



UNIFORM WITH THIS VOLUME

SPRINGTIME.	H. C. Bailey.
MOONFLEET.	J. Meade Falkner.
KIPPS.	H. G. Wells.
THE GATELESS BARRIER.	Lucas Malet.
MAJOR VIGOUREUX.	"Q."
OLD GORGON GRAHAM.	George Horace Lorimer.
MRS. GALER'S BUSINESS.	W. Pett Ridge.
HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS.	G. Douglas.
THE DUENNA OF A GENIUS.	M. E. Francis.
THE RECIPÉ FOR DIAMONDS.	C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne.
WHITE FANG.	Jack London.
THE OCTOPUS.	Frank Norris.
THE PIT.	Frank Norris.
THE LADY OF THE BARGE.	W. W. Jacobs.
FORTUNE OF CHRISTINA M'NAB.	Miss Macnaughtan.
SELAH HARRISON.	Miss Macnaughtan.
A LAME DOG'S DIARY.	Miss Macnaughtan.
THE TRANSLATION OF A SAVAGE.	Sir G. Parker.
THE BATTLE OF THE STRONG.	Sir G. Parker.
AN ADVENTURER OF THE NORTH.	Sir G. Parker.
MATTHEW AUSTIN.	W. E. Norris.
HIS GRACE.	W. E. Norris.
MARCELIA.	Mrs. Humphry Ward.
ROBERT ELSMERE.	Mrs. Humphry Ward.
DAVID GRIEVE.	Mrs. Humphry Ward.
MARRIAGE OF WILLIAM ASHE.	Mrs. Humphry Ward.
QUISANTE.	Anthony Hope.
THE GOD IN THE CAR.	Anthony Hope.
THE KING'S MIRROR.	Anthony Hope.
THE INTRUSIONS OF PEGGY.	Anthony Hope.
THE PRINCESS PASSES.	C. N. & A. M. Williamson.

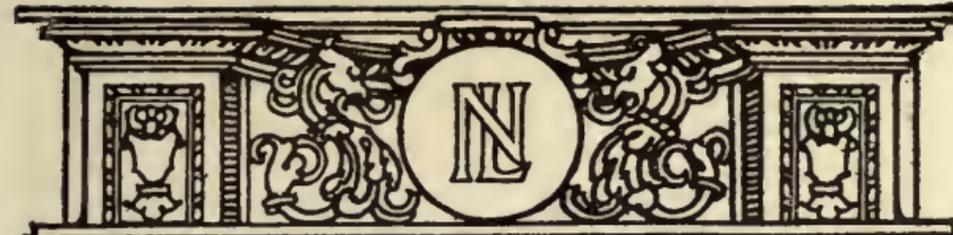
*And Many Other Equally Popular
Copyright Novels.*

NELSON'S LIBRARY.

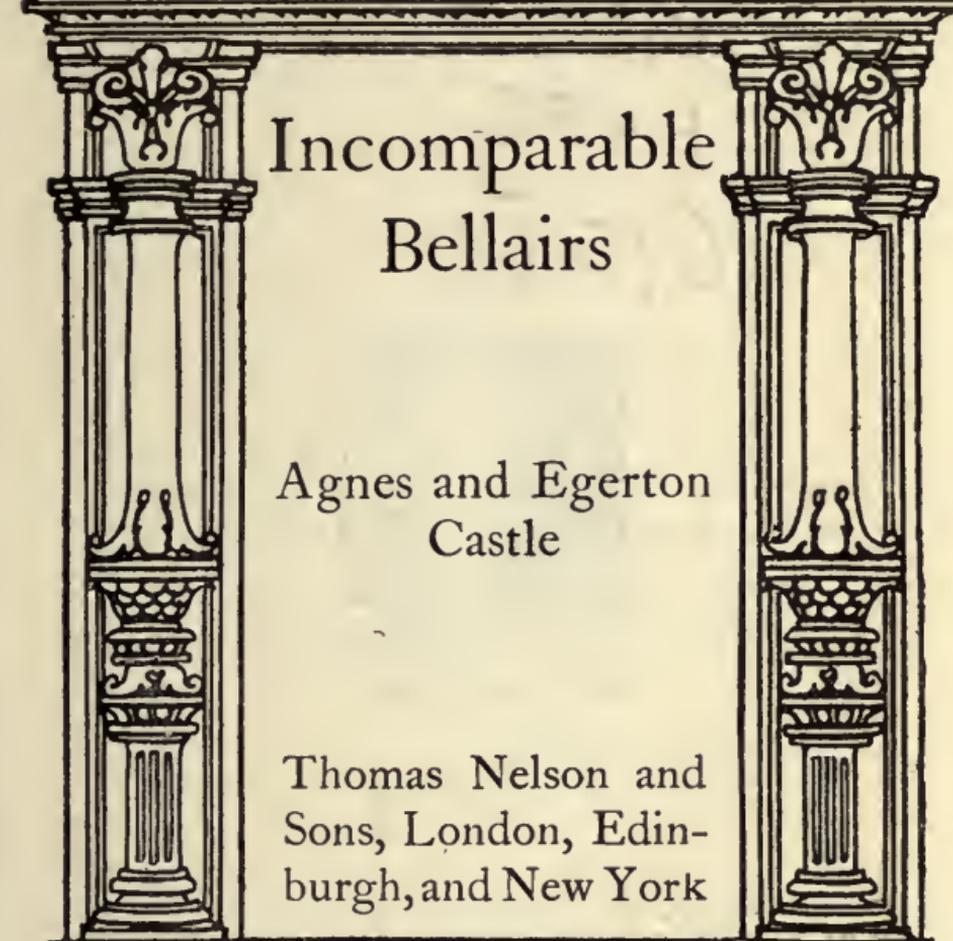




Mistress Kitty caught her in her warm arms.



N



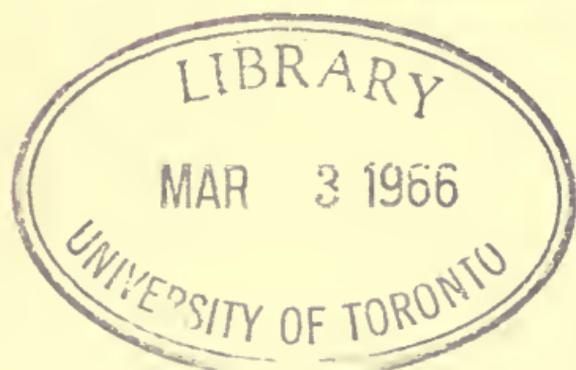
Incomparable
Bellairs

Agnes and Egerton
Castle

Thomas Nelson and
Sons, London, Edin-
burgh, and New York



PR
4452
C75 I5



1052398

TO

AUSTIN DOBSON,

*Who, by his delicate art, has made all that is shapely and charming in
the Eighteenth Century live again for us, as with a fragrance
of old Pot-Pourri and a rustle of brocades no loom
holds now the secret of ; as, with a lost grace,
to the dance of little high heels stilled
long ago and the measures of
a forgotten music.*

*Assume that we are friends. Assume
A common taste for old costume,
Old pictures, books. Then dream us sitting—
Us two—in some soft-lighted room.*

* * * * *
*Silent at first, in time we glow ;
Discuss “eclectics,” high and low ;
Inspect engravings, ’twixt us passing
The fancies of DETROY, MOREAU.*

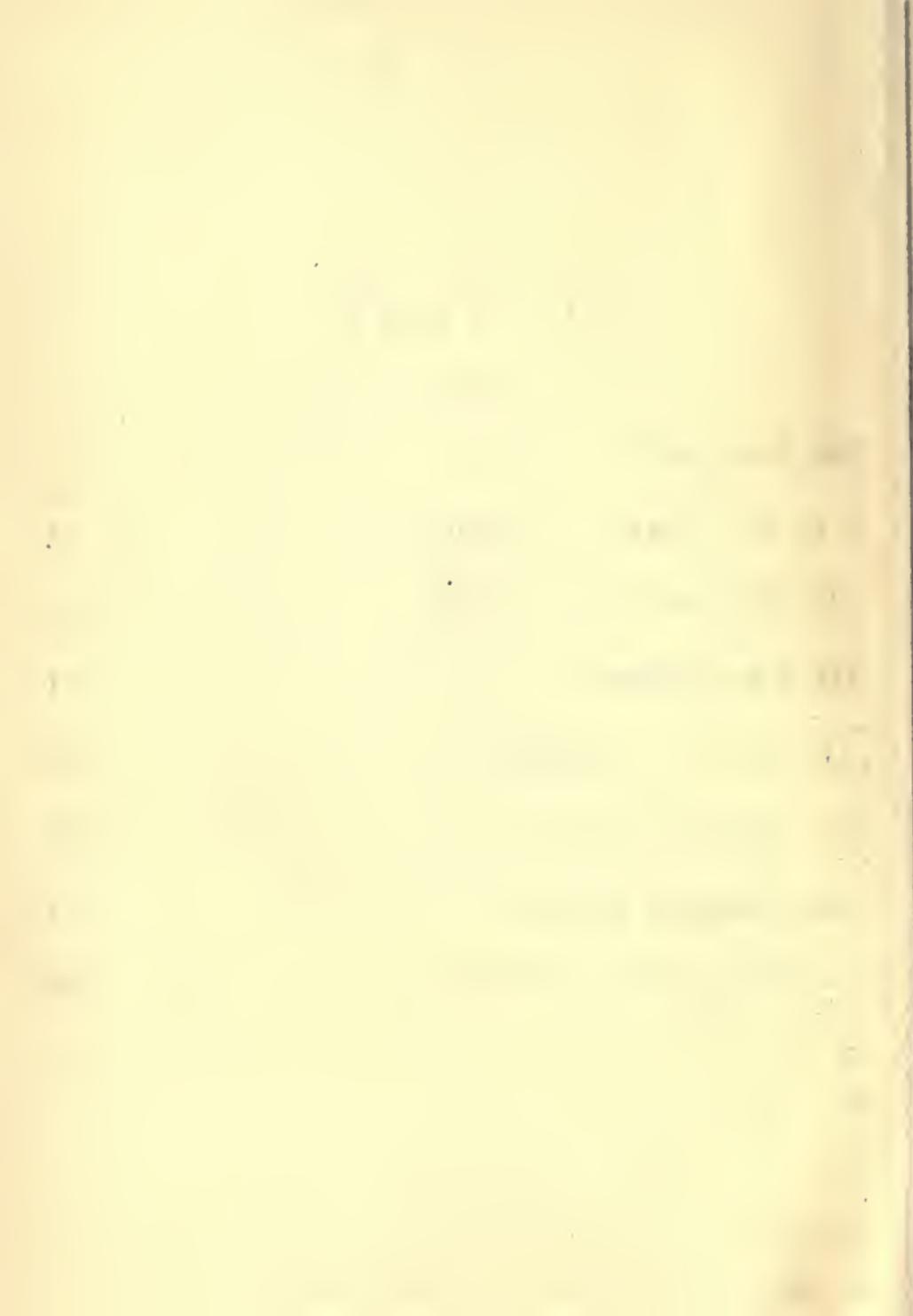
* * * * *
*And so we fall to why and how
The fragile figures smile and bow ;
Divine, at length, the fable under . . .
Thus grew the “scenes” that follow now.*

(From “PROVERBS IN PORCELAIN.”
AUSTIN DOBSON.)

CONTENTS.



THE PROLOGUE	v
I. THE HEART OF MANDEVILLE	13
II. THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT	40
III. GRAY DOMINO	81
IV. LITTLE RED HEELS	120
V. RACHAEL PEACE	162
VI. THE LITTLE LOVER	202
VII. THE BLACK LACE MASK	239



THE PROLOGUE.

“ADVENTURES,” it has been said, “come to the adventurous.” ’Tis a glib enough saw, but you may see the truth of it any day, if you care to watch in the Theatre of Life. And adventures come not only to the darer of perils by flood and field, to the player with fire and wielder of the sword’s argument, but also to the bold taker of shares in the perpetual lottery of Love. In the pretty game of “Love and Hazard,” as well as in the sterner one of War, ’tis your fine decisive spirit which rules circumstance and leads the gambler unscathed amid pitfalls where the timid, or even the merely prudent, are like to leave life or limb.

Love—the chief adventure of life, some maintain—comes to the lovely, to the lovable, as sure as mountain stream to lake. And, to such as are in love with love, love adventures

“Come not single spies, but in battalions.”

Nevertheless, let the heart be pure, let even the taste be but fastidious, then will these same adventures link

you a chaplet of jewelled memories, to be retold, smiling, in the more sedate hours of life.

Mistress Kitty Bellairs, "Incomparable Bellairs," as, in an enthusiastic moment, she had been proclaimed by Mr. Stafford—that fine connoisseur, if ever there lived one—had, among her unnumbered lovable qualities, paramount, a most fastidious daintiness. Hence, no doubt, the delicate colour and the fragrance of that chaplet of tender triumphs, of sweet crises and emotions, of unexhausted romances which, already in this the first rosy lustre of her young twenties, she could draw through the fingers of memory.

"My dear" (she is recorded to have said to her weeping friend, Lady Standish), "I have had thirty-seven *declared* adorers these three years, and never one tired of me yet! Poor Bellairs!" (as she pursued on that occasion, with a light sigh), "he had two wives before me, and he was sixty-nine when he died, but he told me with his dying breath 'twas I gave him all the joy he ever knew."

The boast would have been a pretty one on any fair woman's lips, but 'twas the prettier on Kitty's that it was true to the letter.

Wedded, in her innocent teens, to a wondrous wealthy Nabob—an excellent gentleman withal, who had re-

requested the little beauty, in a phrase that held humour as well as pathos, "to condescend to be his widow"—Kitty had been released after not too many years of faithful companionship and solicitous care spent at the waters of Bath and elsewhere—released with two easy tears and a clear conscience, experienced but not embittered, and by no means inconsolable; released, in short, to all the delights of a charming world.

So much for "Poor Bellairs!"

"These three years" referred to the period of brilliant young widowhood during which Kitty had become the acknowledged Queen of Bath—during which, also, innumerable had been the attempts to provide her with a happy consort.

But if Kitty the girl had submitted to a *mariage de convenance*, Kitty the woman, in the ripeness of her beauty, had no mind to deal with Love otherwise than as her slave. Thus, at the particular date at which we take up these episodes, she had already collected a variety of experiences of the heart, which, although inconclusive, had not been devoid of sweetness to her, nor of pride.

