs rushed by; he sprang forward and seized the reins. They were powerful brutes, and would in all probability have mastered him had not another hand come to his aid.

Black Sandy was beside him! Together they forced back the ponies, and presently, with a soothing word or two, and the instinctive knowledge that they had found their masters, the terrified creatures stood quite still, trembling, but subdued.

Mrs. Vereker was very white, but when he had time to go to her, she had recovered her composure.

“It was such a mere nothing,” she said, in a rather panting little way. “Only a sow and her little ones that crossed the road; but Magic,” pointing to the off pony, “cannot endure a pig. I am so much obliged to you, and to——”

She glanced at Sandy, and then, as quickly, withdrew her gaze, as if what she saw offended her.

“If you had not come, I don’t know what would have happened. My groom tried to get out, but he fell, and,” in a distressed tone, “I am afraid he

is hurt. What shall I do about him? I had better go on to Colonel Scott's and send a messenger from there."

"You needn't," said St. John, who was gazing down the road behind her. "I can see him on the top of the hill, he is running to you; I am sure from his bearing he is all right."

"Oh! what a comfort," said she eagerly. "I was so afraid that——That man too has been kind." She said this without a second glance at Black Sandy, to whom however she alluded, and who stood at the ponies' heads, sullen and defiant. "I——" she made a hasty movement towards her pocket and then stopped short, and blushed hotly. "If—if you will lend me half-a-crown, I shall be so obliged," she said.

If she had been a woman with money always at her disposal—even at her disposal so far as the smallest sums were concerned—it would have been impossible to her to look as she looked then. She had lost her colour because of the ponies' misbehaviour, but white as she was when St. John stopped them, she was not so white as she was now, when she made him this small request. His heart seemed to die within him. Without knowing—whilst even sternly forbidding himself to believe it—he knew the truth! She was kept penniless! Any married woman will understand the cruelty, the degradation, of such tyranny as that.

A miserable shame had crept into her lovely eyes, and it hurt him like the stab of a knife. But he was careful to conceal from her all knowledge of her

confusion, and his voice was just ordinarily cheerful and courteous as he answered her.

"Is that all I can do for you?" he said. "You are going on to Colonel Scott's, I suppose. Don't you think I had better undertake these troublesome brutes so far?" He held out to her half-a-crown as he spoke.

"No, give it to him, *you*," said she drawing back.

St. John went round to where the man stood, still with his hand on the bridle of the cob near him.

"Mrs. Vereker is very much obliged; she desired me to give you this," said he, holding out the half-crown.

Black Sandy, who so far had stood motionless as if dazed at the ponies' heads, now suddenly grew into life. He upreared his gigantic frame, and looked first at St. John and then at Mrs. Vereker. His expression changed slowly, from stolid indifference to a slow rage and from that to a boiling fury. Deliberately he took the coin that St. John offered him, spat upon it, and without a word, flung it right into Mrs. Vereker's face.

A second later he had cleared the wall and had disappeared into the thick brushwood on his left.

CHAPTER IX.

“If no love is, O God! why feel I so?
And if love is, what thing and which is he?
If love be good, from whence cometh my woe?
If it be wick', a wonder thinketh me
Whence ev'ry torment and adversity,
That comes of love may to me savoury think
For more I thirst the morè that I drink.”

ST. JOHN'S first thought was to overtake and half kill him, but a second's reflection showed him the impossibility of being able to do this. It had all happened so suddenly, so unexpectedly, and now the fellow was so far ahead that to run him down was out of the question. His second thought was for Mrs. Vereker; she was lying back in the phaeton, very pale and nervous.

“You are frightened!” said St. John. He was pale too, and his eyes were flashing. “That scoundrel, I shall take care that he lives to regret this day.”

“No, no,” said she eagerly. She leaned towards him and laid one trembling hand upon his arm. “That is what I feared. But to oblige me, if I ask you, you will take no notice of it. *Promise* me you will not move in this matter. That man—brutally as he has behaved—there are reasons—believe me—he is to be pitied—forgiven.”

She was stammering hopelessly, and again that shamed look grew within her eyes. She stooped, as if to arrange her skirts, but in reality to hide her face, and the little action was so ineffectual, so

childish, that anyone would have been sorry for her. Old Colonel Scott's revelation about Black Sandy's daughter rose to St. John's mind, and of course he understood.

"Well, as you wish," said he carelessly. "But it is over good of you to let that scoundrel go unpunished. And now, you are looking very much unnerved, suppose you give me a place beside you, and let me drive these refractory little beasts to the haven where you would be."

"Oh! if you *will*," said she. She moved to one side, and very willingly made room for him. The groom had come up by this time, and had taken his seat behind. "Are you too coming to Colonel Scott's?" she asked.

"Yes, I was on my way there. You are sure you are feeling all right now? That you would not rather turn and go home?"

"*Home!* No!" said she, with a quick certainty that told its own tale.

They were a little late when they arrived, but no one took much notice of them except Lady Bessy, who arched her brows slightly, and looked at Blair, who happened to be beside her.

"Well, I *never*," said she, under her breath.

"Never what?" demanded that young man with lively interest. "Is there anything under the sun you have never done yet?"

"One!" said she. "I've never made a fool of myself at all events; for those who *have*——" She broke off abruptly and turned away.

"What's for them?" asked he, "your blessing?"

“The other thing,” said she.

“Good heavens! don’t say that!” entreated he. “Consider what a fool *I’ve* been, about you, ever since we were both born!”

To her, this open flirtation of St. John’s with Mrs. Vereker seemed the very acme of folly. She loved her brother too well not to shrink from anything that might compromise him in the eyes of his world. She wanted to marry him, and marry him well, and to see him deliberately compromise himself would ruin all her schemes. The fact that Mrs. Vereker was looking very white and nervous as she crossed the terrace towards her host only added to her belief that something more than ordinary had happened between her and St. John.

“I shouldn’t wonder if he were to fall desperately in love with her. He is just the sort of man to let pity be akin to love, and of course she is to be pitied. One must admit that. But I wish she would look for consolation elsewhere.”

In the meantime, Mrs. Vereker, having greeted Colonel Scott, had gone swiftly to where Dorothy Aylmer was sitting beneath the branching limbs of a huge beech.

“Dorothy, can you let me have half-a-crown?” she said softly, yet with such evident, even painful, anxiety that Dorothy, turning her shoulder to Mr. Vesey, who was sitting as nearly in her pocket as he could manage, drew her down caressingly on the seat beside her.

“Now don’t give way to vulgar excitement,” she said, “when I tell you that I am at present not

only the proud possessor of two shillings and the invaluable sixpence, but that I can even lay my hand on one pound ten. You have only to say the word and all shall be yours. Ah! I knew I had been too abrupt. You pale! One should break such tidings with a velvet tongue!"

Mrs. Vereker smiled faintly.

"Keep the rest, you rich girl," she said, "but lend me the half-crown. I owe it to somebody."

"To the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker?"

"No, to your cousin—to Mr. St. John. The ponies came to grief on my way here, and a man—helped me——" she hesitated, as if not knowing how to go on.

"What's the matter with you?" said Dorothy promptly. "You know it does you good to speak out. What man helped you? Come, tell me, was it Hilary? Surely you are not going to reward *him* with half-a-crown?"

"No. It was Black Sandy!" Even with Dorothy she looked shy and distressed as she mentioned the man's name. "He caught the ponies by the head, and I borrowed the money from your cousin to pay him, and—and—now I want to pay your cousin back again."

"So soon? Is thy servant a Jew that he—— Well, you are right, I think. Here is the money; get that debt off your conscience as soon as ever you can."

"What a comfort that you have it," said Mrs. Vereker, with the first gleam of sunshine on her

charming face that the day had yet seen. "I was so afraid you would be without a penny. I'll go and pay him at once. I assure you, Dorothy, I was so ashamed at having to borrow it, that I didn't know which way to look. I'll come back in a moment."

Her brow had quite cleared. Her smile was once more natural. She moved in her pretty, slow, graceful fashion over the grass, saying a word or two as she went to those who addressed her, but stopping only when she came to St. John.

She slipped the half-crown into his hand.

"Thank you so much," she said. "I shouldn't have known what to do without your help to-day, though certainly that luckless coin did good to nobody. I came out without my purse, as you know, but Dorothy has been my banker."

He coloured slightly, but his tone when he spoke was studiously careless.

"Was that privilege denied me?" said he. "What a hurry you were in to get out of my debt. You are certainly honest," glancing at the money in his hand, "but," glancing now at her, "you are as certainly very unfriendly."

"Oh! not *that*," she said.

"Then why not let me be your creditor as well as Dorothy?"

"It is not the same thing. One can see that. I have known her all my life; you are a stranger!"

"I see," said he shortly. They were standing near an old well, picturesquely hidden by hanging ivy, and as he spoke, almost unconsciously as it

seemed, he dropped the half-crown into it. "Come, let me take you back to your friends," he said. "It can hardly be amusing to you to stand here with me."

"Are not you my friend, too? I am sorry I used that cold word, stranger," said she, so gently, that his short-lived anger died. Her eyes were full of tears. She crossed the lawn to where Lady Bessy was sitting, all unaware of the thoughts with which that rather highly-strung person was regarding her. She looked so dejected, however, that Lady Bessy, who preferred to think she was suffering the throes of slighted love, received her very kindly.

"Can't even such a day as this throw a little warmth into you?" she said. "You look positively frozen. Have some tea? Bobby, go and get Mrs. Vereker a cup of tea. Bless me, what a white little object you are! If you were to pose as the real and original mediæval saint, or the Christian martyr who has been so dreadfully long drowned, no one would think you overdid the part. Well, what is it? What has Hilary been saying to you?"

"Hilary? Mr. St. John? What should he say?" She had lingered over the pronunciation of his Christian name as though it was dear to her, and a tiny fleck of colour had crept into each cheek. "Did he tell you the ponies ran away with me, and only that he met me half-way here and stopped them, I daresay I should be—well, whiter even than I am, by this time."

So *that* was how it came about that he arrived *with her*. Lady Bessy grew even more friendly.

"Beastly things, ponies," she said. "Give me the most racketty horse in Europe in preference to them. And so they bolted, and destroyed your nerve for one day. The only antidote for that sort of thing is to have them bolt again. That restores one's balance; and if they *do* go, make them take you so far from Brent that you will never be able to find your way back again. Dullest hole *I* know."

"I think, perhaps, I am as happy here—as I should be anywhere," said Mrs. Vereker, with her eyes on the ground. There was something in her tone that made Lady Bessy sincerely sorry for her.

"You are not very happy, I am afraid," she said impulsively, and with bad taste, perhaps, but *so* kindly that it would be impossible to be angry with her. Mrs. Vereker raised her eyes and fixed them on her. There was a world of despair in their dark depths.

CHAPTER X.

"*Have some ruth on her adversity!*

. She stood alone;

She had no wight to whom to make her moan."

ST. JOHN, with no very settled design in his mind, made straight for Dorothy, when Mrs. Vereker, with a little bow, had dismissed him. Miss Aylmer was pleased to receive him graciously.

"So it was Hilary to the rescue?" said she gaily. "What would have become of her if you hadn't been on the spot just as those treacherous cobs were playing her false? Poor Cecil she hasn't much

nerve at any time, but to-day seems to have finished her. She certainly owes you a debt of gratitude."

"She is determined to owe me nothing it seems. She felt weighed down with care until she had repaid me the uttermost farthing of the trifling sum she was obliged to borrow from me. By-the-bye," looking keenly at his cousin, "why is she obliged to borrow? Am I to understand that that fellow——?"

"Does a woman never leave her purse at home?" with an evasive smile. "Are we all so methodical that you——"

"There is more than that in it. Something in her manner betrayed her——"

("Something in *your* manner will betray you before long," thought Dorothy, but with a wisdom rarely exercised by her, she kept the thought to herself.)

"You study her very carefully," she said demurely.

"I hope not. Not purposely, at all events. It would be an impertinence to treat her or any woman in that way. But I confess I pity her and feel for her——" He paused. "I feel for her as I never felt for any other woman," he said, earnestly.

He honestly meant, and wished to convey the impression, that what he felt for her was compassion for the life she led; but his words were certainly ill-chosen, and Dorothy laughed a little.

"You are frank to a fault," she said. "And let me add—if, indeed, you wish to be a friend to her—distinctly imprudent."

"You misunderstand," said he, with a slight frown.

“If I do, that is your fault, not mine. And, indeed, I do not misunderstand—*so far*,” with a meaning glance at him. “But I warn you that others may.” She paused, and then went on in a lower tone, and one tinged with deepest regret: “She is very forlorn, very solitary; she calls for one’s tenderest care.”

“Dorothy!” began he, sharply, but she checked him.

“It is all true what you think,” she went on. “That—that man never gives her a penny! Isn’t it a *shame*?” Her cheeks flushed angrily, and her eyes sparkled with righteous indignation. “He pays her bills, but always insists on seeing them first, and though she is ever beautifully dressed, it is only because he takes a selfish pride in hearing *his* wife called the best-gowned woman in the county.”

“It is well his pride runs that way; but do you mean to say she has no allowance?”

“Not a farthing; and it is so awkward for the poor little thing sometimes. Now to-day, for example—of course it would have been nothing if she could have gone home, and got her own money, and sent it to you; but to feel she should first explain everything to him, and be under compliment to him for what every other wife would regard as a right—that is galling. I assure you there were tears in her eyes when she asked me for that miserable two-and-sixpence. Oh! I felt as if such a man as Francis Vereker should be ground to death.”

“And how will she repay you?” His expression was cold, almost stern.

“She will still have to ask him for it; but then it will be for *me*, not for *you*.”

“And what difference will that make?”

“Oh, nonsense!” said she, reddening. “Do you mean to say that you haven’t heard he is jealous, or pretends to be jealous, of every man that speaks to her? That is why I would have you be careful, Hilary, lest you make her life still more unbearable to her, instead of pleasanter. Ah!”—to Lady Bessy, who, with some others, had strolled up to them. “Is there no tea to be had anywhere? I have been pining for mine for the last half-hour.”

“It’s coming,” said Lady Bessy. “I left word that a special consignment should be left here till called for. It appears it won’t have long to wait. Cecil,” glancing at Mrs. Vereker, who had come with her, “like you, has been on the verge of tears for ten minutes or so; but here it comes. Lady Eustace, I know you never forget who takes sugar and who doesn’t, will you pour out the tea?”

“I go on the principle that every well-regulated person takes sugar,” said Lady Eustace in her deep voice, that would have made her fortune on the tragic stage. “I declare that sentiment before lifting the teapot, and I generally find that no one says a word against the sugar afterwards: ‘Sweets to the sweet,’ you know. Every one here take sugar?”

She looked round. There was not a dissentient murmur, and she laughed.

“Told you so!” she said, in her mild bassoon. “Though I do think I might have been let off duty now that I am down here for a rest.”

“Rest! Is such a thing known to you?” asked Mr. Blair. “Awesome tales have been handed down to us that sleep and you are two—that never do your eyelids close in slumber; and really, when one remembers the number of works of fiction—the yearly amount of lies—you fling upon the London market, one is bound to believe the fabulous tale.”

“One is never bound to believe anything. That is the special charm of the age in which we live. As for your fabulous tale of me, learn that there is nothing in it! Moments I have known when heroes, heroines, plots and counter-plots, were alike abhorrent to me. But one’s friendliest friends are those who will not believe that. Once!” said Lady Eustace, looking round upon her audience, with the tiny teapot uplifted tragically in one massive hand, whilst the other points her tale, “I went for a holiday to a house that shall be nameless. I went to refresh my tired brain. It was deep in the country, and I thought myself fortunate in my selection of a breathing spot. I told myself that here, if anywhere, I should find people who would seek to make me happy. So far I guessed the truth. They were filled with designs for my welfare, and, to start with, they gave me a sitting-room to myself, to which none of the other guests were to seek entrance on pain of death—or a cruel mention in my next book! Perfect solitude, they arranged, was to be mine for five long hours in every day, during which time I was to cudgel my wretched brains for fresh ideas. Solitude for *me*, who craved only the ‘hum, the shock of men,’ and whose sole desire was to forget, for the

time being, that such things as pens and ink, and ideas, were in the world! I went to that place," said the novelist sadly, "for rest; I left it more fagged, more spiritless, than I had ever been in my life before!"

St. John broke into laughter. He could not resist a glance at Lady Bessy, who returned it with a valiant effort at not understanding its drift. Where was now her theory about her novelist? Where were the charms of her empty room, her pens, her ink, upon which she had so depended as a means of ensuring the eternal happiness of Lady Eustace?

"It was cruel," said Dorothy, who possessed quite a talent for being able to fall into the breach at any moment. "But one must suffer for the many, very often, and those three weeks' martyrdom of yours gave, no doubt, to the world an incalculable pleasure. What was the name of the book that arose from it?"

"I hardly remember. It was one of my maiden efforts," said Lady Eustace, smiling even whilst she deeply growled! Poor woman, she couldn't help it; Nature, not she, was answerable for that *basso profundo* of hers. "And I daresay everyone else has forgotten too. That is the worst of this rapid age in which we live." She had given them the special charm of it a moment ago, so was bound to explain to them the darker side. "Nothing is remembered beyond to day, except," with a sigh of conscious merit that overpowered them like the breath of a grampus, "by the special *few* who dwell upon a good thing, when they get it."

"Am I a special few?" demanded Mr. Blair at

this moment. "I *must* be. I know no one who can appreciate a good thing better than me. I am sure there was that *vol au vent* last night, that I——"

But here, fortunately, somebody choked him off.

"The insatiable reader," Lady Eustace was roaring deeply, "is the animal we authors dread beyond all others. No sooner is one book finished than (no matter how soul-satisfying it may be,)"—and here she looked as though any of *hers* would satisfy the souls of millions—"up he takes another, rushing through it, at railway speed, and so on, to its successor. Not one moment is spared to the joys, the griefs, the anguish, the indignation, of those heroes and heroines just flung aside; those who had been their faithful companions for at *the very least* a whole long twenty-four hours. Verily we write for an unregenerate public."

Lady Eustace wound up her harangue and her teapot at the same moment. There was not another drop of Bohea in the latter.

Mr. Blair, I regret to say, was convulsed with laughter; the others had better sense or taste, and only mildly stared at her.

"You have been badly used," said Mr. Blair at last, who was without shame.

"I have been slighted, yes. But they must harden themselves to misconception who voluntarily yield their talents to the world," said Lady Eustace, with a resounding sigh.

"Don't mind 'em, they are all jealous of you," said Mr. Blair, regardless of an angry nudge from

Lady Bessy, who feared he was going too far. She need not have feared, however. Lady Eustace entirely agreed with the sentiment thrown out, and beamed upon the author of it. "When one *does* meet an agreeable——"

Here Lady Bessy put an end to him.

"Agreeable!" she said. She leaned forward and so placed her charming person that Mr. Blair was exactly as if he was nowhere. "Experience has taught me that to be a strictly agreeable person one should have no opinion of one's own. That wouldn't suit *you*, Lady Eustace, would it?" with an adorable smile, and an emphasis that flattered that massive person immensely. "One should simply be a machine wound up to agree with everybody. I'm a machine. I agree with everybody. But it takes talent, I can tell you. And to get through the stream of public opinion in this little country place without wetting one's petticoats, one has to hold them up pretty high, I can tell you."

"Which teacheth the lesson that, unless one has pretty feet, one should never be censorious," put in Mr. Blair, mildly.

"Even that wouldn't be sufficient; the feet may escape notice, the face never," said Farquhar, who had just come up. "To be agreeable to *all* the world, a woman must be pretty."

"Then I'm done for," said Lady Bessy, with her merry laugh. "No! not a word of consolation from anybody; I should consider contradiction an insult. As if my eyes were not as good as yours, my mind as efficient," with a crushing glance at Mr. Blair,

who was evidently full of argument. "I know I've had a narrow escape of being pretty; but I *have* escaped. I have seen myself occasionally, and to do my friends—*men* friends, you understand—justice, however absurd they may have fancied themselves about me, I don't remember that one of them ever, even in his insanest moments, called me a beauty. It's," with an interrogative glance, "my nose, isn't it? But I've pulled through pretty well in spite of it."

"Dear little, cruelly-maligned nose!" said Mr. Blair, so pathetically that they all laugh.

CHAPTER XI.

"And drunkenness is eke a foul record
Of any man
. Drink more attemperly,
Wine maketh man to losē wretchedly
His mind."

DINNER at the Chase was well at an end, the women had gone to the drawing-room, the men were still lingering over their wine. Vereker, who had got through the courses in his usual silent, sullen fashion, had just asked his host for some brandy. St. John, who would have liked to refuse it, but hardly knew how to manage it, gave a reluctant order to one of the men, and let strong misgivings take possession of him.

Up to this, Vereker had plainly been holding himself in. He had taken his champagne sparingly,

and had in effect been quite sober, though some of the women regarded him with doubt. It was indeed impossible to him now to *look* the part so unusual to him, as his features were swollen and reddened, and his voice had attained a permanent gruff indistinctness.

Still he had got through the dinner very respectably, for him, and had given no occasion for the throwing of a stone. But now, as though his patience was exhausted, or as though, the hour being close on ten o'clock, he felt the end of his probation was at hand, and the hour of release nigh, he surrendered himself to the Demon that held him bound and chained, and the mad craving for strong drink that had ruined his body and was imperilling his soul, rose within him, and conquered him.

He drank, and drank deeply, hurriedly, as if to make up for lost time. Some of the men, seeing how it would shortly be with him, rose from the table, and St. John, with a sickening remembrance of the pale, beautiful, frightened face, awaiting their return in the drawing-rooms beyond, joined them eagerly.

Vereker had found, with the brandy, his voice, and was now arguing loudly, insolently, on some political subject with a meek old baronet, who, living in the next county, was not so well aware of his opponent's besetting sin as those residing round Brent, and therefore persisted in debating the question at issue with him, in a high key, that grew gradually offended, as Vereker waxed unbearable.

Old Colonel Scott, breaking into the discussion, sought to finish the matter by carrying off Sir Henry, and by so doing only increased Vereker's vicious wrath, and gave increased zest to his insulting retorts. Finally Sir Henry was drawn away, and Vereker, who, though in a dangerous mood, still knew what he was about, finished another glass of brandy, and went with the others towards the drawing-room.

Colonel Scott, in a fine frenzy, caught hold of St. John and poured his indignation into his ears.

"A damned unmannerly fellow, sir. By Jove! he ought to be cut by the county, and so he would, but for that poor little wife of his."

"Who gave her to him?" demanded the mild Sir Henry, who was as angry as it was possible for him to be.

"An impecunious papa," said somebody standing by, with a shrug.

"A rascally papa!" growled the Colonel fiercely. "By George! he ought to have swung for it; but he only died in his bed two months afterwards."

"Pity he didn't die two months before," said Sir Henry, who thought this so neat that it nearly restored him to his wonted good-humour.

"And, have you heard—have you heard," said the Colonel, drawing St. John aside, "that he has sent that poor devil of a Black Sandy to prison? Some small poaching affray. By Jove! sir, you should have seen the convicted poacher's eye when Vereker sentenced him to a month's hard labour. There was battle, murder, and sudden death in it--

specially murder. 'Pon my soul! I felt for the rascal, when I remembered everything. Vereker of *all* men to be down upon him. Such confounded sharpness, considering what has come and gone." Here the Colonel began to wink so hard with his left eye that it occurred to St. John in a dull way that soon the long-suffering lid would fall to rise no more.

"What became of the girl?" said he.

"Ran away to town, some people say. Anyhow, she disappeared. The father smashed her up one night when the truth came out, and she was gone next morning. They are a gipsy lot, I believe, and not up to much good. In fact, there's no doubt, between you and me, that the fellow is a blood-thirsty scoundrel; but yet one can't help seeing he was badly used. 'Pon my soul!" said the Colonel, "'tis my opinion 'twould take a clever fellow to decide which was the bigger scoundrel of the two, he, or our respected friend inside, who has just sent him to prison."

"I wish something could be done with Vereker, for his wife's sake," said St. John, in a low tone.

"With him, the miserable drunkard!" said the Colonel contemptuously, who never took anything stronger than water. "Tell you what," in a confidential way, "when Black Sandy gets out again, if I were Vereker, I'd keep my weather-eye open. But you see, a fellow perpetually fuddled can't keep an open eye! By Jove! sir, when they put such fellows as that on the bench, it's a surer sign than *any that the country is going to the dogs.*"

"I wonder what he is doing now?" said St. John uneasily. Both men walked into the larger drawing-room and looked apprehensively around them.

It was an intense relief to one of them to find that Mrs. Vereker was sitting alone, partially hidden by a heavy satin curtain that hung near her. Vereker was standing on the hearthrug looking down at Dorothy Aylmer, who, dainty—sweet, in her simple white robe, was lying back in a lounging chair, with lowered lids, and a distinctly disdainful expression on her pretty face. She was playing with a huge fan that she waved to and fro indolently, yet with a suspicion of rising anger.

"You and I hold such entirely different views," she was saying, in a clear contemptuous tone, without troubling herself to look at Vereker, who was gazing at her with a most objectionable admiration. He frowned heavily, yet still looked at her in the dull brutal way that was all that was left to him.

"Look here!" said he, thickly. "I'll tell you something. I'm not such a fool as you think me. I can see through you. I know what's in your mind this moment, for all your pretence at courtesy. You're calling me a damned ill-conditioned fellow."

"I assure you, you exaggerate—a *little*," said she, coolly. "I never swear!"

Her meaning flashed through his dull brain.

"Ha! I see. You were always a saucy one," said he. He paused for a moment, then: "Well, I don't care the devil *what* you think," he said, politely.

Miss Aylmer rose, without haste, and crossed the room to where Mrs. Mackenzie was sitting.

"What's he done now?" demanded that veteran with the liveliest hope. She turned upon Dorothy, who was a little pale, one of her satirical old smiles.

"It's absurd, permitting such a person to go about without a keeper," said Dorothy, angrily.

"Go on, my dear, go on," said the old lady, joyously, with growing expectation.

"He is quite unaccountable! They ought to lock him up."

"The righteous laws of our tight little island won't permit that. You can lock up a thief, or a vendor of papers, or a seditious orator; but the drunkard, the greatest pest of all, society lets go free; nay, even tolerates, and tries to blind its eyes to his defects, be he rich and of good birth. Bah!" said Mrs. Mackenzie, with an eloquent sniff. "Well, but you haven't told me, my dear; what has *our* social nuisance been doing now?"

"Nothing. Nothing to signify in the sum total of his vices. He has only been unbearably coarse; he——" She laughed angrily. "He only swore at me."

"Pouf! Is that all? What a trifle to make a fuss about," said the old gossip, indignantly. Clearly she considered herself done out of a good thing. "Anyone might do *that*! But one expected better things of Vereker. Heavens! Look at his eyes. I do pity that little mouse of a wife of his to-night."

“Poor girl,” said Dorothy, sadly. But Mrs. Mackenzie wanted to be amused, not to be drawn into a sympathetic mood; she, therefore, picked up her shawl and other belongings, and marched across the room to where Lady Bessy was standing on the hearthrug, talking to one of the neighbouring squires.

On her way she passed an ottoman, a small one, that was filled to overflowing by an extremely pretty girl, with a gay, mischievous face, dark, provoking eyes, brilliant complexion, and a general air of would-be contempt that only meant coquetry—and Mr. Blair. The latter, as a rule, was a host in himself.

He was apparently paying extravagant court to the pretty coquette, and Mrs. Mackenzie, who was always on the look out for *partis* for her rather impossible nieces, regarded him keenly. She knew his name was Blair, and that he had come to the country with St. John, who was, indeed, a cousin of his. She knew also that he had been making violent love to Rosa, her eldest niece, at the last tennis affair they had been at, but, beyond this—She could ask Lady Bessy about him. Lady Bessy was, of course, his cousin also, and could give her a wrinkle as to the young man’s social position, etc. She dropped into a cosy satin-lined nest and proceeded to interrogate Lady Bessy.

CHAPTER XII.

"Singing he was, or fluting all the day ;
He was as fresh as is the month of May."

"THAT young man over there," indicating Bobby by a wave of her hand ; "Blair I think is his name. Tell me, my dear, what Blair is he ?" said she.

Lady Bessy laughed.

"He's Bobby Blair," she said. The old squire, who was the father of the saucy little coquette, glanced at the ottoman where his daughter sat with her extremely attentive cavalier, and sheered off from Lady Bessy (whose face was now turned to Mrs. Mackenzie), probably with a view to making inquiries about Mr. Blair on his own account.

"Yes, I daresay," doubtfully. "Bobby," with a glance at the unconscious young man in question, "is quite the sort of—of—*undisciplined* name I should associate with a person of his style. I mean of course the young man so reprehensibly taken up with Miss Carton. *What Blair is he ?*"

"I'm sure I don't know, even though he *is* my cousin," said Lady Bessy with a little shrug, and a little reminder. "Bobby!" in a clear, distinct tone, that reached the ottoman where Mr. Blair was sitting *very* close to his companion. "Who are you? Mrs. Mackenzie wants to know."

"The last scion of a most respectable race," responded Bobby meekly, if promptly.

"*Then* you should get married at once. It's

your obvious duty," said Lady Bessy with an *almost* imperceptible sneer.

"So I shall, the moment I find anyone who will have me," with an ardent look at Miss Carton, who refused to accept it, and flung it back at him with a dark and lovely glance from her own eyes. "Alas! that moment seems a long way off;—still, I promise you," to Lady Bessy, "I shall marry the very instant I can get someone—I know—" another speaking glance at Miss Carton—"to say 'Yes' to me."

"I expect you'll die an old bachelor at that rate," said that young lady scornfully, but always with the lovely look. "I don't believe anyone will ever say 'Yes' to you."

She edged away from him as she spoke, with a charming disdain, and a little smile that shot from under the long lashes.

"Oh! don't say that," entreated he, hurrying after her along the ottoman in a sliding fashion. "Don't dash my last hope. Everyone says no to me. I was just going to ask you to take pity on a wretched orphan, but if you won't——"

Here his voice was lost, but the mumble, mumble, mumble, that still could be heard was replete with fervid entreaty.

"What I want to know is," persisted Mrs. Mackenzie, who had listened to the foregoing dialogue with a disgusted expression, and who was in herself a walking 'Burke's Landed Gentry,' "if he is one of the Blairs of Warwick?"

"Oh, dear no. A connection of *course*,—that's the worst of the Blairs, everyone, objectionable or

otherwise, is a cousin—but *he*,” pointing to Bobby, who is now evidently growing very energetic, and who, in the vehement pursuit of his argument, has brought himself and his companion so close to the end of the ottoman that it is quite a miracle as to how she, at least, holds on. “*He*,” went on Lady Bessy, after a lengthened stare at the perilous position of her cousin and his new-found friend, “belongs to the elder branch, who look down on a Warwickshire Blair as being a rather poor affair.”

“Eh?” said Bobby, catching his own name again. “Still levelling me to the dust? What is it now, eh? What are you saying about me?”

“Merely that you are a rather poor affair,” said Lady Bessy maliciously.

“Poverty is not a crime, Bessy,” said Mr. Blair, severely. “Rather is it a mark of morality, as every Sunday-school book will show you. Rugged virtue as a rule accompanies it. Look here!” suddenly to Miss Carton—“you’ll fall off this ottoman if you go any farther, and *then*—what will your papa say?” He moved inward and pulled her lightly after him. “You wouldn’t like to make an exhibition of yourself, would you? And why seek thus to avoid one, who——” mumble again.

“I really think I’d *rather* fall off than listen to you any longer,” said Miss Carton. “I do wish you would go away. *Do* now, I’m as tired of you as ever I can be,” she pouted prettily, this little country belle, and lifted one dimpled shoulder against him.

“I go!” said Mr. Blair in a tragic tone. He

rose. There was deepest dejection in his look and tone. "After that cruel dismissal I dare not linger. But before I go, let me tell you that you are the unkindest girl I ever met."

"'Tis well to be first in one's own line," retorted she lightly, waving him an adieu, whereupon he left her, and drew near to Lady Bessy, still standing upon the hearthrug conversing with Mrs. Mackenzie, who, when she had once caught a person in her web rarely let her go until she had sucked all information out of her ; all vitality, said her victims. She was indeed a sort of social spider. She had now drawn Lady Bessy so deep into a discussion about Vereker and his wife, that Lady Bessy hardly noticed the arrival of Mr. Blair, until he touched her lightly on the shoulder.

"Well! what is it?" said she impatiently.

"Don't stir. Something wrong with your hair-pins. But—*don't* stir, I entreat you," as if in an agony of apprehension, "and *I'll* settle them for you."

She moved uneasily, but otherwise took no notice of him, being so far interested in Mrs. Mackenzie's news, as to be foolishly forgetful of the versatility of his powers. One feeble protest, indeed, she made :

"Oh! *don't*, you are running that hairpin right into my head," she said—but nothing more. The real nature of the atrocity he was about to commit never occurred to her.

He had pulled a bit of withered, dejected, most miserable mistletoe out of his pocket—mistletoe in the early autumn!—goodness knows where he had

got it, and with deft, mischievous fingers had woven it into the pretty coil of hair that crowned her head. This done, he proceeded to lay his hands upon her shoulders, and, stooping over her, imprinted a chaste salute on either cheek.

“Really, Bobby! I really *wish* you wouldn’t!” said she indignantly.

It was a lazy indignation, however, and suggested the idea that she was only indignant because he had acted vulgarly in thus embracing her publicly. It was the sort of anger one would show to a brother if he were to kiss one in a crowded drawing-room.

“My dear girl, I wouldn’t,” said he, “only—I thought you expected it. If you *will* go about with mistletoe stuck in your head, like the straws of an Ophelia, in the very middle of August—what *can* you expect? I’m awfully sorry—but I assure you I quite thought that——” He pauses as if overcome with regret.

Lady Bessy in swift dismay raises her hand to her well-ordered head. There, sure enough, was a sprig of the kissing plant!

“Good Heavens!” said she softly, “was there *ever* such a fool!” She regarded the guilty Blair with a withering eye. “You must have kept it since last Christmas, but why for *my* discomfiture? Was there no other enemy in the gate?”

Bobby turned upon her an eye that reduced her attempt at withering to naught.

“‘Misunderstood. By Bessy Gifford.’ That shall be written on my grave stone,” he said, “in spite of Miss Montgomery, in spite of all the copyrights in

the world! The devotion of years, it seems, goes for nothing."

"Well, I can't have this sort of thing. You aren't a baby, though you act like one," said Lady Bessy frigidly. "Go back to your Kitty—that's Miss Carton's name isn't it?—*she*——" with a little vague suspicion of contempt, "acts like one too! Go back to her—if indeed she is so far lost to common sense as still to be ready to receive you."

