



Temptation of
Carlton Earle

by Stella M. During

The Problem That Shadowed Two Lives

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Temptation of Carlton Earle by Stella M. Düring

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I I has been some years since we have had the pleasure of publishing a story by this talented author, a deprivation that, with many other ills, may be blamed upon the war; but many of our older readers of the *Cavalier* and *All-Story-Cavalier* will doubtless remember her work, and certainly, if they do, will be as delighted as we to welcome her back to the pages of the ALL-STORY WEEKLY. Nor will any disappointment await them, for in this last story, the first part of which begins below, she has given us a story of deep human interest and unusual charm.

CHAPTER I.

HAZELBRIDGE.

I I was raining, but being April that was no matter for surprise. One expected it to rain in April. Carlton Earle thrust his hands deep down in his pockets and stared through the latticed window of the coffee-room at the Chequers out at the rain.

What was he going to do with himself, not only to-day and to-morrow, and the day after, but the day after that and all the long, long days that stretched ahead of him, empty of duty, of ambition, of hope? The rain would stop—some time. It did not rain always, even at Hazelbridge. And when the rain did stop he would be faced once again with the question that had stood like a solid wall in front of him all the five

days he had been at the Chequers. What was he going to do with himself?

He yawned wearily, took his hands out of his pockets and stretched. Rogers, the landlord, busily polishing glasses against the big sideboard of polished black oak at the other end of the room, glanced at his broad back and square shoulders, a hint of commiseration in his eye.

"Bit dull, isn't it, sir?" he said.

Earle swung round. He turned sharply, as though he had been drilled. "Army man, belike," suggested Rogers to himself.

"Isn't there anything one can do here?" he inquired desperately.

Rogers pursed up his lips and raised his eyebrows, and his face was not encouraging.

"No fishing?"

Rogers shook his head.

"Mr. Penryan, sir, he preserves very strict. It's a good trout stream as runs through his property—but I never knew any one get leave to throw a fly in it yet, barring, of course, young Mr. Percival."

"And is it all his property—about here?"

"Mostly, sir. There's a meet, sir, over by Long Daleton. Larst of the season it 'll be, I'm thinking."

But Earle snorted softly to himself. He had no hunter, and even if he had had, he doubted if he could ride—now. Neither did he wish to encounter the curious eyes of a crowd, especially a rustic crowd. He took his cap off a chair near and his stick from beside it.

"Well, it's stopped raining, anyway," he remarked. "I'll go out again. At least one can walk."

"In the woods, sir?"

"Yes. Is there anything against it?"

"Not if you keep to the rides, sir. I'd advise you to do that. Mr. Penryan he preserves pretty strict, an' if you wander, sir, an' come across Kelly—"

"Oh, damn Kelly!" returned Earle, and flung out.

Rogers followed him to the door, glass in one hand, towel in the other, and looked after him with puzzled interest. He walked a little stiffly with a steady tramp, tramp that suggested drill, though not quite military drill.

"Now who is 'e?" ruminated Rogers, not for the first time, "an' what's 'e come to Hazelbridge for?"

What had he? That very question was exercising Carlton Earle's own mind as he walked through the gleam and glitter of the sweet April day. The blue and white sky smiled up at him out of every puddle, the needles of the larch-trees at the roadside, still softly green, were hung with diamonds every one, the scent of the primroses in the copse, peculiarly, delicately vernal, perfumed the warm air. He was conscious of his pleasure in them, of a sense of their beauty that at times touched rapture, for it was seven long years since he had seen a primrose in bloom, but for none of these things had he come to Hazelbridge. Why had he come? Truly he did not know.

One day, the 3d of April, had stood

before him for weeks now in such a blaze of glory that it had blinded him to all the days that were to come after. He had lived for that one day, thought of it by day, dreamed of it by night, held his limbs in bondage and his tongue in leash with control almost superhuman, lest some accidental movement or word born of intolerable strain should jeopardize the glory of its promise and plunge him back into the darkness wherein he had sat before he was conscious of its dawn. But of the days that were to come after, of what he was to do and where he was to go—after—he had not thought at all.

That had seemed no reason why he should go to one place more than another. He had relatives, like most other men, but he thought of them with a sick shudder, and the place where they were was the place from which he would most certainly keep away. If his mother had been alive—But his mother was dead five years ago—what had happened to him had killed her. If his mother had been alive life would have held the possibility of happiness for Carlton Earle even now.

So since one place was to him the same as any other, he had brought himself, his seven hundred pounds, and his load of dumb misery to Hazelbridge. Something attractive about the name, a chance recollection of its green rusticity, seen in a flash from a friend's car in the days, long past, when he had possessed friends and ridden in cars, had decided him. As well Hazelbridge as any place. So he had drifted, listless and unhappy, toward the deep places into which the current of his life was sweeping him.

He had been at Hazelbridge now five days, the 3d of April, in its blaze of glory, had faded out into ashes and nothingness behind him. The days ahead were misty, uncertain, and full of pain. But he was getting into touch once more with civilization. The feel of a serviette in his fingers had ceased to embarrass him, the unexpectedly delicious savor of crisp country bread and sweet country butter to surprise. His new shirts, his new socks, his new bath-sponge, his new razors, ties, handkerchiefs, cuff-links, collar-studs, had ceased to be, each and every one of them, a source of

poignant pleasure. The problem before him, always before him now, had stolen something of their ecstasy away. What was he going to do with his life?

He studied the question with profound interest now as he tramp-tramped, rather stiffly, along the muddy grass-bordered road through the clean rain-washed air of the April day. There are many things a man with health and strength and seven hundred pounds can do. He can go to Oregon and grow apples. He can, if he chooses, even grow apples at home. He can buy a cottage and a ten-acre field and support a simple life by the labor of his own hands. He can—

The clash of the five-barred gate that crossed the road some fifty yards in front of him, shutting it off from the greening woods, made him lift his head sharply. Two people were coming through, young people, a girl evidently yet in her teens, with sunny eyes and light, fair hands full of primroses, and a boy a year or two older, tall, slim, and in his early twenties.

Earle studied him with almost painful interest as he moved, lithe and graceful, in an all-too-previous suit of white flannels, his tennis racket, wakened early from its winter's sleep, tucked under his arm. It seemed himself he saw, across interstellar space and eons of time, himself a student at Bart's, as wild as any of them, though his wildness had always a touch of chivalry lying below himself, dressed in white flannels, with a racket under his arm, hurrying on to the recreation ground with confidence in his heart and battle in his eye, and no dream of the long years ahead of him that the locusts would eat bare.

With a little audible catch in his breath he turned his attention to the girl, and wild regret and passionate despair died out in him, swept away by pure pleasure at the sight of her. For she was beautiful, not only with the beauty of charming line and delicate coloring, but with the beauty that sometimes lights a young face from within. The color rose a little in Earle's dark cheek, his eyes softened and glowed as they rested on her, he had forgotten that the world held anything so fair.

But his admiration was impersonal, rather

for the type than the individual. He realized it as he saw the boy flush hotly, the hand that hung at his side clench as they passed. His words came back clearly on a little wandering air to Earle's ears.

"What does the fellow mean by staring at you like that?"

"He didn't stare," returned the girl with a hint of remonstrance. "It was a very nice look," she added softly.

Earle smiled a little as he heard. There had been nothing to object to, and he knew it, since it is the right of every man to look with respectful admiration at a beautiful woman if he meets her on the king's highway. And then the little incident faded from his mind. What had a battered derelict like himself to do with anything so fresh, so innocent, so unstained as that lovely girl in her simple frock?

The woods were thickening, the "faint green mists of April's weaving" were closing in the long vistas on either side almost as he looked. Here and there the anemones lay like a rose-flushed snowdrift across the brown carpet of leaves. On every mossy bank the primroses shone, a galaxy of scented stars. A squirrel, chattering on an oak branch, flung an acorn down at him. A blackbird flew across his path.

He laughed a little and stood, his head bared to the glancing sunbeams, letting the beauty of it all warm and gratify and heal his scarred soul. Quite unconsciously a man may pray. Earle played now, though he did not know it. More than a remnant of his life was his, to shape and mold as he would, for he was not yet forty. He would mold it aright, he would shape it to good ends. Life lay before him, even yet. It should be a worthy life—in spite of everything.

The trees thinned out a little as he walked farther in. Beech-trees planted rather closely followed the oak, their gray trunks, satin smooth, rose on either side. There was little undergrowth and no flowers bloomed among the twigs and beechmast on the ground. Earle was thinking of turning back to the warmer and more luxuriant oak when something at a little distance among the beech-trunks caught his eye. At first he thought it was a beech-trunk, too, so still it was, so tall, so softly gray. And then

it moved, and he saw it was a woman, a woman in a long silk cloak almost the color of the beech-trunks, a woman wearing a large hat with a sweeping plume of gray that shaded and hid her features. But as Earle looked she took it off, flung it lightly on to the brown carpet of rustling beech-leaves, and raised her face to the light.

It was the face of a woman past her first youth, its lines fined and sharpened by suffering, its beauty worn and ravaged by the storms of a life more troubled, it was plain, than most. Her dark eyes beseeched and reproached by turns even the heaven up at which she gazed, her red mouth, one moment mutinous and bitter, was quivering and plaintive the next. Earle watched her intently, too much interested to be aware, as yet, of intrusion. His eyes were keen, and he was near enough to note every change of expression. As he watched her she curved her arm against the beech-trunk by which she was standing and wept.

He drew back sharply out of sight, suddenly aware of espionage, almost eaves-dropping. There seemed something inexcusable, almost indecent, in the witnessing of a grief so unrestrained, for though her appearance was that of a woman of the world, wealthy, tranquil, experienced, mistress of herself and of circumstances, her attitude and gestures had the abandon, the recklessness of a badly frightened child.

He saw her shoulders writhe in torment, the sound of her sobbing, open and unabashed, reached him where he stood. By and by words came:

"Oh, God! don't let him! Oh, God! don't!"

Earle felt his lips go cold, so charged with passion was the protesting prayer. He tiptoed across the path out of earshot.

But he still watched her, his heart going out to her in dumb and ignorant sympathy, watched the paroxysm of suffering spend itself, the storm of emotion subside and die away. He dare not leave her to battle through it alone, for he hardly needed a medical training to acquaint him with the moment of danger. But the moment passed. Whatever the cause of her grief, steadily and deliberately she subdued it, walking to the next beech-tree and back, at

first hurriedly and with agitation, later with composure and a hardy won calm.

At last she picked up her hat, shook it, looked inside with a little gesture peculiarly naive and winning for forest denizens in search of a new and commodious home, and finding none put it on and came straight across toward the spot where Earle stood.

Instantly, silently, he dropped out of sight behind a tangle of blackberry canes and lay moving neither hand nor foot, hiding his face in the curve of his arms lest its gleam betray him as she went by. Not for words would he have her know that an emotional breakdown he guessed to be rare had been seen by a stranger, and that stranger a man. She passed him unseeing, her troubled eyes staring straight before her, her mouth softened into plaintive and touching curves.

When he heard the clash of the white gate behind her Earle rose, dusted himself free of leaves and twigs and bits of moss and one adventurous ant and walked over to the beech-tree under which she had stood. A little greenish patch showed where the pressure of her arm had been, her hurrying feet had trodden a quite perceptible path among the light-lying beech leaves. Earle contemplated it with thoughtful, frowning eyes. What was the trouble that he had no right to console and was powerless to relieve?

For some time he pondered the problem of the suffering, what seems to us the unnecessary suffering, that forms so large a part of life. Then he stooped, picked up one of the crushed and flattened beech leaves from the little path that her feet had trodden and put it carefully into his pocket-book. It marked a day, a day worth marking, the day on which he had found something he would not, yesterday, have believed existed, something, some one, who was more unhappy than he was himself.

CHAPTER II.

THE VICARAGE.

"LOVELY morning, isn't it?"
Earle turned sharply. He had been leaning on the parapet of the little bridge at the end of the village, watch-

ing the tiny river as it shoaled over the bright gravel below. Its music floated up to him, soothing one moment, querulous the next. Under the shadow of the bank a deeper shadow, semitransparent, betrayed here and there the presence of the trout that he might not catch. It was ridiculous that he might not catch them. They were far too thick, some one ought to catch a few of them. He was contemplating the frankest of poaching when the voice behind made him turn. It was the vicar, in long, black cassock and round, felt hat. Earle eyed him with a touch of hostility.

"Very," he said shortly.

"Are you staying with us for a little?" The vicar put his elbow on the parapet, too, and smiled as amiably as ever.

"Ye-es. I think so."

"Been ill?" with persistent friendliness.

"Yes. At least— Yes."

The vicar nodded. He had been ill, but his sickness had been of the soul and not of the body. It did not need words to tell him that.

"You're wise to be in the open air," he said. "Nothing like the open air when one isn't quite the thing. Find it pleasant, don't you?"

Sudden suspicion darkened Earle's face. Why should he find it more pleasant than others did? Then his look cleared. It was an amiable inanity, no more.

"I find it a bit wearisome when I've nothing to do," he said more cordially. "I was wondering if I could get permission to fish a little, there are some beauties down there." But the vicar's face was not encouraging.

"I wouldn't ask if I were you," he said. "All the water rights about here belong to Mr. Penryan, and he isn't one that likes to be asked things. Do you play tennis?"

"I used to, when I was younger."

"Well, you're not so very ancient yet," returned the vicar laughing. "Come round to the vicarage this afternoon. We've a couple of nice courts, and there's sure to be some one on them, and let me introduce you to my wife."

"Thank you," said Earle readily, and with rather a shy bow he took his card-case from his pocket and tendered a tiny slip of

pasteboard. It bore his name, "Carlton Earle," no more, an omission that Mrs. Briscoe, the vicar's lady, was quick to notice when it was duly presented to her at lunch.

"No address, Anselm? Do you think it is wise of you, my dear—"

"The man has suffered, one can see it in his face. He wants help and healing."

"Perhaps. But the church offers all that to those that need it. Get him to come to church by all means, or even ask him here to see you—as a clergyman. But to invite him to the house as a friend—"

"The vicarage is the antechamber to the house of God, and the house of God is open to everybody"—with a touch of sententiousness.

"Yes, of course, if we had only ourselves to think of. But we haven't. If he comes here as a friend, we introduce him to other friends, we can't get out of it. Sylvia will be here this afternoon—and Pap.

"Pap is quite able to take care of himself."