It would be unseemly, perhaps, at such a stage of her life, to draw a parallel between Mistress Bellairs and the celebrated Mademoiselle de l'Enclos, who was awarded the final crown of feminine glory in a passionate

déclaration d'amour and an offer of marriage on her seventieth birthday. But, whatever the Fates might have in reserve for the future Kitty, she had already this much in common with the much-beloved Ninon, that she never lost the devotion of one of her many rejected lovers. Some may have ascended only a step or two of her throne; some others (as in the case of my Lord Verney and that of Mr. O'Hara, whose love-chase formed the main theme of the *Bath Comedy*) may have all but stepped into the throne itself. But every one, on returning to level ground, sedulously resumed his post of courtier, and still had it in his soul to sing to Kitty, in Herrick's words to his Anthea,—

“ Bid me to live, and I will live
Thy protestant to be

Bid that heart stay, and it will stay
To honour thy decree.”

The disposal of so precious a thing as Mistress Bellairs's hand—a prize certainly held as high in her own estimation as in that of her “ protestants ”—was naturally a matter of much concern, of serious consideration.

It was not of Kitty that it could be said,—

“ The woman who deliberates is lost.”

Her deliberation was exquisite. It was subtilized by ambitions of happiness, of satisfaction beyond the usual measure of womanhood. On the other hand, she

had a secret unreadiness to think the world well lost for love. In truth, along the easy road of a quite satisfactory life, turning-points should be approached with caution: the new path may, of course, lead to an enchanting prospect; but again . . . In short, the question of a second marriage was fraught with anxieties.

Meanwhile 'twas clean against Nature that such treasures (and, upon such a theme, it would little fit us to mention mere wealth of gold otherwise than as a further pleasing circumstance)—that such treasures of loveliness should remain long without a legitimate master. Therefore, after she had shaken off her entanglement with the far too solemn Lord Verney, and further, had trampled with adorable little feet upon the far too mercurial Mr. O'Hara's inextinguishable devotion—all in the diplomatic manner set forth in the *Bath Comedy*—the unsolved problem had become a main topic and one of prodigious interest in the gayer world at the Springs.

* * * * *

The latest candidate is now Mr. Stafford. He has his recommendations—'tis a favourite with man and woman, an admitted wit; a spark with a fine head and a good leg; a rake with a mighty delicate conception that life is to be tasted and not greedily devoured—the Laughing Philosopher of Beaux. And it is at the point of Kitty's formal engagement to this silvery

gentleman that we propose to take up with her fresh journey towards matrimony.

In this Sentimental Progress—which is all of the Bath Road—we shall meet with many of the actors of yester-year's *Bath Comedy*. Among them Mr. O'Hara, impecunious as ever, and, as ever, buoyed up with disinterested devotion. Miss Lydia, the widow's own woman, still addicted to secret interference in her mistress's affairs. Master Lawrence (whose little boy drew such amazing clever portraits), genial host of the Bear Inn. My Lord Verney only looms in the background, a memory and a warning; but his lordship, the Bishop of Bath and Wells, has a weighty part towards the journey's end. Crook-eyed Captain Spicer also, the led-captain and fashionable bear-leader, darts in and out among the company—not to his own advancement, it must be owned, but (in a way, as indirect as his vision) to the promotion of the more important travellers' happiness. And, as in all journeys, new personalities appear at the various stages—a lovely one among them, Rachel Peace; another, less easily described, Lord Mandeville; and the youthful ingenuous figure of one Mr. Jernigan of Costessy.

Shape our course for a chosen harbour as carefully as we list, we are always at the mercy of the accident of other lives than ours. Kitty, the imperious and much-obeyed, confidently believed, of course, that she held

the guiding thread of her own voyage in her own pretty hands. But we, behind the scenes, looking around her life, find many causes (quite undreamed of by her pretty head) which brought her, say, to this halt and to yonder turning, and at last to that final haven, which, certes, had been well out of her original reckoning. We find, in short, the birth of all these winds of Fate, and 'tis in a singularly unexpected quarter.

On a certain torrential night of September, my Lord Mandeville, a nobleman of wide repute in town, sought refuge, and the relaxation of an idle hour, in the green-room of the "Little Theatre" (then leased by the celebrated Mr. Foote to some travelling company). Now, nothing could be more purely personal than what happened that evening to his lordship, who at the time, moreover, was as totally unknown to Mistress Bellairs as she to him. And yet it remains certain that none of the events which had such a marked influence upon her matrimonial destiny would have come to pass if (while unconscious Mistress Kitty was discussing wedding fallals with her tirewoman in Queen Square, Bath) my Lord Mandeville had not had, as we said, an empty evening to fill, in the neighbourhood of the Haymarket, London.

"Incomparable Bellairs" being our leading lady in

the company, the chief *rôle* must ever fall to her ; yet in this opening episode, the consequences of which will later on so greatly concern her, she actually appears neither in person nor in spirit. For this reason we will relate it apart, under the name, if you will, of "The Heart of Mandeville."

INCOMPARABLE BELLAIRS.

CHAPTER I.

THE HEART OF MANDEVILLE.

“**L**A! your lordship,” cried Miss Peggy Pommeroy, turning her celebrated blue eyes roguishly upon Lord Mandeville.

They sat together upon the striped sofa in the green-room—she, for his entertainment, passing comments on each actor and actress who lingered in the vicinity of the mirror, awaiting the call, or hurried through to the curtain. His lordship listened, all insolent languor. At rare intervals a little snort would escape him—his nearest approach to laughter.

And if he were moved to such expressions of amusement, it was not so much with Miss Pommeroy as at her. Yet it was all glory for Peggy to have him beside her, the most notorious *roué* upon the town, and the most fastidious. There were ladies, and great ladies too, as she was aware, who would lightly have given all their

admirers for Lord Mandeville's indolent notice. What mattered it that she well knew, in her heart, how empty was this conquest ; well knew that not a smile or a frown in her whole repertory had really the power to charm him ; that he but lolled at her side because, having drifted into the green-room, this weeping autumn night, he was simply too lazy to move again, and pulled her curls with no more emotion than when playing with the seals at his fob ? The others knew naught of all this, and it was enough for Peg. Oh, how her great eyes shone and ogled ; how arch was she and how coy ! How her ripe lips smiled, and how loud (as each new-comer entered the room) they rebuked some unexistent ardour !

Of all passions, vanity is perhaps that which, gratified, affords the most complete and lasting satisfaction. Peg's bosom swelled with triumph as she noted the impression produced upon her colleagues—how the Noble Father frowned and strutted with fresh zest as he passed ; how her dear rival, feigning to examine the position of a patch, sought to catch his lordship's eye in the mirror, and failed.

“La ! your lordship,” cried Peggy, very loud and shrill, “I vow I must not listen when you say such things !”

Lord Mandeville opened his heavy lids a little wider for an instant, and almost hesitated on speech. It

would have been hard indeed for Miss Pommeroy to have listened, for he had not uttered anything more audible than a grunt these five minutes. But Miss de Vyne (the dear rival) could not be aware of this; and the glance of furious envy that she darted at her friend as she flounced out of the room filled that young lady with ecstasy. She had, moreover, succeeded beyond her intention. For, just before Miss de Vyne's exit, Mr. Montagu Mortemar had made his entrance; and, for the first time in his life, he seemed to become really aware of Peggy Pommeroy's existence.

Now, of all men on earth, the First Comedy Lady most admired the Tragic Leading Gentleman. Before the native grandeur of his pale brow all the coronets in the world were lustreless in her sight; but to show him with what high-placed friends she could on occasions consort—that was truly a moment worth living for!

Mr. Mortemar's part was done for the night: he had just been conclusively stabbed, had gulped forth his last blessing and his last curse, and his corpse had duly been carried away by lamenting retainers. He was now stalking down the length of the room, in his best tragedy manner, when the arch cry struck his ear. He started, turned; elevated one eyebrow to anguish, depressed the other to menace. His hand was on his hip.

If any one could have thought him more noble than he thought himself, it was Peggy Pommeroy. Perceiving, however, the identity of Miss Pommeroy's admirer, a change came over him. With a sleeking of his whole attitude, he bowed profoundly and approached.

"We are honoured to see your lordship among us! I trust, my lord, you will permit me to recall myself to your lordship's recollection. I had the honour of meeting your lordship at the Three Tuns."

"Had you?" said his lordship. He tilted his head farther back on the sofa cushions to gaze at Mr. Mortemar, and wished vaguely that "the mummer would stop smiling."

The tragedian's fingers trembled round his snuff-box. His lordship's affability was great: did it justify the happy recipient in offering a pinch?

"Your lordship has seen my 'Altamont' to-night? Connoisseurs are kind enough to tell me that they prefer it to Davy's. But, poor little Davy——" He paused. Lord Mandeville was yawning outrageously.

"O Davy . . ." echoed Miss Pommeroy, with great contempt, running a fervid glance over Altamont's fine proportions.

The room had begun to fill about them; the Tragedy was over, the Farce would begin anon. The First Villain—in private life an irrepressibly jovial soul—clapped his late victim brutally on the back, crying,—

“What cheer, my buck! Curse me if ever we did the business finer than to-night!”

A wan smile curled Mr. Mortemar's lips: “We . . . !”

Mrs. Macnamara—this evening “Zenobia, wife of the Mountain Chief”—in brocade and powder, progressed towards the centre of the room, surrounded by “Mountain Maidens” in tiffany and straw hats. She was thinking ardently of supper, but, at sight of Peggy and her lounging lord, halted with marked disapproval.

And still the company grew larger between the two plays. Many accepted patrons strolled in from the side-boxes—Mr. Stafford, fine, bright and clean-cutting as his own ready sword, doomed (as was already known behind the scenes) to approaching matrimony, but taking the life of London Town with renewed gallantry for his last fling. After him, Captain Spicer, that noted guide of youth. No one could tolerate the creature, yet he knew every one, he went everywhere. The name of his whilom regiment was a mystery; but there was little mystery about his present occupation. He had a military eye for a country recruit—a celebrated gift for drilling the bumpkin in the manœuvres of the world; and if, at the end of a campaign, the gallant instructor's pockets were heavy, and his recruit's correspondingly light, why, it showed that the latter's education was complete.

To-night Captain Spicer's oblique vision shone with

unusual triumph, and there was a glow on his bloodless cheeks. He had in tow a stout young gentleman from the city of Norwich, whose late father had been reputed as of fabulous wealth. (They had each under their belts perhaps more Burgundy than could be carried with grace.)

“Ah, my lord,” cried Stafford, “the evening to you!” His eye was roving round the room as he spoke.—“I vow, Miss Pommeroy, your blue eyes are more prodigious large than ever!”

“They need be,” retorted the girl with her impudent ogle, “to take in so many fine young bucks together!” Her rolling orbs lingered on Mortemar, but he was adamant. Then she shot a sidelong leer towards his lordship, to see if he were anyway stirred. But still his lordship sat yawning, the image of weariness.

“Will Mr. Stafford have a pinch?” quoth Mortemar, with his best leg and his superlative flourish. He was desperately proud of his snuff-box (which, he was fond of hinting, was a tender memento from an enamoured lady of quality). With the tail of his eye on Mandeville, he began to work up to the anecdote: “Do I see you notice this little trinket? . . . A curious history, sir——”

“Gad, Mr. Mortemar, is that you? No snuff, I thank you, sir. ’Tis a fad of mine, but, to my thinking, there’s but one fashion of enjoying rapee.”

“And what is that?” eagerly asked the young

gentleman from Norwich. Stafford wheeled, and measured the recruit with a haughty eye.

“From a little white wrist, my good fellow,” he answered at length, “or, better still, if fortune offers, from a dimpled shoulder. He who has thus tasted his pinch——” He broke off.

“Put a pinch on my wrist,” Miss Pommeroy was crying with a giggle; and, her eyes on Stafford, thrust forth that plump member.

“Do, Mr. Mortemar,” said Stafford, “and Captain Spicer’s new friend can practise. But recommend him to shut his mouth.”

Then he turned airily to Mrs. Macnamara.

“My dear madam,” said he, “I vow I have been thrilled! Zenobia... Zenobia is a magnificent performance. Zenobia, with her bevy of maidens——” He swept a smiling glance along the self-conscious row: black eyes, gray eyes, sly eyes, innocent eyes gave him back his handsome look with interest. And yet his gaze wandered like that of one seeking. “’Twas a sight to make an old man young, and——”

“And a young gentleman?” put in Mrs. Macnamara with a jolly fat laugh. On the boards she outdid Mrs. Siddons; but behind the scenes she was plain Bridget Macnamara, with a good-natured heart, an easy morality, and a zest for meals.

“A young gentleman, if you mean me, ma’am,” said

Tom Stafford, "wished he had twenty hearts...and as many purses."

"Oh fie, sir, who talks of purses!"

"Merely as a means of expressing the feeling of a true heart, ma'am," said Stafford, with his most engaging smile. "But, by the way, do I not miss one of the bewitching mountain maidens?"

"O Mr. Stafford, sir——" She menaced with her massive finger.

"The creature with the voice, Mrs. Macnamara."

"The creature with the voice? Why—he means my new pupil, girls!" said Mrs. Macnamara delighted. The days were long gone by when the light in a young man's eye could hold any personal meaning for her, but she had not lost her sympathy with love.

A shrug and a look of scorn now passed among the listening damsels as you may see the wind ruffle the cornfields. This butterfly gentleman in silver brocade had but a poor taste after all! But Mrs. Macnamara had caught Miss de Vyne by the arm, and whispered in her ear,—

"The child has never had one bit of fun since she came to us. Go tell her that I want her. Mind, my dear, *I* want her. Bid her here instantly." She nodded and smiled, as the messenger whisked away.

"You'd never believe it, sir, that girl—— Oh, you've got an eye, Mr. Stafford—you've noticed her! Now

mark my words: that girl will be the greatest actress on the stage one of these fine days, or my name is not Bridget Macnamara."

"Why, the thing's a Quaker!" cried the pertest of the maidens, interrupting her conversation with the young gentleman from Norwich to throw the denunciation over her shoulder.

"A Quaker!" echoed Stafford, more interested than ever.

"Who's a Quaker?" hiccoughed the young gentleman from Norwich. "Quakers... ecod, we grow 'em fine at Norwich!"

"Do Quakers ever kiss?" inquired Lord Mandeville, raising his lazy voice.

"Yes—on the sly," said Peggy tartly.

"Neither in public nor on the sly, Miss Pommeroy," put in the matron, with some severity (Peggy was not of her favourites), "has my pupil ever known any such familiarities. Poor child!" concluded the lady, half to herself, with a sudden relapse from dignity.

"Positively, quite a phenamenan!" lisped Captain Spicer.

"I declare," cried a gentleman in plum-colour—"a shocking state of affairs! Where is the young lady, that this omission may instantly be rectified?" And he laughed in delight at his own wit.