"She sort of told me she didn't want me," said Mr. Blair quite unabashed. "Indeed I might go farther, and say she desired my absence. But, as you thus barbarously throw me over, I'll try her again."

"Yes, do. What a comfort," sighed Lady Bessy as he moved away. Her eyes followed him. He rejoined Miss Carton on that tiny lounge, but hardly received a welcome.

"No, don't come here. I'm sure you have that horrid thing behind you," said the little country flirt, edging away from him. "Go back to Lady Bessy, *she* suits you." She peeped behind his back, and there saw the dilapidated sprig of mistletoe. "You shan't come a bit nearer," she said—She pouted charmingly. "Not a *bit*."

"Miss Carton," said he. He had thought of calling her Kitty, but really the acquaintance was *too* fresh. "This grows serious. Would you doubt me."

"Bless me!" ejaculates Mrs. Mackenzie at this moment, who has had her glasses fixed upon him for the last five minutes, "I do believe he is *proposing* to her—her! I positively,"—choking—"believe he

is asking her to marry him—in a *public drawing-room* !”

“You needn’t be uneasy about him, at all events,” said Lady Bessy indifferently. “He’s always doing it. He proposes to somebody or other every night of his life—to me,” with a scornful laugh, “if the supplies fall short. I don’t know a single girl of my acquaintance to whom he hasn’t made an offer of his heart and hand. He says they like it; that they expect it of him; and that it makes the plain ones very happy to be able to go about afterwards and say they have refused him. It never comes to anything.”

“He seems to be a person of very remarkable manners,” said Mrs. Mackenzie, still with her glasses levelled and bent on Blair, whom she persists in examining thus, as though he were a very rare and distinct species.

“The most remarkable I know,” said Lady Bessy ironically. “A misfortune happened to him when he was seventeen, which perhaps accounts for a good deal. His mental growth stopped there. He will continue to be seventeen until he dies. Nothing but a troublesome boy.”

“Good gracious, my dear! do you tell me so? But on whose authority?”

“My own, simply. I know him,” said Lady Bessy, carelessly. “Oh, it’s a mere theory of mine, of course, but—there’s something in it!”

“Nothing!” thought Mrs. Mackenzie, relieved, as she sank back in her chair. “Just one of her fads.” She was thinking about those unmarriageable

nieces of hers, and of all the attention he had shown Rosa at their last meeting. Rosa was not here to-night—perhaps had she been, that little forward Carton girl would have been nowhere.

“What you say about his proposing is very singular,” said the old lady sharply. “That might go on for some time—for so long as he was refused—but—suppose somebody should *accept* him?”

She thought of Rosa—dear skinny Rosa! No! She would not refuse him.

“Oh, nonsense! Who on earth would marry Bobby?” said Lady Bessy hastily, and with marked contempt.

She spoke clearly, and Mr. Blair heard her. He seemed, indeed, singularly alive to all her utterances. He broke off in the middle of his twenty-fifth substantial reason why Miss Carton should accept his addresses, and the noble offer of his heart and hand, and turned his eyes on Lady Bessy. For an instant a curious light came into them. For an instant only; then it was gone, and the old mischievous expression brightened his face.

“Wouldn't *you?*” said he tenderly, staring straight at Lady Bessy. She shrugged her shoulders, laughed a little, and then crossed the room to where St. John was sitting beside Mrs. Vereker.

It seemed to be an established resting-place with St. John now. One might almost think he had inherited it, so naturally did he claim the chair next hers as his own.

As Lady Bessy approached the cushioned seat behind the curtains where he and Mrs. Vereker sat, someone else came up too. It was Vereker, frowning, sullen, and considerably the worse for wear. He lurched a little as he walked, and touched a table or a chair as he passed it, with an evident view to steadying himself. But he was unfortunately quite alive to the circumstances round him, and a consuming jealousy was driving him to an open declaration of it.

“Ha! Lady Bessy come to the rescue too. By Jove! it seems to me it was time!” he said, with a dangerous laugh, and an insolent motion of the hand to where St. John and his companion were sitting. His wife started as she heard it, and every touch of colour forsook her face.

“I think it must be late. I had better go home,” she said, in a nervous, hurried way, turning to St. John. It was the worst thing she could have done.

“Pray don’t let *me* fright you from your nest,” said Vereker, with an abominable assumption of courtesy. “Though, after all, perhaps you are right. I daresay it *is* time to go home. Decidedly late, as you say. Let’s hope,” with a cold sneer, “it isn’t *too* late! But when women take to hiding behind curtains with their——”

Somebody pushed him back abruptly and killed the vile word on his lips. It was Colonel Scott, who had come up in time to hear him. St. John had sprung to his feet as if shot, his face as white as death; but the Colonel, with a glance, checked him.

Really the man was too far gone to know exactly the enormity of his words.

“Not a word—not a word!” said the old Colonel warningly. “Man, can’t you see how it is with him?—and—remember her!”

Mrs. Vereker was looking very faint. She made a step forward, and St. John, after one glance at her face, would have offered her his arm; but Lady Bessy, who was a woman of much resource, was beforehand with him. She drew Mrs. Vereker’s arm through hers, in a brisk and pleasant fashion, and moved towards the door.

“You look tired—nothing like bed for that sort of thing,” said she, in her most carefully matter-of-fact tone; instinct teaching her that any other tone at the moment would infallibly lead to tears on the part of her trembling companion, and with the room full of curious onlookers that would mean perdition. She looked over her shoulder and caught the Colonel’s eye, which was as bright now as it was twenty years ago. “Don’t lose sight of *him*,” she said softly, indicating Vereker, who seemed a little subdued; and then she led Cecil with a high hand through the brilliantly-lit rooms to the hall outside. The latter clung to her at first in a frightened, nervous fashion; but when the ordeal of going through the rooms was past she recovered herself, and looked, though extremely pale, quite composed.

“That’s right, keep up your courage,” whispered Lady Bessy, giving her arm a little friendly squeeze. “After all, it was nothing. So *many* men are ill-tempered now and then, and——”

She might have gone on in this kindly attempt at pretending she knew nothing of Vereker's unfortunate failing, but for Vereker's wife.

Cecil turned her eyes upon her, and such despair, such melancholy, such utter misery, shone in their clear depths, that Lady Bessy's voice died from her.

"God help you, my dear," she said softly, feeling an almost motherly sympathy for the unhappy child before her.

And then the Colonel, who had undertaken the piloting of the unpleasant husband, appeared with the husband in tow, the Vereker carriage was announced, and presently the hateful scene was at an end.

St. John had come into the hall, had bidden her good-bye, and now stood beside his sister, silent, motionless, as if listening hopelessly to the sound of wheels that were carrying her away—to *what?*

The Colonel was the first to break the embarrassing quiet that had fallen upon them.

"Well, you know, he's a damn rascal!" said that ancient warrior, spluttering with disgust and rage. "Good Heavens! Why was he created? And that poor, pretty little wife of his! That good little soul! For her discomfiture, it would seem. By Jove!"—fiercely—"it's a cat-an'-nine tails, sir, he ought to get, and—and I only wish *I* had the laying on of it!"

CHAPTER XIII.

“Have pity on my bitter tearës’ smart,
And take mine humble prayer to thine heart.
Alas! I havë no languáge to tell
Th’ effectë, nor the torment of mine hell.”

“HAVE you any other name except Dorothy?” asked Farquhar, leaning back on the garden chair, and taking one knee into his embrace. His face was replete with honest affection. Need one say he was looking at the younger Miss Aylmer?

“Yes,” said she. “By the grace of my godfather and godmothers I stand revealed as Dorothy Matilda. Sweet name, Matilda, eh?” She shot a mischievous glance at him from under her long lashes.

It was Sunday afternoon; and most of the inhabitants of Brent were assembled at The Chase, where Lady Bessy opened hospitable doors between the services. Afternoon tea there had, indeed, become an institution on Sunday, and was cried down as improper by only one person, the valiant spinster at the cottage, Miss Jemima Aylmer!

“Not so nice as Dorothy,” said he cautiously. “That is the sweetest name in the world.”

“Is it?” said she, with careful astonishment. She sat up quite straight, and stared at him. “Has there been a special Act of Parliament about it? Am I, indeed, the possessor of the sweetest name to be found anywhere?”

“The sweetest name to *me*,” said he slowly. “Dorothy.” He repeated the name lingeringly, thoughtfully, as if in love with it.

"Yes. You have it quite right," with unsentimental briskness. "You evidently know it by heart. 'Dorothy.' You look as if you were trying to spell it. It is quite simple," with genial encouragement. "There is no deception, though a perverse inclination *might* lead one to put two 'rs' into it. But don't you let yourself be led away like that; you know what Mr. Mardyke says, that all our natural impulses are sinful. Not that I see any objection myself to the two 'rs'; quite the contrary, except that perhaps in print they look a little superfluous."

"I don't know any name I prefer to it," said Farquhar, still thoughtful.

"You never heard it before, did you?" asked she, bending a mischievously enquiring glance upon him. "I conclude it is quite new to you, by the extraordinary interest you betray in it. And yet—it is known to a few, I believe. My godmother wasn't the brilliant inventor of it."

Farquhar laughed.

"It suits you," he said.

"Being the very sweetest name? Well, it is better than yours, certainly. I don't think I ever heard one so aggravating as that. Arthur Farquhar! Good Heavens! what a combination. Now if it had been Arker Farquhar I could understand, and let it trip lightly from my tongue—but as it *is*!"

"Then why put them together?" said he, with admirable promptitude. "Why not leave out one, and call me Arthur, pure and simple?"

"Is that what you are?" mournfully. "Arthur,

pure and simple. Oh! *don't* be that. It reminds one so painfully of that melancholy old legend about Simple Simon."

"Well, but look here," said he, still holding on to an idea that has opened up to him rich vistas of joy. "If, as you say, you object to my full name, why not call me Arthur? Sometimes you do, but so seldom, I believe I could count the occasions on the fingers of one hand. And it is very hard on me, because somehow I can't keep from thinking of you, and addressing you, as Dorothy."

"Yes, I know! It is very rude of you," with gentle resignation.

"Nonsense. I certainly shouldn't be rude to *you*."

"Does that mean that you could be rude to somebody else? Fie! what an ignoble nature you acknowledge yourself to——"

"Say you'll call me Arthur for the future," impatiently. "After all, why shouldn't you?"

"Why, indeed?" said Miss Aylmer, becoming suddenly grave. Indeed, with such gravity did she appear to be pondering the matter, that a glad hope awoke in his breast. If she would accede to his request what a considerable step it would be towards the desired end he had in view.

Suddenly she aroused herself from her meditation and turned upon him two lovely eyes alight with a brilliant discovery.

"Or why not Captain Farquhar?" she said. "Farquhar, you see, without the Arker—beg pardon, Arthur—that too will solve one problem. I

must never, *never* again think of you as Arthur Farquhar. That happy title of yours will make all things smooth."

She speaks with an air of intense relief, with all the blitheness of one who has gained a satisfactory issue out of all her difficulties.

"And really, as for your Christian name," said she, "I don't see why I should make such a fuss about it, as I—of course, I shall *never* want to use it."

"Do you mean that?" said Farquhar, his brow clouding. "Do you think it is an honest thing of you to keep me dangling after you all day long, one day kind to me, the other—— Sometimes I think you have no conscience. What do you call yourself, I wonder?"

"A maid of honour," returned she saucily. "What do *you* call me? There! Don't look as if you wanted to eat me; I am not Richmond born. I don't think I ever in all my life saw anyone with such an *awful* temper as you have. Really at times you quite frighten me. Are you going to evening service?"

"Are you?" said he, treating this irrelevant remark as a thing of course. To converse with Dorothy is to trip lightly from one subject to another without an instant's warning.

"Of course."

"Then so am I," doggedly.

"Let us hope it will do you good," said she, with pious sweetness. "Come," rising, "let us join the others."

The others are scattered in little heaps all over the shaven lawn.

“One moment, don’t go yet,” entreated Farquhar, angry still, but afraid to lose her. “There is something else I want to say—I——”

The “something else” is plainly the basest fabrication; “ye readie lie” got up to delay the fatal hour of parting.

“I can’t listen to any more to-day. It is *Sunday*,” said Miss Aylmer, dressing the last word in capitals. “No more fighting on the Sabbath, *please!*” It makes me very unhappy, but I cannot help seeing that I exercise a most injurious effect upon you. For others you are all smiles—for me—poor, wretched, unoffending me—all frowns!”

“Oh, Dorothy!”

“Dorothy *again!*” with deep reproach. “I *thought* I had given you a sufficient hint! Well, never mind,” with noble condonement, “it is only part of a studiously cruel whole. Not a word. If there *is* anything you wish to say, any apology you would like to offer, make Monday your day of expiation. Let the remainder of this sacred day have some *slight* element of rest about it.”

Farquhar was too far stricken by this eloquent reproach to make any reply. He sought indeed valiantly to cudgel his brains for a rejoinder, but they had reached the advance group on the lawn before he had put it together, and then Miss Aylmer slipped away from him, and sank into a low chair with a soft little sigh, that he could not help feeling was meant for one of relief. He was quite miserable

as it was, but he felt he would be more miserable if he went away, so he stayed.

Some of the men were handing round the tea, and Dorothy, with a lovely smile, took hers from Sunderland. Vesey, in the background, handed her cake, and was likewise rewarded. Farquhar felt that he was growing murderous. Still, he sat on.

Lady Bessy was laughing gaily over some news she had heard by the morning's post, and which she was now retailing to Mrs. Mackenzie, who, though it was about a mutual friend, and was *risqué* enough to satisfy most, evidently thought it poor. Bobby Blair at a little distance was teaching Rosa Mackenzie how to make a daisy chain. He had Miss Carton on the other side of him, and varied his tuitions by instructing the latter how to nibble a straw with him; this is an extremely scientific game, and can be worked out by two people only. Each takes an end of the straw between their lips, and eats steadily through until the centre is reached. The point and question of this noble pastime, is, who will reach it first! There is generally a good deal of confusion at the end!

Mrs. Vereker was sitting on a garden seat with St. John beside her; Vereker was absent—Saturday night was always a hard night with him—and upon Cecil's pale face a faint glow had risen, a certain sense of enjoyment brightened her large dark eyes. To her, as yet, St. John was but a friend, and she let a gentle delight in his society give some colour to her miserable life.

“Where have you been, Dorothy?” asked Lady

Bessy, breaking off her comments on the little *on dit* just related to Mrs. Mackenzie. "Miss Aylmer not with you?"

"The gods forbid!" said Dorothy. "She never takes her walks abroad on Sundays, and she thinks the fact of your giving us tea and cake here on the seventh day, an act so impious that she wonders (all through each week of your stay) why the heavens don't crush you."

"I like that," said Lady Bessy. "Yet I go to church and she doesn't. I wonder which of us is the better Christian of the two. In *my* opinion," cheerfully, "she is as bad an old woman as ever I met, and so you may tell her, with my love and a kiss."

"Why doesn't she go to church? Is she a Methodist?" asked Mr. Blair, who has devoured one straw, with the assistance of Miss Carton, and is now selecting a second.

"I have so often told you. Because she doesn't approve of Mr. Mardyke."

"But there is another church about three miles from this; why not do her devotions there?"

Farquhar gave him a nudge and a warning glance, and Lady Bessy laughed.

"What's the joke?" said Bobby.

"My dear fellow, she could murder the rector of *that* rural parish," said Farquhar. He sank on the grass beside him. Miss Carton had flown after the trial of skill at the first straw, and Miss Rosa Mackenzie had seen fit to follow her. "Haven't you heard the story? Mr. Hartley, the rector of

the neighbouring parish you mention, married a wife who was a connection of Miss Aylmer senior. She died and left Mr. Hartley with fourteen children, or thereabouts, one or two more or less don't signify."

"Not at all, not at all," said Mr. Blair, with feeling.

"Just so. Well, Miss Aylmer thought she'd play my Lady Bountiful to these motherless babes and, indeed, to the rector himself, and was in and out of the house at all hours, seasonable or otherwise."

"Very much of the otherwise, I should say, from my fortunately slight knowledge of her," remarked Mr. Blair, mildly.

"At all events, it appears she worried the poor man almost into a fever, so that at last he was driven to seek some means of getting rid of her and her sympathy. He decided on taking another wife, and caused the report of his intended second marriage to be largely circulated. Down came the irate spinster upon him with all sails set: 'Mr. Hartley! Mr. Hartley! What is this I hear?' cried she. 'You going to be married again! You, with your sainted Maria scarcely cold in her grave! Have you considered everything? What are you going to do with your family?'

"*Increase it, ma'am!*" said he."

Mr. Blair laid back on the grass and roared.

"Need I remark," said Farquhar, "that she would willingly endure the tortures of the rack rather than listen to the discourse of such a man as that?"

"You two do seem to be enjoying yourselves," said Lady Bessy, looking at Mr. Blair, who was still

lost in admiration of the goaded man's reply. "Suppose you come here and tell us what it was all about."

"Ask Farquhar," said Bobby. "He's the perpetrator of the joke, I'm the innocent victim. He would make me listen. As you may see for yourself, I've been crying ever since." He dragged himself over the grass, and seated himself as close to her as circumstances would permit. "I'm starving," he said. As he always was when cake was anywhere round, nobody took any notice of this remark—Lady Bessy, because she was coquetting with a squire or two who had dropped in for tea—and her—and Dorothy, because she was too indignant with Farquhar to think of anything else. He had been *laughing*, he had been "*joking*," odious word! almost under her nose, as it were, when he knew he was under the ban of her displeasure. Really things were coming to a pretty pass!

One of the footmen passing by caught Mr. Blair's attention.

"What have you got there, Brooks?"

"Cake, sir."

"What cake?"

"Sponge and plum, sir."

"Same old game," said Mr. Blair, with the utmost dejection. "How long is this to last? Is there never to be any change? I should think the original inventors, if they copyrighted the receipts of those two deadly compounds, must have made by this time a colossal fortune. I wonder if they ate much of them themselves, and if they brought them

to an early grave? Bessy,"—giving her a smart nudge—"surely you are not so far gone in the delights of your present conversation as to be lost to a sense of my misery?"

"Oh, are *you* there?" said Lady Bessy, casting a careless glance at him, and then going back to her interrupted *tête-à-tête* with her squire.

"I am, but I shan't be long here, if I've got to consume any more plum cake," said Mr. Blair, mournfully. "I feel assured that another piece will finish me. Bessy,"—giving her gown a determined tug—"don't you even care to learn that presently I shall be numbered with the dead?"

"No such luck," said Lady Bessy, turning angrily towards him. "It is my opinion that you will bury the lot of us. Really, Bobby, I *wish* you would remember that lace flounces aren't made of cast iron!"

"And this from you?" said he, plaintively.

"There's 'ot cake over there, sir," put in Brooks, who was beginning to look profoundly sorry for him.

"'Ot! On a day like this? Well," relenting, "let's see it." He spoke in a tone of deep resignation.

He saw it, and subsequently ate a considerable amount of it, after which he recovered his serenity, and became the artless, happy Bobby, to whom they were accustomed.

CHAPTER XIV.

“That pity runneth soon in gentle heart
Is proved every day, as men may see,
As well by work as by authority ;
For gentle heartē kitheth gentleness.
I see well, that ye have on my distress
Compassión.”

MRS. VEREKER rose to go.

“It is getting late,” she said. “I shall miss evening service if I delay any longer.”

She looked so wonderfully bright and light-hearted as she stood smiling down on St. John, who was still sitting on the garden seat, that some of those present marvelled.

“Are you going to church?” said Dorothy. “Well, so am I. Let us walk through the wood together.”

“Why shouldn’t we all go?” cried Lady Bessy, springing to her feet. “I don’t think I was ever at evening service in my life. Why shouldn’t I find what it is like?”

“Why, indeed! I’m glad you thought of it before it was too late,” said Mr. Blair, scrambling up from the grass with the evident intention of accompanying her.

“Are *you* going?” asked she, with open disfavour.

“Certainly! Have you not invited us one and all? I, too, pine to hear the vicar for the second time to-day. And Miss Aylmer has just spoken of a wood, and woods are dangerous things, and I

thought, if you wouldn't mind, that I'd ask you to look after me till I get to the other side."

"Was there ever such a fool?" said Lady Bessy, with a little sniff of hopeless contempt, addressing nobody in particular.

Here everybody vowed they would love a walk through the scented evening woods with a prospect of a vaulted roof, and very indifferent music, and a dim religious light (evolved out of composition candles stuck in little brass sticks) at the end of it. Lady Eustace led the way with one of Lady Bessy's squires *in tow*, and *out* of temper, and all the rest followed.

It was a delightful old wood, full of quaint old paths, all leading ultimately to the same finish. St. John, who had been strolling leisurely along with Mrs. Vereker, found himself presently alone, with her, on one of them.

"Do you always go to church in the evening?" asked he, presently.

"Always in the summer, and autumn, and as long as the light, and the dry weather lasts. In winter, I cannot, sometimes, be sure of going, because Mr. Vereker objects to my taking out the horses. I am always sorry when the winter comes," said she, with a little sigh. "Going to church gives me such a chance of—— I mean"—hastily—"such a sense of rest, of comfort—such a freedom from ——"

She broke off, and coloured violently.

"Yes, yes," said St. John, somewhat hastily. She was so terribly confused that anger as well as

grief rose in his breast for her. Why should she show such confusion in his presence, was he not her friend? He turned suddenly towards her, and compelled her to meet his eyes.

“Why do you not trust me?” he said. “Why will you encourage this constraint? You said you would treat me as a friend; but do you? Do you think,” slowly, and reddening perceptibly, but speaking with settled determination, “that I do not *know*? I would have you be yourself when with me. If unhappy, be frankly so; if happy, why, be that too.”

“It would not do,” she said, “It would be impossible. When I am unhappy, I must be so, *alone*; that is my fate. *When!*” she paused and looked fixedly before her without seeing, in a little desperate way that made him miserable. “As for my happy moments,” said she, presently with a faint smile, “they are so few, it is hardly worth while talking about them.”

“You were happy this afternoon—I think,” said he, eagerly, wistfully.

“Yes. That is quite true,” she spoke as if surprised at herself. “I cannot tell you how peaceful it all seemed, but now—now it is over, and one has to go back, and——”

“What I cannot bear is,” said St. John, as she paused, “the thought that you do not trust me. You trust Dorothy, and she would tell you that I, too, can be a loyal friend, and—I think you need one.”

“You must not think that—that I do not trust

you," said she earnestly. "And as for wanting friends, who is there in all this wide world who wants them more?—but, but—what can they do for one? Oh!" she stopped short upon the path, and clenching one little white bare hand, pressed it passionately against her bosom. "Can't you see how it is with me now? I must tell you this—I *must*. I am frightened! I shall have to go home soon, and I don't know how I shall find him, and the dread of it makes me feel sick—*sick*."

Her eyes as she looked at him were actually terrified and St. John's heart died within him.

"He—he would not *hurt* you?" he said. He felt choked as he asked the question.

"No! He has never touched me—*yet*." She drew a sharp breath. "But he will, soon," she said. "Sometimes I think that he will kill me—in one of his furies."

"Don't dwell on that," said he, "you are not altogether so without protection——"

"You would speak of the law," interrupted she with a bitter smile. "Once dead, what good could the law do me? and I could be safely done to death before that august arm could reach me. Well," recklessly, "as for that, why need I care? To be dead, quietly dead, asleep within my grave, what a desirable solution of the mystery called my life, that would be." She waited for a moment and then said, very gently, "I wish I was dead."

"Don't speak like that," entreated he sharply. "Good Heavens! think of your age; there must be *some* good thing in store for you in the future."

“Nothing! Nothing at all. There you are wrong. And that,” said she, speaking in a frightened whisper, “is what terrifies me. He will live, and I shall live, and it will be the same horrible life always. There is no chance for me, no hope of escape. It will go on for ever and ever—unless, as I say, he——” she broke off abruptly.

“It was a miserable marriage,” said St. John in a low tone.

“That is true, but you must not say a word against my father,” cried she anxiously. “I know everyone blames him, but I don’t believe he *knew*; I don’t. He loved me. He was fonder of me than he was even of the boys, and—and I think when he found out, it killed him. Why, look you,” eagerly, “what did he gain by it? He knew he had heart disease, and there was no money, and he feared leaving me here all alone (Oh! how I *wish* he had so left me!) and then came this chance of giving me more money than I had ever dreamed of, and he grasped it. Oh, *cursed* money!” cried she, covering her eyes with her hands. “What it has brought me to!” A quick shiver ran through her slight frame. Then suddenly she turned to St. John, and looked straight at him.

“*You* do not blame my father, do you?” she asked, feverishly. “I know it is the fashion to condemn him here, and even Dorothy, though she is silent, will not believe. But he did NOT know. *You* understand, don’t you, *you* exonerate him?”

“From my soul, I believe he *could* not have done it,” said St. John, whereupon she burst out crying.

"Don't do that," said he. "Don't. What good will it do you?"

"Ah! what good can anything do me," said she. She was trembling with nervous agitation, and St. John, taking one of her hands, drew it through his arm. Impulsively, as he did so, he imprisoned it with the other hand. Passion was dead within him at the moment; he felt only a divine sorrow for her. Poor soul! What was to be the end of it? So sweet a life; so young a life; and all as hopelessly adrift as thistledown before the wind.

As though she understood his thought, his motive, she showed no anger at his touch. Instead, she moved her fingers within his, gladly, restfully, until they found a position comfortable to them; the pretty, slender, trembling fingers! they seemed to find a home within his broad palm!

"What a friend I am," said he presently, in a contrite tone, "I have only helped to distress you."

"Oh, no! You have done me good," said she sweetly. "After all, to speak eases one; and I know you will not betray me. But we shall be late," looking a little startled. "Come let us hurry; and my eyes," stopping again, and raising her face anxiously to his, "are they *red*? Will the others notice them, do you think?"

"They look a little queer," said St. John, honestly. He had been too long a traveller to be a clever courtier. "Here, wait a moment."

A little stream rang gurgling by, and, stooping, he wetted his handkerchief, and brought it back to *her*, and helped her to hold it to her eyes. The re-

sult was so far satisfactory that, with the assistance of the declining daylight, that made most things obscure, she eluded all comment from those assembled at the church gate, waiting for them as they came up.

The vicar, good man, had reason to be proud of his congregation to-night. It was full to overflowing. So much of the county element seldom graced the walls of the old church for an evening service. The pews were all crowded, almost to an uncomfortable pitch, a circumstance that gave joy to more than the vicar. Farquhar took a mean advantage of it to get as close to Dorothy as he could, and, indeed, a great deal closer, and I regret to say spent his time mumbling apologies into her ear, until for very fear of the vicar's wrath she forgave him all the sins he had *not* committed; whilst Mr. Blair, who was sitting between Miss Carton and Rosa Mackenzie, made himself so extremely troublesome that the latter had to threaten him with a visitation from the sexton with a view to turning him out, and getting him a more commodious seat elsewhere; probably on a tombstone in the churchyard. Providentially he fell asleep later on, when the sermon was in full swing, so peace was restored.

I have said the vicar was a worthy man, but I don't think I said (which was quite as true) that he was the stupidest creature alive; yet, strange to say, he was saturated with the conviction that he was gifted beyond his fellows. Originality was the target at which he aimed, and he honestly believed he had struck the bull's eye in it. To betray this originality,

to seek in every way to demonstrate it, and disseminate a universal knowledge of it, was the ruling passion of his life. And his sermons were the great medium by which he hoped to attain his end. His texts alone, as he thought, showed power and daring—the latter quality indeed could not be denied them. He fought long and valiantly with the Old Testament every week of his life, with a view to getting something original out of it; and to do him justice, as a rule, he succeeded. As to whether—the text being chosen—he succeeded in explaining it, or beating any moral meaning out of it, I am not prepared to swear.

To night he was specially felicitous in his choice. When he stood up in his pulpit, and opened his Bible, and gave out the words: "And he said shoot! and he shot!" there was hardly anyone present who was not conscious of a slight electric shock. Had it occurred in Ireland during the present crisis, I should hardly like to dwell upon the consequences.

Everyone indeed started into instant life. Was it a breech-loader, a cannon, or a pea-shooter that was about to go off? Everyone had an immediate sense of relief, in that the missile, whatever it was, had passed them by, that they were still sound in wind and limb, although it had skimmed by them as it were.

The vicar, noting the effect, was delighted, and began his sermon (which had nothing whatever to do with his text) with a sprightliness born of his late triumph. Drone, drone, drone, went the vicar's voice; buzz, buzz, buzz, went a fly on the painted window

pane on the right hand of the aisle ; snore, snore, snore, went an old woman in a back pew. It was all as seductive as distant music !

Cecil Vereker, not thinking of the shooting or the being shot, the assassin or the victim, sat in a half-mournful, half-ecstatic reverie, dwelling on things so vague, that they were as delicious as they were unsatisfactory. So would her whole life be, she thought ; present torture mingled with dreams too sweet to be attainable.

It was very warm. Lady Bessie, that most awake of all people, began to feel drowsy ; the little children on the benches kept nodding, nodding. That buzzing fly grew almost insupportable. The clerk, who had taken it into his ancient noddle that the weather was going to change, and who nursed his rheumatism as though it was a baby, had firmly closed all the windows. Mr. Blair had sunk into a sound slumber.

The vicar was at the height of his discourse. He was proving triumphantly some impossible thing. Having made a point, as he supposed, he paused, to let the artfulness of it sink into the hearts of his hearers. It was just this important moment that one of those luckless school-children, overcome by fatigue and impatience, should elect to beat a tattoo, a regular double-knock, on that part of the pew where its short legs could reach. It was a loud double-knock ; it reached unfortunately even to the sleepy ears of Mr. Blair. He started into instant life, and looked wildly round him.

“ *Come in !* ” shouted he, with stentorian lungs.

There was an awful silence. The vicar bent over the pulpit and glared at him, then brought his sermon to an untimely end. Everyone listened in breathless awe to the blessing, very slowly delivered, after which there was a general rout.

“Well, Bobby, you’ve done it this time, at all events!” said St. John, as they tumbled over each other into the outer air.

CHAPTER XV.

“Now look ye, is not this an high folly?
Who may not be a fool, if but he love?”

“THIS way—this way. Sh! Come *this* way!” whispers Dorothy, poking out her charming head from behind a rhododendron bush, as Farquhar, the next morning, was walking up the tiny avenue that led to Miss Jemima Aylmer’s sylvan retreat.

Long time accustomed to pitfalls when within the precincts of this spinster’s home, Mr. Farquhar, without a second wasted on surprise, turned towards the peeping apparition, that stood with its finger on its lip, and disappeared with it up a side walk.

“Another yard or two and you would have been a dead man,” said Miss Aylmer, junior, when they had entered the little copse, and stood snugly surrounded by greenery that hid them from all observation. “She was watering her plants in the grass plot, and I never knew her in a worse temper. Matilda,

that's the housemaid, you know, asked permission to go home to see her mother, who is always ailing, more or less, and Aunt Jemima was *furious*. Considering she had it all her own way, and didn't let the girl go, I don't see why she is furious, but so it is. Perhaps the prickings of her conscience does it. Well, how d'ye do? I hope *your* temper is better to-day."

"Oh, Dorothy! I hope you are not going to begin it all over again."

"I begin it. I like that! Why, it was you who, yesterday, grossly—yes, *grossly* insulted me."

"My darling girl——"

"Oh, tut! Nonsense! *Your* darling girl, indeed! Well," with a beaming smile, "to-day is too lovely to be abused by quarrelling. And, besides, I've been at it tooth and nail with Aunt Jemima since early dawn, so I think I've had enough of it. I'll let you off. But you must allow that——"

"Yes, yes. I feel I behaved badly, though I'm not quite sure how," said Captain Farquhar, quite anxious to acknowledge himself in the wrong, now that his goddess seemed prepared to forgive him. "But, I say, Dorothy, how you can go on living this sort of life, in fear and trembling, when—when there is another life you *might* accept, passes my comprehension. I can't bear to think of you as chained to the caprices of that miserable old woman, who doesn't know what a priceless treasure dwells within her doors. Why can't you make up your mind to cut it all, and marry me?"

"Why, indeed!" echoed she airily.

"I do wish, darling, you would try to be serious, if for even *one* moment."

"*One* moment! To what end? Such an infinitesimal portion of time could contain no good worth mentioning."

"Five minutes, then."

"Well," doubtfully, "I'll try. Go on. You were advising me to cut it all. Cut what?"

"These daily worries that are troubling you so much. Your aunt's—er—peculiarities for one thing, and—and all the rest of it."

"I might," reflectively. She paused, and placing the stem of the flower she held in her mouth, chopped it slowly with her pretty white teeth with an expression so full of earnest, inward argument, that for about the thousandth time his spirits soared heavenward.

"But should I, by such an irrevocable act, achieve the end towards which you point—*should* I 'cut it all,' as you so tersely and graphically put it? You too, I think," with a mild and friendly glance at him, "have peculiarities, by which I presume you mean tempers."

"Have I?" said he, ruefully. "I *used* to think I was one of the easiest going fellows anywhere, but somehow, you," mournfully, "have made me doubt it. Is it not strange that you—whom I love above all others—should be the one to rouse in me an evil passion?"

"I'm so dreadfully sorry," said Miss Aylmer, with overpowering contrition as to voice. Her eyes as a contrast look warm with mirth subdued.

"I can't be ill-tempered really," went on Farquhar, recurring in offended accents to his grievance. "I don't think you need be afraid of that. *Au fond*, I'm all right I'm certain. But when a fellow's put out, you know, and unhappy, he sometimes *will* show symptoms of temper."

"How strange," said Dorothy, with a little short burst of irrepressible laughter, "let me confess in turn that I often show symptoms of it *without* being in the least unhappy."

"And there's one thing to be said for me," went on her lover anxiously. "The man who can get on with his servants is, they say, safely to be trusted; you're a woman, so you ought to know all about that; and I have had mine every one of them for *years*. There's a groom, now, Bennett is his name. Know him?"

"Very well indeed!" said Dorothy drily. "He gets drunk every Saturday night in the St. John Arms, doesn't he?"

"Nonsense! Who told you that? That old woman Mackenzie I suppose. She must live in the St. John Arms herself to know all she pretends to know. Not a bit of it. Jerry is as steady as a rock—just as steady as any of them."

Here Miss Aylmer laughed again, but he disdained to take any notice of her unseemly merriment. He decided upon mistaking her laugh for a yawn and thus maintain his dignity.

"You're tired, I bore you," said he. "Let us change the subject."

“On the contrary, you interest me more than I can say. Well, and what about Bennett?”