"Yes, but Sylvia isn't. I mean, of course, that while she is under our roof we are responsible for the acquaintances she makes. I'm sure Mrs. Royston wouldn't like—"

"If Mrs. Royston lets Sylvia come here she must be prepared for her to be introduced to—"

"Any tramp whom you happen to find interesting?" with acerbity.

"He isn't a tramp, my dear, he's a gentleman," returned the vicar mildly. "And Sylvia isn't in the least likely to find him interesting. To nineteen a man of forty is a senile dodderer—and he must be forty, quite."

Mrs. Briscoe bridled. That was all the vicar knew about his new acquaintance, and even of that he wasn't sure.

But when Earle presented himself that afternoon, correctly clothed in spotless white, and with a brand-new tennis racket under his arm, the good lady softened a little. He was at home in drawing-rooms. He did not call her "ma'am" like Anselm's last importation, and he followed the "single"—two charming young people who were playing out in the garden—with a

keen appreciation of its finer points. A flash of interest lit up in Earle's eyes at sight of them, for they were the same two he had met at the white gate in the woods a few days before. Mrs. Briscoe, who was thawing moment by moment, marked it.

"That's Sylvia Conyers, Mrs. Royston's step-niece," she said with the placid certainty of the country-bred that the names at least of every one of importance within a ten-mile radius are known to her listener. "And the one playing with her is old Mr. Penryan's only son. You have heard of Mr. Penryan, of course."

"Yes, he's the old curmudgeon who won't let any one thin his trout for him, isn't he?"

Mrs. Briscoe laughed. From the Manor House flowed the Pactolean stream that kept every parish activity going, and of late it had dwindled to a most unsatisfactory dribble. She wouldn't have done it herself for the world, but it was pleasant to hear some one else call him an old curmudgeon.

"My daughter will be in very shortly, and then there will be four of you," she told him cordially. "Katie, my dear," as a jolly-looking girl that moment opened the door, "this is Mr. Earle. He is staying at the Chequers, and your father—"

"Yes, I know," interrupted Katie, frankly shaking hands with him. "Can you play? Then, for pity's sake, help me beat that arrogant couple outside."

"You'll be clever if you manage it," laughed Mrs. Briscoe.

"We're going to try," called Katie back, gaily waving her racket.

Try, yes, but could he? Earle's face twitched nervously as he asked himself the question. Could he play at all after seven years? And then, as after a few bad faults, his old cunning came back to him, another question followed it. Had he any right to be playing among these kindly people who offered him hospitality without inquiry and friendship without stint?

He had had a bad half-hour with his doubt in the morning, and had decided that it could not possibly hurt any one if he, a passing sojourner and pilgrim resting for a day or two in Hazelbridge, did indulge

his craving for the daintinesses, the elegancies, the simple gaieties of life as he had known it once before—for but one afternoon. But now his presence seemed inexcusable, almost treacherous.

In vain he argued that it could not dim the brightness of Katie's eyes or the roses on her healthy cheeks by one iota that he should for one afternoon run and jump and hit a ball and laugh, positively laugh, by her side. Yet if Katie's mother had known what he knew she would have swept Katie with indignation and wrath a hundred miles away from him.

It seemed to poison everything. It took the accuracy from his eye and the nerve from his arm. By the end of the afternoon young Penryan, whose supremacy had been gravely challenged at first, was as self-satisfied as ever, and Earle had made up his mind.

"It was just the once—only this once," he told himself as he stepped through the open drawing-room window on his way toward a welcome cup of tea, and then his eyes widened and his breath caught a little.

For in a low chair near Mrs. Briscoe sat another lady—a lady in a long gray silk cloak of graceful cut and quite individual design, a lady past her first youth, with deep, dark eyes, faintly shadowed, and a well-curved, red mouth, faintly cynical. Sylvia went over to her and kissed her. She looked up at the girl's lovely flushed face with an amused smile.

"My dear, you are tousled," she said.

"It's no use tidying myself *yet*, aunty," remonstrated Sylvia, patting her unruly curls into place. "We're only even. We haven't finished yet."

"Well?" said her aunt with a whimsical twist of her lips. "Of course, if you really enjoy making a sight of yourself!"

Earle thrilled. The smiling eyes were the same he had seen raised, brimmed up with tears of agony, to the heaven that, though it watches over us all, seems sometimes so deaf to what we have to say to it. Her voice, half indifferent, half affectionate, the same that had prayed, "Oh, God, don't! Don't *let* him! Oh, God, *don't!*" in passionate protest out in the sweet April woods. If she could in any way divine that

he knew, that he had seen her! With his thought she turned to him in the easy, indifferent inquiry of the casual acquaintance on whom it is incumbent to find something to say.

"Then you are staying in Hazelbridge, Mr.—er—Earle. Do you know it well?"

"I have seen it only once before—from a car." He spoke with a slight smile, as a gentleman speaks, and his manner and accent both won Mrs. Royston's approval. "When it was necessary to come into the country to — to recuperate, I remembered it."

"Ah—it's a sweet little place, isn't it? We haven't been here long, but we wouldn't like to leave it, would we, Sylvia? Thank you"—for he had brought her a cup of tea, balancing it on its slippery saucer with the ease of much practise, and handling the silver cake-basket after the manner of one to whom they are matters of every-day occurrence.

"Have you seen our various objects of interest yet? The Roman camp in the woods? The prehistoric barrow on the hill? I think those are about what we most pride ourselves upon. You mustn't leave Hazelbridge without seeing them—must he, Sylvia?"

But Sylvia did not hear. She was asking Pap for bread and butter. The boy bent over her, flushed and indignant.

"I wish you wouldn't call me by that ridiculous name," he said.

Sylvia raised her lovely eyes, and a hint of mischief twinkled in them.

"What shall I call you, then?" in demure inquiry. "Rusks? Revalenta? Like the others do?"

"I will ask you to call me Percival," he returned, stiff and furious, and Sylvia made a wicked little moue at him and said nothing. Mrs. Royston saw; so did Earle. She looked up at him and smiled. It was a delightful smile, full of the ease of a woman whose position is assured, and quite friendly. Earle drew up a low chair and sat down by her. Why should he not, for this once, be his old self and accept, for the moment, the goods the gods gave him?

"Why does she call him Pap?" he asked in an undertone.

Mrs. Royston laughed and leaned a little toward him. They might have been friends for years.

"It is all the fault of his initials. Percival Ambrose Penryan! There! What will you—when sponsors lay traps of that kind! I'm sorry for him. It's a handicap—at least with Sylvia." And Earle laughed, too, comprehending well that it might be, and took her teacup.

It was when he took her teacup that she noticed his hands, broadened, scarred, calloused—hands that had manipulated pick and shovel for many a long day. What did they mean, those hands? Railroad laying? Placer mining? One thing they meant without doubt, and that was a life different from any that one could have imagined for him, as he sat there, quiet, well-bred, and accustomed to drawing-rooms, at her side.

It was generally in the States—the Western States—that men lived the sort of life that his hands suggested. Mrs. Royston, aware that she was more interested than usual in the personality of a new acquaintance, began to talk about the States.

"It's nice to be in England in April," she said. "I never miss April in England if I can help it. Last year we were in New York, my niece and I, and if there is one place on the globe I loathe more than another, it is New York. Horrid, east-windy, hurrying *hole!* It was better on the other side. I liked Oregon. It is a land of flowers, indeed; I didn't know half of them. Do you know the Western States?"

"No, I have never been to America, though I have often thought I should like. I may go—very shortly. I rather think I shall."

Mrs. Royston nodded. It was not in America, then, that he had spoiled his hands. She put her elbow on the arm of her chair and rested her chin on her hand as she quite frankly studied him. Earle found himself staring at it, the line of the delicate wrist, the curved fingers, pink-tipped, the rose-flushed palm. It moved him to poignant admiration. How long it was, how long, since he had seen a lady's hand! Mrs. Royston's voice roused him with a start.

"We went across to Japan," she was saying, "but the Japan of to-day isn't the Japan of one's dreams at all. Sylvia was awfully disappointed in it. Quite a traveler, isn't she? One would hardly expect it."

Earle glanced across at her.

"Of a lovely child like that? No."

"Child!" repeated Mrs. Royston, laughing. "She's nineteen. She doesn't consider herself a child."

Earle was silent, suddenly overwhelmed with a sort of dull wonder. How entirely she had accepted him! How frankly she showed not only that she was willing to make his further acquaintance, but that already she liked him! She who, if she had seen him as he really was, would have drawn her skirts away and shaken off the dust from her dainty Parisian shoes against him. He must tell her! He would tell her now. He would tell them all. He checked his hurrying thoughts. Was he crazy?

For some little time they talked, and it was evident that she was interested to talk to him. She was quite clearly a woman of sufficient importance to indulge her passing fancies while they pleased her, and to drop them as soon as they ceased to do so. With a sigh Earle yielded himself to the keenly happy moment. Why should he not? It could do no one any harm, and it was the once—only the once. By and by Katie came and clamored for him. He rose reluctantly, meeting quite mildly Pap's bellicose eye. Mrs. Royston leaned forward.

"Beat him if you can—for the good of his soul," she whispered.

"I'll try," he returned. "I used to be pretty good in the old days at Bart's."

"Bart's!" She seized on it. It was the first definite fact she had arrived at concerning him, and she was aware that she wanted facts. "You are a doctor, then?"

He was silent a moment, and a peculiar stillness settled like a mask over his face.

"I did not say so," he said at last. "I have had a medical training—but I am not a doctor."

Mrs. Royston leaned back in her chair and pondered. What was he, then? And how did he come to have the manners of a gentleman and hands like those? One or two other people had come, the sort of

people that can be trusted to come to tea at the vicarage on a Wednesday afternoon, the sort of people that Mrs. Royston lumped all together as "parishioners." Suddenly she remembered the obligation to be "pleasant" to them. Mrs. Briscoe beamed at the result.

"My dear," she said, as the little party broke up, "I wish I had your charm of manner."

"Oh, poor *things!*" returned Mrs. Royston softly. Earle heard her, and the words went through him like a two-edged sword. So would she speak of him, with infinite pity, and deep sympathy, and utter detachment—when she knew.

CHAPTER III.

WHAT LOVE MEANS.

ARE you sure you are all right—up there?"

Sylvia merrily laughed down from her saddle.

"It does seem rather like being on the top of a dromedary's hump, but I'm all right, aunty," she said.

Mrs. Royston ran an uneasy eye over her niece's new mount.

"He's a long-legged, ungainly looking brute with a vicious rim to his eye, and you have only got him on the snaffle," she remarked; "but I suppose Percival is to be trusted. He would not put you on anything—doubtful."

"Of course he wouldn't. I'm quite all right, Aunt Margaret. Here he is!"—as young Penryan ran down the steps. "For pity's sake, don't suggest any doubt of his wisdom to *him*. I *should* have a breezy morning."

A groom brought forward the boy's horse, and in a moment he was up and beside her. Prince sidled nervously away from his too close proximity, but Sylvia soothed him, and his inclination to dance subsided. Mrs. Royston looked rather anxiously after them as they went out of the gate into the lane; but though Prince was as she had said, a big, ungainly brute, his action was perfect, and Sylvia looked quite happy on his back.

"I suppose it's all right," she reflected half aloud.

Of course it was. Common sense assured her of it. Sylvia rode with young Penryan nearly every day. Why should the fact that Prince stood a good hand higher than the gentle little mare to which she was accustomed mean tragedy? In a mood of determined optimism, Mrs. Royston turned and went back into the house.

It was a long, low, white house with turret rooms, all windows, at the corners, a pillared parapet running along the edge of the roof, and an ugly square porch supported on two stone pillars over the door. Inside the porch the swallows built yearly. They made an awful mess, but Mrs. Royston would not have them banished.

Along the front ran a wisteria, covered already with tiny golden-bronze leaves and the tight little lavender buds that would lengthen day by day into a veil of quivering beauty. Roses were trained round the windows; a magnolia raised its stiff and glossy leaves at either end. Some one, Mrs. Royston was wont to say, had done his or her best to hide its hideous Georgian utilitarianism, though nothing could render the house, as a house, beautiful. But if it were not beautiful, it was thoroughly comfortable. A richness of plenishing, an abundance of flowers, a more than sufficiency of service, marked it as the dwelling of a woman to whom money was a matter of course.

Mrs. Royston had taken the house some eighteen months ago on a ten-year agreement, but already she had spent so lavishly on both house and grounds that it was evident she considered herself its permanent tenant. Some would have wondered at it, since the neighborhood showed no particular readiness to "make friends" with her. But she regarded the undoubted fact with an easy indifference that was certain to revolutionize the neighborhood's attitude in time.

Meanwhile she visited at the vicarage, gave young Penryan's ardent attachment to Sylvia a good deal of quiet encouragement, and went her own apparently tranquil way. She had been talking about young Penryan and his devotion that morn-

ing—to a Sylvia oddly disinclined to appreciate either.

"It isn't that I don't like him, aunty," she had explained and much too calmly; "I liked him very much before I found out that he wanted to marry me. I don't want to marry him. I don't want to marry *anybody*."

Mrs. Royston raised her eyebrows and sighed. It would have been so admirable a settlement for Sylvia, so welcome a solution of more than one problem—for herself.

"I should be sorry even to appear to influence your inclinations, Sylvia—"

"But you would have been glad if they had pointed to Pap."

"Very!" with emphasis.

"Well, aunty, I'm sorry, but they don't. Not the least little bit. I like him as a companion; there is no one I like better. But as a husband—"

"But why, Sylvia? A husband is a companion. Why, if he will do for the one, should he not do for the other?"

"He's such a boy," with acute distaste. "When I marry, it will be some one older than myself, much older, much wiser, much better. Some one who is able to teach me and guide and control me—for I shall want it."

Something quizzical in the laughing glance of Mrs. Royston's dark eyes, in the twist of her red lips, checked her.

"Well, I knew you were young, deary, but I didn't know you were as young as all that," she said.

She was thinking of the little scene now as she walked into the house out of the glory of the April day. Youth, to be natural, should turn naturally not to the wisdom of its elders, but to the folly of its contemporaries. Then, when wisdom comes, it comes to both alike. Sylvia and Percival were, to her indulgent seniority, admirably matched in folly, at least. But to Sylvia's mind all the folly was on Percival's side this morning, for he was fully of airy plans to which she saw no possibility of acceding.

"I want you," he began, as they cantered along a white road delicately dappled with the light shadows of the April trees,

"to let me take you in this afternoon and introduce you to my father. He was saying only this morning that he would like to know you." And the ease of his tone little suggested the amount of argument and diplomacy he had found necessary to bring the old man so far. "I thought if I walked over about three and we went back together—"

But Sylvia's face was not encouraging.

