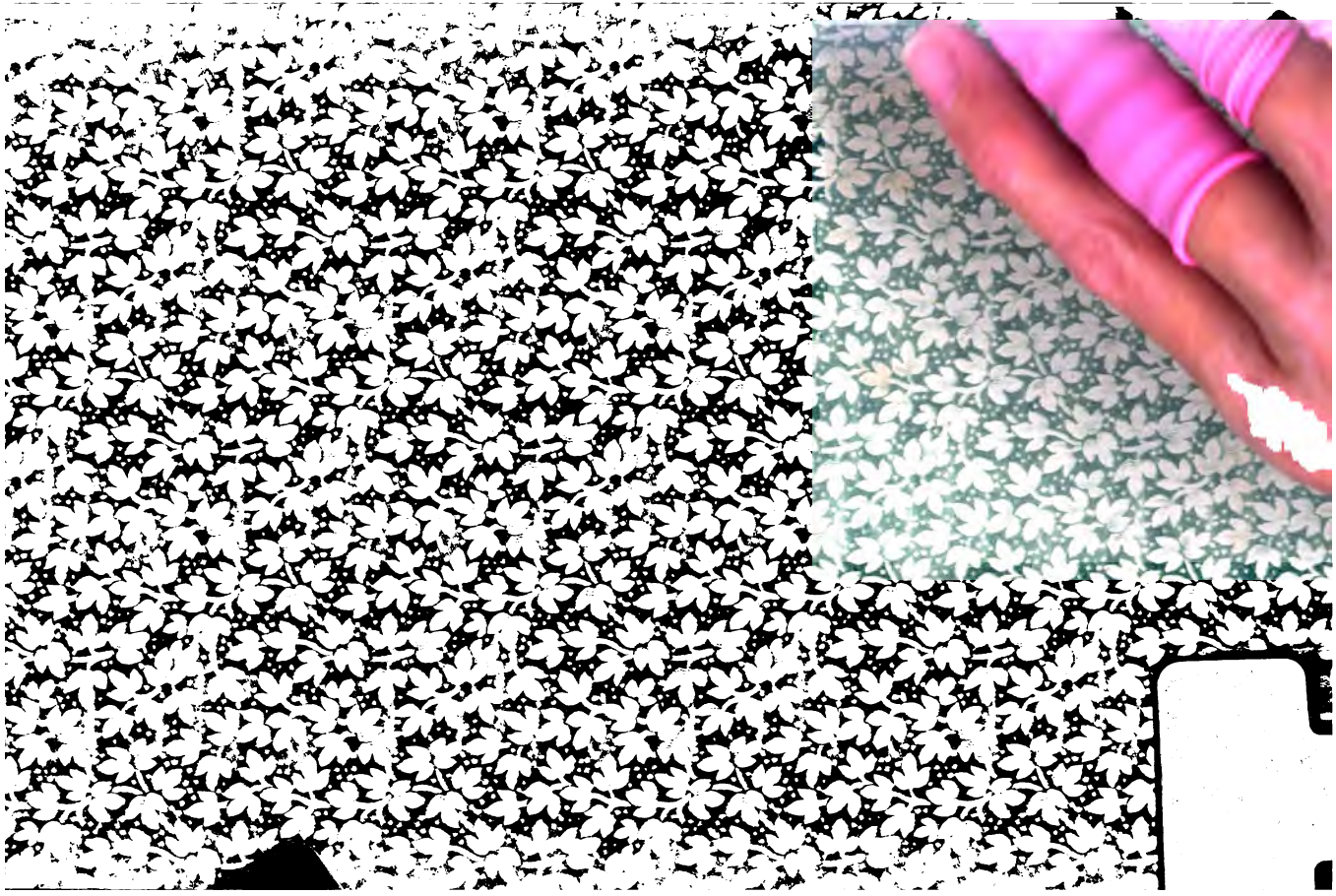
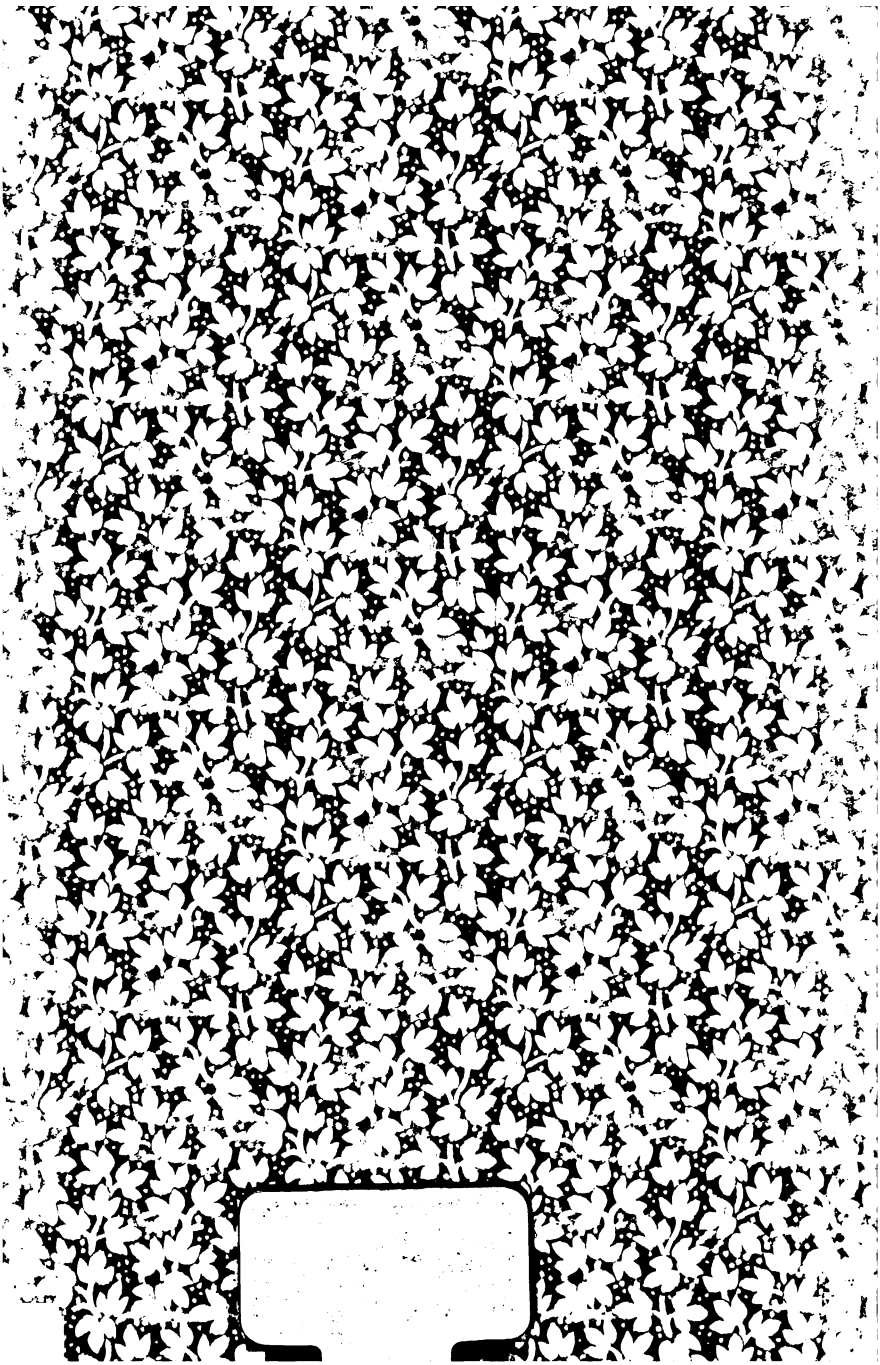
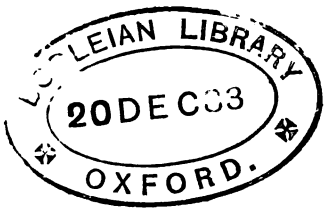
# THROUGH THE STAGE DOOR

BY

HARRIETT JAY







# THROUGH THE STAGE DOOR.

## CHAPTER I.

'My dear Sigismunda!'

'Did you speak, Horatio?'

'I did, my dear,' said Mr. Fane desperately. 'I was going to suggest that if you *must* sing to the baby, you might choose something more lively.'

'Why so, Horatio?'

'Because I'm copying a comedy, and your music would do for a dirge.'

'It *is* a dirge!' echoed Mrs. Fane, in

her most stentorian tones; 'a dirge, Horatio, from the "Spartan Mother," in which I made my first appearance.'

To this Mr. Fane said nothing; he only uttered a faint little sigh of protest, and laid down his pen.

The couple were man and wife; and at the opening of this story, they had stood in that relation to each other for nearly twenty years.

Mr. Fane was a little man, very round, very fat, and very good-humoured looking, with a face which, to a good low comedian, would have been a fortune. But though he had been almost born in the theatre, as he said, and was brought up among the flies, he had never risen to the dignity of treading the boards. At a very early age he had been made 'call-boy' in the

theatre where his father was master-carpenter and his mother a dresser; from that, in the course of time, he had risen to the position of prompter, and there he had stopped. Up to the time when this story opened, he had managed to live by spending his evenings prompting at the theatre, his days in sitting at home copying out plays.

But his wife was a very different kind of person. She was a tragedienne from head to foot. Tall and bony, with black hair, black eyes, she could have played one of the witches without any make-up to speak of. She sat at the other end of the room, rocking the cradle with her foot, while her hands were busily employed in stitching some tinsel on to a highly coloured skirt.

As her husband dropped his pen and thrust his little fingers into his hair, she placed her work upon her knees and fixed upon him her most tragic gaze.

'Years ago,' she continued, 'when I was a child of twelve, I played the boy Pethonius, and was stabbed by the great Mrs. Giddens in the second act! My mind is wandering back to those happy days, Horatio, remembering that my youngest child, now sweetly slumbering here, made his first appearance only three nights ago.'

'And so he did,' replied Mr. Fane, rubbing his hands delightedly; 'and made the hit of the piece, my dear.'

Mrs. Fane rolled her melancholy eyes slowly in the direction of her husband, and seemed about to reply; before she could

do so, however, the door of the room was burst suddenly and violently open, and a young girl about seventeen years of age rushed breathlessly in.

'Oh, Ma!' she cried, coming to a full stop in the middle of the room, and triumphantly flourishing an open newspaper, 'such a *splendid* notice in the *Sporting Gazette!*'

Mrs. Fane, whose ideas worked slowly, again succeeded in merely opening her mouth; but her husband jumped up from his seat and came delightedly forward.

'Of you, my dear,' he said, 'or Lottie?'

'No, Pa; of the baby—bless his heart!'

She rushed up to the cradle, where the baby still slumbered with his fist in his

mouth, and bestowed upon him a few hearty kisses, then she returned again to the paper.

'Just listen,' she said; and she commenced to read: '"But the very young performer who played the child in arms carried off the honours. Such wonderful confidence; such fertility of resources in a kid——"'

'A *kid!*' shrieked Mrs. Fane, finding her voice at last.

'Yes, Ma,' returned the girl, 'a *kid.*'.

Mrs. Fane gave a tragical shudder.

'How un-Shakespearian!' she murmured.

'Look here, Ma,' said the girl, dropping the paper, 'do you want to hear the notice, or do you not?'

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her name and married the gay Horatio, was the well-known Sigismunda Smeddle, of the Western Circuit." What do you think of that, Ma ?'

Mrs. Fane smiled.

'An honest tribute,' she said, 'though coarsely expressed. Heigho !'

'Lor', Ma ! what's the matter ?' said Carrie. 'Ain't you well ?'

'It is nothing,' returned the ex-tragedienne solemnly. 'I confess I was merely regretting that my youngest child had not made his *début* in the legitimate drama, instead of a farcical comedy.'

'Ah, my dear,' returned Mr. Fane good-humouredly, 'times have changed ! Shake-speare now spells bankruptcy.'

'When I made my first appearance, Horatio, it was different. We live in

degenerate days. Both my girls get their bread by performing in burlesque; and one of them is actually engaged to a music hall vocalist, outside the profession altogether.'

'Meaning *me*, Ma!' returned Carrie. 'Well, if Charlie *is* a comic singer, he drives his trap and keeps his tiger. Ah, that reminds me; 'twas he who brought me the *Sporting Gazette*, and he said he'd wait outside till I gave him the signal to come in. What a brute I am to keep him there so long. Here, Charlie!' she cried, throwing open the window. "Come up! come up!'

'Carolina Fane,' exclaimed her mother, 'be less boisterous!'

But Carrie did not heed. She was leaning well out of the window, gazing with

admiring eyes upon a very small but very high dog-cart which stood just outside the gate. Attached to it was a sleek, well-made chestnut, wearing no harness to speak of, and standing at the head of the horse was a little figure, looking like one of the American Midgets, but habited in full tiger's uniform, with high boots and cockaded hat.

Having gazed her fill, she let down the window with a bang, for she could never do things quietly, rushed to the door and threw it open.

'Here he is!' she said. 'Come in, Charlie!' and Carrie's future husband entered the room.

He was a young man, and not at all bad looking, but his costume made him noticeable wherever he went. He wore

patent leather boots with gold-coloured gaiters; a tweed suit of a most gorgeous design; yellow kid gloves; a white hat, which he wore slightly tilted over one eye; and a large highly-coloured bouquet in his button-hole. He mounted the stairs, merrily singing an air:

'He smokes a penny "Pickwick," la-di-da, la-di-da.'

'Here I am!' he said, entering gaily. 'Morning, governor,' shaking hands with Mr. Fane. 'Mother, hope you're well.'

He advanced respectfully towards Mrs. Fane, who gave him her hand.

'I am as well, Charles,' she said, 'as can be expected.'

'Lor', Ma!' said the exasperated Carrie; 'don't talk as if you'd just been adding to the population!'

Her mother gave her a look of withering reproach; before she could speak, however, Charlie Jinks chimed in.

'And so she did,' he said, 'nine month's ago. I say, mother, I call your married life a highly creditable performance in three acts.'

'How so, Charles?'

'Act one, Lottie; act two, Carrie—there she is—and then, as they say in the programme, an interval of twenty years was supposed to take place, till act three, the baby!'

'Don't be ridiculous, Charlie,' said his bride-elect. 'I've called you up to speak for yourself—Ma's been abusing you again.'

Once more Mrs. Fane attempted to wither her daughter by a look, and turned with a sad smile towards the young man.

'I merely expressed my regret, Charles, that you were not a follower of the legitimate drama.'

'Quite right,' returned Charlie good-humouredly. 'I'm only an outsider, ma'am; but what's the odds, so long as you're happy? I do three turns a night; and I'm able to dress like a gentleman.'

'So you are, Charlie,' returned Carrie approvingly; 'and what's more, you keep your trap by honest work, and very few in the profession can do that, I can tell you.'

'You know, ma'am,' continued Mr. Jinks apologetically, 'I tried the profession and found it didn't answer. In the theatre I was only utility — now I'm playing leading business. Where's Lottie?'

'Carlotta is at rehearsal.'

'But she'll be home to dinner,' returned Fane, who, during the last half hour, had been trying hard to get on with his copying, but had brightened up wonderfully at the mention of Lottie's name. 'Will you stay and take a mouthful, Charlie?'

'Do,' said Carrie; 'there's a nice shoulder of mutton with baked potatoes—and—onion sauce.'

'Can't, my dear,' said Charlie affectionately; 'but I thank the governor and you, Carrie, all the same. I've got to make a call at the music shop, and be back home at three sharp to practise a new song.'

'All right; then you'd better go,' said Carrie. 'Good-bye!'

'Good-bye, Carrie!' he said, giving her

a kiss; then he again turned respectfully to Mrs. Fane. 'By-the-way, ma'am,' he said, 'Carrie and I have been talking together, and she thinks it time I was a married man—eh, Carrie?'

'Married and done for!' said Mr. Fane, laughing.

'Horatio,' said Mrs. Fane severely, 'don't be coarse.'

'All right, my dear,' he said, turning to his work again.

'On a more fitting occasion, Charles,' said the lady, keeping up her tragedy tones, 'we will discuss the subject to which you allude. Meantime, farewell!'

'All right, good-bye, ma'am—good-bye, governor. Carrie,' he added, with another kiss, '"to our next"—*au revoir* as the French say,' and dropping his hat

jauntily on his head, he departed. Carrie rushed to the window again to see the dog-cart drive away; when it was gone—and Mr. Jinks had nearly broken his neck looking back at her—she slammed to the window again, and turned to her mother, who was by this time occupied with the baby:

'I declare, Ma,' she said, 'I wonder Charlie wants to marry into our family at all. You're always sitting upon him.'

'Sitting upon him, irreverent girl!'

'You know what I mean,' screamed Carrie, while Mr. Fane stuffed his fingers into his ears, and continued his writing. 'You're always pretending he ain't good enough for me, and I won't have it—there!'

'Carolina, forbear!' said Mrs. Fane severely; 'Charles Jinks is a worthy young person, but is utterly ignorant of our divine Art.'

'Oh, bother art!' said Carrie.

'Revile it not; the immortal Shakespeare——'

'And bother *him* too!' screamed Carrie; 'he doesn't pay, and what's more, I don't believe he ever did. Nobody really cares about him now, and you know, Ma, *you* can't get an engagement.'

At this unpleasant home-thrust, Mrs. Fane winced, but she drew herself proudly up, and her manner became even more severe.

'In an evil moment,' she said, 'I married your father, who has no aspirations. My dream was to become the

bride of a leading tragedian; it was nipped in the bud. My only consolation is that your sister Carlotta has the face and figure for juvenile lead, and may eventually soar to the empyrean of the poetic drama.'

'Oh, bother the poetic drama, Ma. I tell you it isn't——'

'Enough! let this discussion end. Take the infant and put him to bed, while I go and attend to the viands.'

'Very well.'

Carrie went over to the cradle, lifted the baby and gave him a few boisterous kisses; then, pressing him fondly to her, she seemed about to leave the room; having gained the door, however, she paused again:

'I say, Ma——'

'Well, Carolina?'

'I saw Lottie's swell to-day at the stage door.'

Mrs. Fane frowned.

'To whom in those ribald terms do you allude?'