“Nothing. I won’t go back to *him!*” meaningly, and with a reproachful glance at her. “But you know Redmond, that old butler of mine; well, I’ve given him warning about half-a-dozen times and still he *won’t go!* Does that look as if I had a bad temper? I assure you I can’t get him to leave me. I couldn’t get rid of him if I tried, and I have tried.”

“Type of your wife when you get one! No matter how hard you may try, you won’t be able to get rid of her either. You speak so feelingly about your butler, that this thought I have suggested should appal you!”

“If the wife were *you*, it wouldn’t. If it were any other woman on earth I daresay it would. But it never shall be any other woman.”

“You don’t know. One grows tired of everything in time, even of one’s favourite belief; you might grow tired of me too, even if you did get me, no matter how impossible it now seems. Impossible to you, that is—not, I acknowledge, to me. I am as tiresome a person as I know.”

He opened his mouth as if to speak, but she stopped him by laying a little imperious hand upon his lips.

“Don’t!” she said apprehensively. “I know you are going to say that thing about ‘Age cannot wither——’ and I hate the word ‘*stale*.’ I wish it could be expunged from every dictionary; but I suppose that would be a crime. Well, even if you haven’t a temper, you have something else.”

“What *now?*” anxiously.

“A sister.”

“Why I thought you quite liked Jane.”

“As a friend, at a distance—a considerable distance—*yes*; immensely. She is so good, so solid, so earnest, so painstaking, so entirely and always all there, so full of energy (Oh, *how* full of energy!), so——”

“Oh! I say, that’ll do!” interrupted he impatiently. “You’ve made her out a paragon, a consolidation of all—all the virtues. If she be that, what is the matter with her? What fault do you find with her?”

“None. None. Only,” mildly, “something warns me, that if I were to live in the same house with her, I should shortly be hanged for murder.”

“You wouldn’t have to live with her,” eagerly. “She has any amount of money of her own. You know *her* mother was an heiress; mine wasn’t. She’ll be very glad I daresay to leave my place, and set up an establishment for herself somewhere.”

“How well you understand the maiden sister,” said Miss Aylmer admiringly. “As a profound student of human nature I don’t believe there is your equal. When people have been master and mistress in a house for twenty years or so, I have always understood that they are filled with boundless delight when asked to give up the keys to another. Especially when they come to Jane’s age.”

“She isn’t so very old, if you come to that—she is only——”

"She is," with gentle insistence, "the very oldest person I know."

"She is only ten years older than I am anyway. That doesn't make her a female Methuselah."

"'Twill serve," said Miss Aylmer. "If you said she was twenty, or only two, years older than you, it wouldn't make any difference. It wouldn't alter the true fact that age has caught her. I have a theory about Jane. It is all my own. It is a secret. It sounds wild, but I feel sure there is something in it. I believe," leaning confidentially towards him, "that when you were a baby it was your *step-sister* who died and not your mother. Take my word for it, Jane is by all the laws of the land Mrs. Farquhar, and—your mother! I hope," anxiously, "you are always respectful to her."

"May the heavens forbid the truth of such a theory as that," said Farquhar, with pious horror. "I feel the relationship acknowledged, quite close enough. Jane, as a step-sister goes a long way!" Here he gave way to irreverent mirth, in which Dorothy joined him.

"But really," said he presently, as if very properly ashamed of himself, "it's a low thing of me to sneer at her. Jane isn't half a bad sort. At heart she is quite sound."

"Don't speak of her as if she were a potato," reprovingly.

"She has been very good to me, ever since I can remember."

"Long may she wave," with a light yawn and a stretch of her pretty lithe body. "Let her con-

tinue in good deeds. Far be it from *me* to prevent her."

"Of course, I know what you mean by that," said he in an offended tone. "But I don't care"—doggedly—"I shan't give you up until I actually *see* you married to another man. Every word you say goes in at one ear and out at the other."

"And a very good thing too. In at one ear and out at the mouth might cause considerable confusion—if you were to repeat, for instance, what I have just been saying of the immaculate Jane. Come, let us talk of something more agreeable; Hilary's ball, for example."

"Thursday next, isn't it?"

She nodded her head.

"Aren't you going to ask me what I intend to wear?" she said presently. It struck him that a rich, quick colour leapt into her cheeks as she said this, and he wondered at it.

"I didn't think of it," said he slowly, being employed in puzzling out the meaning of that rare blush. "But," a sudden thought striking him, "I *should* like to know."

"Don't send me a bouquet," said she cruelly, divining his thought at once. "It would only make matters worse."

"What matters?"

"Why, you see," with a rather awkward little laugh, "it would be sure to be a lovely bouquet, and it would only make an odious comparison between it and my gown open to everyone. The fact is," said she desperately, "I want to prepare you for the

gown. It won't be so fresh or so pretty as any of the others; indeed," rather miserably, "I shouldn't wonder if it proves the shabbiest there. Of course," turning away her head, "I know I oughtn't to care. I know," with a forced little laugh, "I ought to be above all such folly as wishing to be as well gowned as those who have money, but—I *do* care for all that."

"Oh, Dorothy—Dorothy!" said he sharply. It was agony to him to see her thus cast down—his pretty, bright, saucy girl. "If I might say something," entreated he.

"But you may *not*!" She turned to him with a lovely gleam in her eyes, half tears, half wrath, half something else, he hardly dared to believe in. "Not even one syllable of it. Tut! I'm not such a baby that I can't live through it. And one can't have one's cake and eat it, you know, and I had *such* a lovely month in town. It took every penny I possessed, and now I shall go barefoot, like the beggar maid." She laughed. "I've thought out a costume for the coming winter, however," speaking quite gaily again now. "Necessity, you know, is the mother of invention, and the patent *I* shall take out for mine will certainly not be tampered with. I have ordered two or three nice, clean, secondhand meal bags, in which I shall cut holes for my head and arms, and thus equipped I shall defy the world. This costume will be cheap, and, I flatter myself, highly effective."

Here she sprang to her feet.

"Go home!" she cried. "What! have I nothing

better to do, think you, than to sit here from morn to dewy eve, listening to you. Go home, good youth, go home! You have been here an unconscionable time; all day long, in fact."

"All day *short* it has seemed to me," said Farquhar. He got up, however, and took the hand she held out to him. He held it closely, and looked at her with a warm and earnest expression in his eyes. It was as though he would have spoken, but he suppressed the desire. He raised his hat, however, and imprinted a lingering kiss upon the small hand he held.

"You send me away, yet, I believe, when I am gone, you will have nothing to do," said he.

"You are wrong. I shall go and cut holes in those bags for my head and arms," retorted she, with a pretty little *moue*, after which she disappeared amongst the shrubberies, and he took his lonely way homewards.

But never yet had he carried there so light a heart. She had confided in him. She had been actually uneasy about her appearance at this ball, lest *he* should think her gown shabby. Modest a lover as he was, he could not but be certain that she thought more of his opinion than of that of others. His darling girl! As if she mightn't know, that, were she indeed dressed only in that sack of which she jested, she would be to him the dearest, the most precious, the most beautiful thing in all this blessed world.

And so on, and on. Dear Heaven! How sweet a thing it is to be young and fathoms deep in love!

CHAPTER XVI.

"In fellowship well could she laugh and carp."

"As I best might, I hid from him my sorrow."

THE dances were growing low down on the cards; for the past hour a good many of them had been got through on the upper steps of the most unfrequented staircases, and in secluded corners where the prying light was dim, and there was room only for two.

Lady Bessy, in a very special gown, that seemed to emit electric sparks as she moved, had given up doing hostess long ago, and was now flirting to her heart's content, *almost* as diligently as Mr. Blair, who, however, had brought that pleasant pastime to the level of a fine art, and was therefore hard to beat. Mrs. Mackenzie was radiant in a terrible gown of the colour of beetroot and a cap that Lady Bessy devoutly hoped hadn't its match in Europe, and was enjoying herself immensely, going about, and saying unpardonably rude things to every friend (?) she had. Dorothy, in spite of a gown that undeniably had seen its best day, many a dance ago, was looking as sweet as uncut flowers, whilst the Hon. Mrs. Vereker, who was clad like a snowdrop, looked like one, although her eyes were brilliant and a fleck of lovely red had crept into her cheeks.

She had been dancing a good deal with St. John. There could be no doubt that, much as he sought

to conceal the fact, for *her* sake, the host was more devoted to her than to any other woman in the room. Mrs. Mackenzie's sharp old eyes noted this, and grew angry beneath it, and she waited her time to thrust a barb or two into his side for it. A young and eligible man, wasting his days philandering after a married woman, when the county was literally overstocked with marriageable girls, only too willing to accept the handkerchief thrown! It was abominable! These nineteenth-century wives who were only half wives, should be suppressed at all risks, trod under, broken like the butterflies they were.

She seized upon St. John after a while, but was too wily to make her attack direct.

"It goes well, your dance," she said graciously. "Lady Bessy is indeed a host in herself. I was going to say host *and* hostess, as one has seen little of you. Ah! ah! Young men *will* love darkness rather than light when a pretty girl—or—let us say—woman is in the way."

"*Apropos?*" said he.

"Why nothing! A general observation. All young men are alike."

"I thought you might be suggesting that my ways were evil." He cast a rather curious glance at her from under his half-closed lids. It was a look, a trick, he had when angry.

"Tut! Not worse than most, no doubt. And as for me, I am not difficult, I know my world too well for that. See! There goes your cousin Dorothy. It is surely one of the amazing things of life,

how one girl can look well in a dowdy gown, and another can't."

"Your honey has its sting—as usual," said he. "I am a man, you will therefore pardon my ignorance. My pretty cousin, is her gown dowdy?"

"It was that so long ago that really I have forgotten to remark on it," said this terrible old lady, with a yawn. St. John looked at Dorothy, and his heart smote him. That pretty child—to want for anything when he had more than he knew what to do with? For the time being he felt depressed, and altogether selfish and unworthy.

"She must be the prettiest creature of my acquaintance," he said, "for, will you believe me? I fancied her looking singularly charming to-night. Fine feathers, as we all know, make fine birds, but Dorothy seems to be strong enough in Nature's fal-lals to do without them."

"Ah! You haven't had eyes for her, or indeed for anyone," with a would-be playful laugh, "save for Mrs. Vereker—you seem very attentive *there*," digging at him lightly with her fan, and looking odiously at him through her bleared old eyes. "Going to run away with her?"

"You are an old friend, Mrs. Mackenzie," said he, in a disgusted tone, "but permit me to say, that——"

"*Pouf!* my good boy! Why give yourself those virtuous airs?" interrupted she, unmoved. "They don't suit your age. And why be shocked or offended? I really think a debt of gratitude would be due to the man who would take her away from

that deplorable person, her husband. You have heard Black Sandy is out again? One would know it by Vereker's face, if by nothing else. Hatred, and fear of him, are the only emotions that miserable creature's features can betray. I guessed his enemy was let loose again—upon the pheasants, or on Vereker, as the case may be—the moment I saw the latter's brow to-night. Did you notice the frown thereon?"

"No," shortly.

"Ha! ha! just carries out what I first said, that you had no eyes for anything but—— No, no. Come now, I haven't said a word, have I? But seriously, you should see to Vereker, rather than to his wife. Tut! what a spitfire it is! And to attack an old woman too! Bad enough to attack a young one. But, see you, I give you a hint; Vereker's face is on fire, so is his temper. Believe me, there is mischief brewing for some one. Let us hope not for your poor little friend Cecil."

"She is your friend too, is she not?" said St. John, in a tone that would have been furious if he had let himself go. But she was so *very* old, so very near the grave, this cruel old woman!

"Quite so. *Our* friend I should, of course, have said. Really he looks as ferocious as an unfed tiger. I wonder how long society round here is going to endure him and his—er—little weakness?"

"You, as one of the leaders of the society, should know," said St. John, coldly.

"Oh! A poor old woman like me! How should

I dare to interfere? It is in her interest alone I speak. Surely," with another odious old leer, "you should be grateful to me. Such charm, such grace, such die-away beauty should attract anyone. 'A dainty dish to set before a King' I say, not a satyr like Vereker. What! Going! Well, *au revoir*." She kissed her withered though still beautiful hand to him, and, feeling mightily refreshed both in body and spirit, took her wicked old way to where the Heidseck was to be found.

St. John, his colour somewhat gone, his eyes alight, went on his way. In one of the halls he met the object of the late discussion, and with a cruel pain at his heart stayed to say a word to her *en passant*. Was she ever to be open to such vile comments as these? The poor, lovely, friendless, tortured thing, for whom he would have freely given his very life, if such sacrifice could help her—the very soul of him!

He knew it now, if he had never known it before, by the passionate, almost uncontrollable well of pity and love that rose within him as he looked on her, that she was the one woman in the world for him. Perhaps something of his agitation, his keen sympathy, and vehement affection, shone in his eyes as he addressed to her the few words that came to his lips, because she started, and paled a little, and looked at him without answering. Good Heavens! what a childish creature she seemed, clad all in her pure white, and with a soul as white as her garments shining through her starry eyes. Neither he nor she saw Vereker, who had come out

from the supper-room, and, leaning against the portal of the door, stared at them steadily. As he watched, a slow but devilish fire lit within his eyes. He satisfied his sight, and then bent his gaze on the floor, and a small smile, as devilish as the fire, curved the corners of his lips. Then he looked again.

This second time Cecil saw him. Saw the steady stare, the cruel meaning of it, the evil smile, *all*. Instantly, the happy light died from her face. It grew almost livid. She seemed on the point of fainting.

Vereker, who had seen the change, chuckled softly, and turned back into the room he had just quitted. So! He had now a hold over her, his immaculate saint!

Dorothy Aylmer, passing at the moment, went quickly up to Mrs. Vereker.

“What is it, Cecil? The heat, the——”

“Yes—yes—the heat.” She roused herself sufficiently to say this, and she caught Dorothy’s arm as though it were an anchor, and clung nervously to her.

“Hilary, go and get her an ice. Iced water. Champagne, anything,” said Dorothy, softly, but quickly; she had dismissed Farquhar, who was fortunately her partner, with a glance. As St. John went for the ice, she drew Mrs. Vereker into a tiny ante-room on her left hand.

“What has happened?” she said. “Francis, of course. But what new thing?”

“I don’t know,” said Cecil, whose teeth were

chattering as if with intense cold. "But all day he has been in a terrible temper; and just now, when I was talking to Mr. St. John, I caught his eye, and there was something in his expression that—that——" She shuddered and was silent.

"Is that really *all*?" asked Dorothy. "My dear girl, it isn't so very much. He—he—is not quite himself, I daresay. It is pretty late now, and——"

"No. There is more in it than that. I don't think he is——"

"What did he take at dinner?" asked Miss Aylmer, who, as I have before said, was nothing if not practical.

"Nothing. Only half a tumbler of champagne. I assure you, Dorothy, he has been most careful all day. That is what unnerves me. He looked just now as—as if——"

"Yes, dear, I know. Don't go into it. Let us change the subject. Who were you with, though, when he saw you?"

"Your cousin, Mr. St. John."

"Ah!" said Dorothy. It was the mildest ejaculation, and conveyed nothing to her listener, but to herself it meant a great deal. She drew Mrs. Vereker away from her nervous dreads, which, indeed, were daily increasing, and presently restored her to a more healthy frame of mind. She was, however, uneasy about her and Hilary, and would have liked to assure herself that, however it was with St. John, Cecil was heart-whole. But Mrs. Vereker shrank from any questioning on that

subject, which alone seemed to Dorothy a bad sign.

“ You have a good many friends. You should not be so fearful. You have me and Lady Bessy, and——”

“ Not Lady Bessy, I think. She is kind always, but——”

“ Well, never mind her. She is only a bird of passage. You have Hilary, certainly.”

“ A bird of passage, too.” She stifled a sigh as she said this—a sigh, however, that Dorothy heard.

“ Perhaps not. By-the-bye, what do you think of him ?”

“ I haven't thought of him. *Why* should I think of him ?” She seemed to freeze even towards this, her one real friend whom she *might* confide in, when it came to the great touch of all.

To tell a direct untruth would have been beyond her. She knew, in spite of the poverty of her religious up-bringing, all about the wickedness of lying, and where liars are popularly supposed to go to. Ananias and Sapphira were old friends of hers. She had an immense admiration for George Washington, and never heard his name mentioned without thinking of that immortal hatchet. And yet she could calmly tell Dorothy that she never thought of St. John.

It was just such a *little* equivocation, a word so small as to be written in infinitesimal characters, like the gnat's speech in Mr. Lewis Carroll's wonderful book.

“ Oh, Cecil !” said Dorothy, who was not angry

with her, feeling as if under the hopeless circumstances she would have said the same thing herself. That was what was so *comfortable* about Dorothy; she always made allowance for circumstances. And then :

“Surely you must have thought of him, and he such a friend ? ”

“Well, I haven’t,” said Mrs. Vereker, folding her hands tightly and looking at them as though her life depended upon her scrutiny of those slender trembling fingers. Then suddenly, all at once, as it were, she lifted her head and grew defiant.

“Is he that sort of person ? ” she asked coldly. “Is one *supposed* to think of him ? I confess he has not struck me in that light. He did not suggest himself to me as one of the fatiguing order. However, you should know. What has he done, then, or said, or written, or left undone, that he should be unfortunate enough to bring down on him the eyes of all his fellow-creatures ? ”

She was almost flippant now, but Dorothy who had a great heart of her own, saw through her.

“I shouldn’t have asked you,” she said simply, and took the other’s cold little hand and fondled it gently, lovingly.

Mrs. Vereker resisted her for a moment silently. Then she abruptly drew her hand away from the kindly ones that held it, but only to throw it round Dorothy’s neck, and to press her face against her bosom.

She did not cry; she only lay there quite silently, with Dorothy’s arms round her !

CHAPTER XVII.

“Such is the world, whoso it can behold !
In each estate is little heart’s rest,
God lend us each to take it for the best !”

A FOOTSTEP drawing rapidly near, roused both. Dorothy gently raised her friend, and put her a little back from her.

“It is Hilary,” she said softly.

St. John came in with some iced champagne, looking rather anxious ; a swift glance at Mrs. Vereker, who was quite composed, but deadly pale, increased his anxiety.

Dorothy induced her to take some of the champagne, whilst St. John who, manlike, was feeling somewhat awkward, pretended to be struggling with a thoroughly obedient link in his cuff.

“It is our dance,” he said presently to Mrs. Vereker. “But if you are too tired—too——”

“Oh yes, she is quite too tired,” said Dorothy, who indeed thought they had danced together quite enough for one night. “I think—the night is very mild—if she were to go into the garden for a little bit. Just to give her some air. Not—not to be *long*, Hilary”—this rather sternly—“she is tired you must remember.”

“I’ll remember,” said St. John

But Dorothy had her doubts of it. He threw a shawl round Mrs. Vereker, who got up as if eager to reach the cooling blessed influence of the night, and together they disappeared into the conservatory on

their left that led by means of steps to the lamp-lit gardens beneath.

Not that the lamps were needed; a magnificent moon illumined all the heavens, and shed a radiance pure as crystal upon the earth beneath: the garden, the stone balconies, the marble statues that lurked in every corner, were all lit by it; and flung out their beauties eagerly, as though to do honour to Diana fair. It was as though the Queen of Night had risen in all her majesty to put to shame the puny pretensions of the Chinese lanterns that so liberally, but so futilely, sought to light the pleasure grounds of The Chase.

“Am I to ask no questions?” asked St. John abruptly, stopping short as they came to a more deserted corner of the vast shrubberies. A charming corner, rich in the music of a dropping fountain that shed its melody slowly, sadly, note by note as it were, singing to the tall white hollyhocks that stood up like virgin ghosts around it.

“What question would you ask?” said she tremulously. As if restless, or desirous of gaining all that the night could give her, she loosened the soft Syrian shawl that he had bound round her, and threw it on a garden seat that stood near. Like a child or a very young girl, she shook herself slightly, and made a movement as if she would have flung out her arms to the sweetness of the dewy dark, but suddenly restrained herself. Her whole life—though the thought did not then occur to her—was one long restraint.

“I know something has troubled you,” said he.

“You remember our compact of the other day, that you were to come to me when in distress of any kind? Well, I will not enforce that now. You have confided in Dorothy—I *think*—and that should suffice me. She is very good, very true.”

There was, nevertheless, a note of reproach in his voice.

“Dorothy is the older friend,” said she, uncertainly; she hesitated, looking at him wistfully, having indeed heard that reproachful note, and being distressed by it; but the ways of the world were unknown to her, and she knew not how to get herself out of her dilemma. “But you are a friend, too,” she said at last. She plucked a leaf from a bush near her, and pulled it to bits. “It—it wasn’t very much,” she said, “I think Dorothy thought me foolish, but,” she crumpled up the remains of the leaf and held it spasmodically in her small palm. “It was Francis, he—he was angry with me I think—I am *sure*, though I only saw his face, and yet—what had I done?” she turned to him with a miserable excitement. “You have been with me all the evening, you should know,” she cried with sudden abandonment, “*what* had I done?”

Her voice ceased. Her hand opened, and the crumpled leaf fell to the ground; fell dead as her life. She covered her face with all her pretty outspread fingers, and burst into tears. She had not cried with Dorothy, but now all her heart seemed to break within her.

“It is cruel, *cruel*,” she sobbed with all the vehemence of a child who had been brought up without

contradiction, and had only waked from childhood's happy dream to find herself a slave. "Why don't you speak?" with passionate petulance. "You heard me. What have I done?"

"Nothing, my dear, nothing," said he, soothingly; she looked such a frail, childish little thing, tall for her age as her nurse might have said, standing there in the moonlight, that he answered her as he might have answered anyone specially young, who was refractory, but dear.

"Oh! I *never* saw anything like his face when he looked at me," said she; and now, a certain amount of indignation mingled with her grief. "He looked just as if——"

She paused as though in search of a simile that should express all her horror.

"But when was this? You see I know nothing;" he was indeed rather bewildered.

"When you stood and spoke to me in the hall just now, just as Dorothy came up to us, you remember?"

"Yes. But why should he show anger then? Perhaps——" he paused, it was very hard to go on.

"No, it was not that," said she, paling. "It was something more. But *what* I cannot tell. I shall know, however, before morning. *Oh!*" she paused, and drew in her breath as though to compel control of herself. "Sometimes," she went on in a low, exhausted voice, "I feel as if I couldn't go on any longer."

"Cecil!" exclaimed he, with a passionate forget-

fulness of all things. He was shocked when he had said it, fearing her instant anger. The more unhappy, the more unsophisticated she was, the more he was bound to respect her. But she was not angry. There was almost a suspicion of gladness in her voice as she spoke to him.

"You call me that," she said. "Then I may call you Hilary, *may* I? I am always," with a faint smile, "thinking of you as—as that, and now that you don't mind, it will be such a comfort to me!" she sighed, "but I wish, don't you," said she, "that the world was all different?"

"I wish this!" said he in a hurried tone, carried away by the compassion, the love that was consuming him, "that you and I had met before—before this."

"Ah!" said she. It was a mysterious little cry, and once again she turned to him as if with an impulsive desire to hold out her arms, but again she restrained herself. "You must not speak to me like that," she said sadly. "Never, never at all. It is *too late!*"

With what sad prophetic truth the words fell upon the air. When she had said them she stood silently, her head bent down, her white, sweet arms hanging loosely, dejectedly, by her sides. Was she *sorry* that it was "too late"? St. John's heart was beating so wildly as almost to suffocate him. He caught one of the hands and crushed it within his own, but all the laws of courtesy, of manhood, forbade more than that.

"Don't believe it," he said in a stifled tone.

“Great Heaven! to one young as you are, ‘too late’ can have no meaning. Hope—hope always; one never knows when help may come.”

He felt himself, it was the sorriest reasoning. To a creature like that (too young to know the divine patience that comes later on), to preach hope was but to parry miserably with the sword of destruction.

“Help. From where?” asked she. “From Heaven? I am *tired* of waiting for Heaven.” She ceased speaking abruptly, and then, as if a little frightened, drew closer to him. “Oh! no, I am *sorry* I said that. What have I to trust to but help from Heaven, and yet sometimes I feel as if that—as if all things had forsaken me, as if everything was slipping away. All that makes life worth having. Love, friendship, all.”

“Am I nothing? Is my friendship nothing?” asked he, a touch of despair in his tone. Friendship, what a mockery that word now seemed. Oh! that his way lay open to him, that he dared speak. A passionate, an almost ungovernable desire to take her in his arms and press her lovely, melancholy face close against his breast, and thus to comfort her, seized hold on him. He could not take his eyes from her as she stood there in the cold brilliance of the moonlight, gowned all in white, as best suited her, with her face as white as her robe, and her large, dark, mournful eyes gleaming as the rays from heaven fell straight into them. She had taken off one of her long gloves that she might run her fingers through the dew that lay on each leaf and

flower, but now the pretty naked arm was hanging listlessly by her side.

“Her throat was whiter than the dove,
Her eyelids as the seals of love
And as the doors of love her lips.”

He took the little bare hand that hung so idly at her side and held it in a pressure that was stronger than he knew. His heart was beating; to see her, so young, so helpless, so given up body and soul to her tormentor, was anguish to him. Until tonight he had done great battle with his love for her, but at this instant he knew himself vanquished. The little winged god reigned triumphant, and all hope of peace within him, from this time forth, lay dead.

“You do not speak,” he said unsteadily. “Am I nothing to you? If to lay down my life could help you I would do it, and yet you stand there, cold, impassive, you give me no word—— Cecil——”

She started, and slowly, as if frightened yet fascinated, drew her hand from his clasp. There was a dull red mark upon the pallor of it. St. John saw it.

“Did I do that?” said he, shocked. “Did I hurt you?” He took the hand again, very gently this time, and pressed the reddened spot with tender vehemence to his lips.

“I am tired,” said she, very faintly. “I will return to the house, alone. Alone will be better——”

“Oh! don't say that. Have I offended you? I take back everything I said.” He released her hand. “This only I repeat, if ever you should want me—want a *friend*—remember——”

“I want one now,” said she, with a faint smile. “I think I hardly know my way back to the house.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

“Mine heart is now in tribulation.”

THEY find the next dance nearly finished as they get back to the ball-room, and Mr. Blair, happening providentially to catch St. John's eye, made a signal of distress that might have melted the heart of a Jefferies. He had evidently been having a bad time of it; and just now had been jostled somewhat impolitely into a corner with his partner—a spinster, so simpering, so old, so affectionate, that she had reduced him to the point of tears. For many minutes, indeed, he had been wishing himself dead.

St. John, as his host, felt bound to go to the rescue.

Mrs. Dameron was swinging round in her usual sensuous fashion in Bertie Hawtrey's arms, talking all the time, as if to remind one that life is short. Lady Eustace, talking too, but rather as if centuries of earthly enjoyment lay before her, had stopped short by Blair and his Damsel, and made a place

for Lady Bessy beside her, who was dancing with Farquhar.

"You here!" said Lady Bessy, looking with undisguised amusement at the wretched Blair. "Why, how is that? Rosa Mackenzie, to say nothing of Miss Carton, are——"

Farquhar whispered a word in her ear, anent "the Damsel," who was beginning to look like vinegar. Lady Bessy laughed and shrugged her shoulders, and lowered her voice half a tone.

"But really you should not be here. You should be with the little Carton girl," she went on to Blair. "I saw her pining all alone just now in one of the off rooms."

"Just now isn't *now*, apparently," retorted Mr. Blair, who was not in the best of tempers. "I see her over there," pointing to the other side of the room. "She's got Sunderland to pine with her, so, I suppose she is all right. You've got sympathy for everyone but me, it seems."

"Oh! there's Dorothy. Dorothy, come here," cried Lady Bessy, turning her shoulder on him. "Why, where have you been all night, you erratic girl? How have you been getting on, eh? It's been quite a little success, don't you think?"

"It has been a night amongst nights," returned Dorothy, pausing beside her, breathless, her expressive face all one sweet lovely glow. "Oh! how I *have* enjoyed myself, old rags and all."

"Nonsense; you look as nice as po
few to compare with you in *my* estima

yours, Captain Farquhar?" this, with a mischievous little *moue*.

"Miss Aylmer knows what I think," said Farquhar, rather coldly.

"But I don't. *What* an answer! Is there frost in the air, that I should receive so cutting a reply to an innocent question? I've always said the air down here is bad. Bad for the morals. In fact, it is too exhilarating, too fresh—too much of it altogether."

"It isn't half a bad place," said Dorothy, calmly. "Though," with quite a dreadful glance at Farquhar, "I confess it is a place where good manners do *not* obtain."

"What have I done now?" demanded Farquhar indignantly. There was a sense of injury full upon him. She had scarcely looked at him all the evening, had had her card pretty nearly full, when he came early in the night to ask her for a dance, and now—*now*, when surely he was the aggrieved one, she took upon herself all the airs of a person distinctly indignant.

"Did I say you had done anything?" said she coldly.

"No; not in words; but you hint at it, you look it. That is so barbarously unjust, so like a woman," said he bitterly.

"Well, what would you have me be like—a *man*?" asked she calmly, with quite an unprejudiced air.

"Why are you angry with me?" asked he in turn. "Good Heaven! Have I not spent an

evening sufficiently miserable already, that you should seek to make it more so."

"You didn't look in the least miserable; I never saw anyone so intensely happy as you looked when dancing with Miss Carton."

"That is *beneath* you, Dorothy," said he reproachfully. "You know there is only one person in the room I care to dance with, and that is you. Oh! my darling, if you only knew how charming you look, how superior to everyone else here to-night, you would understand that. Really, Dorothy, I think I never knew how—how——"

"Pretty I was. Oh, yes, I know I'm pretty," said Dorothy, with all the delicious insolence of youth. "But other people are pretty too. That *hideous* Carton girl, for example." She turned petulantly away from him.

"If you would only listen to me, Dorothy—Dorothy!" a little louder. "Dorothy, my sweetheart——"

"I'm *not* your sweetheart," said she indignantly, compelled to hear him lest others should.

"But, indeed, you are. Come away from this, and I'll prove it to you."

"You are evidently bent on proving it to all the world," said she angrily; but he looked so determined to settle the matter then and there, that she took his arm, *and* him, into the nearest conservatory.

"Well, I never knew two people so fond of quarrelling," said Lady Bessy.

"I did," said Blair promptly. "Shall I give you their names?"

"No. I don't care to hear about them. Your acquaintances, as a rule, are more eccentric than proper. I suppose Captain Farquhar forgot he was my partner. However, all's fair in love and war, so I forgive him; and besides the dance is over. But how I'm to get through these people to the other side of the room——"

"If you want a pilot, take me," said Blair. He looked at her with deepest entreaty. Wouldn't she come to his rescue, and save him from the damsel? That young old girl had fastened upon him again, and was growing so fond, that he felt death or instant flight were all that were left him. There was no intermediate course.

"Oh! no, you mustn't dream of giving yourself so much trouble for me," said Lady Bessy cruelly. "I shall be able to manage beautifully; just a little squeeze round there, and a dive near that door, and I shall be free. *Pray* don't put yourself out. Enjoy yourself while you can."

"Bessy!" murmured he, in a frenzied tone.

Lady Bessy gave way to grim mirth. Then she relented.

"Well, if you *will* be so good," she said, speaking reluctantly for the benefit of the Damsel, and slipping her dainty fingers through his arm she led him away, determined to be revenged upon him for all that. If she didn't *give* him a dance, she certainly *led* him a dance for the next twenty minutes or so.

At the end of that time, having enjoyed herself beyond measure, she came up with Dorothy, who

was standing somewhat within shadow in the outer hall.

“Not dancing, Dorothy?” said she. “Why, where are your feet, child. Do you know that morning is breaking, and that pleasure is beginning to loose his hold of the helm? What do you, moping here?”

“I hardly know,” returned Dorothy, who was looking uneasy. “But I’m afraid that—— Oh, Bessy, I am afraid he is very bad to-night.”

Her eyes were more expressive than her words, and Lady Bessy wisely preferred to follow them. They led her to a group at the upper end of the hall, near the door, which stood open.

It consisted of Mrs. Vereker, and St. John, Farquhar, and the Hon. Francis. The latter was not exactly drunk, but he had evidently taken enough to let loose within him the Devil that possessed him. Neither Lady Bessy nor Dorothy had heard what had just been said, but they could see Mrs. Vereker shrink away from her husband, and, unfortunately, the step she took led her to St. John’s side. It was the last straw, the one thing wanted to drive Vereker’s smouldering anger into flame. The evil passion, the uncertain jealousy, that all night long had lain rankling in his breast, stirred within him, and grew full of life.

“Do you mean to stay here indefinitely?” he said savagely. “Am I to consider myself well rid of you? Do you choose *him* for your——” When he had got so far, as though even ashamed of himself, he stopped short, and, going up to his wife, laid his

hand with a wicked grip upon her soft rounded arm. She did not even flinch, though the cruel fingers sunk deep into her flesh; and only that her face grew whiter, she showed no sign of any feeling whatsoever.

St. John, with a swift movement, caught him and flung him backwards. He would have fallen but that Farquhar put his arm out and steadied him.

"Oh! I should not have come," said Mrs. Vereker, in an agonised tone. It was all she said, and she spoke very low. St. John's eyes were blazing, and his nostrils dilated.

"Take care! Take care!" said Farquhar sharply, with a glance at him that went on to Mrs. Vereker, and meant a good deal. Dorothy, at this moment, went quickly across the hall, and stood by Mrs. Vereker.

"Hilary, it is your own house," she said, with a touch of severity. Farquhar, in the meantime, had drawn Vereker into a private room. It had been very quietly done, considering all things, and the fear of a public *exposé* was almost at an end.

"Are you going home with him?" asked St. John, addressing Mrs. Vereker. He was still pale, and almost trembling with ungovernable disgust and fury. "Why should you? Lady Bessy will be only too pleased to receive you for to-night."

Lady Bessy, who heard this, though she was herself unseen, made a little face. She felt sorry for Cecil. But to compromise Hilary! After all, who was there she could consider before *him?*"

“Or come to me,” said Dorothy; “that will be better.”

“I shall go home with him,” said Mrs. Vereker slowly.

“But why, *why?*” cried Dorothy, impatiently. “Really he looks unsafe. Don’t be so impossible, Cecil. Do what is wisest for you.”

“Yes. That is what I must do,” said Mrs. Vereker, her face like marble, her eyes on the ground. “I shall go wherever he goes.”

At that moment the door of the room on their left opened, and Farquhar came out again with Vereker. The latter looked subdued but sullen. Whatever Farquhar had said to him, had brought him to a sense of the fitness of things, for the moment.