"Just me?" she asked. "Alone?"

"Well"—it was the core of the situation, and he knew it—"he did not mention anybody else."

"Then I can't come." Sylvia spoke with finality. "You must see, you must know that I can't—without Aunt Margaret. If things were ever so little different, if he had ever called upon her or even sent a message—"

"He never calls upon any one. He is an invalid and a recluse."

"Yes, I know. And if he had said so, and asked us both to go, I would have been very pleased. But to ask just me, alone! Why *doesn't* he ask Aunt Margaret?"

Percival hesitated a dreadful moment, his father's words in his ears.

"The woman has no status. Who is she—and where does she come from? Who is her husband, if she has one? Where is he? No one knows; no one knows anything about him."

"Oh, yes, they do, father. He was a great traveler—"

"What in?" with a curling lip.

"I didn't mean that sort of a traveler," the boy had replied with steady patience. "He traveled for pleasure. They heard of him last in America. When Mrs. Royston and Sylvia went over, they went to try and get news of him. They traced him to Japan, and there they lost sight of him. They think he is dead. She has been allowed to presume his death, to prove his will and to come into his property. I think that is pretty conclusive."

"Not at all, not at all," in testy disagreement. "Lots of people whose deaths are presumed, whose wills are proved, come back—to the confusion of their successors. If we take the woman up, if we countenance

her at all, we run the risk of having some perfectly impossible bouncer and cad dumped upon us at any moment. It wouldn't do, my boy. It's a risk we are none of us *ready* to run. If we were sure he was dead! If we even knew something *about* him! But as it is—" and a Burleighian shake of the head had clinched the argument. "But I'll see the girl, if you wish it. I should like to see the young woman who has made a fool of you, my boy, so early."

It was an overture—of a sort—and now Sylvia refused it, refused it steadily, though he dwelt on it and argued it, embellishing and embroidering it out of all semblance to its original self.

"I can't, Pap," she told him steadily.

"You mean you won't?"

"Very well, then, I won't," she agreed bluntly, and Percival sighed and abandoned the project—for the time.

After which the morning was happier, so happy, so light-hearted, so gay that Sylvia, lulled into a false security by Prince's perfect behavior, forgot the caution of the earlier hours, and rode with a lax rein and a loose stirrup. It was then that it happened, for Prince, ambling amiably in all serenity of mind, was suddenly badly scared.

The weather was changing, a little wind blew fitfully, raising the dust in clouds one moment, dying with a sob the next. One gust, stronger than its forerunners, plucked a sheet of paper, relic of some tramp's dinner, from the hedge, whirled it at the oncoming Prince, and wrapped it neatly about his head. With a plunge and a snort he shook it from him, and then, the bit between his teeth and Sylvia, nearly unseated, clinging desperately to his saddle, he was off at a gallop down the road. Percival shot after him, but he dare not come up.

"Hold him!" he shouted. "Hold him! Mind the turn!"

It was too late. The next thing he heard was the dying clip-a-clop of Prince's frantic feet; the next thing he saw a limp, little, pale-gray bundle in the middle of the road—Sylvia.

There were cottages at the bend, poor

little two-roomed places; a woman out of one of them was bending over Sylvia as he flung himself out of his saddle. He picked her up and went blindly in at the open door with her in his arms. Her head drooped like a flower on a broken stalk; one arm trailed horribly, unnaturally; a livid bruise was beginning to show on her temple. He laid her on the bumpy sofa just within the cottage door, the women keeping up a continual "Oh, deary me! Look at that now! Oh, deary me!" at his side.

"Take care of her. I'm going for a doctor," he said hoarsely, and galloped down the road toward Hazelbridge in the wake of the vanished Prince.

But in the midst of his horror and grief his mind was busy. To what end was his hurry? It was between twelve and one in the day. Old Stebbings would be miles away on his scattered round of visits. There was no one in Hazelbridge capable of handling so grave an emergency. There was the chance, only, that Stebbings might not have started; that some providential delay—

A pedestrian was coming toward him, a square-shouldered, stockish man who walked with a grim tramp-tramp that suggested and yet did not quite suggest a military training. Surely Heaven itself had sent him. Percival sprang down, almost sobbing, right in his path.

"There has been an accident. Sylvia, Miss Conyers, has been thrown. Mrs. Woodward's cottage—just at the bend."

He thrust the reins into his hand, and Earle understood. In a moment he was in Percival's saddle, and his horse spun round on his haunches in the road.

"Come as quick as you can! I may want you to fetch something!" he shouted.

"The fool! What does he think I shall do?" Percival asked himself with wrath.

When with laboring heart and sobbing breath he entered the dark, low room where Sylvia lay, her gray riding jacket, the sleeve of her muslin blouse, a foam of lacy mystery beneath was cut from wrist to shoulder. Earle's firm hands held her white arm.

"Catch hold," he said curtly, "and help me to pull. That's right. So!"

But at Sylvia's sobbing shriek Percival let go, covered his eyes with his hands, and shrank backward into the dimness. Earle swore softly, stooped, and began to unlace his shoe. Percival watched him, breathless. What was he going to do? As he stared, wondering at him, Earle sat down on the sofa by Sylvia's side, set the heel of his stockinged foot in her armpit, and exerted all his strength. There was another wailing, anguished shriek, a click, and the doctor was skilfully binding the arm of the now unconscious girl across her chest with long strips from the sheet Mrs. Woodward was holding.

"Find a conveyance of some sort. You can do that, I suppose?" he said sharply. "If I can get her home before she comes round again—"

There was a greengrocer's cart and a decent pony by the roadside. Percival rapidly unloaded it, flung a couple of sovereigns to its protesting owner, and commandeered both. Earle stood up at sight of him with Sylvia in his arms. He gave her to Percival, climbed into the cart, and held out his arms again.

"I'll carry her," he said; "I can break the jar. You drive. That's right, don't spare him! Get every ounce you can out of him!" And the pony went as he had never gone before.

They were nearly in sight of Greenshaws when Earle spoke again. "Softly," he said, "softly. She's coming to. We mustn't shake her now," and with his words Sylvia's dark lashes swept upward, and her eyes, full of the pathetic bewilderment that marks the borderland of consciousness, gazed into his. Percival glanced at her, and at the sight of her, wrapped in an old sofa rug vibrant in stripes of red and yellow and blue, and lying in Earle's arms like a baby, the fury in him surmounted even his heart-break, and shone almost vocal in his eyes. Earle laughed a little, the boy's anger seemed so futile, so foolish, so utterly uncalled for. Then he bent over Sylvia in his arms.

"My little girl," he said, and Percival would not have believed that his dry, cool voice held such tones, "I am sorry I had to hurt you"—and Sylvia smiled at him,

in entire understanding and angelic forgiveness, and fainted again.

Mrs. Royston whitened at sight of them.

"I knew," she said, her voice deepening tragically at the boy's stammering explanation. "I *knew*," but her crisp orders were a model of foresight and completeness, and her voice, as Earle laid Sylvia down in the white shrine that was her bedroom, was steady and controlled.

"You'll stay to lunch, doctor?"

A peculiar listening stillness fell over his face. How odd the title sounded and how pleasant—after seven years. And how pleasant, how more than pleasant, it would be to stay to lunch at Greenshaws and talk to his dark-eyed hostess once again afterward.

"Thank you, I should like to know how she seems—when she is settled," he said.

At the bottom of the stairs sat Percival, sick and shivering. Earle glanced at him and walked into the dining-room as though he had been at home in Greenshaws all his life. The *tantalus*, unlocked, stood on the sideboard. He poured out a generous tot of brandy and carried it into the hall.

"Here, my boy, drink this; and remember," laying a kindly hand on his shoulder as he took the glass from his chattering teeth, "that if you can't find it in your heart to hurt what you love for its own good, you don't love at all," he said.

CHAPTER IV.

"OLD STEBBINGS."

"WELL, what do you think of her?"
"Oh, she is getting on all right," replied Earle almost brusquely.

It was a week after Sylvia's accident, and this was Earle's third visit, for Sylvia, with the petulance of a much-indulged child, had refused to see any one else.

"Old Stebbings," as Pap irreverently called him, was more than a little indignant that a stranger without local standing or, as far as he was aware, any sort of qualification, should have stepped between him and so desirable a patient, and Earle knew it. But he cared nothing. In a week or

two he would be far away from Old Stebbings and his indignation. They mattered nothing. What mattered for the present was the careful conservation of any excuse for visiting at Greenshaws.

He had gone the day after Sylvia's accident as in duty bound. The next, by dint of steady self-control and the conscious and deliberate mastery of every rebellious muscle, he stayed away. On the third day he went again, to find Sylvia sitting up in a loose wrapper, a little pale and shaken, but smiling, and on the way to convalescence. After that he let two days lapse at a cost to himself that dismayed him, and to-day he had been met by pathetic reproaches on Sylvia's side and a distinct sense of neglect on her aunt's.

"I can't do anything," he told her, "and I didn't want you to feel that I in any way presumed upon my quite accidental installation as surgeon here. As I said, I can't do *anything*. We can only wait."

"But Sylvia likes to see you," Mrs. Royston told him gently, and he smiled. It was sweet to hear it, the more so as he knew it was not only Sylvia who liked to see him. So to-day he had sat quite a long time with Sylvia, talking books and music and pictures, recalling the embroideries and elegancies of life as he had known it seven years ago. What surprised her a little was that the books, the pictures, the music he mentioned were of the long past ages when she had been a child.

"But those pictures are all—so old," she objected at last, for she was losing her shyness with him, and venturing on views and opinions of her own. "I remember my dear father taking me to see 'Marathon' the year every one was talking about it, and I couldn't have been more than eleven, for he died when I was twelve. Haven't you seen 'Travelers All,' Dr. Earle, or 'Snow in Summer'? Why, where can you have been?" with the pretty daring of youth.

"Been! I have been—ill," he said somberly, and Sylvia's sweet eyes filled up with angel pity. He must have been ill indeed to have been out of touch with things so long.

With Mrs. Royston he fared better. She

smiled at his allusions to Dickens, she was at home with Thackeray, she finished his half-hesitating quotation from Browning, she was his contemporary and—the wonder and delight of it!—was ready to be his friend. Could he do anything else, he asked himself, than bless the accident that had given him the right of entry to Greenshaws and snatch the sweet chance of feminine companionship while it was his?

So that to-day, when Mrs. Royston again asked him to join her at luncheon, he yielded without even the semblance of a struggle. It was not his body that needed sustenance; it was his soul. He would stay his hungry soul with the feast so unexpectedly offered him in the wilderness. He would be happy for the few short days of his sojourn in Hazelbridge. Why should he not? The outcome of which was his walking on the terrace after luncheon and discussing Sylvia's recovery.

"When do you think you will be able to release her arm?"

"Oh, a week—ten days from now. She'll have to be careful, carry it in a sling, and use it as little as possible."

"But she can dress properly?"

"Oh, dear me, yes, with a maid to help her. I wouldn't advise her to ride again just yet. She has been a good deal shaken."

"She shall never ride again, if I can help it," returned Mrs. Royston with passionate decision. "She might have been killed."

"Oh, easily," agreed Earle, all of which, of course, was the outward, decent, conventional garment of words under which was hidden the subtle and tentative outstretching of their thoughts.

"Who is he?" Mrs. Royston asked herself. "How does he come to be loitering here, with no work, no visible object in life—as far as one can see, no plans? He is a man of good family; his manner and accent prove that. He makes no secret of the fact that he is poor. He never refers to his past. He has, as far as I can discover, no future. What does it mean?"

And behind the gratitude, the almost humble gratitude and admiration deepening day by day in Earle's dark eyes, lurked questions that would surely reveal themselves to his companion's intelligence be-

fore long. What was this woman's history? What old, unhappy, far-off things had fined and sharpened her face and drawn these faint and bitter lines about a mouth designed only for gracious and kindly curves?

Half unconsciously sometimes he would touch the pocketbook inside his coat, where lay the pale and withered leaf her hurrying foot had crushed the day when he had seen her first out in the greening April woods. What was the trouble whose existence, thus accidentally revealed to him, had made him so fiercely conscious of their spiritual kinship? But for that accidental glimpse of her vouchsafed him by Fate in the woods, a revelation he looked back upon always with shame, though he was not responsible for it, she would have been to him only a wealthy resident, more attractive and gracious, perhaps, than most, but with no special appeal for him. Never, now, could she be only that.

He had had a momentary vision of the real woman beneath her conventional mask—a vision that, could we only attain it, would transfigure for us half the world. If he had suffered, so had she. If he had sinned, so, it might be, had she. His intuitive knowledge—it was almost knowledge—drew him to her by forces he was powerless to resist. Her hands might be stained, as were his own, but they held the wine of life once again to his lips, and he drank of it as a man dying of thirst drinks from the sweet well suddenly discovered in the wilderness.

But of all this nothing, as yet, found words. Quite possibly, quite probably, it never would, since words are clumsy contrivances for the use of those who lack the finer means of communication. They feared instinctively, both of them, any allusion to personal matters. Instead, they discussed the intellectual tastes of the day and the trend of its literature.

"What do young people read nowadays?" she repeated, in reply to a question of Earle's prompted by the difficulties of his conversation that morning with Sylvia. "Really, I hardly know. Sylvia seems to like boys' books, tales of adventure and hardship and moving accidents by flood

and field. I believe an examination would reveal the fact that her tastes and Pap's are precisely the same — which is an excellent thing for Sylvia. She doesn't read Dickens; he seems to her 'so unreal.' She 'can't stick' Thackeray — why, I don't know. She hasn't time for Scott. 'Really, aunty, I wonder you can ask me to wade through this sort of thing. Chapter after chapter, all about nothing!' she protests. We didn't think them all about nothing, did we? Young folks nowadays seem to me to take their literature in tabloid form—"

"Choosing it as they do their pills, for the greatest possible result in the least possible compass," he finished.

"What a very professional illustration," commented Mrs. Royston, laughing heartily.

"Profession," he said, and his face shadowed. "I have no profession." And Mrs. Royston, with a glance of mild protest at so manifest a lie, turned to Sylvia and her predilections once more.

"And for the theater motley is the only wear. Musical comedy! Girls in trains and trams and taxis and torpedo-boats—for that is where we shall find them next. Pap hails another 'girl' as the highest effort of dramatic art, and Sylvia agrees with him. They drag me off, protesting, to see every inanity that turns up to thrill London. Sometimes they tell me I had better stop at home, as they are afraid I shall be shocked. But *they* are not shocked—oh, dear me, no!