"It would take a better man than you, Sir Thomas,

I'm thinking," said Mrs. Macnamara with her fat laugh.

"By gum, is it a wager?" cried Captain Spicer's recruit. This youth was beginning to have vague glimmers of a gentleman's duties in London Town. "Ecod, if it's for kissing a Quaker, I'm on for it. . . . We know how to deal with 'em at Norwich!" He winked offensively; then, of a sudden, kissed the nearest maiden with a smack, and was instantly paid back by a swinging box on the ear.

"Mr. Staffard, sir," cried Captain Spicer, "are you for a wager?" (When was Tom Stafford not for a wager, even with so uncongenial a taker as Captain Spicer? He would almost as soon have refused a duel!)—"And you, my lard?"

"If any one is wagering, I'll wager," said his lordship. "Perhaps some one will kindly tell me what it is about."

"'Tis who shall kiss the Quaker," said Captain Spicer waggishly.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" clucked Mrs. Macnamara in some fluster.

"Nay," said Mr. Stafford; "the bet, as I take it, is won by him whom the lady herself shall choose for favour."

"Why, certainly," said Spicer, with one severe orb on his pupil. "I trast we're all gentlemen here. Shall each stake ten guineas?"

“ I’ll have no tricks played with my young ladies,” said “ Zenobia.”

“ Tricks ! ” exclaimed Stafford. “ My dearest madam, it shall be a fair field and no favour ; the gentle Beauty shall choose as freely as young Paris himself . . . amongst us divinities, ha ! ” His ironical eye swept from the insignificance of Sir Thomas to Lord Mandeville’s pallid, indolent mask ; from Spicer’s green visage to the red vacuity of the young gentleman from Norwich. And he had an agreeable consciousness of the charming figure cut by one Tom Stafford among these assorted rivals. “ If kissing goes by favour . . . ” thought he, and smiled.

“ Well, well,” said the placable matron ; “ indeed, I’m never one to spoil sport ; and a kiss never hurt anybody, to my thinking. But, hush, hush ! ” she warned, finger on lip.

A tall slender girl came quickly in, her draperies fluttering. She had evidently been interrupted in her disrobing, for her soft brown hair had been almost brushed clear of powder, and was coiled in a careless knot at the back of her head. The paint had been washed from her cheek. A very windflower she looked, white and fragile, and yet with a certain woodland strength of her own, amid these high-coloured stage-flowers. She seemed very tall, in the long lines of her plain stuff dress ; and her throat merged like a flower-

stem from the violet folds of the mantle she had thrown across her shoulders.

Lord Mandeville prodded Miss Pommeroy, and then pointed, with his large white forefinger.

“Who is that?” he said suddenly.

“That!” echoed Miss Peggy, with huge scorn. “That!” she cried with her coarse giggle. “Why, that’s the Quaker your lordship has wagered to kiss!”

The newcomer looked neither to the right nor to the left; she went straight to Mrs. Macnamara.

“You sent for me, madam,” said she.

Mr. Stafford had been right: hers was a voice indeed—low-pitched and tender-noted, it seemed to murmur to the heart, and yet reached in distinctness to the farther recesses of the room. Such a voice alone, in an actress, is genius.

“By gum!” suddenly shouted the young gentleman from Norwich. He was never overcome by shyness, and now, with a stiff lining of Burgundy, felt himself a match for any fine fellow of the company. He elbowed his way between a beau in puce and the indignant Miss de Vyne. “By gum!” he cried, and slapped his thigh, “if it’s not Rachel Peace!”

“Rachel Peace,” said Lord Mandeville to himself, as if the sound liked him.

“Captain Spicer,” cried Stafford, with sharpness; “keep your cub in order, I pray you!”

The blood had rushed in a lovely tide to the brow of Rachel Peace; but she kept her eyes steadily on Mrs. Macnamara's face, and stood, wrapt in her gentle dignity more closely still than in the folds of her violet cloak.

There was something of a scuffle between Captain Spicer and his young friend, which resulted in the latter's momentary silence. But his mouth was already open for the passage of his next explosive contribution to the dialogue.

"Rachel, my dear," said the good-natured Mrs. Bridget, "I'll not have you hiding away in this fashion when there's laughter and compliments, and all the things young people like waiting for you. Here is a friend of mine wants to be introduced——"

"If anything could make me prouder," interrupted Stafford in his pleasant high-bred tones, "than the title of friend, which Mrs. Macnamara so obligingly bestows upon me, it would be, madam"—he bowed deep before the girl—"to have the honour of knowing one whose voice—too seldom lifted to-night—has moved this heart in such unwonted fashion."

He laid his hand upon his fine brocaded waistcoat. The girl's glance deepened and kindled as she listened to him. Her sensitive face quivered. She looked from him to her protectress, and seemed to hesitate between a guileless pleasure and a timid distrust. Lord Mandeville suddenly rose from his seat beside the now sulky Peg,

and stood gazing at Miss Peace as upon something unknown, undreamed of, his heavy-lidded eyes wide open at last.

“Hark to him!” Mrs. Macnamara laughed, pointing at Stafford. “He’d talk the birds off the trees!”

“Ah!” cried that gentleman, “if I could but talk this lady—and yourself—to my poor table to-night . . . !”

“Table?” quoth she, a glitter in her eye.

“A trifle of supper, with my unworthy self as host——?”

“Well,” responded Mrs. Bridget comfortably, “I’m not the one to say nay. Supper is always a good thing. We’ll come—eh, Rachel?”

All the light had fled from the girl’s face. She shrank back. “Indeed, sir . . . I beg you, madam, let me retire. I cannot sup with this gentleman.”

“Hoity-toity!” cried madam, as the vision of capon and Sillery faded from her mental gaze. “’Tis a vast pity, my dear, that you will wear these airs! Oh, forget that you were once a Friend, Rachel Peace, and for Lord’s sake be friendly!”

Once more the girl shifted her eyes from Mrs. Macnamara to Mr. Stafford, and then back again. Something, perhaps, in the suppressed eagerness of the gentleman’s watchful look; something, it might be, of self-betrayal in the dame’s greedy lips and her meaning glances seemed to strike her with horror. She stepped back as if a precipice opened at her feet.

“Indeed,” she said quickly, “I must go home.”

Her eyes were like a frightened child's. Lord Mandeville caught sight of them, and suddenly there was a throbbing within his breast. Now, this was strange, for it was as well known to himself as to every one else that he possessed no heart.

Rachel turned, wrapping her mantle about her. Blindly she was seeking an escape, when, at a whisper from Captain Spicer, the young gentleman from Norwich sprang forward playfully to bar her way.

“Dost thee not remember me, Friend?” cried he, and thrust his grinning face close to hers.

She looked from him in disgust, and her eye then fell on Sir Thomas, who, at the other side of her, had advanced with skip and jump, and a series of inane bows. He had but a vapid mind, this little baronet, a poor taste in garments, and a feeble command of attitude; nevertheless, he had been born a gentleman. With another bow, he fell away forthwith.

But an undaunted spark was he of Norwich.

“Ecod!” he pursued, in light and elegant tones of banter. “Is there so much hurry, my dear? By gum, but old Master Peace made a fine to do after you at Norwich! . . . What will thee give me,” he cried, charmed with his humour, “not to betray the secret?”

Rachel's face was white, but with a sudden gathering

of strength and dignity she turned upon him in grave composure.

“I am sorry,” she said—and her wonderful voice vibrated through the room—“but I have no speech to hold with thee, Friend. There is no secret for thee to keep, and therefore nought thou canst do for me. Nor is there ought I can offer thee.”

Her answer in that same Quaker phraseology with which she had been thus insolently baited, her delicate, serious air, held strange rebuke for one who could feel it. Mr. Stafford lifted the single eye-glass that hung from a ribbon round his neck to look at her with ever-deepening interest. Lord Mandeville came a pace nearer. The young gentleman from Norwich thought the little silence that had fallen on the room could betoken nothing but a flattering attention centred on his next move. He caught Rachel by the elbow.

“What!” he cried, “naught? Naught for *me*? Shall I not have the Kiss of Peace?” He paused to look around for admiration.

“Captain Spicer,” exclaimed Mr. Stafford, with an air of nausea, “that animal of yours is not fit to be let loose!”

Rachel stood like a statue. Peg Pommeroy had clapped her hands with a loud laugh, echoed by some of the other girls from the different corners whither, with their admirers, they had retreated. Stimulated by

the sound of this applause, Captain Spicer's pupil lurched forward towards the Quaker's disdainful face.

"Unhand her, sir!" deeply ordered Mrs. Macnamara.

Lord Mandeville had taken two long steps. Without a word he extended his arm. His great white hand closed upon the nape of the youth's neck; it was a fine grip. The youth's wig yawned over his cropped head. "Ow!" he cried, and this was all he had breath to cry. He was swung violently backwards, shaken like a rat in the jaws of a terrier, and then released with a twist that sent him plunging into Captain Spicer's lean waistcoat.

The gentlemen of the Little Theatre were prodigiously impressed by my lord's neatness of action. The ladies screeched or tittered, according to their disposition. Lord Mandeville and Rachel Peace looked upon each other's faces, and minded no other in the room.

"Madam," he said, bowing before her with a profounder respect than he had ever shown a duchess, "you wish to retire; my coach is at the door——" Her grave and searching eye darkened with a deep reproach. "Madam," he went on earnestly, as he read her thought, "I shall be honoured if you condescend to make use of it and my horses and servants. I purpose to return on foot."

Mr. Stafford stood watching with that smile of his that was at once so genial and so cynical. He saw her,

after this single hesitation, lay her slender hand in acquiescence upon Lord Mandeville's wrist. "God help the girl!" thought he. "She's fled from the arms of the bear cub into the lion's jaw. Gad! I've never seen Mandeville so taken. 'Tis a pale child, when all's said and done . . . but, stab me, how she moves!" His experienced eye kindled as he marked the inimitable grace with which this unknown actress paused to curtsy before Mrs. Macnamara, and then passed on, still led by Lord Mandeville, towards the door.

Here, however, they were arrested by a roar: the young gentleman from Norwich had recovered from his sudden giddiness and found his breath once more.

"Ecod!" he was crying; "I will have blood for this!"

His stout red face looked so exceeding comic without the shade of his wig that Stafford was seized with laughter. But Captain Spicer, whose usually astute intellect had been to-night somewhat troubled by the fumes of the bottle, now grasped the situation with a return of sobered wits. A quarrel with Lord Mandeville! His fool of a recruit could come but poorly out of any such pass, and the gallant Captain's deeply interested exchequer could allow of no such risk.

"Blood?" he echoed shrilly. "No, sir, no blood here, but marrowbones!" He caught the youth sharply by the shoulder. "Are you mad?" he hissed in his

ear. "Don't you know who 'tis you're talking to? 'Tis the famous Lard Mandeville, you booby. You must apalagize."

"Apologize . . ." cried the unhappy young gentleman. "I? Apologize . . .?"

"He's had too mach wine, my lard. Why, what a sight the fallow is!—Where's your wig, sir. You are making a laughing-stack of yourself—and of me!"

Here the irate Captain plucked the wig from one of the actors, who was convulsing Miss Peggy by some merry antic with the same. He clapped it fiercely on his pupil's poll—with so much disregard to symmetry, however, that the cue came to the front and effectively choked further protest.

Rachel's lips broke into a delicious smile. Mandeville, who could not move his eyes from her face, even for one contemptuous glance towards his victim—although he had halted to hear what this latter might have to say in the way of further challenge—proceeded again unmoved towards the door. He had once more ceremoniously taken the Quaker's hand. As the panels closed upon them, Stafford fell likewise into sudden gravity upon the memory of Rachel's smile. "By Heaven," he said to himself, "Mandeville is a connoisseur; the creature is exquisite!"

"So, gentlemen," said he aloud, cheerfully, as he turned once more to the company, "we have lost the wager."

“ You, at least, made but a poor race for it, Mr. Stafford,” said hungry Mrs. Macnamara in dudgeon. Then, “ And you, girls,” she cried with asperity, “ shame on you to be loitering like this ! Some of you will be called in a minute.—Miss Pommeroy, you’re for the curtain, if you please.”

Captain Spicer and his recruit from Norwich were wrangling in a corner. And presently the young gentleman was observed to shed tears : Spicer had actually threatened to abandon him.

“ What would become of you if I did not keep my eyes on you ? ” rated the Captain.

“ Captain Spicer’s eyes are more useful than most people’s,” said Stafford soothingly ; “ he can see both sides of things at once. And ’tis a prodigious advantage, sir.”

* * * * *

The slope of the Haymarket was being scoured by the rain of a September tempest. The gutters were rushing streams, the black roofs dripping. Foul old London was pure for an hour, the moist air vivifying. Rachel, on Lord Mandeville’s arm, halted involuntarily under the porch.

“ Oh,” she cried, “ how fresh, how clean, after that scent, that heat of the green-room ! . . . Oh,” she added, breathing deep, “ if it were not for my art ! ” The exclamation seemed to have escaped her. Quickly she

recollected herself, and turned to him. "Nay," she said now, "it is raining still. I pray you, call me a sedan, and keep your coach, sir."

And for the first time that evening Lord Mandeville in his turn smiled.

"A little rain will not hurt me," he said gently. "Nay, nay; 'tis I pray you. My running footman shall escort you; you shall tell him yourself where you wish to be driven. I do prefer to walk."

If she had a lingering doubt of him it then vanished. She stepped into his coach, the Quaker girl, as the Queen into her state carriage. And it pleased him to bend before her, as before majesty itself. But he paused at the coach window, looking in upon her lingeringly, and could not bring himself to give the signal for driving on. The light from the footman's link and the lamps of the portal fell full upon her face. He thought his eyes had never beheld anything so fair.

"How come you," he said after a while—"how come you, Rachel Peace, on the boards of a playhouse?"

The soft eyes, fixed upon his, shone as through a mist of tears they would not shed. Her lips quivered. He tightened his hand upon the edge of the coach window to keep back the mad impulse of seizing her to his breast.

"Oh, I have done wrong, I know," she said. "I fear I have broken my father's heart. But I cannot go back—I cannot!" A sudden passion shook her; she wrung

her slender hands. "Sir," she cried, "I have no mother. . . . I cannot think that God meant that we should live such lives—God, who made all the things beautiful, and gave us eyes to see, lips for laughter. Oh, you in the world, who see in the odd ways of Quakers nothing but food for jest . . . could you but know the long tragedy of a Quaker home to the young soul, I believe it might rather draw your tears!"

