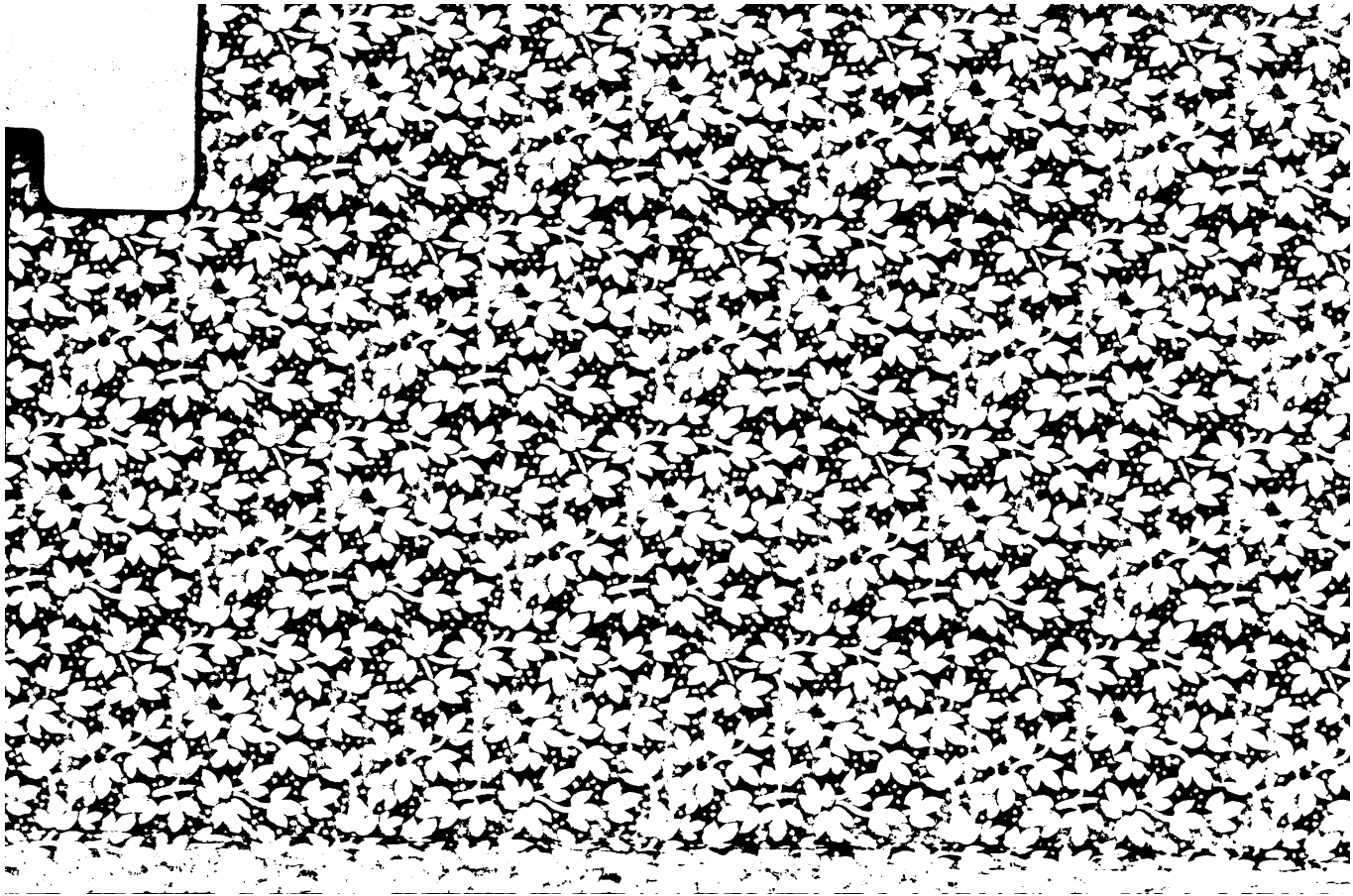
THROUGH THE STAGE DOOR

BY

MARIETTA HOLLEY

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THROUGH THE STAGE DOOR.

A Novel.

BY

HARRIETT JAY,

AUTHOR OF

'THE QUEEN OF CONNAUGHT,' 'THE DARK COLLEEN,' 'TWO MEN AND A MAID,' 'THE PRIEST'S BLESSING,' 'MY CONNAUGHT COUSINS,' ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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TWO MEN AND A MAID.

F. V. WHITE & Co., 31, *Southampton Street, Strand.*

THROUGH THE STAGE DOOR.

CHAPTER I.

Colonel Sedgemore was not a particularly intellectual man; nor was he, in any profound sense, either a philosopher or a man of the world. Finding himself utterly disenchanted regarding the one object on which he had set his simple faith, he at once became a full-blown pessimist, and abandoned his belief in the goodness of human nature. He was deeply and cruelly wounded; but, with a soldier's pride,

together with not a little of a soldier's unintelligence, he determined to disguise his suffering; and the only way he could think of was to assume a profound interest in amusement for which he did not in reality care one straw.

'I will show her that I can despise her,' he said to himself; 'I will show her that I can abandon without a thought one who has proved herself so worthless, and say with the others, "*Vive la bagatelle!*"'

So he forthwith plunged into all the gaieties of the London season, then rapidly drawing to its close. His face was to be seen at theatres, balls, racecourses—everywhere that Fashion jingled her fool's-cap and bells. He had always had an attraction for Bohemian society, and now he indulged it to the full. He went a good deal

'behind the scenes;' he was introduced to luminaries of the drama and stars of the ballet. He was present, in company with the Prince of Wales, at a smoking concert given at the Tomahawk Club. In short, he became quite a busy man about town, a shining light in both Belgravia and Bohemia.

'Old Sedgemore's going the pace!' the younger officers of his club would say among themselves.

But they wronged him deeply who imagined that he ever descended to vulgar debauchery or scandalous dissipation. Though externally changed, he remained internally the same—a high-souled, pure-minded soldier, who kept his conscience as clean as his person, and did no wrong. But his belief in the honesty of men and

the goodness of women was quite gone. He could look at their revels, though he would not share them; and he was content to rub shoulders with doubtful reputations of all kinds, though he never really descended to their level.

Meantime his character suffered, and before long, of course, news was wafted to the Fanes that Lottie's old lover was going altogether to the bad. On one occasion, as she was passing along Piccadilly, Carrie saw him seated on the top of the Dorking coach in company with a well-known low comedian and two Spanish ladies who danced at the Alhambra. He had merely met them by accident on the road, but the deduction Carrie drew was fatal to the Colonel's character for morality.

The poor Colonel soon found that the

ordinary gaieties of Bohemia were only Dead Sea fruit. He grew more and more dissatisfied and misanthropic. Everything now seemed evil, and doubtless Lottie was only like the rest. He determined to apply, as soon as possible, for active service in some distant part of the world.

One evening he was taken by a lively friend of his, Major Buncombe, to the Haymarket Theatre; and after the conclusion of the performance the Major proposed that they should adjourn to the Belladonna Club.

The Colonel hesitated.

'I don't know the place,' he said.

'Don't you? Then you ought to; so let me take you.'

'But what is it—an ordinary club for men?'

'No,' replied the Major, with a laugh. 'A club for women—a ladies' symposium. It is chiefly used by actors and actresses after the performance. You can get a very fair supper, and there are always some pretty faces.'

After a little further hesitation, the Colonel consented to accompany his friend. They hailed a hansom, and were transported without delay to the club-rooms, in the near neighbourhood of Oxford Street.

The entrance was narrow, but gorgeously fitted up with crimson curtains and delicately shaded lamps. A thickly carpeted staircase led up to a suite of rooms on the first-floor, from which came the sound of female laughter and of popping champagne corks.

The first room the Colonel entered was a

salon, with large mirrors and crimson velvet lounges. On the table were strewn newspapers and illustrated journals. Several groups sat here; the men in dress suits, the women for the most part in walking costume. The Colonel recognised at a glance several actresses of doubtful reputation, a few male members of the profession, and numerous chorus ladies and members of the ballet.

At one end of the room, earnestly conversing with a very pretty young lady whose diamonds were liberally displayed, was a middle-aged man in a frock coat and white tie. A waiter stood near them, opening a pint bottle of champagne. The spectacle was so incongruous, that Sedgemore was startled, and audibly expressed his astonishment to his companion.

'Don't you know who that is?' asked the Major, grinning. 'That's the Rev. Hark-away Hackney, well-known in connection with the Clerical and Theatrical Congress.'

'Never heard of it,' said Sedgemore drily. 'What does it mean?'

'It originated, old fellow, in Hackney's enthusiastic desire to reform the stage, and procure for it the countenance of the Church and the Bishops. Up to the present moment he has only succeeded in enlisting the co-operation of one Bishop, the darkey who represents the See of Ohanimana, in the remote Pacific, and who has evinced the most extraordinary interest in the drama, especially the first row of the ballet.'

'Who is that girl in his company?' asked the Colonel.

'Pollie Greyhen, of the Folies Bergères. You know Pollie? She hasn't an "h" to bless herself with, and yet she addressed the Congress the other day on "The Religious Teaching of Shakespeare." But come into the supper-room and have a cutlet.'

The supper-room was much more crowded. Groups of merry men and women were seated at the tables, corks were popping, waiters were hurrying to and fro. The two gentlemen found a vacant table and sat down. The Colonel's friend supped well, and drank a liberal supply of wine; but the Colonel himself made a mere pretence at eating. He was interested, however, in watching the groups about him. How the women drank down the champagne! how boisterously they laughed! and what coarse jokes

they made! Some of them had not washed the paint from their faces, and many of them were arrayed in the finery in which a few hours before they had strutted on the stage. Major Buncombe seemed to be pretty well known to many. While he was eating his supper he received many nods and smiles, and even kisses, which were wafted to him from pretty lips on the tips of pretty fingers; and when his supper was over he offered to introduce the Colonel to some of his fair friends. But this honour was refused; and leaving the Major behind to finish the night, the Colonel went home, with a taste in his mouth as if he had drunk sour wine.

When he left the club his opinion of Lottie was lower by several degrees than it had been when he entered it.

'If those were her associates,' he said, 'no wonder she could deceive me!'

About three weeks later the Colonel met the Major again. The two men were walking in Piccadilly, and came face to face.

'Why, Colonel,' said the Major, 'where have you been? Rusticating with some pretty girl, eh? Haven't seen you at the club!'

'I haven't been to the club.'

'No? Thought you'd be there every night. Some better game, eh? You are going to the Long Acre to-night, of course?'

'I don't know. What is on?'

'God bless my soul! My dear fellow, don't you know? Why, Cora Stevenage is on, or will be; and we fancy she'll be all

there. She is going to play Julia in the "Hunchback;" and glorious she'll look in it. Superb creature, Cora! Do you know her?'

'I have heard of her, of course, but never met her.'

'Then you shall, for it's time you did. I have got a couple of stalls. You shall have one. We will dine at the club together, and go on to see Cora afterwards.'

At seven o'clock the two friends, dressed now in full evening costume, met at the club, consumed a charming French dinner and a good deal of champagne; afterwards they called a hansom, and drove to the Long Acre. The theatre was crowded in every part by a very representative audience; the curtain was up, and the play going forward; Miss Stevenage was on

the stage. The Colonel and his friend took their seats as quietly as possible—after that the Colonel never removed his eyes from the stage. When the act-drop fell there was a hum of conversation. The Major, who was pretty well known everywhere, gallantly kissed his fingers to his female friends. Then he turned to the Colonel.

'How do you like her?'

'She has a nice face—is she like the rest?'

'Humph! her past has been somewhat shady, but she's trying to do the respectable now, and, egad, sir! I don't see why she shouldn't. But the women won't have her at any price. I mentioned to my wife that she ought to invite her to one of her "small and earlys," and she nearly had a

fit. Fact is, they're afraid of her, egad! for Cora's clever, deucedly clever, and would cut 'em all out, you see!'

At the end of the second act the Colonel was still more interested, so the Major said:

'Would you like to be introduced?'

'Very much!'

'Then you shall. We'll go round after the piece, and I'll make you known to one another. She can't bear to be disturbed during the performance; she's always upset with the part, and can't talk to her friends. Stop a bit, though, I had better let her know you are coming.'

He took from his pocket a card, and hastily scribbled on it in pencil:

'I want to introduce you to Colonel Sedgemore. You know him—Sedgemore

of Sedgemore—Fane affair. May I bring him round after the performance?'

He handed this to an attendant, and soon got back another card with the word 'Yes' scribbled beneath Miss Stevenage's name.

'Does she frequent the Belladonna Club?' asked the Colonel.

'Never goes near it, my dear fellow; she's a cut above *that*. As I told you, she's going in for the respectable, but I am afraid she won't find it pay.'

The piece went magnificently, and the actress obtained a triumph. While the audience was streaming out of the theatre, the Colonel and his friend made their way behind the scenes. They passed across the stage, along several dark passages, and were shown into a gorgeously fitted room.

The room was empty. The two men waited for some time; then a door opened, and a lady came in. She was plainly but elegantly dressed in a walking costume, and she had a lace veil thrown over her head. Her hands and throat were sparkling with diamonds.

'So glad to see you, Major,' she said sweetly; then she turned to the Colonel: 'Awfully good of you to come round and talk to me. I hope you have enjoyed yourself.'

'Very much,' said the Colonel; 'but I felt out in the cold, because I didn't bring you any flowers.'

'Oh, never mind!—you shall have one from me.'

She pulled a rose from one of the many

bouquets which covered her table, and put it in his coat.

'I shouldn't like you to give *my* flowers away.'

'No? Well, perhaps I wouldn't give away yours. Here's an *embarras de richesse*, you see, and it's possible to have too much even of a good thing.'

'Ada, dearest, will you have some supper?' said the Major.

'Can't, love; I'm engaged three deep to-night—some other time, perhaps.'

'You'll dine with us?—with the Colonel and me, I mean. You're not engaged three deep for dinners, are you?'

'Perhaps, I don't know; but if you'll bring the Colonel to see me, we may arrange something. Will you come?' she asked sweetly of the Colonel.

'I shall be delighted.'

'Very well, then, that is settled, and I shall look for you. *Au revoir!*'

She shook hands heartily, and the two gentlemen took their leave.

CHAPTER II.

From Ellen Grayfield to Carrie Fane.

'My dear Miss Carrie,—

'When I consented to leave you and come out here as maid to Miss Lottie, I promised to write you truly about everything. I'm getting this letter ready to send on shore at the first port. Well, Miss Carrie, I'm sorry to say Miss Lottie is ill; it came on quite gradual like. After you and master had left the ship at Gravesend and we sailed off, she went into her cabin and locked the door, and she didn't open it for

hours. When she did, and I got in, I saw that quite a change had come over her. She tried to be cheerful-like and unconcerned, but, oh! Miss Carrie, it broke my heart to look at her—our dear young lady that was so happy and so good to us all at home. Well, miss, I tried to get her into the saloon, for I thought maybe a sight of the passengers might cheer her and do her good, but she wouldn't go. She just took her meals alone in her own cabin, and when the passengers were below, she came out and walked about the deck with me. This went on for three days, and on the fourth morning she was in a fever, and couldn't rise at all. She is very bad now; the ship's doctor is attending to her, and everybody is very kind; and don't you worry yourself, dear Miss Carrie, for I shall look

after her well, and I pray God she will soon be well.

'Your humble servant,

'ELLEN GRAYFIELD.'

From Carrie Fane to Ellen Grayfield.

'Your letter has put me into a fever. I dare not tell Pa and Ma. Poor, poor Lottie! Telegraph from the next place how she is, and for heaven's sake, Ellen, nurse her well. I shall write to her, and try to drag her out of her melancholy.

'CARRIE FANE.'

From Ellen Grayfield to Carrie Fane.

'DEAR MISS CARRIE,—

'Thank heaven Miss Lottie is coming round! The doctor says she passed the worst three days ago and is rapidly gaining strength. She is sitting up in her bed at

present, writing to you. The doctor says you may write her all news—it will do her good.

'Your humble servant,

'ELLEN GRAYFIELD.'

From Lottie to Carrie Fane.

'MY OWN DEAR SISTER,—

'It seems so strange to be writing to you from all this distance. I have been ill, but am now better; the crisis has past, and let us hope a new life has begun for me. Oh, Carrie dear! you don't know how I felt that day when you and Pa said good-bye to me, and left me all alone on the ship.

'For two years!

'When we were all at home talking it over, I did not realize what it was; but

at that moment I did, and oh, I thought my heart would break! I knew I must be ill, and I thought I might die; I hope to gain strength before we land, and then, when we get to work, I shall have less time to think. Write me, dear, all the home news. I enclose letters for Pa and Ma; they are short, because as yet I feel too weak to write much. There are some very nice people on board: one family of three—Papa, Mamma, and daughter—have seen me a few times at the Variety, and seem to admire me very much. The daughter, a very pretty girl, comes in the morning to chat with me; she looked at me so strangely at first, she quite made me laugh: I think she expected to find me habited like a burlesque prince, and dancing about the cabin; now she is beginning to

comprehend the fact that I am but an ordinary girl. How is Charlie? and when are you going to be married? You must tell me, Carrie dear, for though I am so far away, I mean to keep your wedding. Ellen has just come to say I must write no more, and as she has been my very good nurse, I obey her.