"They go to church once on Sundays out of respect to the wishes of their elders, and they play tennis all the rest of the day. They have laid their Bibles aside, revered relics, under glass, and evolved for themselves a new ethical code of which the first commandment is 'Thou shalt not swank!' and the last and greatest, 'Thou shalt play the game with every one, with those above thee, and with those on a level with thee, and those unfortunately below thee!' and I don't know that they could have evolved a better."

"Sylvia and Pap! Products of the age!" he murmured softly. "They seem admirably suited to one another."

"Admirably—if only Sylvia would see it."

"And doesn't she?" with surprise.

Mrs. Royston shook her head and sat down on the stone bench at the end of the terrace. Perforce he sat down beside her.

"It is an awful pity, for she has no money except what I may be able to leave her," she said, yielding deliberately to the impulse toward confidence. "And—things may happen. One never knows! It is quite possible I might not be able to leave her anything. I would give the world to see her happily married. She is very dear to me; I could never tell you how dear. I don't suppose a man can understand even remotely—"

"Oh, yes, I can! I had a little sister—once—" His face worked painfully a moment. Mrs. Royston leaned forward, her eyes warm with pity.

"Don't tell me—if it hurts you," she said, but he had recovered himself.

"It isn't what you think," he told her bruskiy. "She didn't die."

"Then some day you will see her again?"

"Never."

The word fell, heavy with tragedy. And then fear turned him cold. What if she asked him why? One gives with a half confidence a claim to the other half. Was he prepared to recognize it? What if she asked him why and he told her? The April day turned dark before his eyes at the thought.

But she was too experienced a woman to force issues. He would tell her one day, and she knew it. What mattered for the present was to arrange how and where she should see him again.

"Why do I want to see him again?" she asked herself when, his last pretense of resistance beaten flat, he had promised to come to luncheon the next day but one. "He is not rich; he is not handsome; I do not believe he is even good. Why should I wish, as I do wish, to have him here?"

Earle did not reason about the matter at all. There is a hunger of the heart more clamant than the hunger of the body. When he was away from her, he bore as best he might his sick longing for the glance

of her dark eyes, the occasional touch of her cool, slender hand, the music of her voice—a voice deeper than the ordinary, vibrant with the possibility of many and varied emotions, of a timbre that found and thrilled his soul. When he was with her he was conscious of nothing as yet but peace.

And up-stairs little Sylvia sat in her window, smiling softly to herself.

"How clever he is—and how kind," she mused. "His voice is so soft, his hands are so strong—and yet so gentle. He never hurts me now. He touches me as though I were a dewdrop; he looks at me as though I were a star. He sets me apart—in a class by myself. 'What has she to do with sordid details of dress and diet, a lovely child like that?' He said it to Aunt Margaret this morning. I heard him. But I am not a child; I am a woman"—which was a fact that Earle as yet had failed to recognize.

As he came out of the white gates of Greenshaws and turned into the lane he met Dr. Stebbings driving past, and the scowl the good man gave him from the elevation of his shabby gig rankled in his mind all the rest of the day. In the evening, counting on the genial hour of rest after a good meal, he walked down to see him.

The old man turned from filling his pipe out of the red jar on the high mantelpiece and inquired curtly what he could do for him. Earle sat down on one of the hard Windsor chairs without being asked and looked up at him with a smile.

"Nothing," he said. "I've come to explain what has happened up at Greenshaws. I'm not in any way poaching on your manor; it's not, strictly speaking, a professional affair at all. I was on the spot, and I gave Miss Conyers the aid imperative at the moment; any St. John's ambulance man could have done it as well. She insisted, like the spoiled, bewitching baby that she is, that I should go and see her again. But it was quite unnecessary, really. I'm not going professionally at all."

Old Stebbings nodded, not without satisfaction. Certainly the frank explanation put rather a different complexion on things.

"Are you qualified?" he asked abruptly.

"Well," in spite of himself, Earle stammered a little, "I've got my M.D. But I'm not practising—nor intending to."

Stebbing rang a bell, and an apple-cheeked maid promptly appeared with glasses, whisky, and soda-water.

"Help yourself," he said curtly. "Lord, man, a little more than that!" in horrified protest in Earle's meager modernity. "And for the Lord's sake," with sudden cordiality, "stay and talk to me a little. If you knew the eternal grind! Coughs and colds and bellyache! Bellyache and colds and coughs! I've been at it forty-five years; started before you were born, and my nose is kept so close to the grindstone that I haven't any time to read anything. I've hardly time to think."

Earle smiled, and his smile was very pleasant.

"Your book-shelves would hardly suggest it," he remarked. "I see one or two volumes there that are pretty well the last word on their subjects."

"Oh, well—oh, well," the old man's voice was gratified, "one can't afford to drop hopelessly behind even in Hazelbridge. But we're handicapped, we men with big country practises—heavily handicapped. I don't get the chance of talking to a man with modern ideas once in a twelvemonth. Come, now," dropping comfortably into a shabby leather armchair on one side of the window and waving Earle into the other, "tell me something of what's going on out there—away from the Little Puddlecomb, where all that's best of me has been buried this forty-five years. What do you think, now, of Boissereau's new theory," and the old man plunged into technicalities.

In spite of himself Earle enjoyed the next hour, enjoyed listening to Stebbings's opinions, and opposing and sometimes ridiculing his prejudices. With ever-increasing respect Old Stebbings allowed it. Here was a man who spoke with authority, in contrast to whose attainments and knowledge his own were negligible. One odd fact, however, stood out plainly for Old Stebbings at the end of that refreshing hour's talk. His new friend's acquaintance with happenings in the medical world broke off

short in the oddest fashion some seven years ago. Up to that point his grasp of things was precise; after it, his ignorance was profound. He had never heard of Raymes, or Poiret, or Liebstien. He knew nothing of Flüssen's theories nor of the marvel of the "F" rays.

When he had gone Old Stebbings took down a medical directory of seven years ago and dusted it.

"Here he is," he said at last, half aloud, glancing from the card on the table to the open book by its side. "M.D.! He's F.R.C.S. as well. Honorary consulting surgeon to St. Ives. Author of 'Brain Lesions.'" His eyes lifted, full of thought. Earle on "Brain Lesions"! It was an epoch-making book! "Now, what's he come to Hazelbridge for? What's a big bug like that doing here?"

And then a misty memory rose in the back of his mind. Out of a cupboard he drew a neatly tied pile of "Lancets," seven years old too. It didn't take him long to find what he sought.

"H-m!" he said, his eyes widening and fixing themselves, his mouth dropping softly open. "H-m!"

And what was to be his attitude toward him when next they met. His professional probity, which is a good thing, was at war with a wide and understanding charity—which is a better. Besides, he liked him.

And also our personal necessities have an odd little way, sometimes, of modifying our moral values. It was just at this time that an epidemic of typhoid broke out in the low-lying district around Hazelbridge; not a dangerous epidemic, though there were one or two deaths, but one the cases of which required watchfulness and care. Work as hard as he would, the doctor found it physically impossible to get through more than a certain number of visits during the day, and his outlying patients were inevitably neglected.

It was one of them, the mother of a large family, that he lost; and while smarting under the sting of his knowledge that a little more attention might have saved her, he met Carlton Earle. There was another patient, an elderly farmer living some five miles away, who ought to be visited,

and for the life of him the doctor did not see how he was to manage it. At sight of Carlton Earle, he stopped the gig and beckoned to him.

"I'm appealing," he said, "in the guise of a man run off his legs to another that doesn't seem to have anything much to do. Would you see a patient for me?"

"Certainly," agreed Earle readily. "I'd have offered my help before now, for I know you've more to get through than mortal can, only I wasn't sure you'd like it. Who is he?"

Stebbing told him, and Earle listened. One condition he made rather curtly.

"I'm to have a free hand."

"Surely, man, surely—with your own patients," agreed Stebbings at once. His own patients. The phrase lay oddly in Earle's mind. His own patients! He—who had never thought to have a patient of his own again. For a week he worked loyally under the old man, doing cheerfully all the drudgery of an ordinary G.P., and then his conscience lashed him into action. He might be many other things, but he was not a hypocrite. This must not go on—unless Stebbings knew.

That evening he went to see the old man again. He found him weary and a little disheartened, but not too weary to be keenly interested in the details of the cases, and there were many now, in Earle's hands.

"And I'd cheer up if I were you," he finished. "We haven't had a fresh call either yesterday or to-day. The thing is pretty well over, and they're all doing well; even old Stumps is mending."

"Thanks to you," returned Stebbings heartily. "Man, but I don't know what I'd 'a' done without you."

Earle laughed and seized his opportunity.

"I'm glad I've been of use," he said. "This sort of thing isn't quite where my experience lies. I'm more interested in surgery than medicine." Suddenly he laid both his hands on the table and studied them closely. "Shouldn't be much good for anything delicate now, should I?" he went on quietly. "They're spoiled for that kind of work."

The old man studied them, too, a long, long moment. Then he lifted kindly eyes.

"They'll improve with time," he said; "like a good few other things."

Earle drew a long, hard breath. He need not trouble about Stebbings any more. Stebbings knew.

CHAPTER V.

DANGER!

"YOU! Is it really you?"

Earle started and flushed. He had been up to town on some errand for Dr. Stebbings, and, stepping out of the stuffy train on to the Hazelbridge platform, saw there Mrs. Royston. She wore a delicate spring frock, and had a lace parasol over her shoulder. A couple of dogs attended her, and a whip for their chastisement, never used in doggy memory, was in her hand. For Earle the May afternoon took on a new glory. He stood looking almost foolish, tongue-tied under the rush of his own gladness.

Mrs. Royston smiled; her eyes rallied him softly. She enjoyed his blush, his dumbness. His awkward inability to say or do anything for the moment was more to her taste than self-possession.

"Do you know," she said, with a touch of reproach, "that it is a whole fortnight since you have been near us, and that Sylvia is desolate without you? Where have you been? What have you been doing? Why do you neglect your best friends like this?"

"You know what I have been doing." His voice was husky; his throat felt dry; his manner was brusque, almost forbidding. Mrs. Royston, still smiling, silenced him.

"Yes, I know," she said. "You have been busy, frightfully busy. I hear of your activities and your kindnesses everywhere. But you are not busy now, are you? You won't refuse to escort me with due ceremony up to Greenshaws and share my dish of tea when we get there."

She saw his eyes widen wistfully. He turned at her side without a word, he who had sworn so often that never again would he enter the white gate of Greenshaws.

"And where have you been this afternoon?" she asked. "To London?"

"Yes." He forced himself to look at her, to speak with something like his ordinary ease. "Buying books and instruments and drugs for the old man. I'm afraid I have widened the circle of his wants, made him conscious of various lacks in his professional equipment he never would have been conscious of but for me. Not the kindest thing in the world to do, is it? But one does that sort of thing without intention sometimes. Anyway, I did. I have been meeting a friend for him, too. We had lunch together at the Victoria."

"You seem to do a good deal for him!" with some amusement.

"I do all I can."

Mrs. Royston glanced at him curiously. The note of gratitude, almost passionate gratitude, in his voice had been unmistakable.

"You are living with him now, aren't you?"

"Yes. He wished it. We have been a good deal driven of late. It saves time."

"And I should think it is more comfortable for you than at the Chequers. Is it a permanent arrangement? Are you staying with him?"

"Oh, no, there is—nothing of that sort."

He spoke with energy, almost with a touch of horror. Mrs. Royston's eyelids flickered. She was genuinely surprised. Old Stebbings was getting past his work, and every one knew it. Earle was poor. Why, when the opportunity was his of stepping with naturalness and ease into an assured position and a decent living, did he not take it?

"He will be sorry if you leave him now," she said. "He tells every one how glad he is to have you, how much he thinks of you."

"I know," returned Earle somberly. And the knowledge pleased him. He had been subtly aware for some days now that his relationship of informal assistant to the old man was merging rapidly into that of son, and the realization touched him profoundly. He had seen with a kind of tender enjoyment his growing dependence, his dawning affection; he even enjoyed the way he ordered him about. But his connection with Hazelbridge was, of course, a

temporary one. It could not, in the nature of things, be anything else. Meanwhile, between the high hedges wreathed in bridal white, the sweetness of their myriad blossoms blowing over him, the blackbird on the topmost bough fluting "Pretty, pretty, pretty!" in a rapture of delight, he walked up to Greenshaws with Mrs. Royston.

She had tea out of doors, as befitted the May weather, and Sylvia and Pap were with them. Sylvia, now quite recovered from her accident, was oddly inclined to sit on the little stool usually reserved for Pap on these occasions and listen while Earle talked, and in his company the touch of slang she affected, so piquantly in contrast with her angel face, entirely deserted her. But Percival was losing his first brusque suspicion. Earle did not encourage her incipient hero-worship. Had it been possible, the boy could almost have thought he was to be without it, that he was relieved when the two younger ones, drawn away by some important interest of their own, left him alone with his hostess. It was the difficulty he experienced in drawing Sylvia away that irritated him.

"I can't think why you want to stay with a dry old stick like that," he commented wrathfully. "What does he talk about all the time? People you have never heard of, books you have never read. But you seem to like it."

"I like him," returned Sylvia firmly. "It doesn't matter what he talks about."

"But *why* do you like him?"

"I think he is so good," in softest assurance. "I should have such a respect for his opinion—on any subject. I should be so sure of his guidance—in *any* difficulty"—which, could Earle have heard it, would have dismayed him indeed.

But he was not thinking of Sylvia as he lay back in a lounge chair under the shade of a rose-hung trellis, Mrs. Royston's graceful dark head in profile between him and the gold of the western sky. When Sylvia was present, she moved him to poignant admiration by her delicate and vernal charm. When she was absent he forgot all about her. But the woman by his side, bending a little toward him, her arm resting lightly on the table's edge, her eyes on

the cloud of apple-blossom that marked where the orchard peeped over the garden hedge—her he never forgot.

"I wonder," she said presently, apropos of nothing in particular, "who was the first symbolist to liken life to a river?"

Earle smiled. When Margaret Royston sat silent there seemed to be nothing better in life than to sit silent with her. But when she spoke he sat convinced of error.

"He must have been a very ancient one, the comparison is so obvious. The first poet, perhaps, who scratched an ode to the sun with a bit of sharpened flint on the smoothest slab of stone he could find."

"Scratched! But they could not write when flints were used."