“Are you ready?” he said to his wife in a thick surly tone, that to the listeners sounded so ominous, that even Lady Bessy’s heart died within her, and I think had it been possible to do so, she would at this moment have persuaded Cecil to stay beneath her brother’s roof.

Mrs. Vereker, without answer, moved towards the door, and Farquhar gave her his arm. The carriage was waiting outside, the horses impatiently pawing the gravel. He handed her into it, and then, giving a very necessary shove to Vereker, with as impassive a countenance as he could manage considering the contempt that filled him, he drew back, the footman closed the door, and presently it was all over, save for the distant roll of the carriage wheels in the distance. After a while this too ceased.

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OF NEW YORK CHAPTER XIX.

“ ‘ O Death, alas ! why wilt thou do me day ?
Accursed be that day which that Nature
Shope me to be a living creature ! ’ ”

THE dawn was just breaking as they reached their house. Mrs. Vereker, going swiftly through the hall, began to ascend the staircase, with a wild hope of reaching her room without interruption. Once there, she might expect peace—of a kind. Leisure to think over, and dwell upon, and torture herself, with memories of the shame, the humiliation to which she had been subjected. Perhaps, too, there were forbidden thoughts, too sweet to be openly allowed, and that yet would force their way in spite of all opposition.

Peace of any kind however was denied her.

“ See here ! ” roared Vereker from the foot of the staircase. “ Where are you going ? I’ve a word to say to you, my lady, before you turn in. Come back here. D’ye hear ? ”

She stopped, and for a second hesitated. Perhaps, poor soul, a sudden determination to rebel suggested itself to her, but if so, it fell dead. She came slowly downstairs again, her lovely face like death.

“ Ha ! You thought better of it, ” said he with a fiendish grin. “ Come in here. ” He caught her hand with an indrawn, hissing breath, and almost flung her into the library. She staggered and seized hold of a table to steady herself. Vereker turned and deliberately locked the door.

“Now I’ll have it out with you,” he said.

“I don’t know what you mean,” said she, leaning against the table and panting. Great Heaven! was there no help anywhere?

“Don’t you? You’ll know soon. I want to learn from you what’s the meaning of your—*friendship*—with our exceedingly civil host of to-night—our interesting acquaintance—eh? What’s the meaning of his attention to you, his die-away looks, his smiles for you, and his frowns for me? Damn you!” cried he, with a burst of fury, “Why don’t you speak?”

“What is there to say?” returned she icily. Somehow, now that his insults poured thick and fast upon her, she was conscious of a growing calm.

“There’s *this!*” shouted he, drumming with brutal, drunken force upon the table against which she stood, until the table shook, and each second seemed to bring the strong, hard fist within reach of her delicate face. “That as I have you I’ll hold you! D’ye hear? You’d go to him now, wouldn’t you? to cry and whine for succour against the brute of a husband! Eh? You’d go to your lover, eh?”

He thrust his face so near to hers that she drew back a bit.

“You will be sorry for this in the morning,” she said.

“I’m drunk, you mean. But not so drunk, let me tell you, that I haven’t been up to your goings on with that fellow. Do you think I’ve been blind all this time? That I haven’t seen the glances that passed between you? Hah! my immaculate angel,

I'm not so drowned in liquor as you suppose. I can still see more than I am intended to see. There; why don't you go to your lover? Take your white face out of this, I'm sick of it. Take it to him!"

She moved towards the door. He rose abruptly, and following her, caught her and drew her back into the full glare of the lamp.

"By Heaven! If I thought you would take me at my word, I'd dash your life out against that wall," he said. "I'd kill you as soon as I'd look at you; ay, *sooner*, so beware. Let me once catch you tripping, and say your last prayer." He stood over her as he spoke, the words coming thickly through his purple lips. This man of good birth, of decent education, was, partly by nature (which sometimes plays sad pranks), partly through vice and general demoralization, so brutal, that he spoke and acted as might a costermonger. Romance so dear to us (and deservedly so) hides many things: But in real life we shall often find such a deformity as this.

"Now I've warned you," he went on, still leaning over her, as though exulting in his coarse strength that kept her in his power. "Love him if you will, eat your heart out for him if it suits you, but remember this, that you are *mine*, and mine you shall remain. Do you hear me, you bit of wax? You bloodless fool! Not bloodless for *him*, eh?—only to your husband. Marble to me, but willing enough to——"

She wrenched herself free from him before he could finish his sentence, and stood panting before him with cruel indignation. Her white lips parted as

though she would speak, but no words came. She clenched her hands, and stood staring at him as though, were power given her, she would willingly slay him with her own right hand. It was a most mournful thing to see her pure, lovely childlike face thus transfigured by passion.

“Oh! that I were as strong as you!” she said in low, vehement tones.

He laughed; and turning to the table poured out and swallowed a glass of brandy. The spirit acted like fire on tow; his drunken mood changed and grew into absolute fury.

“What! You would defy me,” he said, “you—*you!* Why see here!”

He caught her suddenly and bent her backwards and then forwards, shaking her violently as if to show his mastery over her slight frame, and then, with a brutal burst of rage, dashed her from him.

She came heavily against a bookcase, but her senses did not desert her, and she stood erect clinging to it desperately. For a moment she thought he was going to kill her, and she grew sick and faint; but the action seemed to have partly sobered him, and he made no further advance towards her. A slight touch of shame grew on his face.

“There, go to bed,” he said roughly. He moved to one side, and she went slowly towards the door. As she went she staggered.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” he said in a dogged, angry tone. “Here! drink this before you go.”

He held out to her a glass of wine, and seeing she made no effort to take it, thrust it into her hand.

She held it for a moment, and then deliberately dropped it on the floor. The glass broke into a thousand fragments. She raised her head and looked him full in the face for fully a minute, very strangely. Something in that long, intense gaze disconcerted him. As she went out and closed the door behind her, he breathed more freely.

“She-devil! I’ll tame her yet,” he said, between his teeth.



He went back to the brandy and drank steadily until the calm pallor of the early dawn had grown into clearer daylight. Then he threw himself heavily on a lounge, and dropped into a sleep that was almost insensibility. He woke about ten o’clock, rang for more brandy, and after that fell asleep again. At two he roused himself and made a pretence at eating something, but more as an excuse to get down more brandy than for anything else. Hardly three solid morsels passed his lips.

He was subject to these attacks of the demon who governed him, and for a day, or sometimes two or three, would drink continuously, nay, ravenously, until on the very borders of delirium; once or twice, indeed, he had over-stepped those bounds. As a rule these attacks came on after a period of forced abstinence, and he had kept himself pretty steady for the ball at The Chase. For months together sometimes he would go on, drinking hard certainly, but rarely getting beyond the sottish state

of stupidity that now characterised him, and then would come a time when he revolted from all effort at respectability, and would give himself up a willing prey to his tormentor.

Shortly after his pretence at luncheon, he sent for Cecil's maid, and asked where her mistress was. The girl, who had been a sufficiently long time in the house to understand his moods, said promptly that her mistress had gone for a walk in the grounds, though she had just left her lying down in her own room. She was particularly attached to Cecil, and thus sought to shield her from what might prove a scene. Vereker believed her, and once more sank back on his lounge.

The day wore on, and no one called. For this Cecil was devoutly thankful. She felt that if Dorothy or St. John had come, she could not have seen them. A very agony of shame, degradation, and misery, was overwhelming her. They had been witnesses of that most disgraceful scene in the hall at The Chase ; but she felt too as though they must, through some occult means, be aware of the horrible ordeal through which she had passed on her return home.

Her shoulder hurt her terribly. She had been flung with crashing force against the sharp edge of the bookcase, and all her tender flesh was bruised, and was even now beginning to grow black. She had thought of nothing else but of Vereker's conduct towards her, and her utter powerlessness to escape from him, all through her sleepless night ; but strange to say no tears had risen out of her desperate

musings. She sat and brooded—dry-eyed—sure only of this, that the worst was not yet come.

She knew her husband well by this time. She had certainly—may God help all such!—sufficient cause to do so. There was mischief lurking still within him, and sooner or later it would break out. She would be the victim of it. She dreaded the approaching dinner hour with a horrible sinking of her heart that would not be subdued.

With a view to rousing herself, to help her failing courage, she flung a shawl over her shoulders, and towards evening went into the open air. She walked swiftly, as if hoping exertion would brace her nerves, but after half-an-hour's eager pursuit of mental strength, she acknowledged that she had gained nothing by this rapid walk.

She had, indeed, suffered one further shock. Amongst the shrubberies she had espied a man peering at her through the laced boughs—a man with an undying rancour in his eyes.

It was Black Sandy! She could not mistake him. She knew he had been released from the prison whither her husband as magistrate had sent him some time since, and that his depredations, as an accomplished poacher, had been as numerous as ever, in spite of his taste of jail life; she remembered that day long ago when he had insulted her—that day when St. John had been almost a stranger to her (how *odd* that now sounded)—and a quick sense of fear drove her back to the house. Indeed, her nerves were all unstrung. The man's face haunted her, as she took *her homeward way*. What was there in it? Some-

thing beyond a common anger. There was determination, settled purpose, an unchangeable patience, a waiting for something that was bound to come.

It puzzled her, and distressed her in a vague way, and it was with a sense of relief she once again entered her own room. What was the man waiting for? What had she done to him, that he should look at her so strangely?

All other thoughts, however, were presently swallowed up in the fear that her husband might put in an appearance at dinner. She did not dare send down word that she would not come, as, were he sufficiently recovered to dine in public, he would not submit to her absence, but would insist on her coming downstairs. Once before there had been unpleasantness arising out of her desire for solitude—unpleasantness of so marked a nature that she did not care to risk a repetition of it.

Slowly the daylight died; the gold and blue of the morning had deepened into grey, and now at the last darkness fell upon the land. It fell upon her heart, too, when her maid told her that Mr. Vereker was in the drawing-room. She rose precipitately when the maid said this, and got herself into her gown in haste—a pretty cream-coloured dress that gave an additional charm to her beauty, though she was just now too distressed in mind to think of effect of any sort—and hurried downstairs. She was a little late, but one glance at Vereker told her this fact would pass unnoticed.

He managed to get into the dining-room, how-

ever, without assistance, and sat all through dinner quite quiet, save for a lurch now and again, or a call for champagne. This latter he sipped slowly, as if not caring for it, and finally asked one of the men for brandy, a glass of which he threw into the tumbler of Heidseck that stood at his elbow. Plainly, the champagne was too weak to gratify his heated palate.

He deliberately helped himself to every dish, entrées and all, but though he played with what he with difficulty placed on his plate, he ate nothing. Mrs. Vereker, at the head of the table, ate just as much. Her brain seemed on fire. What would the end of it all be?

From time to time she glanced at him, and something singularly malign in his naturally bad countenance made her fear a break-out later on. She sat almost motionless until, dessert being on the table, the men retired, and she was left alone with him. A half-formed notion of calling one of them back as a sort of protection occurred to her, but whilst she puzzled over an excuse to do so, the man was gone, and the door closed.

She had seen the brandy he had asked for and taken, and, though with many throes of remorse and horror, had hoped he would take more and more until he sank into insensibility. Poor soul! She had learned to hope for what happy wives would have shrunk from in anguish and despair.

He was looking terribly sodden and disgusting; his hair hung damply on his forehead, and one of his sleeve-links had not been fastened. The cuff

hung wide open, so that the fat, white arm inside could be seen.

This seemed to trouble him. All through dinner he had made abortive attempts to fasten it, and now when the men were gone and he and she were alone, and silence deep as death hung over the room, he began once again to fumble with the refractory link.

Again it failed him, slipping through his palsied fingers with a persistency that seemed to his dull brain demoniac, and created in him a desire for conquest.

"Come here and fasten this damned thing," he called to his wife in a broken, indistinct voice.

She understood him, however. Practice had made perfect. She rose from her seat, and came up to him and let her delicate fingers undertake the task commanded. But though she could control her movements, the soul within her would not be silenced, and the terrible shrinking, disgust and hatred that betrayed itself on her face was written there in letters of fire.

Through all his drunkenness he saw it.

"It offends you to touch me, eh?" said he with a wicked snarl. "You shrink from me. You think me the very devil, eh? I'll give truth to that thought of yours—before I die." Some expression in her frightened face caught his senses and struck him wrongly.

"Ah, ah! You'd laugh at my death, wouldn't you? 'Twould be a release, eh? and leave you free to join your lover. Why, *curse you!*" cried he, rising from his chair and staggering towards her as

she backed in a terrified manner away from him. "D'ye think *I* want you. Come! I'll show you what I mean. I'll have no wanton in *my* house! Out you go, and may the devil prosper you!"

He flung back the shutters, and opened the broad window; then, catching her, swung her through it on to the gravel beneath, the window-sill being only a foot or two from the ground.

"Now, damn you! go to perdition your own way!" he shouted, slammed down the window again and banged the shutters, thus leaving her alone in the cold darkness of the night outside.

CHAPTER XX.

"God wot, love and I be far asunder;
I am disposed bet, so may I go
Unto my death to plain and makē woe."

FOR a while she was conscious only of a thrilling sense of relief. The sweet night wind blew upon her heated forehead; she was alone. No longer could she see that bloated, malignant, sottish face!

She stood, trembling violently, and leaning against the wall, but hardly conscious of what had really happened. Then, slowly, by degrees, the truth came to her: she had been flung out of doors by that brute within! That brute, who was yet her husband! She had been spoken to, addressed, treated as though she were the very scum of the

earth. She—*she!* Not another woman, but she herself!

She looked down at her hands as if to convince herself, and then ran her finger lightly yet feverishly up and down her bare arm. Then, all at once, the whole enormity of the thing flashed upon her, and a wild storm of passion swept over her. It shook her frail body and blanched her cheek, but it gave brightness to her eye. She stood up as though strong in herself, and disdaining further the support of the wall, and swore to herself that, as he had done to her, so would she do to him. He had cast her forth, he had abandoned her—she would never return.

But where to go? The night, in spite of its beauty, was cold enough. It was eleven o'clock, and a chill wind blew from the west. Her arms, her bosom was bare, and there was no covering nearer than the house, and that she had told herself she would not re-enter.

Where to go! Instinctively her thoughts turned to St. John. *He* would help her. He would tell her what to do. It was a long walk there, but she gave no thought to distance, in her then wild mood, and moving across the garden, entered the wood on her right that led by a path she knew to The Chase.

As she ran eagerly onwards, looking like the wraith of some forlorn thing in her light floating gown, she remembered what St. John had said to her, and some courage came with the memory. When, or if ever, she was in trouble, she was to

come to him! He would be ready to take her part to defend her against the world. She was *sure* of him. She did not even wonder what the help was he would offer, she thought only of his power to help her, and a strong, eager desire for revenge on the man whom she hated, welled up in her heart. St. John would see that she was avenged!

Her nerves were quivering, her heart throbbing with a painful haste. She, who had been the most patient of mortals, now dwelt only on a longing for retribution. It is hard to be patient when the first flush of a vile wrong is strong upon us; it is only later, when the wound is healing, and merciful Time is perfecting its cure, and we are beginning to forget, that we tell ourselves at last that we grow calm and forgiving—ofttimes mistaking apathy for pardon.

The moon came slowly from behind the banks of cloud that up to this had dimmed its glory. Weird glimpses of it fell through the overhanging branches that formed a net-work above her head. A few stars studded the heavens. The soft, sweet dew of night clung to her naked arms as she sped swiftly onwards.

She was not cold now, she was conscious of nothing but an overmastering desire to reach St. John. No thought of love for him was in her heart, no tender surety of a love returned. It was only safety she seemed to be seeking, and a way out of her troubles, that had grown greater than she could bear.

The strong deep bracken, with its odour of earth *and of all things green*, made a soft rustling as she

passed through it; once a dark thing sprang up beneath her feet and fled like a spirit away. It was a timid brown creature, a hare; yet for the moment it startled her. The music of a stream—that one sleepless thing—came to her through all the drowsy noises of the night, falling with a sense of rest upon her brain.

The wind had altogether died away. A wonderful stillness reigned.

“Hard overhead the half-lit crescent swims,
The tender-coloured night draws hardly breath,
The night is listening.”

Her steps began to grow a little slower, it suddenly appeared to her that she had come a long, long way, and with the sense of growing fatigue came a sharp terrible thought. It must be late; suppose he should be gone to bed—that she could not see him?

Her breath came sharply. She felt as though she could not live out the night without speaking to him. And if, if so cruel a thing *should* happen as that this walk of hers should be in vain, what was she to do? Go back again! All through this awful slumbering silence—alone—worn out in soul and body!

A sensation of faintness crept over her as she dwelt on it. No, she *could* not go back. Fate could not so entirely have abandoned her. She felt that she was trembling, and growing icy cold; and so great was her relief when, on turning a corner, she suddenly, through the terrible darkness, saw

lights shining in the library windows of The Chase—the room where he always sat at night—that for a moment her nerve gave way, and she sank shivering upon the trunk of a fallen tree close by.

It was only a momentary weakness, however. With a renewal of hope she sprang to her feet, and, gaining the balcony steps, began eagerly to ascend them.



There was a slight fire burning in the library grate, and St. John, his arm on the mantelpiece, stood looking moodily into it. Lady Bessy and all the other guests had left that morning, so that he was in a measure entirely alone. Lady Bessy, with Lady Eustace Fenmore, had run up to town for a day or two, escorted by Blair and one or two other of the men; the rest had passed themselves on to various other country houses.

St. John had been rather glad of their going. It gave him liberty to dwell on the one consuming thought of his life, on Cecil Vereker. All day he had let his love for her hold full sway, and had lingered with a passionate fondness over this smile, that word, a touch of the hand, a glance from the melancholy eyes, that he could not but see brightened for him alone.

How young she was, how defenceless! That last scene, at the close of his dance, had quickened both his love for her and his fear. He had spent a terrible night after she had gone, but next day—that morning—had not dared, for her sake, to call

at Vereker Court. He had not mistaken the expression of her husband's eyes, as they caught his, nor the evil meaning of his half-uttered words.

How strangely things were ordered. If she had been his, his wife! How he would have adored, prized, treasured her. And that devil! that brute! he treated her as though she were only made to be trodden on by him.

If she had been *his*! This thought seemed to cling to him as he sat in his library alone, with the lamps lighted, and the small but cosy fire, that effectually killed the slight suspicion of damp in the air, burned cheerily upon the hearth. With all the tender folly of a lover, he had drawn a little dainty satin-lined chair close to his own favourite lounge, and had pictured her to himself as sitting in it, gazing silently, happily, at the glowing logs, hand in hand with him, perhaps, too much at peace, at touch with each other, to care for conversation.

He grew almost to think she was *really* in that pretty chair; dressed all in white, as he loved to see her: His wife! Perhaps the mother of his children.

A log had fallen with a crash into the fire. The sparks flew upwards with a little roar; the vision faded, the chair was empty.

He rose and pushed it from the hearthrug, and, staring at the fire, told himself that all such dreaming was but vanity, she would never come to him—she would never——

A slight noise at one of the windows startled him. He raised his head. For a moment his heart failed

him. Had that fellow murdered her at last? Was that her ghost looking in at him?

He strode forward and flung open the window, and drew her in out of the growing mists of the night.

CHAPTER XXI.

* For all that comes, comes by necessity;
Thus, to be lorn, it is my destiny."

SHE came in very quietly, but he knew of course that something had happened. She was very pale, and her dark eyes were gleaming, the lovely red mouth was parted, and her breath came through it in little nervous gasps. Her hands were as cold as death.

"You, *you!*" he had said at the first moment of unconquerable surprise; but when he had felt her hands, he said nothing more until he had drawn her close to the fire and placed her in that very chair he had been giving to her in imagination half an hour ago.

"What has he done?" he asked then, in a low, stern tone. The sternness was meant for Vereker; but in her unstrung state it frightened her. She held out one hand to him appealingly, with a little pitiable expression in her eyes. He knelt down beside her, and took the hand and chafed it between his own.

"You are frozen! May God forgive him," he

said brokenly. "Go on; tell me what has happened."

She told him, as briefly as she could. She did not cry; she seemed to herself to speak almost callously. But she forgot how her face spoke for her. Misery was imprinted upon it.

"So I came to you," she said.

St. John got up and went back to the mantelpiece.

"If even Bessy were here," he said.

"Why! Where is she?" asked Cecil, in a startled tone.

"Gone to town for a day or two. Great Heaven! one would think that misfortune pursued you. But don't let that distress you. I shall——"

"I don't care," interrupted she recklessly. She got up from the chair on which she was sitting, and went to another one near the centre table. With a miserable abandon she threw her lovely naked arms upon this table, and let her head fall on them.

"What does it matter about anything?" she said. "I'm tired of it all. I'm worn out. I wish I were dead."

She did not speak with excitement; but slowly, in a lifeless fashion, that sent each word home.

"Nonsense!" said he roughly, a sharp pang at his heart. "Don't talk like that. That is what any fool might say when the world went a little bit wrong. Besides, there isn't a word of truth in it. No one ever yet honestly wished himself in the grave. Come; sit up."

He laid his hand heavily upon her shoulder, and she obeyed him, lifting her head and leaning back in her chair. Ever since she had reached her goal, a change had come over her. The wild excitement had died, and only a certainty of the hopelessness of her position had stayed with her. After all, what could St. John, what could *anyone* do for her? She was bound irrevocably to her husband, and Death alone could be her saviour.

"Well," slowly. "Then I won't say it. But I'll tell you what I *shall* say, and this, at least, is true. I wish *he* was dead! No! I don't care whether it is wicked or not—I wish with all my soul he was dead!"

She sprang to her feet and pressed her hands against her breast.

"I think," she said, "if I once knew I should never see him again, my heart would burst my bosom for very joy."

"You don't know what you are saying," began St. John——

"I do. And I am glad to have said it, for once. I have always wanted to say it, from the first hour in which we were wedded. I should like to *kill* him——only——"

She broke off abruptly, and the glitter faded out of her eyes, leaving a touch of horror instead.

"You will hate me," she said. "But," with a long, heart-broken sigh, "sometimes I feel almost mad. Hilary,"—unconsciously—for the first time—she called him by his Christian name, and slowly, step by step, she drew nearer to him. "*Must* I go

back to him? Is there no way out of it?" There was absolute agony in her glance. "I have borne so much—must it go on for ever? Oh! *try* to think of some means of escape."

Her eyes were burning into his, she put out one hand and laid it imploringly upon his sleeve.

A shiver ran through St. John. He gazed almost vacantly at the small clinging fingers as a very tempest of passion swayed his soul.

In a sort of dumb fashion he tried to realize that this temptation had come to him through *her*, who had no knowledge of what she was doing, and that therefore doubly it should be resisted; but his heart cried out for her and would not be silenced.

Surely there *was* a way! He could lift her out of all her troubles. And she would go with him. He did not for a moment doubt that. He might, nay he could make her so entirely happy that this present torture would fade from her memory like a bad dream, for he knew—what as yet she scarcely knew—that she loved him.

And then—he looked down into the uplifted lovely face, the clear eyes, and the unblemished soul that shone through them, and he told himself it was impossible. Better *anything* than the cruel, dull awakening to the fact of honour gone, of every sweetest feeling embittered. Would she live when it came to that?

Still—to give her back. To actually, deliberately thrust her again into the power of that brute—that incarnate villain! His fingers closed tightly over the trembling hand, that turned its palm gladly

upwards and clung to his, and once again Satan held him.

“Have *you* ever thought of a way?” he asked, hoarsely, rapidly, bending over her.

“Oh, no—no!” said she, mournfully, shaking her head. “It was because I couldn’t that I came to you. I was sure you would know of something—that you would be able to help me.”

Her lips quivered, her eyes filled with tears, she gazed at him hopefully, yet with all the childish abandon that was one of her chiefest charms. It conquered him. He told himself he would be a very devil to betray such unconsciousness as that.

“Well—I cannot!” he said, sharply, brutally, as it seemed to himself. “There is no way.”

At that she began to cry, silently, miserably, yet with a sobbing sigh here and there as though she were worn out. Had heaven and earth both deserted her?

She laid her head down upon his shoulder, the pretty dishevelled head that the night-breeze had played with, and the tears fell slowly, helplessly down her cheeks. There wasn’t the faintest suspicion of passion in the action, or an idea of softening him, only a sense of trust and a forlorn giving up of all hope. If *he* failed—if *he* could suggest to her no way out of her difficulties, all was indeed over!

His own eyes remained dry, but his lips grew hard and stern, as might the lips of one suppressing deadly pain. His arms closed round her,

however, and he drew her to him, and held her so without a word. What was it he could say?

Presently, unable to bear those cruel, heart-broken sobs any longer, he put her from him, holding her still, but with hands that held her shoulders with a heavy pressure.

"Cecil, this is madness," he said. "Think, *think*, for heaven's sake." There was something so strained, so unnatural in his voice, that it startled her into a sudden calm. She glanced at him with frightened eyes, eyes that hurt him! A terrible pang shot through his heart, and he felt as though he were a greater brute than that man at Vereker's Court. "My darling! don't look like that," he cried, "trust me still. Take heart, I will find some way presently, but just now——" He broke off, feeling how powerless to help were his words, and how terrible his inability to interfere. "My poor child! My poor darling! Cecil! What *can* I do?"

"Nothing! I see that now. No one can help me. But at first I thought—It was foolish—but—It is a great disappointment. Do you think I could run away?" she asked suddenly, doubtfully.

"No, no. What could you do? One reads of such things—but it is really impossible; you are too young."

"But you might help me."

"That is just the one thing I can't do," said he, turning very pale. "You *must* know, Cecil, that for a man to help a woman to leave her husband means, in the world in which we live—means——"

"Yes, I have heard," said she. But she spoke

listlessly, as though the opinions of the world were of little moment. She seemed, however, to see that there was no use in any further argument.

"Well, what am I to do now?" she asked, presently, with an air of utter weariness. "You cannot help me. I am forsaken by all. Must I go home? *Home*, what a mockery it is!"

"Yes, yes; and at once!" said St. John, with energy. "You must leave this before it is known that you have been here."

"At once!" She looked at him nervously. "Oh, no! some time of course. To-morrow, when the light dawns, but not *now*. Let me wait until——"

"No. *Now!*" with a decision he felt to be abominable. But there was something about her that forbid the thought of hesitation of any kind. She, to whom evil was unknown, should be kept from evil. And who should be her best guardian but he who was her truest lover?

"But why? Why can't I stay here until the light comes?" It was plain now that she was beginning to think him exceedingly unkind.

"Impossible," he said, impatiently, growing towards his wits' end. "If it was discovered—if he once knew of it."

"But he cannot hear. No one knows save you—and me. I can sit here, can't I, until the day dawns? and then creep out, and home, and no one the wiser. He will be asleep then," with a shudder.

"You must not pass the night here," said he, very pale.

"Oh! If you will not *let* me——" She rose from her

seat, angry reproach in her eyes. "I shan't go to Vereker Court, however," she said defiantly. "I shall go to Dorothy. *She* will not turn me out."

"Why do you speak to me like that?" exclaimed he, flushing crimson. "Can't you see—can't you understand how it is with me? Why will you *compel* me to explain? Don't you know that if I didn't think of your good name now, *now*, when you have appealed to me for help, I should be the greatest blackguard on the face of the earth?"

Something in his tone, in his expression betrayed all to her. His love—a knowledge of her position—a knowledge too of the world's cruelty; and, stronger than all else, a certainty of her own love for him all at last lay clear.

A rich flood of colour rose to her cheek, her lips parted slightly, and her breath came through them quickly. Her eyes were fixed on his as though she could not remove them—eyes shamed, bewildered, horrified, yet filled withal with a divine joy.

"Do not look at me like that," said he, in a choked tone. "It can't be helped now. It is too late for regret; we must only make the best of it. Though, for myself," said he, with a touch of determination, "I feel *no* regret. Come!"

He did not attempt to take her hand. He felt at the moment that he could not trust himself to do it. But he went to the window and threw it wide, letting a rush of sweet, mild night wind enter.

"I should not have come," she said, in a low, shocked voice; her head now had sunk upon her bosom.

“I am glad you came,” said he; then he moved forward, and she followed, into the open air.

In silence they went through the moonlit wood; in silence entered that smaller one that led to Dorothy's home. Once they came to a little brook, and as she sprang across it she stumbled slightly, and but for him would have fallen. As he held her for that instant in his arms, he felt her bosom heave, and knew that she was crying. He pressed her to his heart, then, in an agony of despair, but almost immediately released her. After that, however, he kept her hand in his, striving in a dumb sort of way to comfort both her and himself. He made no attempt to console her in words; indeed there was nothing he could say.

Presently they came to the Cottage, and making her stand still within the shadow of some shrubs, he pointed to a particular window.

“That is her room, I think,” he said; “but what if I should be mistaken?”

“You are. It is the one farther on,” said she, in a voice broken by tears. “But if she should not be awake?”

“I shall stay here until you make sure of that. Go and throw a pebble at the window. Don't be nervous; I shall wait until I see you safely housed. Good-night, my darling!”

He took her suddenly in his arms, and kissed her gently.

CHAPTER XXII.

“Let not this wretched woe thine heartē gnaw.”

DOROTHY received her with loving words, creeping down through the darkness on tiptoe, and opening the door for her, so that Miss Jemima might not waken to ask awkward questions. She drew the trembling Cecil upstairs, before she would hear a word, safe into the shelter of her own room, and then comforted her and cried over her, and was as indignant with the cause of all her woe as any stricken heart could desire. Dorothy was indeed one of the most sympathetic creatures on earth.

But, alas! she preached the same sermon as St. John had done. She seemed to have taken her text from him. Cecil must go back to her husband.

“You mean I must go back to my death,” said Mrs. Vereker; “and you can say that in cold blood!”

Then Dorothy asked if he had actually struck her, but this she denied vehemently. It is one of the strange things about a woman: she will hate a man, revile and scorn him openly, but if you ask her if he has raised his hand against her, she will recoil from the question, and will lie heartily rather than acknowledge herself a victim to such indignity. It is not *him* she would spare in thus lying, but her own decent pride and self-respect.

“I almost wish he *had*,” said Dorothy. “Then, at least, you would have occasion against him, such as the law would hear.”

But Mrs. Vereker would say nothing about that

brutal dashing of her against the bookcase; and when Dorothy had persuaded her to get into her bed, was so careful about the way she took off the body of her gown, that the former knew instantly that there was some cause for the extreme caution. A chance let her see a crimson bruise, fast turning purple, upon the delicate shoulder.

Her heart grew sick within her; yet what can a woman do? She made a great deal of her guest, grieving secretly, hanging over her with little fond attentions, kindling a fire for her with her own hands, and putting her into one of her warm dressing gowns. She even stole down to the pantry, at imminent danger of rousing her ever alert aunt, and rescued a roast chicken and some bread and butter, and bringing it back in safety insisted on making Cecil eat some of it.

“I am starving myself—roused up at this unearthly hour. Surely you will not let me feel myself a right-down greedy one?”

Thus importuned, Cecil ate something, and presently Dorothy tucked her into bed, where, exhausted, she fell into a dreamless sleep.

But next day Dorothy took her home. Scandal, above all things, was to be avoided, and this true and earnest friend did the best she could for her. She would have liked, indeed, to keep her for ever near her to shield and comfort her, but the impossibility of such a project conquered her.

She bade her sad little guest of a night farewell on the doorstep of the Court, and then, with a miserable sense of having been faithless to her—of

having abandoned her ruthlessly to the wiles of her enemy—went slowly away up the drive.

Half-way between the house and the gate she encountered Vereker, looking sodden, purple, abominable, and, in effect, half drunk.

“Ha! You, my dear!” said he, with undue levity. “What good wind blows you here to-day? Come to see that little colourless wife of mine? Why, you’re worth a dozen of her, eh?”

It was plain that he knew nothing of last night’s work. Had forgotten his own share in it, and believed his wife to be, as usual, in her own rooms.

“Your compliment overpowers me,” said Dorothy, whose mouth had grown mutinous. “To be superior to your wife is to be superior indeed, and unhappier than most. A fact you have not as yet taken to heart.”

“What d’ye mean?” said he, partially sobered by her eyes, which were flashing fire.

“You know,” she said. “And if not, it is a pity no one should tell you. You have married an angel, and your wife has married a devil! I wonder! I *wonder*,” cried she, stamping her foot, “that you have the hardihood to stand there and look any decent woman in the face when you know how you treat Cecil.”

“By Jove! I never knew how pretty you were until now! Go it, my dear! passion transforms you!” said the miserable creature, with a loose, detestable smile. His dulled brain failing to catch the righteous anger that filled her, he put out his

arm, and suddenly, with a lurch, encircled her waist with his arm.

For an instant only. She flung him from her, and without hesitation lifted her hand and gave him a very hearty, resounding blow across his face.

Even as she did so, St. John came upon the scene, seized Vereker and hurled him backwards; but for this intervention it might perhaps have gone badly with Dorothy, for Vereker once roused was a savage beast, and would have thought as little of striking her as if she was a dog; but *she* evidently did not think so. She so far believed in herself as to deem herself a good match for this wretched drunkard.

"No. I will have no interference," she said, placing herself between the two men. "You," menacingly to Vereker, "will go home at once."

"You are right there," said he. "By Jove, what a vixen! I'd like (vindictively) to have the taming of you. Yes, I'm going, after such a reception as *that*." He placed his hand to his cheek, which showed a good respectable colour for once. He hardly seemed to see that St. John was present, his intellect being so clouded after his many hours of debauch as to be capable of thinking of one subject alone. He turned abruptly on his heel, and with a last malicious glance at Dorothy, walked away.

"Oh! I *do* hope I have not made it worse for her," cried she, remorsefully, when he was out of sight. "What a terrible temper shone out of his eyes. And she—she is not fit for excitement of any kind to-day."

"She stayed with you last night? You knew I brought her to you. What of her, Dorothy? speak, I implore you," said St. John, drawing her arm through his, and leading her from the main avenue into a side walk that led to the wood.

"What *is* there to say?" she exclaimed, vehemently. She was looking pale and troubled. He could see that her eyes were red from crying.

"You brought her home to-day. To *such* a home! Go on, tell me how she passed the night. Did she sleep? Why are you so silent, Dorothy? Has——" He stopped short, and caught her arm. "Has anything fresh happened?"

"Oh! nothing, nothing," with a sigh. "There is nothing to tell."

"Nevertheless, let me hear it. Anything about her"—his face paling—"must touch me. Tell me what you know."

There was such a passion of anxiety in his manner, that it struck Dorothy as being dangerous, and angered her.