'Ask Lottie and she'll tell you. He's a regular swell, and no mistake, but not my style, and much too old for Lottie. Come along, Popsikins!' and giving another boisterous shake up to the baby, she bounded off, while Mrs. Fane left the room by another door to look after the dinner.

When the doors closed—Carrie's with a bang, Mrs. Fane's more softly—Mr. Fane looked round, and finding that he was at length alone, he began to bite the end of his penholder, and mutter thoughtfully to himself.

'Lottie's swell!' he said. 'Lottie's swell! What could Carrie mean by that? Is it possible that my little girl——but no ——come what may——I'll never believe ill of my Lottie!'

Feeling somewhat comforted in his mind, he turned again to his well-filled table and began to write. But it seemed he was not to have much peace that day; scarcely had he filled three pages when the room door was opened again—very quietly and cautiously this time—and a pretty girl, no other indeed than Lottie herself, stood smiling upon the threshhold.

## CHAPTER II.

LOTTIE might certainly be accounted the most successful act in Mrs. Fane's life-drama. She had just passed her nineteenth birthday—tall, slim and graceful; with a face and figure which, as her mother said, were both admirably suited to juvenile lead. From the early age of five Lottie had trod the boards, and the necessary stage training had given a peculiar grace and lissomness to her figure, a pretty tone to her voice, and had added to her manner a *naïveté* and charm which she might not otherwise have pos-

sessed. Continual late hours, and the unnatural atmosphere of the theatre, had robbed her, it is true, of that blooming complexion which is given to most young ladies who are enabled to go to bed early and breathe plenty of fresh air. Her face was pale to a fault; but she was an accomplished dancer, and, with very little voice to speak of, a most charming singer.

For a moment or two she remained standing in the doorway, watching with her pretty eyes her father as he wrote; then, still noiselessly, she came forward, closed the door, and tripped across the room. Then an onlooker would have perceived another charm. Lottie Fane was a lady—both physically and spiritually as far removed from her sordid surroundings as

the moon is from the earth. There were no gaudy colours, awkward gestures, and boisterous flouncing about Lottie; she walked quietly and gracefully across the room, put her arms round her father's neck, lifted up his face and kissed him.

'Dear Papa,' she said, 'how you're working; I wonder your dear fingers don't ache again.'

It was easy to see who had managed to take undivided possession of Mr. Fane's heart. Sitting there with the girl's arms around his neck, her soft cheek pressed close upon his forehead, he seemed another being.

'Lottie,' he murmured, kissing her pretty hands, 'you've come, my dear.'

'Yes, Papa,' said Lottie, 'I've come.

And now, dear, put away your writing and turn round; I want to talk to you.'

'Rehearsal over?' he asked, as he proceeded to obey her.

'Ever so long ago!' returned Lottie, kneeling at his feet.

'Then what makes you so late, my dear?'

Lottie hesitated for a moment, then she said:

'I've been walking in the park.'

'Alone, Lottie?' asked Mr. Fane uneasily.

'Yes, Pa, alone. What makes you ask me that?'

'Nothing, my dear, nothing,' said Mr. Fane; and then there was silence.

In fact, he was thinking of what Carrie had said, and he was wishing

heartily that he could hear the story of this mysterious 'swell' gentleman from Lottie's lips.

Presently, after a short silence, the girl spoke.

'Pa.'

'Well, my dear?'

'You do look dreadfully tired to-day; you want a rest—a good long rest and a day in the country; but then you can't get it, because you're poor. You know you are awfully poor, now, aren't you?'

'Well, my dear,' said Mr. Fane, smiling good-humouredly, 'I'm not a millionnaire.'

'Of course you're not,' said the girl, kissing his hand again; 'and neither am I. My salary is wretchedly small, con-

sidering all the boots and gloves and wigs I have to buy out of it.'

'It's not large,' assented Mr. Fane.

'No, of course it is not, Now, Pa, tell me truly, you'd like to have more money, now wouldn't you—and more rest?'

'That depends, my dear, upon the conditions.'

'Oh, you cautious old thing!' said Lottie, laughing; 'you're *always* afraid of committing yourself. Now, suppose *I* could offer you a lot of money—suppose I could say, "Papa, come and live with me in a splendid house in the country, and see the green fields and the woods, and never go to the theatre any more"—what would you say then, sir?'

For a minute or two Mr. Fane said

nothing; he looked at her with eyes full of strange doubt and uneasiness, then he answered.

'Lottie,' he said, 'I want to talk to you for a minute or so; will you listen, little woman?'

'I will, Pa.'

He clasped the girl's hands in his, and held them while he spoke.

'It's now nearly fourteen years ago,' he said, 'since you passed, as it were, out of your mother's care, and came under my protection. One night—I remember it as well as if it was yesterday—I came home from the theatre and told your mother that you'd been offered your first engagement. Your mother shook her head at first, and said you were too young. But I soon talked her round; and the next morn-

ing I took you with me down to Drury Lane. The pantomime-season was just coming on, and the stage-door was surrounded by a crowd of men, women, and children. Their shivering bodies were clad in the most miserable rags, and their pale, emaciated faces told only too plainly their tale of wretchedness and want. I was too used to such scenes to take much heed of them. I lifted you on to my shoulders, carried you up to the manager's-room, and your first engagement was sealed. For a couple of months after Christmas, you appeared every night as the pretty little "Queen of the Fairies." Do you remember it, Lottie?'

The girl shook her head.

'I don't think I do, Pa; but go on.'

'Well, my dear, when the pantomime business began to flag, and most of the little fairies and hobgoblins were thinking of going back to idleness and wretched homes, I looked back on this engagement of yours, and decided that my little girl was none the worse—perhaps, indeed, a trifle better—than she had been before it; therefore, I looked about for another, and, with the help of our manager, I got you a child's part in a piece that was coming out at the National. You played this part till the pantomime-season came round again, and then I got you back to Drury Lane. From that day to this, you've scarcely spent an evening off the stage; and I don't believe there's an hour of your life that couldn't be looked into, Lottie, though you've been knocked about as few girls

have—there isn't a chapter in your life that your father can be ashamed of. Now listen to me, Lottie. I know what the profession is, and I know the sort of women we've got in it—women who can't advertise themselves in any other way than by going on the stage—women who earn less than you do, my dear, yet who wear diamonds, drive about in their carriages, and invite friends to stop with them at their country seats. Lottie, I hope to God you may never be in a position to offer this to me!'

'Papa,' said the girl uneasily, 'I don't know what you mean!'

Then Mr. Fane told her of the few words he had heard from Carrie.

'Who is this man, my dear?'

Lottie shook her head.

'I don't in the least know, Papa. He stands near the stage-door to see me come out; and he throws me the bouquet that I bring home every night. I saw him to-day; and that's what made me go for a walk in the park. I was thinking that if he were rich, and asked me to marry him, I would do it, because I could make you all so happy.'

'My dear, money isn't everything. If you and I were left to ourselves, we might be very happy without it.'

## CHAPTER III.

At eight o'clock that night Lottie Fane stood upon the stage of the Variety Theatre facing a happy throng. The performance consisted mainly of the three-act burlesque of 'Dick Whittington;' it was the two-hundredth night of the run; the piece had never gone better, and, above all, the business did not appear to flag. The pretty little house was packed from floor to ceiling—roars of hoarse laughter from the pit were alternated with gentler sounds of applause from boxes and stalls. Lottie doffed her cap, stepped daintily down to

the foot-lights, repeated her most successful song, founded on the famous music hall ditty of 'Doodledum, doodledum da,' received another encore, and the curtain fell.

For half a second there was silence, then the applause burst forth once more. The curtain was pulled back, Lottie stepped forward, smiled brightly at the house; then, just as she gave her second bow, a bouquet fell at her feet.

'Lottie Fane's usual floral offering!' lisped a handsome young man in the stalls to a vapid-looking swell beside him. 'Look; it's old Sedgemore of "Ours"—comes here every night, and always does that sort of thing. Hang me if I don't try to cut him out!'

So saying, he unfastened from his

button-hole a beautiful white camellia, and cast it on to the stage.

Lottie, having taken the bouquet, was turning to make her parting bow, when the white flower fell within a yard of her feet. Ignorant alike of the donor and the feeling which had prompted the gift, she tripped merrily forward again, lifted the flower, and bowed; while the donor, with heightened colour, kissed the tips of his fingers and waved them towards the stage.

'Pretty little girl,' continued the young gentleman languidly, as he and his friend were swept onward by the surging throng now making for the doors. 'Never thought of it before, but, by Jove! old Sedgemore has got good taste. Suppose we get up a little party and give her a

dinner at Richmond?—it would be rather good fun.'

'Would she come, old fellow?'

'Come!' echoed the other in amazement; 'why, of course she would come. Bet you ten to one she dines there with old Sedgemore three times a week at least. When shall it be?—Sunday? I'll drive down to the club, and ask Fred Weathersby to join us; he's deuced good company, and rather sweet on Lottie.'

'But hadn't you better make sure of getting her first?'

'Pooh, she's sure enough. I've only to make the invitation tempting enough to induce her to give old Sedgemore the slip for once, and the thing's done.'

'Then let it be Sunday.'

'All right, old fellow, good night.'

'Good night!'

And the two friends, having reached the door of the theatre, lighted their cigars, called their hansoms, and drove off to their respective clubs.

Meanwhile, the object of this discussion was fully as elated as if she knew of the scheme which was being woven for her future amusement. Having bowed her acknowledgments and regained the wing, she was conscious of a cloak being dropped upon her shoulders, and drawing its folds about her, she proceeded to pick her way among the *débris* of the stage. It was very dark by this time, for the gas-jets had all been lowered; however, being well accustomed to such difficulties, she soon surmounted them, tripped

lightly up a rickety flight of wooden stairs, and ran merrily into her dressing-room.

The room was by no means a pleasant-looking place, and the atmosphere of it would have turned a delicately nurtured girl faint. The floor was uncarpeted, the walls were whitewashed, and ornamented with one or two highly coloured prints which had been taken from the illustrated papers and nailed up by Carrie, who shared the room, and who professed to have a taste for dramatic art. At one end of the room stood a wooden dressing-table liberally besprinkled with the accessories of an actress's toilette—rouge, empress cream, pearl-powder, eye-brow black, camel-hair brushes, and a host of other things; while above it, on either side of a

cracked looking-glass, stood out two jets of gas, the flames of which hissed and flared and licked the bars of the iron cages which encased them.

Lottie Fane was too well accustomed to all these things to take much notice of them. Her eyes, instead of surveying the room, rested upon the figure of her sister, who stood before the dressing-table in her under-clothes, and who, bending close to the cracked looking-glass, was busily employed in rubbing vaseline over her be-rouged cheeks.

'Good gracious, Carrie!' she exclaimed; 'I declare you're almost ready!'

Carrie Fane turned towards her sister a face liberally besmeared with vaseline, and as she did so her eyes fell upon the dainty white camellia.

'A white camellia! Who is it this time, Lottie?'

'I don't know; some gentleman in the stalls; the spirit moved him to throw it on just as I got to the wing with my bouquet.'

'Well, I wish the spirit would move them to throw on a looking-glass, or a few useful things of that kind, occasionally. Fancy having to dress every night before this thing, which tells you you've got a crack down the middle of your nose, and that one half of your face is about three times as big as the other.'

Lottie only laughed; and having laid her flowers in a place of safety, proceeded to undress and subject herself to the process which her sister had already gone through.

With deft fingers she applied the refreshing vaseline to her flushed and well painted cheeks; her hair, released from the confinement of the flaxen wig, was well shaken out and brushed; her bright burlesque dress was carefully laid aside and replaced by a thick walking costume, until she stood in every-day apparel, laughing and happy-eyed, looking as fresh and pretty as Venus newly arisen from the sea.

'Are you ready?' asked her sister.

During the last quarter of an hour Carrie had not been idle. Having performed her change, she had quietly gone through the work which nightly fell to her share. The dressing-table had been cleared; its various paraphernalia packed into a box and secured by lock and key;

the smart costumes worn by both the girls during the evening had been shaken out, folded and carefully packed away; the boxes had been pushed all together into a corner, and covered by a piece of coarse brown holland, their only protection against the dust which the cleaners would make on the following morning.

Lottie glanced about her: having ascertained that all was right, she lifted her flowers.

'Come along, Carrie,' she said.

In a moment the gas was out, and the two girls proceeded to leave the theatre together. They had reached the stage door, given a bright good-night to the stage door-keeper, when the voice of that somewhat beery Cerberus was heard calling them back.

'Stop a bit, Miss Fane; I think I've got a letter for you.'

Lottie stepped back, watched while the man searched the pigeon-holes which adorned one side of his box, saw him produce a square white envelope and hold it towards her.

'Thanks, Mordaunt,' she said, taking it from his hand; then, glancing at Carrie, she added: 'I wonder who it's from?'

'Well, my dear,' cried the straightforward Carrie, 'the surest way to find out is to open it and see.'

But Lottie did not appear to think so; one glance at the address satisfied her. She folded the unopened letter in two and thrust it into her pocket.

'It's from little Thorpe,' she explained, as she took her sister's arm, and the two

passed through the stage door out into the dull street.

It had been a wet inclement evening, but by this time the wind had hushed itself and the rain had ceased to fall. Yet though the storm had passed away it had left behind it tokens which made it very unpleasant for walking abroad. The air had a cold, clammy feeling, and the pavement glistened cheerlessly beneath the flickering lights of the street. The policemen shivered under their dripping helmets and oil-skin capes, while the cabmen, muffled up to the chin, were only too glad to drive their worn-out horses home.

At many of the adjoining stage doors stood well-appointed broughams waiting to receive their delicately nurtured possessors,

who, clad in silks and furs, could afford when their work was done to loll among luxuriant cushions and roll home to nests of splendour. But as yet such good fortune as this had not fallen to the share of Lottie and Carrie Fane—no cab or carriage awaited them.

Having passed the portals of the stage door, they drew closer together, bravely faced the clammy breeze, and walked with quick steps along the cheerless dripping streets.

When they had gone a dozen yards or so the elder girl felt her arm squeezed.

'Well, Carrie, what's the matter?' she asked.

'Hush, don't talk so loud—or stop, or —anything; that man is following us again!'

'What man?'

'Don't you remember? I told you only last night that some man hides himself every night near the stage door to watch us come out and follow us home. I wonder what he wants? I'd give anything to find out who he is. Let us turn round suddenly and walk back again.'

But Lottie was of a different mind. Though still little more than a child in years, she was old in experience, and too well accustomed to flattery and adulation to care much for a chance admirer who thought it worth his while to follow her through the street. She was, moreover, weary with her evening's exertions, chilled by the touch of the clammy night air, and longing for the warmth of a cosy

fireside and the comfort of a substantial supper. So she held her sister tightly by the arm.

'No, I'm afraid; and the omnibus won't wait—I'm tired, and want to get home.'

The tone in which these words were spoken was so decided that Carrie knew the fiat was not to be questioned. So she kept a firm hold of her sister's arm and walked on, though every now and again she glanced back over her shoulder to make sure whether the mysterious stranger was still on their track.

It was near midnight, and the thoroughfare through which the two girls passed was growing noisier and fuller of night-birds. On every side miserable human creatures were standing, crawling, or

clustering together. Now the girls were rudely jostled by some drunken street-walker, now familiarly addressed by some cockney ravens of ill-omen, who haunt the streets in search of prey. But to all these incidents the girls paid no heed—fearless and unharmed they passed along, clinging to each other, feeling a little wet from the soaking pavement, a little chilly from the touch of the wind, but perfectly confident and unafraid.

Lottie paused.

'If we don't take a short cut, Carrie, we shall miss the 'bus. This side street will lead us right on to Charing Cross.'

They left the crowded thoroughfare and passed up a dark bye-street, which was almost deserted. They had not proceeded far, however, when their progress

was suddenly stopped. A figure emerging from the darkness, stood before them, barring their way.

'Well, my dears, and where are you off to?' demanded this being.

'Mind your own business, and get out of the way,' said ever-ready Carrie, 'or we'll call the police.'

'Come, come! let's have a look at you.'

And the night-bird seized Lottie round the waist. He had no sooner done so than he received a smart stinging smack in the face, cleverly dealt by Carrie's ungloved hand. Having dealt it, Carrie stepped back to fly, but Lottie felt herself clasped in a close embrace. Her first thought was to do as her sister had done before her; she tried to strike her

assailant, but her hands were held—then, struggling vainly to get away, she screamed aloud.

The cry rang out in the silent street. In a moment she heard the sound of hurried footsteps. A well-planted blow behind the ear brought the ruffian to the ground, and she was free.

For a moment Lottie stood trembling and breathless, already surrounded by an eager crowd; then, quick as thought, she made her escape and ran away as fast as her feet could bear her to Carrie's side.

'Come along, dear! quick!' she panted, half laughing, half crying hysterically.

Without another word the two girls hastened swiftly onward, never pausing

to look about them until they were snugly seated in a corner of the midnight omnibus which was to convey them home to Camden Town.

## CHAPTER IV.

On awakening in the morning, Lottie's first thought was of the letter which had been given her by the stage door-keeper, all remembrance of which the events of the preceding night had completely driven from her mind. It was still where she had placed it — in the pocket of her dress, which hung up behind the bedroom door.

'I don't suppose there will be anything in it,' thought Lottie, 'but I may as well read it before I get up.'

She slipped from the bed as quietly as

possible, for fear of disturbing her sister, who still slept soundly by her side, walked quickly to the door, got her letter; then moved to the window, drew up the blind, and looked out. It was a lovely morning: a slight frost had succeeded the rain, gleams of sunshine had cleared away the mist which on the preceding day had almost thickened into fog, while the spire of the church which faced her window pointed to a sky of cloudless blue. Lottie glanced at the clock in the church tower —a quarter past ten. She yawned, shook back the hair which now fell untrammelled upon her shoulders, and, still holding her letter in her hand, got back into bed again. But not to settle down to sleep. She half sat, half reclined this time, her hands clasped tightly behind her head, her eyes

carelessly fixed upon the ceiling, her thoughts wandering away.

In five minutes, however, and before she had had time to open her letter, Lottie's reflections were brought to an abrupt termination by the opening of the bedroom door.