"No. He would draw a picture of the sun to the best of his ability, and a picture of himself prostrate before it. And what more does one want? All the poetry in the world could not express his feelings better. I have no doubt if we examined the old cave drawings we should find one of a river flowing smoothly one moment, plunging down boiling cataracts the next, with a crudely drawn man in a skin coracle floating helplessly down-stream. A picture—and a symbol, too."

Mrs. Royston smiled at him. She had a sudden smile that broke across her face like light.

"It would be interesting. It would prove, wouldn't it, a pretty clear conception of life as a whole, an appreciation even of its power to surprise. I always think that that is one of the most delightful things about it. One tastes the bitterness of the dregs. One yields up at its bidding, slowly and reluctantly, bit by bit, all that one values most. One imagines that it will be forever, if not exactly black, then certainly gray, dark gray, chill, unsatisfying, simply to be endured. And then, quite suddenly, the sunshine sweeps across it again. Mine seems lately to have gone to sleep in a sunny pool, like the Hazel does, here and there." And then, suddenly aware of the too personal note: "Isn't it a pretty river?"

Earle did not hear. She had drawn asunder the silence in which she was shrouded, and given him a glimpse of hid-

den things, old, far off, and certainly unhappy. Well, he had seen them dimly before in her face.

"Your husband, then, is dead?" he commented softly.

It was a daring development of her half-confidence, but he risked it. Village opinion on the subject of her widowhood was inconclusive, and, though of course it in no way touched him personally, it was a point on which he ardently desired information.

"Yes," she said, and looked away. "He is," she told herself; "he *is*!" Earle saw her lips move, but, absorbed in his own satisfaction, missed the significance of that passionate reiteration.

"It will be a little lonely for you when Sylvia marries," he remarked presently.

"There are worse things in life than loneliness," she returned.

Earle glanced sharply at her. What was she trying to tell him? What did she wish him to understand by that? Had it a personal significance? Did she desire him to realize that she wished no companionship, not even his? No, for it was she who sought his society, not he hers—as her next words proved.

"I want you," she told him, "to dine with us a week from to-day. I have a friend coming whom I should like you to meet. Now don't say you can't," as refusal trembled visibly on his lips. "The rush of work is over; Dr. Stebbings told me so himself. You can spare me one evening. I shall really be disappointed if you don't come. You will?"

He nodded, too much absorbed in painful thought to be aware of his lack of good manners. A week. He would have time to get a dress suit. After all, why not? Why should he not allow himself one happy evening to look back upon after he left Hazelbridge, as he must shortly? As he would, almost at once, of course.

The week passed quickly, as weeks do with busy men. And Earle was very busy, for Old Stebbings, who seemed to find relief in the acknowledgment that for some time his work had been beyond his strength, placed it every day more entirely in his hands. Arrangements between them were delightfully informal. No word had been

said of money in any form. The fact enabled Earle to stand out when Stebbings would have filled the day of Margaret Royston's dinner as full as all the rest.

"I can't," he told him shortly. "I am dining at Greenshaws, and I must have the evening and time to dress. Pile as much as you like on to Thursday, but Wednesday after five I want myself."

The old man looked at him sharply. "Aye," he said, "aye, I have been piling it on a bit lately, haven't I? Ye're right, lad, we can't go on like this. I never meant it. We must come to some arrangement, of course. We'll talk things over to-morrow."

Earle said nothing. He should, he knew, have told him that there could be no question of an "arrangement," that he was leaving Hazelbridge almost at once. But he said nothing.

He put a light coat over his new dress suit and walked up to Greenshaws through the sweetness and glow of the May evening. Animadvert against its ugliness as we may, a gentlemanly looking man never looks more thoroughly a gentleman than in the severe simplicity of its dead black and white. He was a little startled to find six or seven people in the drawing-room. Sylvia was there; that was to be expected; but Pap was also, and a couple called Lorraine had motored over, as people do to-day, from the next county. The guest of the evening was evidently a Dr. Stephen Whitworth, and his sister Bertha was with him. Mrs. Royston introduced Earle with a touch of impressment.

"You should have much in common," she said gaily. "You are both medical men, but you have both something better to do than practise. I met Dr. Whitworth in Japan"—to Earle—"and we saw some odd things together, didn't we, doctor? By the way, when is the book to come out?"

It was an exciting topic. Earle left them absorbed in it and did his best to render himself acceptable to the rather severe maiden sister.

But Dr. Stephen Whitworth, as a study, obsessed him. It seemed to him afterward that he had seen no one else all the evening, that he had heard nothing all the

evening but his well-modulated voice, learnedly discoursing of a thousand interesting things. Or so, at least, Margaret Royston considered them. She gave her friend her keenest attention. They indulged in reminiscences that quite too evidently pleased both. Earle forgot all about the maiden sister sitting grimly silent by his side, and marveled at his own suffering.

But the meal was not all complacency, even for Dr. Stephen Whitworth; Margaret Royston mentioned her new acquaintance, Dr. Carlton Earle, too often for that. After dinner Whitworth made his way over to him, bent on finding out for himself what manner of man he was.

He plunged at once into topics that must interest a member of his own profession, and before long he made an odd discovery: that Earle's knowledge of what had happened in the scientific world broke off some years ago. First he established the fact; then he pondered it. But in no way could he explain it. "H-m! Been a little out of it lately, haven't you?" he commented quietly, since the fact was beyond dispute.

"Yes," agreed Earle, "I have been—"

Ill? Should he say he had been ill? No; for however ill a man may be he must yet hear some faint echo of discoveries that shake the world.

"Abroad," he finished, after a pause.

"Indeed!" with keen interest. Why, Earle asked himself, *why* had he not remembered that the man was much traveled? "May I ask in what part of the world?"

"In—in the Argentine."

It was incumbent on him to lie, but he lied badly. Whitworth's eyes narrowed, and the dawning suspicion in them shamed Earle's very soul.

"Really. That is very interesting. I know the Argentine well. Very interesting at Buenos Aires, isn't it? Were you there long?"

"I—I was never in Buenos Aires," with desperate truthfulness. "I went to Paraná." It was the first town that rose in his memory. A sudden awful fear that it might lie inland gripped him, but Whitworth's face told him nothing.

"Indeed. May I ask how you got there? By what, I mean? Nearly all the decent boats run to Buenos Aires."

"The—the Messageries, I think."

A little gleam shone in Whitworth's eyes. Earle turned cold. Did the Messageries boats run to Paraná? Did they go to the Argentine at all? But Whitworth's voice was as suave as ever. He began to discuss economic conditions, stock-raising, agriculture, the coming mineral industry. He touched on the people, the Gauchos of the plains, the mixed races of the ports. A few minutes sufficed.

"Now, why did he lie to me?" he asked himself. "He has never been near the Argentine. Why should he romance—like that?"

"I met some people of your name a short time ago," he said presently. "At Outhwaite, in Cumberland. A Mr. Gerald Earle. He owns a fine old house there—Tarn Head—overlooking a pretty stretch of water—"

"My father," said Earle, with a twist of his mouth that did duty for a smile. Whitworth's eyes opened wide.

"Hardly," he demurred gently. "He was a younger man than you by some years. He might have been your brother. Now I come to think of it, he was like you—very like you."

He broke off, as the face he was frankly studying whitened slowly before his eyes.

For it *was* his brother, and that meant that his father was dead; that Gerald, his second son, reigned in his stead. And Muriel, little Muriel, that he had seen last with her hair in two long, brown pigtailed, her brown eyes laughing from under the brim of her schoolgirl sailor hat. What of her? Was she married—or was she, also, dead? He stifled the troubling questions that he dare not ask, and Dr. Stephen Whitworth turned away a little abruptly. For there was something wrong, evidently something wrong. Not only had the man lied about his whereabouts during the last few years, he did not even know that his own father was dead. A fissure so deep between a son and his father does not happen without cause. There was something wrong. Margaret Royston must be told so.

And he, Dr. Stephen Whitworth, would

do the telling. Not without satisfaction, though, as a rule, he was a kindly man, and an experience wider than most men's had taught him charity. But here there was no room for it. Mrs. Royston had mentioned her new friend a little too often that night.

Earle saw it all in his face. The dawning suspicion that so soon reached certainty, the resolve that followed close on its heels. This, then, was the end, and rightly so. Never again would he stand in Margaret Royston's drawing-room and meet her friends with the shameful, dishonest, tacit claim that he was even as they. Never again would he sit alone with her among the flowers in her garden, while the dark beauty of her face satisfied every fiber of him and the music of her voice soothed his sore soul. Dr. Whitworth would speak, would awake her suspicion, and arouse on his behalf the chivalry that would be his undoing. There would be questions, inquiries—inquiries that he dare not prevent, questions that he could not answer. He would go. He must. Margaret Royston had said there were bitterer things in life than loneliness. Suddenly he realized that there are bitterer things in life than renunciation. He must leave her lest worse befall. He would leave her to-morrow. This was his last evening. He had exactly an hour, and a half in which to con over and fix in his mind all her little tricks of movement and expression, the memory of which would be all that was left him—to-morrow. For this was indeed the end.

He stayed late—stayed till one of the two motors purring before the door had taken Dr. Stephen Whitworth and his sister down to the station to catch the ten-twenty back to town, and the other had whirled Mr. and Mrs. Lorraine away into the next county—stayed until Sylvia had gone with

Pap to the gate, and Pap had come back to the house with Sylvia, and she had gone to the gate again with him, and at last Aunt Margaret, all laughing protest, had followed her and ordered her indoors. Had Whitworth said anything? He did not think so. Her dark eyes were inscrutable, but they were soft and friendly. His last few moments with her would be sweet ones. Her manner was easy and free from doubt or suspicion. As he gathered his courage for that which he knew he must do, she laid a light hand on his arm.

"Don't go yet," she said. "That was only a quarter to eleven, and it is so lovely."

It was too much. He took the slim, cool hand, gleaming white against the black lace of her falling sleeve, from his arm and held it crushed in both his own on the top of the wooden gate.

"I'm going—now," he said hoarsely, "and I'm going for good. I ought never to have come; it was a piece of wicked folly. You will be indignant, rightly indignant, when you hear why, as you will hear; but I think, if you knew what the last few weeks have been to me, you would find it in your heart to excuse—even me. Forgive me. I ought not to have said that. I am—not quite myself. I have—lost control." And then, in desperate, heart-wrung appeal: "Margaret, let me go."

For an amazing, an unbelievable, thing had happened. She had raised her other hand, and it had closed, cool, firm, decided, on his quivering wrist. Her lips were parted softly in a smile half tender, half rallying. Her dark eyes looked up at him, warm, alluring, bright with laughing reproach. And she was not a girl to beguile a man unawares. She was a woman. She knew what her attitude meant.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK. Don't forget this magazine is issued weekly, and that you will get the continuation of this story without waiting a month.

When Ancient Magic and Modern Machine Gun Meet

FANG TUNG, MAGICIAN

BY H. BEDFORD-JONES

Author of "Sword-Flame," "Mr. Shen of Shensi," "The Rajah of Hell Island," etc.

An Amazing Tale of the New China. In Next Week's All-Story.

Temptation of Carlton Earle

by Stella M. Düring

Author of "The Crooked Stick," "The Loom of Life," "The Sword of Damocles," etc.

PRECEDING CHAPTERS BRIEFLY RETOLD

WHEN Carlton Earle, once a prominent London physician, but who had, seven years before, dropped out of sight, came to the little village of Hazelbridge, he had no intention of staying. But on his first day he saw in the woods a woman who oddly attracted him, and when later he met her at the vicar's, he lingered on. She was, he learned, a Mrs. Margaret Royston, a widow, who with her niece, Sylvia Conyers, had taken a house in the neighborhood. Later when Sylvia, while riding with young Percival Penryan, son of the big man of the neighborhood, was thrown, Earle happened to be near, and attended her. In this way he met Dr. Stebbings, the clever old country practitioner of the town, and a friendship grew up that still further bound Earle to the neighborhood. He knew he should go, however, and when one night in the face of a visitor with whom he had talked he read suspicion, he made up his mind to go at once, but as he was leaving he met Mrs. Royston.

"I am going now," he said. "I am going for good. I should never have come. It was a wicked piece of folly, but I think if you knew what the last few weeks have been to me you—Forgive me. I should not have said that. I lost control—" And then in desperate, heart-wrung appeal: "Margaret, let me go."

For an amazing, an unbelievable thing had happened. She had raised her hand, and it had closed, cool, firm, decided, on his quivering wrist.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BARRIER.

"WHY?" It was the softest little whisper, but it seemed to thunder in Earle's ears. She had, to his profound gratification, made no secret of the fact that she enjoyed his society; she had, to his undying honor, even admitted him to her friendship, but that there should be the most remote possibility of—anything more! He stared at the mobile face raised to his in the moonlight. The gracious, well-curved mouth was not quite steady, the dark eyes were full of protest, but a smile was hiding, even now, behind it. What, *what* did it mean?

"Don't you want me to go?"

She bridled a little, the hoarse, brusk

question was almost rude. And then she saw that all his soul hung on the answer.

"I don't intend you to go."

This was definite. A moment he stood, seeing with dazzled eyes the kingdom that might have been his and the glory of it that might, that would have been his but for what lay behind him. Then he turned, hid his face in his arms crossed on the gate-top and groaned aloud. Margaret paled a little, the hands hanging limp at her sides clenched sharply. More than once lately she had pictured ways in which he might take this thing that he meant to do, but never, never once had she pictured his taking it like this. He had turned his back on her. He seemed to have forgotten her. Her shoulders heaved under the lace wrap twisted about her throat.

"May I ask what this means?" she said

This story began in the All-Story Weekly for July 26.

at last, and there was an edge to her tones. "Have I been so unfortunate as to misunderstand you? Don't you"—in sudden, tremulous appeal—"care for me after all?"

He turned fiercely, his face working, his eyes wet.

"Care!" he echoed with passionate contempt. "*Care!*"—ineffective, futile word. "I love you with every fiber of body and soul. I worship you! I would give my life for you, gladly. But"—staring over her head down the shadowy garden as the depth and bitterness of his loss swept over him again—"I am not mad enough to ask you to marry me."

"No." She spoke with a little laugh, a shaken one, but it was a laugh. Her certainty of him had come back, and it was very sweet. "No, I did not expect it. I have known from the first that if there were to be any asking I should have to do it myself!" and she glanced up at him in the moonlight with mock resignation. For his attitude was so understandable, so entirely to be expected. She knew his financial position to a penny. And she! She was a wealthy woman.