'Believe me, dearest Carrie,

'Your ever-loving sister,

'LOTTIE.'

From Carrie to Lottie Fane.

'MY DEAREST LOTTIE,—

'I am not going to tell you how sorry I was to hear about your illness, because that would make you dull, dear, and I don't mean to do that; for heaven's sake, Lottie, keep up your spirits till you

get back again. Now for home news. We are much the same as when you left, Lottie, except for one thing. Pa has had a rise in the world. Mr. Caterer has engaged him as prompter and assistant stage-manager for his new theatre, and has given him a rise of salary. Now, as we know very well that Mr. Caterer never pays a man ten shillings a week unless he's worth twenty, I think we ought to appreciate Pa. Now, my dear, for another piece of news. The very morning after you had taken your departure for good, we had a visitor—none other, indeed, than our amiable friend, Mr. Fred Weathersby. He came dashing up in a hansom cab, and I, thinking it was Charlie, rushed out to meet him. He looked fearfully ill, Lottie, and almost desperate. He asked

for you, and when I told him you were gone to Australia, I thought he'd have fainted on the pavement. I asked him in, and when we were in the parlour together, I extracted from him a few truths about what you had to endure from that abominable woman, Mrs. Crowe; mark me, Lottie, she has worked your destruction. I shouldn't be astonished to hear that she had intercepted your letters and burnt them. Oh, my dear Lottie, what a fool you were to take it all quietly and run away!

'Your ever-loving sister,

'CARRIE.'

From Carrie to Lottie Fane.

'Such news, Lottie! If I had known a week ago what I know to-day, Mr.

Weathersby wouldn't have had quite such a gushing reception when he called upon me. But I must begin at the beginning.

'Caterer has opened his new theatre, and who do you think is the so-called manageress? Who, indeed, but Mr. Weathersby's light-o'-love, Clara Hark-away! The fact is, she has bribed Caterer with a few thousands, and he's put up her name. A week before the theatre was opened, Caterer had the stage fitted up, and issued invitations for a grand reception. Pa and I got invitations, and thinking, of course, it was all right, we went. Everything was magnificent. The curtain was down. A lovely drawing-room scene was set, and the whole stage was carpeted and filled with drawing-room furniture. The stage was crowded—a more magnificently

dressed throng I never set eyes on; but, my dear, imagine my feelings when I discovered that the prominent members of the crowd were Clara Harkaway and women of the Clara type. Now, Lottie, although we are actresses, and burlesque actresses, and have been sneered at by a few people whom I could name, we've always kept ourselves straight, and the sight of these gaudily bedecked butterflies flaunting about in their ill-gotten finery, naturally got my back up, and when Clara had the audacity to come forward, before the whole assembly, and gushingly offer me her hand, I positively trembled with indignation. I gave her a cold little bow, and turning to Pa, said we'd better go. The impudent woman laughed maliciously.

'"Oh, I'm not good enough for you,

Carrie Fane, am I?" she said; "at all events, I haven't been jilted by a Colonel, and I haven't had to fly to Australia because my newly picked up lover got tired of me in about three days!" Then what do you think she told me? She said that Fred Weathersby and Mrs. Crowe between them had managed to spoil your little game of becoming Mistress of Sedgemore, and that if I would go to her house on the following day she would prove it. The next day I went, and then my eyes were opened. She told me of the awful trap that had been laid to catch you, and of the innocent way in which you walked into it. She showed me Fred Weathersby's letters, in which he described the progress of his love affair, in which he caricatured you for his mistress's amusement, and promised her

a handsome present when his work was done—in fact, when your heart was broken, and he was certain of being re-installed as the Colonel's heir. Oh, my dear, what a wicked plot! but I'll have you cleared: I'll write to the papers, and I'll see the Colonel. I'm off to Sedgemore to-morrow.

'Always, my darling Lottie,

'Your loving sister,

'CARRIE.'

Telegram from Lottie Fane to Carrie Fane.

'For God's sake spare me. Don't write to the papers; don't see the Colonel. If further publicity is given to this, I shall never face England again. Am writing.'

From Lottie to Carrie Fane.

'My dearest Sister,—

'You have made me positively wretched. I know you act for the best, dear—I know it is your love for me which has led you to open up these old wounds; but, believe me, they are better left closed for ever. Of course, Carrie dear, I knew there had been a plot, else how could it all have come about? I knew when I left Sedgemore that the moment the Colonel returned Mrs. Crowe would try to poison his mind against me, but I never thought that he would hear it and believe it without asking a word of explanation from me. It is better as it is. If his faith in me could be so easily shaken, what a wretched married life ours would have been! As to Mr. Weathersby, the

part he has played will assuredly bring with it its own punishment. Meantime, I am trying to forget that that part of my life has ever been. I am enjoying the voyage hugely, and feeling much stronger for the sea breezes. Send me all the home news, dear. When I read that I seem to be sitting with you all round the dear old fire at home.

'Ever your affectionate sister,

'LOTTIE.'

From Carrie to Lottie Fane.

'Your telegram arrived in time to prevent my writing to the papers, my dearest; but it was too late to stop my visit to Sedgemore. I went down, but didn't succeed in meeting the Colonel. He has never been there since that night when he returned and found you gone. Yes; that cat of a woman has got it all in her own hands

again; but, mark my words, Nemesis is sure to overtake her! When she heard I was there she refused to see me, but my former influence with her maid told again, and I was allowed to make my way into the old harridan's presence. I won't distress you, dear, by telling you what passed, but I can assure you I didn't come out the worst of the two. Frankly, Lottie, I think you are well quit of them: they are not our sort; but really, I should like to clear you to the Colonel—may I?

'Your ever loving sister,

'CARRIE.'

From Lottie to Carrie Fane.

'MY DEAREST CARRIE,—

'One last request—try to dismiss all thoughts of what has passed, and on

no account whatever mention my name to Colonel Sedgemore; you know my wishes on this subject, and I shall not feel you are my sister if you violate them in any way.

'I am in harness again now, and already feel better. We opened last night to a magnificent house, and I have every hope of a most successful tour. I am writing by this post to Pa and Ma, and sending them a portion of last night's receipts. Will you see, Carrie dear, that Pa doesn't work so hard in future? He must give up his copying, and I will send more than enough to make up for it. It is my one happiness to know that you are all comfortable and happy at home.

'Your loving sister,

'LOTTIE.'

From Carrie to Lottie Fane.

'My dearest Lottie,—

'I have such lots of news, that I don't know where to begin. Well, to begin with, I may as well tell you we are all well and happy at home. Times have changed for us, Lottie—they have indeed! Your little cheques, which come very regularly, bless you, are of great value; but don't distress yourself, Lottie, for we could rub along without them—we could indeed, dear. Pa never thinks of copying now, nor prompting either; he is called assistant stage-manager at the Variety, but he is really stage-manager, and he gets a very tolerable screw from Caterer. Now for news number two, my dear. I am going to get married. Charlie is doing so well that he

won't let me hold out any longer, so on the 21st the stage loses me and he gets me. He has taken a beautiful little house at Richmond. I am afraid it'll be rather dull at first, but the baby's coming to stay with me for a bit, and Ma and Pa will be down every Sunday, so I shall have one jolly day a week. Now, Lottie dearest, to return to a painful subject. Don't you think anything more of Colonel Sedgemore; or, if you do, think of him with contempt. We thought he was a dear old thing, but we were mistaken—the vice was there, and it has come out. Only three weeks ago Charlie saw him entertaining a few of the Topsies of our profession at supper at the Belladonna Club; now he has gone and picked up with that Cora Stevenage. She has ruined old Lord Strathmore, and I heartily hope she

may do the same to our friend the Colonel. Well, Lottie, I'm not sorry I am going out of the profession. When I think of what goes on in it, it nearly makes me ill. Drink my health on the 21st, dearest, and keep yourself as happy as you can.

'Your affectionate sister,

'CARRIE FANE.

'I sign "Fane," because if all goes well it is the last time I shall ever be able to do it.'

From Lottie to Carrie Fane.

'EVER DEAREST CARRIE,—

'I have an hour left before I go to the theatre, and I am going to spend it with you. To think of this being your wedding-day! Well, dear, I only hope you may be as happy in your married as

you were in your single life. I think you will, Carrie, for you are a dear, kind, good little thing, and Charlie Jinks is the best man I ever met in my life, I think. I have been with you in spirit all day, for it is a very sad day to me, being so far away from you all; but you must write and tell me how things go off, dear, and I shall feel as if I had been with you. We are still doing good business, and I fancy the travelling and change of climate agrees with me; but after all there is nothing like dear old England, and I do long sometimes to be back again; the hardest of all to bear is being absent on your wedding day.

'Ever, my dear Carrie,

'Your loving sister,

'LOTTIE.'

From Ellen Grayfield to Carrie Fane.

'My dear Miss Carrie,—

'You will excuse me, I am sure, but I do want to congratulate you. To think of you being married in England, and us being here! It do seem too bad; and Miss Lottie, she does feel it too, for she's done nothing but talk about you all day long. She wore a white dress to-day, and white flowers, and she made me wear white flowers too; and we both touched glasses together and drank your health; and when the clock struck twelve, Miss Lottie cried a bit, and said: "Well, Ellen, she's entered on her new life now, God bless her!"

'She is doing wonderful well, Miss Carrie, and you wouldn't believe the lot

she's made of; every night the house is crammed, and you would open your eyes if you were to see the presents she gets—rings, brooches, and bracelets, and such fruit and flowers. Then the invitations she gets!—she might almost live without spending a penny, but she won't—she won't accept one of them, but just goes to her hotel, and lives there as quiet as if she was nobody.

'Ah, Miss Carrie, she ain't the young lady she used to be; all her life and soul is gone, and she's as solemn as a woman of sixty, except when she gets a packet of letters from home, and then she's happy. She's prettier than ever she was, and let her go where she will, everybody adores her.

'My compliments to master and missis,

and I hope to bring Miss Lottie safe back to you soon.

'Your dutiful servant,

'ELLEN GRAYFIELD.'

From Carrie Jinks to Lottie Fane.

'MY DEAREST LOTTIE,—

'I'm married and done for, and firmly established in my little cot at Richmond, and a dear little cot it is too. Well, dear, I'm going to tell you all about it. Though it was a prosy wedding enough, I can tell you;—there was no honeymoon, no bridesmaids; Charlie, Pa, Ma, myself, and the baby, just went off to church in the morning, and after the ceremony was over we drove in a landau down to Richmond, where a jolly dinner was waiting for us in my new home. Well, all would have passed off very quietly, only Ma, after

drinking my health, suddenly thought of the comfort I had been to her, and went into hysterics at the idea of losing me. By the time she came out of them, Pa and she had to go. Well, dear, I found it rather slow down here at first, but I'm getting used to it. I've got the baby staying with me; Charlie coaches him in comic songs during the day, and I train him in stage-dancing during the evening. The neighbours think we're cracked. As soon as ever you come home, Lottie, you must come and stay with me. You would love this place, and Charlie would go out of his senses at the sight of you. The Colonel is still with that woman, and I believe Weathersby has completely gone to the dogs.

'Your loving sister,

'CARRIE JINKS.'

'P. S. We are going to be a happy family; Ma and Pa are going to give up the old house at Camden Town, and are coming to live with me till you return. It will be very nice. Pa and Charlie can go up to town every evening together, and during the day we shall all get the benefit of country air. You must come and stay here too, Lottie, when you get back, though I doubt we shall seem rather humdrum to you, love.'

CHAPTER III.

'WELL, Carrie!'

'Well, Lottie!'

The girls laid their hands upon each other's shoulders and looked into each others eyes; then they kissed each other and cried. As they stood thus, the room door opened, and a man entered, and Lottie, disengaging herself from her sister's embrace, found herself once more locked in her father's arms.

'It's all true, then,' said Lottie, when at length the three were seated around

the fire; 'the two years are over, and—and I'm home again.'

'Yes, my dear,' said Mr. Fane; 'you're home again.'

He sat by her side holding her hand in his, but his heart was sorely troubled; one glance into Lottie's face convinced him she had spoken the truth that night when she had sobbed in anguish 'My heart is broken.'

'It doesn't seem like the truth, does it, Lottie?' said Carrie, looking about her; 'who would have thought, two years ago, that you would be living in a room like this? When we got your letter to say you had actually arrived, and had put up at an hotel, even for a few hours, I thought Charlie would have gone wild.'

'Charlie was always very good to me,' said Lottie; 'where is he?'

'At the theatre. He'll be here by-and-by for Pa and me, and he said we were to make you promise to come back with us. Ma expects you too.'

'You will, Lottie?' said Mr. Fane, gazing wistfully into her face.

Lottie shook her head.

'I can't, Pa. After lunch I'm going to rehearsal, but I'll come down to-night. I'm going to play Rosalind on Saturday, you know. Think of that,' she said, smiling; 'think of me in Shakespeare—in the legitimate drama.'

'Ma always said you'd rise to it, and so you have,' said Carrie; 'but why on earth didn't you give yourself a few weeks' breathing time, Lottie?'

'I thought it would be better to set to work at once,' returned Lottie; 'so

when Mr. Caterer made the offer I seized upon it. He has been rehearsing the company for weeks, and all I've got to do is to slip into my place. Tell Ma I shall be down to-night. After this is over I'll take a good rest and come and spend it with you.'

The waiter at that moment announced Mr. Jinks and luncheon at the same time.

Mr. Jinks appeared much the same as when Lottie had left him two years before. He had grown a little stouter, perhaps, and looked more like a family man, but his face was as genial and kindly as of old. He welcomed Lottie cordially, and rated her soundly for not making his house her home.

'We could have put you up in style, Lottie,' said he. 'We've got a pretty

little place like you read about in novels, with roses and a lawn. Carrie has retired from public life, as you know, and keeps her carriage; the governor won't retire, but he could have got off for a week or so, and we could have been as jolly as sandboys.'

Lottie thanked him, and promised to take an early holiday and spend it at the country house.

The lunch passed off well. When it was over Mr. Jinks's trap was announced as ready, and Lottie took her sister into her room to put her bonnet on.

'Lottie,' said Carrie, when she was busily employed in putting on her wraps, 'who do you think I saw as I came here to-day?'

'Who?' asked Lottie, growing a shade paler than before.

'Colonel Sedgemore!'

This time Lottie made no reply, and Carrie, looking over her shoulder, saw that her face had grown hard and cold.

'Lottie,' continued Carrie, facing her sister, and forcibly taking possession of her hands, 'don't think I want to pain you; my dear, I only want to save you pain. That man has ruined your life—I saw that to-day when I looked in your face—and yet he's not worth a second thought. Lottie, you'll see him as I saw him to-day, sitting beside that woman who has supplanted you.'

'Carrie, don't!'

'All right, dear, I'm done. After all, I think you were right to come straight back to work, Lottie; it's the best thing for a while.'

The two girls went back to the drawing-room, and Lottie made her adieux with a smiling face but heavy heart. Then she walked to the window to see the dog-cart drive away, and after it had gone she stood staring blankly into the street.

'How weak and foolish I am!' she murmured, passing her hand wearily across her eyes. 'Oh, if I could only forget!'

She rang for her maid.

'Bring me my cloak, and order a hansom, Ellen,' she said, when the girl appeared.

'Yes, Miss Lottie.' The girl walked to the door, paused, and came back again. 'Are you going to the theatre, miss?' she asked.

'Yes; to rehearsal. I shall be back again in three hours, I expect, and then we go to Richmond.'

'Shall I come to rehearsal with you, miss?'

'No—not to day.'

Still the girl lingered.

'Miss Lottie ——'

'Yes.'

'I don't think you are well to-day, miss; you ought not to be by yourself.'

'Nonsense, I am quite well, Ellen, and I must learn to go out alone.'

With the assistance of her maid she was soon ready; then she descended the stairs, entered the hansom which was waiting for her at the door, and drove away in it alone.

When Carrie had cast her indignantly reproachful look at the Colonel that morning, it had been seen by another pair of eyes. The lady seated beside the Colonel had in that glance been able to read Carrie's

inmost soul; it set her pondering during the rest of their drive. The cab which held the two stopped before the door of the lady's house—a charming little residence in Park Lane—and the two entered the house together. The Colonel went straight to the drawing-room; five minutes later the lady joined him there. She found him standing upon the hearth, with his eyes fixed thoughtfully before him, and his fingers pulling carelessly at the ears of her lap-dog, which was coiled on a gipsy table at his side.

'Will you come in to luncheon?' she said.

He followed her as she passed between the curtains which divided the room and took her seat at the table, which was spread for lunch. During the meal very little was said, the presence of the servants utterly putting a stop to any private conversation;

the Colonel had his iron-grey head bent low, and the lady watched him furtively. When the meal was over, she dismissed the servants, handed the Colonel her little cigarette case, took her seat beside him, and said quietly:

'Colonel Sedgemore, I want to talk to you.'