Lord Mandeville, though he had a sense of humour of his own, found nothing comic in that he, of all men, should be selected for this confidence. And truly there must have been, even in his silence, some strange quality of sympathy; for, after a pause, the girl, with the thrill of unshed tears in her golden voice, went on,—

"But I could have borne it. My father is a just man; and though mere justice is cold comfort, I could have borne to bide with him, had he been content that I should do so."

She shuddered and fell silent.

"He wanted to wed you, against your will," said Mandeville, by some quick intuition of an indignant mind leaping at her story.

"Oh," she answered quickly, "it was to a worthy man—a Friend of great standing among us, of many virtues. My father meant well, doubtless. But I—it would have been a crime! Sir, I was forced to break the Commandment and disobey my father, for I carry

in my heart another Commandment, and it I could not violate."

The passion had come back upon her. Her velvet eye flashed, and the gathering tears suddenly fell and rolled down her cheeks. Mandeville leaned in, and whispered,—

"You could not wed where you did not love?"

"Verily, I would rather die."

"And, verily, it is well said," he answered. And there was no mockery, but a deep earnestness in his echo of her asseveration. "And so," he added, after a pause, "poor Quaker dove, your white wings have taken you among all these painted birds, these jays and peacocks—these Pommeroys, these de Vynes and Mortemars." Once again there came a silence between them. Then, glancing down, he said suddenly, and with a change of tone, "'Twas the easier flight, perhaps, and doubtless——"

"Nay, nay," she interposed; "do not so mistake me. I would hold it shame now, having taken my life into my own hands, did I not employ it, for I believe Heaven meant me so to do. Sir, I know I have my talent, and I will not bury it; now that I am free, I would use it. Mrs. Macnamara has been kind to me . . . in her way. . . . I knew her daughter at home. I am already earning a small salary, and she——" Rachel hesitated a moment, and an arch smile crept on her lip—"she instructs me."

“She!” said Mandeville, with his short loud laugh. Once more he gazed deeply on the girl in his coach, but this time it was with a new point of view. Every inflection of her voice, from passion to pathos, from earnestness to delicate mirth, lingered in his ear like to the strains of music. He remembered her rare gesture, the grace of her every movement. Beneath his gaze, even now as she sat silent, watching him, the shadows of her thoughts were passing upon her countenance as the clouds over a clear lake. Ranting, strutting old Macnamara, teach her! “’Tis you,” he cried suddenly, “shall teach the world!”

As he spoke, he meant a lordly promise. The Earl of Mandeville had powerful interest in most worlds. . . . But she caught his words only as an encouragement to the artist; and such a beautiful gratitude leaped to her face that he bit his tongue over the coarse proffer of patronage which would have spoilt all.

“O sir, if *you* think something of my gifts, then shall I hope. But, indeed, I had but a poor part to-night——”

She had had a part, and he had not seen her! He had sat by Miss Peggy Pommeroy all that precious time, wondering that life could hold so much tedium. Had there ever been such waste of an evening?

As he leaned into the coach the rain pattered on his back, hissed into the torches of the linkmen, striped in

long slants and snake-lines the farther windows of the coach. From gutter and cobble-stone, roof and pavement, rang out the song of the rain. Ever and anon would come a flying gust, and all the lights of torch and lantern would bend, burn blue, and madly dance. Lord Mandeville's horses stamped and shivered and shook the harness. But his lordship himself had no thought but to marvel on the snowdrop beauty of the face of Rachel Peace when the lights and shadows played on it. All at once his silence and his brooding eye seemed to frighten her. She drew back, with a look that woke him, too, from his dream. He instantly moved from the window.

"You would go home," he said formally. "Madam, I wish you good-night."

At this, in her woman's way, her heart seemed to smite her that, by unworthy apprehension, she had wronged one so generously courteous.

"Nay," said she, eagerly arresting him, "one word more. Friend, may I not know by what name to remember thee?" Then she blushed, and begged him excuse her for that, in spite of all her self-schooling, the old language still came easiest to her tongue.

He broke in abruptly, vowing it was the sweetest he had ever heard; then interrupted himself, afraid of his own vehemence. Here was a flower that scarce could withstand a touch. He caught back at his highest air of ceremony.

“Madam, I have to crave your pardon. I am remiss indeed not to have introduced myself. My name is Mandeville.” He drew himself up and bowed; then, looking at her, saw, half piqued and half amused, that the name of which England thought so much had no meaning in her ear. “I am,” he went on, with a sort of awkwardness, yet proudly too, “Lionel Hill-Dare, Earl of Mandeville.” And he added, with emphasis, “At your service.”

“My lord, I did not need the sound of your name nor the sight of the coronet on your coach to tell me that you are great and noble. Amongst us Friends the outward show is little, but the deeds of the generous heart are much. . . . Good-night, my lord.”

Her white fingers now clasped the window frame where his own had rested. He extended his hand.

“Will you then not say, ‘Good-night . . . Friend’?”

At this she smiled—that smile of exquisite archness that had already bereft him of his senses.

“Good-night, Friend, and thank thee!” said she, and laid her slim, cool hand in his.

He stooped and kissed it.

* * * * *

As he stood, his back against the grimy pillars of the Theatre porch, and watched his coach clattering up the Haymarket, the red torch leaping as the footman ran beside it, all through the downpour, his whole being was

aglow. Lord Mandeville the *roué* had found something in himself he had not known he possessed; and as his coach rounded the corner, and was lost to his sight, this thing that he had discovered, behold! 'twas gone from him. She was carrying it away with her. He had given it—nay, had flung it into her pretty hands, this hitherto unknown possession of Lord Mandeville—his heart.

* * * * *

When Mr. Stafford emerged from the Theatre, he absolutely started to see the motionless figure leaning against the pillar. For once his knowledge of the world was at fault; for once events had prepared for him a genuine surprise. A sharp exclamation escaped him.

Lord Mandeville turned his dreaming eyes, saw the amazed countenance, and read the thought behind it.

“Sir,” said he, and took his hat from his head with a certain grandeur of gesture that he could assume at times, “I beg to inform you—and kindly yourself pass the news to your companions—that I have not won the wager.”

He turned, replaced his hat, and pensively walked away in the rain.

CHAPTER II.

THE BRIDEGROOM REJECT.

WHEN Mistress Bellairs, the toast of Bath "for wit and beauty," and one of the richest matches in the kingdom besides, consented to marry Mr. Stafford, it was a nine days' wonder. True, he was a prodigious buck, and her name had been connected with that of many a less eligible suitor. Nevertheless, "Why does she do it?" was the question on every lip.

And, indeed, it was the question that the pretty little widow was asking herself as she sat warming her slippered foot before a cosy wood fire on the eve of her wedding day. The reason she had given to the world at large, "that it had become absolutely necessary for her to have a protector," had taken in nobody—least of all herself.

Kitty Bellairs was right well capable of taking care of herself, and, moreover, enjoyed the process. The reason she had given to Miss Lydia, her tirewoman (a personage, by the way, who highly disapproved of the intended alliance), had been received by that respect-

fully irate damsel with a sniff that spoke volumes of scepticism.

“The poor fellow, Lydia! He is so desperately enamoured, I had not the heart to say him nay.”

“Yes, ma’am. There’s others besides yourself have always told me he was a feeling gentleman.”

Mistress Bellairs averted her head from the challenging flame of Lydia’s eyes. She knew all about the little French milliner in Quiet Street; she did not choose to have the story again. And now, surveying in a melancholy manner the toes of her small pointed shoes in the flickering firelight, with the dusk of the October evening pressing close round her, she could find no excuse for her own folly.

Upon one side or the other she could scarce plead *entrainement*. She had been flattered by Mr. Stafford’s persistent besieging, and yet piqued by feeling how little real passion she had been able to inspire. The moment when, in due form, he had laid his hand and heart at her feet had been one of rosy triumph. From Lydia upwards, how many a female well-wisher had dinned into her ear that Stafford had no serious intentions! She had cut out the little milliner in Quiet Street. And yet, was it possible that Kitty Bellairs was giving up liberty, money, and something finer and closer, for such an advantage?

Her friends had freely prophesied that it would be

with this engagement of hers as with one or two others—those with my Lord Verney and Mr. Denis O'Hara (Lord Kilcrouney's only son), for instance; and bets circulated freely in Pump and Assembly rooms upon Mr. Stafford's chances of being jilted like his predecessors. But "Beau Stafford," despite the most genial laugh in the whole of the west country, had (or so Mistress Kitty fancied) a cold eye. She shuddered a little as she thought upon it now. Yes, she was almost afraid of him!

* * * * *

Some one came stumbling into the room, and fell on the floor at her feet. Her hand was seized and mumbled over with kisses, and the fire gleams danced on a red curly head, insufficiently powdered.

Kitty smiled, and her black eye softened. This Denis O'Hara, this impoverished madcap Irishman—with him she had once been as near marriage as now with Mr. Stafford! And if an ingrained prudence had made her, at the eleventh hour, prorogue the ceremony *sine die*, she had nevertheless beheld its approach with little of that dismay which now filled her soul.

"Kitty, you've broked my heart on me! Kitty, Kitty, I never thought you'd let it go so far. Is there no hope at all, asthore? Is it bent you are on going to the bitter end? Sure, then, I don't care what becomes of me, and the sheriff's officers that are after me this minute may have me at long last, and devil mend them!"

Unfortunate Denis ! But for that last despairing admission, who knows into what rashness Kitty might not have been tempted in this twilight mood ? But the sheriff's officers—*cela donnait furieusement à penser !* She let her little taper fingers rest for a second caressingly within his.

“Don't be so foolish,” she said. Though her voice was tender, in her heart was the thought, “What a pity he should be so impossible—a scattercash, a money sieve !”

“Foolish !” exclaimed the lover with a break in his voice. “Say mad, and you'll be nearer the mark.” Then he cast himself flat on the hearthrug, and shed such heartbroken tears that Kitty's own eyes caught the infection. And he, rising to his knees on a sudden, saw the pearly drops upon her cheek. Very little pearls they were—quite seed pearls, if the truth must be told—but so precious in her lover's estimation that he had to gather them with reverence and wonder upon his lips.

“Don't cry, Kitty dear !” said he, forgetting his huge sorrow at the sight of her butterfly grief. “Sure, I'm not worth it ! I was not fit to be your husband, my darling, though it's the love of the world I'd have given you. Tom Stafford's a good fellow—blast him !—and it's careful he'll be with your money on you.”

Kitty gave a tiny sob. It was very, very hard on poor Denis : there was perhaps no one that was better able to judge of the magnitude of his loss than she her-

self. The sound of that sob drove a wave of blood to O'Hara's giddy head. He clasped her fiercely to his breast.

"Ah, but by the Lord, we were near it once! Ah, Kitty, why, in God's name——"

He finished his sentence with his lips upon hers. Kitty's heart beat quick as a fluttering bird; an agitation overpowering, yet not unpleasant, seized hold of her. Even now, if only——

But, as abruptly as he had seized her, the impulsive Irishman loosened his grasp, sprang to his feet, and dashed to the door.

"The night of your wedding will be Denis O'Hara's last day upon earth."

"Fudge!" cried Kitty, in a sudden fit of exasperation.

Denis flung himself out of the room. With the touch of those fresh lips flaming into his soul, he did not dare trust himself another instant in her presence—believed, indeed, that he had already sinned beyond forgiveness. When will a man, even the most practised in the science of love, ever really learn how to deal with a woman's heart?

"Fool!" said Mistress Bellairs to herself as the sound of his retreating steps died away in the passage. "I vow I shall go on with it now . . . and 'tis his own fault!"

*

*

*

*

*

Mr. O'Hara rushed blindly into the vestibule and into

the arms of Miss Lydia, who had but just turned away from closing the hall door. She caught him by the wrists with small bony hands.

“For your life, sir,” said she in an important whisper, “you must not leave the house!” Drunk with his despair, he stared at her. “They’ve seen you go in,” she went on. “Front and back doors are watched.”

“Oh, that!” said Denis O’Hara, and tossed his head. “Sure, what do I care? Ah, my little Lydia, it’s to be married to-morrow she is, and I’ll not survive it! And what odds is it to me once I’m dead and done with it, if I’m in quod in the morning?”

“She’s not married yet,” suggested the maid.

Again O’Hara stared at her; then his whole countenance became irradiated.

“Why, Lydia!”

She put her finger to her lip, looked round cautiously, and whispered in his ear,—

“Come with me.”

Like a lamb (as he said when subsequently describing the scene) the Hon. Denis O’Hara suffered himself to be led to Miss Lydia’s own virginal bower. She locked the door, and they were alone. A compromising situation! But (as Denis said) nothing could have been more virtuous at that moment than the pair of them.

“Oh, alanna!” said he, catching her trim waist, “if you’ve put a spoke in the wheels of that most ill-con-

sidered alliance, it's more than my life I'll owe you. What have you got to tell me, darling?" he went on eagerly. "It's broken off already, maybe? And the little devil—God bless her!—only playing with my poor heart, as usual? Or"—for Lydia had shaken her head—"will she do it to-night, or will she fail him at the church door?"

"None of these things, as far as I know, are likely to occur this time."

"What, then, in the name of wonder?"

"I place my trust in Providence," said Miss Lydia, piously casting up her eyes.

"Ah, it's a fool you're making of me!" cried Mr. O'Hara in an angry voice, as he turned away in disappointment.

"I shouldn't like to speak ill of the dead," retorted Lydia acidly; "and, indeed, if all your man says is true, your late respected mother was a very elegant lady; but if you've been made a fool, Mr. O'Hara, sir, it is not I that am responsible!"

The worst of Denis, as he was fond of admitting, was that he could never resist a joke. Sore at heart as he was, and impudent as were the girl's look and words, he burst into appreciative laughter. Such humour, indeed, must be suitably rewarded. And if Mr. O'Hara's guineas were scarce, he was always provided with a kiss for a pretty woman.

“Will you remember, sir, where you are!” cried Lydia, struggling like a kitten, all her claws out, yet with no intention of scratching.

“And in what better place could I be?” cried the gallant gentleman. But the next minute, overcome once more by his misery, he broke off abruptly, sank in a chair, and looked round with haggard eye.

Miss Lydia lived near the rose. She had literally, indeed, a good deal of the scent of the rose about her, for she considered herself entitled to the common use of her mistress's *flacons*. She had, moreover, assimilated many of Kitty's little ways; and her room was as dainty as the lady's own, with many pretty belongings hallowed by previous use.

Mr. O'Hara groaned softly. Miss Lydia whisked round upon him, rubbing her lip with a business-like hand, and showing a colour like a cherry in each cheek.