"From the *first!*"

"From the first. Oh, yes"—with a little break in her voice as she scorned pretense and flung embarrassment behind her—"I have seen it from the first. You are very transparent. I knew, perhaps before you did, what I might be to you, what I should be, must be, *would* be—when once I had undermined your pride. Why should I not be honest? Why should I not acknowledge that, of late, I have deliberately set myself to undermine your savage, selfish determination that however much you suffered you would say nothing. Do you think I do not know, better, perhaps, than you do, what I am to you? Do you think I have not realized before now what you might be—*nay, are*—to me? When the chance of happiness comes to a woman of my age she recognizes it—its rarity, its evanescence. Am I a girl—to let it slip for want of a few straightforward words?"

Her rapid sentences, low, seductive, sweet to agony, ceased to scorch his soul. He raised his haggard face to the sky, filled with pale radiance, above him, and what-

ever it might be that he had done amiss he expiated it fully then. The glow in her dark eyes died as she watched him. Fear seized her, so chill that she shivered in the warm night air. She half extended her hand and let it fall again. Dumbly she waited, filled with vague dread. He forced himself to meet her eyes, to speak and to speak steadily, but his voice was the voice of a stranger.

"Mrs. Royston, will you please forget, as I will, every word you have just said."

"Why," she demanded breathlessly, "*why?*"

His eyes held hers steadily and a lost soul looked out of them.

"I have been in prison," he said quietly. "They only let me out five weeks ago. I had a ten-year sentence, but part of it has been remitted owing to my uniform good conduct. I am, however, still under police supervision. I shall be for the next three years."

She backed away from him step by step. The gate-post, white, square, solid, checked her further shrinking. She threw her arm over the bar of the gate and clung.

"You," she said in a tense whisper, "have been in prison! Oh"—the word was barely above her breath, but to Earle it seemed to go wailing round the world—"and I was so sure of you! So sure, so *sure* of you!"

She dropped her forehead on her arm and sobbed softly once or twice, and then was very still. Earle stood looking down at her, helpless in the net he had woven for himself.

"You knew," he said hoarsely at last, "that there was something."

"Yes. Trouble. Financial embarrassment. Anything"—her white face flashed up at him—"anything but this!"

He nodded. She had been so sure of him, so sure that whatever the trouble was it could be honorably explained.

Suddenly she grasped the top of the gate with both hands and raised herself. Earle felt it tremble under her hold.

"Tell me," she said with desperate calm, "are you ashamed of what you have done?"

His head lifted sharply. His frowning brows drew downward over his unhappy

eyes. His chin thrust out a little, dogged, rebellious. The question was not the one he had expected. He had almost to reverse his mental attitude to answer it honestly.

"No," he said at last. "No, I don't think I am. I broke the law. I have been rightly punished for it, but—no, I'm not ashamed of what I did."

"You would do it again?"

"Not if I thought I was going to be found out."

"But if you wouldn't! If you were to be—your own judge!"

"Then, in the same circumstances, I should do it again."

She watched him closely, her breath coming quick, as though she had been running, a sudden stain of color showing across the whiteness of her cheek. Perhaps, after all, she had had reason to be sure of him. Even of him who was just out of prison.

"Tell me—what you did."

It was half entreaty, half command, and wholly compelling. It had come a little late, but he had known it must come. He braced himself to his task.

"I had a friend, the best a man ever had. We were schoolboys and students together. We filled the world for one another; there was no room even for women in our lives. We worked together, we played together, we looked to one another for help in every kind of difficulty. It was a pact between us that each, at any cost, should save the other unnecessary suffering. It fell to me to keep it. He was struck down by a disease, the end of which is hideous. I killed him—and they found me out."

"He *wanted* you to kill him?"

"Yes. He held me to my promise."

"It—was *best* to kill him?"

"Undoubtedly. We had tried everything. Nothing could save him, and the end was near. I knew what he would have to go through. I saw it coming—"

"And they put you in prison for *that*?"

The iron band about his heart seemed to loosen a little. It was there, the inclination to excuse and condone that he had prayed he might, and yet dreaded he would see. He put out a quick hand and held it off.

"I broke the law," he insisted, "and I was rightly punished. From a professional

point of view I acted infamously. It was murder."

"No. Never!" The protest was quick, passionate. The excuse he had been careful not to offer for himself she insisted upon for him. "It was justifiable homicide, no more. It is a thing half the world is praying for, the right to put an end to unendurable and useless suffering. You say yourself that you are ashamed of having done it. You know yourself that you were justified, abundantly justified."

He drew a long, hard breath as the painful tension of his muscles relaxed. He looked weary and old and worn in the white radiance that poured over him, but his eyes had softened. If that were how she saw things without a word from him, at least he might say what was possible for himself.

"No," he repeated, "I am not ashamed of it. If I thought I should not be found out I would, in the same circumstances, do the same thing again. It will be the ordinary and legalized medical practise fifty years from now. Why should a man suffer a horrible death when the remedy against it lies close to his hand any more than suffer a horrible illness when the remedy against it lies close to his hand? If the gifts of God protect him against the one thing they protect him against the other. Brandon, my friend, was faced with a hideous death, and he dreaded it inexpressibly. He looked to me to save him from it—and I did. What I did, according to the law, is murder. Whether it is murder for which I deserve to be punished is another matter.

"I took life intentionally and deliberately—but life, in some circumstances, is a curse. It means, sometimes, agonizing, unendurable, intolerable pain, ceasing only as one's strength wears down under it. The stronger a man is the more he suffers. Death! He longs for it! The sudden death we pray to be delivered from every Sunday. How can we! What we should pray to be delivered from is not death—merciful, restful death—but suffering. I saved Brandon from suffering, from weeks of useless, harrowing torture that could serve no purpose and do no good. I am glad I did—even though I have paid for it

by the loss of the best years of my life and every possibility it held of happiness."

He finished, looking down, yet he knew that the face of the woman clinging to the gate beside him had altered, and that her eyes were full of deep and passionate pity. They drew his own, in humble thankfulness. "You don't—altogether—blame me," he said very low.

"Blame! I would ask you to do as much for me—and bless you for the promise."

He felt himself tremble, and for a few moments had to fight hard for self-control. Excuse, understanding, even condonation he had dared to hope for, but unquestioning support, passionate approval, the claim that she should do the same—for her! His eyes showed something of his dumb gratitude. She drew impulsively a little nearer. He held her away with bitter decision. This was not the time for impulse, she must understand the position in full.

"Yet technically, actually, I am a criminal. This that I did is known against me. It will bar me always from the only life that is in my opinion worth living. It will, inevitably, bring upon others who befriend me part of the shadow, the blight, that lies over me. If it were known that I was working with Stebbings here he would get into terrible trouble with the association. No other man in the profession would let me so much as make up a bottle of cough mixture. If I dare to make friends I run the risk of drawing upon them obloquy and condemnation."

"How? Why? In England, perhaps, yes, but there are other places than England. You can go abroad. You could change your name—"

His slow smile silenced her.

"I stand by what I have done—and its consequences," he said.

She flushed hotly. Of course he did; he was likely to. And this was the man of whom the law had made a felon, the law which he insisted was both necessary and just, but against which, in this instance, her whole soul rose in futile indignation.

"How could they!" she said passionately. "How could they be so cruel! Had they no feeling? Could they not see?"

"Well," he returned, as her voice faltered

and broke; he had all an Englishman's desire for justice, even when it told against himself—"well, we were young and foolish. We had complicated matters, in our ignorance, by leaving all we had in the world to one another. I had little, he had much. And this is a world that thinks money a sufficient incentive to any crime, even the murder of one's dearest friend."

"But couldn't you, didn't you—"

"Try not to get found out? Of course I did." His voice was almost natural. No one, hearing its steady, even tones, would have guessed that he was discussing the tragedy of his life. "I certified the cause of death to be the disease from which he was known to be suffering. I made all arrangements for his funeral, as it was quite natural that I should. No one questioned my right, no one questioned anything—or ever would have done but for his man, Lebel.

"Brandon was pathetically dependent on his ministrations; he had been his body-servant for some time before he became his nurse, but he never liked him. There was never between them the touch of feeling that can make a relationship of that sort sometimes so very pleasant. One had always the idea that Lebel cared for him with a watchful eye on what he would get in return for it, and Brandon, who paid him very liberally, made up his mind, with the touch of malice that often accompanies severe illness, to disappoint him. I remonstrated, but he stuck out. I would have righted matters myself if he had given me time, for I thought he deserved something, but he didn't give me any. As soon as he found that everything Brandon had was left to me and that he was deliberately and intentionally left out he denounced me.

"He was quite abreast of the situation. He had read letters and listened at doors, done all the tricks a man of his sort always does do. We hadn't been any too careful, and I soon saw I had no chance against him. Things looked very black against me, I don't deny it, for he told all he knew of my part in the affair, the drug I had used, the lie I had told to cover it, and suppressed altogether his knowledge of Brandon's acquiescence. I got ten years, as I told you—and I never wondered at it."

He ceased, looking down at the woman by his side with wide and wistful eyes, the woman who loved him, yet who set apart from him forever by this thing that he had done. He gazed at her as a man gazes at what he loves better than his own soul and must shortly lose forever, and even as he gazed she laid a trembling hand on his arm.

"Carlton," she began, and choked, and shook her head with impatience at herself, and mastered her voice and tried again, "Carlton, do you think I shall consent to lose you—to let you go out of my life—for this?"

It was too much. In a moment his arms were round her, and she was sobbing on his shoulder. He hid his wet eyes on her hair.

"Margaret! *Margaret!*" he whispered, and all the longing of his soul was in the word. And then, on a low note of pain, "Oh, what a hound I am!"

CHAPTER VII.

BOUND.

HIS compunction was momentary. He walked home under the May moon too happy to think, thrilled through and through at the rapture of the moment that had given the woman he worshiped to his arms, even the remembrance of what lay between them dulled, dead and buried, its very grave hidden under a mausoleum of beautiful dreams. His past, he told himself, was burned away. He stood purified by the fires of punishment, able still to lift his life from the ashes and make of it a thing that even Margaret might be proud to accept. It was not an idea, an aspiration, a perhaps; it was a certainty.

The little graystone house, flush with the cobbled pavement of the village street, was silent and dark when he reached it, for it was very late. He let himself in and went tiptoe up-stairs. Stebbings was asleep and snoring heavily. He undressed in the moonlight and lay down.

But he could not sleep, he was too happy. He lay, his hands behind his dark head, his soul bathed in the glow of his new imaginings, while the silver radiance of the night faded to the chill blue of dawn,

and then throbbled into sudden rose and gold to greet the up-rushing of the summer sun. Life, the life of other men, sane and simple, warm with the dear human ties of wife, and children, and friends, was, in spite of everything, for him.

He would live it to the full, and he would live it worthily. Destiny, after all, had not cheated him. Fate, in the end, was just. The happiness that had been withheld from him all those seven long and bitter years had but been hoarded up for him somewhere, to be poured upon his thrice-blessed head in the concentrated rapture of to-night.

And all the world should share his happiness, all the little world; that is, in the center of which each one of us lives. He had—or would have—money. He would use it wisely and well. Want, the want that is so wicked in a world as rich as ours, should not exist where he did; poverty no longer cramp and stultify. He had no fear of opposition from Margaret. She would ask nothing better than to use her great possessions for the good of others. Together, and hand in hand, they would walk through a world all aflower with the results of their beneficent activities, looked up to, respected, beloved. His past was behind him, done with, utterly wiped out. His future was with Margaret. Did not that mean all that the world could hold of gladness and good?

So he told himself as he lay in the moonlight, almost light-headed under the burden of his bliss. And all the while a little shrouded devil just below his consciousness whispered, "Dreams, dreams, dreams!"

But he would not know it, blinding himself to its presence, deafening himself to its warnings, refusing to acknowledge to himself even the possibility of its existence. In the glory of the May dawning he fell asleep.

It was late when he woke, and he woke sane. The little devil whose existence he had denied the night before had grown with the new day as the jinnee grew when *Said the Fisherman* let him out of his bottle grown till the whole world lay black beneath his shade.

"Was I mad?" he asked himself, contemplating a face haggard and gray under the pressure of realities. "I must have been. How could I—how dare I—plan so?"

But his madness had not been long-lived. After seven starveling years, the grimmest of fates could hardly grudge him one night of delirium. So that he recognized it as delirium. So that he could distinguish between things as they were and the foundationless fancies of a brain-sick man. This morning he realized things as they were, and that to the bottom of his soul. And he saw what he must do.

"I must go away," he told himself dully. "It is my only chance. If I stay here I shall let myself be—persuaded." His breath caught, his heart lost a beat, as he sensed the sweetness of that persuading, that dear persuading, difficult to repulse and impossible to deny. "I should end by letting her tie her life to mine, be shamed by my shame, suffer, perhaps, almost as I have suffered. At least, I am above that. No man shadowed as I am has a right to tie any woman to him. God, if I did! If I let myself drop so far! She would stand by me so loyally, she would fight so bravely, she would feel it so cruelly! For it would come out—these things always do. Marry! Marry *Margaret!* I'd blow my brains out first."

And since if he allowed himself to stay in her neighborhood, marry her he must; the only thing left him was to go away, to go at once. He would leave Hazelbridge to-day, he told himself, without explanation and without farewell. Once removed from her dear witcheries he could write what, within reach of the clinging of her hand, the half-laughing, half-imploring claim of her dark eyes, he would never, never be able to say.

He went down to the little parlor to find breakfast laid for one.

"Where's Mr. Stebbings?" he asked, for the circumstance was unusual. Mrs. Grayson put his toast down and absently rubbed the side of the britannia metal teapot with a corner of her apron.

"I've let him sleep," she said. "He seemed so heavy like I thought I'd better. I tried to wake him once or twice, but he didn't seem to want to move, so I let him be."

"He's tired," returned Earle, and compunction shot through him. "He did double

work yesterday. Tell him when he wakes to take it easy. I'll see all the pressing cases this morning."

But old Stebbings did not wake. Earle was briskly disposing of the last of the surgery cases when Mrs. Grayson's voice floated down into the hall.

"Dr. Earle! Dr. Earle! Please!" she said.

"I don't like the look of the master, sir," she told him. "I don't know what's wrong with him, but something is."

Something was very wrong. Earle did not need a second glance to tell him what. He turned, the hand of the man who had been good to him held fast in both his own.

"Go down and telephone for Nurse Tilson, you'll want help," he said. "Yes, it's a stroke; at least, that's what you would call it. Don't stand there and cry. It's the first and, God helping, we'll pull him through. Get Nurse Tilson, there's a good soul. I've got to leave him, and I must leave him in skilled hands."