The new-comer was the maid, a neat little girl of about fifteen, employed by the young ladies to attend to their wardrobes and to assist their mother in the household work. She bore in her hands a tray, on which stood a couple of cups of tea and a plate bearing two thin slices of bread and butter. She placed the tray on a little table which stood on Lottie's side of the bed, and after imparting the information, 'Half-past ten, Miss Lottie,' handed her mistress two letters, and retired. Lottie turned to

her sister, who still slept, and gave her a little shake.

'Carrie, wake up!' she said.

She turned again to the table on which stood the steaming cups of tea, commenced to sip the beverage, eat her slice of bread and butter, and leisurely go through her correspondence.

The letters brought last were the first to attract her attention. Being business communications, they were quickly read, and thrown on the tray. Once more she picked up the letter which had been neglected by her so long.

'A pretty thick one, at all events,' thought Lottie. 'I wonder what little Thorpe can have to say.'

She tore open the envelope, and pulled forth its contents. As she did so a look of

intense surprise stole over her face. The first thing which met her gaze was a ribbed envelope of silver grey, the seal of which was ornamented with a tiny dove. She turned it over, and there beheld, written in some unfamiliar hand, the words

'*Miss Carlotta Fane.*'

Dropping this missive upon the bed, Lottie turned to the letters. The first one which she read mystified her still more. It was written on pretty grey rep note-paper, and ran as follows:

'DEAR MR. THORPE,

'Will you kindly fill in the address and forward enclosed letter for me. I have sent a formal card to your little friend (I

thought it best to do so), and hope she may be able to come with you on Sunday.

'Yours truly,

'ADELAIDE STRANGFORD.'

Lottie dropped this sheet of paper, and opened another. At last she gazed upon a familiar hand, and saw words which were at least intelligible to her. This time she read:

'MY DEAR MISS FANE,

'I was sorry I couldn't look in last Sunday. The fact is, I went to visit my friends the Strangfords, whom I haven't seen for some time, and whose Sunday afternoons have just begun again. In the course of the afternoon I happened to

speak to Mrs. Strangford about you. She is such a charming woman, and spoke so nicely of you, that I told her I should like to make you personally known to each other. In her generous way she responded at once, and said over and over again, "Do bring her down next Sunday," but I suppose, on second thoughts, she thought a verbal invitation was not enough, so she has sent you a card. Do come, if you possibly can. The Strangfords are such jolly people you will take to them at once, and they generally have one or two people whom it is worth one's while to meet. If you decide to go, drop me a line and say what time I had better call for you. I am hard at work this week. That little comedietta of mine, which has been such a success in the country, is being

transferred to the boards of the Princess of Wales.

'Very truly yours,

'HENRY THORPE.'

Having read this, Lottie tore open the pretty grey envelope, and drew from it a card, on which was set forth,

Mrs. Strangford,

At Home,

Sundays, 5 till 7.

*To Miss Carlotta Fane.*

Then Lotty gathered the whole of the correspondence together, and turned again to her sister.

'Carrie, wake up,' she repeated, with another shake, this time administered rather

more sharply. 'How you do sleep, to be sure!—wake up, and look at my letters. I've got an invitation from a lady to go to an evening party!'

This piece of information produced the desired effect. Carrie sat up at once, and without a word proceeded to make herself acquainted with the contents of Mr. Thorpe's envelope.

'Upon my word!' she exclaimed when she had finished. 'Little Thorpe's a brick, and if you don't make capital out of this invitation, my dear, you are not the girl I take you for.'

'Do you think I ought to go?'

'*Go*—why, of course you'll go! Who knows, you may meet the hero of last night's adventure there—the man who knocked the other man down, I mean—

he may be a swell, and he might propose to marry you. Give me my tea, Lottie; I must hurry up and run out for some note-paper, for the letter will have to be answered, you know.'

'Of course it will; but I've got note-paper.'

'Pshaw, none that will serve in this case, my dear. I haven't lived as long in the world as you have, Lotty, but I know it better, and I can tell you this, that to be poor and seem poor is the devil all over. The next best thing to living in a swell house is to write on swell note-paper. Mrs. Strangford will see one, but she won't see the other. It's your one opportunity of making an impression, and you shall do it.'

So saying, Miss Carrie bounded out of

bed, and commenced to make a hurried toilette; while her sister, obedient in this as in all things to her stronger will, lay watching her with dreamy eyes.

The dressing complete, Carrie donned her hat, boots and jacket, and taking her umbrella under her arm, made for the door.

'Make haste and get up, Lottie,' she said; 'I shan't be long, and when I come back, we'll write the letter together.'

When the bedroom door closed again, Lottie rose, and began in a more leisurely manner to dress for the day. In truth, she was almost as excited as her sister, though she had a less boisterous way of showing it. An invitation such as she had received that morning had never before fallen to her share. Hitherto she

had known 'swells' merely as people who came to the stalls to throw her expensive bouquets, and who wrote to her letters full of veiled insult couched in complimentary terms. But to have an invitation from a lady was a very different matter to receiving a bouquet from a gentleman. Lottie was quite woman enough to recognise this and feel flattered accordingly.

When she descended the stairs, she found her father already busy at his copying, and her mother feeding the baby. Lottie sat down at the table, where her breakfast was awaiting her, took out the letters from the pocket of her dressing-gown, and handed them to her father.

'Read them, Pa,' she said, 'while I take my breakfast.'

Mr. Fane proceeded to obey; when he

had finished, he patted Lottie on the head, and said:

'I'm very glad, little woman; it will be a nice change for you.'

Mrs. Fane proceeded to place the baby in the cradle; then she took up a cup, and gazed mournfully at her eldest daughter.

'Carlotta,' she said, 'I pledge you. At this solemn moment, when a new and bright career is opening before you, my mind cannot help travelling back to the moment——'

'Ma,' said Lottie, 'don't make a speech.'

'To the moment,' continued Mrs. Fane, regardless of the interruption, 'when I thought of leaving the stage. A handsome admirer, by his own account of noble

birth, asked me to fly with him. I had almost consented, when he was discovered to be the valet of Sir Tilbury Dazzle, and was arrested for stealing the family plate.'

What all this had to do with her invitation, Lottie was at a loss to understand. She was saved from unnecessary thinking by the appearance of Carrie. Lottie turned to her at once.

'Have you got the note-paper?' she said.

'I should think I had!' returned Carrie, with a nod and a smile. 'Beautiful paper, my dear; and dirt-cheap. Mrs. Strangford will be rather astonished when she gets it, I can tell you!'

So saying, Carrie opened her parcel, drew forth the paper, and threw it down before her sister with a triumphant smile.

'What do you think of that?' she exclaimed.

Lottie said nothing; but after one astonished glance at the evidence of Carrie's taste, she proceeded to write her letter without a word.

At ten o'clock the next morning, Mrs. Strangford sat in her pretty little breakfast-room at The Beeches, holding an unopened letter in her hand.

The letter had first been brought to her by her servant; and the sight of it lying on the silver tray had aroused in her breast such a feeling of consternation, that she had been unable to break the seal.

It was a hideously shaped envelope of bright green, ornamented with a huge,

and very forbidding, design in purple and gold.

The lady looked at it; and, as she did so, the wonder in her face deepened to horror.

The design was composed of two letters—a purple C. and a golden F.—held together by a writhing golden snake.

The lady tore open the envelope. One half of the note-paper was covered with another impression of the monstrous design, while beneath it was scrawled:

'Miss Lottie Fane thanks Mrs. Strangford for her invitation, and begs to say she will avail herself of it on Sunday.'

The lady stared at the letter for a moment with astonished eyes, gave a little

convulsive shudder, then handed it to her husband, who sat at the other end of the table, reading his *Times*.

'So this is Thorpe's little friend, is it?' he commented, as he handed the letter back to his wife. 'Rather a flash young party, I should say, my dear.'

'Terrible!' returned his wife, with another shiver. 'Really, it is too bad of Mr. Thorpe to have allowed me to ask her here.'

'I don't see that Thorpe is to blame. He knows that you invite all sorts of people to your afternoon teas.'

'All sorts of people! I don't think I've gone the length of inviting anyone who would dare to commit such an outrage on good taste as this girl has done. If she had written on paper at a penny a

quire, I should have thought nothing of it —poverty is no disgrace to anybody, in my eyes, at least; but just look at the tawdry vulgar rubbish! Do you know what it means? Why, that she will come here in the finery of a street-walker; talk in a loud, offensive way, disgrace me, and disgust everybody in the room. Well, it can't be helped now, I suppose; but rest assured of one thing—never in all my life will I invite her here again.'

With this determination firmly fixed in her mind, Mrs. Strangford rose from her seat, tore up the paper which it had cost Carrie so much trouble to procure, and threw it behind the fire.

## CHAPTER V.

SUCH a week of excitement as followed the receipt of Mrs. Strangford's card had seldom fallen to Lottie's share. The honour, which from the first had appeared very great, increased considerably as days went by, until Lottie, catching the excitement of everyone about her, began to feel as if she was approaching some important crisis in her life. Was it possible, she asked herself, that her mother's high-flown assertions were about to be realized, and would she at this party meet the prince

who would have both the power and the will to turn the world into fairy land?

It was rather a disappointment to them all, especially to Mrs. Fane, when one afternoon, just as the family were sitting down to their usual bread and butter tea, little Mr. Thorpe dropped in, and, in answer to their numerous questions, informed them that The Beeches, far from being the magnificent mansion they had pictured, was a modest little house enough; that Mr. and Mrs. Strangford were quite homely people. The husband, he said, was in a Government office, and had a small private income besides; while his wife loved to gather a few friends about her to enjoy herself on Sunday.

'I was glad to get you the invitation, Miss Fane,' continued the little man, un-

conscious of the fact that he was about to upset a great social scheme, 'because it's just the sort of house you'll feel thoroughly at home at. No swells or stuck-up pride, and most of their friends are Bohemians, fond of literature and the drama, and very jolly to meet.'

The information was certainly appalling, and for a moment Mrs. Fane's spirits sank to zero; but in the course of conversation she managed to extract the information that on one occasion Mr. Thorpe had at one of Mrs. Strangford's afternoons been introduced to a lord, one who was said to have lost a good deal of money in certain London theatres; and that on another occasion he had met an honourable, whose books Mr. Strangford had managed to get reviewed very favourably, and so made him

his friend. This was certainly very encouraging, and on Mr. Thorpe's departure, the excitement blazed out all the more brightly from the fact of its having received a temporary chill.

But despite the excitement which threatened to consume them, business had to be attended to, and every night the two sisters plodded backwards and forwards to the theatre with happy, contented hearts. It seemed to them as if the Fairy Prince had already waved his wand, things began to get along so merrily. It seemed to Lottie that the little theatre had never done such business, or resounded with such merry rounds of applause, while the delighted audiences who nightly thronged its walls were loud in their praise of the pretty little girl who had so long ruled

their hearts. Certainly Lottie had never appeared to greater advantage. Brimming over with delight and happiness, she entered heart and soul into her work, and gazed at her admirers with such a bewitching smile upon her lips and in her eyes as to make them her slaves for ever.

Meanwhile the Sunday, fraught to Lottie with so much imaginary joy, and to Mrs. Strangford with so much imaginary woe, drew near.

On Saturday night Lotty danced and sang her very best, and, as some small reward, was handed an extra five pounds when, after making her last bow, she came off with a bouquet of white roses in her hand.

Breathless with excitement, she ran up

to her room with the open note in her hand.

'Look here, Carrie,' she cried, 'it never rains but it pours. Make haste and put away the things while I undress. We'll take home such a glorious supper."

That same Saturday evening had been a busy one at The Beeches, for Mrs. Strangford had been helping to prepare for the guests who were to grace her little drawing-room on the following day. By nine o'clock all was done, and the lady, candle in hand, entered the drawing-room to take one last look round and see if all was right. After a severe scrutiny the lady heaved a little satisfied sigh.

'Yes, it is all nice,' she said to herself; 'very nice, indeed; and yet, how I wish to-morrow had come and gone!'

She was still thinking of Lottie, of the hideous paper and monogram, and now more than ever she wished that she had possessed the courage to write and demand her little card back. The picture of Lottie which had haunted her ever since the fatal letter had been received was still vividly impressed upon her mind; it kept her awake all night, and tortured her most of Sunday.

By five o'clock on the Sunday afternoon the guests began to arrive, and the lady grew busy. She had a bright smile and a pleasant word for one and all. Only her husband, who was watching her, knew why the colour deserted her cheeks every time the door was opened and some new guest arrived.

By six o'clock the room was pretty

well filled; but somehow things did not seem to be going well. The gentlemen stood about, leaning indolently against the chimney-piece or the piano, holding their half-empty cups in their hands, and looking terribly bored; while the ladies, clever ladies enough, but remarkably unattractive, sat neglected upon the chairs and couches and tried to look as if they liked it.

There was a dead lull in the conversation, a sort of wet-blanket feeling over the whole assembly, when the drawing-room door was suddenly opened and the servant announced:

'Mr. Thorpe and Miss Lottie Fane.'

'The crowning point!' thought the hostess.

Nevertheless, with the instinct of the

brave warrior who nerves himself to meet with courage and resignation the blow which he knows means death, she turned with a smile towards the door. She looked, paused, and looked again; then for the first time in her life, forgot her duty as hostess, and stood stock still.

Miss Fane! could *this* be Miss Fane—the person who had sent that letter? and the thought of whom had given her nightmare for three nights at least! The woman with the painted face, loud voice, and showy gown suddenly faded away. The girl who entered the room, half-shrinking back as if to hide herself behind her companion, was a slenderly made young lady of nineteen, with a pretty but very pale face and large lustrous eyes. She wore a plain but well cut dress of

black; some black lace wound tight around her throat, and a red rose nestling amid some lace on her left shoulder. Her hair, which was very soft and silky and of a bright golden tinge, was twisted into a simple knot at the back of her head, while a little soft downy fringe fell upon her broad white forehead. She wore neither hat, jacket, nor gloves, but her pretty white hands were adorned only with a simple little turquoise ring.

Mrs. Strangford gave a short gasp as she made her second pause; then she went impulsively forward and took the girl's outstretched hand in both of hers.

'How do you do, Miss Fane?' she said heartily; 'how do you do, my dear? I am so very glad to see you!'

Then the lady, who never did things

by halves, and who seemed anxious to make up for the injustice which she had been guilty of, beckoned up her husband, introduced him, and ordered him to make himself agreeable to Miss Fane while she herself moved off to get her something nice to take.

The host—a little florid fat man with a round merry face and a jolly good-humoured laugh—was by no means averse to the task which had been set him. He had seen Lottie on the stage scores of times; had admired her dancing, though he had never thought much of her acting, and had listened with pleasure to her songs.

'Yes,' he said to himself; 'she was certainly a girl with whom he could enjoy a few minutes' conversation.'

He got her a chair, and took one himself, and after she had taken possession of a cup of tea and a biscuit which the servant had brought, he began to talk to her about things which he thought would interest her most. But if he expected her to be brilliant, even about theatrical matters, he was woefully disappointed; he was left to question—his questions were answered by monosyllables; Lottie's hands toyed nervously with her cup and saucer; her eyes wandered restlessly about the room.

'Aren't you fond of tea, Miss Fane?' asked her host, at length; noting the fact that she had been ceaselessly stirring the beverage for nigh upon a quarter of an hour, and becoming very nervous at the continual grating sound.

Lottie started as if awakening from a dream.

'I? Oh yes, very!' she said, looking rather confused. 'I drink it three times a day at home.'

'Then you won't let me get you some coffee or wine instead?'

'Oh no, thank you! I would much rather have this.'

She looked down at the cup, which was still full, and was about to raise it to her lips. By an unlucky accident, her sleeve caught the spoon, and the cup was overturned. Half of its contents remained in the saucer, the other half flowed in a graceful stream down the front of her dress.

No need to complain of lack of colour in her face now! Her cheeks flamed

## CHAPTER VI.

In five minutes, Lottie found herself chatting to her new acquaintance as familiarly as if she had known him for a similar number of years.

'Rather an unfortunate occurrence,' he said, looking at her dress, and alluding to the tea.

'Wasn't it?' returned Lottie, smiling brightly. 'If it had gone on the train of the dress, I shouldn't have cared, for that belongs to me.'

'And doesn't it *all* belong to you?' he asked, smiling.

'Oh dear no! This satin petticoat is new, and belongs to Carrie.'

'Indeed.'

He hadn't the least idea who Carrie was; and, what was more, he seemed by no means anxious to inquire.

It was enough for him to know that the pretty little burlesque dancer, whose face had charmed him at first sight, was sitting beside him, clothed in modest womanly garments, and talking to him with all the innocent freshness of an *ingénue*.

'I don't know how I could have been so silly!' continued Lottie, pursuing the train of her thoughts; 'or rather—yes, I do! No wonder I upset the tea! Do you know, since I came into this room, I have felt even worse than I do on a first night!'

'Have you?'

'Yes. Do you know why?'

'How can I know, since you haven't told me?'

'You don't want me to tell you; your eyes ought to do that. Now, just look round the room, and say if you don't see a very material difference between all the lady guests and me.'

'I do: a very material difference.'

'What is it?' she looked up archly, as if she were waiting for the solution of a riddle.

'You are prettier than any other lady here.'

He expected a blush, and a gentle lowering of the eyes; but he was disappointed. Lottie looked straight at him and laughed.

'A very good thing for me,' she said, accepting his statement, not as a compliment, but a truism; 'otherwise I might lose half my salary; or, worse still, the whole of it. But don't you see anything else?'

'I don't think I do.'

'Ah, that's the way with all the men! they never look at anything, or if they do they don't see it. Do you know I have never been at an afternoon tea before, never even heard of them; and when I asked Mr. Thorpe what I should wear, he said he didn't know, though I firmly believe *he* had been to a dozen. Well, he let me take off my hat and jacket, and leave them in the hall, and the moment I came in and looked round the room I felt as if I must sink through the floor, every lady in the place

was muffled up as if about to go;—I felt I must look as if I meant to take up my abode here.'

'Mr. Thorpe?' he said, taking up the part of the sentence which had the most power to interest him. 'Who is Mr. Thorpe?'

'The gentleman who came with me.'

If she deemed the explanation sufficient he evidently did not, for he continued:

'A relation, I suppose?'

'Oh dear no—only a friend!'