“Now, look you, Mr. O'Hara, sir,” said she, bustling, “this is no time for philanderings . . . nor for groans either. You don't wish my mistress to be married to-morrow. Neither do I. I have my reasons. A man that's as good as married already! It shan't be, and it can't. There's they that have the right to claim him at the altar. Hush!”

Kitty's voice was ringing from below in clear call for Lydia. O'Hara clasped his hands in some anxiety of mind, and cast a look at the window; but the damsel,

after a momentary pause, proceeded calmly in a rapid undertone,—

“And there’s no time for questions either. Enough that I’d as soon the sheriff’s men did not get you to-night. My lady might want you yet—and I might want you. There, there, be quiet, I tell you! You’ll not rue it, if you do as I bid you at once.”

She began to move about the room, deliberately busy; opened a press here, a drawer there, took out sundry garments; considered, selected, put back, talking the while with perfect imperturbability.

“The puce silk pelisse which my mistress bought when she was after Lord Verney, and thought to look sober for the dowager and my lady Maria—neither of us ever wore it. It is a little too good, perhaps; but there, it’s such a quiet colour! The bonnet we wore, second mourning, for old Bellairs. It got rained on, too. ’Twill suit beautifully. The kerchief. Eh?” She paused and ran her eye over the young man’s petrified figure. “A skirt?” she said. “A skirt—what the mischief!”

She seized an ancient damask petticoat and measured it against him. He looked at his own long protruding legs, and a slow grin spread itself upon his face. The call-bell at the head of the bed rang with a peremptory jerk. Lydia glanced at it sideways and proceeded,—

“ ’Tis the devil you’re so tall! Stay—I have the very thing.”

She rushed to the press, plunged into its depths, and emerged, shaking a voluminous garment of shot purple and copper hue that made a great crackling.

“Cook’s best,” she stated briefly. “I promised to put a bit of braid on it for her. Poor servants, sir—we have to do each other a good turn now and again. ’Tis not that she’s so much taller than myself, but she takes it up in breadth.”

The bell rang again—a double peal this time. The Abigail did not even turn her head.

“I’ll request you to take off that coat. Yes, sir, and your waistcoat too.”

She slipped a wadded skirt from her chosen heap over his head, and exclaimed at the size of his waist. Snips and stitches had to come in aid. But no sooner had she clothed him in “cook’s best” than the lively damsel anathematized his leanness.

“No more on you,” she exclaimed, once more at work for bare life, “than on one of your own Irish red herrings! How in the world——? Well, there, then we must just stuff, I suppose! There’s all my mistress’s stockings that I was packing for her—she’ll not need them, I’ll take care of that; but you’ll have to give them back to me. Drat that bell!”

In a twinkling Mr. O’Hara found himself seated before

the dressing-table, Lydia's hands busy in the thick curls of his hair.

"Cook favours a plain style," quoth Lydia.

"Mercy!" cried Mr. O'Hara, suddenly waking up and wincing; "what a fright you're making of me, child."

"Do you want your beauty to be recognized about the streets?" said Miss Lydia in her dry way. And as she spoke she smeared a dab of pomade on either side of the bandeaux, and surveyed her handiwork with much satisfaction.

"Now," quoth she, "for your face. I hope I can paint a face with any tirewoman in England. Some of the eyebrow brown, mixed with the rouge, as near cook's own tone as I can get it, and as little eyebrow as possible."

Her hands flew. O'Hara fell into a dream; there was something soothing in the manipulation. Then, upon a sudden thought,—

"Did you ever use these implements on your mistress's face?" he asked.

And as Lydia told him "yes," with a sharp, sidelong glance she saw him kiss the old hare's-foot as it passed his lips, and laughed half scornfully, half pityingly.

* * * * *

Mrs. Bellairs's negro boy had been knocking at Miss Lydia's door for full five minutes, and shrilly clamouring, before, with a flounce and a whisk, she admitted him.

"Haven't you been taught better," she cried, tweaking

his wool with practised fingers, "than to disturb ladies in their conversation?"

"Missus," began the boy, whimpering; then broke off to stare aghast at the tall, forbidding female who now rose and advanced upon him. As he met the gaze of a pair of mad, light eyes dancing in the candle-light out of the raddled and haggard face, Pompey gave a howl and fairly took to his heels.

"A body mayn't have her own aunt visit her, next," growled Lydia after him, through the open door, tying on her outer garments as she spoke with jerky energy. "This way, Aunt Eliza, dear, and mind the step."

O'Hara, smothering laughter till he grew purple under the paint, followed, in utter meekness, his bustling guide. As they passed the parlour door, it was suddenly flung open.

"Upon my word, miss," cried Kitty, "and this is pretty behaviour! Pray, where may you have been the while I have been calling till I was hoarse, and ringing till my arm ached?"

"Ringing, ma'am!" echoed the innocent Abigail. "Did you indeed? The bells in this house—they're a scandal! My Aunt Eliza, ma'am, from Wales, of whom, you'll remember, I've often told you—my poor mother's only sister." Lydia gave her favourite sniff, which this time signified pathos. Rarely had she more thoroughly enjoyed a situation. "She arrived to see me, unexpect-

edly, this evening; and if you'll allow me, I should like, with your permission, to go out for half an hour."

The gleam in Lydia's eyes somewhat marred the humility of this request. There was a certain point, Mistress Kitty knew, beyond which she did not dare go in her dealings with her confidential maid. She tossed her head discontentedly: "Not more than half an hour, then."

As she was turning away, her careless eye-glance fell upon Lydia's aunt, became fixed and widened with amaze. The huge figure in cook's best modestly drooped its head till the plumes that had mourned for "old Bellairs" fell forward unrecognized over the shaded countenance; and "Aunt Eliza" began a series of spasmodic dips, faithfully copied from the countrywomen in the marketplace of Bath.

Mrs. Bellairs whisked back into the parlour and slammed the door. How dared Lydia have such extraordinary belongings?

Lydia nipped her relative's arm with exceeding sharpness as they emerged on Queen Square.

"Now, don't be more of a fool than you can help; and for Gracious sake" (her nails nearly met in his flesh) "don't take strides like that. Don't turn your head. There are your men under the trees opposite."

Fortunately the square was sparsely lit, and the wits of the sheriff's officers none of the keenest. The bulky

female who minced along with nodding feathers was only stared at in stupid amusement and allowed to go by unmolested.

“Where are you bringing me to, darling?” whispered O’Hara hoarsely as they rounded the dangerous corner. And his arm, irrepressible still, despite disguise, began to creep round the sprightly figure. “I hope it’s not far; for much as I love the petticoats, they don’t take kindly to me this way at all.”

“I’m bringing you to a friend,” answered the other with stern repression. “It’s not likely she’ll want to be bothered with you, for she’s in trouble herself; but”—she halted, while suspicion and vindictiveness glistened in her eye—“you’ll have to give me your word, sir, that there will be no philandering in that house to-night. If not, I wash my hands of you. I’m not going to have had all this bother for nothing.”

“I’ll give you my word; I’ll be as good as gold,” solemnly declared O’Hara, awake once more to the graver issues of the venture. Too well did he know the power of the tirewoman in her mistress’s councils.

“Then you’ll keep to your room, and behave, till you hear from me again. And here we are now.”

It was the end of Quiet Street. O’Hara stared at the round, jutting bow-window, lit up behind its lace curtains, and barely restrained himself from whistling aloud.

“Tom Stafford’s little French milliner !”

The plot was thickening.

* * * * *

A small, slim thing, of squirrel-like nimbleness and brightness of eye, this same Madame Eglantine. But the bright glance to-night was dim, and the olive cheek tear-roughened, as the lady came herself to the door to answer the knock.

Leaving the aunt from Wales unceremoniously in the narrow passage, Lydia darted upon her friend and drew her into the shop; whence the sound of a long whispered colloquy, broken by little explosions, sometimes of laughing, sometimes of crying, penetrated to the listener’s ear. At last Lydia returned, very tight and determined.

“I shall be here about ten o’clock to-morrow,” she said as she passed O’Hara; then added in a fierce whisper, “You may take off your disguise, so long as you don’t hang out of the window. And please to remember, sir, to be careful with cook’s best paduasoy and my mantle, unless you wish me to repent of my good nature.”

“Vill you come dis vay, please, me lady?” said Madame Eglantine, beckoning to him, while between their swollen lids her black eyes shot out a gleam of such mirth and mischief at him that he was hard set to keep his promise of “behaviour.”

Keep it, however, he did: met with an unmoved

gravity the sudden friendliness with which the pretty Frenchwoman laughingly surveyed him so soon as they were alone together in the neat garret allotted to him ; met with the same stolid irresponsiveness her fresh change of mood, when, wiping the corner of her pretty eye with her lace apron, she hinted, with head engagingly on one side, that Heaven knows *she* had no desire to be making pleasantry, and that nobody's heart could be more completely broken than her own.

Mr. O'Hara was not aware how greatly his solemn demeanour added to the comicality of his appearance ; nor did Madame Eglantine herself seem to realize it, for there was very little amusement in the petulant look she finally flung upon him, and in the dry manner in which she remarked " that she would derangé monsieur no longer, and would send up his supper in due course."

" Pity ! " thought the gentleman to himself, as the door closed upon the wave of a tempestuous petticoat. " Sure, it wouldn't have done a ha'p'orth of harm to any one, if me and that darling little soul had deluded our troubles for a while by a smile and a tear together. But, there, I've given me word. God help Lydia's husband ! I fear she's the born old maid ! "

He took an impatient turn up and down the room, then suddenly catching sight of his countenance in the little square of glass hanging on the wall, seized a candle and drew near to gaze.

“Faith,” he laughed, “I’m the holy show, and that’s the truth!”

Suddenly the eyes gazing into the mirror became fixed, the grinning countenance overspread with a deep gravity. Full a minute or so Mr. O’Hara remained motionless, contemplating some inward vision. He passed a forefinger dubiously over his chin, then, lost in reflection, he walked over to the little bed and sat down on the edge of it.

A small, sharp charity-girl staggered in with a tray, and stared with cunning eyes at the strange figure.

“Look here, child,” said O’Hara suddenly; “I’ll give you a whole crown piece...next week, if you’ll bring me a jug of hot water to-morrow morning, and if you can beg, borrow, or steal a razor for me at the same time; and, stop—a packet of face-powder.”

* * * * *

If it had been his own wedding-morn instead of that of Mr. Stafford, the Hon. Denis O’Hara could not have bestowed more care upon the shaving of his handsome chin. It was a haggard face that looked into the glass, still strangely crowned by feminine bandeaux of hair; for Mr. O’Hara, having his own reasons for desiring to preserve Lydia’s handiwork undamaged, had spent the night, not in bed, but in uneasy dozing upon a high chair.

This business accomplished, he next proceeded to set

to rights the embarrassing garments—a somewhat uncertain proceeding, attended by a good deal of fumbling with unfamiliar hooks and eyes, and a good deal of subdued cursing. When the stiff kerchief had been refolded across his artificially buxom figure, Mr. O'Hara stationed himself once again before the mirror. And now all the experience culled behind the scenes—ladies' boudoir or the playhouse—was brought to bear upon the situation.

With the aid of the packet faithfully provided by the serving-maid, and a great deal of friction, he succeeded in producing a truly interesting pallor. An artistic loosening of Lydia's coiffure, with a cloud of powder, next created such an improvement that Mr. O'Hara, surveying himself knowingly, was pleased to observe that he would not have made such an ill-looking female after all! And, when his labours were crowned by the nodding plumes and a gracefully-disposed lace veil,—

“I defy any one,” he cried joyfully, “to say I don't look the image of respectability—for once.”

Then he pulled his flexible mouth into lines of woe.

“Afflicted respectability,” he added, with approval.

All the chimes and church clocks of the old gray town were ringing out eight in the morning when O'Hara, with the most genteel gait imaginable, emerged from the door of the little milliner, and directed his steps towards a ladies' chocolate-house opposite the Abbey. There he

spent his last white piece on a cup of coffee, and took great satisfaction in the fact that his appearance evoked but a passing curiosity.

“They think I am just a fine figure of a woman,” he told himself, with an inward chuckle.

* * * * *

Punctually upon the chime of a quarter to eleven, a coach, drawn by a shining pair of horses, halted with important clatter at the Orange Grove entrance of the Abbey. My Lord Bishop of Bath and Wells stepped out, followed by an attendant Canon; was received in due state by several minor dignitaries, and conducted into the vestry. It was a bright gusty morning, and his skirts fluttered against his handsome purple legs as they moved in dignity from coach to porch. A noble-looking prelate—Kitty Bellairs could not have been married in Bath by any lesser personage—and, this morning, filled with the condescending urbanity of one ready to rejoice with those who rejoiced!

No sooner had he crossed the threshold than the Abbey bells set up a mad clangour of chimes.

“Quite a notable event this, Mr. Selwyn,” said the Bishop, affably addressing the Dean.

“Indeed so, my lord,” quoth the Dean, a pretty mouse-gray man, rubbing his hands till they almost crackled. “The Abbey is full of our most elegant visitors.”

“The lady—ah—is possessed of considerable—ah—personal attractions.”

“It is so reputed, my lord.”

“And I believe,” said the Bishop, “of no mean fortune.”

“Vastly rich, they say, my lord.”

“Then,” said his lordship waggishly, “the bridegroom is indeed (as our fashionable youths might say) a lucky dog.”

Before the Dean, the Canon, and the minor clerics had at all mastered their appreciation of this episcopal sally, there came a loud knocking at the door, and, upon the verger proceeding to open it, a colloquy ensued outside which soon became of so earnest a nature as to attract the Dean’s attention.

“What is this, Jenkinson?”

“Please, Mr. Dean, there’s a lady demanding to see his lordship in private. I’ve told her, sir, it’s quite impossible; his lordship is robing.”

“But I must see his lordship; ’tis most urgent.” The strained, high-pitched voice smote the Dean with further amazement. “I must see his lordship!”

And the lady, pushing open the door with remarkable ease against the efforts of the verger, made good her footing inside the reverend circle. Dean and Canon fell back in some dismay before the imposing female figure that entered among them with this sweeping

energy, but the prelate frowned and advanced sternly to meet her.

“ This intrusion, madam——”

The lady rolled upon him, from over the folds of a voluminous handkerchief, an eye laden with so much tragedy that the Bishop was instantly impressed.

“ Your lordship,” said she, sinking her high note of distress into one that matched the expression of her gaze, “ had I waited but five minutes later to seek you, it would have been too late. A crime——”

“ How now !” exclaimed his lordship, quick to seize the inference; “ do you mean, madam?—tut, tut; ’tis impossible. This marriage——”

“ Alas !” cried the newcomer with a stifled sob, and buried her face more completely.