'Go on, my dear,' returned the Colonel, in his genial tones, as he patted the hand which she had laid upon his arm.

'First, then, I want to thank you; you have been a very good friend to me—the best friend I ever had in my life. You have done me many a good turn; the time has come when I can help you.'

'Help me!'

'Yes; when we say good-bye to-day, it must be for ever. God knows, I shall never forget you, but I must never see you again!'

He stared at her in amazement.

'Why, Cora,' he said, 'what's the matter?'

'Very little,' she replied. 'I have thought for some time this hour would have to come; when I looked into that girl's eyes in the Park to-day, I *knew* it must come. Colonel Sedgemore, come what may between us two, there is one woman in the world who must never think ill of you!'

He rose from the table, walked into the adjoining room, and took up his old position on the hearth. She followed. After a short silence she said quietly:

'Have you seen the *Times* to-day?'

'Yes.'

'Then you know that she is coming back?'

'Yes, I know it!'

'And you will see her?'

'No; I hope never to see her again.'

'You are very bitter!'

'Do you know what she has done?'

'I know what the world says she has done.'

'The world is right.'

Again there was silence. The lady rose, took a few turns about the room, then returned to her seat.

'Until to-day,' she said, 'I believed the story I had heard, but since this morning, when I looked into Carrie Fane's eyes, I have changed my mind. I am sure that it is all untrue . . . Colonel Sedgemore,' she continued, rising, and laying her hand upon his arm, 'I have never mentioned this before, because I feared to pain you;

but I must speak of it to-day. Will you tell me about it?'

'You have heard,' he answered coldly. 'There is nothing more.'

'Yes,' she returned quietly, 'there is something more. Tell me, did you learn from Miss Fane's lips that she had ceased to care for you?'

'No; I learned it from her actions. When I arrived home from the war, with only one thought and one hope in my heart, longing with all my soul to see the little girl who was all the world to me, what did I find?—that two days before my coming she had run away with another man!'

'And you followed her?'

'Followed her? No! I might have done—I think I should have done—and

then, God knows what might have happened in the mood I was then in—I might have killed them both; but my sister kept me back, and I did nothing.'

'Nothing!'

'Nothing. When the first flush of my passion was over I felt like a broken man. I waited, hoping sometimes that my little girl would come back to me. I think if she had come I might have been brought to forgive her. I waited, but she never came; then I heard that she had left the country.'

'And so you never saw her?'

'Never.'

'Colonel Sedgemore, what became of the man?'

'I don't know. I forbade him ever to enter my doors again.'

Half an hour later the Colonel took his leave. Nothing more was said of his banishment, indeed, the lady had ceased to wish it.

'He must come back,' she said to herself; 'we must not say good-bye until this wretched mystery is cleared.'

She sat down and covered her face with her hands; when she rose again her face was as pale as death. She took up a card which lay upon her table and read:

'DEAR CORA,—

'Come and have some tea with me on Thursday, for the sake of old times. 'CLARA HARKAWAY.'

'Yes, I will go,' she said. 'I had hoped to be able to wipe all that set out of my life, but—it is for *his* sake.'

The Colonel meanwhile was walking abstractedly on his way. He had passed down Park Lane and along Piccadilly, oblivious of all that was going on around him, when suddenly he became conscious that something was the matter, and raising his eyes, he saw that he had come upon the outskirts of a great crowd. There was evidently something amiss, but the crowd was so dense that the Colonel could see nothing. He made inquiries, and learned that a cab had turned over and a lady had been killed.

'Killed!' he exclaimed.

He pushed his way through the crowd, saw the smashed cab and injured horse: then his eyes fell upon the white face of a woman, and he shrieked out in pain.

'Lottie!' he exclaimed. 'Good God!'

Yes; it was Lottie, lying upon the pavement, her head supported by a policeman's arm: her face was death-like, and streaked with blood; the sleeve which covered her left arm was also soaked with blood. In a moment the Colonel was on his knees beside her; he put his hand upon her heart and uttered a cry of joy.

'She is not dead!' he exclaimed; 'make way there! call me a cab!'

His tone was so commanding that he was at once obeyed. The cab came up: the Colonel lifted the girl tenderly in his arms and placed her in it. He ordered the cabman to drive to a certain celebrated surgeon in Harley Street; the policeman got up beside the driver, and they drove off.

Lottie still lay insensible, and the blood which flowed from her face and arm soaked

the Colonel's coat. For a moment he held her fondly to him, gazing sadly upon the pale face which he had loved so well. When the cab stopped at its destination, he lifted her tenderly in his arms again and carried her into the surgeon's room. The first thing to attempt was to restore Lottie to consciousness; with the aid of a few restoratives this was quickly done. She opened her eyes, gazed about her in a dazed sort of way, and saw Colonel Sedgemore. She rose, staggered a few steps forward; then with a cry she put up her hand and fell sobbing into a chair.

'Miss Fane,' said the Colonel coldly, when the violence of her sobs had ceased, 'I hope you are not suffering much.'

Lottie did not answer—she could not speak.

'I owe you an apology,' he continued, in a voice even colder than before. 'I have no right to be here—indeed, it was quite by accident that I came here. I was passing along the street when I saw the crowd and you lying senseless.'

'And—and you brought me here, you have saved my life? I have to thank you for that.'

She gazed wistfully into his face, but he was not looking at her.

'You owe me no thanks,' he said coldly. 'I did what any stranger would have done, that was all.'

Lottie turned away: her tears were dried now. She looked at the surgeon with eyes of dead despair.

'I think my arm is hurt,' she said.

She held it towards him; he ripped up

the sleeve and laid the arm bare; blood was still flowing from an ugly wound, and the bone was broken. The surgeon looked at her, hesitated for a moment, then said quietly:

'The bone must be set, and the wound stitched and dressed. It will be a painful operation, I am afraid; shall I give you chloroform?'

Lottie shook her head.

'Go on,' she said bravely; 'I can bear it.'

Colonel Sedgemore still stood there. He looked at the broken bleeding flesh, then at the pale face, racked with pain, and the love in his heart found voice.

'Lottie!' he exclaimed; but he spoke too late.

She put up her hand to motion him away;

and turning again to the surgeon, said quietly:

'Go on, please; I—I want to get home.'

The surgeon did his work, and Lottie bore it without a murmur, though once or twice she felt her senses clouding over, and her head fell back upon the chair. When all was finished her tears began to flow; she was too much exhausted to resist them. She sipped the wine which was brought to her, and lay for a time with her eyes closed. When she opened them she saw that Colonel Sedgemore was still there. For one second their eyes met, but Lottie quickly turned hers away.

'I should like to go home,' she murmured faintly.

A cab was called. Lottie, more dead than alive, was put into it. After a

moment's hesitation the Colonel was about to follow, but Lottie motioned him back, and he obeyed.

'Can you send some one with Miss Fane?' he said to the surgeon; 'she is not in a fit state to go alone.'

One of the maids was summoned; she entered the cab, the door was closed, and the next moment Lottie's pale pained face was gone.

CHAPTER IV.

All that night the Colonel scarcely slept. The next morning he rose feeling like a heartbroken man. Lottie's pale face was still before him; her weary voice was still ringing in his ears, and with it came the memory of those other words which he had heard: 'I am sure it is all untrue.'

'Could it possibly be that Cora was right?' he asked himself. 'Was Lottie blameless? Had he done her all this terrible wrong?' Oh, how he prayed to God that it might be! And surely it might be—surely, if she had been a guilty

woman, she could not have looked at him as she had done only twenty-four hours before.

With his brain on fire, and his heart beating wildly, he descended the stairs, and having rung for his breakfast, he opened the *Times*, which lay beside his plate; he glanced keenly over it, until he came to the words:

'Shocking accident to Miss Lottie Fane!' Following this was a long account of Lottie's accident, and of the share which he had had in taking her away. Then he turned to the theatrical announcements and read:

'On account of the sad accident to Miss Lottie Fane, the grand production of "As You Like It" must be postponed.'

Having read the paper, the Colonel

made a pretence of eating his breakfast, and then went out. He walked about aimlessly for some time; then he hailed a hansom and drove to the hotel where he had ordered the cabman to take Lottie the day before. Having reached his destination, he descended quickly, and asked in nervous haste if he could see Miss Fane.

'Miss Fane,' replied the waiter, 'is gone.'

'Gone?'

'Yes, sir. She had a shockin' accident yesterday, sir, and come back here more dead than alive. Her friends was telegraphed for, and they fetched her away yesterday afternoon, sir.'

'Do you know when she will return?'

'I do not, sir.'

The Colonel walked away, re-entered his

hansom, and ordered the man to drive to Harley Street. Here again he was disappointed; the surgeon had been called out to a consultation, and would not return for hours.

'It seems as if it was not to be,' said the Colonel to himself, as he drove towards home again.

Meanwhile Lottie was thinking of the Colonel. She was lying in an invalid-chair, looking out upon a lawn which sloped towards the river. Mrs. Fane was in the kitchen. Carrie was sitting beside her sister busily sewing, pausing now and again to give anxious glances into her face.

'Lottie.'

'Well, dear?'

'I don't altogether regret this accident,

except for the pain of it. It has enabled you to see what a brute that dear kind Colonel has developed into. He *was* a brute, wasn't he, love ?'

'I don't know, Carrie,' returned Lottie wearily; 'he was just like anyone else would have been; he was very polite to me.'

'Which means he was a brute. To see you in that plight and be polite. Oh, my dear love, what you must have suffered ! I couldn't have behaved so even to that cat his sister.'

'Don't talk about it, Carrie.'

'Very well, my dear, we won't; we will both try to forget it, and him—it's the only thing to do.'

At this moment Mrs. Fane appeared with some beef-tea, and the subject was dropped.

During the day nothing more was said; but in the evening, when Lottie found herself alone with her only comforter, she laid her head upon his shoulder and eased her aching heart in tears.

'My little girl—my poor little Lottie!' said Mr. Fane, stroking her golden hair.

Presently Lottie dried her eyes and choked down her sobs.

'Pa,' she said, 'I want to talk to you.'

'Go on, my dear.'

'I want you to advise me, Pa, just as you used to do when I was a little child.'

'What do you want to do, my dear?'

'I don't know, Pa. Do you remember, dear, that night when you and I sat in the little bedroom in the old house at Camden

Town, I said, "Two years will soon be over, then I shall come back and shall have forgotten"?'

'Yes, my dear, I remember.'

'Well, Pa, I was wrong; I cannot forget. When I was away over there in Australia, I used to lie and dream of home. I used to think it would be all the same as it had been; that I should be the same. That dreaming was the best part of it, Pa. There's no home and no peace for me in England now. I must go away again!'

Mr. Fane started, glanced with a troubled look into her face, and clasped her hand more tightly. Lottie understood.

'It would not be for long, Pa,' she said. 'I will write to Mr. Caterer, and if he says yes, I—I think I will go.'

The next morning, immediately after

breakfast, Lottie despatched her letter. She had written:

'My dear Mr. Caterer,—

'I have altered my mind about appearing in England. Get some one else for your Rosalind, and let me travel again. America or Australia, I don't care where it is—all I want is change, and to be out of England for a few years more.

'Faithfully yours,

'Lottie Fane.'

Lottie despatched her letter; a few hours later the answer came in the shape of Mr. Caterer himself.

'My dear,' said the little man, rubbing his hands, and gazing delightedly into Lottie's face, 'I'm glad to see you're better.'

'Much better,' returned Lottie. 'Did you get my letter, Mr. Caterer?'

'I did, my dear,' returned the little man, gazing at her more intently than before; 'that is what brought me. When I read it I was alarmed; I thought I detected symptoms of softening of the brain.'

'What!'

'My dear, I believed that nothing but softening of the brain would dictate such a proposal. Now, listen to me: I don't object to your going away—not a bit of it; but if you continue to beat the colonies without once appearing in London, you'll soon find it barren ground. You've been away for two years. Good: you come back fresh, and thanks to my advertising during your absence, as much in the mind of the public as ever. Then in the nick of time comes

your accident; it delays your appearance, gives one matter for paragraphs and advertisements, awakens public sympathy, and makes the booking better than ever. Excuse me, my dear, sympathetically speaking, I am very sorry for the accident, but business is business, you know.'

Lottie smiled.

'I understand,' she said. 'Go on, Mr. Caterer.'

'Well, my dear, as matters stand, I shall, I dare say, be able to run "As You Like It" a hundred nights. You play Rosalind, and at the end of the run you return to the colonies with three times the prestige, and get three times the money you had when you left them; refuse to play it, and you are done. Depend upon it, my dear, you'd better take my advice.

Old Caterer hasn't been a manager for thirty years without knowing his business.'

Lottie's determination was certainly shaken. She would not give him a definite reply, she said, but would think it over. Before he left the house that day, however, Lottie had decided to play.

As her appearance was delayed, there was no necessity for her immediate return to town, so she continued to stay with Carrie in her little villa on the Thames. The time might have been a dull one for Lottie, but for the ever-ready Carrie, who one day made a proposal.

'Lottie,' she said, one day when the two girls were seated alone together, 'how would you like me to play Celia to your Rosalind?'

Lottie's face flushed up joyfully, and she clapped her hands.

'Oh, Carrie, of all things in the world!' she cried.

'Well, my dear, I don't mind if I do,' continued Carrie. '"To oblige for this occasion only," as they say in the ads., or rather, for the first week of the piece.'

'Well, it would be nice—it would be like old times, indeed,' said Lottie; 'but, Carrie, dear, there's Charlie—we didn't think of him!'

'What, do you want to give *him* a part?' returned Carrie; 'what's it to be, William?—and Pa Adam, and Ma Audrey, and we'll call it the reappearance of the Fane Family.'

'No, I didn't mean *that*,' returned Lottie, laughing in spite of herself; 'but I thought

you had promised Charlie to give up the stage?'

Carrie screwed up her face and shrugged her shoulders.

'I wasn't born yesterday, my dear,' said she. 'I promised Charlie Jinks to give up the stage until I wanted to go back to it: well, I *do* want to go back to it, so there's nothing more to be said.'

'It's awfully good of you, Carrie.'

'Not at all, my love. I'm like an old war-horse scenting the battle from afar. Oh, Lottie! how I do long for a sight of the dear old footlights, and how my legs do ache for a dance!'

'But you can't dance in Celia.'

'Of course not, dear; but I can walk, and talk, and laugh, and feel I've got an audience before me again. Oh, Lottie!

won't it be jolly?—there, now I do feel you are one of us again! Lottie, I don't mind confessing to you now, that when I first gave up the stage and came to live here I was positively wretched. It was all very well in the day-time, when Pa and Charlie were about, but at night, when I had packed them off to the theatre and was left here alone with Ma, I thought I should go wild. I used to sit watching the hands of the clock go round, and thinking about the Variety, till I began to fancy I was really on the stage again, and whenever the girl knocked at the door I thought it was the call-boy.'

'You've got over that now?'

'I'm better, dear, but not cured. Every night before you came I used to amuse myself by acting my parts in the room

here. The servants thought at first I was a mad-woman; but at last they got to like it as much as I did. They used to cluster round the door and peep through the key-hole, till I found it out and let them in . . . but Lottie——'

'Yes, dear.'

'Would you mind coaching me in Celia?'

'Not a bit, dear—not a bit,' returned Lottie, brightening at the very idea; 'do you remember how I coached you in "Endymion," and what a hit you made in it? We shall act so nicely together, Carrie.'

'Well, well, you write to Caterer, he'll have to know soon; he's got somebody else for the part, hasn't he?'

'Yes, but I'll buy her out, and soon make that right. I'll write to Caterer in the morning.'

'Why not to-night, Lottie?'

'Why? because Charlie isn't here!'

'Why, what on earth has Charlie to do with it?'

'Everything. You are a married woman now, Carrie; I'm not going to let you take such an important step without your husband's consent.'

That night, when Mr. Fane and Mr. Jinks returned from the theatre, they found Carrie sitting up for them. She conducted them into the little sitting-room, where their supper was laid, and while they took it she unfolded her plans.

'Charlie,' she said, 'I'm going back to the stage.'

'What!' cried Mr. Jinks.

'There, don't look as if I was choking you. As far as I can make out, no good

ever came to anybody from giving it up. Now, by going back to it I can do a very great deal of good—to Lottie.'

'To Lottie!' exclaimed Mr. Fane. 'How can you do good to Lottie, my dear?'

'Ah, you wouldn't ask that, Pa, if you had seen her face this afternoon when I offered to play Celia to her Rosalind. Pa, I saved Lottie once, and I must do it again. Think what it will be for Lottie to step on to the London stage again after what she has gone through; think what it would be for her to have me by her side to help her on. Charlie, I must play Celia for Lottie's sake.'

Mr. Jinks rose solemnly, and kissed his wife. Mr. Fane patted her hand approvingly.

'Well, Charlie, is it settled?'

'Of course it is. You're a wonderful woman, Carrie.'

The next morning Lottie proffered her request, and Mr. Jinks, who seemed a little astonished at first, assured her ultimately that to have Carrie return to the stage in such a capacity was the one great dream of his life.

'But when you have returned to Australia,' he said, 'what will become of Carrie?'