'A very old friend, then?' wanting to find some tangible excuse for Lottie being alone in his company.

'Not even that; I only met him a year ago, when I played in a piece of his at the Variety; but he has been awfully kind to us. Haven't you heard of him, really?

How funny that is, for he is quite an important person, though he does look so shy. He has written several capital burlesques—that have been hits, too; and he does the dramatic criticism for two of the most important of the dailies.'

'I am not much in theatrical society, you see.'

'Aren't you?' looking up at him, and making him wish she would not hurry herself to look down again; 'and yet you must be fond of the theatre. You go to the Variety every night, do you not? and I believe I have to thank *you* for half a dozen lovely bouquets.'

'That does not prove that I am fond of the theatre; indeed, till a few nights ago I had not entered one for months. A sharp and sudden shower of rain drove me one

night into the Variety. I saw you run breathless on to the stage, and after that I had no wish to come out again. You worked hard, very hard that evening, Miss Fane—danced and sang so charmingly you quite took my heart by storm. I wondered how I could reward you, and after a good deal of thought, decided to bring you on the following evening a bunch of flowers. I did bring them, and the way you received them made me wish to bring you some more.'

'Really!' looking up at him again, and speaking in very confidential tones. 'What did I do—tell me?'

'You took them up, and pressed them to your lips; then you looked right into my eyes, and your look seemed to say, "Thank you for the flowers. Through their agency

I seem to be transported from this artificial world to the fresh and pure open country" !'

For a moment or two there was silence between them, Colonel Sedgemore was the first to break it.

'Have you been long on the stage, Miss Fane?'

'Are you good at arithmetic?' she said, gazing up at him again with one of her most bewitching smiles. 'I made my first appearance when I was five, and now I'm nineteen.'

'Is it possible? Why, I thought people never went on so young as that!'

'Young!' echoed Lottie in astonishment; 'five is considered quite old in the profession, I can tell you. Why, our

baby has got an engagement, though he's only nine months. He appeared in a comedy, and got as good notices as anybody in the play.'

'Impossible!'

'But it isn't, I can assure you. If you were to call at our house any evening during the week you wouldn't find one of us at home. Why? Because we're all hard at work. At five o'clock we all sit down to a thorough good tea: plenty of bread and butter and cakes, you know—for we've all got pretty good appetites; and at half-past six we all set off to our Theatres. Mamma goes to the National with baby; she sits in the green-room with him till he is wanted, you know, and then stands at the wing till he is done with. Papa goes to Drury Lane—

he is prompter there. Carrie and I go to the Variety to play in the burlesque.'

'Carrie is your sister, then?'

'Yes; the little dark girl who plays the Prince, you know.'

But the Colonel did not know. The fact is, during all his visits to the theatre he had had eyes for one person only—Miss Lottie Fane.

Again there was silence for a minute or so; again it was broken by the gentleman.

'Miss Fane.'

'Yes.'

'I am going to ask you a favour; will you grant it?'

'I dare say; if you'll tell me what it is.'

'I want you to let me come to the

stage door for you every night, and see you and your sister home. Will you?' he asked, noting, on her part, an uneasy pause.

'No, thank you; it wouldn't do at all.'

'Why?'

'Carrie and I are very well able to take care of ourselves.'

'My dear little girl,' he said, taking one of her hands in a friendly fatherly fashion, 'you and your sister were not able to take care of yourselves the other night when that infamous ruffian assaulted you——'

He paused suddenly, conscious of what he was revealing, but it was too late to draw back. Lottie's eyes had opened their widest, her cheeks flushed their

brightest, while over her face swept a genial contented smile. She rose from her seat and impulsively put her hand in his.

'And you knocked the man down; please don't deny it, for your eyes have confessed. Well, it was very good of you. Carrie and I have often wondered who it could be, and have longed to say how grateful we were. Thank you, so much: the pleasure of being able to thank you is worth coming here to-day.'

Suddenly she became aware of the fact that she was speaking very loud and demonstratively indeed. She looked round to see if she was being observed, and discovered to her mortification that nearly all the guests had taken their departure.

She turned to her companion and gave him her hand again.

'Good-bye,' she said.

'What, are you going?'

'Well, yes; I think so.'

'Are you in a hurry to get home?'

'No, not at all, but everybody seems to be going.'

'And you think you ought to follow their example? Well, promise me to sit here while I fetch Mrs. Strangford; it's not polite to go without taking leave of your hostess.'

Lottie took her seat again, while the Colonel went in search of Mrs. Strangford. In two minutes he re-appeared with his hostess, who took possession of the vacant seat by Lottie's side.

'My dear,' she said, 'I have come to

ask you if you won't give us the pleasure of your company to dinner.'

Lottie looked up, utterly at a loss what to say. She was certainly not anxious to go; yet she was by no means sure that it was strictly within the bounds of etiquette for her to stay.

'Thank you, very much,' she said hesitatingly. 'I should like to stay, only —is Mr. Thorpe going to stay?'

'Will you, if he does?'

'Oh yes, I must! because'—laughing awkwardly—'I shouldn't have anybody to take me home!'

'Very well, then, that's settled. And now you'll sing something for us, won't you?'

'Sing!' echoed Lottie, shrinking back. 'I—I never sing!'

The lady smiled, and turned to the Colonel.

'Is this quite true?' she asked.

No! the Colonel could testify that it was not. Even as he stood there, he seemed to hear the soft dove-like tones of the girl's voice as they had filled the little theatre, eliciting from an entranced audience thunderous bursts of applause.

'I wish you *would* sing!' he said, looking down at her.

Lottie felt ashamed of herself. They were all so good and kind to her; it seemed ungracious to refuse so trifling a request. She looked up bravely, and said:

'I didn't mean what I said exactly. Of course I sing on the stage; and I will sing for you now, if you would like me to, but

I never play my own accompaniments, you know. I have always been used to the orchestra.'

She had a faint lingering hope that this might prove an obstacle; but it did not. There was an accomplished musician in the room, who volunteered his services. One of Lottie's most popular songs was found amongst Mrs. Strangford's music; and everybody settled themselves, as if preparing for a treat.

Lottie rose, and walked towards the piano. What was the matter with her? She could not tell herself. She only knew that her hands had turned deathly cold, and were trembling violently; that a faint, sickly feeling had crept about her heart, and that her breathing was laboured. She was nervous—horribly nervous.

Incongruous as it may seem, it was nevertheless a fact. She, who possessed the nerve to bound on to the stage, and sing before thousands of people nightly, now shrank back affrighted like any schoolgirl, because she had been asked to sing before half a dozen people in a room.

The conventional first bar was over, the first chord of the accompaniment had been struck, further delay was impossible.

Lottie gulped down something that would rise in her throat, and began her song. How her voice trembled! She tried to steady it, but failed. The faint little tones, which came wavering miserably across the room, grew fainter and fainter, then altogether ceased.

The musician looked up in surprise.

Lottie gave one despairing glance into his face, and whispered desperately:

'Begin again, please.'

He obeyed her, and once more the song was commenced. But, alas! Lottie's head was whirling round by this time; her lips were parched and dry; her breath came in short, quick pants. For two minutes, she struggled bravely against overwhelming odds; but succumbed at last to the inevitable decrees of fate.

With her body trembling with nervousness and mortification, her cheeks aflame, her eyes full of tears, she turned from the piano, and grasped the hand of her hostess, who stood close by.

'I am so sorry, I don't think I am well. I really must go,' she said, rather lamely; and the next moment she found herself in

the little hall, putting on her jacket, and adjusting her hat by the aid of the glass in the umbrella stand.

Mrs. Strangford had followed her, so also had the Colonel, and both were pressing her to stay with unusual warmth.

But Lottie was inexorable. She had yielded once to the soft persuasions of her hostess, and now stood shamed and humiliated at the result; she resolved this time to be firm. So she held to her hastily made resolution, and quitted the house, conscious that her first entrance into so-called respectable society had been a failure; and that the moment the door had closed upon her, everybody would enjoy a hearty laugh at her expense.

## CHAPTER VII.

COLONEL SEDGEMORE was forty years of age, yet he was still a bachelor. Nay more, he had never been in love. These facts were as incomprehensible to himself as they were to all his friends. There seemed no reason in the world why he should not marry. As a young man, he had been tolerably good-looking; as a middle-aged one, he was decidedly handsome, and not at all averse to the thought of having a wife to brighten his fireside, and children to brighten his home. But if the seeds of conjugal love had been sown in his

heart, they had never been made to spring; he had cleverly avoided all the matrimonial traps which had been set for him, and while longing for matrimonial bliss, had gradually passed into cheerless old bachelorhood. In other respects he had been singularly fortunate; had obtained distinction, though he had had to work hard for it. He was an only son. At twenty he had been left an orphan with a good education, but not a penny in the world. Brought up to no profession, his only chance seemed to be to enter the army. This he did; was ordered to active service, received medal after medal for his bravery, and finally, at the age of five-and-thirty, found himself Colonel Sedgemore, with a magnificent country seat and an income of ten thousand pounds a year. A distant cousin had died

and bequeathed to him an income and a home.

From that day forth it seemed as if heaven's blessings were indeed raining upon him.

Colonel Sedgemore became the lion of the day. During the period of his mourning he retired to his newly acquired country home, but at the beginning of the London season he came up to his chambers in Bond Street, quite as willing to be fêted as society was to fête him.

'In fact,' he said to himself, 'if I can fall in love I will, for it's weary work living on alone.'

He presented himself to society, and society received him with open arms. His card-basket was soon full to overflowing. Invitations poured in fast and furious. He

went out to dinners, balls, and suppers; he was danced at, sung at, dressed at; he saw with amusement that all the pretty girls of his acquaintance were working their hardest to catch him, and, moreover, he was not averse to being caught; but somehow the traps which they set were not strong enough. If by chance he stepped in, and once or twice he did, the springs invariably gave way and left him a free man. Still, he was very lenient to these pretty strugglers, and being sorry for their disappointment, made them what compensation he could. A great part of his income was spent in bouquets, magnificent fans, boxes for the opera, so that, although the Colonel was at length pronounced to be no marrying man, he was generally acknowledged to be the dearest creature in the world.

The London season over, the Colonel retired to his country seat; induced his sister, who was a childless widow, to come and do the honours for him; and, since the house was not large enough to hold all his society friends, invited them in relays. Alas, little did he know what was to follow.

At sight of his picturesque park, filled with magnificent oaks and meek-eyed deer, of the stately old hall, of the family pictures, the family plate, the family servants, the eager desires of his charming young friends awoke with renewed vigour. During the day they mounted his horses and rode at him; they induced him to give a ball and danced at him; they sang at him, played at him, talked at him; yet the beginning of the next season

found him free for them all to try again.

Thus several years passed away. Colonel Sedgemore's name had been struck from the list of marrying men, though he was still regarded as the kindest, noblest creature in existence; he still presented his flowers, fans, and boxes for the opera; he was still the recipient of many bright smiles and unsought attentions, but he was beginning to feel very lonely, when an incident happened which threatened to change the whole complexion of his life.

One evening he was walking listlessly along the Strand when a sharp shower of rain came on, and he turned into the Variety. There was only the stage box to be had; this he took and passed in.

The curtain was up, the burlesque had begun; the stage was filled with crowds of girls in tights and spangles, who danced and sang like automatons, but whose thoughts and eyes were wandering about the house. Presently he was espied; a moment after he found himself being danced at and sang at in the usual way. The band of girls broke up: a pretty little figure dressed in tights, satin shoes, and a velvet tunic, burst through the crowd upon the stage, ran down to the footlights, then stood smiling, blushing and bowing in answer to a thunderous burst of applause.

A few minutes before, Colonel Sedgemore, bored and uninterested, was thinking of leaving the theatre; something in this girl's face held him to his seat.

She danced, sang, acted, but all the time seemed perfectly unconscious of any presence but her own.

The evening over, the Colonel, standing at the door of the now deserted theatre, felt a strange reluctance to move away—a strong wish to look again upon the face of the little girl who had not thought it worth her while to exhibit any arts to catch him, and who had consequently made his evening pass very pleasantly indeed.

'Who is she?' he asked himself. 'The plaything of some feather-brained fop, who is rich enough to give her fine apartments, rich dresses, and a brougham? Is she bought and sold like most of her sex? I should like very much to see.'

He buttoned up his greatcoat, passed up a dirty bye-street, and stood in the shadow, near the stage door. His heart turned sick within him; there were few figures about, but a brougham and a hansom cab stood waiting.

Presently a lady emerged, stepped into the brougham, which instantly drove away; a minute or so later and two others came forth, took possession of the cab and were also driven away.

Colonel Sedgemore, disgusted and more disappointed than he cared to own, was about to quit his post and stroll homewards, when his steps were suddenly arrested.

The stage door, which he imagined had shut for the night, was suddenly thrown open; a bright young voice, which he

seemed to recognise, said 'Good night, Mordaunt;' a man's voice replied 'Good night, Miss Fane—good night, Miss Carrie,' and a moment after two young girls stood side by side in the street.

A momentary pause; then they walked away arm-in-arm, Colonel Sedgemore following.

They walked along the Strand to Charing Cross, crossed over the road, and waited a minute or so at the corner.

An omnibus came up; they stepped in, and were driven away, while the Colonel returned to his chambers, smoked a cigar, then went to bed, feeling happier and more contented than he had done for months.

The next morning, he looked over his list of his engagements, and found that he

was due that night at a ball. He sat down and wrote an excuse; then he went out, ordered some choice bouquets to be sent to the young ladies of the house, and selected another, which he had sent to his own rooms.

That night he again occupied the stage-box of the Variety; and when the performance was over, the Colonel leaned gallantly forward, and threw his bouquet at Lottie's feet.

Thenceforth, the invitations sent to Colonel Sedgemore were always refused; his time, he thought, could be so much better employed.

Every night he took his bunch of flowers down to the Variety; and then, when the performance was over, he went round to the stage-door to wait for his favourite, follow

her through the streets, and see her safe into the omnibus, which was to take her home.

It seemed to the Colonel as if a new life was opening before him; or rather, he felt that he had never known what it was to live until his eyes had fallen upon Lottie's pretty face. He began to long to meet her—to hold her little hand, and look into her eyes; yet, when the opportunity came —when he was informed by his old friend Mrs. Strangford that she had sent an invitation to Miss Lottie Fane—he shrank back in fear.

Would his vision fade—all his dream of happiness be suddenly dashed to the ground?

He had seen many pretty faces in his day, and admired them, too, until brought

into close contact with the owners. Would Lottie angle for him as all those other fair damsels had done?

The thought sickened him. And yet, he asked himself, why should he look for perfection here, when he had so signally failed to find it in other daughters of Eve?

She their superior? Almost every one of his acquaintances would have told him that she was infinitely their inferior, since she was only an actress—worse still, a burlesque actress—one not above wearing tights, and exposing her shapely limbs to the common public gaze.

After hours of indecision, the Colonel decided to meet the lady.

When the meeting was over, when Lottie, humiliated and crestfallen, had

taken her leave, and the Colonel found himself being bowled away in a hansom, he began to wonder what sort of an impression he had made upon Lottie; and whether she would be ever likely to think of him again.

She had certainly given him scant encouragement. She had not offered him her address. She had refused his offer to see her home from the theatre at night; and she had hinted that, unless he wished to damage her reputation, he had better discontinue his habit of throwing bouquets, and he must not try to see her.

He rigorously attended to her every wish; but since she had not told him to keep away from the theatre, he was clearly at liberty to go.

He secured the stage-box for the season,

and regularly took his seat there; but he evidently went to see, and not to be seen. He hid himself behind the curtain, hoping, with a wild hope, which every night grew fainter and fainter, that, by withdrawing himself altogether from Lottie's notice, she might be made to look for him.

But he was very soon undeceived. Lottie danced and sang more prettily than ever, blushed and bowed in answer to her well-deserved rounds of applause, but never once did her eyes wander round the house or into the stage box. It was very evident that if he wished to win her he must woo her, and not wait to be wooed.

He determined to emerge from his obscurity. He entered the theatre one night, drew back the curtains which had afforded him such safe shelter, and boldly took his

seat in front of the box. Lottie would see him to-night, would perhaps honour him with a special smile and bow, the very thought of which made his heart beat as if he were a boy.

The curtain was still down, but the overture was nearly finished. He settled himself, trembling all over with happy expectation. The curtain rose, the preliminary scene seemed to him to drag itself along; then the cue for Dick's entrance was given.

'Here she comes,' he said to himself, and prepared to add his tribute to the lusty round of applause which Lottie always commanded.

Merciful heavens, what had happened? The Colonel gave three hearty claps, then his hands fell powerless by his side. Dick Whittington stood there, it is true, but no

Lottie! He seized the programme, which, as usual, he had taken mechanically from the attendant, then cast aside. A slip of paper fell from it—he snatched it up, and read:

'The manager begs to announce that in consequence of indisposition, it has been thought advisable that Miss Lottie Fane should take a rest. She will be absent from the theatre for one month. At the end of that time the popular burlesque of "Ixion" will be produced, and Miss Fane will re-appear in the title *rôle*.'

Colonel Sedgemore dropped the paper, rose from his seat, and left the theatre, determined at all hazards to find out Lottie, and to ascertain for himself the real nature of the illness which had struck her down.

## CHAPTER VIII.

During the whole of the Sunday afternoon while Lottie had sat demurely in Mrs. Strangford's drawing-room, the Fane family had shut themselves in their little parlour, to await in lugubrious silence, but eager expectation, the heroine's return. She was away rather longer than they expected; and they were glad, imagining all sorts of pleasant things as having been the means of detaining her; but the moment she returned, before she had had time to open her lips, they knew by common consent that the whole thing had

been a failure. Nevertheless, since the conclusion arrived at was not agreeable, they one and all plied her with questions, eager to prove themselves wrong.

But Lottie, still smarting at the memory of her ignominy, was in no mood to conciliate them. She impatiently threw off her hat and jacket, showed Carrie the terrible stain which the tea had made on her new satin petticoat, and gave it as her opinion that parties were ridiculous things, and not worth the trouble of dressing for.

Mrs. Fane's ardour about parties was considerably damped when she learned that so far from dukes and marquises, there had not been a single lord present; as to the middle-aged gentleman who chatted with Lottie so pleasantly, but

whose name she had omitted to learn, she did not think it worth while to mention him, being quite unconscious of the fact that she had been face to face with her fairy prince, though he had omitted to wear his gilded coat.