"Her—her! Who?" she asked, coldly. "Why do you speak of her like this? What is she to you? What *should* she be, save an acquaintance—a friend?" After all, has not this unhappy business arisen because of him? Jealousy in a man like Vereker is ever the precursor of brutality. Had St. John not been mad enough to fall in love with Cecil, the latter might have been spared this last indignity. Dorothy's heart grew hot within her, and she looked at her companion with marked disfavour. "If you are talking of Mrs. Vereker——"

“Do not misjudge me, Dorothy,” interrupted he, with some agitation. “It would be impossible to misjudge *her*; but as for me, you know how it is. You are our best friend, do not give us up. I must confide in some one, if only for her good, and who should it be but you? I entreat you to abandon conventionalism in this matter, and try to believe that I love her with singleness of heart. I am half mad with misery at the thought of her being in that brute’s power, yet I would not dare so much as breathe to her that—that there might be a remedy—a means of escape. And yet—is it the kinder thing to leave her alone, defenceless, in his power?”

“I can’t bear to think of that either,” said Dorothy, and then she began to cry. “She had a terrible mark on her shoulder,” she sobbed miserably. “She *said* he had not struck her, but——how did she get it, then? It was a cruel bruise, and she tried so hard to hide it that I knew it meant something! It must have happened to her quite lately, as she could not have had it the night of your dance; it was as high up as this,” pointing to her own shoulder; “one would have seen it when she wore her evening gown. It made me feel sick. Oh! what is to be the end of it?”

St. John had turned deadly white, and an awful curse passed his lips.

“Can nothing be done?” went on Dorothy, still crying bitterly. “Was there ever so miserable a case? If she were a big, strong girl it would not be so bad, but she is so small and slight and fragile;

one would think a heavy wind would sway her, and she is so awfully *afraid* of him. Yet it would be folly to counsel her to run away from him."

"Unless she ran away with me," said he, in a dull, measured tone.

"Oh, no!" cried Dorothy, shocked. "What a *thing* to say! How *dare* you say it! Far better for her to die than to—to——"

"Then there is nothing—and probably she will die," said he, coldly. He looked like one turned into stone. "A blow!" he repeated to himself, as though stunned. "A bruise on her delicate flesh! A blow!"

He turned aside abruptly, and struck across the field on their right. He had evidently forgotten all about Dorothy, but she forgave him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"No gentleness of bloodē may them bind."

"CALL that acting! *I* don't," said Colonel Scott, with supreme contempt. It was a fortnight later, and they were all taking afternoon tea with Miss Jemima Aylmer. That truculent maiden now and then so far bestirred herself as to summon all her neighbours to break cake beneath her roof, and woe betide the one who refused her invitation!—for the next six months his or her bones were not left worth picking.

Lady Bessy, who with some of the other guests

was still at The Chase, always made a point of accepting the summons, declaring that she would not miss it for anything, and hither she had dragged Lady Eustace, Mr. Blair, and the rest. She always wore her most elaborate gown on these occasions, and her most frivolous bonnet, with a view to working up Miss Jemima's temper (who looked upon finery of that sort as a device of the Devil to ensnare unwary souls) to the requisite pitch.

Mrs. Vereker was sitting on a low lounge near the fire. She was looking wonderfully bright and pretty, and in such good spirits, for *her*, that St. John, who was watching her anxiously from a distance, felt a sense of comfort warm his heart. Vereker had remembered later on something of his conduct towards her on that luckless night, and had had the grace to be sullenly ashamed of it. He had shown his contrition by letting her alone and keeping out of the way, which accounted for the touch of happiness that now illumined her face.

St. John, warned by a word or two from Dorothy, had of late avoided being seen too much with her. A word, a glance had explained to Mrs. Vereker this change of manner on his part, and glad in the thought of his care for her, glad that there was someone in the world who loved her and on whom she could rely, she acquiesced in his decision not to seek her, and was content in the knowledge that he was always near.

Colonel Scott was waxing eloquent over the delinquencies of a little American actress, who had created quite a furore in the fashionable world

about two or three years before. He was a man who lived his life thoroughly, if always respectably, and who would not have missed a new sensation for the world. There was so little time left him for the enjoyment of a heart-throb, he would say, that he took care to secure all that he could.

No new Prima Donna, therefore, no fresh tenor, no foreign actress (he adored Sarah Bernhardt) went on unheard by him. He ran up to town as lightly as a robin skips from bough to bough, and enchanted his ear, or enchanted his eye, as the case might be. But he was severe on such artists as disgusted his sense of perfection. He was particularly hard on the little American, who had made a small reputation amongst the gilded youth of the Great Babylon. He was now holding forth with a righteous displeasure; whilst Miss Jemima watched him with an ever-increasing wrath that put his to shame.

Lady Bessy, who was nothing if not mischievous, had led him to this blind wall, knowing that the word actress stank in the nostrils of her grim hostess, and hoping that some merriment might result from an encounter between her and the gallant Colonel, who regarded the maiden veteran with awe.

"Call that acting?" said the Colonel, rushing on his fate. "Pouf! my dear Madam," to Lady Bessy. "No; I am too old to find laughter in grimaces, or talent either. As a person who can disjoint every feature, and turn a very nearly pretty face into an almost repulsive one, I grant you she has no rival. But where does the artistic instinct

come in? Where does her legitimate business lie? I should say in tights, and——”

“My dear Colonel!” protested Lady Bessy, very feebly, more as a means of drawing Miss Jemima’s attention to the enormity, than for any moral reason. She yawned sleepily behind her huge fan, and glanced at the spinster. Yes, it was all going on splendidly; a lurid fire was beginning to burn in the orbs of the chaste Jemima. There was something bristling in her whole air, the cap on her ancient head had begun to wag in a fashion that meant immediate war. Lady Bessy regarded this cap with admiration. It was a structure built of velvet, lace and ribbons, and was as like a helmet as it might be.

“Yes, in burlesque she might make her mark,” went on the Colonel, all unconscious. “She can dance a little, but as for comedy!” He threw up his hands. “Her attempts at sentiment make one sad.”

“Well—that is surely as it should be.”

“Change a letter then and make the word ‘mad.’ I for one found her particularly unpleasant.”

“That class of person generally is, eh? so vulgar,” said Lady Eustace.

“There you wrong the class. Look at ——,” he named a celebrated burlesque actress of the day. “She is unutterably, marvellously vulgar, if you like, yet she never *jars* on one. When she comes forward and condescends to amuse us, why we are amused most honestly. She has ten times the talent of the American, and therefore we can pardon and admire her audacity.”

“Have you quite finished your licentious conversation?” demanded an awful voice, at this juncture. It was Miss Jemima. She had done bristling, she had now sprung, and had fastened upon the luckless Colonel, who was turning purple beneath her clutch.

“Eh!” said he, startled into a monosyllable. He, who so dearly loved his own voice.

“You heard me, I think,” said the elder Miss Aylmer, with an uncompromising glare. “If you *have* finished, I beg to say that for the future I hope you will select some other room than mine for the airing evil sentiments.”

“My dear Miss Aylmer, I assure you——” But he was not allowed to do even that.

“Not a word, sir. If I am to judge by what has gone before, I must decline to hear what still remains to be said.”

“But you have mistaken me, my dear——” He had meant to say madam, but, unfortunately, a nervous cough caught and choked off the conciliatory word, and Miss Jemima misunderstood him.

“Don’t dare call me your ‘dear,’” cried she, furiously. “You forget yourself, Colonel Scott. One would think I was one of those bold-faced jigs you have just been describing, who go about unclothed, and lure the foolish to their destruction. At your age, you bad old man! to encourage such hussies. I am horrified, that I am. Naked, indecent——”

“Miss Aylmer! Madam! Oh! I beg of you! I entreat! I do assure you! Bless me, what *can*

"I say?" shouted the poor Colonel, falling back in his chair and mopping his heated brow with a large silk bandana. He felt crushed, stricken.

Lady Eustace, who had been deep in a discussion about the "Unemployed," whose cause is so ably advocated in *Longman's Magazine*, and who was just proving to Mr. Blair that in their sufferings lay innumerable plots for the construction of "novels with a purpose," such as might suit such writers as Mr. Besant *and* herself, here paused and gazed at her hostess with a careful scrutiny. Surely here was "copy" ready to her hand! She stared at her with a studious attention, and presently fell back in her chair with a satisfied sigh. Yes, she would suit very well; she would pad in beautifully—*somewhere*.

She let her glass drop from her eye, and turned her glance on Blair.

"Is she often like this? Is she subject to these attacks?" she asked, judicially.

"Whenever she sees the full moon, *or* Lady Bessy," replied that young man promptly. "They'd have shaved her long ago, but for the cap. She wears it night and day, and they are afraid to attack *that*, even with a razor. In fact," said he, confidentially, "the razor isn't born that could do it."

Meantime, Miss Jemima had returned the Colonel's rather puerile charge.

"You can say nothing," said she, grimly. "You must only fast and pray to be delivered out of temptation!"

The Colonel's face was a study. It was plain that she considered him as one given up body and

soul to the wiles and fascinations of all the Coryphées in town. *He!* who would have seen them all—well—anything you like first—before he would have relinquished his quiet pipe at ten and his comfortable four-poster afterwards.

“She is religious, it seems,” said Lady Eustace in a low tone to Blair. “Really, I am immensely obliged to Lady Bessy for bringing me here. Anything so original!—she *does* believe herself religious, I suppose?”

“That’s not the term. ‘Saved’ expresses it better. *She* is saved, like the Methody Parson down in the village, and the bootmaker, and—last year’s bacon!”

A dead silence had fallen on the room; the lull that follows the storm. Lady Bessy was lying back suffocating with laughter behind the useful fan, and no one else felt equal to breaking the awkward silence. Mrs. Vereker was rather frightened, and St. John was amused; Lady Eustace, as I have said, intensely interested.

Through this unexpected stillness rang three words, clear as a crystal bell—

‘My heart’s treasure!’

CHAPTER XXIV.

"He must rehearse, as nigh as ever he can,
 Every word, if it be in his charge,
 All speak he ne'er so rudely and so large;
 Or ellës he must tell his tale untrue,
 Or feignë things, or findë wordës new."

MISS JEMIMA pricked up her ears. She was now in an exalted frame of mind, ready for any emergency, only too anxious to do battle with the froward. It was growing dusk, and the fire, which was a noble one, built of pine logs, threw vivid flashes of light into different parts of the room, with a malignancy of which so good and hearty a fire should have been ashamed; it shone brilliantly upon the thick lace curtains that partly hid the lower window; it shone, too, upon a pair of boots that showed beneath the curtain. There were only the boots as evidence; but then the voice was the voice of Farquhar.

In these days few men talk out loud to themselves, so Miss Jemima must not be thought *too* sharp if she came to the conclusion that he stood not alone behind that curtain — a conclusion strengthened by the fact that Dorothy was nowhere to be seen. It was plain that Farquhar had been addressing some one, secure in the protection the buzz of the outside conversation gave him, when that awkward lull of a moment since had fallen on the room. It was as though a stringed band had suddenly, and of *malice prépense*, stopped playing. Perhaps some of us have suffered from such bands, and have known what Farquhar now knew—a desire

that the earth might open and swallow him up, *quickly*.

“Who’s behind that curtain?” demanded Miss Jemima, in a tone calculated to make one quake. She had swung herself round in the direction from which the abominable sound had come. Her eagle glance fell upon the boots—and recognised them; like that sacred bird, scenting the quarry from afar, she swooped down upon the luckless pair in the embrasure of the window, and prepared to make short work of them.

“Whoever is behind that curtain I desire that they stand forth!” cried Miss Jemima, whilst the rest of her guests, filled with an unholy joy, lay back in their several chairs, and gave way to speechless mirth. The curtains parted—but slowly.

“Dorothy,” cried the irate spinster, in stentorian tones. “What do you mean by staying over there, *in the dark?*”

Even at this supreme moment Miss Jemima remembered the Colonel and *his* baseness. She turned to him.

“See!” she cried, pointing dramatically to the curtains, “what comes of your atrocious example.”

“Were you speaking to me, Aunt?” asked Miss Dorothy with a suspicious amount of innocence.

“Come out,” said Miss Jemima, indignantly. “What do you mean by such conduct?—though, indeed, when those whose white hairs,” with a withering glance at the Colonel, “should teach them better, lead you in the way you should not go, you are not so much to be blamed.”

“But, my dear ma'am, I really beg to say——” began the Colonel, feebly,

“Come out, I say,” persisted Miss Jemina, taking no notice of him, and addressing herself to her niece. “Is not the company here good enough for you?”

“Perhaps not,” suggested Mr. Blair, meekly, regretfully. “Colonel Scott is present.”

“So am I,” retorted Miss Jemima, sternly. “Do you consider me incompetent to protect my niece? Dorothy, why don't you speak. I insist on knowing who is the partner of your—ahem!—indiscreet conduct. Hah! Captain Farquhar!” dragging aside the curtain with a firm hand and betraying that trembling culprit to a delighted audience. “May I ask you, sir, why you thus cultivate the gloom? I trust it is not because your deeds are evil!”

Eloquent silence. Farquhar appeared before his public, bent a little, as if desirous of concealing his face. There was a suspicious heaving movement about his shoulders. Agitation, no doubt.

“Stand up, sir! Don't cower like a beaten hound. Let me tell you once for all that I will not sanction any such goings on in my house. I insist now on your repeating out loud once more the words I heard you address to my niece.”

“Words!” stammered Farquhar, incoherently.

“Ay, words—idle words—most indelicate words I call them, as addressed to any maiden without the consent of her guardians. I *heard* you, sir. Prevarication will avail you nothing. Your ‘heart’

treasure,' you called her, at the very top of your lungs."

"My dear Miss Aylmer," said Farquhar, with a promptitude that did him honour, "you really *can't* be serious? Why I was but telling your niece about some little bits of *bric-à-brac* I have just got over from Rome. Some '*art-treasures*' I ventured to call them, though indeed they are hardly worthy of so presumptuous a title."

"*Dear Aunt,*" murmured Dorothy, sweetly. "*Such* a mistake! Anything so *unlikely*. How *could* you think I should allow——"

"Humph!" said Miss Jemima, with a glance and an accent of the very darkest suspicion.

"It is really very serious," said Farquhar, sympathetically, "that sort of thing grows on one so. Have you consulted Sir Wilkes Warren? He is the best authority now on all cases of deafness."

"Humph!" said Miss Jemima again. She sought to read each innocent face, but vainly, yet her unerring instinct did not fail her. She could not contradict, but she knew. "Art treasures, was it?" she said with a saturnine smile. "Then, if I were you, Captain Farquhar, I should go home and keep an eye on them. Judging by the tone in which you spoke of them, they must be priceless indeed. I should be sorry if anything were to happen to them, as I should dearly like to see them. Pray see that they come to no harm between this and to-morrow, as I shall then make it my business to go over to your place and take a look at them. Like you, I am a devoted admirer of art treasures."

She laid a malicious emphasis upon the last words and with her threat of looking them up on the morrow, turned away.

"She'll do it. She's capable of anything. She saw through you; you may expect her to-morrow," said Dorothy, in an awe-stricken tone. She received no answer, and, turning a sharp glance on Farquhar, was disgusted to see that he was convulsed with laughter.

"Is it a time to laugh?" said she, giving him an indignant little shove. "She'll go, I tell you."

"So shall I," said he, rising from the cushioned window-seat on which he had sunk. "I've plenty of time to catch the night-mail, to provide myself with a statuette or two, and be back here again by to-morrow morning."

"If you had had any common sense, any *thought*, this would not have happened."

"There you are wrong; it was because I was full of thought, for you, that I forgot to lower my voice."

"Oh, nonsense. It is always the same story, and such a *silly* one."

"What—my love for you?"

"No; your absurd forgetfulness that there is any one in the world *but* me."

"Well, there isn't," said he.

She sighed eloquently.

"I give it up," she said; "you are beyond hope."

"Has it taken you until now to discover that?"

"Oh! forget me for a moment, *do!*" cried she.

"I want to talk sense."

"And do you think that talking sense would com-

pensate me for forgetting you for a moment? It is a most ridiculous idea," said he. "However, I know what you mean, you want to discuss something with me. You can; it will not make me forget you."

"What I mean is, that it was such a pity you said *Rome*," declared she, with feeling. "Anything in marble is so expensive, and she has an undying belief that only marble things come from Rome. Now, if you had said Japan, or India! Cups and saucers go for a song nowadays. You have regularly let yourself in for the statuettes, and you don't want them; the Hall is full already."

"It isn't; it's the emptiest house in England," said he, with a reproachful glance at her that made her laugh, in spite of herself. "And as for one or two more little marble figures, why I *do* want them. There is that boudoir I am preparing and beautifying"—Here there grew a mischievous gleam in his eyes, as he caught and kissed her hand behind the shade of the tabooed curtain. "*Your* boudoir! It wants a few gimcracks still to make it worth your acceptance."

"If you mean to catch that mail you ought to go at once," said she calmly. "There—there—you *can't* take my hand with you, so you may as well give it up at once."

"I wish I could, and its owner, too. But soon I shall be the owner," said he, undaunted, "and then it shall take *me* with *it*."

There was a touch of humility in the last sentence, that saved the speech. Dorothy relented, smiled

sweetly, and sent him off a happy man, for that evening at least.

Soon afterwards, they all rose and bade Miss Jemima farewell. They were indeed very grateful to her. She had given them a most enjoyable evening. She received Colonel Scott's adieux with a frozen air.

"Oh! I really think you should forgive him now," said Mrs. Vereker, with a little smile, who was standing next her. Her carriage had been the first to be announced, and she was hurrying away. "I'm sure he looks dreadfully penitent!" She made a pretty *moue* at the Colonel over Miss Jemima's shoulder, which he caught and returned, perhaps not so prettily. That was hardly to be expected.

St. John, who was looking on, was surprised by this little touch of *espièglerie* in Cecil, who, up to this, had always presented herself, or been presented, in the most sombre colours. He thought it altogether charming; he smiled in sympathy with her, and then suddenly his heart seemed to tighten, and he grew sadder for her than before. Good heavens! had not her life been ruined for her at its start, what a merry creature, what a joyous, brilliant child, she would have been! It was as though a sculptor had conceived and begun an exquisite design; that when half finished was overthrown, and left by the wayside defiled by dust and rain.

Miss Jemima, who regarded her with distinct favour, nodded her head somewhat grimly, and then extended her hand once again to the Colonel.

"You must reform, Samuel, you must reform,"

she said, still nodding the amazing cap; and Colonel Scott, not knowing how to reform, being innocent of offence, pressed the bony hand and beat a dishonourable retreat. She was so old a friend of his, that after all, perhaps, he didn't care what she thought of him.

"She's a wonderful woman," he said, when he had made good his escape. "Astounding! No one can get over her but that little Vereker creature. Even that old she-dragon can't resist *her*. Bless my soul! how she pitched into me this afternoon, and all for nothing, sir, all for nothing."

He was getting dreadfully mixed up between the two women he was describing.

"I hope not, Colonel," said Bobby Blair, giving him a playful dig in the ribs. "But there's no smoke without fire, you know, and she evidently knows more about you than most. Eh? Go along with you for a sly dog."

"Oh! now really, I give you my word," protested the Colonel, who was nevertheless (strange inconsistency) flattered. "Nothing of the sort, my dear sir. She's only one of those old tabbies who always think the worst of every one, without rhyme or reason. But, as I've said, that pretty creature, Mrs. Vereker, has overcome her. She is the one soul on earth that has not been attacked by that—er—con—er—condemned old maid."

"Have you seen Vereker lately?" asked St. John, knocking the ash off his cigar. The three men were walking home together, as the Colonel's house was not far from the Chase.

"Yesterday. Pretty yellow about the face. He began, the moment I saw him, about that unfortunate devil, Black Sandy. It appears the latter is at his old tricks once more—poaching—or else Vereker wishes to think so. He'd give something to clap him into prison again, but somehow, from what I can gather, he's afraid to do it himself. He as much as hinted he'd be obliged if *I'd* do it. I never met so low a fellow! One would think he'd done that poor wretch injury enough without wanting to persecute him into his grave."

"He's afraid of him," said Blair.

"D'ye think that?" said the Colonel, wheeling round. "Faith! I've often thought it myself. A guilty conscience, you know! Well, he won't get *me* to do his dirty work. Besides, he hadn't a tittle of evidence to bring against Sandy, only 'his own convictions.' To the deuce with his own convictions, say I."

"As long as Black Sandy is loose on the county, Vereker will be uneasy," said Blair, with a tone of conviction. "I've seen it in his eye when the fellow's name has been mentioned. Any talk of Sandy's having threatened him, eh?"

"Not that I ever heard of," said the Colonel.

CHAPTER XXV.

"Now certes, false Arcite, thou shalt not so."

* * * * *

"And thou art false, I tell thee utterly."

In spite of the fact that it was October the day was warm. A hot sun, so brilliant as to be a base

deceiver, a usurper of June's rights, was flooding the drawing-room at Vereker Court. It put to shame the fire that burned gaily in the grate.

Upon one of the tables a mass of autumn flowers lay scattered. Mrs. Vereker had ordered them to be sent in here to her, and now stood over them arranging them in their several glasses. She was humming a little, merry French song as she went on with her work, stopping occasionally to admire some of the late dahlias which were unusually fine.

Her good spirits seemed suited to the day. Of late, indeed, she had been somewhat happier, somewhat more at peace with her life. Ever since that last abominable display of his temper in the library, Vereker, as I have said, had been specially careful to keep out of his wife's way, and for the past two or three days had been positively civil. This change puzzled her perhaps, but it also rested her, and gave her tired heart a season of repose, long unknown to it.

Yet still when she heard his step in the hall, and his touch upon the handle of the door, the old startled look sprang into her face, and her hands grew cold. She could not conquer the feeling of repugnance and disgust that filled her whenever he drew near. She was afraid of him too, and perhaps this was the one thing she found it hardest to forgive him; she, who, until she married, had known no fear of living creature, who would have laughed to scorn the thought that she should cower before aught human, was now fallen so low from her happy child-

ish courage that she felt as though a cold clutch had been laid upon her heart whenever her husband drew near.

He came in now, looking bloated, hideous. His huge form seemed to stunt all his surroundings. He went over to the hearthrug, and poked the fire with his tremulous hand, and then stood facing the long, beautiful room with his back against the chimney-piece.

“Well, what sort of an evening had you yesterday?” he said at last, seeing his wife was not disposed to speak to him, or leave her occupation of arranging her flowers. “Did the old cat show her claws as usual? Who was there? St. John?”

“Mr. St. John was there. Everyone was there,” said Cecil.

“Hah! Bright taste ‘everyone’ showed. St. John now. Must have been some special object took *him* to the old maid’s paradise. What could it be, eh?”

“I daresay if you ask him, he could tell you,” contemptuously.

“D’ye think so? I don’t. I expect I’m the last he’d tell. Not but what I think there’s good in St. John,” with a sudden change of tone. “He seems a friendly sort. Look here! I want you to do something for me.”

Mrs. Vereker did *not* look there. She bent rather more assiduously over her flowers, and bit her lips behind the huge bunch of them she held to bring back the colour that had suddenly ebbed.

“Yes?” she said.

“There’s that scoundrel, that devil, Black Sandy, at his old tricks again—poaching, poaching from morning till night, or, rather, from night till morning. Why the deuce is he left at large like that, eh?”

He stopped, as if waiting for a reply, and Mrs. Vereker felt bound to say something.

“It sounds like one of the riddles they are so fond of laying before Parliament,” she said, trying to speak brightly, though in reality she was warm with anger. How did he *dare* to mention that man’s name to her!

“Just so. Just so. But in the meantime—why, the country wouldn’t be safe if such vagabonds were allowed to go loose, unquestioned, about it. You agree with me, eh?”

“I am not a politician,” said she, coldly, “I am only that most helpless of all things—a woman.”

“Not so helpless, by Jove! You can help *me* now, if you will. In the interests of society, I would have that fellow locked up again, clapped into prison, and kept there. It’s disgraceful that he should be let out to destroy all the game in the neighbourhood. If I had my way I’d make it a hanging matter. I would, ’pon my soul!—best way of getting rid of such varmint as that.”

“It would get *you* rid of him, certainly,” said she. She had given up her flowers now, and had turned towards him, a brilliant spot of colour on each cheek.

He looked at her sharply, a curious glance, and then, as if partially reassured by her calm, went on:

"Glad you see it in my light. Well, I want you to give your assistance to this good cause."

"You are a magistrate; you convicted him before; why not do it again?" said she, coldly. "If you know for a certainty that he has been transgressing, why should you not send him to prison again? You, of all the magistrates on the bench here, seem best acquainted with his doings. And you will have nothing on your mind because of his being locked up. He has no wife dependent on him, no child, *now*, to support."

She looked steadily at him as she said this; some hope of checking in him that purpose vaguely hinted at of getting her to induce St. John (who was also a magistrate) to send this wretched man to prison, animated her to dare thus far. She paled a little beneath the glance he shot at her from under his reddened lids, but she showed no further sign of cowardice.

"It would look like malice my doing it," he said. There was a change in his tone; it was now full of suppressed hatred that might at any moment become violence. This man had so long yielded himself up a willing victim to intemperance and all vices that he hardly knew how to control himself. "It was I, as you know, who last convicted him."

"Yes, I know."

"I spoke to Scott, but he seemed uncertain, paltered with the question, and spoke of insufficient evidence. He is an old idiot," savagely, "who should have made acquaintance with a tombstone long ago. But St. John has not his excuse. St.

John *knows*. I have it from his own gamekeeper, that Black Sandy was found snaring birds in The Chase only a week ago."

He paused, as if for a reply, but none came.

"Well?" said he at last, with a dark and evil frown.

"It is so uninteresting," she said, with an effort. "What have I to do with poachers, and their natural enemies?"

She spoke quite quietly, but she breathed hard. A crisis was imminent, and she knew it; but something within her revolted, and she felt she should obey its orders, though death lay in obedience.

"Nothing with poachers; a good deal with me, even though I am that despicable thing, Francis Vereker," said he, sullenly. "There is something I want done, and you must do it for me!"

"Yes?" she said. She kept her hand moving amongst the dahlias, lest he should see the trembling of it.

"Am I to say the same thing over and over again? I wish this fellow Sandy to be got rid of for the present. I consider him a dangerous brute. St. John is in a position, as I have told you, to commit him to prison. He is such a special chum of yours," with an evil smile, "that you will find no difficulty in asking him to see to it, and, *as I know*, he can refuse you nothing."

She threw her head up sharply, as if stung, and looked at him.

"You seem wonderfully well informed," she said;

"You are right in this matter, however. He will not refuse me—when I ask him."

Her tone and glance both told him that she meant to defy him, that she would not ask St. John. He grew livid, and took a step nearer to her.

"What is it you mean?" he said savagely. "That you *won't* ask him?"

"That is what I mean."

"You refuse, then?" drawing even nearer to her.

"I distinctly refuse," replied she, in a low, clear tone, though her face was now ashen white.

"You won't do it? I tell you you *shall!*" shouted he. "Damn you, do you think I can't coerce you *so far*? If I am willing to sell my silence for so small a price, do you think you shall not buy it? If I consent to shut my eyes to your little intrigue with this precious Hilary of yours, you shall——"

"*Silence!*" cried she, so imperiously that for the moment he paused. Her hands were clenched, her eyes flashed fire. There was a terrible anguish, an outraged dignity in her whole air. She was trembling from head to foot, but not because she was afraid.

"I shall not speak to Mr. St. John about that man," she said, "and you *know why!*"

The words had scarcely passed her lips when he raised his hand; a vicious light came into his eyes; he made a sudden movement towards her.

CHAPTER XXVI.

“So much sorrow had never creature
That is, or shall be while the world may dure.”

HE struck her full on the forehead. She staggered, but caught at a chair near her, and presently was able to stand quite still. No cry escaped her. Once again the thought arose in her that he meant to kill her, but this time she felt no fear. She was almost conscious indeed of being glad of his brutality. *Now* she might indulge the passionate hatred that for long time had found a home in her breast—might give a loose rein to the bitter scorn and contempt that scorched her spirit. Now too, surely, she might think without such great sin upon the deep, unhappy love that filled her very being!

That first time when he had actually ill-treated her, she had striven with all her strength, and on her bended knees, to compel herself to forgiveness, and had very nearly succeeded. She had at least brought herself as close to condonement as earthly soul can go.

There had been a suspicion of jealousy in that first cruel attack, and she had made excuses for it to herself, and had sought to blot it from her memory; but *this*—this was different. Out of sheer revenge, born of a baffled desire, he had struck her that evil blow. No; she would not forgive. Though death indeed were coming (and his face was black with fury), she would meet it, and her judgment hereafter, without a thought of pardon for this brutal tyrant.

"Will you give in?" demanded he, his breath coming thick and fast.

"Not though you kill me," returned she, her face like marble, save for the dull, red mark that was now slowly covering her forehead.

Her calmness, that looked like, and was in part, defiance, enraged him. He struck her again, then caught her in a vicious grasp, shook her like a reed, and flung her from him.

This time she lost her balance, swayed, and came heavily to the ground, striking her head against the sharp corner of an ottoman as she fell.

Not caring whether she lived or was dead, Vereker lurched out of the room, closing the door with a savage bang behind him. That last time—that night in the library—he had felt some twinges of remorse; now, he felt nothing, only a savage joy in that he had punished her.

By degrees consciousness returned to her; she rose to her knees, and from that got on to her feet, and then stood looking round her in a half-dazed fashion. She pushed back the hair from her forehead, and stared vaguely at the fire, which had begun to burn low. A long, long sigh escaped her.

Presently she made a mechanical movement, as if to lift her right arm to her throat, but something, some shooting pain that felt like the touch of a red-hot iron, checked her, and a sensation of sickness almost overcame her. The arm was not broken, but in falling she had severely bruised it. She raised her left hand then, and pressed it against that side of her brow from which the dull intolerable throb-

bing anguish seemed to be coming. As she touched it, she winced and let the hand fall again languidly to her side. She saw then that there was blood upon it.

She was in great pain. She knew *that* at least, though as yet she was so benumbed in mind that the whole truth had not come home to her. She still stood on the same spot on the carpet, as though she had forgotten she could move.

But now her eyes began to roam from side to side, as if with returning memory. All at once they concentrated themselves on one object; it was a mirror; and in it she saw reflected what brought sense, memory, and an abhorrence of that memory, back to her with a cruel rush.

She looked, and looked again; letting a horrible shame sink deep into her. There she stood, revealed! The same woman she had seen an hour ago, yet, *was* it the same? The ghastly pallor, that crimson streak, the dull lack-lustre eyes, the rigid mouth, did she know them? Her hair had escaped from its fastenings, had come undone, and was hanging in inartistic confusion round her. It seemed to hold in an untidy frame her strange, staring face.

It was a hideous portrait of a most lovely woman! And to *this* he had brought her!

A low moan broke from her. She put up her hands as if to hide from her that painful semblance of herself.

“Oh! God have pity! *Must* I submit to this degradation?”

It was no common expression of despair that burst from her parched lips ; it was an earnest, an impassioned question. She shrank and cowered away from the mirror, and tears that might have been of blood, so agonized were they, ran down her cheeks.

After a little while, she made an effort, and bound up in some wise her loosened hair ; and sought to make herself presentable again, as women will, even in their direst hours. Men call this vanity ; but who shall say it is not an honest virtue ?

The expression on her face was beginning to change, as a fuller consciousness grew on her. The dulness, the apathy, disappeared, and every feature began to assume a look of hard and unflinching hatred, terrible to see in one so young, so gentle. As remembrance became perfected, so, too, this deadly loathing gained vigour. She raised the hand on which lay the stain of blood, and her eyes fastened themselves upon it with a sort of tigerish rage. This dainty, petted creature, who in her old home, poor as it was, had never known what it was to have a wish thwarted, was now the legal prey of a brute, who treated her as he would certainly not dare to treat any other human thing.

She sank upon a lounge and crouched there, immovable, with dark eyes staring before her into an unseen future. The old resignation, the gentle patience, was all gone from her. Gone, too, was the soft girliness that had been one of her chiefest charms. She looked haggard, and years older—*quite a woman.*

The hands that used to rest in her leisure moments in a pretty idleness upon her knees, were now firm and tense; the right one was clenched, and with the knuckles of it she kept rubbing the palm of the other, up and down, up and down ceaselessly in a slow, curious fashion. She was thinking.

Her thoughts all ran in one groove. That sooner or later there came an end to all things. One day there would come an end to Francis Vereker. Oddly enough she had ceased to believe that he would do *her* to death, either through wrong or actual physical ill-usage. It seemed as though he was the one to die. She had survived this last brutal treatment of his; she could still think, move, feel; there was no reason that she should not survive another, nay, a hundred such. Life was evidently terribly, remorselessly, strong within her. There was no escape that way. But he, *he* would go! Things when they came to the worst always mended, and, therefore, as matters lay, he was the one bound to sink into the grave. Death was waiting for him, so she devoutly prayed, hoped—believed!

The idea had a fascination for her. She began even to picture her life as it would be when he was no longer there to darken it. In this strange wild fit that was on her—when all the decent womanhood in her had been outraged, affronted—when she had been crushed and bruised and beaten as might a dog—she longed for revenge. She felt as though she could hardly be satiated, no matter what form vengeance took. She saw the coming life—without him—that she hoped for, and with a passionate

sense of freedom threw wide her arms. Oh! the joy of it—the exultation! To know him gone—*for ever*. Her tyrant lowered, removed, laid in the very dust. It was impossible that she should not live to see it! Surely she should not die until she had “seen her desire upon her enemy.”

She was still crouching, hurt, and spent, and fierce, like some wounded animal, when a footman flung open the door and announced—“Mr. St. John.”

CHAPTER XXVII.

“So feeble were her spirits, and so low,
And changed so, that no man could know
Her speech, neither her voice.”

* * * * *

“And shortly, turned was all upside down,
Both habit and eke disposition.”

THE door had closed again, and the man had disappeared before St. John quite understood that something had gone terribly wrong with her. She raised her head and looked at him, but beyond that effort made no attempt to greet him. He was horrified at the change in her.

The blood-streaked forehead, the large dark eyes, the deadly pallor of the face all shocked him; but what was worse than all, was the cruel calmness, the sternness that seemed to disfigure the young face.

A sharp cry escaped him as he went quickly up to her. Was *this* Cecil?—the gentle, pretty, fragile

creature whom he loved. *This!* He felt half mad, and a terrible imprecation fell from his lips.

“What has that *Devil* been doing to you?” he said presently.

“Not quite enough,” returned she, with a bitter smile. “After all, you see, he has failed again. It is marvellous how long life will stay in one. Misery will not kill, nor brutality. Don’t look so distressed, I assure you I was seldom more alive to everything than I am this moment.”

Her tone sounded strange to him. The usual charming harmony had all died from it. It was now stern, hard, unmusical.

“Cecil——” he began.