'We won't talk about that yet,' said Carrie; 'we may get on so well together that Lottie may be induced to stop—who knows?'

CHAPTER V.

From that day forth the life of the two girls underwent a material change. On getting Mr. Jinks's consent, Lottie wrote at once to Mr. Caterer, who was so anxious to get back Lottie, that he willingly agreed to take Carrie too; the resignation of the lady already engaged to play Celia was easily bought; so after these preliminaries were settled the regular work began. During the day very little was done; the gentlemen being at home, the party gave themselves up to enjoyment. But in the evening, when the two girls were left alone,

they set to work with a will. Carrie required a deal of coaching; not content with Celia, she insisted upon being trained in Rosalind.

'For,' said she, 'what's the use of having a sister high up in the profession if you're not to profit by it? I'll be your understudy, Lottie, and as your position is quite secure enough now for you to give yourself a few airs, you might be too ill to act one night and give me a chance. I shall watch all your scenes, and try to copy all your business; and who knows?—I might make a hit.'

So Lottie trained her; and Carrie promised to be the pertest Rosalind that had ever trod the boards.

Meanwhile Lottie's health had so improved as to warrant her attending re-

hearsal; and the two girls went up and down to town every day, and in and out of the stage-door, just as they had done in the good old times when they danced and sang in burlesque together. Carrie noticed that her sister's eyes wandered restlessly about the streets, as if searching for a face which she longed yet dreaded to see.

Mr. Caterer was anxious for the performance to take place. One day after rehearsal he took the two girls up into his room.

'My dear,' he said, addressing Lottie, 'when do you think you will be well enough to act?'

'I could act to-night,' she said, 'with my arm in a sling.'

'Good! will you act on Saturday night with your arm in a sling?'

Lottie hesitated, but Carrie broke in:

'Of course you will, dear; if you wait till you can do without the sling, you'll have to wait for months. Do put it up for Saturday, Mr. Caterer, and let Lottie give her new reading of Rosalind.'

After a little more hesitation Lottie consented.

Carrie's villa was deserted now, and the whole family removed to charming rooms which Lottie took in town; Mr. Jinks brought up his horses and Lottie hired a brougham, which the two girls used.

'Rather a change from the old days, when we used to walk through snow and rain to get the omnibus, isn't it, Lottie?' said Carrie. 'Well, whoever marries you now won't marry a pauper; and you've

got the satisfaction of knowing that it's all the result of hard honest work.'

At six o'clock on the Saturday evening Lottie's brougham was brought to the door, and the two girls, together with Lottie's maid, were driven down to the theatre. They had elected to dress together, so they occupied the room which had been theirs a few years before.

'To him that hath shall be given,' said Carrie, looking round. 'Lottie, would you ever have known the room?'

Indeed, no one would have known it, it was so transformed. There was no cracked glass now—no bare dressing-table and ugly flames of gas. Pretty curtains covered the windows, and a thick carpet was on the floor. There were long mirrors let in the walls, and soft globes over

the gas; and when Lottie, attired in her clinging satin robes, with her gold chain about her neck, and pearls in her hair, stood for a moment before one of the mirrors, she cast upon herself a look of admiration. Never before in her life had she looked so pretty, not even in those days when she had almost become the mistress of Sedgemore Park.

During all this time what had become of Colonel Sedgemore? He had made no sign to Lottie, yet scarcely for one moment had she been out of his thoughts. His first impulse had been to follow her to her sister's house, to take her back in spite of the past, and to try and forget. A moment's reflection made him change his mind, for he remembered that day when he had returned to Sedgemore and

had found her flown. He made no sign to Lottie, but every morning he called at the surgeon's, and learned from him how his patient progressed; and every day he read some paragraph about her in the paper. At last came the announcement of her forthcoming appearance, and as he read, he trembled from head to foot. He had business to do in town that day; about three o'clock he called at the little house in Park Lane, and found its mistress at tea.

'I am habited like this,' she said, smiling, and touching the pretty dressing-gown she wore, 'because I am going out this evening.'

'Yes.'

'I am going to see Miss Fane play Rosalind.'

He said nothing; he rose from his seat and walked about the room and she watched him keenly.

'Colonel Sedgemore,' she said presently, 'I am going to the stalls with some friends. I have a box which I cannot use—will you take it?'

He paused for a moment; then he said:

'If I do, what then?—it will simply open up an old wound—it will simply make me live again through the misery of the past three years.'

After that nothing more was said: they sipped their tea in silence, until the Colonel rose to go. Then she offered him a sealed envelope.

'You had better take it,' she said.

He took it: thrust it into his pocket, and hastily walked away.

When he was gone she rang for her maid, and strolled into her dressing-room to finish dressing for the theatre. She was scarcely thirty years of age, looked dazzlingly lovely still, but grave beyond her years. She dressed herself in black velvet that night, put a spray of diamonds in her hair, and a collar of diamonds about her throat. Then she threw a heavy lace shawl about her head and shoulders, and descended to the brougham which was waiting for her at the door.

'26, Portland Place,' she said to the footman, who stood by the carriage-door.

The man touched his hat, mounted the box, the brougham drove away, and Cora lay back with her head resting on the soft cushions. How grave her face looked that night!—and yet she scarcely seemed

to be thinking. Her gloves and fan still lay in her lap, the lace had fallen back from her head, but she took no heed. Her eyes wandered carelessly about the streets, then upon the jewels which burnt like fire upon her fingers; and her heart was turning to the coldness of stone.

Presently the brougham stopped, the footman knocked, the door of the mansion was thrown open, and Miss Stevenage descending from her carriage, entered the house.

'Is Mrs. George at home?' she asked of the maid.

'I'll see,' answered that domestic discreetly; 'if you'll step into the drawing-room, miss.'

She passed up a broad staircase, fit for a palace, and entered the drawing-room,

a magnificent apartment, furnished and fitted in a style worthy of a duchess. She sank down into one of the softest chairs, and stared vacantly at the ceiling. Presently the door opened, and a lady entered the room. A short plump woman, with black hair, black eyes, a marble-like skin and a full voluptuous mouth. She was dressed in a fashionably cut dress of red, and she carried a half-smoked cigarette between her fingers.

'What an hour to come, Cora,' she said, as she kissed her friend; 'don't you know by this time that the Duke is always here from four to six? However, you had better come down—perhaps it will hurry him off.'

'I'll stay here if you like till he goes, Clara.'

'No, dear, you had better come down.'

'I say, Clara!'

'Well.'

'Are you going to the Variety to-night?'

'I should think I am!'

'Anybody going with you?'

'Can't get anybody; I intend to take Rose, my maid.'

'Give your seat to Rose and come with me. I'll stay here and dine with you, and we'll go together.'

The little woman threw away her cigarette, and seized her friend by both her hands.

'Done!' she cried. 'I say, Cora, I thought when you picked up old Sedgemore you were going to give us the cold shoulder, but you're a regular brick after all, upon my soul you are. Come along down; let's try and hurry off George.'

They descended the stairs together, and entered the dining-room—a room as sumptuously furnished as any in the house. The air was thick with tobacco-smoke, and a few empty tea-cups stood about. On the hearth, with his back to the fire, stood a tall, thin, middle-aged gentleman, whom Cora knew to be the Duke of Bland, but whom she gravely accepted, since he was introduced to her, as Mr. George.

'Miss Stevenage is going to dine here, and we are going to the theatre together,' said Mrs. George, sinking into an easy chair, and glancing at a great bronze clock which stood on the chimney-piece. 'I suppose,' she added with a yawn, 'I shall soon have to dress?'

The Duke, who by no means shone as a conversationalist, seemed glad to take the

hint. He fidgeted about a little, looked nervously at his watch, and then said:

'My dear, there is that appointment of mine, you know.'

'Yes, and I think you had better keep it,' cut in the lady.

Nothing loth, he looked round for his hat, and took his leave.

'What a frightful bore George is getting,' said Mrs. George—no other, indeed, than Clara Harkaway—as she returned from the pleasing task of showing the gentleman out. 'Fancy, my dear, two hours of him every day!'

'He seems to pay handsomely for it,' said Miss Stevenage, looking about her.

'Of course he does. I should like to know who would stand him if he didn't. But there, after five years I oughtn't to

begin to grumble. I used to be as sweet-tempered as any woman when I had Fred Weathersby, but now I don't seem able to give George a civil word.'

Cora started as she heard the name of Weathersby; but she knew her companion too well to take any heed.

'Hadn't you better get dressed, dear?' she said sweetly.

'Yes, I think I had,' returned Clara, 'perhaps dressing will put me in a better temper. I won't be long; try and amuse yourself till I come back, and we'll have a jolly little dinner together!'

She passed out of the room and along the hall, calling shrilly to her maid as she went; then all was still.

Cora still sat upon the sofa, with her head well thrown back, and her eyes

assuming that weary, dreamy look which they had worn during that day. When the shrill voice reached her ears she shivered, and glanced contemptuously about her.

'I thought I was free of all this,' she said to herself. 'I thought I had shaken it away, as one would shake off one's dress the refuse of a gutter. But after all, what does it matter?—I can't sink lower than I have been; but with God's help I won't drag down the only man that ever showed genuine kindness to me. I am not fit to become *his* wife—besides, he loves her—can't I see it in every look of his eye, and hear it in every tone of his voice? yes, he loves her.'

As she sat and mused thus, the time passed on, until the mistress of the house

returned. She was dressed for the evening now, in a gaudily resplendent robe of crimson plush, with heavy gold ornaments on her bare neck and arms, and in her hair.

'I have given the seat to Rose,' she said in her shrill treble as she swept noisily into the room, 'and dismissed your brougham, my dear, which you had left to spend the night at the door. And now to dinner, for I am as ravenous as a starving bear.'

The dinner was a charming one, charmingly served, and the mistress of the house did justice to it—as it went on her coarse lips seemed to grow coarser—her marble-like cheek took a deep flush; her laugh grew more boisterous, and her conversation less choice; she sipped her champagne unceasingly, and it had its effect.

'I say, Cora,' she said, folding her plump bare arms upon the table, when the servants had left the room; 'rather a change to the time when you and I were out in the cold together. We're ladies now, ain't we? fit to walk over the heads of such chits as Lottie Fane.'

'Don't you like Lottie Fane?'

'*Like* her?' she exclaimed, and her black eyes grew positively fiendish. 'I *hate* her!'

'Then why are you going to see her to-night?'

'I'm not going to see *her*—I'm going to see *him*.'

'*Him!* whom?'

'Fred Weathersby, to be sure! When she's on the stage he'll be in front, you take my word for it!'

'Ah, yes, of course. Fred Weathersby, he left you to go and live with her, didn't he?'

'To go and live with her! no, that he didn't; for after all his infinite pains he found that the minx wouldn't have him. No,' she continued, growing very confidential over her wine. 'Fred, my dear, was engaged by Mrs. Crowe to make love to Lottie Fane, and place her in compromising positions, so as to break off the match between her and old Sedgemore. He told me all about it, and I owing a grudge to little Fane for certain cold shoulders she had turned upon me, urged him on. Well, between Fred and Mrs. Crowe, who, I believe, nagged Fane nearly into her grave, they managed to dish her fine marriage, and a good job too!'

'Then I was right, she did live with him.'

'You were wrong, she didn't.'

'But she ran away with him.'

'She didn't even do that, though it looked as if she did. She was worked up to such a pitch by Mrs. Crowe's nagging, that in a fit of temper she left the house. Fred happened to be coming to town by the same train, and he escorted her. When they reached London they parted, and he has never seen her since. *Voilà tout.* Have a cigarette?'

Both ladies lit cigarettes; when they had done so the coffee was brought in: while they sipped it, the conversation went on.

'I can't make out, Clara,' said Cora, 'why Fred never came back to you.'

'But he did, my dear,' returned Clara, puffing out her smoke and sipping her coffee. 'He came upon a very pleasant errand. He came to tell me that he hated the sight of me, but that he loved Lottie Fane, and meant to make her his wife.'

'Well?'

'Well, I was so wild, I could have killed him. I told him to go to the devil, and we had no end of a row; the upshot of it was he threatened to tell George of my little flirtations with him. Well, I let him go in peace, but I had my revenge.'

'How?'

'I was determined if she married him she should marry a beggar; so what did I do but go to your gallant Colonel, my dear, and tell him that his hopeful heir,

who had been flirting with me, had deserted me to live with Lottie Fane. I got him disinherited on the spot.'

'But if this Weathersby loved the woman, why didn't he explain—why did he allow this stigma to be cast on her?'

'Because the fool wanted to marry her, you see. He was always hoping she'd come round, don't you know, and was afraid if he cleared it up she would go back, as she certainly would have done, to the Colonel. But good heavens, my dear!' she exclaimed, suddenly catching sight of the clock; 'while we have been chattering here, see how the time has gone on. We shall be late.'

'Clara, should you mind very much if I didn't go to-night?'

'Not go! why, what on earth is the matter?'

'I don't know; perhaps it's the dinner—perhaps the champagne. If I go I'm afraid I shall be ill in the theatre.'

'Well, this is absurd,' returned Clara, most unsympathetically. 'I can't go alone; I wonder if Rose is off?'

She rang the bell, and her maid answered it.

'Oh, you're *not* off, Rose,' she said; 'bring me my opera cloak and get on your shawl; you must come with me after all, for Miss Stevenage is ill. Now, dear, what are you going to do?' she added, turning to her friend, 'stop here, or go home?'

'Go home, if you'll order a hansom.'

'Yes, of course I will. I'm awfully

sorry, you know,' she added, feeling that she ought to say something, 'for of course I'd much rather have you with me than Rose, but there's no use in risking a scene in the theatre, is there? and if you're ill, perhaps you are right to go home.'

The brougham and cab were announced together, so the two ladies rose to go. The brougham, containing mistress and maid, drove straight to the Variety, the cab to Park Lane. When Miss Stevenage reached her home her lassitude seemed to have disappeared. She hurried up to her little sitting-room, sat down to her writing-desk, and wrote:

'My dear Colonel Sedgemore,

'I have to-night heard news of very great importance to you. May I

beg of you to come to me as early to-morrow as you can?

'Always your friend,

'CORA STEVENAGE.'

Having sent her letter to the post, she sat down beside the fire to think over all that she had heard.

CHAPTER VI.

When the call-boy gave the last tap at Lottie's door, and called out 'Beginners, please,' Lottie was standing before her mirror, surveying herself critically. She was about to turn away, when the door of the room burst suddenly open, and Carrie, dressed in the dignified robes of Celia, but looking by no means dignified in them, rushed breathlessly into the room.

'Lottie,' she exclaimed, 'I have been taking a peep through the hole in the curtain—such a house, my dear!'

'Is there?'

'I should think there is. I've seen a few good houses in my time, but none to equal this one. Little Thorpe is in the stalls.'

Lottie laughed.

'Does little Thorpe constitute a big house?' she said.

'Lottie, don't be ridiculous!' said Carrie severely. 'It's very good of little Thorpe to come, for you're sure of four good notices. My dear, the stalls are crammed with critics—and, Lottie, who do you think I saw in a box?'

'I don't know.'

'In his own box—I mean the stage-box—the one he used to occupy every night when "Dick Whittington" was going on, and he brought you the flowers!'

'Not Colonel Sedgemore!'

'Yes, dear, Colonel Sedgemore. Lottie, don't think I'm a chattering little fool to have told you this. You'd have been sure to see him; he is so near the stage, and I know how keen your eyes are; and I thought it would be better for you to know.'

Lottie went up to her sister, took her face between her hands, and kissed her.

'Carrie,' she said, 'I think you are my guardian angel. You are always wondering how to spare me pain!'

'The curtain is up, Miss,' said the maid, entering the room.

'Good gracious!' exclaimed Carrie, putting her hand up to her head as usual, 'and I dare say I'm a fright. Well, never mind, dear, you look pretty enough for the two of us, so come along.'

They went together down the dark narrow staircase, past the wings, and took their position near to their entrance at the back of the stage. Lottie felt a strange nervousness beginning to creep over her, and was glad when the cue was given for her to walk on. She took a few steps forward, then paused. She felt Carrie's firm hand upon her arm, and she heard Carrie's voice whispering in her ear:

'Oh, Lottie, how they adore you!'

The very first glimpse of her face had been the signal for one tumultuous outburst of applause, and hundreds of voices seemed to be raised in a cry of welcome. Lottie's pale cheek flushed; she smiled, bowed, took three more steps down the stage, and tried to speak; but still the roar continued. It was a spontaneous cry of

welcome, and it went to her very heart; she felt her head swim round, and her eyes fill with tears. Suddenly she knew that flowers were raining upon her; she lifted some with her right hand; the only one that was free, and pressed them to her lips; she felt her body trembling from head to foot—her tears, which she could no longer restrain, coursed slowly down her cheek, when she was saved by feeling Carrie's reassuring pressure upon her arm, and hearing Carrie's pert little voice exclaiming:

'Rosalind—sweet, my coz, be merry!'

Lottie quickly brushed away her tears, and when, turning her pale face upon her sister, she replied:

'Dear Celia, I show more mirth than I am mistress of,' her tender tones went

straight to the heart of the audience, and at the very outset gained for herself their love.