A week passed.

If Lottie thought of the party at all now, it was only to remember with some degree of pleasure the gentleman who had made a few hours pleasant to her. She began to wonder who he really was, and to be sorry she had not asked his name.

'Such a nice homely sort of man,' she said to herself; 'he'd get on capitally with Pa.'

But very soon these fleeting thoughts of the Colonel were completely driven

from her mind; the hard realities of every-day life left her no time for dreaming.

Though 'Dick Whittington' still drew crowded houses, there were certain signs which told the manager that the piece had very nearly run its course, and that some new attraction must soon be secured.

After a little thought he determined to revive 'Ixion.' Lottie Fane had never been seen in the part; the piece had not been done for years, and if well revived would assuredly draw. Accordingly, as soon as the decision was made, the scenic artists were set to work, and rehearsals called, which meant weeks of hard work to Lottie.

From that day forth she was seldom to

be found at home. At ten o'clock she entered the theatre, to work like a slave till four; then she took the omnibus home, had a hasty dinner, and returned to the theatre just in time to dress for the burlesque.

It was hard work, certainly, but Lottie thought nothing of it, for had she not gone through the same hundreds of times before. She was therefore very much astonished when one morning, as soon as the rehearsal was over, the manager linked his arm familiarly through hers and strolled with her towards the wing.

'My dear,' he said, touching her cheek, 'what's the meaning of this?'

'Of what, Mr. Caterer?'

'Your pale cheek, weary looking eyes,

and listless walk, my dear. Any late hours, champagne suppers, or things of that sort lately?'

'No,' returned Lottie. 'Carrie and I go straight home from the theatre and go to bed.'

'Then it means over-work; and you must have a rest. Don't be alarmed, my dear,' he added, noting her hesitation, 'I shan't stop the salary; but you shall go out of the bill the last month of "Dick."'

For a moment, Lottie was silent. The intelligence was by no means welcome to her. Going out of the bill, taking a well-earned rest, simply meant sitting at home alone all the evening, instead of being down at the theatre, delighting in her dances and songs.

She protested, but the manager was firm; for he was wise in his generation. He foresaw that unless Lottie really took a rest, her health would become sadly undermined, and that probably the period of her breaking up would be the first night of the production of 'Ixion.'

Such a catastrophe he knew would certainly give the death-blow to his burlesque. It must be avoided. And while avoiding it, he perceived a means of advertising his novelty still more.

The announcement of Miss Fane's indisposition would arouse the sympathy of all her admirers. They would crowd into the theatre to give her a welcome when she made her re-appearance as 'Ixion.'

Yes! it was certainly a good idea. Mr.

Caterer held to it, and Lottie's fate was sealed.

On Saturday night, when the performance was over, Lottie, coming off after having appeared before the curtain, found the manager awaiting her near the prompter's box.

'My dear,' he said, 'are you off to the country next week?'

'Not that I know of,' returned Lottie. 'Why?'

'Nothing. I was only going to say that if you want to go you can. You don't act, you know.'

'I know; but aren't you going to rehearse "Ixion"?'

'Of course we are, my dear; but that needn't interfere with you. You were rough-perfect in the part a week ago, and

know your way about well enough to be spared for a fortnight, for the matter of that. But if you don't want to go away, you may as well come down every morning. You know my motto, my dear—can't rehearse too much if you want to make things go;' and with a cheerful good-night, he left Lottie free to go to her dressing-room and effect her change.

So Lottie's holiday began, and a very wretched time it promised to be.

On the Monday it was very wet; and as it was not absolutely necessary for her to go to the theatre, she resolved to stay at home.

During the day she felt right enough; but when evening came, and the whole family departed to fulfil their theatrical

duties, Lottie felt very lonely. She settled herself to read. Growing weary of that, she tried to study 'Ixion.' Absurd! she knew every word of it! She threw it aside, and spent the remainder of the evening trying to kill time.

By ten o'clock, she was in a state of the utmost depression; so she sat down, and hastily scrawled a note to Mr. Thorpe. She wrote:

'DEAR MR. THORPE,

'Mr. Caterer has given me a holiday, and I don't know what to do with myself. Will you come to tea to-morrow night, and we will go together to see "Bombazine"?

'Yours truly,

'LOTTIE FANE.'

The letter posted, Lottie felt easier in her mind, and looked forward with pleasure to the following day.

Wet again!

In spite of the weather, she went to the theatre, and got through her rehearsal.

The rehearsal was an unusually long one. When it was over, Lottie had some shopping to do. She reached home just in time for six o'clock tea. She looked round, half-expecting to see Mr. Thorpe; but he was not there. Still she did not despair. The opera did not begin till nine o'clock.

'He knows that well enough,' said Lottie to herself. 'Perhaps he can't come to tea; but he'll be sure to come after, or I should have heard.'

The tea over, Lottie took an affectionate

leave of her family, and when she found herself alone, ran up to dress. She had almost completed her task, when the little maid gave a gentle tap at the door, then entered the room.

'A telegram, Miss Lottie.'

Lottie took the envelope, tore it open, and read:

'H. THORPE *to* MISS FANE.

'Suddenly and most unexpectedly detained; very, very sorry.'

'And, if you please, miss,' continued the girl, as soon as she saw that one message was disposed of, 'a gentleman has called, and is waiting for you in the drawing-room.'

'A gentleman at this hour, Ellen! What's his name?'

The girl held forth a card, and Lottie, taking it, read:

'*Colonel Sedgemore.*'

'Who can it be?' she asked herself.

As the shortest way of ascertaining, she ran lightly down stairs, opened the sitting-room door, and found herself face to face with the middle-aged gentleman with whom she had chatted so unrestrainedly at Mrs. Strangford's party.

The surprise was a pleasant one, and Lottie showed it. She advanced with a brightly smiling face and outstretched hand, cordially exclaiming:

'How do you do; I am so glad to see you!'

The Colonel smiled, took her little hand in both of his, and pressed it warmly.

'And I to see you, Miss Fane,' he said. 'Do you know I half feared I might find you on a sick bed.'

Then he told her of his visit to the theatre on the preceding night, of his astonishment at finding her out of the burlesque, and of reading the slip of paper.

Lottie laughed.

'It's too bad of him to make capital out of me in that way, isn't it?' she said, lightly; 'but he will do it. I know what he's working for as well as he can tell me. He thinks by working up my re-appearance after an illness he'll get a good start for "Ixion."'

They were both standing, for up to this Lottie had never once thought of offering

her visitor a chair. She had just become aware of the fact, and was about to rectify it, when he, smiling down upon her, spoke again:

'Do you know, Miss Fane, I began to think your illness had been brought on by Mrs. Strangford's tea.'

In a moment Lottie's cheeks flamed scarlet.

'Oh please, don't mention that!' she said. 'I have been trying my best all these weeks to forget it.'

'Have you—why?'

'Because it was such a miserable failure. I mean I was such a miserable failure. All I hope is, I shall never be asked out to a party again.'

'Don't say that!'

'Well,' returned Lottie, laughing, 'I

won't say it unless you like, but I mean it all the same. Imagine what they all must think of me—imagine what you must have thought of me. Ugh! it makes me shudder to think of it all.'

A compliment was on the tip of the Colonel's tongue, but remembering the way in which his last and only attempt in that way had been received, he refrained.

For a moment they stood looking at each other; then the Colonel held forth his hand. Lottie took it; nay, more, she kept it. She knew all the time that she was doing wrong. She knew well enough that she ought to give it him back and allow him to depart; had any single member of her family been present she would have done so, but she was alone—

worse, she had several hours of loneliness before her. She kept Colonel Sedgemore's hand, and looked up pleadingly in his face.

'Are you going?'

'Well, yes; I suppose so. I had no right to come at such an hour at all; but frankly, I was alarmed at the notice, and anxious to ascertain what was really the matter. May I come some other day and see you?'

As he finished the sentence his voice took almost a pleading tone, and his eyes grew wonderfully tender as they rested upon her face.

'Oh yes, of course,' said Lottie hurriedly; 'you must come and see Ma and Pa and all of us—but—do you really want to go now?'

Did he want to go? He looked at the pretty downcast face, involuntarily pressed the little hand which still lay in his, and answered cordially:

'My dear little friend, I do *not* want to go; indeed, I would much rather stay here with you!'

'Really?' exclaimed Lottie, opening her eyes in delight; 'then why in the world don't you stay?'

'Because I'm afraid my visit may inconvenience you. I fancy when I came,' running his eyes over her dress, 'you must have been dressing to go out.'

'Quite right,' returned Lottie; 'I *was* dressing to go out. I expected Mr. Thorpe to take me to the theatre, but he can't come.'

'And you are not going?'

'No. Unless you stay—and you will, won't you?—I shall have to spend all the evening alone.'

'Are you sure?'

'Quite, quite sure.'

'Then I will stay.'

## CHAPTER IX.

'WELL, really, it was very good of you to come,' said Lottie, looking complacently at her visitor when the two were cosily settled, one on either side of the fire.

In order to reward him for his self-sacrifice she had tried to make him comfortable. She had drawn her father's easy-chair up to the hearth and made him sit in it; she had hunted all over the room for her father's pipes and tobacco, and when she found her visitor could not smoke a pipe, she had hunted again for

some tissue paper in order that he might make himself some cigarettes, and she had got in some tumblers and hot water to mix him toddy.

Though the Colonel averred he wanted none of these things, Lottie was firm.

'If you will neither smoke nor drink,' she said, 'I am sure we shall never get on. I always notice that when two people sit and do nothing the conversation is sure to flag.'

So the Colonel smilingly submitted. He smoked the cigarettes which Lottie rolled up for him, and occasionally sipped the toddy, which stood on the corner of the table by his side.

'So,' he said at length, 'you have got a month's holiday. Don't you feel glad?'

'Not the least in the world; why should I? Don't you think I would much rather be down at the theatre doing my work, than sitting here passing my evenings in lonely misery? For the last three years I have never spent an evening out of the theatre; now I have a prospect of sitting here all by myself for twelve!'

'But surely, now that you have a holiday you don't mean to spend it here!'

'Surely I do, though,' returned Lottie, laughing; 'why, where else do you suppose I should spend it?'

'If you have been for three years in London, I should think you deserve a trip into the country.'

'Ah!' sighed Lottie; 'if we all got

our deserts—— Do you know, I was never in the country in my life!'

Here was a revelation.

The Colonel dropped his cigarette, and stared.

'Never?' he exclaimed. 'And wouldn't you like to go?'

'I should, indeed. If Papa hadn't been so particular about our going away from home, I should have been off on tour long ago. I've had plenty of offers. Last summer I might have done the watering-places with "Dick Whittington"; but Pa seemed against it, so I said "No!"'

'And quite right too,' said the Colonel. 'But now it is different; you have a month before you. Why not go to some quiet country place and recruit?'

'Because I don't like going alone.'

'Surely you could get some one to go with you? You have a lot of sisters, haven't you? I remember you told me about Carrie.'

'Carrie! She is playing "Dick Whittington" now; but I dare say Mr. Caterer would let her off if I asked him. But suppose he did, what then? Fancy the two of us in a quiet little country place with only ourselves to talk to! We should spend one night there, I expect, and return to town by the early morning train.'

'But you could stay with friends!'

'So we could,' returned Lottie, laughing, 'if we had them. First catch your hare, as they say in the cookery-books. Ah! what a pity it is that you haven't got a nice little country house you could invite

us to! That would settle the matter at once.'

'Would it?' he returned eagerly, throwing his half-smoked cigarette into the fire, pushing back his tumbler of toddy, and leaning forward. 'Then if I *had* a country house, and if I were to invite you and'—with a curious smile—'Carrie, you would come?'

'I should feel very much inclined to—if your wife didn't object.'

'My wife! Who told you I had a wife?'

'No one; but of course I thought you had.'

'Well, I haven't. And now, I suppose,'—with a smile which first put Lottie at her ease with him, and was now beginning to make her like him very much

indeed—'it is no use my having a country house, because you and Carrie would not come?'

'Well, I don't see how we could, could we?'

'Not even if I had a sister who kept my house, and who sent you the invitation? You would be *her* guest then, you know.'

'But have you?'

'If I say, "Yes," will you say, "Yes, I will come"?'

Lottie put out her hand.

'You are too good to me,' she said. 'First, you threw me flowers, because you thought I liked them; now you are planning to go into the country, which you don't like, simply because I want a change. And you put it as if I were doing you a

favour! You are really very kind. Yes, of course I will come. I should like it of all things in the world; but you will have to manage Ma.'

'Shake hands,' he said; 'it's a bargain!'

He took her hand in both of his, and so sealed the bond. Little did he know that he was about to begin the work which was destined to bring him so much pain.

One Sunday, about a fortnight after that memorable evening which the Colonel had spent with Lottie, the little sitting-room of the Fanes was set out as if for a party.

At the table an extra place was laid; there was a little dessert on a table at the side, and there were extra glasses, which

plainly showed that the occasion was not an ordinary one.

It was, in fact, the anniversary of the birth of the baby; and, as that young gentleman was already a public character, his health was to be drunk. The extra place at the table was for Mr. Jinks.

It was about half-past two when Lottie, in walking-costume, peeped cautiously into the room, and finding it empty, walked in with a very disappointed look on her face.

'No one about?' she said. 'How provoking, just as I wanted to give them a surprise by driving up to the door in a carriage and pair! How the neighbours did stare, to be sure! and those two gentlemen at the corner of the street seemed thunderstruck! I declare I felt

like a duchess, quite grand and splendid! What a dear old fellow the Colonel is! and, though he's so rich, as homely as Pa himself. It was so good of him to send me home in his carriage, and to walk to his club on foot! I wonder what they'll all think when I tell them he's proposed; and that, if I only like, the carriage and horses, and a fine house in the country, and any amount of money may be mine for ever!'

She threw off her hat and jacket, crossed the room on tiptoe, and peeped cautiously out of one of the doors.

'There's Ma,' she said, 'busy cooking. I won't disturb her, for I must speak to Pa first of all. Dear, kind, hardworking Pa, if I could only make *him* happy, I wouldn't mind much who I married!'

She began to arrange the dinner-table according to her own idea of the fitness of things, when Mr. Fane walked briskly in.

At sight of Lottie, he was about to utter some slight exclamation, but she rushed up to him and put her hand over his mouth.

'Hush, Pa!' she said; 'don't make a noise, but come and sit down. I've something very important to tell you.'

'Have you, my dear?'

'Very important,' said Lottie. 'Now sit down, sir, there, and I'll sit here. Are you ready? I'm going to tell you a story.'

'Yes.'

'A romance,' continued Lottie, 'like they dramatize sometimes out of the *Family*

*Herald.* But before I begin, give me a kiss!'

He did as he was commanded, and then Lottie began.

'There was once a girl who had a dear father and mother, and lived—well—in a room like this.'

'Go on.'

'Well, one fine day, this plain little girl had an offer of marriage from a very rich man; a man who kept his carriage, and all that sort of thing.'

'I see,' said Fane, smiling slyly. 'Was he a *young* man, my dear?'

'Not *very* young—say forty.'

'Nice?'

'Yes, rather nice.'

'Military, perhaps?'

Lottie clapped her hands delightedly.

'Military! You dear old Pa, you've guessed it. Yes, it's true, Colonel Sedgemore has proposed to me!'

'Dear me!' echoed Fane.

'Dear me?—you don't seem to be delighted, Pa.'

'I'm thinking, my dear; I'm thinking! You really believe he's in earnest?'

'Of course he is, Pa.'

'Well, it's a very great compliment; quite an honour, Lottie. And what did my little girl say?'

'What *could* she say? She referred him, as Ma would express it, to the "author of her being"; and, if it's settled, I'm to go and live in a splendid house in the country, and I shall see the green fields and the woods, and never act in the theatre any more!'

'Ah! leave the stage,' said Mr. Fane meditatively. 'Would you like to do *that*, Lottie?'

Lottie considered for a moment.

'I don't know,' she said; 'I'm not quite sure. But you know, Pa, I've hardly been out of London, and sometimes, now and then, I do *long* to see the country and the happy country people, who are supposed to spend their lives in reaping and hay-making, and singing choruses, just as in the opera. Then, no more struggling to quick music, and crying, "Unhand me, ruffian!" till the virtuous lover appears, and knocks the heavy man down! No more rehearsing all day and studying all night, just to be slaughtered in a single line! No, I shall leave all that behind, and have ever so much money to spare.'

'My dear,' said Mr. Fane, 'as I told you once before, money isn't everything. Do you really and truly *love* Colonel Sedgemore?'

'Love him?'

'Yes!'

'I like him very much, indeed."

'Ah! but do you *love* him?'

'I don't quite know,' said Lottie thoughtfully. 'Did—did you love Ma when you married her?'

Mr. Fane looked decidedly uncomfortable.

'My dear,' he said, 'what a question!'

'I mean very, very much,' said Lottie apologetically. 'How did you feel, Pa? Tell me, there's a dear, and I'll tell you if I feel the same.'

'Well,' said Mr. Fane, looking sorely puzzled, 'you see, my dear, it's such a long time ago. Your Ma was a splendid figure of a woman—and—and her Lady Macbeth was a wonderful performance, and —I—I had a tremendous respect for her—tre—mendous!'

'And so have I for the Colonel!'

'True, I was a little afraid she was my superior in intellect.'

'Just my fear, Pa.'

'And—and no one was more astonished than myself when she proposed—ah—I mean, my dear, when she *consented*.'

'Just my case,' said Lottie. 'And you haven't repented?'

'Ah!—well—no. I don't think I have.'

'Then kiss me again. Our cases

are precisely similar, and—I think I'll have him.'

'Lottie,' said Mr. Fane solemnly. 'I hope no mercenary considerations——'

'No; don't be afraid, Pa; it's not *that* altogether. Of course I am glad that he is rich, for then I can make you all so happy; but I wouldn't marry him for money alone.'

'Of course not.'

'I like him—I really like him because he is so nice—so like *you*, Pa.'

'Like *me!*' said Mr. Fane in amazement. 'But, my dear Lottie, a husband is so different to a father.'

'Well, of course he is.'