“We cannot talk here.” She interrupted him in a quick, cold way. “Other people may come in. If I could get to my own room,”—she paused—“without meeting the servants, I mean. I can’t have *them* know,—at least, not until they must.”

“Well, come,” said he.

“Go to the door and see if anyone is in the hall.” She seemed quite collected and cold, as if turned into stone. There was something about her that alarmed him. He opened the door and looked into the hall, and saw no one.

“Come,” he said again.

“I must first get rid of this,” said she, touching the wound upon her forehead, from which the blood was still slowly oozing. “At any turn of the staircase one of them might appear. Good Heavens! has there not been humiliation enough?”

Though she spoke with seeming excitement, she seemed to feel no emotion. She went to a vase where she had been arranging the dahlias earlier in the afternoon, and throwing the flowers to one side, saturated her handkerchief with the water, and began to wash away the blood. She seemed to sicken a little and to whiten as she saw herself in the mirror, and St. John, coming up to her, tried to help her, but she waved him aside with a touch of impatience.

When she had washed away the blood she went quickly to the door, passed St. John almost as if she did not see him, and ran in a quick, yet firm, way up the broad staircase to her boudoir. She gained it unseen by any of the domestics, and standing on the hearthrug, acknowledged that fact by a sigh of relief.

St. John followed slowly. His blood was boiling, and there was a feeling of such devilish hatred in his heart as seemed to numb him. He felt all at once as if the knowledge of good and evil had failed him, as if he knew only the evil, and as if that were the only real good. A longing to destroy was full upon him.

He followed her into the pretty room, that always struck him as being so specially suited to her, so made up of the little tender delicate trifles that were so dear to her, and stood there silently, looking at her without speaking.

All things seemed changed; light was darkness, darkness light. He hardly knew where the right lay, or the wrong. Yesterday—only yesterday he

would have shrunk from asking her to leave her home and tarnishing her good name—to-day, it seemed the only thing left for him to do. He glanced at her as she sat upon the ottoman with her hands tightly folded, staring at the carpet in a dumb, miserable way.

“Look here,” he said. He touched her shoulder to rouse her—to gain her attention—but she never moved. “Listen to me,” he said again. She raised her eyes for a moment.

“That night when he thrust you out—you remember?—and you came to me. *Do you remember?*”

“Yes. Go on.” She spoke with apathy, and yet with a vague touch of impatience.

“That night,” he went on deliberately, “I was tempted to say to you something that I refrained from saying (although I confess the temptation was almost too strong for me), simply because I thought the idea that filled me would harm you. Now I think differently. I do not hesitate to say now all that was in my mind that night, because I refuse to believe that any man has the right to keep you here and subject you to—to such indignity.”

He paused, and she looked at him again; this time steadily, and without lowering her eyes.

“What are you going to say?” she asked slowly.

“Will you come away with me? Will you leave this brute’s house? Will you trust yourself entirely to me?”

She half rose from her seat.

“Wait!” said he, quickly, “there is more to be said. In time you would get your divorce, and then it would be——”

She put up her hand, and by a peremptory gesture checked him. He had spoken very quietly, without even a suspicion of passion, and she answered him in like manner.

“Don’t go on,” she said. “I understand all that you would say, all that you *have* said, but it is useless.”

“You are angry with me perhaps, now,” said he calmly. “But if you would hear all there is to be——”

“Do not mistake me,” interrupted she. “I fully comprehend the nature of your proposal, but I am dead to all shame—to all emotion I think, because I feel no anger towards you, or indeed anyone. That night to which you allude I might perhaps have listened to you, but not now. I shall not leave this, I shall stay on here—*until the end!*”

“The *end!* Until he kills you, you mean!”

“He will not kill me.” Her voice was low and curiously penetrating. Her face—save for that terrible crimson stain on the forehead—as white as death, and her large dark eyes had begun to gleam brilliantly; she had fixed them upon the opposite wall, as if there she saw something, and St. John, as he watched her, grew strangely disturbed. Some change was passing over her. The lethargy was gone—a hope, that had cruelty in it, was now filling her whole being. Her sad lips had lost not only their colour but the childish melancholy that used

to characterize them. They were now pressed together, cold, stern, unrelenting.

“No; I shall not die,” she went on, leaning forward, as if *seeing* something on the opposite wall. “All the world may die, but I shall not—until——” She paused abruptly. “I cannot explain it to you,” she went on; “I cannot explain it to myself, but something *here*,” laying her hand upon her heart, tells me that if he were to strike me to the earth again and again, if he were to do his best to murder me, still I should live. No; it is not *I* who shall die.”

“Who then?” asked he, involuntarily. Her whole tone was suggestive, not only of her belief in her own exemption from death, but of the certainty of another’s being obliged to succumb to it.

“He will!” She spoke with a nervous but glad and eager assurance. “Don’t ask me to explain that either; I can’t; but I know that he *will* die, and soon—*soon!*” She threw out her hands. “Oh!” cried she, “How can it be soon enough?”

She let her hands drop again upon her knees, and clenched them until the nails showed white; her eyes were still fixed upon the wall, as though she saw there something that fascinated whilst it repelled her. A strong shudder ran through her.

“It is not just that I should suffer always!” she said, her voice now nearly a whisper. “He will die—die—and then——”

St. John felt his heart grow cold. He went quickly up to her. He knew she was half delirious, and he could not bear to see her slender figure

crouching there, with the small hands clenched, and that terrible expression of exultation on her death-like face. What dreadful thing had happened to her, his gentle darling, that she should have come to this? He stooped over her, and raised her forcibly from the position that had now become intolerable to him. She struggled slightly, and pushed him impatiently away.

"It is all dream-work; do not dwell on it," he said, with actual entreaty.

"It is not. I am awake. I feel as if I should never sleep again. And I tell you what I say is *true*." She was growing excited now. "I don't know when the knowledge first came to me, but I think it was when he stood over me, with his hand clenched to strike—or else when he had struck, and was looking down at his work—I cannot be *sure*"—she broke off confusedly, and pressed her hand to her brow—"but something in his face then told me I should soon be free—safe—*alone*!"

She rose to her feet and began to pace the room; presently she swayed a little, as if faint, but when he would have caught her she waved him aside. It seemed to him as though she could not endure that he should touch her now. A miserable feeling that she felt herself lowered, degraded in his sight, oppressed him. She went up to him, and lifted her eyes to his—almost defiantly, he thought.

"If he dies, will you marry me?" she said.

"Don't talk like that," exclaimed he, sharply. "Bad as he is, I cannot bear you to speak thus of his death."

“Ah! you hesitate—you evade the question. *Will you marry me?*” cried she, obstinately. Her tone was almost fierce; she came closer to him.

He would have drawn her closer still, being filled with a passionate sorrow for her, but she shook her head.

“*Answer me!*” she said “No, do not touch me; only speak, *speak*. I will have an answer; or is it that you, too——”

“Do not say that,” interrogated he. “You know you don’t think it. You know I am yours heart and soul. You *know* that you trust me. If—if your husband were to die, what thing is there that could keep me from you?”

She sighed heavily. And this time she did not repulse him when he placed his arms round her, but let her head fall forward on his breast as might a child tired out, and worn with grieving. She did not cry, but, as if from exhaustion, two large tears gathered in her eyes, and rolled down her cheek.

“Go to your room, and try to get some sleep,” said St. John gently, seeing indeed that a reaction had set in, and that she was once again on the verge of unconsciousness. The tired brain and body were now in a state of rebellion.

“Yes. Go,” she said, faintly. “Go away. I want to be alone.”

“And you will lie down? Promise me that. Shall I send Dorothy to you?”

“Oh, no. I will have nobody here, not even her. Now *go!*” She pressed him away from her peevishly,

and, after a last entreaty or two that she would try to sleep, he left her.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

“But for to speaken of her consciéce,
She was so charitable and so pitous.”

“Hold thy peace,
And by mine head thou shalt be eased soon.”

“WHY, what is the matter now, Matilda?” asked the younger Miss Aylmer, as she passed through the kitchen. Matilda was sitting on a low stool, her apron over her head, sobbing boisterously. Dorothy laid very natural emphasis upon the “now,” quarrels both loud and deep being matters of daily occurrence between Miss Jemima and her domestics.

Matilda pulled down her apron with a bang, and showed two scarlet-lidded eyes to the sympathetic Dorothy.

“Oh, Miss!” gasped the maid, “you know how ill my mother have been of late.”

“Yes, yes, indeed. Is she worse, poor thing?” with ready interest.

“Oh yes, Miss. Oh! dear, oh! dear, I doubt if ever I’ll see her alive again. You know, Miss Dorothy, I told you as how, when I went to see her on Sunday—which was my evening out, and not beholden to anybody”—with an angry snort of defiance, buried in a sob, directed at Miss Jemima—“you know, Miss, how, when I came back, I told you she looked like death—that pale, you wouldn’t give tuppence-ha’penny for her.”

“Well, but if you heard nothing since, perhaps she——”

“Oh, but that’s just it, Miss,” with a fresh burst of tears. “Bobby Mitcham, old Barty’s boy, came up here a while ago, and told me she was at the very point of death, and that she wanted me, and she sent me a message to come to her, and Oh! dear, Oh! dear, the mistress says I can’t go, unless I do all my work first, and promise to be back here by five o’clock.”

“Well, why don’t you go?” said Dorothy. “Good gracious, what are you wasting your time here for, crying like one silly, and your poor mother waiting for you? Run, run, run away.”

“But, Miss Dorothy dear, you know it is ironing day, and the mistress said I wasn’t to stir until I had folded all the clothes for the mangle and the iron; and there they are, and never a hand near them yet.”

“All those!” said Dorothy, gazing with dismay at a huge basketful standing on a table near.

“Yes, Miss. All them. And you know now, Miss Dorothy, that it would take me two hours alone to fold them. Oh! if I’d only known last night, I could have folded them then, and mangled them when I got back this evening.”

“Why not fold and mangle them to-night?” suggested Dorothy.

“Because the mistress comes down punctual at five, Miss, to see they’re folded; and, indeed, I’d risk all, Miss, and go to my mother, only—I’m a poor girl, Miss Dorothy, and to throw up my place

and get no character from it, would be the ruin of me. Oh! *what* shall I do?"

She had recourse to the apron once more, and disappeared behind it.

"How far away does your mother live?" asked Dorothy, who was now on the verge of tears herself. Good Heavens! was this a civilized country or was it not? Were people to be debarred from paying a last farewell to their nearest and dearest because a few sheets and towels wanted folding for the iron or the mangle?

"'Tis a long way, Miss. It would take me two hours to get there and two to get back, and it's twelve now, Miss Dorothy, and even if I could start this minute, it would only give me an hour at home with poor mother. But I *can't* start now, Miss, with all them clothes to be folded, and damped and settled."

"Matilda," said Dorothy suddenly, "you shall start this instant."

"Lawks, Miss, your aunt would never forgive me. She as good as told me I might take my month's warning if I left them clothes undone."

"They shan't be undone. When five o'clock arrives, and Aunt Jemima with it to inspect these clothes, they shall be ready for her."

"But who's to do them, Miss?"

"I shall."

"*You*, Miss! Oh! Miss Dorothy, you couldn't. What! you with *your* hands, Miss? You haven't a thought of how hard a job it is, and——"

"You are wasting valuable time, Matilda," declared

Dorothy severely. "Go, and make yourself tidy and start *at once*, or you'll be late for clothes and mother and all. I tell you, you can go in peace, because I'll see that Aunt Jemima is satisfied. - Now run away, there's a good girl, and whatever you do be back at five sharp, or *I shall catch it for letting you go.*"

"Oh! Miss Dorothy, was there ever anyone like you, I wonder?" cried the grateful Matilda, springing to her feet, fresh hope in her moist eyes. "But, indeed, Miss, I can't bear to think that you——"

"Well, *don't* think it. There, go, every minute is precious." Yet as the girl joyfully disappeared, and Dorothy turned her gaze upon the heaped-up basket full of rough-dried clothes upon the table near, it must be confessed that her heart fainted within her, and her courage sank so low that she found a difficulty in raising it at all.

She had pledged her word, however, and it must be done. It seemed now a herculean task, an almost unsurmountable difficulty, and besides, there was the chance of Aunt Jemima's sudden return from Mrs. Mackenzie's, where she had gone to pay a visit, her descent upon the kitchen and discovery of Dorothy at her work. Clearly, the gigantic undertaking was not to be attempted here. She called upon Jane, the other maid, and telling her to catch one handle of the clothes-basket, she herself laid hold of the other, and together mistress and maid started for the orchard.

This charming spot lay just behind the Cottage and was seldom visited by the elder Miss Aylmer. Here then Dorothy elected to bring "her washing,"

as she now felt a certain alloyed joy in calling it, in an almost certain hope that she would be able to struggle with it unseen by human eye.

Yesterday's fine weather had not deserted to-day, and a hot sun shone down from a blue and pearly sky. With a fervour hardly to be expected, Dorothy, with her lovely figure—lithe and young, and strong, and well thrown back—marched through the flower garden, basket in charge, treating the heavy thing with a noble unconcern unknown by Jane, who, though born with a back made to carry the daily burden, groaned most lamentably all the way from the kitchen to the sunlit orchard.

Here they laid the basket on the short crisp grass, and Jane having desired Miss Dorothy for about the twentieth time to be sure and call her to her help when she came to the bigger articles, such as sheets, ran back to the house to continue her work there.

Dorothy toiled steadily on, folding, pulling out, smoothing, doing all things with an elaborate care, as conscientious tyros always will. She had finished all the smaller things, and was sufficiently tired to regard with hatred those still left. It seemed impossible she could do them alone, and yet she hardly liked to call on Jane to come to the rescue. It would be a risky thing to do, as Aunt Jemima would be almost sure to want a servant for something or other just then, and if no one answered the bell, a serious squabble would ensue.

With a sigh she drew out the end of a sheet. Good gracious! was there no other end to it? It seemed as though it would reach from that to the

village. How could she fold such a thing as that? How did Matilda do it? It suddenly occurred to her that Matilda's mother was a very troublesome old woman, and that she was positively certain she wasn't half as ill as she said she was. Well, if she was to die over this task, that was all about it, but it did seem a poor thing to be slain by a sheet. She hoped they wouldn't put it on her tombstone. She was still laughing rather forlornly over this mild joke, when a voice broke on her ear.

"What on earth are you doing?" exclaimed Captain Farquhar.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"And in that yonder place
My lady first me took unto her grace."

"And yond so gladly 'gan she me behold,
That to the death my heart is to her hold."

DOROTHY'S forlorn laugh all at once became an intensely joyous one.

"Earning my living, of course," cried she, throwing down the abnormally long sheet and turning to greet him. She had flung her hat aside in the heat of her struggle with "her washing," and the light glinting through the boughs of the apple-tree above her—heavy now with reddening fruit—shone on her shapely head. Her pretty cheeks were flushed with her unwonted exercise, her eyes shining. To Farquhar, at all events, she stood out there from all the rest of the world as the very sweetest thing in it.

“But what has happened?” asked he, detaining her hand. “Have all the servants left in a body?”

“All is two, and only one of them has departed this life just at present, and that only for a time. It was Matilda. Her mother is, or thinks she is, dying (she has been doing it now for eight months), and Matilda naturally wished to go to her.”

“Yes,” said he, with a puzzled glance at the clothes; “but surely she could go, and her mother could die without your having to kill yourself like this?”

“There you are wrong. There you differ from Aunt Jemima. Aunt Jemima has principles. Work first and pleasure afterwards is a favourite motto of hers. If Matilda finished her folding of these awful clothes first, she might have the pleasure of seeing her mother expire later on. But Matilda was afraid her mother might expire before the clothes were done. So I sent her off, and promised to do her work for her.”

“How long have you been killing yourself here?” demanded Farquhar, almost sternly.

“About an hour, I think—I *suppose*! Though, if you ask me how long it *seems*, I should say a month,” returned she thoughtfully.

“Well, give it up now!” peremptorily.

“Oh, I can’t! I have pledged my word to Matilda, and I must either do or die.”

“Nonsense! I shan’t let you do anything of the kind. What folly! The worst that can happen to the girl is a severe scolding from your aunt.”

“It would be dismissal from my aunt; and

Matilda's people are very poor. Oh, no, I couldn't get her into such a scrape as that—not after telling her to go," said Dorothy gravely. "Sit down there, and talk to me, and I daresay I'll be able to get through the rest of them before to-morrow dawns."

"I certainly shan't sit down," said he doggedly. "If you are determined to sacrifice yourself like this, I shall help you."

"You!" She had, perhaps, meant to say more, but a sudden fit of laughter choked her. "Don't be absurd," she said.

"I shall certainly do what I can," said he, unmoved. "Come, show me how to begin, and we'll get it finished as quickly as possible."

"I really couldn't. I shouldn't like to ask you," said she, growing confused. "To come up here to pay a visit, and to be compelled to——"

"Here! What's to be done with this thing?" said he impatiently, seizing hold of the sheet.

He too, like her, had flung his hat aside, and, seeing that he was really determined to see her through with it, she attacked the sheet, and told him how to hold it by the corners and how to pull it this way and that, until he quite entered into the spirit of the thing. By the time the second sheet was folded, they felt like past masters of the art, and when number three was in hands, they gave themselves leave to enter into conversation of a lighter description than had adorned their labours for the past half-hour.

"Where were you all the morning?" asked she idly, looking at him over a white linen field.

"I went up to The Court to see Mrs. Vereker. She wanted to know something about the local concert that is to come off at Christmas."

"You saw her?"

"No. She wasn't well, the servant said—was lying down. Do you know, Dorothy, I couldn't help fancying there was something queer about the man's manner. I hope Vereker hasn't been at it again."

"I think not. I *hope* not. Indeed, I'm sure you fancied it, because Francis has been quite wonderfully improved of late. He has *let her alone*, which is the greatest boon the poor darling craves. However, you have made me a little uneasy, so I think I'll walk up there this evening and see her."

"I'll go with you," said he, promptly.

"Now, why?" said she, judicially.

"Well, just for a walk, you know." He paused. "I can come, can't I? I could meet you at the cross roads, you know."

"I certainly know *them*," said she; "but considering you are here now, which means seeing me once to-day, I do *not* know why you should want to see me twice."

"Don't you? And yet you are a clever girl," said Farquhar, mildly. "Try again. A child could guess it. Besides," artfully, "do you call *this* a visit? Why I've been about ten yards away from you ever since I came."

This reminded her of what he was doing for her, and she relented.

"True," she said, sweetly. "This is but a sorry

reception you have had. Very well, then; you can meet me at the cross roads about six o'clock. There! That's the third. I really believe there is only one more left for us to do."

The fourth sheet was dragged from the basket, and taken into hands that had grown vigorous again, because of the hope of a speedy finish to their labours that now sustained them.

They have pulled it bias-wise, and cross-wise, and straight-wise, and every other wise. There were moments when Captain Farquhar had been pulled nearly off his balance, and several moments when Miss Aylmer had been as nearly as possible falling into his arms, so admirably in earnest were they to do a good day's work, and justice to the absent Matilda. Dorothy had found her thoughts running with much compassion on that afflicted maid. She felt positive the poor girl's mother *must* be dead. Only so mournful an occurrence could be reason sufficient for all the terrible toil, to the performance of which she, Dorothy, had voluntarily, but ignorantly, pledged herself, and which, indeed, she had now almost got through.

Her cheeks were pink as a newly opened rose from fatigue and anxiety, and it cannot but be said that Farquhar himself was considerably the worse for wear. They both sighed now and then, and conversation had fallen low. The sun still beat fondly through the laden apple trees, though Dorothy felt as though he should have gone to bed an hour ago. *What* a day it had been. She did hope Jane's mother wouldn't think of dying for a long time yet.

At all events, until she had had time to recover from the effects of Matilda's mother's dissolution.

They had now come to the shaking of the huge piece of linen—that had grown positively hateful to them. This consisted of an instantaneous uprising and down-flinging of the four hands, which Dorothy, from constant study of Matilda's and Jane's method, had learned to consider the only true manner of reducing a sheet to a proper frame of mind for the waiting mangle.

Little sharp angry sounds came from the damp linen as they did this; resonant reports that smote the air, and breathed of reproach and defiance. Dorothy's charming face grew pinker, and Farquhar's moral strength gave out.

"Let's wait awhile, and—and give it time to dry a bit. It's the water in it that makes it so con-foundedly heavy," said he.

"Water! There's no water in it; it is barely damp," pouted Dorothy. "But it's the heaviest thing certainly that I ever felt, and I do hate banging my arms up and down in that jerky way. However, it *must* be done, so come on."

"Give us breathing time," said he.

"What's the good?—once done we can rest. Better finish it," said she, in a despairing tone; but he held on to his two corners with so stern and immovable a grip, and with so open a determination to carry on the war no further just at present, that she succumbed to it.

"If it gets *too* dry, Matilda will be able to do nothing with it," she said, as a last protest.

"She can stick it in the stream, or somewhere," said he. "What on earth is the matter with her mother? Why couldn't she be ill some other day but this?"

"Oh, hush! Poor thing! she is—I'm almost sure she is dead," said Dorothy.

"I bet you anything you like she isn't," said Farquhar, in the aggrieved tone of one who has been thoroughly done. "You'll find Matilda will come back to-night with excellent accounts of her."

"You speak as though you would be sorry if she did," said Dorothy, with reproach, which was rather unfair of her, as she was conscious all the time of a feeling in her own mind that would, she felt, amount almost to indignation, should Matilda return with a buoyant air.

"Oh, not *sorry!*" said he, rather shocked, "only—I can't bear to see you so thoroughly done up as you are at present."

"I *am* tired," confessed she, with such utter abandon and with a glance so full of a desire for sympathy that his pulses began to beat quickly, and a raging hatred towards the absent Matilda, her mother, and Miss Jemima, tore at his heart. "All I can say is," continued she, "that if Matilda *does* bring back a good report of her mother's condition, that I hope it will be a lasting one. A little more of that poor old woman's sciatica, or whatever it is, would be the death of *me*. I have borne a good deal of it; I can bear no more."

"I don't see why you need bear anything," cried he impatiently. "What folly it is, your subjecting

yourself to scenes like this, all because of your aunt's temper! You can come at any moment to where (uninviting as it may appear in other ways) you won't, at all events, have to tire yourself to death helping your servants."

"Would you have had me *not* help her?—and her mother dying!"

"Nonsense! You know what I mean?"

"I know this, at all events, that if we don't make haste with this sheet, Aunt Jemima, temper and all, will be down on us." She seized upon the article in question again, and he, of course, followed her example, but not in silence this time. He had found his grievance; he would air it with the sheet.

"Servants impose on you," he said indignantly, though holding on valiantly to the linen, and dragging and shaking it in obedience to her movements. "So long as you are there to stand between them and your aunt's wrath, they feel themselves at liberty to go and see not only their mothers but their thirty-first cousins should occasion arise. They take every advantage of you, and as for that old tyrant of an aunt of yours, I——"

"Sh!" anxiously and peering round. "Not so loud. It is amazing what she can hear sometimes, when she isn't *wanted* to hear. Her ears are the thinnest things possible—all sounds, even the lowest, go through them. I'd *hate* to have such acute hearing myself, one would learn so many things personally unpleasant."

"I wonder if your aunt has ever heard *my* opinion of her," said Farquhar, still wrathful.

“Judging by the extreme cordiality of her manner towards you at all times, I should say she had,” returned Dorothy, with a little irrepressible burst of mirth.

“Well, I don’t care. She behaves abominably to you. I wonder why it is you cling to her as you do.”

“She’s all I’ve got, you see. (Take care, you are twisting it.) I haven’t a relation on earth but her, and—of course Hilary and his people—but they don’t count. They are not so close as an aunt, you see. She is the only person, I suppose, who would really care whether I lived or died.”

“Dorothy!” said he, with such a burst of indignation that she stopped short in her manipulation of the sheet and glanced at him. His hands had grown limp at his work, and he showed an evident desire to go to her; he took, indeed, one step in her direction, a disastrous step that brought the sheet almost to the ground.

“Oh! take care, take *care*. See what you are doing,” cried Dorothy in an accent so heartrending that it reduced him to a standstill. “Now, what have you done? You are dropping it. Oh! *do* stay where you are. How can you be so wicked as to deliberately let it fall after all our trouble! But this all comes of idle talking. Now to our work again.”

“Good heavens! isn’t it jerked enough yet?” said he. “Is it possible that one can’t sleep in a sheet unless some wretched creature has worked his or her arms out of their sockets in the preparation of it?”

“Of course, if you don’t *want* to finish it——”

"Of course I want to finish it."

"I can call Jane——"

"You shan't call anyone, Dorothy. You know it isn't this *beastly* thing that is annoying me; it is the look of your lovely tired face and—and the fact that I begin to doubt if you will ever give yourself to me."

"I think you needn't tease me about that now," said Dorothy rather feebly. She was indeed tired out and despondent, and something in the extreme sadness of his face had touched her. She would not look at him again. She fastened her eyes on the sheet. "Perhaps, after all, you are right, and it *is* shaken enough," she said with hesitation.

"It's worn out from it," said Farquhar with alacrity, yet still very sadly. Why would she never give him an answer? Surely the real answer to that was that she did not care for him.

"What's the next thing to be done with it?" he said, alluding to the sheet.

"Fold it. That's the last move."

"The gods be praised," returned he piously, "After that you will perhaps come with me for a stroll round."

"No!" dejectedly. "After that, Aunt Jemima will want me."

"Ah!" crestfallen. "At that rate, I don't think this thing *is* jerked enough; we might as well do all we can for Matilda. It looks queer, doesn't it? I think perhaps we had better give it another——"

"Not one," sternly. "Now! Hold your corners *tightly*, and your arms up high—*so!*—it mustn't

touch the ground, you understand—and come up close to *me*, and give me *your* corners into my hand.”

There was quite a promising sound about the command so far. With arms uplifted Farquhar advanced on her.

“There! That will do. Now go back and catch the middle of it. Pull it tight, and keep your arms up always. Now, *that's* all right.”

The sheet was most accurately divided in two. Farquhar was now only half as far away from her as he had been at the beginning. Even in this fact he found comfort. Once again she issued her commands. Once again the folding was commenced, and presently but a quarter of the length of the sheet stood between him and her—in another moment only half that distance; her pretty, tired face was very close to his own, her eyes grown languid looked into his. What was there in them that gave him courage?

Suddenly, regardless of all consequences—of Matilda's despair, of Miss Jemima's wrath, of Dorothy's own displeasure, he caught the sheet, and flinging it deliberately to one side, caught Dorothy in his arms.

“I can't stand it any longer,” he cried; “you *must* end it one way or the other now.”

To his surprise she made no effort to free herself, and indeed there was something in the quick sigh that escaped her that savoured of relief. No doubt she was tired. She glanced at the sheet, however.

“What a shame!” she said plaintively; “after all the time we have spent over it.”

“Think of all the time *I* have spent,” exclaimed he. “Doesn’t *that* count with you? I have waited and hoped, and endured. Dorothy, say you will marry me?”

“Is that a command?” said she, with a faint laugh. “Well—yes, then.”

“And you love me?”

“I do—I think.”

“My darling girl, there is just one thing more. You will marry me *soon*, Dorothy? My sister, as I tell you, will be glad to take a house of her own, and you, *you*,” with a little hug, “will be mistress of mine, and of my heart and my life, and everything. You will marry me soon?”

“Don’t you think you are as bad as Matilda?” said she, with another low little laugh. “Are not you, too, taking advantage of my good nature? You plead in a happy moment; it seems to me, I have not the strength to say no to anything; those clothes have been too much for me. You shall have it all your own way.”

“I am too happy,” said he, presently. “I don’t believe it will last. There is one thing more, Dorothy; promise me that you will not wake to-morrow morning, and go back of every word of it.”

“This is too much!” cried she, pushing him away. “Good Heavens! is it possible you really want me not to wake to-morrow morning? What an inhuman monster! In *such* mad haste to be rid of me. No, I shan’t answer any more questions to-day. There is four o’clock striking, and I have many things to do before we go down to The Court.”

The "we" is sweet to him.

"I shall go in and speak to your aunt at once," said he, thinking it wise to strike whilst the iron is hot.

"*Now?*" evidently startled. "So soon? Well, if you will. But I warn you to be prepared for all things. She is quite as likely to fall upon your neck and kiss you as to turn you out of doors. I don't know which contingency would be the worse, but in either case you have my sincere sympathy."

"I feel it will be the latter," said he.

"Your modesty is well placed," said she saucily. "You evidently see you are not good enough for me." Then all at once her mood changed, and, with a sudden shy but lovely friendliness, she held out her hand to him.

"I think you are too good for me," she said.

CHAPTER XXX.

"Though clerkës praisë women but a lite,
There can no man in humbless him acquite
As women can, nor can be half so true
As women be."

It was, as she had said, four o'clock. Hilary St. John, as he reached the gates of Vereker Court, heard the hour chimed from the clock in the old ivied tower that overlooked the gardens.

Instinctively he glanced in its direction, and from it to the open patch of ground that spread all round

it. It could be distinctly seen from that part of the avenue on which he now stood, and the tall, late hollyhocks and glowing dahlias made a brilliant bit of colour against the grey stonework of the ancient building. A light breeze was stirring, and the stately hollyhocks swayed to and fro, the dahlias bent their heads. There was a pretty air of life and feeling about them.

Something else was moving too. A slender figure dressed in white. It went languidly, as one wearied, pausing often, as though oppressed by cruel thought. He abandoned all idea of calling formally at the hall door, and went straight to the tower garden, as it was called.

He was quite close to her before she heard his step on the soft, shaven sward, and when she did hear him, and looked up, he was almost sorry that he had come.

She was looking very ill, but she grew positively ghastly as her eyes met his. There was a tiny piece of black plaister on her right temple, and a nasty, discoloured bruised look all round it.

She stood still for a moment, and then began to tremble visibly. Her eyes fell before his, she seemed filled with a stinging shame. He could not fail to see that she would gladly have blotted him out of her sight, that she shrank from him, that his presence was in some way a horror to her, and as he watched her he told himself that he had never been really miserable until now.

“Who told you I was here?” she said, her voice sounding harsh and strained.

"No one. I saw you through the trees down there. If I had known——" He paused. "Of course I can go away again," he said.

He turned abruptly away, but she put out an imploring hand.

"Oh! not like that!" she cried. "But—I had told myself I could *never* see you again. I had given the servants orders to admit no one; I meant to go away—anywhere——"

"But why—why?"

"Don't do that. Don't try to ignore it," said she. "When I think—when I remember yesterday."

"But," said he again, "what have I done that you should banish me from your presence because of yesterday's cruel work? I can readily understand that all things helping you to recall it must be hateful to you; but do not, I implore you, harden your heart against me. The gross wrong you suffered at that man's hands is not to be lightly forgotten, but——"

"That! Do you believe I think of *that*?" interrupted she. "Oh, no—no! It seems to me that I have forgotten all about that. It is you—what I said to *you*——" She turned abruptly away, as if unable to endure the thought that he was looking at her.

"What morbid folly!" exclaimed he, angrily. "What did you say? Nothing; nothing that sounded strange to me. If you did, I have forgotten it."

"You have not," said she mournfully. "Nor have I. Oh! that I could!" She looked away from

him and then back again, and finally burst out with deep agitation: "Believe, *believe* that I was mad yesterday. My head—he had hurt it here," nervously touching the wounded temple, and I scarcely knew what I said or did. Oh! surely excuses should be made for me!"

She looked at him pitifully, and he took her hand between both his own and pressed it eagerly.

"If I could only convince you," he said, "that there was nothing, nothing at all. Why will you disquiet yourself going over it again?"

"If you will let me speak, it will be a relief, I think. I know I said to you things that—Oh! how it *hurts* me to remember!" She pressed the hand he was not holding to her breast. "But, indeed, I was distracted. Never was there a woman so crushed, so overwhelmed. I cannot bear to think of it all, and yet—I fancy—if I were once to *say* it to you, I should not endure such torture. I,"—here she braced herself as if for a supreme effort: "I asked you to marry me, if Francis died!"

She turned aside, and covered her face.

"Well, what of it? What was there in that?" said he, trying to speak lightly. "You know it is the one desire of my life to marry you, to rescue you from all this misery that seems to have engulfed you. Otherwise you would not have said it. Come, forget it. Cast these foolish thoughts behind you."

"Alas!" she said. "What happy thoughts have I to replace them? And besides, they will not be cast aside. It is one thing more I owe him," her

cheek flushing—"that he has made me lower myself in *your* eyes."

"That he has not! Whatever crimes are his, you cannot lay that to his charge."

"Well—there is still something," continued she, with a heavy sigh, and yet with a faint touch of comfort in her tone. "I said I wished—*him*—dead. That I *longed* for his death. Will you try to believe I did not mean that?" She shuddered. "No—no," she said. "I do *not* long for it."

"I know it. If I might advise you," said he, gravely, "I should beg you to go in and lie down, and rest yourself. You have not yet recovered from yesterday's unhappy excitement. If you will only——"

"Hush!" she lifted her finger and stood motionless, as if listening. Her face paled again until the bruise upon the white forehead showed almost black. Her eyes dilated. "He is coming!" she breathed quickly, painfully. It was horrible to see any one human thing so much in dread of another.

St. John lifted his head, hardly believing, so still was the air around; but presently he saw that her instinct, sharpened by that fear she could not overcome or conceal, was truer than his. Vereker turned the corner and came towards them, with the slouching, lurching gait that had grown peculiar to him.

"Fine evening," he said, addressing St. John.

"Very," said St. John. He affected to be busy with a cigar he had taken from his pocket, so as to

avoid shaking hands with the contemptible brute before him. He knew his voice was unsteady, that it was with difficulty he restrained himself from catching him by the throat and shaking the very life out of him, so he confined himself to a word. Vereker, who knew very well what the strong interest in the cigar meant, and the altered tone, half closed his eyes and looked from St. John to his wife, and back again with a slow insolent smile.

“Come up to see Mrs. Vereker?” he went on.

“Yes,” curtly.

“Ah! She has been hurting herself, you see,” pointing deliberately to the mark on Cecil’s forehead. “She must be careful, you see! I’m always warning her, but she won’t take advice. I shouldn’t wonder if she came by something even nastier if she refuses to listen to reason—a husband’s reason.”

There was something abominably malignant, something that looked like brutal amusement, in the eyes he fixed on her.

St. John threw up his head and looked the other full in the face. *His* eyes were blazing. Vereker, who had as usual been drinking, laughed coarsely. St. John made a step forward, and at the same instant so did Mrs. Vereker. She got between the two men and raised her hand as if to warn her husband back. He laughed again, louder this time—and lightly, but with a dangerous swiftness, threw her hand aside.