There were many among them that night who remembered her when three years before she had bounded on to that very stage 'as a slim Prince in trunks and tights,' and had danced and sang for very happiness and gladness of heart. Could this be the same Lottie, they asked themselves; this pale, grave girl, with the sorrowful eyes and tender quivering lips? Even Colonel Sedgemore, who had looked into her face already, had never thoroughly realized the change till now. He gazed at her like one entranced; then as the tender tones of her voice fell upon his ear, he felt his very soul stirred within him.

The play proceeded. Lottie, conquering

her emotion, acted as no one present believed her capable of acting. The one great episode of her life, sorrowful as it had been, had invested her with a soul-stirring power which she might otherwise never have possessed, and as the act-drop fell upon every act, the applause was immense. At last the play was over, the curtain fell, and Lottie received an uproarious summons. She came, looking—now that her work was over—pale and exhausted. She stood, feeling dazed and weary. She heard the deafening applause, saw the handkerchiefs which were waved; then Colonel Sedgemore, standing up in his box, cast his flowers at her feet. Orlando stooped to raise them, but Lottie checked him, and after one cold glance into the box from whence they came, she

turned, bowed to the house, and walked away, leaving the flowers upon the stage.

'Lottie, you *have* made a hit,' said Carrie the next morning, standing by her sister's bedside; 'make haste and come down, dear. Such a pile of papers, and such a pile of letters; thank heaven it's Sunday, and we can talk it over in peace!'

Lottie sipped the tea which Carrie had brought her; then with the assistance of her maid she dressed and went down to breakfast. There she found her mother, father, and Mr. Jinks, all looking radiant.

'My dear,' said Mr. Fane, as Lottie put her arms round his neck and kissed him, 'it's wonderful—it's really wonderful to think of my little girl, my little Lottie,

playing in Shakespeare, and making such a hit too!'

'Horatio,' interrupted Mrs. Fane, 'my daughter Carlotta has done no more than a child of mine should do; I always prophesied, even during the tender years of my child——'

'Lor, Ma,' interrupted the impetuous Carrie, 'don't make a fool of yourself to-day, and don't take possession of Lottie as if she owed her existence entirely to you, because she doesn't, you know. Pa——'

'Carolina!' screamed Mrs. Fane; then, turning to Lottie, she solemnly kissed her on the brow. 'My child,' she said, 'receive the congratulations of your mother; but why so pale and sad?'

'Now, don't find fault with that, Ma,' interrupted the irrepressible Carrie again,

'because it's all in keeping. Lottie's a leading lady now; she's going to be the fashion too, like Miss Kerry, so of course she must be pale and thin and filmy looking. I say, Lottie, make yourself comfortable; read your papers and your notices, and prepare for a good dinner. We mean to have such a tuck in.'

'A tuck in!' screamed Mrs. Fane again.

'Yes, Ma, a tuck in,' continued Carrie. 'I've ordered such a dinner, and Charlie's going to stand the champagne, ain't you, Charlie?'

'Rather,' returned Mr. Jinks; 'and we'll toast Lottie in a song. Lottie, old girl, my love to you, and may you always be as successful as you were last night.'

During the congratulations Lottie had

eaten a few crumbs of bread and sipped a cup of tea—a poor apology for a breakfast; then she gathered up her letters and papers, and saying she would like to be alone, returned to her own room. A look which she had given Mr. Fane induced him to follow her. He found her sitting in an easy-chair by the open window, carelessly watching the people who were passing along the quiet streets, and listening to the chiming of the bells, her papers and still unopened letters lying on a table beside her. When the door opened and her father came in, she rose and sprang into his arms.

'Now, Pa,' she said, placing him in the chair which she had just vacated; 'I want to talk to you. Sit there, and tell me, dear, what you most wish for in the world.'

Mr. Fane reflected.

'I should like to see you happy, my dear,' he said.

'Do you remember that day, years ago, Pa?' continued Lottie, taking no notice whatever of his reply, 'when we lived in the dear old house at Camden Town, and ate the dinners that Ma cooked so nicely? I said I should like to take you from work and give you a nice house, and a garden, and a carriage. Well, I mean to do it, dear. Times have changed for us, haven't they? Shakespeare pays now he is made fashionable, and my pockets will be filled with more money than I shall know what to do with. Now, do you know my plans?'

'What are they, Lottie?'

'Well, I am going to educate the baby

thoroughly well; but we'll make an actor of him, won't we, Pa? for we mustn't forget that the dear old stage has done it all. Then I am going to take a charming house, and keep a carriage for you and Ma to ride about in all day; then you'll be happy, won't you, dear?'

But Mr. Fane shook his head.

'I don't think I could do it, dear. It's all very nice but one thing. You must let me keep to work, Lottie.'

'Very well, Pa, perhaps you are right,' said Lottie. 'We'll work together, won't we?'

For a time she was silent. Mr. Fane saw she had more to say, but dreaded to say it. Then she began fidgeting about amongst her letters and papers.

'How fulsome all this is,' she said at

last; 'what heaps of friends one gets in one's bright days—look at all these invitations to parties.'

'Accept them, my dear. Lottie, do you remember your first party at Mrs. Strangford's, when you upset the tea all down the front of Carrie's dress?'

'Yes,' said Lottie abstractedly, 'I remember. . . . Pa, *he* was there last night; he saw me play Rosalind, and he threw me some flowers—do you know what I did?'

'No, my dear.'

'I left them lying on the stage.'

Mr. Fane sighed.

'That wasn't like my little girl,' he said.

CHAPTER VII.

When Lottie had walked away, leaving the flowers before the footlights, Colonel Sedgemore felt as if she had placed a dagger in his heart; and he began to wonder for the hundredth time why that heartrending episode of the past had ever been, and if it were possible that Lottie had been innocent. It seemed difficult to associate guilt with her; and yet how could he possibly believe her innocent?

'It's not the most guilty who bear it upon their faces,' he said with a sigh, as he rose to go.

He passed out of the theatre with the crowd, and having gained the street, paused in hesitation; finally, instead of calling a hansom, he turned up a familiar side-street, and once more took his place, as of old, near to the stage-door.

The aspect of things was almost the same as it had been on that night, now nearly three years ago, when he had stood on this very spot, watching for a little figure which at last came out, and made its way on foot through the dreary rain-drenched streets. He paused and waited: a brougham, with flashing lamps, stood in readiness; he heard the stage-door open and shut repeatedly—saw figures pass out and disappear into the darkness; then he heard a sound which made his blood tingle from head to foot.

'Good-night, Mordaunt,' a sweet voice said.

The Colonel, trembling like any child, drew further into the darkness, and saw the figures emerge from the shadow of the stage-door. First came the maid, with her arms full of flowers; then followed Lottie and Carrie, clinging closely together. The two girls paused for a moment to look at the radiant stars above, and during that moment the Colonel, gazing from his obscurity, caught a glimpse of Lottie's face, pale, and oh! so sad, as it was raised to the sky; then the girls entered the brougham, which rolled away, leaving the Colonel alone. He neglected to call a hansom, but walked away, traversing street after street, until he was within three yards of his own chambers; suddenly he paused, called up

a hansom, and ordered the driver to go to Miss Stevenage's residence in Park Lane. Late as it was, he was at once admitted, and shown up into the lady's room. When the maid tapped at the door, the mistress, clothed in a loose dressing-gown, with her magnificent black hair falling about her shoulders, sat in an easy chair, looking pale and haggard. At the mention of Colonel Sedgemore's name she started to her feet, pushed back the little table which held her untasted supper, and walked forward to meet him with a smile.

'You are a late visitor,' she said lightly; 'do you know, I had almost begun to think of bed?'

Neither the light tones nor the smile deceived the Colonel. He took the hand

which she extended to him, and asked anxiously:

'What is the matter, Cora; are you ill?'

She shrugged her shoulders and turned her face away from his earnest gaze.

'I am not exactly well,' she said. 'A racking headache all the evening does not tend to make one feel well. I could not go to the theatre.'

'You could not?'

'No. Did you use the box?'

'Yes.'

'And—and did things go well—was it all successful?'

'I believe so—yes.'

There was a silence between them for a time. The Colonel lit a cigar and smoked it nervously, while Cora Stevenage watched him and read every thought that was

passing through his mind. Presently she drew her chair close to his, and laid her hand gently upon his arm.

'Colonel Sedgemore,' she said, 'tell me, do you still love Lottie Fane?'

He shuddered and pushed her hand away.

'Don't ask me,' he said; 'don't talk of her—she has ruined my life.'

'You think so, yes; but suppose you heard that your suspicions were wrong—suppose it was Lottie who had been the victim, what then?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that I have discovered to-night what your love for Lottie should have made you discover long ago—that you have been duped, and that through those near to you both, she and you have been ruined.'

She then told him the tale she had heard that night; and when her story was ended, she looked at his face: it was as white as death.

'Well?' she said.

He shook his head.

'I can't believe it—it's too diabolical to be true. My sister do that—and Fred? Why, I saw him after Lottie had sailed, and when I taxed him with having taken her from me, he never said no.'

'Then you had no faith in Lottie—in the woman you were going to make your wife?'

'Yes, I had faith, but look at the temptation. I was an old fellow—he is young. I was in India, he was at hand at Sedgemore Park. Young girls will lose

their heads; perhaps she is sorry now, but I can't forget.'

'And you won't believe?'

'I can't believe.'

'Why are you so ungenerous, you, who are the kindest of men? Don't you think I know a little of human nature, Colonel? I ought to, for I've seen a good deal of it; and I tell you now the world's a liar, and little Lottie Fane is as good as gold. She's not like *us*!'

Miss Stevenage forced a laugh and put her thin hand to her forehead, with a gesture of sudden pain.

'What do you mean?' asked the Colonel, looking at her kindly. 'Like *us*! Why, you are one of the best women I have ever met, or hope to meet.'

And he took her hand quietly, and

pressed it; tears stood in her eyes as she continued:

'I think Nature *meant* me for a good woman, but I've been spoiled in the making. Ah, Colonel dear, you needn't flatter me—you know pretty well what my life has been. The man I married when I was only sixteen years old soon brought me to his level, and would have poisoned my whole disposition, if the wild passion to become a great actress had not possessed me, and saved me. Well, you know how I bought my chances: I sold myself, God forgive me! in my despair; had I been better and purer, the world would never have heard my name.'

'Don't speak of these things,' cried Colonel Sedgemore; 'don't even think of them!'

'But I *must*. If I hadn't known the badness of men, how should I ever have appreciated their goodness? for there are good men in the world, and you're one of them, Colonel! Yet look what they say even of you and me! I can't have a friend, a dear true friend, whom I respect as a brother, without them saying——'

'Cora! Cora!' cried the Colonel, interrupting her.

'But they do say it!' cried Miss Stevenage.

'Let them say what they will. A friendship like ours should be able to defy scandalmongers.'

'Ah! we should be, but we are not. It's easy to set a rumour afloat, but it's not so easy to clear it all away again. Don't think I'm moaning over it for my

own sake. I'm past the reach of scandal-mongers, because I've been just as bad as ever they could make me. I'm thinking of you—and *her*.'

'Why should you think of her?'

'Why? because I'm a fool, I suppose. Ah, Colonel dear, I can't help thinking what I might have been if I had had a friend once. I've a respect for little Lottie Fane—she is an ornament to the profession which I have tried to drag down into the mud, and I'm glad to know that she is a good woman.'

'Then you believe the story?'

'Most implicitly.'

'If I could only prove it!'

'You shall prove it, you must; if you do not, I will.'

'Cora!'

'I mean it, Colonel; in refusing to listen to this story you are false to yourself —to your better nature. Will you investigate it—yes or no ?'

'I will.'

'That is well. God speed you in your work, Colonel, and if it turns out well, you will remember me sometimes, when you are with her, will you not ?'

She gave him her hand: he took it in both of his and pressed it to his lips.

CHAPTER VIII.

On leaving the house in Park Lane, the Colonel called up a hansom and drove quickly home. It was early morning by this time; dawn was breaking in the sky, and heavily laden country carts were rolling in towards Covent Garden. He entered his chambers with his latch-key, and went straight up to his sitting-room. He found his valet sound asleep in an easy-chair, and the supper-table laid, and Miss Stevenage's letter lying beside his plate. He sent the valet to bed, opened and read the letter, which recalled to his mind all

that he had just gone through; then he sat down to think. Was he dreaming, or was it all real?

Was it possible that Lottie had been true to him and had suffered such humiliation for his sake? The more he thought, the more he seemed inclined to believe—and how he longed to believe! He knew that so long as life was left to him, he could never forget Lottie; indeed, ever since that day when he had looked again upon her face, he had felt all his old love return, and his heart had cried out to him to forget the past and take her again to his arms. And he had yielded: he had made his offering, which she had rejected. Had he learned the truth too late?

The next morning his mind was still full of Lottie. He read the notices of her

Rosalind, and as he read them his heart sank; they seemed to remove her so far away. Had she been cast down, he felt he would have gone to her and said, 'Lottie, will you try to love me? we will both forget and forgive, and try to be as happy as we should have been if that black spot in our lives had never been.' Yes; a few months ago he might have said that, but now he felt that it was too late.

He looked at his watch, hurriedly left his chambers, stepped into the first hansom he saw, and drove quickly to Victoria Station. He was just in time to catch the express to Brighton. Having arrived there, he drove at once to Weathersby's lodgings, and was just in time to catch that young gentleman at his breakfast.

It was a long time since the two men had met; but though Colonel Sedgemore had, to all intents and purposes, cast off his ward, he had in reality quietly watched his movements, and had often sent him very substantial help. Because Weathersby had proved himself a villain there was no reason why Colonel Sedgemore should do the same. He had promised his dying father to look after him and he meant to keep his word. So although he apparently cast him forth, refused to see him or to have any personal intercourse with him whatsoever, he sent him from time to time such assistance as would keep him from starving. Weathersby took the cheques without the slightest compunction. Why should he not do so? he said; had not the Colonel ruined him, hadn't he brought

him up in idleness and luxury, and why should he allow himself to be cast off like an old worn-out garment? So he bought bread and butter, as he termed it, with the Colonel's money, and turned card-sharper in order to get the luxuries which he knew he could never do without. His downward course had been rapid. His drinking and black-leg habits soon got him turned out of the army, and since then his life had been spent in going from place to place, following in the wake of fashion and picking up crumbs as he went.

The Colonel looked at him for a few moments utterly unable to speak. He was so changed: all the signs of debauchery were plainly written on his face; his eyes were sunken, his hands trembled; of the two men he looked the elder by fully

ten years. He looked up when the Colonel entered, a little surprised at first; then his face darkened, but he neither moved nor spoke.

The silence was broken by the Colonel.

'I have heard a story,' he said, 'which I can hardly believe, and I have come to you to verify it. Can you speak the truth?'

Had the speaker been anyone but Colonel Sedgemore, Weathersby would have replied insolently; he remembered, however, that he might still stand some chance of obtaining part of the revenue which he had always hoped for, so he replied, mildly enough:

'I have never spoken anything else to you. What do you want to know?'

'I want you to tell me the real history

of Miss Fane's life at Sedgemore during the time of my absence in India, and the real cause of her flight when she knew I was coming home.'

'She didn't know you were coming home.'

'Didn't know! Why, I had written to tell her so.'

'She never got the letter. The last letter she received from you arrived at Sedgemore fully a month before you came back.'

The Colonel's cheek went ashy pale, and his hands trembled.

'Do you happen to know if she wrote to me?'

'She wrote to you twice a-week.'

'Up to the date of my return?'

'Yes; and as she got no answer to any

of the letters, I began to think that Mrs. Crowe was right when she told me you wanted to be free.'

The Colonel uttered a low moan, and sank into a chair.

'Tell me the rest of this story,' he said; and Weathersby did tell it, not sparing Mrs. Crowe any more than she had spared him. However, his story had so strong a ground-work of truth in it, and tallied so well with the one which Miss Stevenage had told him, that the Colonel believed it, every word.

'My God!' he exclaimed. 'Why did I never learn all this before? why didn't you tell me?'

'I tried to do so, sir,' said Fred; 'but if you remember, you wouldn't listen to a word I had to say. Then I wrote to you

over and over again, but my letters came back unopened; so what more could I do?'

'Nothing, I suppose,' said the Colonel hopelessly; and he rose and left the room.

Part of his work was over; the most difficult part, however, had yet to come; he had to meet his sister. Mrs. Crowe still dwelt alone in her glory at Sedgemore Park, and on leaving Brighton it was thither the Colonel made his way. He arrived quite unexpectedly in the dusk of an autumn evening, drove rapidly through the lanes, and arrived at the Park before darkness had set in. He found that his sister was at home, and was engaged in her spiritual avocations. The drawing-room at Sedgemore had for the nonce been turned into a chapel, and Dr. Perkins was presiding over a company of ladies,

who were engaged in prayer. The Colonel ordered the company not to be disturbed, and went straight to his study. He had been there about a quarter of an hour when Mrs. Crowe came in. One glance into his face, and her heart sank.

'My dear Edward, you are not well!' she exclaimed impulsively, extending her hands; but he waved her back.