'*Very* different. You'll have to love, honour, and obey *him*, you know.'

'And don't I love, honour, and obey

*you*, you dear old thing? There, say no more. It's settled; and he's coming here this very afternoon, to talk it all over.'

'*Here*? At what hour?'

'At half-past three.'

'And we dine at three. Bless me! we'd better get the dinner over as soon as possible. Our humble fare might shock him!'

'Not a bit. Why, you know, Pa, he's the plainest, dearest old thing in the world. Not like those swells who sit and stare in the stalls. We needn't mind him a bit.'

'Nevertheless, my dear, I think we'd better get dinner over.'

'Very well, Pa; then I'll finish laying the cloth.'

Mr. Fane rose and moved towards the door; suddenly an idea struck him; he turned nervously.

'Lottie.'

'Well, Pa?'

'Have you—have you informed your Ma of this matter?'

Lottie laughed.

'No, Pa, I haven't,' she said; 'I left that for you to do.'

Mr. Fane tried to look as if he liked the task, but signally failed.

'Perhaps I'd better go and tell her at once,' he said nervously. 'Dear me, I feel quite excited! I wonder how she'll take it?'

Lottie laughed again and gave him a kiss.

'Don't linger,' she said; 'the more

you think of it, the worse it'll be, Pa. Take a header and get it over.'

'All right, my dear; I'll try.

So Mr. Fane disappeared, and Lottie was left alone. In a moment all her smiles vanished. She sat down and looked thoughtfully before her.

'Do I love him?' she said. '*Do I love him?* I ought to, for he's so thoughtful and so kind; and though he's not the sort of husband I've *dreamed* of—young and beautiful, like Claude Melnotte and Lord Clancarty—I'm sure he'll make anyone happy. How strange he should choose such a girl as me, when I'm sure he might have some great lady, just for the asking, and——' she paused suddenly, for at that moment she heard a well-known voice singing on the stair:

'Oh, what a dreadful thing it is
To be a married man!'

and the next moment the door opened and Mr. Jinks and Carrie came in. They were both arrayed in Sunday costume, and both looked particularly happy.

'All alone, Lottie?' said Mr. Jinks, giving his future sister-in-law a kiss. 'Where's the governor and Madame Mère?'

'Ma's dishing the dinner, I think,' said Lottie; 'and Pa's gone to tell her something—and—and Carrie, dear, and Charlie,' she continued, stammering and blushing a little, 'I—I've got news for you.'

'Baby ill?' said Mr. Jinks.

Lottie shook her head.

'Another offer, Lottie?'

'Yes, that's it,' said Lottie. '*I've* got an offer of a new engagement.'

'But you can't take it,' said Carrie; 'you know, my dear, we're both engaged to the end of the season.'

'But I don't mean in a theatre, Carrie!'

'Where then?' asked Carrie, whose ideas never ran into anything else.

'In a church,' said Lottie. 'I'm to play the leading part in the great sensational drama of "Matrimony."'

'What nonsense you're talking,' said Carrie.

'Sober truth, my dear,' returned her sister. 'The performance to begin with the laughable farce of "The Honeymoon."'

'What! you don't mean——'

'Yes, I do; the fact is, Colonel Sedgemore has proposed to me.'

'Carolina!' cried Mrs. Fane, who now made her appearance carrying a leg of mutton fresh from the fire; 'run and dish the potatoes; the domestic is engaged with the child. Carlotta,' she added, turning to her eldest daughter when Carrie had left the room, 'is it possible you have had a proposal?'

'Yes, Ma.'

'May you be happy, child!' she said, kissing her melodramatically on the forehead. 'Your father has told me all, and at this solemn moment—Horatio,' she added suddenly, 'will you order the beer?'

'Beer be hanged!' said Mr. Jinks. 'I've brought you something better, ma'am.

A couple of bottles of fizz—there, we'll drink Lottie's health in that, and some prime cigars for the governor and yours truly.'

Mrs. Fane smiled gloomily, and as Carrie put the potatoes on the table, said solemnly, as if addressing a large assembly:

'Dinner is ready. On this occasion I fear we must wait upon ourselves; the child is fretful, and requires the care of our little maid.'

'All right,' said Mr. Jinks, who was always equal to the occasion. 'Got any champagne glasses, ma'am?—no—never mind, we'll use the tumblers. Champagne, ma'am?' turning to Lottie.

She nodded merrily.

'Just a sip.'

'Lottie!' said Carrie, raising her glass; 'your health, my dear, and *his!*'

'Thank you, Carrie,' said Lottie, giving her sister a nod and a smile.

'Here's fortune, my dear,' said Mr. Fane, surreptitiously taking his daughter's hand and pressing it under the table.

'Thank *you*, Pa.'

Then it seemed that Mrs. Fane and Mr. Jinks were both struck with the same idea at the same moment. They both rose, they both lifted their glasses, and opened their mouths, when they were both stopped by a loud rap at the outer door. Everybody stared in consternation. Before they had time to recover their speech, the door of the sitting-room was thrown open by the servant, who held the baby in her arms, and Colonel Sedgemore stood upon the

threshold. The company stared as if they had been seized with a species of catalepsy, but nobody spoke; while the Colonel, standing in some confusion upon the threshold, looked first at the dinner-table and then at his watch.

'I—I really beg your pardon,' he said, 'but——'

'Why, it's the Colonel!' said Lottie, who was the first to regain power of speech.

'Yes,' said the Colonel, making no attempt to move; 'but I had no idea—the fact is, the servant never told me you were at dinner.'

'Oh, it doesn't matter,' said Lottie, 'we've nearly finished. Do come in; you know them all, don't you?'

The Colonel advanced, and shook hands all round; then he hesitated again.

'I'm really afraid I interrupt you,' he said.

'By no means,' returned Mrs. Fane graciously. 'I suppose, sir,' she added, with a theatrical wave of her right-hand, 'I cannot ask you to partake of our humble repast?'

'Well, the fact is,' returned the Colonel politely, 'I've just lunched.'

'Will you have a glass of champagne?' asked Lottie.

The Colonel smiled.

'If I *must* have something,' he said; 'but really, I wish you wouldn't put yourself out about me.'

'The fizz is A 1, sir,' said Jinks; 'I can recommend it.'

The Colonel cast a wondering gaze upon Carrie's *fiancé*, and Mrs. Fane suddenly

remembered that he had not been introduced.

'This is Mr. Charles Jinks,' she said graciously.

Whereupon the Colonel shook hands, and afterwards took the glass from Lottie.

'Now,' he said, 'pray go on as if I were not here. If you don't, I really must withdraw. It's my fault for being so punctual. Military habits, you see.'

He took his seat in the easy-chair, which Lottie had pointed out to him, and began to sip his champagne. All the others resumed their places; but nobody could eat and nobody could talk. There was a dead silence, which was suddenly broken by Carrie.

'Ma,' said that young lady, 'are you ill?'

'Why do you ask, Carolina ?'

'Because you looked as if you were. If you want me to clear the things away, why don't you say so, not go on as if you were going to choke.'

Mrs. Fane's features assumed a look of terrible reproach. On suddenly meeting the Colonel's eye, it changed into a wistful smile.

'Do pray finish your dinner,' he said, seeing that Carrie was busily engaged in packing the things on to a tray.

'Thank you,' said Mrs. Fane sweetly, 'we have quite finished.'

Then she assisted Carrie to carry the things from the room.

'Colonel,' said Mr. Jinks, producing a very resplendent cigar-case, 'will you have a weed ?'

'If the ladies don't object,' said the Colonel.

'Oh, don't think of us,' said Lottie, 'we're used to it. Let me give you a light.'

She took one of the spills from the chimney-piece, lit it, and brought it over. Mr. Fane seemed suddenly to be struck with the idea that the two ought to be left alone.

'Charles,' he said, touching his future son-in-law on the arm, and giving him a significant look, 'will you step with me into the next room? I've something to say to you.'

'All right, governor,' returned Mr. Jinks; and the two made off while the Colonel was lighting his cigar.

'There,' said he, looking round, 'I've frightened all your friends away, Lottie!'

'Never mind. You see, they're not used to fine company,'

'Fine company!' said the Colonel; 'an old campaigner like myself! I wish you'd ask them to come back!'

'Do you? Then you don't care for my society?'

The Colonel smiled.

'Of course, Lottie,' said he, 'I prefer a *tête-à-tête;* but——'

'Then don't say another word; they'll be back quite soon enough. Sit down there, and make yourself comfortable.'

The Colonel sank again into his easy-chair, while Lottie leant her arm upon the chimney-piece, and stood quietly watching him.

'I'm afraid,' she said, at length, 'that's not a good cigar.'

The Colonel, who had been smoking with a very wry face indeed, said:

'Capital! Have you—have you spoken to your father, my dear?'

'Yes.'

'And your mother?'

'Yes.'

'Well,' he asked, rather nervously, 'and what do they say?'

'They haven't had time to consider about it *yet*. It was such a surprise!'

'I hope they've no objections?'

'I don't suppose they have,' said Lottie, who, during the last half-hour, had become woefully changed. 'It's not *that*.'

'Lottie,' said the Colonel in surprise, 'what's the matter?'

'Nothing,' returned Lottie quietly; 'only—— Colonel Sedgemore, I think

you'd better change your mind. I didn't quite realize it somehow till you came here to-day; but now I feel—I am sure—it would be a mistake.'

'What—our marriage?' said the Colonel in amazement.

'Yes.'

'In heaven's name, why?'

'You see how we live,' said Lottie. 'You've been introduced to all my family; and, there's no disguising it, we're not genteel—not at all your sort of people. If I married you, you'd be ashamed of *them*, and naturally.'

'On my word of honour—no!'

'Then there's Charlie Jinks,' continued Lottie desperately—'he who gave you that cigar, which I can see you don't like—he would be your *brother-in-law!*'

She watched him quietly as she spoke, but he did not wince—he only laughed.

'And what then?' he said. 'My darling Lottie, what I have seen to-day only deepens my respect for you and yours. Your father and mother, all connected with you, are worthy people; your sister a dear good girl; and as for Mr. Jinks—why, if he *does* smoke cabbage-leaf, what does that matter? I don't want to marry *him*, but *you*—you, whom I love more than my life—you, who are the dearest and the best girl I ever met in this world of folly and frivolity. Yes, Lottie, I have found a rose—a flower worth all the world. Do you think I care where it *grew*, when I see how fresh and pure it is, how unstained, how beautiful? And I mean to transplant it

before long into a garden worthy of it, remember that.'

Lottie looked up at him with tears in her eyes.

'How good you are!' she said. 'And you really love me so much?'

'With my whole heart and soul,' he said, drawing her towards him. 'Come, Lottie, no more hesitation or drawing back. Kiss me, my darling, and promise to make me the happiest fellow in the world.'

She seemed about to reply, when the door opened suddenly; and, with flushed cheeks, she started away from his side.

'Oh, here they are!' she exclaimed.

'Don't run away,' said the Colonel; 'there's nothing to be ashamed of. Mr.

Fane,' he continued, in spite of Lottie's remonstrances, 'I am an old soldier, and come straight to the point. I love your daughter, and she has half-promised, with your and her mother's consent, to accept my hand.'

'Well,' said Mr. Fane proudly, 'it's a great honour!'

'A very great honour!' echoed his wife.

'And since Lottie wishes it,' began Mr. Fane.

'She does!' broke in the Colonel. 'Lottie, my dear, is it not so?'

'I—I don't know,' stammered Lottie; 'Colonel Sedgemore.'

'My dear!'

'I would rather you would think it over;

and, if you ever feel inclined, ask me again.'

The Colonel smiled. He knew what she was thinking of. Nevertheless, he consented to what she asked.

## CHAPTER X.

From that day forth, although Lottie refused to be regularly engaged, Colonel Sedgemore was a constant visitor at the house of the Fanes, and was almost regarded by them as one of the family. Sometimes he would call in the morning, and walk with Lottie and Carrie to the stage door of the theatre when they went to rehearsal; in the afternoons he would look in to drink a cup of tea, chat with Mrs. Fane about the palmy days of the drama, and bring pockets full of presents for the baby.

He dropped in one day as usual, and found the family at afternoon tea. They were all in a high state of delight over another notice which the baby had received, but Lottie looked despondent.

'Another fortnight's holiday,' she said as she shook hands with the Colonel. 'Mr. Caterer says the public are so interested about my illness he means to keep it up a little longer; isn't it too bad?'

'No, I don't think so,' the Colonel replied. 'Personally, I am very much obliged to Mr. Caterer.'

Lottie opened her eyes in amazement; before she could speak the Colonel continued:

'When I came here this afternoon I intended to ask you if you couldn't get

a fortnight longer; the fact is, my sister has written, inviting you and Carrie to spend a fortnight with her in the country.'

'Your sister! why, we don't know her!'

'That is a misfortune which can easily be remedied,' he returned with a smile. 'To tell you the truth, the house is mine; but as I am a bachelor and don't want it, I have lent it, as it were, to my sister, who is a widow, and who makes it her home.'

The moment the words were spoken everybody present saw exactly what they meant.

They knew as well as if he had told them, that the house and invitation were in effect both his, and that Lottie

and Carrie, if they accepted, must inevitably be his guests; nevertheless, they could not but admire him for the extreme delicacy of his action.

They all looked at each other; they all said 'thank you,' but no more.

'If you will come,' continued the Colonel, fixing his eyes pleadingly upon Lottie's face, but trying to make his gaze embrace Carrie too, 'you have only to drop a line to my sister saying when you will arrive. She has written to you both. I expect you will get the letters in the morning.'

After this there was a good deal more talk about it; and though at first, owing to the complicated ownership of the house, Mrs. Fane felt very much inclined to say no, yet the Colonel's persuasions were so

strong that at length she was induced to yield.

He pointed out to her that during the last year or so the young lady visitors at his house might be counted by dozens; mentioned quite casually ladies and honourables, countesses and viscountesses, until poor Mrs. Fane's head quite whirled with delight.

'The drama,' she said to herself, 'is indeed taking its proper stand when my daughters can be the honoured guests of a man who has entertained such grandees.'

So, to the Colonel's intense delight, it was arranged that if 'my daughter Carolina could induce the manager to take her name out of the bill,' the two girls should accept the invitation.

'Mind you come soon,' said the Colonel, when he stood at the street-door holding Lottie's hand in his.

'I will,' she returned heartily; 'I ought to be right down in love with you, you know; you're so awfully good to us all.'

The next morning the invitations came. The Fane family were thrown into a state of the uttermost bewilderment and delight. The whole thing was so much finer than they had anticipated.

If the Colonel was content to hide his light under a bushel, his sister was not; and the girls now understood for the first time the kind of visit they were about to pay.

The letters, which were three, instead of two, in number, were written to Mrs. Fane,

Lottie, and Carrie. They were elegantly penned on the most delicately perfumed paper, and couched in the most courteous terms. The writer averred that the country was not looking its best at that time of year; but if the young ladies decided to come, she would try to make the house pleasant by inviting other guests. She would like to know the precise hour as well as day of their arrival, in order that the carriage might meet them.

'She doesn't want us,' said Carrie, throwing her letter aside. 'The Colonel's the dearest old thing in the world; but she's a cat!'

'Carolina!'

'Oh, it's all very well to say, "Carolina!" Ma; but you'll find Carolina is right. I tell you she's a cat; and I tell

you she doesn't want us—all the same, we mean to go, don't we, Lottie ?'

'I don't know,' said Lottie anxiously. 'If she doesn't want us, do you think we ought to accept her hospitality ?'

'*Her* hospitality, indeed! My dear, she's no more right there than we have. It's the Colonel's house, of course; and we shall be the Colonel's guests, whether she likes it or not.'

Later in the day, when the Colonel called, he found to his intense delight that the girls were already collecting together their visiting clothes.

The invitation had been answered, and the day of the girls' departure fixed for Thursday.

It was only two days hence, but it seemed an age to the Colonel. He said

there was no reason why they should not go the very next morning; there was no necessity for any long notice, etc. But Carrie assured him that the thing couldn't be done. She was obliged to play her part two nights longer—either that, or she could not be spared from the bill at all.

'It's all very well for Lottie,' she said. 'I'm her under-study; so she can give herself airs, and go out of the bill at a moment's notice, if she likes. But when they put me into "Dick Whittington," it was only for a month; and they got no under-study for me.'

This argument was incontestable.

The Colonel gave in; and, in reality, felt very glad he had got the girls to consent to go at all. He sat down to

drink a cup of tea with them; and, when it was over, Lottie, as usual, tripped out into the hall to help him on with his coat, and open the door for him. Then she held forth her hand, and he took it in both of his.

'It is good-bye to-night, Lottie,' he said.

She raised her eyes to his, still leaving her hand where she had placed it, and looked inquiringly into his face.

'Good-bye?' she said.

'Yes; don't you understand? I shall not be able to call again, because I am going down to Sedgemore Park to-morrow morning, to see that everything is properly got ready for you. My dear little girl, it will be such a pleasure to have you at Sedgemore, that I mean to make you

happy if I can. Besides,'—with the smile that Lottie loved to see—'all the kindness has been on your side hitherto. I have to repay you for your hospitality.'

'My hospitality.'

'Yes; don't you remember how well you treated me the first night I came intruding here, and found you alone? You rolled me up cigarettes by the dozen, you know, and made me sip whisky till my head went round.'

'It is very good of you to ask us down there.'

'Do you think so? Then repay my goodness by being excessively happy. I have no fear of you when you get there,' he continued, 'but the journey—I rather dread the journey for you. At this time of year railway travelling is apt to be disagreeable,

but you will take care of yourself, will you not ?'

'Most certainly I will.'

'That reminds me. Yesterday I was passing one of those fur shops, and saw some skin rugs that I knew you would like. I ordered two; one for you and one for Carrie, and told them to send them. Be sure to bring them with you: we shall find them useful if we do much driving, and they will be cosy for you in the train. Good night, Lottie, and good-bye.'

And before the girl could utter a word, he was gone.

## CHAPTER XI.

'LOTTIE, how do I look?' asked Carrie, standing as steadily as she could before her sister, who, wrapped up in her rugs, was comfortably reclining upon the cushions of a first-class compartment of the train which was carrying them rapidly to Sedgemore Park. 'Do I look grimy at all, or dissipated?'