“Don’t be frightened,” he said, with an odious sneer. “I shan’t hurt him. I shan’t spoil *his*

beauty. It doesn't belong to me; I only guard and cherish, and punish what is my own. Mark that well!" cried he, his hateful suavity dropped, and a savagery hardly to be described taking its place. "Get to the house, woman!"

Cecil, as if too frightened, too shocked, to know what to do, stood still.

"Go!" roared he, shaking his fist at her. "Do you dare to defy me, publicly? What! Do you think your lover can protect you? *Go!* I say, whilst you have still a rag of character left you, in which to delude Society. Go! or I'll——"

"Leave us!" said St. John, sharply, catching her arm and shaking her slightly, to wake her from the torpor into which she had fallen. Her nerves were no longer under her control. She was crushed, broken, half insensible.

St. John's voice, however, happily roused her, his touch woke her to a fuller life; and, with the painful start of one waking from a hideous dream, she brushed past her husband and ran towards the house.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"Me rememb'ring
Of my living;
My death wishing
Both early and late."

It was the first time St. John had heard him openly brutal to her, and a sense of disgust almost choked

him. Vereker stood looking after his wife until she had disappeared, a curious smile upon his face. Then he turned to St. John, who had turned and was walking abruptly away without bidding the other the courtesy of a good-bye.

“What! going!” said Vereker, following him. He seemed amused. “Don’t let me drive you away,” he said; “you came to see Mrs. Vereker—pray follow her to the house and finish your visit. What! you won’t? *Really* going?”

“Yes,” said St. John. They had entered the shrubberies now, and were in a rather unfrequented part of them. St. John could barely bring himself to answer, and was conscious only of a longing that the fellow would leave him before his last remnant of self-control was gone. He was pale and rigid with the effort to subdue himself. He knew if he once let himself go nothing could come of it but scandal, in which her name would infallibly be mixed up, and that was to be avoided at all risks.

There was, too, the knowledge that a struggle between him and Vereker would be an unfair one. Strong and powerful as that big, burly brute looked to the uncritical eye, St. John knew that he was so demoralised by drink that there was no real strength in him, and that if he, St. John, once had him by the throat he could shake him as a terrier might a rat, and afterwards crush the life out of him. Why the devil couldn’t the fellow leave him alone instead of following him here? Surely some demon was goading him onwards to his undoing.

St. John walked steadily forward, taking no notice

of his companion, smoking his cigar with a fierceness that gave some slight relief to his temper.

"I must congratulate you," said Vereker with an evil smile, "on the taming of that charming shrew of mine. I bid her go into the house and she practically refuses; *you* bid her go, and heigh presto, she is off like a shot. She obeys you admirably. You should give me a wrinkle, my dear fellow. To me, her husband, she is anything but subservient; to you—pray what are you to her?"

It would be impossible to describe the insolent vileness of his manner and his meaning.

"A friend!" said St. John in a dangerously quiet tone. "As I should be to anyone whom I saw ill-treated by a cur." He removed his cigar from between his lips and leisurely knocked the ash off it.

"Meaning me!" returned Vereker, with an unpleasant laugh. "Now do you know to me it seems that there are two curs in this case, both fighting for a useless bone. It is a pity we should be at cross-purposes. You can take her, my good St. John, and welcome. I don't want her!"

"You scoundrel! you damned villain!" cried St. John violently. He felt at the moment mad with grief and rage. He caught Vereker by the throat, swaying him backwards and forwards with a mighty strength born of a fierce joy, and at last flung him from him with all his force.

The man fell with a dull thud upon the grass, and lay there motionless. St. John stood a moment looking down at him with a bitter hatred and con-

tempt, and then turned on his heel and strode away into the now gathering twilight. He went quickly, not daring to trust himself any longer with that recumbent figure.

He walked swiftly, eagerly, and by degrees grew calmer—even a little ashamed of himself. Beyond doubt he had thirsted for that blackguard's blood, had been perilously near stamping the vile life out of him as he lay at his feet. He took off his hat as he went through the cool woods, and let the wind play upon his forehead. He felt entirely and deeply thankful that he had done no more than strike him to the earth. He hoped Cecil would hear nothing of it, and rather believed she would not, as there was no one to tell her except Vereker, and he would probably be the last to do it.

But how much more of this was there to be gone through? How often would he be moved thus to righteous wrath? Would the time ever come when his savage longing to end that villain's power to insult and harm that poor child would prove too strong for him, and he should stand out before the world as a common murderer?

He drew his breath sharply, and his brow grew damp. It was a terrible picture, and what added to its horror was the feeling that it *might* prove true. To-day's experience had taught him that he could not altogether trust himself.

Well—he would wait awhile. Perhaps he had given him a lesson—perhaps—why many things might happen. If the worst came to the worst, he would ask her once again to give herself to **him**.

and if she again refused, he would go abroad—for ever.

And then he told himself, as a sharp pang shot through his heart, that he could never leave her—could never abandon her. She had called him friend; he would not desert her in her sore need. He would stay, however things turned out, and face all responsibilities for her sake.

* * * * *

Meantime, Vereker lay prone upon the sward, as quiet as if he was dead. He was not so much as insensible, however. His eyes were open, and he gazed oddly at the sky above him, now growing grey as the October evening began to close in. It was pleasant enough lying there, he thought, on the soft grass, with his heavy limbs at rest, and his dull, burning head close to the cool earth. He felt lazy, enervated, unwilling to stir, and perhaps that blow of St. John's had taken something out of him.

Ah! well, he could revenge it on *her*. For this one blow of her cursed lover's she should have a score. It was really almost a luxury to lie here, staring at the calm heavens, and dreaming out delicious plans of vengeance to be all lowered on the head of one fragile, powerless woman.

He stirred lightly, and laughed aloud in a soft, devilish fashion, as he thought of all this. He must take care that St. John heard of each bruise on the skin of his fair lady, otherwise his joy could not be complete. St. John was evidently very far gone, and, by a judicious treatment of him and her, there was no doubt but he could lead him on to

such an assault as would place the gallant Romeo within his power. He knew how the law would look at it, how the injured husband would stand out white and blameless. Oddly enough, it never for one moment occurred to him that his wife would leave him, and gladly accept St. John's protection. Dulled as his brain was, perverted as was his nature, some instinct told him he was safe in trusting her to keep her innocence at all hazards, and that an unhappy passion for St. John was all that could be laid to her charge.

Well, he would get the better of that cool, respectable young man yet. He would sweep him out of his path. He had had many an enemy; but who had overcome him? He would baffle St. John, as he had baffled that poor devil, Black Sandy, who——

A slight noise near him. A little, *little* noise! A vague creeping sound! Slowly, slowly, with an awful prescience of coming evil, he turned his head, to see a dark, crouching figure steal through the laurels near him, to find a relentless swarthy face bent over his prostrate form.

CHAPTER XXXII.

"I am now slaw

Behold my bloody woundēs deep and wide."

* * * * *

"When he least weeneth, soonest shall he fall."

"I SEED him. 'Twas a fine stroke. I've come to finish his job for him," said Black Sandy, with a

sinister glance at that part of the walk down which St. John had gone.

Vereker said nothing. It was strange — the strangest thing possible, but he found that he couldn't stir. Fear, that cruel thing that he had so often instilled into others, had now taken possession of him. His eyes opened wider, and glared at Black Sandy, and his face grew greyer than the darkening heavens above him. Not a word passed his lips. The horrible numbness that had attacked his lower limbs had seized upon his tongue also.

Black Sandy stooped lower, and thrust his hand into his breast. There was a mad gleam as of dawning satisfaction in his eyes. Slowly he drew out his hand again, and the cold bright glitter of steel shone through the fading light. It seemed to fascinate Vereker. He removed his fixed stare from the man's face, and transferred it to the man's knife. It was long; it was sharp; it was as bright as silver. It seemed to hold him as by some subtle charm, but at last he tore himself from the contemplation of it, and lifted his gaze blankly to the savage face above him, that every moment seemed to come nearer and nearer.

All at once the full, awful knowledge of what was surely coming, grew plain to his bewildered mind, and a horrible scream broke from his lips.

Black Sandy killed it at its birth. He laid his hand with a strong, strangling pressure upon Vereker's throat.

"Your time is come, my lad," said he. "Think now on my Bess, think, *think*, THINK!"

He lifted his hand, the knife flashed brightly in the growing dusk, and then the hand descended. With the glaring open eyes of the doomed man fixed upon it, with all the awful horror of perfect consciousness in them, the knife sank deep into the quivering flesh.

Once, twice, thrice, it rose and fell! There was an abominable crashing, *forcing* noise, a wild convulsion of the arms and legs, a sickening contortion of the features, an unearthly groan, and then—an eternal silence!

It was over!

Black Sandy rose to his feet with a fierce, revengeful chuckle.

“Thou’lt be the ruin o’ no more wenches, my man,” said he. He stooped and peered into the ghastly dead face below him as if to make sure of his work.

“Thou’lt tell no tales either,” he said. He gave the still warm corpse a kick or two, dragged the butcher’s knife out of the gaping wound and flung it far from him into the distant field. Then, without a backward glance, he sprang through the laurels, and was soon a mile away from that tragic spot.

• • • • •

Slowly the evening was growing to night, though still daylight claimed a slight allegiance. The song of the birds was growing fainter, more intermittent. There in the shrubberies, where many of them slept, the quiet was almost perfect.

Once a little robin flew to the ground and perched

upon the breast of the murdered man, with a daring, a certainty of safety, that might have surprised one looking from a distance on what seemed a sleeping form. A last hymn of praise burst from the tiny creature's throat; soon she must seek her rest; she wiped her beak to and fro on the edge of the grey coat, twittered and preened herself a bit, then shook her wings and disappeared. She did not know that her little claws were then as red as the crimson feathers of her breast.

Still, no one came. The short October day was almost done, a touch of solemnity grew upon the air. The sun had dropped finally beneath the distant hills, and the roar from the sleepless ocean sounded louder as the silence of earth became deeper.

"A faint dawn breaks on yonder sedge; and broadens in that
bed of weeds,
A bright disc shows its radiant edge, the moon now rises
from the reeds,
Its level rays of silver glide across the steel-dark river tide."

It was as yet a very pallid moon; Dorothy and Farquhar, stepping lightly over the stepping-stones of the small stream below there at the end of the meadow, paused midway to look up at it.

"A baby of a moon," said she, admiringly. "How does it dare face the strong old day? I'm afraid however it is rather later than we thought it."

"It would be early if it was July," said he. "Perhaps you had better not stay very long. I'll wait for you at the end of the shrubberies. Now

that your aunt—*our* aunt,” with a tender squeeze of the arm, “is in a good temper, let us try and keep her there.”

“I shan’t be more than a quarter of an hour; will that do? *Fancy*, Aunt Jemima taking it so beautifully. Well, you know I warned you she would either kiss you or kill you.”

“She did neither, however. She was most forbearing; she was, in fact, so agreeable that she rather put me out.”

Dorothy laughed.

“See how glad she is to get rid of me,” said she. “Doesn’t that thought make you quake? Doesn’t your heart fail you? Consider what a life I must have led her.”

“I can only think of the life I am going to lead you,” returned he promptly. “Where shall I lead you first, Vienna? You said once you thought Vienna would be interesting.”

“I have seen so little, that everything would be interesting. *You* know it all, you shall take me just wherever you like. That will save me the trouble of deciding, and besides— What’s that?”

She pointed to something that lay half hidden in a bunch of thistles, on her right hand; she could hardly see what it was, but it shone a little as the pale rays of the young moon fell on it, and attracted her attention.

Farquhar did not at first see where her gaze was directed, and she went up to the thistles, and drew out from it a knife; a moment later she dropped it, and a sharp cry broke from her.

“Oh! Arthur, look, *look!* There is blood on it! Oh! *look* at my hand! Oh! what shall I do?” She fell on her knees and tried in a little frenzied fashion to rub off the stain upon her pink palm in the short dewy grass.

Farquhar bent over the knife and examined it closely.

“It is strange. It certainly *is* blood,” he said slowly. “What could have brought the knife here?”

“It won’t come off,” cried Dorothy, in terrible distress. She was gazing with a shuddering distaste at her hand. “Get me some water. Where are you, Arthur; what are you doing? Don’t touch that awful knife,” with a vehemence that startled him. “*Don’t!* Let it lie there. I tell you there is some dreadful story connected with it.”

“Nonsense, darling! I daresay it is only——”

“It is what I say—the instrument of some terrible crime. I’m certain there is *human* blood on it!” Here she began to cry, and glanced fearfully around her, and clung to Farquhar with an honest grip that spoke of unaffected terror. “Oh, how *dark* it is. Come, come up to the house with me, and let us tell Cecil.”

She started at full speed for the house, and Farquhar, tucking his arm into hers, ran with her. She stopped only as they got to the high bank that led direct to that part of the shrubberies where the laurels grew.

It was steep, and she was a little out of breath from her run and her excitement, so that she walked slowly up, and at the top paused for a while. As she

stood there some strange, unaccountable dislike to go on, to take another step in the direction of the shrubberies, took possession of her.

“Let us go home,” she said, turning a pale face to Farquhar. “I don’t feel as if I *could* go on.”

“Then don’t, darling. Why should you? You look quite unnerved. We need not go back by—that field; we can go round by Barrett’s farm; it won’t be half a mile out of our way.”

“Yes, I know. But it seems cowardly, doesn’t it? And you said you heard Cecil was not well. Perhaps, if I wait a little I shall be able to overcome this silly——”

Speech failed her. A wild, a piercing shriek rent the air. It sounded quite near. It came, indeed, from the shrubberies—that part of them that was not a hundred yards distant from where she stood.

“Great Heaven! what has happened?” she cried. She drew herself from Farquhar’s grasp and stood erect. All her fear seemed to have vanished. “That was Cecil’s voice,” she said. “Come!—come quickly! She wants me!”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

“They found

The deadē man, that murder’d was all new.

O, blissful God! that art so good and true,

Lo, how that thou bewray’st murder alway.”

MRS. VEREKER was standing, as rigid as though smitten into stone, in the centre of the small

gravelled walk that ran between the laurels. On the grass before her, almost at her feet, lay the dead body of her husband.

There could be no doubt that the scream they had heard had come from her lips, yet it was difficult to realize it as one gazed on her marble features. Her eyes were riveted upon that awful figure lying so close to her; her lips were tightly closed, and to Farquhar it seemed as though she did not breathe.

Dorothy ran to her and tried to pull her aside, but Mrs. Vereker resisted angrily.

"It is Francis," she said. "But who did it? *Who?*"

She drew the nails of her fingers into her palms, and looked at Dorothy with an awful fear in her eyes.

"That will be discovered later on. Come away now. Come," cried Dorothy vehemently. "Do not stay here looking at—at—Come with me, Cecil, I desire you."

"He *can't* be dead! There *must* be life in him still," said Mrs. Vereker, panting and shivering. She fell on her knees beside Farquhar, who was examining the corpse. "His heart—try if it beats. Dorothy, run for brandy, for anything. He *can't* be dead, I tell you!"

"Mrs. Vereker, go indoors with Dorothy, I implore you," said Farquhar. "He," solemnly, "he is surely dead." As he said this he uncovered his head.

"What do you know about it, sir?" cried she in a piercing tone. "Send for a doctor. I tell you he *must* be brought back to life. It was an accident

—I mean—I——Dorothy, why do you stand there idly? Send for a doctor, I tell you.”

“I’ll send at once,” said Farquhar. “I’ll do all that is necessary, if you will only go away.” He was terribly distressed. “I’ll see also that the police are communicated with at once.”

“The police! What for? Oh! no, no, *no*.” Her voice grew into a scream. “He is not dead. Oh! get help, do *something*. Dear, *dear* Dorothy, help me now. Oh! why did I leave, why did I go away?” She caught Farquhar’s arm. “Put your hand upon his heart again,” she said, “you *may* have been mistaken.”

Farquhar shook his head. He could not speak. Something in the shocked expression of his face convinced her that all was indeed over. She turned with a gasping sigh to Dorothy, and fell fainting into her arms.

Farquhar lifted her, and carried her as quickly as he could towards the house.

“Who would have thought she would have taken it like this?” said he. “Such a brute—er—er—as that poor fellow was. If he had adored her she could not have felt it worse. Dorothy, my poor girl, this is an awful ordeal for you. Will you be able to stay with her?”

“I don’t understand her,” said Dorothy. “Stay? Of course I shall stay. Do you think I would leave her now?” She spoke very bravely, though her face was as white as a sheet, and she was trembling in every limb.

“What did she mean about an accident?” said he.

"I don't know. I don't think she knew what she was saying." Then suddenly she broke out. "That knife! Arthur! That knife!"

He gave her a startled glance, but at this instant some of the women who had seen them from the upper windows came running out, anxious to know what was the matter with their mistress.

To them he resigned his unconscious burden, and they and Dorothy passed into the house.

By this time the alarm had spread, and men from the stableyard and some of the indoor men came hurrying to him. Messengers were sent post-haste for doctors and for the police, whilst others lifted the dead body of their master and carried him indoors. There had been no love lost between master and men, yet a terrible melancholy fell on all, and those who spoke addressed each other in bated whispers, with pale faces, and lips that trembled.

Farquhar, taking two of the men with him as witnesses, went down to the field that he and Dorothy had so lately crossed, undreaming of evil, and there searched for and secured the knife.

The blood was now almost dry upon it, but yet it was not without a shudder that Farquhar touched it. As he and one of the footmen were examining it, a young lad, a stable-boy, lately hired from the village, spoke suddenly:

"I seen just such another," said he, "yesterday—I were down yonder," pointing in the direction of the village.

"Yes?" said Farquhar, looking at him. "And with whom?"

“Babbs, the butcher, sir. Him as supplies the house here.”

“Like this?” said Farquhar, regarding the lad with keen eyes. “And where did Babbs get his, eh?”

“I dun’no, sir. Most like at Mr. Cummins’, opposite his stall. Mr. Cummins he do deal in knives and pots and pans, and such like.”

“Cummins,” repeated Farquhar slowly. He had folded the knife in his handkerchief, and now went silently back to the house, his companions following.

The police had arrived by this time, and Farquhar was only too glad to surrender the knife to them. He told them what the stable-boy had said about its fac-simile in Babbs’ possession, and mentioned also that he—the boy—believed it had been bought at Cummins’. The sergeant, who seemed an intelligent man, took the knife and gazed at it somewhat abstractedly.

“And you have no idea, sir, as to who—there is no clue, you say? Have you never thought—hasn’t it occurred to you——” he paused as if slightly embarrassed.

“If I haven’t thought, you have,” said Farquhar. “What is your suspicion? You think, perhaps——” a sudden glance of comprehension brightened his face. “Is it Black Sandy?” he said.

“That was my thought, sir, surely. And this knife——But of course it is mere surmise, nevertheless——”

“Where is Sandy now?” asked Farquhar eagerly.

“Ah! that is just what I shall find out,” said the

sergeant. He rose as he spoke. "I have already sent two of my men to his house; if not there they will know what to do. It is hard to speak sometimes; but you know, sir, there were reasons why——"

"Yes, yes, I know," said Farquhar.

Of course the news had spread like wildfire. Barely half-an-hour after the discovery of Vereker's dead body, the intelligence of his death was conveyed to Lady Bessy Gifford, and by her to St. John.

"Good heavens! what an ending!" said she. "Who could have done it? Of course he was on the worst possible terms with his tenants—but then he was on the worst possible terms with *everybody*, so that doesn't count. I could name a good round dozen of people this moment," making a pretence at counting on her pretty taper fingers, "who would, at any moment, have been delighted to murder him if they could have done it with safety. Oh! poor wretch! what a miserable stop to all ways."

She had been talking incessantly, and had therefore hardly noticed St. John's extraordinary silence. He had not, indeed, once opened his lips since the ghastly story was told to him. He had grown extremely pale, and there was a suppressed look about him, as though he were keeping guard over himself.

"What a scandal!" went on Lady Bessy. "And—it seems brutal to say so, so early in the day—but *what* a deliverance for her. Poor little thing!

It is a fine property, too, and by the settlements she inherits everything. It is not entailed in any part, I think. What a hideous catastrophe! And *she* was the one to find him. The unfortunate! Certainly misfortune seems to follow some people. Now why could it not have been anybody else but her? It seems such a piling up of the agony, and *so* unnecessary. How curious she should have been there just then—that she should have gone there, I mean. So late in the evening, too! And a very unfrequented part of the grounds, I am told.”

St. John's face had turned even greyer.

“She was in the habit of walking there,” he said. He said it deliberately; and saying it, he knew that he lied.

“Well, it was most unhappy. I wonder if they have found out anything yet. The murderer, whoever it was, can hardly hope to escape.”

“How you dwell upon it,” cried he, so suddenly, with such sharp anger, that she looked at him a moment in astonishment.

“How should I *not* dwell upon it? Is it such an every-day occurrence? I tell you my flesh *crept* when they first told me; as it is I am quite unnerved. And common people—servants, how they gloat over the minor, the *nasty* details. It appears that poor Cecil's white gown was quite stained with his blood.”

“Not another word. Do you hear? I can't bear it,” exclaimed he, in a choked voice. He began to pace up and down the room, as though quiet was no longer possible to him. Lady Bessy

lay back in her chair and gazed at him compassionately.

“Poor *dear* fellow! How he feels it for her. Ah! a lover in a thousand! Well, things could hardly have fallen out better. Now I shall keep him at home; and the property is everything that is desirable.” All this ran through her mind.

“I suppose I had better go up there,” said St. John, at last, stopping opposite to her. His voice sounded hoarse, and unnatural.

“Oh! I *think* not. Not so soon. To-morrow morning, now. Forgive me, dearest Hilary, if I say I think you ought to be *especially* careful just now. You see your attentions there have always been so marked, and—and one should always think of the future, and above all things be careful to give no handle for idle talk to——”

She stopped abruptly. He had ceased his rapid walk up and down the room, and had turned his eyes on her with such a depth of anguish in them, that frightened, puzzled, anxious, she had found it impossible to go on. When she recovered herself he had left the room.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

“Murder will out that see we day by day,
Murder is so watsom and abominable
To God, that is so just and reasonable,
That he will not suffer it heled be;
Though it abide a year, or two, or three,
Murder will out, this is my conclusioun.”

HIS brain seemed on fire! He went out of the house, and towards an old summer-house, and there, flinging himself down upon the mouldering seat, tried to think. But only one thing came to him. It shut out all other thoughts, and compelled him to dwell on it alone.

It was a vision, a miserable picture. A tall, slender, white-robed figure, transfigured by rage and hatred. The clenched hands, the flashing eyes, the blood-stain on the low, broad brow, he could see it all. It was indelibly fixed upon his memory. She had wished him dead! She had spoken of his death as a thing sure to happen *soon*. Soon! Merciful Heaven! How *terribly* soon!

He got up and began to pace hurriedly up and down. It was impossible, of course. He was mad even for a moment to imagine otherwise. Those little frail white hands could not—Yet how was it that she had been upon the spot, and without having made an effort to summon help apparently? Dorothy had found her there. He felt as though he must see Dorothy at once. She would know something—give him some help to destroy this awful fear that was driving him distracted. To talk to

Bessy was impossible. How eagerly, with what a sense of enjoyment, even a good woman can gloat over the hideous details of a tragedy. That picture of—of *her*, kneeling there with her white gown dyed with——

He fought off a touch of faintness, and knowing that he should see Dorothy there, went straight down to The Court, in spite of Lady Bessy's advice. It was now night, and he had to make his way through the trees of the wood as best he might. It was a singularly dark night, and he lost the pathway once or twice, but at last found himself walking down the avenue.

The hall-door stood open, and inside Farquhar was standing conversing in low tones with the sergeant and one of the policemen. The latter looked heated and excited. Farquhar, seeing St. John, went up to him at once and drew him aside.

"We have a clue. It is almost sure," he said, in a whisper. To St. John it seemed ominous that he should whisper, and once again that sensation of faintness almost overcame him. He held himself together as well as he could, but he was obliged to sit down on the chair nearest to him.

"A clue?" he repeated.

"Yes—yes! As yet we say nothing. Better give her *time*, you know. She is so very excitable. Time—until we are *quite* positive. You think so, eh?"

"Yes—time," said St. John. There was a terrible expression on his face.

"It will be a bad business having to break it to her. Dorothy says she is a little more composed

now. Just at the time I firmly believed she was out of her senses."

"The man who believes otherwise," cried St. John wildly, "must be out of his. A delicate, fragile creature like that to——"

"Just as I say. How she had the strength at all. Many women would have given in altogether——"

"Few women were wronged as she was," interrupted St. John fiercely. "What she endured beforehand no one knows. I tell you she was driven to it——"

"Eh!" said Farquhar, as if not understanding—as if puzzled. Then he went on. "Oh, yes! She endured more than most," he said. "It is wonderful, however, how she feels it. The death, I mean. That is strange. I can't make it out. I should have thought, now, that she would have been a little callous about it, considering everything. But Dorothy tells me she is suffering keenly."

A groan burst from St. John. He covered his face with his hands.

"When must it be said to her?" he asked, in a stifled tone.

"Well, as I say, there is no need to hurry. Better be absolutely sure. The police are now on his track, and we expect——"

But St. John had sprung to his feet.

"*His* track! Whose?" he asked. He laid his hands heavily on Farquhar's shoulders, and stared at him as though his very soul depended upon the answer given.

"Why that scoundrel's, the fellow we have been

talking about—Black Sandy,” returned Farquhar, rather impatiently. What the deuce had St. John been thinking about all this time? “The very knife has been secured, and proved, beyond doubt, to be his, and——”

But St. John no longer heard him. He had pushed Farquhar from him, and had rushed out again through the open hall-door into the darkness,—the silence of the night.

* * * * *

Meantime, another tragedy was being enacted. The miserable murderer had been tracked and brought to bay in an outhouse belonging to a farmer about seven miles from the scene of his crime. He had run swiftly through byways and unfrequented parts of the wooded country, hoping to gain a seaport town that lay about twenty miles lower down upon the coast.

Ill luck, however, ran with him. About a mile from the outhouse in which he was subsequently captured, he fell over the root of a tree hidden in dank grass, came heavily to the ground, and, trying to rise, found himself with a sprained ankle. He had managed to crawl along another mile, had crept into the first shed that he reached, and there, covering himself with straw and other litter, hoped to lie undiscovered until morning.

Here they found him. He made no effort to deny his crime, but, like the half savage that he was, fought with a brutal strength for his liberty. When overpowered he seized one of the guns, turned it on

himself, and, before he could be prevented, gave himself a fatal wound.

Before Death entirely conquered him, he gave them a full account of what had happened. He expressed no contrition, seemed rather to glory in what he had done, and to the last was distressed only by the thought that he had failed to make good his escape.

"'Twarn't fair," he kept on repeating, over and over again. "Three to one. 'Twarn't fair! No time given me to enjoy what I done. 'Twarn't fair, I say!"

The farmer and his wife, and a crowd of labourers, were witnesses of his confession. He acknowledged that he had bought the knife, and kept it "clean" for a whole month, waiting the opportunity to requite the seducer of his daughter. And after all the waiting, the watching, the prowling, the fulfilment of his design, he was hounded to death a few hours after he had laid his enemy low. No time to enjoy it!

"'Twarn't fair!"

• • • • •

They brought his dead body back with them. The slayer and the slain lay cold in death. Stern justice had meted out her punishments with blind impartiality to both alike. Both to her calm mind were equally guilty. Both had destroyed a life!

CHAPTER XXXV.

“Alas ! a foul thing is it, by my faith,
To say this word, and fouler is the deed.”

“SHE *must* be told. The sooner now the better,” said Farquhar. Dorothy had come down to him from Cecil’s room, where she had left the latter sitting in an apparently frozen state staring into the fire. She had not spoken for quite an hour, and Dorothy was growing seriously alarmed about her.

“If I didn’t know it was impossible, I should say she has even something more cruel upon her mind,” she said. “I should feel easier if she would let me talk to her about all this awful affair, but she shrinks from it with such an agony of horror that I am afraid to persist. The very mention of a hope that the murderer may be discovered, and the mystery cleared up, sends her almost out of her mind. She frightens me,” wound up poor Dorothy, tearfully.

“My darling, it is a miserable thing that you should be thus mixed up in it. See here, Dorothy. Will you come home with me, and I’ll get someone else—Mrs. Mackenzie, Lady Bessy (she is very good natured), or someone—to sit with her? You look awfully done. I cannot bear to see you so pale and upset.”

“Mrs. Mackenzie—Lady Bessy ! Oh, Arthur ! how *heartless* of you. Do you want to *finish* the poor thing? Mrs. Mackenzie, with her insatiable

curiosity, her ceaseless pumpings, her never-ending surmises. Why that woman would be capable of probing a man on the rack to find out where the pain was worst! And then Lady Bessy, with her frivolities, her little fashionable inanities. No, indeed! I'll stay with her. I may be curious, and I may be frivolous, but at all events, thank goodness, I can hold my tongue."

"That is what you mustn't do now, d'ye see? If you insist on staying with her, you must let her know that it was Black Sandy who—who—killed the poor fellow."

"Couldn't *you* tell her?" suggested Miss Aylmer, with flagrant cowardice.

"I couldn't," said he, simply if contritely. "I wouldn't know how to do it. I shouldn't mind if she was like anyone else—but she has taken it all so badly; and—er—a woman always knows so much better what to say."

"Well, I'll do it," said she in a resigned tone. She turned away.

"Don't go like that, Dorothy," entreated he. "Look here, after all I *will* do it. It is too much to expect of you, and perhaps a good rousing will be the best thing for her. When it is over, and she knows everything, I wish both you and she would go to bed."

"I feel as if I should never sleep again," cried she, wearily. "Oh! what a day it has been! Shall I ever be able to blot it out of my mind?"

"You will. I'll be with you," said he, folding her in his arms. Perhaps she found some comfort

in his tender embrace, because she began to cry quietly.

"If you will really come to her, let us go up at once," said she presently. "I begin to think a shock of any sort will do her good."

They went up hand in hand. Mrs. Vereker was still sitting before the fire in the very attitude in which Dorothy had left her. She neither moved nor spoke on their entrance, and was not indeed perhaps aware that Farquhar was in the room.

Her expression was strained, her lips tightly closed; when Dorothy went up to her and laid her hand upon her shoulder, she started violently, and looked round, in a curious, shrinking way, as might some guilty thing.

"It is only Arthur," said Dorothy, nervously. "Cecil, he has come to tell you something that you must hear. Try to nerve yourself, dearest."

Mrs. Vereker sprang to her feet, and raised both her hands to her head.

"I won't hear it," she cried hoarsely. "Go away. I want to hear *nothing*. Do you understand? Oh! oh! have I not suffered enough?" She staggered as if she would have fallen, but when Dorothy tried to place an arm round her, she repulsed her almost rudely. "Why won't you leave me in peace?" she cried fiercely, lifting her miserable eyes to Farquhar.

"It is what you must hear," said he, pitifully. "I entreat you to listen to me. Once you know *all* there will be no necessity to speak of it again."

"All!" repeated she in a low tone. "*All*," she shuddered.

"Yes. Everything is now known, and it is only right that you should be made acquainted with the bare facts. He, the doer of that awful deed," he could not bring himself to say the word murderer in her hearing, "has been found. I think it probable you may have already suspected him. It was——"

A cry, sharp and bitter, burst from her.

"Oh, no, no, no!" she threw out her hands as if to ward off some frightful thing. "Do not *say* it. Do not let it pass your lips. Oh, what shall I do, what shall I do?" She began to walk up and down like some frenzied creature. "Dorothy," she cried suddenly, "how can you stand there so calmly with such news within your heart? You, who know all! Who know how it was with us. Have you *no* heart—no feeling!"

The mind of woman is swifter to receive an impression than that of man. In a flash Dorothy understood the truth. She grasped at the real meaning of the agony that for the past interminable hours had beaten Mrs. Vereker down to the very earth. She ran to her now, and caught her hands.

"It was Black Sandy!" she said, blurting out the truth in a fashion that seemed to Farquhar, who understood nothing, both unnecessary and dangerous. "Do you hear? Black Sandy! There is no doubt at all about it. The very weapon he used has been discovered. He, himself, has made confession."

"Is it true?" said Mrs. Vereker, faintly.

"Sure. Positive. Why, come, rouse yourself now, and listen to it all. Black Sandy has been arrested, I tell you. Are you listening? You must not faint until you hear every word," giving her a little shake. "They caught him only a few miles from here. Red-handed as it were. In the scuffle caused by the attempt to capture, he managed to seize a gun, and shot himself. He lived long enough, however, to declare that he, and *he alone*, was guilty."

She still held Cecil's hands,—now, to support her. Mrs. Vereker had turned deadly white, and was trembling visibly, but such a light had shot into her lovely eyes as no one ever yet had seen there; it was a radiance that covered all her face.

"Oh! I am too happy!" she cried, and fell back upon the couch behind her, insensible.

Farquhar was not only alarmed, but it must be confessed a good deal scandalized. Whilst he was ringing for the servants, and ordering brandy and other things, he looked at Dorothy, who was supporting her friend's head, and found that she was crying.

"What is it?" he asked. "What was there in the fact of her husband's murderer being discovered to make her *happy*? What a word, you know, just now, eh? And why are you crying, my dearest?"

"I don't know. Oh! poor thing. I can't think how she bore it."

"It—what?"

"Well, if I tell you, you mustn't ever speak of it.

It is a secret, mind ; and I shouldn't tell you either, only I can't bear that you should harbour an unkind thought of her. The fact is, she—thought it was *Hilary* who had killed him."

"Hilary? St. John? Good Heavens! Why? Even in her wildest flights I can't see why she should have fixed on him. But allowing that she did, I don't see why she should have gone so entirely to ribbons over it."

"Ah! what a thing is a man!" said Dorothy, infinite compassion in her glance. "Don't you see it yet? Why—she loves him!"

"By Jove! Of course. What a situation it would have been," said Farquhar. "Poor girl!"

Dorothy pushed him gently out of the room.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"Nought may the woful spirit in mine heart
Declare one point of all my sorrow's smart."

MRS. VEREKER stirred slightly, and opened her eyes. Dorothy, dismissing the women by a gesture, went and knelt down beside her.

The dawn was already beginning to steal through the curtains, dulling and deadening the light of the one lowered lamp that was shedding a rather depressing gleam over the lower end of the room. The first sweet, vague warble of birds came to them from outside, and caught the attention of Mrs. Vereker's still but half-conscious brain.

“It is morning,” she said, as if surprised, and uncertain. She sighed heavily. As yet she did not remember, but the late anguish she had endured weighed on her, and crushed her spirit.