This was a case of genuine distress, or Dr. Thurlow had little knowledge of an unhappy world. An agitated hand plucked him by his lawn sleeve as he advanced still closer to the weeping unknown.

“ Your lordship, the bride is arriving.”

There was another jangle of joy-bells. The stranger moaned.

“ The bride must wait then, sir,” said the Bishop, and looked rebukingly round upon the curious faces that pressed nearer. “ Stand back, gentlemen,” he commanded. “ I must speak a few words with this lady in private.”

“Upon my word,” whispered the Canon to the Dean as, slightly huffed, they withdrew, “this is an odd business.”

“It bodes ill,” quoth the Dean, wagging his little head till the powder flew, “for the ‘lucky dog’s’ marriage to-day!”

“Pooh!” said the Canon, as he propped his burly form against the great carved oak press. “That creature, that grenadier of a woman—an adventuress, I’ll warrant!”

“An adventuress! I am not so sure. Watch her now, Mr. Selwyn. ’Tis some weighty story she pours into his lordship’s ear. And mark you his countenance.”

“She has a fine pair of eyes, and knows how to roll them,” whispered the Canon dryly.

Then they nudged each other; but the meaning smiles faded from their countenance as the mysterious stranger’s voice was raised in broken accents, and the pathetic announcement, “Six living, your lordship, and one underground!” was delivered in tones audible enough to reach all their ears. These tones were of rich Irish quality.

The Bishop also raised his voice, shocked out of his first impulse of discretion.

“Fie, fie! This is a terrible scandal. It is a pity that matters should have been allowed to go so far.”

“Sure I only crossed last night. And a terrible tossing——”

“Tut, tut! To the point, madam! If, indeed, a previous marriage ceremony has really taken place——”

“In Ballybrophy Church, your lordship, nine years ago next Patrick’s Day, as sure as I am a living wo——”

The Bishop extended his pastoral hand with a deprecating gesture, and turned to beckon to his subordinates. His countenance was seamed with lines of care, yet bore an expression of not altogether ungratified importance.

“Mr. Dean,” he said gravely, “I see no help for it: we must request Mr. Stafford’s presence here immediately.”

As he spoke, the joy-bells, which had been but faintly jangling the last few minutes, suddenly fell into silence; and, after a dead little pause, the solemn chimes gave forth the hour of eleven.

* * * * *

Mistress Bellairs had been waiting some time in vain for the officiating clergy, before the eyes of all fashionable Bath, and by the side of a slightly anxious bridegroom. She had arrived at the Abbey in none too good a humour, and for every second of delay accumulated fresh vials of resentment against the innocent partner of her discomfiture. But when this latter was fetched away from the altar steps by a solemn-faced

gentleman in a surplice, and the subdued amusement of her guests broke into loud whispers and titters, her fury grew almost unbearable.

Miss Lydia, screened behind a monument (sufficiently near the altar to keep a keen eye upon the progress of events), had not been so sensible of the flight of time; for she was engaged in animated discussion with her companion—a small woman, whose dark, tear-stained face was almost hidden under a hood.

“I tell you,” she was repeating impatiently for about the twentieth time, “you’ve nothing to be afraid of. Lord, Madame Eglantine, don’t be such a fool! ’Tis all as easy as kissing. Oughtn’t I to know my mistress’s mind? Why, I tell you she’s only longing for the excuse—for any excuse. If he’d given her a pretext no bigger than the black of my nail she’d jump at it. She does not really want to be married—no more to him than to any one. And if you work your bit of scandal——”

“Ah, Miss Lydia,” said the little Frenchwoman, trembling from head to foot, “I shall be know, and I shall be ruin!”

“Ruined, you mean-spirited thing!” cried Lydia in angry despair. “Is that what you’re thinking on at the last moment? And will you let your beau be snapped away when you can keep him by stretching out your hand? Well, I declare, I’m prodigious sorry I

ever took all this trouble about you. If you'd even had the sense to keep an eye on Mr. O'Hara, as I told you—him as I meant to have ready to snatch her off in her coach as soon as we had scored the first trick! A nice fool I was to trust either of you! Ruined, you little French zany! Why, how could you be ruined? All you have to do is to keep your hood over your face and whisper in the lady's ear; she won't be so anxious to show your little muzzle to the world."

"The bell have stop!" interrupted the Frenchwoman suddenly.

Lydia craned a long neck round the monument. Presently she turned back, bursting with excitement.

"I declare," she cried, "something's up! They've fetched Mr. Stafford away from the very altar. And there's the bride all alone. Well!" Then, as such born generals generally are, she was seized with the inspiration of the emergency. "Now is your moment!" she whispered, gripping Madame Eglantine fiercely. "Go and tell your story in my mistress's ear; and if this wedding goes on, I'm a Dutchwoman! Tell her he's promised you marriage, mind. . . . We must stretch a point sometimes."

* * * * *

When Denis O'Hara saw Mr. Stafford's puzzled face following in the wake of the usher's portentously set countenance, he had reached that stage of what he

would himself have described as "devilment," in which a man becomes quite reckless of consequences. No sooner had the bridegroom crossed the threshold of the vestry than the Irishman flung himself headlong upon the newcomer's beruffled bosom; and the mad mirth he had so long suppressed broke out in hysterical gasps, and sobs.

Clutched in a strangulating embrace, overwhelmed by the suddenness of the attack and the physical weight of the demonstrative lady, by the noise of her distress and the volume of her silks and laces, Mr. Stafford for once lost his cool head, staggered, and turned pale. Rolling a wild eye round for explanation and help, he met the Bishop's gaze fixed upon him with searching reprobation.

"A most painful scene!" said his lordship. "But, thank Providence, a crime has been timely averted, and the sweet confidence of so virtuous and trusting a lady as Mistress Bellairs has not been abused beyond repair."

"Crime—confidence!" ejaculated the bridegroom. "What in——"

He made a struggle to relieve himself from the octopus-like embrace; but, owing to his reluctance to put forth his strength against a woman, only succeeded in producing a momentary relaxation, followed by a yet more loving clasp. Denis felt that speech was imperatively demanded of the injured wife; but, aware that

his first words must inevitably betray him, he was forced to restrict himself to moaning endearments.

The *dénouement* could not have been delayed but for an unforeseen development. Mr. Stafford was not one likely to be long deserted by his wits; the colour had come back to his cheeks, and assurance to his voice, when next he spoke,—

“Will some one kindly tell me who this person is supposed to be?”

The bishop inflated his high nostril still higher with a scornful snort.

“If you deny your wife’s identity, sir——” he began, when Mr. Stafford interrupted him with a fierce laugh of dawning comprehension.

“My wife!” he cried. “Oho! Aha!” And with little of their previous forbearance, his hands laid hold of the muscular wrists that displayed such unfeminine strength. “Let me see what sort of face this wife of mine carries upon her remarkably fine figure!”

There was a scuffle—the struggle of two well-matched men. O’Hara’s one idea was to postpone the revealing vision of his countenance; and while resisting, therefore, with all his might, he kept boring his head into Stafford’s chest, much to the detriment of the mourning bonnet.

“Mercy!” exclaimed the Bishop; “he will kill her! Gentlemen, secure the ruffian—call the vergers!”

But the Canon, heedless of the episcopal command, cried to the Dean in a fit of sporting enthusiasm,—

“Gad, sir, I’ll back the petticoats; she’ll have him down to a certainty!”

It was at this juncture that Fate intervened.

* * * * *

So many strange things seemed to happen this morning that Mistress Kitty’s wedding guests beheld with more amusement than surprise how, immediately after the mysterious removal of the bridegroom, a small cloaked woman, who kept her face concealed, crept to the bride’s side and began to whisper in her ear.

But after a brief colloquy, in which Mistress Bellairs had vouchsafed every token of indignation and astonishment, it was felt that matters had gone beyond a jest when she suddenly sprang to her feet, clutched the becloaked woman by the wrist, and marched with her towards the vestry, a perfect tornado of white lace, pearl-pink brocade, and waving white plumes.

Miss Lydia now likewise emerged from the background, and, with the audible cry, “What is this?—my poor mistress! Oh! I must to her aid!” (which, having a taste for the drama, she contrived to deliver in the best style of the “devoted attendant,” rushed in the bride’s wake).

Those who had staked their money on Stafford’s chance began to look awful while there was appear-

tionate triumph with those who had freely betted that there would again be no marriage of Kitty Bellairs.

* * * * *

The wrath of Mistress Bellairs (which was genuine), and her astonishment that there should be any one else with a claim upon the man she had come forth herself to marry (which was well-feigned), merged into one overwhelming stupefaction when, bursting into the vestry, she discovered Mr. Stafford struggling in the embrace of yet another woman.

But little Madame Eglantine, who had made closer acquaintance with the shot silk and the brown *mantua*, instantly grasped the situation; and on the spot she determined to make the most of it for her own ends, well realizing that, whatever the issue, her small personality must sink into safe insignificance.

“ Ah, *ciel!* ” she cried, quite as dramatically as Miss Lydia, “ but this is not to believe one’s eyes ! ”

She sprang forward, flinging off her cloak.

“ Let him go, madame, let him go ! ” she commanded shrilly, and herself laid hold of Stafford with clawing hands. “ He is neither of yours nor of Madame Bellairs : he is mine by all the promises a man of honour can make ! ”

Assaulted from this unexpected quarter, Mr. Stafford loosened his grasp of O’Hara with such abruptness that the gentleman, unable to recover his balance, and ham-

pered by his petticoats, stumbled and fell face forward on the floor. Madame Eglantine profited by the opening to fling herself in her turn upon the bridegroom's bosom.

The Bishop, who, finding his orders unheeded, had been actually hesitating on the brink of personal interference, was now seized with the full tide of that cholera which is not only constitutional with gentlemen of his rufous complexion, but which was here imperatively demanded of the outraged dignity of the Church.

His red eyebrows arched above the haughty, protuberant eye. His tense muscles quivered as he stood looking from the trim little body clinging to Stafford's repellent arms to the ungainly figure stretched upon the floor. He cried in a voice of thunder,—

“This is the most disgusting spectacle I—I——”
Words failed him.—“Mr. Selwyn, my coach!”

As he turned, repudiating with a Jove-like sweep the now superfluous lawn, his eye fell upon Kitty.

“My dear lady,” said he, “my dear child!”—and it was beautiful to see how the tenderness of the shepherd for his afflicted lamb struggled with his righteous anger against the prowling wolf—“I will not insult you by asking you if you still desire——”

Mrs. Bellairs whisked round upon him with something of the movement of a kitten, dashing on one side the smelling salts which Lydia—very anxious to get

her mistress out of the way before she should discover the identity of the aunt from Wales—was officiously offering. The bride's eyes literally shot sparks.

“I will not,” pursued the Bishop, “insult you by explaining to you that this marriage cannot now proceed. You have my fullest sympathy. May I offer you a seat in my coach? You will thus avoid the further unpleasantness——”

Kitty's cheeks were flaming under her rouge.

“Certainly not, my Lord Bishop!” she exclaimed. “I will have some explanation of this odious business first, and am surprised you should not also consider it your duty——”

“My jurisdiction, madam,” cried he, interrupting her in his turn with equal acerbity, “does not extend, I am thankful to say, over the conduct of all the profligates”—here he flung a withering glance upon the unfortunate Stafford, who had but just succeeded in freeing himself from Madame Eglantine, and was regarding her reproachfully—“nor of all the unfortunate females”—here his lordship's eyes were averted in distaste from the still prostrate O'Hara, who deemed that utter collapse was now his only resource—“who flock to this city of Bath. But,” proceeded Dr. Thurlow, turning to the clerics, and speaking in a tone that made of the observation a command, “I leave it to Mr. Dean to see that the fullest investigation be carried through.”

And thereupon he moved to the door, and was lost to sight.

“The fullest investigation!” sniffed Mistress Bellairs, no whit impressed. “I should think so indeed. Leave me alone, Lydia; I will *not* come away.—Mr. Stafford, sir; I had heard rumours, but I refused to believe them. That person, I presume, is your Madame Clandestine—Eglantine—or whatever the name may be . . . it matters little to me. But who—who—— “Oh, will one of you reverend gentlemen,” said the bride—and even in her anger she did not forget her pretty smile—“have the goodness to turn over the creature on the floor?”

No sooner had these awful words fallen upon the ears of the prostrate Denis than, gathering his limbs together, he sprang to his feet and made one wild leap for an exit. The bonnet, in which the late Mr. Bellairs had been mourned, fell upon one side, revealing a disordered red head. The brown silk mantua was dashed from broad shoulders.

“O’Hara, as I live!” cried Stafford. “I knew it!” And with a curse, the like of which the Abbey walls could never have echoed before, he dashed in pursuit.

“Yoicks! Gone away!” cried the sporting Canon. And, quite demoralized by the unexpected course of events, he gathered up his robes and was for joining in the run, when the little Dean arrested him with such a

scandalized hand and such a heartfelt cry of horror that he returned to a sense of the proprieties, and called fire upon the sacrilege and the disgrace as wrathfully as the Bishop himself might have done.

In the confusion Madame Eglantine discreetly vanished. Suffocating, Mrs. Bellairs fell upon a chair ; but finding at least one offender ready to her vengeance, she gave up the idea of a swoon.

“ So, *that* is your aunt from Wales ? ” she began ; and it was balm to see the impregnable Lydia for once bite her nail and flounder in explanation, her consciousness of guilt in one direction preventing her from exculpating herself where she was really innocent. But the next instant the urgency of the situation made Mrs. Kitty realize that she must defer the congenial task of morally flaying the offending tirewoman to a more appropriate moment, and meanwhile gather all her bright wits together to extricate herself with honour. She must be the first to laugh at what was ridiculous, and turn the discomfiture of the bride completely over to the bridegroom.

Promptly she sent the verger round to the church for Sir Jasper Standish, Colonel Villiers, my Lord Markham, Mr. Foulks, and two or three other Bath notabilities, and was ready to receive them as they presented themselves—variously condoling, curious, and important—in her gayest, most fascinating manner.

Very soon they left her again to join the rest of the guests. But so artfully pregnant had been the few sentences she had addressed to them that it was immediately made known to the eager congregation that not only were they still expected to the feast at Nassau House (which had been lent by the owner for this auspicious occasion), although no wedding would take place that morning, or, indeed, was ever likely to take place between Mr. Stafford and Mrs. Bellairs, but that Mistress Bellairs was in the highest spirits. And, in whispers, it passed like wildfire from mouth to ear that, beyond doubt, the wily little widow herself had not been altogether guiltless of the hitch which had thus disposed of Mr. Stafford's hopes.

"Tell them I expect their congratulations just the same," had said Kitty with her archest dimple.