'I don't know, dear, you look all right to me; but then, I can't see very well.'

'Thank heaven!' returned Carrie solemnly; 'if the ravages in my appearance are not visible to you, they won't be to *her*,

unless she has eyes like a hawk, which I strongly suspect she has. Never mind, my dear, we took the game into our own hands when we decided to arrive at night. One can make one's self look tolerable by gaslight, even after a railway journey, and we can refresh ourselves with a good night's rest, before we have to face the searching light of day.'

'I wonder where we are?' said Lottie, leisurely pushing away her rug, and moving towards the carriage window.

'Nearly there. You needn't try to look out, it's so dark; you'll see nothing but your own ghost in the glass.'

Carrie was right; though Lottie pressed her face close up against the window and stared out, she could see nothing, but she felt that the train was slackening its speed,

and knew they must be nearing their journey's end. She pulled her rug towards her and began folding it, advising Carrie to do the same by hers; collected together their umbrellas, hand-bags, etc., and almost before she had finished her task, the train glided slowly into the station.

Lottie rushed to the window and thrust out her head, then quickly withdrew it. A man's hand was placed on the handle of the carriage-door, and a man's eyes looked in at her.

'So you have really come,' said the Colonel, keeping a firm hold of the door-handle and walking along to keep pace with the train.

As soon as it stopped, the door was flung open, and before Lottie could speak, she found herself lifted in the

Colonel's strong arms and stood upon the platform.

'Are these your things?' he asked, pointing to the collection which Lottie had got together in a corner of the carriage. 'James, bring that luggage; and you've got some boxes in the van, I suppose? Well, we'll see about getting them. I am afraid I must ask you to identify them; but perhaps Carrie would like to go to the carriage?'

It was certainly very nice to be taken such care of; and Lottie stood upon the platform like one in a dream. She saw the tall, handsome footman, dressed in his grey overcoat and cockaded hat, loading himself with her various travelling paraphernalia, and leading Carrie away. Then her hand, which all this time had remained in

a warm, friendly grasp, was placed upon a strong arm, and she was led away amongst the crowd to the luggage-van.

The van had already been emptied, its contents piled upon the platform.

Lottie pointed out the two modest little trunks which belonged to Carrie and herself, saw them shouldered and carried off by a railway-porter; then she was conscious of being led away again, handed into a carriage, sinking back upon the cushions, and feeling herself gently borne away.

'Was it sober reality,' Lottie asked herself, 'or only a dream? Was she really luxuriating in a carriage which a duchess might have envied, with coachman and footman all complete?'

It was certainly a very delightful

change; and, for the first time in her life, Lottie began to understand how rich people must enjoy themselves.

'Whenever they go a journey,' she thought to herself, 'they are always treated like this. No matter how many handbags they may have, there is the polite footman to carry them. No matter whether it rains, hails, or snows, there is the carriage to afford safe shelter and a comfortable lounge.'

No need for them to do as Lottie had often done—walk through the streets in wind and rain, laden with handbag and parcels, to the omnibus which was destined to convey her home.

What a change!

'Yes, it must be a dream!' she said to herself; then she raised her eyes, and

gazed with a smile upon what she knew to be sober reality.

Colonel Sedgemore!

Yes, it was indeed he—the happy owner of this most delightful carriage—sitting among his own cushions, and looking as homely and unpretending as when he had taken his seat at the family tea-table of the Fanes—to sip their tea, and eat their thick bread and butter, to bring little presents to amuse the baby, just as if he enjoyed it.

He smiled as their eyes met; and, bending forward, said in that soft tone which by this time the girl almost liked to hear:

'Well, Lottie, are you comfortable? Let me wrap this rug about you. There, that's better! Why, little woman, I think

you must be tired; you seem to have lost your tongue!'

'I was thinking.'

'And what were you thinking about, eh?'

'All sorts of things;' then suddenly she exclaimed, 'It was really very good of you to ask us down.'

The Colonel laughed, and patted the little hand which held on to the window-strap.

'You are determined to make me a philanthropist,' he said; 'but you forget how good it was of you to come. Ah! here we are,' he added, as the carriage passed through gates which shut with a heavy bang behind it, rolled up an avenue, and stopped before a house.

Lottie's hand was taken from the window-strap and enclosed in a cordial grasp as the Colonel's voice whispered in her ear :

'Welcome to Sedgemore!'

What Sedgemore was like Lottie could not tell; it was so dark she could not see anything. This time, with the Colonel's help, she was suffered to step from the carriage; but as soon as she felt her feet upon the gravel she found her hand again upon the Colonel's arm. She mounted a flight of stone steps, passed through a door which was held open by another elegantly dressed footman, and stood in a brilliantly lighted hall.

'Overture,' mentally commented Lottie as she looked round. 'A charming be-

ginning; if the play comes up to it, it will certainly do.'

The hall was pleasant enough to look at: spacious, lofty, and oak-panneled. Its polished walls were covered with deer-horns, stags' heads, foxes' brushes, dog-whips, and various other paraphernalia of the hunting-field; its floor, dark oak, too, and polished like a mirror. At one end stood an old-fashioned clock, which might have graced a Dutch interior of the last century, while at the other, in a grand old fireplace, surrounded by Dutch tiles, blazed a splendid Christmas log. To the right of the entrance was a door, partially shaded by a crimson curtain, but standing ajar to give Lottie a glimpse of a spacious and luxuriantly

furnished room beyond, while to the left was a broad oaken staircase, built and carved in Elizabethan style. Its steps, polished and slippery as a mirror, were partially covered with a rich red carpet—while at the top of the flight stood a lady quietly looking down.

'Ah, you are there, Elizabeth,' said the Colonel, addressing the lady, who still stood motionless and speechless above him; 'come and be introduced to Miss Fane!'

'Must I come down?—will not the young ladies come upstairs?' replied a cold, hard voice, and the Colonel, laughing genially, turned to Carrie, though he still held tight to Lottie's hand to keep it on his arm.

'I am brought back to a sense of

my duty,' he said. 'Upon my word, Carrie, I'm afraid I've been leaving you out of the picture altogether. But never mind, you must forgive me; come along both of you and make yourselves happy—this is "Liberty Hall," you know.'

They mounted the stairs—the Colonel and Lottie first, Carrie last—and were duly presented to the lady who stood at the top.

'My sister—Mrs. Crowe,' said the Colonel.

The lady inclined her head:

Lottie smiled and extended her hand, saying to herself:

'She is certainly not amiable-looking, or very likeable, I am afraid; but I mean to like her, for she is his sister, and she must be nice!'

Carrie returned the lady's formal salutation by one equally formal, and resolutely kept her hands tucked in her muff. Her mental comment was:

'Nasty—decidedly nasty—and what is worse, unpleasant to look at. Rather worse than I anticipated. I wish the Colonel was in love with me instead of Lottie. I'd marry him, if it was only to have the pleasure of showing *her* the door!'

Mrs. Crowe was certainly not a pleasant person to look at. She was really younger than the Colonel, though she looked his senior by many years. She was a very little woman, with a skin which looked as if it had been scorched up by tropical suns, searching black eyes, and a cold, hard, expression-

less face. She wore a dress of rich black silk; a massive gold chain clasped her shrivelled neck; a handsome gold and diamond locket reposed amid the costly black laces on her breast. On her head was a dainty little structure of lace and ribbon. She wore black mittens upon her hands, and her fingers were covered with rings.

Meanwhile Mrs. Crowe was giving her guests a formal, but anything but a cordial welcome. She shook hands with Lottie, it is true, then turned to lead the way into the drawing-room.

'We are just having tea,' she said; 'of course you would like a cup after your journey. We don't dine till seven, and'—consulting a tiny watch which she drew from her belt—'it is scarcely a quarter past six.'

Lottie, eager to please her hostess, was following without a word; but Carrie came to a dead stop.

'Thank you, Mrs. Crowe,' she said; 'I would rather not go to the drawing-room, if it's all the same to you. You may send me a cup of tea to my room, if you would be so kind. I should enjoy it there; but the fact is, I feel dusty and dirty with the journey, and I should like to make myself a little more presentable before I go in there. I hate gazing upon unpleasant objects myself, therefore I don't wish to force the task upon others.'

Mrs. Crowe shrugged her shoulders, and murmured:

'Just as you please. James,' to the attendant footman, 'show Miss Fane to her room, and tell Osborne to attend

upon her. Osborne,' she expla ing to Carrie, 'is my maid.'

Then she moved on along tl polished corridor, and entered th room, Lottie and the Colonel close behind.

If Lottie thought the hall spa was still more impressed with t the drawing-room—it seemed tc beginning and no end; and v walked across the floor, feeling sink into the carpet as into some down, she felt a very insignifica indeed. The lights dazzled l were so numerous and so brig she felt instinctively that she rounded by every requisite for ease. Yet her heart sank. Ho she must look amid all this sp

and, horror of horrors, she felt that the excessive warmth of the room was already making her turn a vivid scarlet. Wise Carrie, to have foreseen and avoided all this! How devoutly she wished she had followed Carrie's example and retired to the solitude of her room; but it was too late to repent now—she was already inside the doorway, and must go on.

She crossed the room somehow, and came to a standstill on a Persian rug of spotless white which covered the hearth. She was about to sink down upon the sofa which the Colonel had drawn forward for her, when she was arrested by the voice of Mrs. Crowe.

'Miss Fane—Dr. Perkins. Edward, I have asked the Doctor to give us the pleasure of his company at dinner to-day.'

'Very pleased, I am sure!' said the Colonel, who was busily arranging some cushions to make a comfortable rest for Lottie's back. 'Is your tea sweet enough, Lottie?'—Mrs. Crowe winced; 'if not, have some more sugar, my child. Here, pick out the best of these biscuits, you must be ravenous. I am perfectly well aware'—with the smile that Lottie loved—'what a healthy appetite yours is.'

But Lottie refused the biscuits, and after a sip or two set down her tea. The burning of her cheeks was positively painful, and she was longing, ardently longing, to creep away to her room. If the Colonel and Mrs. Crowe alone had been present, she would not have minded so much, but a stranger—a good-looking

young man probably—who at that moment was doubtless regarding her flushed cheeks with a cynical stare.

'At all events,' she said to herself, 'he should never get a thorough good look at her face.'

She kept her head well averted, and her eyes cast down. Presently, unable longer to restrain her curiosity, she took a peep at the stranger. What a relief! Instead of the cynical young gentleman of her imagination, she beheld a little old man dressed in a quaintly fashioned suit of black, with silk stockings and buckled shoes. The relief was so great that Lottie smiled to herself, and had the courage at last to say she wanted to go to her room.

'Oh, what a change!' she cried, when,

having reached her room, she threw herself into an easy chair which was drawn up beside the fire. 'Carrie, you were wise in your generation when you refused to be marshalled in to tea.'

'Of course I was,' returned Carrie, who, attired in a comfortable dressing-gown, was leisurely brushing out her hair. 'Well,' she continued, peeping over her shoulder at Lottie, who, having thrown off her hat and jacket, was examining the two pretty bedrooms, 'well, and how did you find old Perkins?'

'Old Perkins!' said Lottie, coming to a dead stop.

'*Doctor* Perkins, then, if you prefer it. You saw him, didn't you? He was in the drawing-room, I know.'

'Of course he was there, and of course

I saw him, but what do you know about him, Carrie ?'

'A good deal more than you do, I'll be bound. He's the Vicar of Amberley, he's uncommonly well off, and Mrs. Crowe is setting her cap at him.'

'Nonsense !'

'But I tell you she is, and it's a very good thing for you that she has got somebody in view, because when you marry the Colonel——'

'Don't talk nonsense, Carrie !'

'When you marry the Colonel,' persisted the irrepressible Carrie, 'she will marry old Perkins—that is to say, if he is fool enough to have her. My dear, he's here morning, noon, and night; she is one of his district visitors, and she spends nearly all the income which that poor unfortunate

Crowe left her in beautifying his parish and his church.'

'Why, Carrie,' said Lottie aghast, 'where did you learn all this?'

Carrie smiled.

'Ah, where!' she exclaimed; 'you thought I was sipping my tea in weary solitude, didn't you?—but I wasn't. I was having a little conversation with Osborne, Mrs. Crowe's maid—a charming young person!'

'She seems to be—beginning to talk scandal about her mistress to the first stranger she meets!'

'Don't be hard upon her, Lottie—she did nothing of the kind; she only allowed me to pump her, which I did very skilfully indeed. I soon found the way to her heart. She is an ardent admirer of

the drama—so I told her we were actresses, and promised her seats for the Variety whenever she went to town. After that, if I had been so minded, I could have learned the private history of every one with whom she had ever come in contact.'

Carrie continued to brush her hair, Lottie to inspect the rooms. They were two distinct chambers, large, lofty, and elegantly furnished; they were divided by folding doors, which had been opened, thrown back, and covered by curtains. In each of the grates burnt a cheerful fire.

'It's a beautiful house,' said Lottie, looking admiringly about her. 'Carrie, wouldn't it be nice always to live in rooms like these?'

Carrie smiled at herself in the glass.

'It would,' she assented, 'that is to say, if one could live in them alone. But, in my humble opinion, a garret without Mrs. Crowe (which by-the-bye is a bad name—it ought to be Raven) would be better than a palace with her!'

'Upon my word, Carrie, you are very unjust to her. She has been very good to us.'

'Has she?—In what way, pray? I only know that when we arrived she gave us a reception which made my blood boil, and which would have sent me walking out of the house again if we had been anywhere near home; not content with that, she was marshalling us into the drawing-room, knowing we were not fit to be seen, and feeling anxious to exhibit us at our worst to the purblind

eyes of old Perkins, and the infatuated gaze of the Colonel!'

'Well,' said Lottie desperately, 'it was very good of her to give us these rooms. She might have put us miles apart, and made us so miserable we should have been glad enough to hurry home again.'

'So she might,' assented Carrie, 'and so she would if she had had her way. It's no fault of hers that we are so cosy, I can tell you. But the Colonel asserted his authority for once—and quite right too!'

'The Colonel!'

'Yes, Lottie, the Colonel. When she ordered two gloomy ghost-chambers to be got ready, the Colonel protested, and boldly avowed that we were honoured guests, and should be as comfortable here

as we were at home. He knew we liked to be together, so he picked out these two rooms; he had the doors thrown open, and the curtains put up. Depend upon it, Lottie, my first impression was right. The Colonel is the dearest old thing in the world, but—she's a cat!'

Carrie paused suddenly.

A light tap came to the bedroom door; then it opened gently, and Osborne, the smart lady's-maid, appeared. She had come to offer her services to the two young ladies, and to inform them that the dressing-bell was about to ring.

Lottie looked mortified; she had not even thought about unlocking her box, while Carrie, clothed more for ease than for elegance, was still toying with her hair.

They neither of them wanted the lady's-maid; indeed, Lottie's chief anxiety was to get rid of her again. Just as she was about to close the door, Carrie called to her.

'Osborne, do you think I might have my dinner up here?'

'Certainly, miss, if you wish it.'

'Then I will. It will save me the trouble of dressing, and I'm tired.'

The maid courtesied and retired.

'Upon my word, Carrie, it's too bad of you!' said Lottie, with tears in her eyes. 'You might have come down to-night.'

'My dear, I can't,' returned Carrie, leisurely twirling up the curls on the top of her sister's head. 'After a night's rest I may feel better; but if I went

down to-night, and Mrs. Crowe gave me any more of her black looks, I should simply throw something at her!'

'And what am I to do?'

'Oh, you'll be all right—the Colonel will look after you.'

'But my dress——'

'Your dress is very nice; let me brush it for you. There, black always looks well, especially on you. You may use this white rose if you like—now some powder—that's all right. You'll stand comparison with the best of them, take my word for it, dear.'

And Lottie, standing before the full-length mirror, endorsed her sister's opinion. She certainly looked pretty. Though her dress was a travelling one, made of somewhat coarse material, it was very

well cut; and though it was plain, it had a remarkably well formed figure to reveal; her hair, glittering like burnished gold in the gaslight, had been charmingly arranged by Carrie's nimble fingers; while excitement had supplied the touch of colour, the want of which usually detracted so materially from the beauty of her face. As Lottie looked at herself she smiled approval; then she turned from the mirror, gave Carrie a kiss, and with a light heart and a promise to come early to bed, tripped down to dinner.

## CHAPTER XII.

DESPITE Lottie's gloomy forebodings and Carrie's dark prophecies, the first evening spent at Sedgemore promised to be a very happy one, and for the first hour or so at all events Carrie's absence was by no means deplored, save perhaps by Mrs. Crowe, who once or twice expressed herself grieved that the young lady could not appear.

When Lottie reached the drawing-room she found Mrs. Crowe and Doctor Perkins in conversation, while the Colonel, looking singularly restless and expectant, lounged

upon the sofa with a book in his hand. The moment she entered the room the book was thrown aside, and she was installed in a comfortable seat beside him.

Dinner being announced, she found herself tripping down the great staircase, her hand on the Colonel's arm, and when all the places at the board were taken, she was delighted to find herself still close to the Colonel's side.

'How delightful it must be to be rich,' thought Lottie, as she looked with admiring eyes about her, and tasted the dainties upon her plate. And in the very exuberance of her joy she chatted merrily to the Colonel, and laughed delightedly at Doctor Perkins's little jokes, never once perceiving that Mrs. Crowe's shrivelled face was growing ominously dark.

But Lottie's joy was soon to receive a check. Mr. Crowe made a sign to Lottie, and very unwillingly indeed Lottie rose. The Colonel opened the door for her to pass out, and seemed indeed on the point of following, when Doctor Perkins, who doubtless had received his instructions from his hostess, touched him on the shoulder.

'One moment, if you please, Colonel,' he said — 'ah, that is, would it bore you too much to give me your attention for five minutes on a matter which is of very great interest to me?'

And the Colonel, who was the soul of politeness, closed the dining-room door, and sat down with his friend. But the Doctor's business could not be

disposed of in a moment, and though the Colonel chafed and fretted, thinking of the little figure in the great drawing-room upstairs, the Doctor held him firmly. One—two hours went by; at length, the Colonel could stand it no longer: he rose, promising to finish the discussion on the morrow, and led the way upstairs, saying to himself that at last he could have what all the evening he had been longing for, a little conversation with Lottie.