But to leave him for long was out of the question. One or two pressing cases must be visited, and then he must come back to the bedside of the man who had been good to him.

"Don't you be afraid," he said, speaking clearly and distinctly, for who knew how much the dulled intelligence might comprehend. "You'll be all right in a day or two. I'll look after everything for you."

Then began the grim fight over a man's prostrate body, with doctor and nurse on one side and death on the other. With all the skill he had Earle waged it. Nurse Tilson helped him—devoted, silent, and efficient. For days the issue was undecided and to leave it so was unthinkable.

But if old Stebbings's illness held him fast in Hazelbridge it also served as an all-sufficient excuse for his avoidance of Margaret Royston. He sent her a little scribbled note:

Forgive me if I seem neglectful. Stebbings is dangerously ill.

After that he sent her nothing. Neither did he go near her. He dare not.

But he knew that his respite from the

struggle before him would be a short one. While he stayed in Hazelbridge his meeting the woman he loved, and must renounce, was always an imminent possibility. And that without the certainty that if he did not seek her she would seek him. He steeled his soul and waited.

He had not to wait long. One afternoon, about a week after the old man's seizure, he heard the jingle of silver harness, and Margaret's cream ponies stopped at the doctor's door.

She gave the reins to Sylvia and got out, coming round by the surgery and in, unannounced, at the garden door. Straight, still, scarcely breathing, Earle awaited her. Very quietly she gave him her hand. Her manner was grave and gentle and quite free from reproach. He could have blessed her for it.

"How is he?" she asked.

Earle hesitated a moment.

"Not quite what I could wish," he said at last. "He can think connectedly and has recovered his speech. To a certain extent, that is. But he is still very helpless."

"Is he alive to what is going on?"

"Oh, yes; too much so. He's worrying over that boy in London. You remember my going to meet some one for him a few days ago. It seems that his mother—well, anyway, that's the reason that Stebbings has never married. And the young fool is in trouble. A London rook, a pretty black one, from all accounts, has been most industriously plucking him. Stebbings wants him down here out of mischief. But this is hardly the house for visitors."

"Send him to me," said Margaret softly. "Sylvia and I will amuse him."

"Would you—" Earle's gray eyes glowed.

"Of course. Wouldn't I do anything for the dear old man—and you! When are you coming up to Greenshaws? Surely, if he is as much better as you say, you can spare half an hour soon. Come now. Sylvia shall drive us back. Just for a cup of tea and half an hour's change. You look as if you wanted it."

But he stood unresponsive, silent, almost sullen in his misery. Her eyes widened and filled up with a dreadful understanding.

"You were not intending to come up," she said.

"No."

"You were never coming up any more?"

"No," he said again.

She came swiftly round the table that separated them.

"Carlton," she said, in a low, tense whisper, "no! I have a right to be considered. I won't *have* it so."

He put her light hand from his arm as though it scorched.

"Margaret," he begged hoarsely, "leave me some shreds of decency."

"It is—all for my sake?"

"Of course."

"Then I refuse to be sacrificed to my own happiness. I know best where my happiness lies. *Carlton!*"

Again the dear compelling of her hand. He stiffened to rigidity under it.

"You won't?" she said, and her eyes hardened.

"I can't," he returned very low. "Margaret, you know I can't."

She shrugged her shoulders lightly under the long, silken cloak she wore, and turned and left him.

Left him to the hell of the knowledge that he had offended, rebuffed, hurt her. He bore it, an ice-cold burden, through the remaining hours of that long, long day, but he could not sleep under it; he did not try. When Stebbings was settled for the night in Nurse Tilson's care he let himself silently out of the house and walked up to Greenshaws.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE ROSE TRELIS.

SOME men find youthful follies impossible to understand. In others they are possibilities to the end. Earle pushed open the white gate, pausing a moment to lay his lips to the bar where she had clung when he had shocked her into helplessness with the story of his prisoning. To spend the hours of the summer night in Margaret's garden instead of in his bed was not only to him a rational, it was an inevitable thing.

Not that he hoped to see her. To sit in the seat where she had sat in the daytime; to find, perhaps, some trifle she had dropped—her thimble, her handkerchief; to tread the grass her gown had brushed; to stay his heart-hunger with the knowledge that as yet she was near him: that was all he asked. He walked softly along the front of the house in the moonlight and down the steps to the lower terrace where caution was less necessary. He was conscious of neither expectation nor hope, only of misery that nothing but the knowledge of Margaret's nearness would relieve.

But when a man and a woman love as these two loved, chance, fate, destiny, whatever we may choose to call that which shapes our rough-hewn ends, has a little way of interfering. He made his way slowly to the seat under the rose-hung trellis, where he had drunk tea for the first time with Margaret. Something, a misty shape, moved in the moonlight. It was Margaret herself. She rose at sight of him—and held out her arms.

He took her; he had not been a man had he not. Water-drops from a fountain near fell musically into its marble basin. A nightingale sent its long flutelike notes like rays of light across the stillness. For a long, long time there was no other sound.

But a woman has an instinctive dread of strong emotion; she will escape it if she can. Margaret spoke first.

"Reprehensible habit, isn't it, to wander about at night?" she half whispered. "You didn't expect it of me, did you?"

"No," he said, almost curtly; for while a woman can move with swallowlike swiftness from one mood to another, a man, his feet planted firmly on the solid earth, can only lumber after her.

"I learned it," she went on softly, "in the bad old days when the night hours were the only ones that were peaceful. He was always out—at night."

Earle's arms tightened, for he knew she spoke of her husband. And he knew nothing else. Not for worlds would he have spoken, and so checked, perhaps, the words she would say next. But she said nothing, and his interest ached for details. At last he prompted.

"He—is dead?"

"Yes," she agreed, with a long, long sigh, "he is dead. It is a dreadful thing, Carlton, to live so that every one, everywhere, rejoices when one dies."

Once again she was silent, and once again he prompted.

"How did he die?"

"I don't know."

"Where did he die?"

"I don't know," she said again.

He drew away aghast.

"But—" he began, and she laughed.

"Oh, I am not living in a fool's paradise," she said. "He is dead. It was in Brazil, somewhere. He was prospecting, with others; at least, he said he was prospecting. There was an accident of some sort, and they were all killed but one, the one who wrote to me. Carlton, they *were*. He is dead."

But Earle shivered a little, though the May night was warm as noonday. Was there a thought too much insistence in her tones? "God, don't! Oh, God, don't *let* him!" she had prayed with agony, that day he had seen her first in the wood. Don't let him what? Come back?

"Margaret," he said hoarsely, "you have no proof!"

"I have!" She interrupted him with passion. "Sufficient, all-compelling, unescapable proof. When he was with me we were quite, quite poor. Not always. Sometimes we shot up, rocketlike, into unbelievable affluence. But we never stayed up even long enough to count the stars. Always we plunged down again into obscurity, sometimes squalor. I didn't mind; I liked the squalor best. And, then, about a year after I had been told of his death, all this came to him, quite unexpectedly. Do you think, if he were alive, he would not have turned up from the uttermost ends of the earth to claim it?"

"But—he may not know about it."

"If he were alive he would, he *must*! But he isn't! The letter from his friend is enough. He saw him die; he said so. It was even enough for the authorities. They let me prove the will and enter into possession. Would they have done that if they hadn't been convinced? Oh, don't frighten

me. He is dead, dead, *dead!* I dare at least believe—and be happy. For I didn't believe too easily. The very first use I made of my—his—money was to travel in search of proof. I found it; all the proof it was possible to find. But I should have been just as sure without it. If he were alive, if he were anywhere on this globe at all, he would have come before now to claim—this."

Earle's look altered. The constriction about his heart relaxed, and he dared to breathe again. Money is a magnet, the drawing of which such a man as Royston would have felt through the solid bulk of the earth. Surely, surely Margaret was right. Her own conviction, at least, was profound. With a soft sigh of utter contentment her whole body relaxed to its blessedness.

"We won't tell anybody—about you and me," she breathed. "You can't leave Stebbings yet—and it would be such a nine-day wonder. At least, I shall only tell one."

"And who is that?"

"Pap."

"Pap!"—on a note of amazement, for truly he was an odd confidant.

"Yes, of course, he must marry Sylvia; it is the only possible plan. And if I were safely out of the way, he would."

Once again Earle chilled a little. There were possibilities, then, in other people's minds, possibilities of disaster, it seemed, of which even Pap was aware.

"Then is Pap, also, a little—afraid?"

"No. How that idea obsesses you! It isn't that at all."

"Then what is it?"

She laughed and leaned a little away from him, her dark eyes softly rallying him. He caught his breath with a gasp of pleasure. How sweet was her look, half arch, half tender. How gracious the long, slim lines of her body, its silken swathings shining in the moonbeams.

"I hope I shall not pander unduly to your vanity when I tell you that Sylvia has developed quite a considerable *tendresse* for you," she said.

"For *me!*" He drew back, genuinely shocked, and once again she laughed.

"Oh, you needn't take it so," she told

him. "Sylvia's ideas of love are very different from yours. I don't suppose there is any man, anywhere, who really understands what a girl's ideas on that subject are, what she feels or thinks about it at all. She can't even explain herself, for directly she tries she finds she has caused, first, amusement, and then offense, though she cannot imagine why. Sylvia has never dreamed of *marrying* you. Girls don't! All she asks is to be allowed to sit at your feet and worship."

"But surely she expects a little worship in return?"

"No, it is not necessary, so long as you do not worship any one else. That, of course, would be unforgivable. Sylvia knows you do not worship her, but she is as yet quite happy, for that you should misguidedly worship me has never crossed her mind as a possibility. Why you, at thirty-eight, should be a quite possible lover, while I, at thirty-four, am a quite impossible rival, I do not know. But it is so."

"But the thing is ridiculous!" He spoke almost brusquely.

"Of course it is. The difficulty is to make Sylvia see it. Pap is her God-given mate, just as young, as irresponsible, as silly, as charming as she is. How is it she doesn't see that?"

"God knows," said Earle shortly.

"And that is why I am going to tell Pap. At present he is wildly jealous of you. When he hears our little history he won't be; he *can't* be any longer. He will cease, then, to wake Sylvia to passionate partizanship by steady and unfounded abuse—"

"Of me?"

"Of you. When he hears—our little history—he will at once discover that you are quite a decent fellow and that, really, he likes you very much, and he will at once impart his discovery to Sylvia. Now, Sylvia is adorably feminine, and nothing shakes a woman's convictions more than profound agreement with them. Let Pap once indorse all her eulogies and she will promptly discover that you are not nearly as charming as she thought you were."

"How delicious!"

"Isn't it? But it's Sylvia all over. You

don't mind my telling Pap? I won't tell any one else."

"Margaret," he whispered, "should I mind anything you choose to do?"

After which came whispered, happy planning, plans that began to seem remotely possible even to Earle. Greenshaws should at once be sold, quietly, unostentatiously, by private treaty. Slowly but steadily Margaret would realize all her investments, transferring her money, as it came in, to a New York bank. When Pap had prevailed with Sylvia, and Margaret was confident that, with the aid of a little common sense, he would prevail early, they would marry, quietly, unostentatiously, without any of the indecent display and junketing that is such a feature of modern marriages, and then out across the hills they would go "to that new world that is the old." Earle listened, a little dizzy with the rapture of it all, a little stunned with the contemplation of himself as he was a year ago and as he was to-night. And with Margaret Royston's sweet, low voice in his ears he could not hear the little shrouded devil just below his consciousness saying, "Dreams, dreams, dreams!"

Day was dawning when they stood once again at the white gate together. It was then that he laid the spark to the train of events that should blow those glowing plans into rainbow shreds about him.

"Margaret, I took you at your word this afternoon. I've written to that young fool of Stebbings's and asked him to come down here. You would take him in and do for him, I said."

"Of course. I shall be very glad to have him. Sylvia always revels in a new young man," she returned. And in all the glad world about them was never a hint of the thing they had done.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BLUEST EYES!

"MY poor Sylvia! It must get a little monotonous."

"It does," agreed Sylvia, sighing. "I wouldn't care if it were not for Pap, but he *will* be so furious. And he

always thinks it is my fault. It isn't; now is it, aunty?"

"Dear me, no," in heart-warming repudiation. "*You* can't help it! You being what you are and Jack being what he is, the thing is inevitable. It isn't your fault!"

For young Aveling, Dr. Stebbings's protégé, had arrived yesterday, accepting with heartfelt gratitude, and as frankly as it was offered, the hospitality that rendered it possible for him to be near his old friend in the hour of his danger. Already he was "Jack," and already he had demonstrated his utter lack of desire to do anything but sit and gaze in dumb devotion, absolutely devoid of either shame or embarrassment, at Sylvia. It grew for Sylvia, as her aunt said, a little monotonous. Pap's attitude threatened to render it tragic. And it angered Margaret Royston.

"I wouldn't have expected it from Pap," she remarked. "I thought more of his powers of perception."

"Perception! He hasn't any, where I am concerned," sighed Sylvia.

But there Mrs. Royston disagreed with her. He showed a little too much, sometimes. In the matter of Dr. Earle, for instance.

Her eyes, shrewd and tender, sought the two lads in white flannels playing a fast and furious "single" down on the tennis-court. They were fairly matched, but Aveling was attempting the impossible feat of keeping one eye on his game and the other on Sylvia. His game suffered. Pap beat him with the ease which begets that pity which is not akin to love, and tucked his racket under his arm with decision. He had done his duty, both to his hostess and to himself. He had shown himself obligingly ready to offer battle to a fellow-guest and had beaten him handsomely. Now he was going back to Sylvia.

But this time Pap proposed and Mrs. Royston disposed. Hardly had he dropped into a comfortable cane chair and lighted a well-deserved cigarette before she leaned forward and claimed him.

"Pap, dear, will you take a little walk round the lake with me? I have something I want to say to you."

At which suggestion, Pap's whole soul

revolted. What! Wander off with Mrs. Royston and leave Sylvia to a rival whose indecent satisfaction at his going refused to be hidden! It was a monstrous injustice and not to be borne!

But no hint of his revolt showed in his manner. He rose with alacrity. He smiled as he helped his hostess out of her "lazy" chair. That lady laughed a little as she slipped a slender, white hand through his arm.

"You are a real nice boy, Percival," she said softly. He glanced at her quickly, surprised at the unnecessary information. Of course he was!

"Which is the reason that I am going to tell you what, for the present, no one else in the world is to know," she went on with grave gentleness. "I am going to be married."