* * * * *

It was a sight to make the gods smile to see Mr. O'Hara, followed by a hooting crowd, advance in kangaroo leaps down Orange Grove towards the shelter of Nassau House, tearing at bodice and skirt as he went with such furious fingers that "cook's best paduasoy" and the kerchief and Kitty's little rolled-up stockings soon strewed the path of his flight. Mr. Stafford, in his unhindered swiftness, promptly caught him up.

"O'Hara, stop, you scoundrel!" panted he, now at white heat of passion, in the fugitive's ear.

O'Hara halted on the instant and wheeled round—a stranger spectacle than ever, with long legs emerging from Lydia's short quilted petticoat, with white smeared face and feminine coiffure surmounting his own ruffled shirt. In one second his quick eye ascertained that Kitty was not in sight, and he brought it then gaily back upon his pursuer. For the first time in his life, perhaps, Mr. Stafford was shaken by anger. Choking, he flung out both arms with so menacing a gesture that O'Hara leaped aside with an answering glint in his own green gaze which spelt danger.

“Easy now!” cried he. “From a gentleman to a gentleman!”

“Gentleman!” echoed the other with scathing emphasis.

“Well, I am a lady no longer, anyhow,” said Denis leaping out of the petticoat.

There was a shout of mirth from the forerunners of the crowd that had begun to assemble about them.

“By your leave, friends . . . by your leave!” cried a husky voice. And a dingy-looking individual, breaking through the admiring circle at a hard trot, advanced upon O'Hara with outstretched hand. He was followed by a panting satellite.

“Thunder and Moses!” ejaculated Mr. O'Hara, and flung the petticoat with a dexterous movement over the head of the first sheriff's officer, while with a thrust

of his now unhampered leg he neatly tripped up the second. Then, calling over his shoulder, "We'll finish our conversation in the house, Mr. Stafford," was off at full speed again.

* * * * *

With the assistance of a pair of borrowed swords, obligingly supplied by the major-domo (for Nash's draconian edict against the wearing of steel within the liberties of Bath was still in full force), Mr. O'Hara and Mr. Stafford "finished their conversation" in the farther corner of Nassau House gardens—with so much promptitude indeed that, by the time the last group of guests had migrated from the Abbey to the panelled dining-room, Mr. O'Hara's arm had already been bound up neatly by Mr. Stafford himself, and the latter had seen his first fury of anger melt away with the running of his friend's hot blood.

Now, it might be that the little devils he had marked in Kitty's eyes during that ten minutes' purgatorial waiting in the Abbey had filled the bridegroom's soul with doubt. It might be—as some of his friends would have it—that Mr. Stafford's matrimonial intentions had hardly been more steadfast than Mistress Bellairst's own, and that he had been as discomfited as she herself to see matters drift so far (having proposed to her chiefly because it was the genteel thing for a buck of Bath

might be, again, that there is no man who, when it comes to the point, does not feel the nuptial state as one suggestive of a noose, and himself as something of a victim. At any rate there can be no doubt that when Beau Stafford presently sought the company it was with a front of unfeigned placidity, not to say satisfaction—a satisfaction no whit dimmed by finding Mistress Bellairs enthroned at the head of the table, more indisputably “Queen of Bath” than ever—not a man among her guests who did not hang upon her least smile, not a woman who did not fix her with eyes of envy.

He met the jocular greeting and the witty bantering, more or less pointed, more or less broad, of his friends with an unmovedly good-humoured eye; and, demanding the place which would have been his by rights, took seat at Kitty’s left with a magnificent assurance.

The little lady, uncertain whether to keep up her first *rôle* of resentment towards him, or openly to display the sense of relief which was not only fairly well-founded but best calculated to save her dignity, was surprised into quite naturally gracious smiles.

Thus they sat together, bride that would never be wife of his, bridegroom that would never be her husband. The situation was quaint enough to please a woman who, above all things, was a foe to banality—who in the heart of her could never resist a gentle-

manly audacity, and who admired the courage of one capable of thus meeting such evil fortune.

Mr. O'Hara, in a pale blue wedding coat (provided *extempore* by the genial master of Nassau House), his right arm in a comfortable sling, hereupon rose from his seat and lifted his glass in his left hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said he, the mad joyousness of the moment leaping forth irrepressibly from eyes and lips, "let us, in all haste, drink the health of her who still—God bless her!—remains Kitty Bellairs, to the hope of every bachelor heart among us! And (if there's a drop to spare) let us not forget our friend yonder on her left, who, if he's not the happy man he ought to be—I mean he might have been—— But there's a crumb of comfort—a crumb of comfort, I say, in every bitter draught——"

At this point the speaker, who, between a complexity of emotions, the loss of some good blood and the gain of some generous wine, had not quite his usual mastery of eloquence, was not sorry to find his voice drowned in general laughter. Then no sooner had the hubbub subsided a little than the bridegroom reject himself, mimicking with some humour the consecrated manner of the brand-new husband on such occasions, claimed the attention of the table.

"Mr. O'Hara, sir," said he, "ladies and gentlemen, it is with a prodigious sense of gratitude that I rise to

return thanks for myself, and for my wife that was to be, but is not——”

“Nor ever will be. Amen!” put in the irrepressible O’Hara, and tilted another glass to his lips.

“For your very friendly acclamations,” pursued Stafford unmoved. “Had that knot been tied to-day, which, ladies and gentlemen, as Mr. O’Hara so feelingly observes, would have made me the happy man that I am not, I might have hesitated to take so much upon myself as to venture to answer for her. For I have noticed, ladies, that an accomplished wife generally likes to speak both for herself and her husband . . . which is a vastly proper state of affairs. Of course, dear friends, you are all fully aware that I stand before you a heart-broken man.”

The delicately-ironic tone, the sweet, curling smile with which he pronounced these words, summoned back all the little devils to Kitty’s eyes. Her vanity was beginning to smart. Was it possible, could it be possible, that he was not utterly heart-broken?

“Nevertheless,” resumed Mr. Stafford, after an effective pause, “as my valued friend has just remarked, ‘there is a crumb of comfort in every draught.’ I am not, as a rule, perhaps, fond of a crumb in my cup; but I cannot deny its consolatory presence to-day. Had I been made the happy man I hoped to be, why, I should now have nothing left to hope for.”

The clamour which had been gathering about him became uproarious. He waited resignedly till he could make himself heard again.

“As matters have fallen out,” he concluded, “I can still blissfully aspire with the best of you.”

He turned with his courtly bow, took Kitty’s little hand and raised it to kiss. Then he sat down, smiling.

Kitty averted her head with crimsoning cheeks and lips fiercely held from trembling under proud little teeth.

Under cover of the general laughter whispered he to her,—

“And are you very angry with me, my pretty wife that is not to be?”

She looked at him for a second or two, hesitating—hating him for not being in greater despair, yet admiring him exceedingly.

“Confess,” he went on in tender tones—“confess, Kitty, you have never liked me half so well?”

“And confess, sir,” said she, flashing, “that you are vastly happier than if that ceremony had taken place.”

Her mouth quivered, but the demons in her eyes suddenly vanished as if they had been put to flight by a pair of melting little cupids.

“Nay,” said he, “but when you look at me so, I can regret nothing.”

“I vow,” she cried with apparent irrelevancy after a long pause, tossing her head. “I must settle near

dear O'Hara's debts: 'twould be a thousand shames, after this, were he allowed to spend the night in the sponging-house!"

"By your leave, madam," interrupted Stafford quickly, "but I think I owe it to him to pay at least the half."

He looked at the triumphant O'Hara with an unmistakable tenderness while she tossed her head and sipped at her beaker. Then they looked at each other and laughed. But Kitty's laughter quavered a little.

CHAPTER III.

GRAY DOMINO.

"I AM pale to-night." Mrs. Bellairs, the hare's-foot poised in one plump, dimpled hand, bent forward to examine her pretty face in the mirror. "A shade more on the left—eh, Lydia?"

"Never a touch more, ma' m," decided the maid, and from her mistress's hand unceremoniously culled the little foot that had once padded so blithely over green turf.

"I vow," cried the lady, "I'm looking a perfect fright!"

"Well, ma'am," began Lydia sardonically, "I would not let that disturb me, since you are to go masked."

Miss Lydia was in a less placid mood than usual, and she was not one who could suppress altogether a feeling of ill-temper. There were fresh matrimonial projects floating in the air of which she disapproved. Her position as confidential maid to a rich and fascinating young widow was a source of so much profit as well as pleasure; so many discreet guineas as well as

discreet kisses came her way in that capacity that she had little desire to change these conditions, even for the sake of calling her mistress "My Lady Countess." For such was the scheme that had come within the range of practical contemplation since Mrs. Bellairs's return from Bath to her town residence in Mayfair.

"Why, girl," said Kitty Bellairs, balked of the compliment she had the right to expect, "we unmask before supper. Surely any fool knows that!"

Lydia tossed her head and set out the patchbox with a bang.

Kitty sighed languorously, with a sudden change of mood, and flung a bird-like glance at Lydia's irate reflection in the psyche—a pretty mirror this, garlanded with golden roses, held up by peeping cupids, meet, indeed, to receive so coquettish an image as that of "Incomparable Bellairs."

"Ah, child!" said the lady, "happy you, who will never know the troubles and anxieties with which a lonely woman has to meet in the great fashionable world!" Lydia sniffed. "I want a protector sadly, my good girl. (There's that quilted petticoat . . . and the square of Mechlin with the hole in it, where young my Lord Verney, oaf as he is, trod on my skirts in the Pump Room. 'Tis a beautiful bit of lace; you can have it for yourself. 'Twill make you very fine among the other tirewomen.) Ah! 'tis a weighty decision.

My heart is all of a flutter. . . . Give me a thimbleful of ratafia."

Miss Lydia poured out the desired restorative in the same disapproving silence.

"Take some yourself, child."

"No, thank you, ma'am." Ratafia had long ceased to be a treat to Lydia: familiarity breeds contempt.

"It's apt to make the nose red, ma'am."

The lady put down her half-sipped glass, flung an anxious glance upon her pearly nose tip in the mirror, and then broke into justifiable rage,—

"How dare you, miss? Go to the devil, you ungrateful, unpleasant girl!"

"La! ma'am, he would not have me as a present, neither me nor you, for all he comes so often here."

"What in Heaven's name do you mean, Lydia?"

"It don't seem as if Heaven could ever have had anything to say to it, ma'am, one way or another."

"Gracious power, the creature will drive me mad! Who is it wants neither you or me? And what is it Heaven can have nothing to do with?"

"Why, the devil, ma'am, or the nearest approach to him that walks London this moment—meaning my Lord Mandeville. His heart's not really in it, nor ever will be. And if Heaven has anything to say to him, why, I am willing to——"

"Lydia!" cried Mistress Kitty in a fury. Then she

seized the first missile to her hand, and flung it at the girl's head. Lydia dodged with the adroitness acquired by long habit, calmly picked up the silver curling tongs, and began to ply them mechanically, as she surveyed her mistress with disapproving eyes.

Kitty had turned back to her mirror, and now set her small teeth in a smile of defiance.

“My Lord Mandeville not want Kitty Bellairs! We shall see!” The little fierce smile broadened into triumph. “We shall see!”

Presently the eyes swam back into the languor that had provoked Miss Lydia, and the widow pondered. Lydia broke the silence by observing, in a detached manner: “There are several gentlemen sitting waiting in the blue room.”

“Already!” Mistress Bellairs snatched at her jewelled watch and fell into a fresh flutter.

“Good gracious, woman, do you know the time, and how long 'twill take me to drive from Mayfair to Elm Park House with the roads a foot in mud? Come here, you gaby! Put the Paris knot on the left! . . . That curl's too long! The patches now—quick! Where is the box? Call yourself a tirewoman!”

The prettiest fingers in Bath—which some who passed as judges now swore were the prettiest fingers in London—groped for the silver and tortoise-shell box. One charming digit, with a black star on its tip, hovered

tentatively round the dainty face. It was a critical moment: even Lydia held her breath. But the little hand fell back into the silken lap, its mission unaccomplished.

“Is Mr. Stafford among these gentlemen?” she asked suddenly, turning her eyes, all weighted with anxiety, towards Lydia.

“Mr. Stafford, Mr. O’Hara, Sir George Payne—in scarlet, ma’am—and Mr. Mildmay—in sky-blue,” responded the latter glibly.

There was quite a jingle as Lydia frisked round; four guineas at that moment were keeping snug company in her inner hanging pocket.

To the credit of these modish gentlemen (in whose number she felt safety) there was also printed in Lydia’s memory tablets a very pretty compliment from Mr. Stafford, who had the art of neatly placing these assets, and a kiss or two from Mr. O’Hara (really, she had had to box his ears). As for the other two gentlemen, they were obviously new to it. But one principle she had made clear to their inexperience, to wit, that he who would sit in the lavender parlour (next to the young widow Bellairs’s dressing-room door) must know how to pay for such privilege.

“Tom Stafford!” ejaculated the widow. “He is positively the only man who knows how to pitch a patch. Admit him, instantly, instantly!” She drew

her silken wrapper over the falling laces upon her bosom ; then on further thought : “ And Mr. O’Hara, too,” she added ; “ the dear creature has taste.”

“ And Sir George ? ” queried Lydia, her hand on the door knob.

“ Sir George ! Did you not say the zany was in scarlet ? I marvel at you, Lydia—and I in rose-pink ! ”

“ Mr. Mildmay ? ”

“ Let him languish ! ”

Lydia went forth with alacrity. “ Mrs. Bellairs will see Mr. Stafford and Mr. O’Hara, if they will be kind enough to step this way,” said she with a cherry-mouth to the waiting clients. How demure was Lydia !—“ Yes, Sir George, I did inform my mistress of your presence.—Yes, Mr. Mildmay, sir ; I’ll mention it again by-and-by—at least, if I get the chance.—I’ll do my best, Sir George.—This way, please.”

Mr. O’Hara and Mr. Stafford, faithful adorers, knew the way well enough. Kitty’s pink-hung, becupided, becushioned sanctum, with its atmosphere of Parma-powder and flowers—the fragrance of a pretty woman’s dainty vanities—was deliciously familiar to both. Mr. Stafford inhaled it like a connoisseur. O’Hara drew audibly a passionate breath of rapture.

“ Glory be to God, Kitty ! ” he cried ; “ but it’s the beauty of the summer dawn you’ve got this winter night ! ”

He seized his beloved's right hand, and there could be no mistake about the fact that he saluted it.

"A rose!" exclaimed Stafford, advancing with short, dainty steps to bow over the lady's left wrist, negligently extended in his direction, and touch it with a butterfly kiss. "A rose?—a hundred roses, a heaven of roses!"