But he was doomed to disappointment. When he reached the drawing-room he found his sister sitting in an easy chair, serenely knitting. Lottie, with her bed-candle in her hand, was making for the door.

She came face to face with the Colonel.

'Why, where are you going?' he asked in amazement.

'Up to bed.'

She answered very softly and kept her eyes cast down; but for all that, she could not disguise from him that something was wrong.

'Up to bed?' he said, trying in vain to make her look up, 'surely not yet; it's barely ten o'clock!'

'Isn't it?—so much the better for me. I shall get some beauty sleep! Good-night, Colonel Sedgemore; good-night, sir,' she added, making a dignified little courtesy to Dr. Perkins as she disappeared.

But the Colonel followed her. When she reached the hall he was beside her.

'Lottie, what does all this mean?' he asked, taking her hand.

'What does all what mean?' she echoed, with a faint little effort at joviality, but with her head still well turned away.

He took her chin between his finger and thumb, and turned her face towards him. His suspicions had been correct: her eyes, which hitherto he had seen smiling so brightly, were full of tears.

'Lottie,' he said softly, holding her hand more tenderly in his, 'tell me, my child, what has made you cry?'

'Nothing,' she answered, with a little sob which she could no longer stifle, 'that is,'—with a weary effort to smile—'I think I am tired—indeed, I am sure I am tired—and ought to be in

bed. O, let me go—do please let me go!'

'Well,' with a sigh, 'I will let you go now; but I must hear more about this to-morrow—good-night, Lottie—good-night, my darling!'

And before she could move she found herself enfolded in the Colonel's arms, her head resting on his shoulder. She made no resistance — indeed, for one moment she clung to him; then she disengaged herself from his arms and fled swiftly up to her room.

With heightened colour, and a new light in his handsome grey eyes, Colonel Sedgemore returned to the drawing-room. He found his sister still serenely knitting, but listening with evident satisfaction to the small talk of her clerical friend.

The footman was arranging a gipsy table at his mistress's elbow, and presently placed upon it a small silver tray containing coffee for the gentlemen. Doctor Perkins was handed a porcelain cup, and contentedly sipped therefrom; the Colonel, refusing to follow his friend's example, walked restlessly up and down the room. At length the Doctor, having leisurely disposed of his coffee, and seeing doubtless that his absence, by his host at least, was most earnestly desired, ordered his carriage and took his leave. When the hall door had closed upon him, Colonel Sedgemore ceased his restless walk, and took a seat before his sister.

'Elizabeth,' he said quietly, 'what were you and Miss Fane talking about this evening?'

Mrs. Crowe's busy hands began to tremble a little; but she mastered her voice, so as to answer, almost carelessly:

'Really, Edward, I can't remember. During the latter part of the evening I don't think we talked at all!'

'Indeed! And do you call that a polite way of entertaining a guest?'

'I don't see what else I could have done. I tried to talk to Miss Fane, but I found it utterly impossible. She has been nowhere, and knows no one. I am still at a loss to understand why you asked her here!'

'Because she is my friend—because I admire and respect her. I certainly did not intend her to receive what I see she *has* received—coldness and insult from you!'

'Brother——'

'Listen to me, Elizabeth; let us understand each other once and for all. Your conduct to-night compels me to remind you that this house is *my* house, and that Miss Fane is *my* guest. If you do not choose to treat her with the respect which I wish her to receive, you will compel me to find a housekeeper who will—do you understand?'

Oh yes, Mrs. Crowe understood too well; and as her brother, after having delivered his fiat, left the room, the expression of her face grew sinister.

'Abominable!' she exclaimed, throwing down her knitting; 'the thing has gone further than I thought, and unless I adopt strong measures, I must either be ousted from the house altogether, or see that

creature the mistress of it. What shall I do—what shall I do?'

She walked about the room in intense excitement. Suddenly she paused: she seemed to see her way clear.

'It's the only plan,' she said to herself, 'and I will adopt it.'

She sat down to her writing-desk, produced a telegraphic form, and filled it in.

| '*From* | '*To* |
| --- | --- |
| 'E. CROWE. | 'FREDERICK WEATHERSBY. |

'Come down by the 2.40. Wish most particularly to see you. Will meet you myself at the station.'

She enclosed it in an envelope, then rang the bell.

'I wish this to be sent in the morning

the moment the telegraph office is open!' she said to the footman.

Then, feeling that she had done a good stroke of work, she went to bed.

## CHAPTER XIII.

When Lottie got into bed that night she found that she had spoken to Colonel Sedgemore more truly than she was aware of. She was certainly very tired: no sooner did she lay her head on the pillow than she fell asleep. When she opened her eyes again it seemed to her that she had hardly been to sleep at all. The night-light still flickered on the washstand, and save for its faint rays the room would have been in total darkness. How quiet everything was! There was no rattle of

traffic on the pavement, or noise of drunken revellers in the street. As Lottie lay gazing dreamily about her, she could hear distinctly the musical ticking of the bronze clock which adorned her chimney piece, or the gentle sighs softly uttered by Carrie, who still slept soundly in the adjoining room.

Lottie closed her eyes and tried to sleep again. But it was no use. She turned and turned, luxuriating in the delicate linen sheets and soft springy bed. Then, finding her restlessness completely overcome her, she sat up in bed, rubbed her eyes, smoothed back her hair, and found herself ardently wishing it was time to rise.

She slipped out of bed, struck a match, and looked at the clock. Half-past six. She drew up the blind and looked out.

It was still dark, but in the sky she saw signs of approaching dawn. She tripped lightly over the soft turkey carpet and peeped in at Carrie, who still slept soundly, then she went back to her room and commenced to dress for the day. Her toilet was necessarily a more than usually elaborate one, and, moreover, everything about her was so fresh and clean and crisp and bright, that she lingered about, luxuriating a little. When at length she found herself standing before her mirror completely dressed for walking, the clock was about to strike eight, and the maid was tapping gently at the bedroom door. Lottie let her in.

'What time do you breakfast here?'

'Nine o'clock, miss!'

'You may wake up my sister, please;

tell her I've gone out, but shall be back for breakfast.'

Then Lottie walked in her most stately manner down the stairs, across the hall, and out of the front door, pausing at the foot of the steps to look about her.

'O, how lovely!' she exclaimed; for wherever her delighted eyes roamed they met some glad surprise. On every side of her stretched velvety lawns, the smooth surfaces of which were whitened by hoar-frost, or relieved here and there by prettily dressed beds of flowers. Beyond again, and still all about her, arose the tall trees of the park, touched with hoar-frost too, and showing marked signs of approaching winter. Their widespreading branches were bare: in glancing through them Lottie caught glimpses of a smooth slate-

coloured sea, creeping on one side towards golden tracts of sand, and on the other fading in the mysterious light of the horizon.

For a time Lottie stood gazing about her like one in a dream; then she turned to move away.

'I will go into the park,' she said to herself. 'I'll try to imagine I'm playing Rosalind, and that this is the Forest of Arden.'

'A sixpence for your thoughts,' said Colonel Sedgemore, laying his hand on Lottie's shoulder. 'What are you looking at, and what are you thinking about?'

He had come upon her quite suddenly and unexpectedly. She had wandered far

into the park, and stood now leaning with folded arms upon a wire fence, and gazing upon the hillocks of a rabbit-warren.

When he spoke and touched her, she did not start or move; but answered quietly and half dreamily:

'I was playing Alice in Wonderland!'

'What?'

'Well, to put it more clearly, I was realizing what she felt when she got into the enchanted rabbit-warren. Do you know, I shouldn't have been the least astonished to find *this* an enchanted wood. If those little rabbits which were nibbling the grass just now had suddenly grown too big to get into their holes, or those trees had become golden, I shouldn't have

been the least amazed. It would all have been in keeping. Oh!' with a contented little sigh, 'what a good time of it people must have who always live in a place like this!'

'Do you think so? . . . Lottie, would *you* like always to live in a place like this?'

Lottie started this time; but she did not move, for she felt that her cheeks were becoming crimson. She remembered, what until then she had almost forgotten, the former proposal, the passionate clasp, the passionate kiss, the softly murmured 'Good-night, my darling!' of the night before. Then her flaming cheeks grew pale again, and her wildly palpitating heart grew calm. The one recollection brought with it another, which was

decidedly less pleasant to dwell upon. She recalled the hours which she had been doomed to spend in the handsome drawing-room at Sedgemore, and shuddered. She turned and faced the Colonel, and answered his question with another.

'Whatever brought you here this morning?'

'I came to look for you!'

'Really?—how did you know I was here?'

'They told me you were out, and I guessed you might have come here . . . . But you have not answered my question. Lottie, tell me, would you like always to live at Sedgemore?'

She made a little moue, and glanced up at him with a bewitching smile.

'It all depends.'

'Upon what?'

'Whom I should have to live with.'

'Well——' with a smile, but an eager look into her face, 'could you bear, do you think, to live here with *me?* . . . . Lottie, do not turn away now; for the second time, my darling, I must ask you, will you be my wife?'

The question was not wholly unexpected or unprovided for; she knew that he would soon ask her again, and when she came to Sedgemore she had quite made up her mind as to what her answer must be. But since last night her view of things had considerably changed. She still acknowledged to herself that it would be very nice indeed to share Colonel Sedgemore's home; but to have to share

it with his sister was quite another matter.

'Lottie, my child, speak freely; if you can't care for me, say so openly and roundly.'

She put her hand in his, and looked up into his face.

'I can't say *that!*' she murmured, 'because I do like you very much indeed.'

'And you will marry me?'

'Yes—that is, no—I think I had better not.'

'Why, my darling?'

'Well,' returned Lottie, stammering and blushing, 'I don't think *you* ought to marry *me*. I'm not the sort of match for you, as I told you once before—and—and Mrs. Crowe doesn't care for me at all!'

The Colonel smiled; he took her two hands in his, and drew her towards him.

'And so,' he said, 'my little girl thinks that I am selfish enough to ask her to give up home and friends for me, in order that her life may be made wretched in my home. No, Lottie, I should never do that. If you two could not live peacefully together you would have to part. She is my sister, but that is no reason why I should let her destroy the happiness of my wife.'

They had been walking quietly through the Park, and had drawn very near to the house. The Colonel paused again and looked at his companion.

'My darling,' he said, 'what do you say? Will you trust me, Lottie?'

'Yes,' she answered quietly; 'I do trust you . . . you have been so good to us all, that I would not pain you for the world. But will you promise me one thing?'

'Anything, my darling.'

'Let us be just as we are for a little longer—one month longer. Do not say anything to Mrs. Crowe or to anyone else. If at the end of the month you are still of the same mind, you may remind me of what I have said.'

'You wish that?'

'Yes.'

The Colonel consented.

## CHAPTER XIV.

'SURELY I was dreaming last night, or else everything is wonderfully changed this morning,' thought Lottie, as, keeping close to the Colonel's side, she walked up the broad carriage drive towards the hall door. At the top of the steps stood Mrs. Crowe, smiling brightly at the truants, and giving them a playful scolding for being late for breakfast. She actually condescended to give Lottie a kiss, and when at length Carrie thought fit to show herself, she received a cordial greeting.

Breakfast over, Mrs. Crowe, to the

Colonel's intense delight, proposed that her brother should take the young ladies either riding or driving. Since they had seen so little of the country they would be glad, no doubt, to take a long day and return in time for dinner. She would order a luncheon basket to be packed for them if they chose; if not, there was a charming little inn where they could get a plain but very tolerable luncheon indeed. As for herself, they must do her the favour to dispense with her company; she had thought the young ladies would find the house dull, so she had invited one or two people to dinner that evening; besides, she had certain business to transact which demanded a journey to the station.

As she had anticipated, they readily

agreed to do without her, and shortly after breakfast the open carriage, bearing Lottie, Carrie, and the Colonel, and drawn by a pair of chestnuts, rolled out of the park gates and disappeared.

As soon as it was gone Mrs. Crowe sent for the housekeeper, granted her a short interview, and told her that Mr. Weathersby's rooms must be prepared for that young gentleman's immediate reception. Then she ordered the brougham and went up to dress. When she descended again, dressed in velvet and furs, the brougham was at the door. She ordered her coachman to drive to the station.

When the brougham reached the station, it wanted five minutes to the time of the train's arrival, so Mrs. Crowe left

her carriage to pace impatiently up and down the platform.

The five minutes, which to the lady seemed like twenty, at length wore away, and precisely at its time the train came steaming up alongside the platform. The carriage doors flew open, the passengers descended; Mrs. Crowe, who had been keenly watching the train, saw now the only thing which interested her.

The door of a first-class compartment slowly opened, a tall young man, smoking a cigar, leisurely descended: he gave one careless glance about him, spoke to a porter, who drew from the carriage a large leather travelling bag—then he strolled up t o Mrs. Crowe.

'How d'ye do, aunt?' he said, with an affected drawl, taking her hand and

kissing her cheek. 'What's the matter? Anything wrong with the gov'nor?'

'No; that is to say, not much,' replied the lady querulously. 'How late you are, Fred; I'm sure I've been pacing this platform for half an hour.'

'Have you? Very sorry, I'm sure, but I couldn't hurry on the train, you know.'

For answer, she put her hand upon his arm and led him away, looking very small indeed beside him; the porter followed with the bag upon his shoulder.

Mr. Weathersby seemed to be well known, and, what is more, well liked. No sooner had he stepped upon the platform than all the porters had been eager to serve him, the guard had come up to bid him good morning before the train moved

on, while the station-master assured him he was very glad indeed to see him back at Amberley. When he emerged from the station, the footman, who for the last ten minutes had been standing like a statue at the carriage door, came eagerly forward to touch his hat and give him a welcome; while the coachman, looking quite gratified, smilingly took possession of his bag.

As for Mr. Weathersby, he had a smile, a nod, and a kind word for all of them. When he handed Mrs. Crowe into her carriage, it was with a pleasant warm grasp of the hand, and when they sat beside each other he turned towards her and looked at her as if he were very fond of her indeed. And while he was smiling so brightly and looking so affec-

tionately upon her, he was saying to himself:

'Deuced bore, all this; to think that a fellow at my age should have to be at an old woman's beck and call. Fancy dragging a fellow down here at this infernal time of year. If the gov'nor was likely to make his last journey and leave me the Park, I shouldn't mind so much; but he isn't—it's only one of her infernal whims.'

The brougham rattled along. Mrs. Crowe turned to her companion.

'Well, Fred,' she said, 'I dare say you are impatient to know the meaning of all this?'

'Well, yes,' returned the young man with a smile; 'it looks rather mysterious. Is there anything wrong?'

'Not much as yet, I think. . . . My dear boy, listen to me. You know, do you not, that my brother intends to make you his heir?'

'Well,' returned the young man, pulling his moustache; 'he never told me so, certainly, still I always imagined he had nobody else to leave his property to.'

'And you were quite right, Fred, he has no one else. Except myself, he hasn't a single relation in the world. To my certain knowledge he has made a will leaving his property equally between the two of us, with the proviso that at my death the whole shall revert to you!'

The news, which was not wholly unexpected, fairly took his breath away. Seeing that he made no answer, Mrs. Crowe continued:

'Of course, when Edward made that will, he believed that till the end of his days he would remain free. If he were to marry, the will would at once be destroyed, and a new one would be made in favour of his wife.'

'Of course; but he'll never marry now!'

'You think not?' returned the lady, with a smile; 'well, you are not to blame: three weeks ago I should have said the same thing; but one can never be certain, for since then matters have changed considerably. Fred, unless you play your cards well you will stand a very poor chance of becoming the owner of Sedgemore.'

'What do you mean?'

'Simply that Edward is likely to marry!'

'Never!'

'But he is. Moreover, the lady he wishes to marry is at present a guest at Sedgemore.'

'Do I know her?—who is she?'

'Miss Carlotta Fane.'

The young man gave a whistle.

'Lottie Fane!' said he.

'Do you know her?'

'The burlesque actress?'

'Yes—she is on the stage, I believe. Do you know her?'

'Not exactly . . . that is to say, I never met her off the stage; but I've seen her dozens of times dressed up in spangles and tights and dancing in the burlesque. Lord Liston invited me to meet her the other day at a little dinner at Richmond!'

He forgot to add that he went, and that Lottie was not there.

Mrs. Crowe's cheeks grew pale with indignation.

'And *this* is the person,' she said, 'whom my brother wishes to make *my* sister-in-law and the mistress of Sedgemore! For this person he would dispossess you and me, to say nothing of the disgrace such a connection would bring upon our name. Oh, my dear boy, it was well I sent for you!'

'But what can I do?'

'Prevent the marriage!'

'My dear aunt, how can I prevent it?'

'Easily. Force her to show herself to my brother in her true colours. Pluck the glamour from his eyes, and he will thank you till his dying day.'

The young man hesitated, pulled his moustache, and looked thoughtfully before him. Though the lady had spoken rather ambiguously, he knew perfectly well what was required of him; and he was wondering if he could coincide with her plans with safety to himself. At length he spoke.

'Very well, aunt, I'll do my best to help you, if you'll promise one thing.'

'What is it?'

'Never to let the governor know of our plot——'

'Silly boy! do you think I should do that—for my own sake? Have you brought any things? Can you remain for a while at the Park?'

'Yes, I brought a few things. How long is Lottie to stay?'

'A fortnight, I believe.'

'Then I had better telegraph for my man. Can you send one of the servants back with the message?'

'Certainly,' returned Mrs. Crowe, as the carriage stopped at the hall door; 'write it at once, Fred, and it shall be sent.'

Mr. Weathersby hastened to obey. Having written out the telegram to his servant, he asked Mrs. Crowe for a sheet of note-paper and an envelope, and proceeded to write the following note:

'DEAREST CLARA,—

'I have most unexpectedly been called to Sedgemore by the governor, and find I am booked for a fortnight. Awfully sorry I can't turn up on Friday.

Make my excuses to Liston and the rest, and do the best you can without me.

'Ever, my dear little girl,

'Your devoted

'FRED.'

Having quietly slipped this letter and half a sovereign into the man's hand, and enjoined strict secrecy, he muttered:

'An infernal bore to have to miss Clara's dinner. But, after all, I've one consolation —I've pretty little Lottie Fane.'

END OF VOL. I.

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