'I am quite well!' he returned. 'Are those people gone?'

'Gone! no. When I heard of your return, I asked them to wait. I thought you would see them, perhaps.'

'I can't see them,' he answered impatiently. 'When they are gone, come back; I wish to see *you!*'

Trembling with apprehension now, Mrs. Crowe retired, and excusing her dear

brother to her friends, managed to dispose of them pretty quickly. When she went back to the study, she saw the Colonel sitting at the table with his face buried in his hands.

'Edward,' she exclaimed, 'what is the matter?'

He rose from his seat in a moment.

'Are those people gone?' he asked again.

'Yes, dear, they are gone.'

'Then all you have to do is to follow them. In future you and I must live apart—in fact, I hope never to see your face again.'

'Edward, what do you mean?'

'I mean that at last I have found the woman who has deliberately ruined my life. Yes, at last I have heard the truth about Lottie.'

For fully an hour longer the two were closeted together; but so quietly was their conversation carried on, that the curious servants, who soon discovered there was something wrong, and who hung about the lobbies to listen, could hear nothing. At the end of an hour, however, the library door opened, and the Colonel and Mrs. Crowe came forth. The lady, whose face was ghastly in its pallor, went up to her room, while the Colonel passed out of the house.

To the general band of servants these proceedings were mysterious; to Mrs. Crowe's maid they were positively alarming. Having reached her room, Mrs. Crowe rang violently for her maid, and ordered her to pack up her things.

'To-night, ma'am?'

'Yes, to-night; we, you and I, are going to London!'

'Lor', ma'am, do you know the time? it's past nine; long before we can be ready and get to the station, the last train will be gone hours and hours.'

'Will you do as I tell you, and hold your tongue?'

At ten o'clock, when the Colonel returned to the house, he found that his sister had left. Some half-dozen trunks of hers, neatly corded and labelled, were in her room; there was also a letter addressed to him, lying on her dressing-table; he opened it, and read as follows:

'I have obeyed your orders, and left your house. As the last train is already

gone I shall sleep in Amberley, and proceed to London in the morning. On the interview which has just taken place between us I make no comment. My religion teaches me to forgive you, and I will try to do so. You will oblige me by having my trunks forwarded to the address which I will send to you.

'Your sister,

'ELIZABETH.'

Having read the letter, the Colonel cast it from him; then he walked through the desolate empty house, thinking of the past. Oh, how he wished he could waken up and suddenly find all this had been a dream! If he could only hear once more Lottie's cheery laugh, and see her pretty little figure flitting up and down the great stair-

cases, as he had seen it only a few years ago. Yes, she had been happy then, and she had loved him; for he remembered how on the eve of his departure she had clung to him, imploring him to take her with him; but he had been too careful of his little girl for that. Then he fell to thinking what she must have suffered, shut up in that dreary house, with no congenial soul near her, and her lover, the man who should have been at hand to protect her, fighting in a foreign land. He had acted blindly—he knew it; he had unwittingly allowed them to set the trap into which he and Lottie had fallen. He saw it all now, but he saw it too late. What must he do—go to Lottie? that was the least he could do—go to her and ask her forgiveness.

The first train from Amberley to London

the next morning contained Mrs. Crowe and her maid; the second one took up the Colonel. On arriving in London he drove straight to Lottie's house, and being admitted by the servant, sent up his card. In two minutes the maid returned with the information that Miss Fane was engaged. Stricken to the heart, the Colonel tried to send a message, but the girl absolutely refused to take it; so the Colonel returned to his chambers, and wrote the following note:

'My dear Miss Fane,—

'I have learned the truth at last, and know now how cruelly you have been wronged. Try, if you can, to forgive me, and to see me, if only for the last time.

'E. Sedgemore.'

Having despatched this letter, he quietly awaited the reply.

CHAPTER IX.

THE house at which the Colonel had called, and which he had been told was the residence of Miss Lottie Fane, was situated in Elm Tree Road, St. John's Wood, and was about as charming a place as one could picture even in a most romantic dream. It was a pretty little red-brick building, covered with green creepers and surrounded by a spacious lawn, the whole being enclosed by a high wall, which was capped by formidable looking iron spikes. The lawn was cut up here and there into trim little flower-beds, and shaded by the wide-spread-

ing branches of a magnificent oak. There was a hammock swung under the tree for the baby to swing in, a conservatory for him to study in, and sundry bats and balls for him to amuse himself during his leisure hours. There was a charming room beautifully shaded with sun blinds and filled with flowers for Mrs. Fane, who was now habitually attired in imitation of the great Siddons; and there was a pretty little study in a far away corner of the house for Mr. Fane; and Lottie—what was there for Lottie? Well, everything was Lottie's, and not a soul of her acquaintance but envied her, and vowed she should be happy. If happiness had been made by worldly prosperity she would have been. Her reputation was high, her fame was trumpeted all over London, her photographs filled the

shop windows, and her drawing-room table was covered with cards of invitation from the best houses in town, but not one of them had the power to draw her from her retreat. Every night, while facing the footlights, she smiled her brightest in answer to the ringing rounds of applause, and gracefully pressed the flowers to her lips; and at such times she was happy. The excitement of the stage was life to her now—it chased away her thoughts, and took her back to the time when she had never known pain.

She had been only two days in her new home when an incident happened, which, though trifling in itself, caused much subsequent pain. Lottie had been out, taking her little brother for a drive; as she was nearing home her carriage passed another,

which contained only a lady. The lady looked straight into Lottie's face, smiled, and bowed. But the bow was not returned. Lottie felt every drop of blood leave her face; then her cheeks flushed angrily, and she trembled through and through. When her carriage rolled in at her gates and stood before her door, she was panting like an angry lioness, and trembling in every limb. She rushed straight up to her room, shut the door, and burst into a passion of tears. To her amazement the door suddenly opened, and Carrie came in.

'Good heavens, Lottie, what's the matter!' she exclaimed, and Lottie answered with another question—

'How did you come here?'

'Charlie and I are looking out for a little place in town, love, and we've come

to stay with you for a few days, if you'll have us. But what on earth is the matter, Lottie?'

'Nothing much,' said Lottie, hastily brushing away her tears. 'I met that woman as I was coming home, that's all, and she actually had the insolence to bow to me. Oh, Carrie, how I hate her! I wish she was dead!'

'Lottie, this isn't like you!'

'Perhaps not,' returned Lottie; 'but if I'm changed you mustn't blame me, but blame those that drove me to it. I repeat it: I hate the woman. She can live with the Colonel to the end of her days, if she likes, but she shan't be impertinent to me.'

'Quite right, Lottie, I admire your spirit, my dear; you cut her, of course?'

'I did.'

'That's right; I hope you'll soon have the pleasure of cutting *him*.'

Carrie's wish was soon gratified. The very next morning, when Lottie and Carrie were lingering over a late breakfast, a servant brought in a card, and Lottie, lifting it, read, 'Colonel Sedgemore.'

Lottie flushed from brow to chin, and the card dropped from her trembling fingers; Carrie lifted it and promptly replied:

'Miss Fane is engaged; say so, and show the gentleman out.'

Then she ran over to the window to catch a glimpse of the Colonel.

'There he goes,' she said; 'that's snub number one, Colonel Sedgemore: I wonder how you like being made to feel small? I don't think any the better of you for this call. It's like men, to sit upon a girl

when she is poor, and come crawling round her when she's rich. You see now the kind of man he is, don't you, Lottie?'

'No!'

'What?'

'I don't believe a word you say; he was always generous—it was others who were unkind; it was cruel of you to send him away.'

'You would have been a fool to have seen him.'

'That is my affair, and surely I may see whom I please in my own house.'

'Certainly,' returned Carrie hotly; 'you may see a dozen men who have deceived you and gone off with other women before I interfere again.'

She flounced out of the room, leaving Lottie alone.

For a time Lottie paced the room in the utmost misery; then her flushed cheeks grew cool again, and with her hand pressed to her head, she tried to collect her scattered thoughts. A moment's reflection made her rush down to Carrie, whom she found in the drawing-room.

'Carrie, dear,' she began contritely, 'I am sorry.'

'All right, Lottie,' broke in Carrie, who was only too eager to forgive; 'don't worry about it; as for me, I shan't think of it again.'

But she did think of it, and the more she did so, the more convinced was she that she had acted wisely in sending the Colonel away. Young girls do strange things; and Lottie's behaviour that day proved to Carrie that she was no wiser

than the rest of her sex; but Carrie resolved to keep an eye upon her, to prevent her, as Carrie expressed it, from making a fool of herself. In furtherance of this plan Carrie acted again in the evening.

About eight o'clock a letter was left at the house addressed to Lottie; as Lottie was not at home, Carrie received it, and after glancing at the address, she ran with it up to her room. She had recognised the handwriting as the Colonel's. She stood for a time holding the letter between her finger and thumb; then, unopened as it was, she put it into an envelope, addressed it to Colonel Sedgemore, and running out, quietly slipped it into the post. She felt that she had done her sister a service—had saved her, in fact.

CHAPTER X.

It must not be imagined that the unaccustomed splendour of their surroundings had entirely changed the Fane family, either in habits or disposition. They were still homely enough, despite their finery. True, Mrs. Fane sailed about in Siddonian splendour, but she was not too proud to superintend in the kitchen, or to make a nice family pudding. As for Mr. Fane, he was rather lost in the little study which Lottie had assigned him; for he was not a student, and his only books were some manuscript plays, and a dogs'-eared assort-

ment of Lacy's acting drama. A happy inspiration, however, suggested that he should take to gardening, which he did with more satisfaction to himself than any great benefit to the garden itself.

It being warm summer weather, the family usually dined in the garden, under the shade of a spreading pear-tree. They were doing so one hot July afternoon, when a circumstance occurred which was destined to be memorable in their household record.

The table was spread with the remains of a homely meal, the *pièce de resistance* of which had been a steak and kidney pudding, made by Mrs. Fane's own deft hands. Mrs. Fane was reclining in a large garden-chair, affording ample room for her colossal figure; Mr. Fane, attired in a shabby old suit, was busily endeavouring to weed

out the dandelions which disfigured the lawn; Carrie was bending over the hammock and playing with the baby; while Mr. Jinks, in a resplendent summer suit, and with a geranium in his button-hole, was facing Mrs. Fane, and puffing at a very large cigar.

As for Lottie herself, she was seated apart, deep in the pages of a novel from the circulating library. Of late she had developed a strong taste for stories of sentiment, and this one, written by a lady of title, seemed very absorbing.

'I say, mother,' observed Mr. Jinks, 'this is rather better than Camden Town. It's as good as being miles in the country.'

'So it is, Charles,' returned Mrs. Fane. 'It reminds me of a glade in the Forest of Arden.'

'Yes,' said the practical Charles; 'or Epping, or Rosherville, eh? All we want is a little *la-di-da* on the piano to make it perfect.'

Carrie looked round at her husband and laughed.

'What a goose you are, Charlie! I don't believe you ever heard of Arden, or even Shakespeare.'

'Then you're wrong,' cried the vocalist. 'I know the immortal William well enough. Spells bankruptcy, don't he? Not always, though. They're doing good business at the Variety, at any rate.'

'E—normous!' said Mrs. Fane. 'His Royal Highness the Prince was there last night for the second time, and sent round a special message of congratulation to Lottie. The drama is reviving, Charles.

The doom of burlesque and opera bouffe is sealed.'

'The Prince is a good sort,' observed Jinks reflectively. 'He likes my sort of entertainment. He sent down a special messenger for a copy of my last song—

'Rolling in the hay
On a Bank Holiday,
When the buttercups and daisies are a-blowing!"

I suppose he wants to sing it to the Princess!'

'Nonsense,' cried Carrie.

'It has always been a regret to me, Charles,' said Mrs. Fane patronizingly, 'that you did not take to the legitimate. You have humour, though misdirected.'

'Thank you, ma'am,' returned her son-in-law, taking off his hat facetiously.

'You would have succeeded in eccentric

comedy. I myself was once thought to excel in lighter parts; my Violante took the town of Exeter by storm; but my ambition was always for the higher range. The critic, Higgins, said that I was born to perpetuate the Siddonian tradition.'

Carrie burst out into uproarious laughter, while the great Jinks looked puzzled.

'Charlie doesn't know what that means,' she cried. 'Siddonian tradition, indeed! Rubbish!'

'Carrie, you are irreverent,' responded Mrs. Fane. 'Respect a great name, if you please. If you had ever seen my Lady Glenalvon, you would never have forgot it.'

'I don't suppose I should,' muttered Carrie *sotto voce.*

Her mother continued, still preserving her grand manner:

'But there is no drama now, and no reverence for art. We have no plays, no critics, no artists. The critic of the *Bath Chronicle* devoted two columns to a consideration of my Elvira, in the immortal tragedy of "Pizarro," analyzing the motives of the character, and pointing out the superiority of my reading to that of all other exponents. Would any hireling of the press do that now?'

'I'm afraid not, Ma,' said the sarcastic Carrie.

'You're quite right, mother,' cried Jinks, in a tone of respectful conciliation. 'It's all frivolity, now, and legs; leg-mania, you know. I should have liked to have seen you in those palmy days.'

'You would have been astonished. When I played Sigismunda, female spec-

tators were frequently seized with fits; such was the gloomy power of the impersonation.'

'You don't say so!' ejaculated Jinks.

'After my performance of Constance, the young Earl of Swampshire, who was present in a private box, conjured me to fly with him. I was only receiving thirty shillings a week, and a half benefit, but I was firm and repulsed him. The proposal was flattering, but improper, for though I have reason to believe that his proposals were strictly honourable——'

Here there was a loud ring at the garden-bell, and Mrs. Fane's narrative was abruptly interrupted. The serving-maid, a pretty little girl, daughter of one of the stage carpenters, tripped to the gate, and directly afterwards returned, bearing a card, which she handed to Lottie.

Lottie turned crimson, and sprang to her feet.

'I cannot see her,' she cried. 'How dare she come here!'

'What is it, my child?' demanded her mother. As she spoke, she took the card from her daughter's hand, and uttered an indignant exclamation.

On the card was printed in elegant copper-plate the name:

Miss Cora Stevenage.

Mrs. Fane read the name aloud, and all glanced at the garden gate, through which was visible an elegant brougham, driven by a coachman in livery. The next moment there appeared at the gate the figure of a lady, gorgeously dressed in a costume of white silk, with pink hat and sunshade.

The moment Lottie caught a glimpse of this vision, she flung down her book and ran into the house. Mrs. Fane kept her seat, while her brow wore the expression of a gathering thunderstorm.

Miss Stevenage approached smiling, and encountered Mr. Fane, who stood nervously on the side-walk.

'Mr. Fane, I think?' she said. 'I remember you at Drury Lane. I have called to see Miss Fane, if she is disengaged.'

Mr. Fane was a kindly man, and scarcely knew how to reply; but he was perfectly well aware that the stranger could hope for no friendly reception from the severe virtue of his wife. He glanced nervously towards the group under the tree, while Carrie, with a bounce of indignation, was exclaiming to Jinks:

'I wonder she has the impudence! I hope Pa will let her know we can't receive such people!'

But Mr. Fane, instead of being guilty of any such rudeness, approached his wife timidly, with Miss Stevenage by his side.

'My dear, this is Miss Stevenage. She wants to see Lottie.'

The countenance of the inheritor of the Siddonian tradition at that moment was a study. Instead of looking at the stranger or at her husband, Mrs. Fane fixed her steel-like eyes on some far-off vision, as she replied, in a deep tragedy-voice:

'Miss Fane is engaged, and can see nobody.'

'Certainly not!' ejaculated Carrie, in spite of an imploring look from Jinks, who dreaded a scene.

Miss Stevenage turned very red. She understood perfectly the nature of her reception, but having ventured so far, she determined to persevere.

'I shall not detain Miss Fane many minutes,' she said, addressing the indignant matron; 'and I should never have come here to seek her, unless I had her interest at heart. I am anxious to do her a service. Pray ask her to see me, if only for a moment.'

Mrs. Fane kept her eyes still fixed on the remote distance.

'It is impossible,' she replied. 'I will inform her that you have called, and if you wish to communicate with her further, you can do so in writing.'

'Really, my dear,' exclaimed Mr. Fane, 'I think——'

'Hold your tongue, Pa!' cried Carrie; and, as she spoke, she looked Miss Stevenage from head to foot with supreme disdain. The poor lady's colour heightened, and her gentle manner changed to a certain irritation.

'I came here at the request, or at least on behalf, of Colonel Sedgemore,' she began.

But this was the last drop, making the tragic bowl run over. With supreme deliberation, Mrs. Fane rose from her chair, drew herself up to her full height, and looked the intruder full in the face for the first time.

'We do not know any person of that name. We have not the honour of his acquaintance or of yours. My daughter shall be apprised of your message, and in the meantime——'

Elvira ended the sentence with a magnificent sweep of her right arm in the direction of the garden gate.

The lady saw that conciliation was useless, and turned to go.

'You will regret this,' she said, biting her lip; 'I wished to be of service to your daughter, and——'

'Thank you,' returned Mrs. Fane, with regal courtesy; 'but my daughter cannot avail herself of your kindness.