Dorothy rose from her knees, pulled back the curtains, and let a flood of pale, shadowy light illumine the darkness. A star or two still lingered in the heavens, whilst up from the east rose a pink flush, cold and tremulous, that each moment grew more decidedly into a steady grey. Through this came flashes and bars of a pearly shade that shone exceeding bright, and gave promise of a glorious day.

“Night wanes—the vapours round the mountains curled,
Melt into morn—and light awakes the world.
Man has another day to swell the past
And lead him near to little, but his last.”

To Francis Vereker, however, no other day had been vouchsafed. He had been done to death with all his imperfections on his head. Time—to reform, to sink still lower, to repent—was his no longer. Such a very few hours had gone by since last he stood alive upon the earth, and now he had become mere earth himself, and his place would know him no more!

Such thoughts flitted through Dorothy’s mind, as she stood at the window gazing on the solemn dawn. A rapid movement on the part of Mrs. Vereker roused her from her reverie, and sent her quickly back to the couch. Cecil had risen and was looking at her a little wildly. That swift inrushing of the daylight had brought everything back to her.

“It is true, Dorothy? It all happened?” she cried, clinging to Dorothy nervously. “Oh! poor Francis!”

“Yes, yes, dearest. But try to control yourself. It is terrible for you, and you must only remember now that you have friends that love you, and that all that has happened was by the ordering of God.”

“I know,” said she. She threw herself upon Dorothy’s breast, and as the girl’s gentle, loving arms closed round her, she burst into a passion of tears. They were the first she had shed since the fatal events of yesterday, and they brought rest and comfort to her overburdened soul.

“There was something else, Dorothy—you know what I mean. I feel now that I should have thought of nothing but poor Francis, but I couldn’t control the fear. It was horrible, it seemed to burn me like fire. I,” she looked at Dorothy strangely, “I would rather be dead than endure it again.”

“But how was it? I can’t think how you came to believe that Hilary could have had anything to do with it. He has a temper, of course—no man worth a farthing is without one—but to—to——”

“I know. I shall never forgive myself for it. But that day some things had happened that, when I remembered them afterwards, terrified me. It was in the afternoon—what day was it?—yesterday—the day before?”—she grew bewildered—“I can’t tell *when* it was, all seems so confused, but we were in the garden together, Francis, Mr. St. John and I, and poor Francis was not in a good temper I think. He said some things that annoyed your cousin, and

I—I was stupid and could think of nothing that might smooth matters. It was something in your cousin's face that frightened me. He looked so dark, so angry. There was a sort of suppression about him that struck cold to my heart, and that afterwards seemed to me full of significance. At such a time I should not have left them alone together. *Thank God* nothing came of it—but——”

She paused and wiped the moisture from her brow.

“How was it you did go?”

“Francis grew violent and ordered me indoors. He—he said some dreadful things, and though shocked and crushed by them I felt as if I dared not stir, until Hilary spoke. He too told me to go away. I obeyed him, senselessly. I was frightened and ashamed of what poor Francis had said, and I was glad to go. I went, any way. It was cowardly of me, and I blamed myself the instant I found myself alone.”

“Well, I think I should have gone too,” said Dorothy. “And I shouldn't have blamed myself either.”

“You don't know. I had a sort of presentiment full on me that something was going to happen that ought to have kept me by his side. Poor Francis' side I mean. Oh! Dorothy, is he *dead*? *Really* dead?” she clung suddenly to Dorothy as if overcome by nervous horror. “Yes, yes. Don't mind me, but it was such a shock. Where was I?”

“You went indoors.”

“I did, and then I ran to a window and looked

out to see whether they were still in the tower garden, and if they were quarrelling. But they had moved, your cousin was walking rather in front, towards the laurels,—*you know*. Francis was somewhat behind, but I could see he was talking still, jibing in a way he had, but I fancied Hilary did not care. He showed no sign of anger that I could discern. Then they turned the corner; almost as they turned I saw Hilary lift his head, stop short, and say something to Francis. His manner was vehement, *fierce* I think it was. I grew terrified again, but I hardly knew what to do, and then in a moment it was all over. They had both gone beyond my sight. One I never saw again in life.”

She shuddered and grew so pale that Dorothy feared to let her continue.

“Not another word now. Don’t go any farther. Some other day you——”

“Let me tell you all. You cannot imagine what a comfort it is to me to be able to think it all out loud.”

“Well, don’t linger over it,” said Dorothy nervously.

“There is little more to add, but I want you *quite* to understand. I am sure my manner when first you came on me as I stood looking down on—on that awful sight,”—with a strong shudder,—“must have struck you as being strange, but I hardly knew what I was doing. I told myself there could be but one meaning for it all, that there could be but one person in the world who had done that

deed. They had disappeared together into that unfrequented shrubbery, and Francis had never come out again. He was *dead!* I felt positive that something further had occurred between those two, and that Hilary, who was already in a white heat of rage, had dealt him, Francis, a fatal blow."

"But surely it must have suggested itself to you that Hilary had no knife with him that could have inflicted such a wound, and that besides——"

"I thought out nothing. I was half mad, I tell you. Only one thing seemed clear, positive, beyond dispute, and that was, that Hilary had killed Francis, and that it was all because of *me!* I have suffered ever since the tortures of the lost. Even now, what am I, but the most unhappy creature alive?"

She sighed heavily, and regarded Dorothy with eyes full of anguish.

"I can't see that you have anything to reproach yourself with," said that sympathetic friend, taking one of her hands and beginning to stroke it fondly.

"Oh Dorothy! Is that ingenuous? Can you say that with a clear conscience? *Now*, when I have time to look back on everything, what must I think, but that I wronged poor Francis grossly. Outwardly I was loyal to him, inwardly——I was a married woman, I had sworn to be true to him, and him only, and—I loved Hilary. It is a sin it will take all my life to wipe out."

"You should go abroad," said Dorothy briskly. "*Quite* abroad, *ever* so far away from this. Change is what you want. You are growing morbid, unsound.

Your nerves are overtaxed, and they will lead you a pretty dance if you don't get the better of them. You must leave this directly after the funeral."

"Yes, I should like to go," with a little gasp of relief. "To get away from here is the one thing I really crave. I can be ready very soon, and can start almost in a fortnight."

"Start sooner. Why stay on here a day longer than you need?"

"There is my mourning," said she slowly, shrinking a little as she did so.

"Go up to town and order it there. You will be on the spot; and the sooner you are out of this the better. Then cross to France, and from that travel, travel, travel at your own sweet will anywhere but towards Brent for at least a good twelve months. Come, there is sage advice, take it!"

"Will you come with me?" asked she, anxiously. "I have never gone anywhere by myself, and to begin now seems impossible to me. You will come, Dorothy?"

"Well, you see," began Miss Aylmer. She hesitated, and grew a charming pink. "I don't see, if I go with you, how I am to manage about Arthur."

"Captain Farquhar!" Cecil seemed puzzled for a moment, and then said very gently, "You are engaged to him? I am glad of that. He is a good man. He will make you happy."

"Well, I daresay he is more likely to do it than anyone else," said Dorothy, rather shyly.

"Could he not meet us somewhere in Germany

or Switzerland?" said Mrs. Vereker. "Do try and arrange it, dearest."

"I could go so far with you, of course; and when I had settled you somewhere, could come back again with Arthur."

"Or be married there," said Mrs. Vereker. "Anyhow, I may rely upon you to come with me? Yes, I shall speak to Captain Farquhar. I am sure he will spare you for a month or so, or else he will come with us. Oh! how I *pine* to get away from this."

"You will see Hilary before you go?" said Dorothy abruptly; why, she hardly knew.

"No!" shortly.

"I think if you don't, Cecil, you will lay yourself open to a charge of ungraciousness. What has he done that you should so slight him?"

"Nothing. *I*, it is, who have done everything."

"What nonsense! You had a moment's idle suspicion, and you are preparing to make a life-long worry out of it."

"I could not look him in the face," said Mrs. Vereker vehemently. "And it isn't only what you allude to, my unpardonable suspicion of him, but the fact that I once held him in too kindly a regard. Oh! that thought now—*now* when poor Francis is for ever gone, seems to lower me to the very earth."

"Still, I think you should see him," persisted Dorothy. "It is treating him very harshly. At all events, he is a friend of yours, and the very fact of your believing you have wronged him should make

you more considerate towards him. Besides, other people will call. There are some you will have to see, and if you openly refuse to receive him, what will the world say?"

"You forget that I shall leave this before anyone can call? If, however"—coldly—"you think I should see your cousin, I will do so."

"No, no! If it will make you so very unhappy, do not think of it. After all, there is no real reason why you should ever see him again."

"That is what I think," said Mrs. Vereker. "Oh! I *hope* I shall never see him again!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"She said, 'I am ashamed, doubtless.'"

SHE did see him, nevertheless. The day after the funeral, which was quite as largely and respectably attended as though the dead Vereker had been a modern saint, St. John went down to The Court. It had not occurred to Cecil that anyone would be likely to call quite so soon, and as she intended leaving home next day for an indefinite time, she had not thought it necessary to tell the servants to admit no visitors. St. John was, therefore, ushered into the library, where she sat, without any warning being given her.

She rose pale and disturbed, and gave her hand to him in a mechanical way, that bespoke thoughts far distant. She seemed confused rather than dis-

tressed, but beyond this betrayed no emotion whatsoever. It was a little shock to him to see that she was not in mourning, and he could not help noticing that she looked shockingly ill. He could not help feeling, too, that his presence there was undesired by her.

"Perhaps I have come too soon," he said, gravely. "But I was anxious to see for myself how you were, and besides there was something I wished to say to you." He paused, but she said nothing that might lead him to hope he was mistaken in his first suggestion. "You are not looking well," he said, gently.

"No? That is hardly to be wondered at. I have suffered," said she.

"It has been a terrible time. I need hardly say how I—how we all at The Chase have felt for you." Her own tone was so cold, so unfriendly, that he felt it impossible not to copy it in part. "It has been a great trial—a grief," said he, speaking with some difficulty, and almost hating himself that he felt hypocritical as he said it.

She made an effort as if to say something conventional, correct, but after a vague murmur that did not reach him, gave up the attempt. A quick flush born of deep distress dyed her white face for a moment, and at last she burst out.

"Do not mistake me. I have *not* grieved for him. I feel no sorrow of that sort. I feel no grief; none. I must be made of stone, I think. Surely it was a death to make any woman weep, but my tears have refused to come. I know nothing, only

a sense of *horror!* That clings to me, lives with me, night and day."

"You should leave this place. Entire change is what you want."

"I am going," returned she, indifferently.

"Yes?" He was, and looked, a little startled. "You have arranged about it? I am glad of that—for your sake. It will be a wise move. You—will probably leave before Christmas."

"I shall go to-morrow."

He was silent. Just at the moment he knew he could not have spoken. So she had made all her plans, and was leaving—deliberately—and without one thought of bidding him farewell. He had had no part in her arrangements. She had treated him as though he were the veriest stranger. A keen sense of loss—of disappointment filled him.

"You go abroad?" he said, at length, stiffly.

"Anywhere, everywhere. I don't care where I go, so long as it is far from this."

"And to-morrow?" he said. "You certainly lost no time." His tone was bitter.

"Time! You think my haste indecorous," she said, icily. "But do you imagine that ever since—*that*—that I have counted days and hours as you do? I tell you it has been a century to me. I could not live if I stayed here longer. I feel as if to breathe is difficult." She rose as she spoke and pressed her hand against her bosom. Something of the unnatural calm that had possessed her since his entrance, melted away. She looked all at once like the old Cecil, the woman he adored.

He, too, rose. A passion of reproach and pain dimmed his eyes.

"You would have gone without seeing me," he said. "You would have left me, without a word! What has happened that you should treat me so? Have we not been friends? What has come between us?"

"The past!" said she, faintly. "I never knew—I never felt the sin, until—he was dead. I cannot bear to look at you," cried she, with a miserable trembling of her voice. "When I think of all—when I remember how I wronged—*him*. And he is gone. I feel as though I myself had been the one to sweep him out of my path."

To her each word she uttered was a sword, that pierced and hurt—to him each word gave hope and comfort. She loved him still! That terrible coldness with which she had met him was a thing of naught, a mere outcome of a sharp attack of horror and remorse; a remorse naturally exaggerated at such a time as this. Fresh courage filled his breast. He took a step forward, and caught her hand in his.

"Who is going abroad with you?" he asked.

"Dorothy."

"You could not find any better companion. I am glad from my soul you are going away from this, though——" He checked himself. "Why were you going without a word to me?" he asked abruptly.

"I hardly know. And yet,"—with a sudden flash of her large mournful eyes into his—"I *do* know, and you know, too. Oh!"

She drew away her hands from his impatiently, and covered her face with them. "I wish I had never seen you," she said.

A sob broke her voice, and he could see the tears stealing through her fingers. Her slender frame trembled with the agitation that overfilled it.

"Do not say that, Cecil," said he unsteadily. He did not attempt to go nearer to her, or try in any way to check her grief. He walked over to the window, and stood there for a little while, gazing out on, but not seeing, the cold, dull autumn landscape. Presently he went back to her. "Grant me one favour," he said. "You are going away for a long time, I imagine. Before we part make me a promise."

"What promise?" asked she nervously.

"A simple one," said he, with a sigh. "Not to *think* of me, if possible, and I daresay it will be very possible, until all this late melancholy matter is many months older. Do not let your thoughts dwell on me whilst they are still sad and depressed. I entreat you," cried he earnestly, "not to let yourself associate me with this tragedy that has fallen into your life."

"You ask me to forget you?"

"For the present—yes."

"To forget! Oh, if I *could*! And you?" She spoke with a sudden sharpness, and turned her gaze upon him, as though eager to read his answer in his eyes.

He gave her none, however. How could he tell her that he, too, would try to forget, when he knew that every beat of his heart would be for her, and

her alone, until they two should meet again? And how tell her that, either? To speak a single word bordering upon love, or lovers' vows, would, he felt, be a desecration of this hour, in which her mind was filled with memories, however bitter, of that dead man who had been her husband. Silence was all that was left to him. But silence sometimes is golden. Perhaps she read in his eyes what his tongue dared not utter.

At all events, she refrained from further question. Her eyes fell before his, and with nervous fingers she pushed back the hair from her forehead.

"My visit has been a long one I think," said he, making the ordinary movement to go. "If Dorothy travels with you, she will, perhaps from time to time, let me know how you and she are getting on. Good-bye."

He held out his hand.

"A moment," entreated she. She seemed quite unstrung now, and moved a chair out of her way with the jerky manner of one preparing for an effort almost beyond her. "When you came, you said there was something you wanted to say to me. Well—I——" She stammered and grew silent. "Just now you asked me to make you a promise," she went on presently, as if to gain time. "Why?"

"Because I feared your thoughts of me at present. Because I believed you might teach yourself to think hard things of me."

"Hard things! Oh! if you only knew," cried she. All her coolness forsook her. The deepest self-reproach betrayed itself on her face. "Perhaps I

shall never see you again," she went on hurriedly. "Indeed, when I tell you what I now must, I feel you will never want to see me again. Yet say it I will, and to you who have been my kindest friend. It weighs on me, it makes me feel guilty towards you." She moved away from him and went over to the fireplace, and stood there with averted face, and her hands clasped behind her in a nervous grip. "There was a time," she said, very low, "I don't know how long—some hours perhaps—an awful time, when in my secret soul I believed *you* guilty of being the murderer of Francis!"

She ceased and stood there motionless, scarcely breathing, waiting for what he might say, but he said nothing. Presently she looked round to find him in the same spot, his eyes bent upon the ground. He looked grave and sad.

"Oh! you will never forgive me," she said.

She went towards him, then stopped abruptly, as if afraid to go farther.

"It came to me," she said remorsefully. "I couldn't help it. Not that that is any excuse. It seemed to cry itself aloud in my ears all those miserable hours, until I thought I should have gone mad. My only wonder now is that I didn't. No, I cannot hope for your forgiveness."

"Cecil!" cried he. "It is you who have to forgive. She drew back a little as she saw his haggard face, and instinctively put up her hand. What other evil thing was about to befall her? "As you sinned against me, so did I sin against you. But surely my sin was the greater. To doubt you,

you poor child! Look at those little hands." He took one, lifted it up and dropped it gently. "Good heavens! I must have been out of my senses, but— You remember all you said that day. That day when you were suffering from—well we need not call that to mind now. But you said strange things that day, about your certainty that he would die soon. It all came back to me, each word seemed burned into my brain, and I told myself that in a moment of despair, madness—oh! surely pardonable—you had lifted up your hand against him. It was a vile suspicion, but I have suffered for it."

He was watching her anxiously, and now started at the change that came over her. If her expression of melancholy deepened, still there grew with it a touch of passionate relief. A slow flush mounted to her forehead and her eyes filled with tears. She drew closer to him, and voluntarily laid her hand in his.

"Do not be distressed because of it," she said mournfully. "I am glad you so believed, it seems to lighten my own burden. Now, you cannot altogether condemn me. Hilary, we part as friends."

"For a time," said he, something in her eyes sending the blood-chill to his heart.

"For ever, I think. Something tells me we shall see each other no more. And it is better so. There is that between us that——" Her voice died away.

"I will not believe it," said he in a low, unsteady tone. "There has been that between us that can never be forgotten; it is deathless, it will surely bring us together again."

She shook her head.

"Be wise," she said, "see the end as I do."

"There shall be no end," cried he, passionately.

"And yet it has come," said she, with a heavy sigh. "It is here, to-day, *now*."

"Say rather the beginning of a new life," said he.

"True, but apart," returned she. She made a faint gesture as though to dismiss him.

"I may write?" asked he, eagerly.

"No." The monosyllable fell from her softly, but finally.

"In time, when months have gone by, you will permit me to come to you, to——"

"*No, no*," cried she, feverishly this time. "You must not. I forbid it. The very thought is horrible. Oh! cannot you see that it is torture even to speak to you now. Go. Go, I entreat you."

"Good-bye," said he, slowly.

She turned abruptly from him, her face buried in her hands, and so without a word, a glance, a touch of her cold, slender fingers, he left her.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"Great was the strife and long betwixt them tway
If that I haddë leisure for to say."

"WELL, after all, you know," said Lady Bessy, comfortably, "it was about as satisfactory a thing as could have happened." She lay back in her lounging chair, her yellow hair making a charming contrast against the olive-green velvet behind her.

She spoke confidentially, in the low lazy tone of one who is growing almost too warm, and cast a languid, yet interested, glance at her two companions. Lady Eustace returned the look in kind, but Mr. Blair, who was diligently trying to make still more unbearable a fire of pine logs that was already hot enough to roast a salamander, let the log he was holding drop, and turned on her a face full of mournful consternation.

"Well," said he, "you are the first person I ever heard call a murder satisfactory. You are growing right down blood-thirsty. The Irish patriots aren't in it with you."

"Don't try to be sillier than usual," said Lady Bessy, with fine contempt. "You know very well what I mean; as it was decreed that that poor creature *was* to be—er——"

"Removed?" suggested Mr. Blair.

"Quite so; that will do. As he *was* to be done away with, I can't help seeing what a good thing it was for that poor little wife of his, and Hilary."

"I can see. I can quite understand," said Lady Eustace with her usual animation. "That unfortunate little woman, I believe she didn't dare call her soul her own. And one could see that she and Hilary were terribly in love with each other. Really if things had gone like that much longer, one——"

"*Pouf!* Not a bit of it," said Lady Bessy, shutting up her huge red fan with a little crash. "Things would have been the same with them a hundred years hence, as they were a month ago, but for that terrible gipsy person. You are not as good a reader

of character as you ought to be, if you couldn't see that Cecil Vereker was the last person in the world to—er—make a fool of herself."

"She made a fool of herself when she married Vereker," said Lady Eustace, rather shortly, who didn't like being accused of want of mental insight. To be considered a keen student of human nature was her great desire.

"It was her father made a fool of her there," said Lady Bessy. "She was only a baby at the time. A little unfledged thing. What could she know of men, or their treachery, and cruelty, and wickedness."

"What do you know of them?" demanded Mr. Blair. He had subsided into a chair now, and was gazing pensively at the noble (if extremely distressing) edifice he had erected in the grate. It was now blazing half-way up the chimney, and threatened every moment to set the house afire.

"Too much," retorted Lady Bessy, sententiously.

"More shame for you!" said he.

"Eh?" said she, with all the air of one who refuses to credit the evidence of her own ears.

"Surest sign of a born coquette is to be well up in the faults and failings of the other sex," said he, undisturbed. "See what a lot she must know about them to be able thus to give an open opinion."

Lady Bessy stared at him.

"You are very rude," said she.

"So they often tell me," returned he, gazing placidly into the fire.

"You aren't worth an argument," retorted she,

after another prolonged glance at him, tinged with indignation. "And as for that unfortunate Francis Vereker, I don't believe, after all, he was half as bad as *many other* men, I know."

"It is an unwarrantable attack—and I stand alone," murmured Mr. Blair, sadly. "But I'll try to endure to the end."

"I daresay there were faults on both sides," said Lady Eustace. "I daresay Cecil didn't suit the poor man, and that is a fatal fault. She was very cold, you know—very unsophisticated, not a bit the woman of the world about her. Just the very person to bore a man who was—er—rather wanting in refinement, like that much to be pitied Vereker."

"It is really only just to think all that," said Lady Bessy. "Now in other hands—*strong* hands—who can say what that man would have been? Quite another being, no doubt! As you say, affinity has so *much* to do with married happiness."

Here Mr. Blair made a sound that was like a grunt of disapproval, and that instantly drew four eyes upon him. Four severe eyes.

"What do you think?" asked Lady Eustace. "What was your opinion of that poor murdered creature's inward state? Might he have been redeemed, eh? with the help of a more powerful spirit?"

"I thought him a regular sweep," returned Mr. Blair calmly; "as black a one as ever I met. And as to spirits, I wouldn't mention that word in connection with him if I were you. It recalls unpleasant memories. To my way of thinking, he

had more of them than was good for him whilst amongst us; and I can't see that they redeemed him much."

Lady Bessy regarded him with a judicial eye. Was he *laughing*?

"The man is *dead*!" she said sternly.

"Certainly. If he isn't, he ought to be," returned Mr. Blair mildly. "We have heard a good deal about his demise up to this. We have indeed been considerably bored by very nasty details. It would be unpardonable if he were now to reappear and change our joy into mourning."

"One shouldn't abuse the dead," said Lady Bessy.

"Why not?" demanded he impartially. "It is, in my opinion, less treasonable than exalting a defunct sinner into a saint. You are now preparing to cry up Vereker, who was, well——. If you *must* do that sort of thing, why not take up Black Sandy and canonize him?"

"You are in a horrid temper," said Lady Bessy, "just because you have been disappointed in one day's shooting. So like a man! So selfish! As to that wretched creature whose name just now passed your lips, pray never mention him in my presence again. It makes my flesh creep."

"It was such a pity," said Lady Eustace dreamily. "Such a loss to me. I shall always feel as if I had been done out of a good thing."

As this was *à propos* of nothing that went before, Lady Bessy and Blair gave up their quarrel to join in a mutual stare at Lady Eustace.

“What was the loss?” asked Lady Bessy at last.

“Oh! my dear, I’m sure you must understand,” said Lady Eustace plaintively. “Why, that dreadful gipsy creature dying so immediately after the event. I have always desired so greatly to see a real live murderer, *close*; and here was an opportunity given, such as I should never have dared to hope for. Of course I could manage it in town, but those courts are horrid; and, besides, the criminal is always so hedged round, don’t you know. Now here, I daresay, I could have got quite near to him. I might even have been happy enough to exchange a word or two with him. *Such* a chance! And all thrown away because of his stupidity.”

“So much copy gone,” said Mr. Blair sympathetically.

“Yes, yes! You see it as I do. It is really essential that I should make myself acquainted with all classes, and here was a specimen, fresh, straight from the act, as it were—with Cain’s brand burning brightly on his forehead. No time for it to fade. Really it is very disheartening.”

“You are worse than Bobby!” exclaimed Lady Bessy, with a shudder. “For Heaven’s sake cease such ghoulish talk. I shall dream all night of horrors if you continue it. For my part I would run a hundred miles rather than see or speak to an assassin of any sort. No, *no*; not another word. My nerves are quite unstrung as it is. If you bring back that odious scene to my mind, I shall be obliged to up sticks and away to the far west, like Cecil.”

"Mrs. Vereker has only gone as far as Naples, as yet," said Blair; "at least, so I hear."

"For once you have a true story. I had a line from Dorothy this morning. Cecil is better, and a degree more cheerful. Two months nowadays, you know, is quite a long time, so I daresay she is beginning to forget."

"Will Hilary go and see her on his way to Egypt?"

"I fancy not. There is something mysterious about that. He almost admitted to me that Cecil had forbidden him to visit her."

"Ah! yes. One can see the heart workings there," said Lady Eustace, growing interested. "I should like to be near her now, to study her, to see day by day the development of——"

"You'll end in an asylum if you go on like this," interrupted Lady Bessy unceremoniously. "Really, we shall all grow to be mere 'specimens' in your eyes before long."

"May the saints keep me from blossoming into a popular author," ejaculated Mr. Blair piously.

"You needn't be nervous about it," said Lady Bessy, who hadn't as yet forgiven him. "I daresay this fad of Cecil's won't last long. I know in her heart she is very deeply attached to Hilary. Indeed, their devotion to each other was a thing to see."

"Well, hardly—whilst the husband was alive," said Blair.

"Yes, at *any* time," defiantly. "Real, honest, earnest affection," with deep stress on each adjective, "is always a charming thing to witness. I

hope matters will end well for those two. Hilary adores her, and she is quite the dearest little thing. I should altogether welcome her as a sister. She," pensively, "is extremely rich, and there is something a little cold, a little special about her, that will make her the rage of the season—whenever she does appear."

"I shouldn't think St. John would care about *that*," said Blair, nursing his knee.

"There you are wrong. To have a dowdy, an uninteresting woman for a wife, pleases no man. Besides, as I say, there is a little touch of hauteur about her that will repel whilst it attracts. She is like the church—or perhaps unlike it—in that she is as safe as she can be."

"When does she return?"

"That is what no one knows. Not for ever so long, I believe. Dorothy is to be married in April, and after that I hope Cecil will feel lonely, and begin to long for home and—Hilary."

"Are you ever lonely?" demanded Mr. Blair suddenly, looking up at her.

"I? No! Why?"

"It occurred to me that if you were, *you* might begin to long for home and——"

"Pshaw!" said Lady Bessy, rising.



CHAPTER XXXIX.

“ And wonder not, mine owen lady bright
 Though that I speak of love to you thus blive.”

“ Oh ye lovers, that high upon the wheel
 Be set of Fortune, in good adventüre,
 God lenē that ye find ay love of steel,
 And longē may your life in joy endure ! ”

BUT April came and went, and summer succeeded it, and followed it to its grave, and another Christmas whitened the world before Cecil Vereker returned to her home. It was indeed eighteen months since that terrible autumn, when she at last looked again upon the old Court.

Wild March had come in like a lion, had roared its loudest, and now lay crouching on the ground, old and beaten, and dying, and harmless as any lamb.

Sweet moist winds were blowing out of the south, driving baby showers before it. The rooks were building in the tall gaunt elms, and all the land was rich with swaying masses of yellow daffodils. Crocuses in countless thousands, purple and white and parti-coloured, made pretty groups here and there, whilst the pheasant-eyed narcissi and the scented jonquils fought for room with the tinier, daintier tags.

Such a wilderness of sweets as the gardens were ! Old-fashioned gardens some of them, where all these best of Nature's treasures were suffered to run wild.

“ Now blooms the lily by the bank,
 The primrose down the brae ;
 The hawthorn's budding in the glen,
 And milk-white is the slae.”

Every passing wind bore on its wings perfumes delicately rich. In every hedge small birds were building their nests; their songs made countless melodies. Mingled with them was the wild, mad music of the rushing stream as it dashed over its stones, and by its sedgy banks, almost tearing the pale bunches of forget-me-not from their hold.

Cecil stood still and looked all round her. She could not deny to herself that a *home* spring was more distinctly exquisite than anything she had found abroad. She had travelled a good deal during these past eighteen months, a strange unaccountable restlessness driving her from place to place, and now that she had returned to England, she scarcely knew whether she was glad or sorry.

The old familiar landscape, the tender joys of the budding spring, the peculiar sense of life renewed that spoke to her in all around, touched her, and made her pulses throb in unison with it, but at heart she felt lonely and depressed, and full of a sick longing to find near her something or someone beloved.

Dorothy and her husband were in the North paying a visit to an uncle of Farquhar's, and Lady Bessy, whom she really liked in spite of her many eccentricities, was at her own place, for a wonder. As for—anyone else,—why she hardly cared for anyone else, and besides—— Well, why should she *not* think of him? she asked herself this angrily—besides St. John was still in the East.

Even as she thought this she lifted her eyes, and saw him coming to her across the closely-shaven grass.

Her heart seemed to stop beating. For one moment she thought she was going to faint. Then once more life surged strongly, almost painfully, within her. Oh! how he recalled that past terrible time—her past terrible existence. She had hardly known with what a cowardly shrinking she had been looking round on this spot and on that—until he came. But now a full horror of this place made hers by a loveless marriage was full upon her.

“You!” she said. “I thought you were in Egypt.”

“Well, so I was, until a month ago,” said he. He had come up to her, and had taken the hand she had not offered. He was greatly bronzed, and, perhaps, a trifle thinner, but he was so strong, so good to look at. Delight shone in his eyes. “Bessy sent me word that you were thinking of coming home, so—I thought of coming home too. You know you forbid me to seek you whilst you were abroad. And I obeyed you to the letter, though I refuse to say what it cost me. Have I not been obedient? Don’t I deserve a reward? At all events, I have it,” said he gaily; “I am looking at you now.”

A charming thing to look at, too. A very lovely picture. She was the same Cecil he remembered, yet scarcely the same. The weight of many years seemed to have dropped from her, and she stood there before him in her white serge gown like the young girl that in reality she was. She was very pale, certainly, and nervousness was evidently preying upon her; but he noticed that the old miserable

fear was gone from her eyes, and that the pretty oval of the face was rounded and warmer in tint. She was indeed beautiful.

“You are looking better, stronger,” said he, with all a lover’s glad solicitude. “These eighteen months have done you a world of good. Surely they were long enough to work a thousand cures. Did ever months drag so slowly, I wonder? But now,” with a triumphant uplifting of his head, “they are gone. Dead. *Behind us!*”

“When did you return?” asked she. “How strange that you should come here to-day. I, myself, have only just arrived, but I told no one of my intention to be here.” She regarded him earnestly. “Yet you knew!” she said, with a soft blush.

“Yes, I knew. Do you think you could be here, so near, without my knowing? And why should I *not* know? You have been a little cruel to me, I think. You brought your servants?”

“Only my maid, and Thompson. There are always people in the house. But I shan’t stay here,” she went on, hurriedly. “I couldn’t. Even these few hours have convinced me of that. Every scene brings back the past. No, I could not live here.”

“Well, you need not,” said he, slowly.

She coloured warmly, and hesitated for a moment.

“Of course, I understand what you mean,” she said, speaking rapidly, as if to prevent any interruption from him. “That it is in my power to live where I will. But though I dislike this place, I have still a love for Brent. It really means home to me. Where one was born has always a claim on one,

I think. On one's affections. Dorothy lives here, and—all the friends I have ever known."

"You misunderstood me," said he. "I did not mean to suggest banishment from Brent. What I *did* mean was that you might make yourself a new home here, if you would."

"I think not. I can hear of no house in the neighbourhood to be let, or bought, or——"

"Accepted?" questioned he. Then: "There is one," he said, slowly. He waited awhile for her to speak, but presently he saw that she would not. Her gaze was bent upon the ground, and she was looking strangely troubled. That little touch of distress went to his heart, and sent him to her at once.

"Darling," said he, in a low voice, "will you dare to tell me that you do not care for me?"

"Oh! I care for you," cried she, impetuously. "It is not that, but——"

"You love me?" demanded he, drawing her into his arms.

"Yes. I love you. Oh!" she paused, and glanced up at him through eyes warm with tears, "when I saw you coming towards me awhile ago, I——"

"Yes?—go on. What then?"

"I knew," said she simply, "that I had never been quite happy before." A little tremulous smile broke upon her lips.

"My beloved!" said he. And then, after a pause. "Well, you must try to be quite happy for the future. You have a long, long time to make up. And I love you so, Cecil—so deeply, so truly—that

I am presumptuous enough to believe that I can make you so. What! tears! Why I will have none to-day. Nor any other day. We shall begin to be happy from this hour."

He kissed away the drops that would have fallen, and at that she laughed. It was quite a new thing to him that laugh—it told, more than anything else could have done, that she had, indeed, thrown off the spirit of bondage that had for so long oppressed her, and was once more fulfilled with the spirit of youth.

"What am I to do about staying here?" she asked presently. "I don't believe," blushing hotly and looking rather abashed at her own want of courage, "I could sleep here. It is all very well whilst *you* can remain; but after that——. The long dull evening and the night would kill me."

"Don't remain," said he. "Run up to town with me. My aunt, Mrs. St. John, will be delighted to receive you, and to-morrow I'll take you to Bessy. She is, for a wonder, in her own home now, at Wyatts. By-the-bye, have you heard about her?"

"Heard what?"

"Why, her engagement."

"Is she going to be married?" said Cecil, intensely interested. When one is going to be married oneself, it is really astonishing with what pleasure one hears of the intended marriage of others. "To whom?"

"Blair."

"Mr. Blair!" With distinct disbelief. "Oh! nonsense."

"I wish she could hear you," said St. John, laughing. "It *is* Blair, nevertheless."

"Why, I thought they were always—always——"

"Why don't you go on? So they were—so they are. Always quarrelling; sparring is perhaps the proper word. But they seem to like it, and Blair, as you know, or as perhaps you don't know, has been in love with her off and on for five or six years. They are to be married in June."

"It is the funniest thing," said Cecil. "Well, do you know," with all the air of one stating an unexpected fact, "I liked Mr. Blair. They will be very happy I think, and hope."

"Not so happy as *we* shall be. By-the-bye, when shall we be married? Next month?"

"Certainly not," with shy indignation. "There isn't any reason for haste. How could one be ready? This is just the very end of March, and—*next month!*"

"May, then?"

"Oh! no."

"June? That is the month on which Bessy and Blair have decided? The 29th is their day. What do you say to the 1st, eh?"

"Of course, one can't go on saying 'no' *for ever!*" said she, with such an adorable attempt at reproach, that he caught her in his arms, and so put an end to that argument.

"If not 'no' it must be 'yes,'" said he. "Say so, darling heart."

She said it.

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