Kitty shifted velvet eyes for a second from the contemplation of her image in the mirror to that of her handsome swains as they appeared over her shoulders. A little shiver of pleasure passed over her person as she dropped her glance back to her own reflection. She coquetted with it for a second or two, drawing up a pretty throat, tilting an impudent chin, sweeping long black lashes downwards to peep through them as she slowly moved her head from one side to the other.

"Oho, Tom, my boy!" cried O'Hara, "and when did you ever see a rose with such a pair of eyes?"

"And when did a cold, empty sky wear such a smile?" retorted Stafford in a light tone that contrasted with the Irishman's fervour.

"Come, come!" cried Kitty briskly; "do you think I have time to-night for this sort of thing? You've been admitted on business, my friends. Now, Stafford, what say you?"—lifting up the patch again—"shall it be under the left eye?—O'Hara, keep quiet, or out you must go!"

Mr. Stafford sat down on a gilt-leg stool, and worked

it forward very respectfully to as close proximity as circumstances would allow ; then, folding his arms, he threw a deep air of gravity into his looks as he contemplated the visage which the widow turned with equal seriousness for his inspection.

There was a moment of throbbing silence, while O'Hara gnashed his teeth. Presently the oracle delivered itself.

“Such eyes as yours, dear Kitty,” he said in his soft, well-bred voice, “need no finger-post to draw attention to them. They are beacons that claim instant admiration by their own flame.” (“Ah, now! listen to him! Talk of my metaphors!” muttered O'Hara.) “But the dimple that comes with your heavenly smile and goes with your—your gentle melancholy” (Lydia sniffed)—“that dimple, Kitty, which peeps and vanishes like a star in our night—it would not be amiss to make the world mindful of it. As who should look and read : *ad astra!*”

Kitty turned eagerly back to the glass. “Perhaps you are right,” said she.

Stafford half rose from his seat.

“Stay! too low!—too high! O Kitty, have a care—nay, this frown will never do; I must see a smile, or I cannot guide. Stop, stop!” He laid his hand over hers.

A sudden vision in the glass of O'Hara's countenance

behind her, lowering under his powdered red hair, and the desired smile flashed on the lady's lips.

"Now!" cried Stafford.

He shot out a long finger, and gently but firmly pressed its tip just by the side of the dimple. When he withdrew it, Kitty smiled again.

"A stroke of genius," said she.

And Stafford, stepping back and contemplating her with his head on one side, assented in satisfied tones, "Yes. I have been Heaven-inspired."

Mr. O'Hara's comment, which placed Mr. Stafford's proper habitation in quite another region, and further expressed a desire to hasten his home-going, passed unheeded by the two consultants.

"Now for the domino!" cried Mistress Bellairs gaily, preparing to rise.

"Nay, nay!" exclaimed Stafford, arresting her. "Two are the mode of the town, this year, Kitty."

"Two the mode?" echoed she.

"Ay, surely. One patch on the face, dearest Bellairs, and one on the throat—for whomsoever has a handsome shoulder. It has been the rage ever since Miss Rachael Peace, of Sadler's Wells, appeared last month in the *Stratagem*, and Lord Mandeville swore out loud, in my Lady Trefusis's box, that she had the fairest shoulders——"

Kitty started as if the words had covered a little

stab. Miss Lydia turned round with an interested air.

“And has this Rachel Peace, in your opinion, my good man, anything so wonderful about her? A pasty baggage, I thought her, and thin in the collar-bone. . . . Where did she wear that patch?”

“O Kitty,” said Stafford, with his pleasant laugh, “ask me not about Rachel Peace, for I vow, whatever I have seen of other women, I forget to-night. I could not tell you the exact spot where Miss Rachel Peace wore the patch; but, methinks, I could decide where it best would become Mistress Kitty, so that he who saw it will carry the memory of it to his grave.”

“Well, be quick!” snapped she.

He pushed back his chair a pace or two, and surveyed her critically.

The unwonted excitement which possessed Mrs. Bellairs, that usually self-satisfied little lady, this evening, had brought fresh sparkles to her eye and a flush to her cheek that shamed its rouge. Beneath the folded laces, the fair bosom was heaving with shortened breath.

It may be that Mr. Stafford prolonged his contemplation a few seconds longer than was required. It was a talent of this mercurial gentleman to seem most respectful where he was most audacious, so that things were permitted to him with smiles that might have been denied with frowns. He delivered judgment,—

“ Here, where runs that little vein, azure rivulet through a fair field of snow ; where the lovely shoulder falls into this little valley, planned by Cupid himself under Venus’s own eyes ; where——”

“ That will serve, sir,” said Kitty, whisking round and, with the unerring swoop of genius, planting a dainty black star in the faint curve of the white shoulder thus poetically indicated. Then she turned again to flash her triumph at Stafford.

He clapped his hands, half with that mockery that never left him, half in genuine admiration.

“ Perfect ! the last touch ! Ah, ’tis rightly named *L’Assassine !*”

“ *L’Assassine !*” She caught the word with a happy laugh, and then, her eye once again on her mirror, regarded the effect of the patch musingly.

“ Why, madam,” said Stafford, with a sudden dry gravity, “ and pray what fresh assassination are you plotting for to-night ?”

Mr. O’Hara had been no unmoved witness of these delicate proceedings. Only a ripe experience of her temper, when interfered with, had prevented him a score of times from flinging himself between his privileged rival and the complacent lady. His dumb show of fury, the clenched hand thrust out and withdrawn, the mute apostrophizing of Kitty, the mute cursing of his friend, had, however, somewhat relieved his over-

charged feelings, while affording much amusement to Lydia. Now, however, he deemed the time come to recall his personality to the widow's fickle mind.

"By me soul," he cried, running forward and flinging himself on his knees, "if it's assassination she wants, I'm ready for her. Sure she's done me to death a thousand times, but here's a heart that will be ready to die again as often as she pleases."

Kitty cast a glance of good-humoured scorn on the gay, reckless face upturned to the light. In spite of its gaiety and recklessness, there was passion in the green-brown eye—a mad passion which gratified her, little as she now thought of gratifying it. Her glance shifted quickly back to Stafford's countenance.

"I cannot say," this gentleman was stating, "like our volatile friend, that I am prepared to die more than once. But, as Mistress Bellairs has the keeping of my heart, she knows that it is hers to break once and for ever, should she so please."

Looking on him, Kitty considered. Was that cold gray gaze of his capable of one spark of real emotion? Should she ever bring this slippery, polished courtier in true earnest to her feet?

It certainly was to her credit that Kitty's discarded bridegrooms should immediately have resumed their posts as adorers, without loss, it seemed, of faith, hope, or charity in their capricious goddess. But with a

return to London life Kitty's horizons and ambitions had been widening. She nibbled her little finger pensively, then flung out both her hands.

"And are ye men of sport, and would you have me strike again what's dead already, O'Hara?—or slay what's tame, Stafford? Oh fie!"

"Denis, my lad, up with you!" cried Stafford with his jovial laugh, striking the kneeling O'Hara on the shoulder. "Our Kitty has higher game for her pretty bow and arrow than out-of-pocket you or humble untitled me."

The dimple peeped in Kitty's cheek; she kicked off a tiny Spanish slipper.

"My shoes, Lydia," she commanded, unconcerned.

The Honourable Denis made a wild plunge on all fours to snatch the dainty objects from Lydia's hands and have the placing of them upon the little foot in its pink silk stocking, of which he had had a brief, entrancing vision. But Mistress Bellairs thwarted him by a dexterous movement. And as she rose, duly shod, clapping her heels with a conquering air, O'Hara, still squatting on the floor, fell back upon the consolation of rapturously kissing a discarded slipper.

Over a dress of tiffany embroidered with roses, of a splendour that baffled description, the lady now slipped on a dream of a domino, all rosy satin and fragrant lace; and while Lydia spread out the great hood before

delicately drawing it over the high-massed powdered curls, Mistress Bellairs was fain to shoot another glance of sweet vanity at Mr. Stafford—just to read in his eyes how entrancing she looked.

But he shook his head at her. “I am sorry for you, my dear!”

“What is the meaning of that, sir?”

“Only, my dearest life, to see so fair a huntress bent on so bootless a chase!”

Here Lydia’s sniff was fraught with so much meaning that, in a double fury, Mistress Kitty wrenched herself loose from her woman’s hands and stamped her foot at Mr. Stafford.

“You are monstrous impertinent, sir—and, besides, monstrous ignorant of what you are talking about!”

“Madam, his lordship is still the willing prize of another bow. . . . Kitty, Kitty, you will point your little arrows in vain, for once.”

The more serious turn the conversation had taken had arrested Mr. O’Hara’s attention. He dropped the slipper he had been melodramatically apostrophizing, and began to listen with a serious countenance.

“I’ll have you know, dear Kitty,” pursued Mr. Stafford in his gentle tone, “that this same Mandeville is bound hand and foot, heart and purse, to one Rachel Peace—and a pretty piece likewise . . . pardon the quip!—whilom Quaker, now fair renegade and actress

at Sadler's Wells, where she is creating such a *furor* that, by order of the Prince of Wales, a horse patrol is now set nightly to protect the quality that throngs the road between town and the Wells. He's mad in love. Mad jealous too. He'll beat a man if he applaud her not enough, and he'll beat a man if he applaud her too well. Egad, I believe, did she but know how to play her cards, she'd be his countess yet ! ”

Kitty gave a start; her face contracted by a spasm of fury. But, quickly restraining herself, she shrugged her shoulders with a smile as of one who disdains to argue, picked up her mask from the table, and feigned a mighty interest in the glow of her eyes behind it in the glass.

Lydia, who had listened with malicious approval to Mr. Stafford's discourse, received his last remark with a cough and an involuntary shake of the head. “ Lud, but these fine gentlemen be fools ! ” she thought. “ He wants to put my mistress off, and sets her on with as good as tally-ho ! ”

But Mr. Stafford went on. He was, perhaps, not such a fool as the worldly-wise Lydia believed; he perhaps found pleasure of a sort in this delicate baiting of one who had baited him so long.

“ And, sweet Kitty, I'll have you know that when a man is as far gone in love as this same Mandeville,

any other woman, be she as fair as Venus, is no more to him than the veriest hag."

There are limits to the endurance even of a pretty woman's pride. That Kitty Bellairs should live to be told by a man that by any possibility she——

"And I'll have you know, sir—you who think yourself so well posted in the news of the town—that my Lord Mandeville and Mistress Peace have not been on speaking terms these ten days, and that his lordship has been courting me steadily these six. I'll have you know, sir, that his lordship is in sad need of fortune, in sad need of settled life—in fine, sir, of such a wife as your humble servant; and that this masked ball which you are pleased to-night to grace with your company, and where his Royal Highness is likewise to be present, is given, sir, by his lordship's sister, Lady Flo in honour of Mistress Bellairs"—the lady's flowery silks and satins billowed round her as she swept an annihilating curtsy—"and I'll have you know, sir, that this same masque, in my honour, is to no other end than that his lordship may finally conclude matters with a lady of his own world, worthier of his attentions than this play-actress. My Lord Mandeville commissioned his sister to find him beauty, and money and wit, sir. I leave it to you to say if she has succeeded!"

"'Pon my soul!" interrupted the Irish gentleman

with sudden explosion. "He'll be content with no less! It's the devil's own impudence he's got! A carrot-headed, empty-pursed rake of a fellow, with the temper of Old Nick, if all accounts be true!"

"If you say another word, O'Hara," said Kitty summarily, over her shoulder, "Lydia will show you the door." Silence fell on the instant, and Kitty flounced her triumph upon the real offender. "So, sir," she resumed, "you see."

"Beauty, money—and wit," repeated he, in a kind of muse.

"Yes, Mr. Stafford," affirmed Kitty, with a smile and a wriggle; "and my Lady Flora could think of no one better."

"Indeed," said he, "I am not surprised." His voice and look were so silky-soft that Mistress Bellairs deemed him completely vanquished, and woman-like, proceeded to roll the prostrate foe in the dust.

"And so, my good friend, you need no longer fear for me a bootless chase, for the quarry is to my hand to lay low, if I please. And I myself have chosen the form of entertainment for to-night, for it is my pleasure to give his lordship further proof of my wit behind the mask before permitting him to claim as his own—well, what you think, sir, will seem no better to him than that of the veriest hag."

Now Mr. Stafford sighed and Mistress Kitty broke

off. There was something disconcerting about his air. She looked sharp inquiry at him.

“Let us go, my dearest madam,” he said in a melancholy tone.

“You’ll drive me mad,” said she.

“What is it now? My coach has been waiting this hour to escort yours.” Again she stamped her foot. “You have my most earnest wishes,” said he, turning up his eyes and sighing once more.

“Mr. Stafford,” she stormed, “I’ll have your meaning, for this is more than I can endure.”

“My Lord Mandeville will be waiting in vain for beauty, wit, and money.” She caught him by the wrist and shook him. Then he fixed his eyes upon her, for the first time that evening bereft of their dancing mockery. “Kitty,” said he, “you left one thing out of your calculations.”

“And pray what may that be?”

“You’ve never really known anything of it yet, though I vow you’ve seen it oft enough; and ’tis something, my dear, that, when once you know it, you’ll let all the world go by, just for the sake of it. Lord Mandeville knows it, and that is why, for all your wit and all your beauty and all your money, you’ll not meet your match in him.”

Kitty drew back, her lips curling in scorn.

“And this marvellous something?”

“ 'Tis but Love, my dear lady.”

She had known what he was going to say. And yet it enraged her when he had said it. And so did the groan with which O'Hara echoed the word.

“ My pelisse, Lydia !” she cried sharply. “ My fan, girl ! I verily believe I shall turn lunatic myself, if I listen to these lunatics a moment longer. Call up the footmen !”

Yet, as Mr. Stafford was, *facile princeps*, one of the finest beaux in town, she was fain to accept his hand as far as the coach, were it only for the effect upon the gentlemen hopelessly waiting in the anteroom.

Mr. O'Hara caught the maid by the arm as she would have followed her mistress.

“ By Heaven, this is bad news for me ! And since when, Lydia, has your divine mistress fixed her heart upon that devil ?”

“ Her heart !” sneered Lydia, and tossed her head, she being of Mr. Stafford's opinion on the matter.

“ Lydia, me darling, if that Mandeville comes here after her, think of me and poison his tea for him, and I'll give you the finest diamond necklace in the world — if I have to go to the road for it.”

He was desperately in earnest. There were beads of anguish on his brow, and a gray pallor upon his gallant comeliness. Yet, as he slid his arm imploringly round the girl's waist, and felt how slim and trim it