'Kindness, indeed!' murmured Carrie, with defiance.

Miss Stevenage walked slowly to the gate, followed by Mr. Fane, who felt sincerely concerned on her account.

'I'm very sorry, Miss Stevenage,' he murmured apologetically; 'but my daughter has had a great deal of trouble, and my

wife can't bear the mention of Colonel Sedgemore's name. But I'll tell her you've been here, and—and——'

'Ask her to call upon me,' said the lady, stepping towards her brougham. 'I am really her friend, and should like to serve her; and tell her to come soon.'

'I'll do as you wish, though I am afraid——'

Here a sharp voice, that of Carrie, called from the garden:

'Pa, come here!'

So Mr. Fane hastily closed the brougham door, lifted his hat, and hurried back to the family group. To his amazement, his wife and daughter attacked him with righteous indignation.

'I wonder at you, Pa, I do, indeed!' cried Carrie. 'Talking so long with a

woman like that!—Colonel Sedgemore's kept mistress, as everybody knows.'

'Silence, Carrie!' exclaimed the matron. 'It is not for a child of mine even to mention such depravities; as for your father, if he lacks the respect due to himself as a moral man and the father of a family, he is only like the rest of his too frivolous sex.'

Here the great Jinks, who was greatly amused at his father-in-law's perplexity, was caught favouring him with a wink of most prodigious meaning.

'Charles Jinks, for shame!' cried Carrie, metaphorically pouncing upon him. 'You're as bad as Pa! If I had my will, I'd have all these bold creatures whipped; and as for you, if you're going to begin galivanting we'd better separate at once.'

'Rubbish!' said Charlie; 'what a girl you are, Carrie! I'm sure I've done nothing, neither has your father.'

'Oh, don't talk to me!' said Carrie, with a snap; and as this was her favourite and conclusive way of ending all matrimonial disputes, he thought it better to hold his tongue.

Mrs. Fane now summed up, with severe virtue and judicial impartiality.

'Let us cease this argument,' she said, 'it is unseemly; I do not choose to discuss such persons. If Mr. Fane enjoys their society, that is his affair; but, once and for all, I forbid him to bring such characters here, into the presence of his wife and daughters, and of the innocent cherub suspended in yonder hammock.'

'But, my dear,' began Mr. Fane, utterly aghast.

'That is enough,' returned the matron; 'if you have a vestige of moral feeling left, you will change the subject.'

But it was found necessary to recur to it almost immediately, for a minute afterwards Lottie peeped out, looking very pale and agitated, and, seeing the coast clear, ventured back into the garden.

'Is she gone? What did she want? What did she say?' cried the trembling girl.

The reply was a volley from Mrs. Fane and Carrie, denouncing the effrontery of the objectionable person who had dared to penetrate into that haven of domestic virtue.

Mr. Fane stood meekly by, and after the

reflections on his moral character, did not dare at first to utter a single word.

'I'm glad I did not see her,' said Lottie; 'I think her coming is an outrage, and I should have lost my temper.'

Here Mr. Fane took heart of grace, and broke in:

'She seemed sadly disappointed. I think she brought a message of some sort. Before she went, she entreated me to ask you to—to—call upon her as soon as possible.'

'Mr. Fane, I wonder at you!' cried the matron. 'My daughter call upon a woman like that! The very suggestion is an outrage! Lottie, my child, you will never be guilty of such an indiscretion.'

'No, mamma,' answered Lottie ruefully.

So saying, she walked sadly back to her own room, where she threw herself upon the bed, and thinking indignantly of her old lover, had a good cry.

CHAPTER XI.

DURING the next few days Miss Stevenage waited at home in feverish expectation, but no Lottie came. She was not altogether surprised at this, for judging from the faces of the family when she had paid that unlucky visit, she firmly believed that influence would be brought to bear upon the girl to keep her away. She had had confidence in Mr. Fane, but that confidence had evidently been misplaced.

'Perhaps after all,' she said to herself, 'he was only kind because he was sorry for a moment; but to speak kindly and

allow his daughter to come are two different things. Well, I don't blame him; no child of mine should ever associate with a woman such as they think me. Yet for *her* sake I wish she would come. Still, if she doesn't, I can do no more. If she chooses to be a little fool and spoil her life for the sake of a whim, why, she must take the consequences.'

During those days the Colonel was a very frequent visitor at Park Lane, but, as if by mutual consent, Lottie's name was never spoken. At last Miss Stevenage did broach the subject. It was the first time she saw the Colonel after having told him the truth.

'Did you see her?' she asked.

'I called, but she refused to see me.'

'And you made no other effort?'

'Yes; I wrote, and she returned the letter.'

Of her unfortunate visit Miss Stevenage said nothing; she merely resolved never again to mention Lottie's name.

Meanwhile Lottie was thinking a great deal more of Miss Stevenage than she would have cared for any one to know. After her first burst of indignation at the visit was over, she began to wonder why the visit was paid.

'She must have had some object in view,' thought Lottie, and womanlike she felt she could not rest until she discovered what that object was. Her curiosity, once set going, was fanned into flame by Miss Stevenage's silence. Had that lady chosen to repeat her visit to Arden Lodge, she would probably have received more insults,

and been dismissed without a thought from Lottie's mind; it was simply because she kept away that Lottie actually began to think of going to her.

'Pa,' said Lottie one day, 'come here.'

Mr. Fane, who was busy gardening, threw down his hoe, and came over to where she sat, under the shelter of the tree.

'Well, my dear?'

'What did you say to that shameless woman when she said she would like me to call upon her?'

'I said I'd tell you, my dear.'

'But you didn't mean to tell me, did you, Pa?—you didn't mean me to enter the house of a woman like that?'

Mr. Fane hesitated.

'She seemed to want to see you very much, Lottie.'

'Of course she did—she wanted to taunt me. She glories in having taken him from me. I know what it is!'

'Lottie, you don't know what you are saying,' said Mr. Fane: 'it's wonderful,' he continued, 'how cruel women are to one another. If you had seen what the poor lady had to go through the day she called here—well, well, we will say no more about it,' he added hastily, as he saw his wife sailing towards them across the lawn.

But although Lottie said no more, she thought of it, and the more she thought, the more anxious she became to see the woman; until at length she determined to accept the invitation and make the call.

She could say nothing about it at home, for she knew that the indignation of the whole virtuous household would be aroused; but one morning she quietly left the house as if for a walk, and having got some little distance, she took a hansom and drove to Park Lane. Her feelings as she went along were a curious mixture of indignation and curiosity, but when the cab stopped at Miss Stevenage's door her indignation was at its height. Had she alighted at some poorly furnished cottage, she might have had some pity for its mistress; but Lottie could not understand how misery and repentance could dwell in a place like this. The house was a little palace; it faced the best part of the park, and it was a perfect picture for the eye to feast upon. Its window-sills were full of pretty blue china flower-stands

filled with choice flowers, and shaded by striped sun blinds; when Lottie knocked, the door was opened by a footman in powder and plush, and on her asking for Miss Stevenage, she was ushered into the prettiest drawing-room she had ever seen in her life. As the room was empty, Lottie looked about her; it was certainly very pretty. There were velvet lounges and chairs, ebony cabinets filled with china, gilt clocks, and delicate china candelabra; the walls, too, were covered with old china, and the windows shaded with curtains of the most delicate lace; there were photographs all over the room; pictures of actors and actresses, and foremost amongst the latter was Lottie herself.

As Lottie looked about the room her indignation increased.

'These are the kind of baits,' she said, 'that entice men from their homes.'

At that moment the drawing-room door opened, and an extravagantly dressed Frenchwoman, who announced herself as 'My lady's maid,' asked Lottie to follow her upstairs. Lottie went, fully determined to speak her mind. Wherever she went fresh luxuries met her eye. The two women mounted the stairs without a sound, the carpets being so thick and soft that Lottie's feet sank into them, and the air was heavy and slumbrous with the smell of flowers. They reached the top of the stairs, passed along a passage, when the maid paused, gently pushed open the door of a room, and invited Lottie to enter. She did so, and having advanced three steps, she paused, half in wonder and half in pain; what the

room was like she did not know: her eyes were fixed upon a couch, for on this, pale and exhausted and wearied unto death, lay the mistress of the house.

At sight of this figure Lottie's indignation melted away; and pity for suffering took its place.

'You are not well,' she said uneasily; 'I am sorry I didn't know.'

'No, I am not well,' said Miss Stevenage; 'but that needn't alarm you. I seldom am well now. I suppose the life I have led is beginning to tell upon me.'

Lottie shrank away, and made as if she would go, but Miss Stevenage caught her dress.

'You are not going yet,' she said. 'I want to talk to you for your own good, mind, so don't be a little fool and shut

your ears to what I've got to say. Mind you,' she added, as her face hardened, 'I should never have asked you to come here at all if your father hadn't been at home that day I called. He's a good sort; yes, if it hadn't been for him I should have let you and the whole family go to Jericho. How they did turn up their noses at me!—but it's very easy for people to be virtuous when there's no temptation; if it hadn't been for an accident I should have been as good a woman as you are!'

'Of course, they all say that,' sneered Lottie.

Miss Stevenage's face grew crimson.

'You had better take care what you say,' she said; 'remember, I hold your future in my hands.'

'Then hold it,' said Lottie, 'for I defy

you! I suppose you mean that you have taken Colonel Sedgemore from me; well, keep him, for let me tell you I despise him as much as I despise you!'

'Did you come here to insult me?'

'I came here to tell you what I thought of you, and such as you. If you knew how every honest woman despised you, you would not dare to show your face in the sunlight, you would die before you could look so steadfastly at me!'

Once more she turned as if to go, and once more she was seized and held firmly.

'Lottie Fane, you don't go yet.'

'How dare you touch me!' cried Lottie, turning fiercely upon her.

Her grasp relaxed, and with a wild cry

Miss Stevenage fell back upon her pillows. Her face went purple in hue, and huge drops of perspiration came out upon her forehead and rolled down her face. For a few moments she gasped as if her last hour had come. Utterly beside herself with fear, Lottie rang the bell; the maid came; she uttered a dismayed cry at sight of her mistress, and begged Lottie to leave the room. Scarcely knowing what she did, Lottie obeyed, descended the stairs, and re-entered the drawing-room. The sight of all this luxury now made her quite sick. She walked about uneasily for what seemed to her an interminable time, then, unable to bear the anxiety longer, she re-ascended the stairs. All was quiet again now; the lady, pale and exhausted, lay back upon her pillows with closed eyes. When Lottie

peeped in she opened her eyes and beckoned to her. The lady's-maid interposed.

'Madame must keep quiet,' she said.

But Miss Stevenage waved her hand.

'Come in, Miss Fane,' she said, 'and you, Augustine, close the door and see that we are not disturbed.'

When the maid had closed the door, she turned to Lottie, who stood some distance from the bedside.

'It is my heart,' she said; 'when I get excited it comes like that. I suppose some day it will kill me; well, I don't mind dying when my turn comes, but I want to say what I've got to say to you first. Listen to me, Lottie Fane; if I told you that what the world says about Colonel Sedgemore and me was all false, would you forgive him?'

'Forgive him!' said Lottie coldly; 'I suppose it makes very little difference whether I do or not. Colonel Sedgemore is nothing to me.'

Miss Stevenage looked at her, and seemed to read in her face every thought that was passing through her mind. She was silent for a few moments; then she said:

'Lottie Fane, when I was a girl of seventeen I was as good a girl as there is in the world, and I was beloved by an honourable man. Well, he was jealous, and he suspected me without cause. I said I'd never forgive him, and, God forgive me! I never did. When he found his mistake and came to me for forgiveness I was the wife of another man—a brute I had married out of spite, who kicked me and half killed me, and finally turned me

out. I didn't know what to do for a living, so I took to the stage, and finding how hard it was for a good woman to get on, I became a bad one. I soon grew rich then, and my brute of a husband used to share the plunder. I lived in that way until I met Colonel Sedgemore.'

At the mention of that name again Lottie's face grew very hard.

'Don't shrink at the mention of his name,' said Miss Stevenage; 'he is the best and truest man I ever met in my life. I knew something of his story, and I felt sorry for him, and we soon became friends. Well, because I had been bad once, the world thought I must be bad for ever—it wouldn't let me have one friend; so scandal began its work about the Colonel and me. Well, I didn't care—what did it matter to

me?—but when I saw how it hurt him and you, I was sorry. I hated hurting him, because I felt he was the only man who had ever been a true friend to me, and when I remembered my own story I was sorry for you.'

Lottie was about to make some reply, when the bedroom door was opened again, and the maid re-appeared.

'Colonel Sedgemore,' she said.

Lottie turned crimson and started to her feet.

'I cannot see him!' she cried.

Miss Stevenage was more composed.

'You shall not see him,' she returned; 'pass through that door. Now, Augustine, show the Colonel up.'

In two minutes the Colonel's step was heard upon the stair, and Lottie, a

trembling prisoner in the dressing-room, knew she must hear every word that passed. Nay more, she could see, for she discovered that the door stood ajar, and she made no attempt to close it. She saw the Colonel enter the room, bend down and kiss Miss Stevenage on the forehead; then he took his seat gravely beside the couch.

'You are not so well to-day, Cora,' he said; 'what is it?'

She feverishly pushed back the hair from her forehead, and said:

'Colonel dear, I've been thinking, and I have come to the conclusion it will be better for your sake as well as for mine that we should part.'

'Part!' echoed the Colonel; 'are you mad, Cora?'

'No, but I have been—mad and selfish both. Do you know, Colonel, you are the only man I ever met in my life who has treated me with the respect due from an honourable man to a good woman?—you pulled me up out of the mud, but in doing so you were perforce smeared with a little of that you tried to clear from me. You know what the world says about us.'

'What of that? We know these reports are all lies, and can defy them.'

'No, we can't; if we swore on the Book that our friendship had been pure—as God knows it has been—no one on earth would believe us.'

'Yes, *I* would.'

The dressing-room door had opened, and Lottie, pale as a ghost, but quite composed, stood upon the threshold. The inmates of

the adjoining room would not have been much more disturbed if an earthquake had taken place. The Colonel, utterly beside himself with amazement, stared at Lottie in speechless wonder, while Miss Stevenage moved uneasily. She had not anticipated this; she had spoken to the Colonel merely with a view to clearing his character to Lottie, never imagining for a moment that that young lady would so precipitately interfere.

Lottie, however, was impulsive, and the moment she knew she had committed a wrong, even in thought, she was anxious to set it right.

'Miss Stevenage,' she continued, 'I am very sorry for what I said to you. I hope you will forget and forgive.'

Suddenly she became conscious of the

Colonel's presence; she felt her pale cheeks grow crimson and her hands tremble.

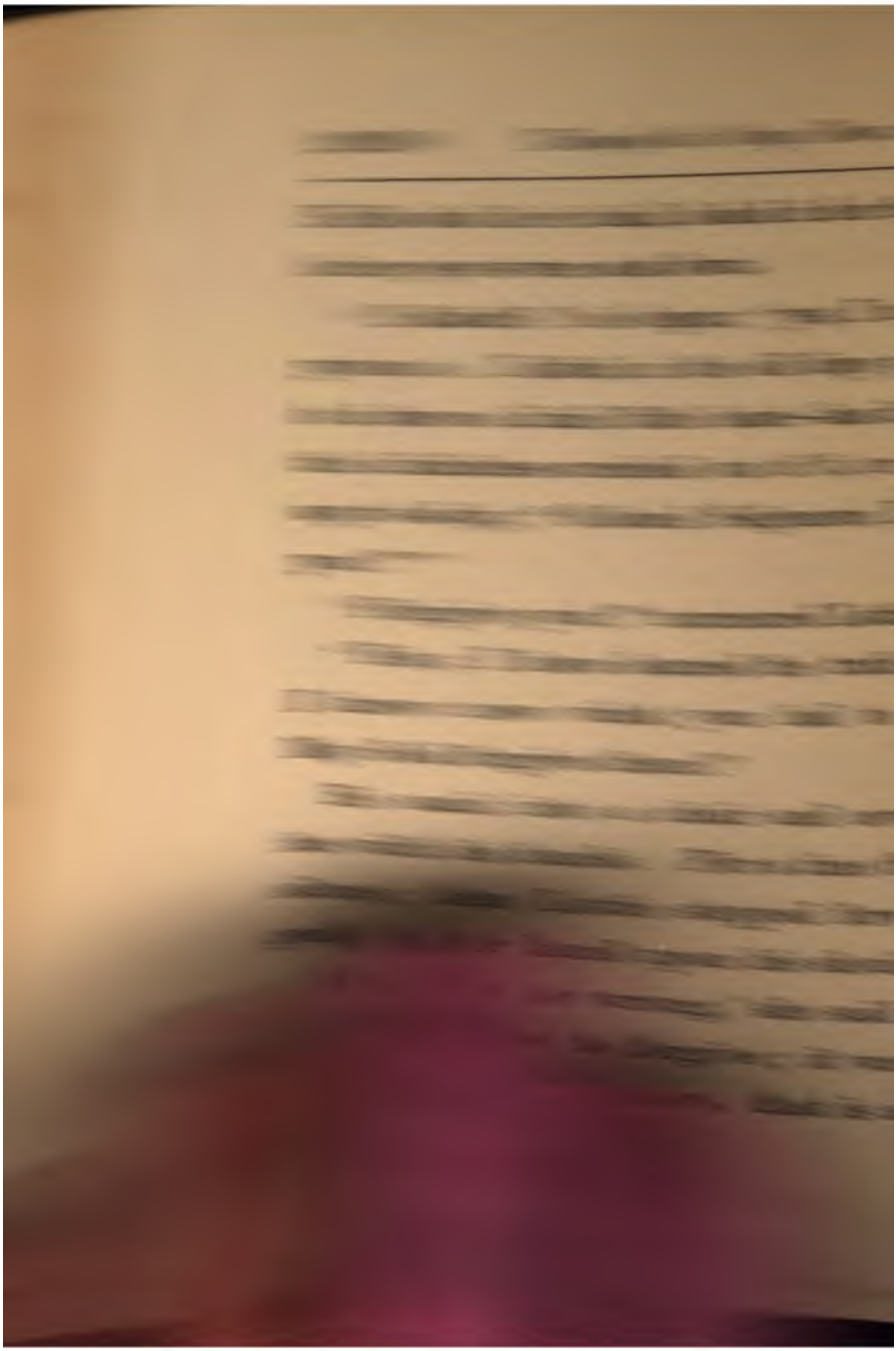
'I—I am sorry,' she murmured; 'I——' and she moved towards the door, but in a moment the Colonel was beside her.

'Lottie!' he exclaimed, 'my little girl! at last!'

In the first wild joy at meeting, he took her in his arms and kissed her; and Lottie passively submitted. Then she withdrew herself from his arms, and said quietly:

'I think I had better go home!'

They were alone in the room now, for Miss Stevenage, having seen the state of affairs, had quietly slipped from her couch and disappeared. Lottie moved again as if to go, but again the Colonel detained her.



Half an hour later Lottie *did* leave the house; but Colonel Sedgemore was by her side. He had taken up his position as of old, and Lottie had not attempted to send him away.

They got into a hansom together and drove to St. John's Wood: when they came out close to the garden gate of Arden Lodge, Lottie gave the Colonel her hand and said:

'I hope you will come and see me some day soon, but—not to-day. I will tell them I have seen you.'

He understood her hesitation, and said he would come another time.

Meanwhile, from a quiet upstairs window, Miss Stevenage had watched the two depart.

'They have completely forgotten my

existence,' she murmured; 'well, I knew it would be so, and I have no right to complain; *they* are happy—that ought to be enough for me.'

CHAPTER XII.

When at length Lottie ventured to announce that she had actually called upon Miss Stevenage, and moreover had become friends again with Colonel Sedgemore, there was rather an unpleasant half hour spent in Arden Lodge. Mrs. Fane, on the spur of the moment, announced her intention of leaving her daughter to her own abandoned course, and what was more, of taking her husband and baby with her. On reflection, however, she decided to stay; but never, she declared,

should Colonel Sedgemore enter those gates.

'But, my dear,' murmured Mr. Fane mildly, 'you must remember those gates are Lottie's, and if she wishes it, the Colonel must enter them.'

Mrs. Fane turned fiercely upon her spouse.

'It is like you, Horatio, to taunt me with my poverty!' she exclaimed. 'Well, since I am evidently a burden here, I have no doubt the workhouse is open to me.'

'Lor', Ma, don't make a fool of yourself!' cut in Carrie, who had been spoken to privately a few hours before, and who had been gradually won over to Lottie's side.

But Mrs. Fane was by this time weeping tragically, and holding her child

to her as if to shield him from harm. Seeing that nothing further was to be done just then, Lottie left the discomfited group upon the lawn, and entered the house. Two days had passed since that day when she had met the Colonel, and since that time she had not returned to Park Lane. In the first flush of her gratitude she had resolved to visit Miss Stevenage frequently, and in defiance of the opinion of the world to become her friend; on reflection, however, she found this could not be. Whatever Miss Stevenage might be at present, and however much Lottie might believe in her, there could be no doubt whatever that her past life would not bear inspection. That being the case, Lottie knew that to have an open friendship with her would endanger her own fair fame. She could

not afford to do this; so she sadly made up her mind that there must be no communion whatever between them. For several weeks Lottie kept her resolve; but at length one day she determined to break it.

'I will go to her just once,' she said.

She was rehearsing Beatrice in 'Much Ado,' and resolved, after rehearsal was over, to call at Park Lane on her way home. Having made this resolution, she felt more contented, and went off to rehearsal with a light heart. But things went very slowly that day, and when the rehearsal was over, Lottie looked at her watch and found it wanted only two hours to the rising of the curtain at night.

'Ah well! to-morrow will do,' she

murmured, as she stepped into a hansom and drove home.

The table spread for dinner stood under the tree, and Mrs. Fane informed her daughter that the meal had been waiting for nearly an hour, and that the 'viands' were well-nigh spoilt.

'All right, Ma, I'll be down in a minute,' said Lottie cheerfully, as she ran upstairs to take off her hat. She had only just reached her room, had hastily thrown her hat off and was about to go down again, when there was a ring at the gate bell. Lottie looked out of the window to see who it might be; she saw her little maid open the gate, and the Colonel walked in. The Colonel was now a pretty frequent visitor at Arden Lodge, and he usually came in the

afternoon to drink tea with the family upon the lawn, and watch Mr. Fane at his gardening. His first visit had been anything but pleasant, thanks to the exceedingly grand manner of Mrs. Fane, and even now; but Lottie had got very angry about it, so the stiffness had gradually become less. Mr. Fane, however, always welcomed him cordially, partly because he liked the Colonel, and partly because he saw that his presence amongst them made Lottie grow younger and brighter every day.

When Lottie saw who the visitor was, she felt her cheeks begin to glow; she ran to the glass to put a few finishing touches to her dress and hair, then she tripped down to meet him.

'You have come early to-day, just

in time for dinner,' she said, giving him both her hands; 'you'll have some, won't you?—but what is the matter?' she asked suddenly, seeing his face grave; 'have you any ill news?'

'Yes,' he returned, 'I am afraid I have. Miss Stevenage was taken dangerously ill last night; in her delirium she has been asking for you. I thought perhaps you would come.'

'Come? yes, of course I will come!' cried Lottie, running back to her room.

'Carlotta!' exclaimed Mrs. Fane, 'I must absolutely forbid;' but here Mr. Fane interposed.

'Sigismunda, my dear, I think you had better leave Lottie alone in a case of illness.'

Mrs. Fane turned fiercely upon her

husband, but before she could speak Lottie re-appeared. She had got on her hat, and was hastily pulling on her gloves.

'Let us go at once,' she said, addressing the Colonel; 'can we get a cab?'

'I have one waiting.'

'Very well, come.'

She was deaf to every word her mother said. She stepped into the cab which was waiting at the gate; the Colonel followed, and they drove away.

'Is she very bad?' said Lottie, when the cab was rolling on.

'Yes, very.'

'Has she been so long?'

'No; yesterday at this time she seemed in excellent health. I dined with her, and she seemed unusually bright, I thought; when the dinner was half over she suddenly

uttered a sharp cry, and fell back, as I thought, dead.'

'Dead!' cried Lottie, shrinking back upon her seat.

'No, no, she is not dead; she had been seized with a spasm at the heart which had made her insensible. Well, I summoned assistance, and while her maid was putting her to bed I went for a doctor. He and I sat up all night expecting every moment that she would die; all night she lay like one stunned; but to-day she recovered consciousness for a moment, and during that moment she asked for you. I thought I had better fetch you.'

'Oh yes; I am so glad you came,' said Lottie; 'if—if she had died I should never have forgiven myself—never!'

The cab soon pulled up at the house in Park Lane, and even from the outside Lottie seemed to discover signs of sickness and death. The blinds were all down, as if to exclude every gleam of sunlight; the knocker was muffled. The Colonel rang the bell very softly, and the door was opened by Miss Stevenage's French maid. The woman had evidently been crying, and when the Colonel asked how her mistress was, she sadly shook her head.

'Just the same as she was all night, sir.'

'She hasn't recovered consciousness again?'

'No.'

Taking Lottie's hand in his, the Colonel entered the house, and was about to pass

on to the dining-room, but Lottie held him back.

'Should I not go to her at once?' she said.

'I think not,' returned the Colonel. 'No, it would do no good to her, and only upset you. You must have something to eat, for you are both tired and hungry. Bring something to the dining-room for Miss Fane,' he added, addressing the maid.

'The lunch is there, sir—the doctor took some before he went.'

'Is he gone, then?'

'Yes, sir, he has gone to see some of his patients; he will be back in an hour.'

The maid went back to her mistress's bedside, and the Colonel and Lottie went to the dining-room. Here they found luncheon spread, but the very sight of it

was repulsive to Lottie, and she refused to take any; but the Colonel was persistent.

'You have had a hard morning's work,' he said, 'and nothing to eat; if you had any strain now, you would break down under it. I must think of you, Lottie; remember what you have to go through to-night.'

She tried to obey him, and managed to swallow a little cold fowl and sherry. Afterwards she seemed better.

'Now,' she said, 'let me go to her!'

Again the Colonel shook his head.

'You can do nothing for her, my child. You had better rest here, and be at hand in case she asks for you again.'

Lottie meekly submitted, feeling that what he said was best: she took her seat upon a sofa, while the Colonel went back-

wards and forwards to the sick-room. In about half an hour the doctor returned, and after having visited his patient, reported a change for the worse.

'Did she ask for me?' said Lottie, springing up.

'She has not asked for anyone,' said the doctor gravely. 'I fear she never will again.'

'Then do let me go to her,' said Lottie. 'I must see her again alive.'

'Then you had better come,' returned the doctor, as he led the way into the sick-room.

Again the Colonel took Lottie's hand in his, and his warm pressure somewhat reassured her; with an effort she pulled herself together to face bravely the coming trial. Lottie trembled as she crossed the

threshold of the room, and when her eyes rested upon the occupant of the bed, she gasped as if for air, and clung close to the Colonel's arm. Miss Stevenage was still unconscious, her breathing was very laboured, her face seemed to have sunk in, and a spot like fire burnt on either cheek. It was the first time Lottie had faced even so near an approach to death, and the sight of so much suffering filled her with horror; her chest began to heave, and her eyes filled with tears.

'It is too much for you, Lottie,' whispered the Colonel; 'come away.'

But she cried and clung to him, sobbing.

'If she would only speak—if she would only look at me!'

Suddenly an awful change took place. The Colonel saw it, and as he did so, he laid

Lottie's head on his shoulder to hide the sight from her. Miss Stevenage's body quivered through and through, her jaw dropped, and her eyes opened their widest. The doctor laid his finger upon the pulse, the maid uttered a terrified cry, and the Colonel, keeping Lottie's face well turned from the bed, took her forcibly from the room. Three minutes later the doctor came to them.

'It is all over,' he said quietly.

The Colonel's bronzed cheek grew very pale, and Lottie burst into hysterical tears. He allowed her to cry, and gradually her sobs subsided; when he saw her lying pale and exhausted on a couch, he called the doctor aside.

'Can you give me some soothing draught for Miss Fane?' he said; 'she

has to act to-night, poor child, and she is not in a fit state for it now.'

He prescribed for her, and by the time she had to start for the theatre she had grown tolerably calm. She asked to be allowed to see Miss Stevenage before leaving the house, but her request was refused.

'It would only upset you, and do her no good,' said the Colonel.

'Have you seen her?'

'Yes.'

'How does she look?'

'Very composed, and very pretty—quite like her old self again.'

The cab drove up to the door, and the Colonel put on his hat.

'I am coming with you,' he said in answer to her look of inquiry. 'You are

not fit to go by yourself to-night, Lottie!'

'My people!' she said; 'they will wonder I do not go home.'

'I have telegraphed to them. You will find your maid at the theatre, I think.'

'Oh, how good you are!'

When the cab drew up at the stage door, Lottie's maid was there, anxiously looking out for her mistress. The Colonel uttered a few consoling words, then walked sadly away. Lottie's heart was very sad that night, but she went bravely through her work. When it was over, and the gallant little woman muffled up in her cloak was leaving the theatre, a figure stepped forward from the darkness, and took her hand.

'Lottie,' said the Colonel in his kindest voice, 'I have come to take you home!'

The sudden and premature death of Miss Stevenage caused much commotion, much regret, and after a while much scandal. She had died a very rich woman, and all her property, except a few trifling legacies to her servants, was left to Colonel Sedgemore. The Colonel, too, was the chief mourner at her funeral, the poor lady having died almost without friends. So for a time scandal was busy with the names of the dead and the living; then it gradually died away.

CHAPTER XIII.

'LOTTIE.'

'Yes, Pa.'

'What are you going to do about Colonel Sedgemore?'

Lottie, who had been contentedly reading under the garden tree, looked up at her father, who sat near her.

'What am I going to do about Colonel Sedgemore?' she repeated; 'nothing.'

She tried to speak carelessly enough, but her cheeks would burn in spite of her.

'Then you ought to do something, my

dear,' persisted Mr. Fane; 'things can't go on like this for ever.'

'Why not, you silly old Pa?' said Lottie; 'we're happy enough, aren't we? The Colonel comes often——'

'Yes, that is just it: he comes a good deal too often if he is only to be a friend.'

Luckily for Lottie the conversation was interrupted by the appearance of Mrs. Fane.

'Tea, Carlotta,' she said. 'I have had it placed in the drawing-room, as the evenings are growing chill.'

Lottie gladly jumped up.

'I don't want any tea, Ma,' she said, as she sped up to her room. 'I'm going to see Carrie.'

Carrie lived in a pretty house well

within walking distance of Arden Lodge, so instead of calling a cab, Lottie walked, pondering as she went on what her father had said. It was not the first time she had asked herself that question, what was to be done about Colonel Sedgemore? but she got no satisfactory reply. She did not know what to do; the Colonel seemed very fond of her, she knew she was very fond of him, but they were only friends, and she could not propose the tie that would make them more than friends: in her perplexity she resolved to carry her troubles to Carrie.

But when Lottie arrived at the house she found Carrie in no mood to receive confidences. Master Jinks, aged six weeks, was far from well, and Carrie was so full of maternal cares that Lottie decided to

say nothing about her own doubts and fears. She listened patiently to Carrie's account of the baby; then she said good-bye.

'By the way, Lottie,' said Carrie, as she kissed her. 'Have you seen the Colonel lately?'

'Not for three or four days.'

'Ah, then, perhaps you haven't heard?'

'What?'

'Why, that he is going away.'

'But where is he going to?'

'Don't know, dear.'

'When is he going?'

'That I don't know. I was so worried about baby when Charlie told me that I never thought of asking him particulars. Charlie seemed certain about his going.'

'It is a wonder you are certain about anything,' said Lottie pettishly, as she took her departure.

At twelve o'clock that night, when Lottie returned from the theatre, she found that her mother had gone to bed, but her father was sitting up for her.

'I am *so* glad you are alone, Pa. I am very, very, very glad,' she cried, as she threw her arms round his neck and kissed him.

'Why, Lottie, what's the matter?' said Mr. Fane.

'I have solved a problem, Pa.'

'Well, my dear?'

'I know now what I am going to do about Colonel Sedgemore. I am going to marry him.'

'Going to marry him?' repeated Mr. Fane.

'Why, of course; did you suppose I was going to do anything else, you silly, dear old Pa?'

'But, 'Lottie, isn't the decision rather sudden?'

'Why, of course; these decisions always are sudden, you know, dear. I have heard several married people say that if marriages were thought over they wouldn't come off. I don't suppose you vacillated much; Ma wouldn't let you.'

'My dear!'

'Now don't deny it, Pa, because you know I'm right. Well, just as Ma took you in hand, the Colonel has taken me. He came to the theatre to-night.'

'Oh!' ejaculated Mr. Fane.

'He came to the theatre to-night,' continued Lottie, 'and proposed to me

during one of my waits. Pa, I shall keep that Beatrice dress: it is very pretty, and I look very nice in it.'

Mr. Fane smiled and kissed the little hand which lay in his.

'About the marriage, my dear?' he said, 'when is it to be?'

'At once,' said Lottie; 'we are going away together.'

'Going away?' said Mr. Fane.

'Yes; but not for long, so don't look glum, dear; he is obliged to go, he says, and he doesn't like to leave me, so I suggested we should make it our honeymoon; when we come back we are going to live in London here. I am going to buy this house and make it a present to you and Ma; you like it, don't you, dear? The Colonel and I will come and

see you very often, and Carrie and Charlie are close at hand, so you won't feel lonely.'

'But what about you, my dear, without the stage?'

'I shall not be without the stage,' said Lottie. 'I didn't get much happiness when I gave it up before. The Colonel says I may act as much and as often as I choose. And now, Pa dear, kiss me and say you're glad, and we'll go to bed.'

Mr. Fane did as he was told.

'You're a good girl, and you deserve to be happy,' he said; 'God bless you, my dear.'

THE END.

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