"Married! *You!*"

His amazement was uncomplimentary, but it only amused Mrs. Royston.

"Yes. To Dr. Earle."

Pap released his arm from her gentle hold and turned and faced her in blank surprise.

"Earle!" he echoed. "But I thought—thought—"

"I know," returned Mrs. Royston. "You have thought a good many foolish things in your time, Pap, but none more foolish than that."

"But Sylvia—"

"Sylvia is a little goose," with finality. "But she wouldn't be quite such a goose if you were not—well, another."

"*I!*" in outraged inquiry. "How? Why?"

"Because you're always belittling him. Why can't you be sensible, and try and like him a little, too. It would make all the difference in the world with Sylvia."

"I'll like him all right *now!*"—with heart-warming fervor. "Really, you know, I've liked him—in a way—all along. Only—only— Oh, I say, and I've never congratulated you! Aunt Margaret, I hope, I do hope, you'll be happy."

Margaret smiled up into his frank, boyish eyes, so friendly and so warm, and still a little wide with his profound astonishment.

"I think I shall," she said softly. "Don't you think so, too?"

"Yes, I do, honestly. How I came never to see it or even suspect it— How I came to think things—so very different—"

"Well, you see, we have been careful. We should both of us hate anything in the way of notoriety and talk. As I said, you are the only one—"

"May I tell Sylvia?"

"No," with decision. Pap's face lengthened. "I don't want you to tell any one, least of all Sylvia. You can't—for your own sake. You must be her first choice, Percival, not her second. Neither must you ever be able even to suspect that circumstances drove her into your arms. She must come to you of her own free will."

"She never will!" His voice roughened a little. "Not while her whole mind is full of that—I beg your pardon. I forgot."

"Well," returned Margaret, laughing a little, "in future, you are, please, to remember. And I want you and Sylvia to be married, Pap, married before I am."

Pap flung out tragic hands.

"But how can we?" he demanded, "if she won't?"

"I think she will—if I help a little. And I can help in many ways. I can convince her, for instance, that I in no way resent your grandfather's very evident disinclination to make friends with me. I don't, Pap. I don't care at all whether he receives me or he doesn't. The person I want him to receive is Sylvia."

"He is ready to do *that*, now. I mean, of course," and Pap stumbled into silence. Again Mrs. Royston laughed.

"Poor Pap!" she said.

The boy went back to Sylvia, his head buzzing with his new knowledge. All life lay gilded under it. It even enabled him to be civil to Jack Aveling. When, a little later, he saw Earle coming along the terrace, he flushed to his hair, and welcomed him with so anxious a hospitality that Earle's eyes twinkled at the change.

"He knows," he told himself with intense satisfaction. Margaret had lost no time.

"I've come," he said, shaking hands with her, and keen and subtle was the pleasure

of politely shaking hands with her as any ordinary acquaintance might. "I have come to take Jack back with me. Stebbings is better to-day, clearer in his mind than he has been yet, and he would like a talk with him—after tea."

"He is coming out this very moment," returned Margaret quickly, for his voice had been more wistful than he knew, and it was Pap who carried his cup and passed his bread and butter and showed a quite tender solicitude about his cake. Earle glanced quickly at him and the boy's eyes were eloquent. When he had an opportunity the elder man offered a quiet hand. Pap shook it with fervor. Sylvia saw it and marveled.

But a good deal of his irritation returned after tea, for Sylvia showed no desire to do anything but sit, metaphorically, at Earle's feet, and drink in the words of wisdom that were conspicuously absent from his conversation. In vain, Pap protested. "Sylvia, I want you! Sylvia, come and have a game. You haven't played once this afternoon and it's not too hot *now!* Sylvia, are you going to sit here all *night!*" Sylvia never moved. Stronger measures were needed. At least he would have to include Jack.

"Oh," the boy burst out at last, "come on, both of you. I'll play you with one hand and beat you to a frazzle!" And this was too much even for Sylvia.

"That you won't!" she assured him crisply. "Come along, Jack. We must take the conceit out of him somehow."

Earle looked after the three, racing headlong down to the nets, and his eyes were full of pain.

"That child!" he said, hardly above his breath. "To make a hero and a demigod—of me! I—almost wish you had never told me."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I only know it fills me with shame and humiliation, that it reduces me to bathos and banality beyond words. I feel, sometimes, as though I couldn't bear it. I suppose it's—the prison taint."

For a moment, Margaret's hand lay soft and cool on his.

"You think too much of the prison taint," she said. "Prison doesn't taint. Many good men have suffered imprisonment, nearly all pioneers do. What does your imprisonment mean? That you are a pioneer, just that. You would, in the same circumstances, do the same thing again. You say so yourself."

"Yes," he agreed slowly, "I would."

"Then what have you to do with repentance! Leave it to the really guilty—like me."

"You!"

His tone was more than incredulous, it was almost amused. She to talk about guilt, Margaret, his lady of dreams, his goddess! His eyes filled up with a tender, almost smiling pity. It was to him as though an angel should cover his sinful face with his stainless wing and cry "*Mea culpa!*"

Who was it first pictured Love as blind? Nothing in the world is clearer sighted. Unerringly Margaret read all that was in his heart—for her.

"Carlton," she whispered, "*don't!* You must know me—as I am. When I—when he— Oh, I have wished him dead." Her voice was monotonous and full of horror. "I have prayed that he might die. If I had known—how! But I didn't, I never knew how. If I had *known!*"

He checked her with authority, almost with sternness.

"My dearest, hush. You are a little overwrought, and what you are saying is ridiculous," he told her.

She was obediently silent. Her breath caught a little on what was almost a sob, but she said no more. Why insist? And when he knew her better, well, he would know her better. Yet she could not quite desist.

"Carlton, those things happen," she said.

He nodded. There was no need to call a medical man that. So that her interest were remote and impersonal, he was not minded to deny facts.

"The difficulty is proof," he said. "But if you think I would allow you to suggest for an instant that in your case—"

"My case is among the worst, for I did

not lack the will, only the power. And I am not sorry, I don't repent at all. The world would be—cleaner—without some of its occupants. It is wholesome, for the rest of us, that they should be got rid of. I agree with Rybank there."

"Rybank! Who is he?"

"My butler, and I should think one of the most truly religious men who ever lived, in spite of what I have just told you. The other servants live in dread of him, he is so anxious about their souls. And the young people of the present day don't concern themselves about their souls. If one looked into the depths of their consciousness one would find a profound suspicion that they haven't any. But to Rybank the world is all soul. Carlton, he is so good that his goodness is terrible. There are times when I can't bear him in the room with me. His eyes are so keen, so calm, and so ruthless. 'You are a wicked and a sinful woman,' they say. And I am."

"My dearest," said Earle in tender protest. But Margaret's thoughts were running on Rybank. She hardly heard.

"His life," she went on, "all his life, is an active and conscious fight against almost visible powers of darkness, and he thinks all weapons legitimate. If he had a wife and she—erred—he would kill without compunction. So would I. There are circumstances in which it is right to kill. It is right to kill—as you did, when to keep alive is to condemn the innocent to unendurable suffering. It would have been right to kill a man like my husband, who was a source of moral infection to all about him. Fundamentally you agree with me, though you don't go quite so far as I do."

"Dear," he said, and his eyes were very tender, "I wouldn't like to think you go quite so far as you say."

"But I do. I *do!*" The words came tense and low. "If you had suffered as I have—Carlton, will you ever get tired of comforting me, of trying to make me forget, of teaching me that there are men like you in the world, tender, considerate, unselfish! I had given up believing it."

"Oh, my dear!" he returned, in deepest deprecation. What was there, what could

there be about him, he asked himself in wonder, ordinary, commonplace, stained as he was, that Sylvia should worship and, miracle of miracles, Margaret should love him? Truly, Fate's gifts to a man have nothing to do with his deserts.

A footfall silenced him. An elderly man, irreproachably attired, a man who could not have been anything but an upper servant in a "good family" was coming along the terrace toward them.

"That is Rybank," whispered Margaret. "We are a man short, so he condescends to remove the tea-tray himself."

"He has the eyes of a fanatic," remarked Earle, as the man retired with the tray. Rybank could not have done anything else but "retire." "I can well believe all you say about him."

"And we're not beaten to a frazzle!"

It was Sylvia, flushed and lovely, with a couple of panting youths in her train. "And he couldn't play us with one hand, no, nor with two either, could he, Jack! No, Pap, I'm not coming down again. Have another single, you and Jack. I'm going to stay here and talk to Dr. Earle."

Earle bit his lip and flushed a little. He found himself a trifle dizzy on his unwelcome pinnacle. It is embarrassing to be called upon for moral treasure in which one discovers oneself unexpectedly bankrupt. He sat hoping dumbly that no very serious demand might be made upon his inadequate store of wisdom, that Sylvia might never discern the broken and friable feet upon which her idol stood. His present and his future conduct, gave him no concern, that should be all that even Sylvia could expect from him. It was a hint of his past that he feared.

But Sylvia's mood this afternoon was not exalted. She was content to chatter, in gay and girlish fashion, of ordinary, every-day affairs. Earle's look lost its touch of apprehension. And Margaret, watching him with dark and smiling eyes, read him like an open book.

"Who was it?" she inquired softly, "that labeled us the romantic sex? Because we are not, not after girlhood, anyhow. To find real romance, deep and genuine, we must go to you dear men."

The five walked down the avenue to the white gate together, Sylvia in front, a swain on either hand, Margaret and her lover behind. Earle glanced from the boys to Sylvia.

"Jack won't be here long," he said. "Rather a good thing for him, isn't it? Stebbings wants him to go to Edinburgh almost at once. It seems he has had a decent medical training as far as it goes, but it's time he finished it. He won't be able to if he doesn't stop making ducks and drakes of his money."

"I thought he had stopped."

"Yes, left to himself, I believe he has. But we're not sure that the fellow has been plucking him in London, hasn't followed him here. He's the sort of fellow that would follow him so long as he had a cent left. There's a stranger staying at the Chequers, a nice-looking fellow enough, with the bluest eyes I ever saw. An artist in language he is, too. He was relieving his mind about something or other to Rogers as I came past and it was a picturesque performance. Of course, he may not be Jack's 'friend'—save the mark!—but I'm inclined to think he is. The sooner the boy goes to Edinburgh, in my opinion, the better."

For some little time after Earle and his companion were out of sight down the winding country road, Margaret stood by the white gate, her slender, capable-looking hands shut hard on the topmost bar. The bluest eyes he had ever seen, Earle had said of the stranger's at the Chequers. The bluest eyes she had ever seen had closed, three years ago—for ever.

CHAPTER X.

THE RETURN.

IT is a wonderful thing to be actively, consciously, cloudlessly happy—and a very rare. Most of us are content, when there is no acute cause of disquiet, to believe ourselves happy. It only proves that we have forgotten the meaning of the word.

But this morning in early June, Margaret Royston was actively, consciously, perfectly happy. Life stretched before her, rosy with

possibilities. She had been the daughter of a "starveling manse." She had married Terence Royston during one of his periods of prosperity, a prosperity into the sources of which her unworldly and trusting father had been far too sensitively delicate to inquire.

The years of her girlhood had been lean; the years of her marriage had been bitter. Suddenly life had not only swept away from her every source of suffering, it had poured into her hands the power to gratify her every wish and fulfil her every desire. The wonder, the glory of that power had not yet had time to fade.

And life's gifts had not stopped even there. The last and greatest of them all for a woman, the deep and adoring love of a man she can revere, had crowned them all. If destiny had appeared before her this morning in visible form and her most generous mood, Margaret could have found nothing more for which she would have cared to ask.

And the age-long convictions of humanity are not without foundation. They had reason, those ancients whose wisdom we have so light-heartedly put aside, to believe in the jealousy of the gods. When all seems well with us, when life is at its rosiest, then let us beware.

But this glorious June morning, Margaret was too happy even to distrust her own happiness. There would have seemed to most of her acquaintances, little in the fact that a man like Carlton Earle, a quiet, ordinary, every-day doctor, of some attainments, but of little wealth and no position, should have come to live in Hazelbridge.

Yet in spite of her knowledge of the handicap against him, the stain upon him, the remembrance of his nearness, the fact of his love, made for Margaret the splendor of the world. By reason of it her very personality had acquired a new and special significance and value. It modified her every moment and molded her every thought. She did not so much as put on her stockings in a morning without what was almost a prayer that she might do it daintily—for his sake.

The thought of him was the mainspring of all her happy activities to-day. Already

a letter to her banker, giving instructions for the realization of her investments, lay on her blotting-pad. An advertisement in the *Times* had suggested a possible purchaser for Greenshaws. Busily Margaret jotted down on paper the heads of her reply. It was while she was so engaged that she heard a crisp footfall on the gravel outside and the ring of the front-door bell.

And the footfall disturbed her. One may forget a laugh, a voice, a handshake, but a footfall once learned—never. For years, Margaret had listened for a footfall, listened in a chill, wordless terror of the happenings it would assuredly bring. This footfall was like it and the likeness disturbed her, set her thoughts flowing backward down the long, long years that the locusts had eaten bare. With a half-tremulous laugh at herself she shook off the vague fear of which she was conscious. The feet of a ghost make no sound.

Then came a voice, light in timbre and pleasant to the ear. "Don't you worry," it said, "I'll announce myself." After which the door opened, and cheerfully, casually, as though he had only gone out half an hour ago, Terence Royston came in.

Slowly Margaret rose, her limbs moving stiffly, jerkily, like the limbs of a dead woman galvanized into the semblance of life. She put out her hands in mute protest, as though she would hold off some horror that threatened her sanity, and moved slowly, slowly backward.

A pedestal holding a vase filled with long sprays of rambler roses went over with a crash. Margaret never heard it, she only moved steadily back over the broken shards, the water, the splashed and fallen roses, away from that smiling, sinister figure standing in the doorway. The wall of the room checked her further retreat. She stood, her slender white shape outlined against its lavender silk panel, a figure of tragic horror, a woman turned to stone. The eyes of the man by the door, the bluest eyes the world had ever seen, opened wide in genuine astonishment just touched with dismay.

"Well," he said, and he laughed a little. "*Well!* I knew, of course, that you would be—pleased to see me, but, by God! I

didn't know that even you would be as pleased as this."

Margaret answered nothing, her dark head leaning back against the lavender panel, her dry lips parted, her very breathing stilled. And something in her eyes held the man by the door, so that he dare come no further step toward her. The laugh left his face as though some one had wiped it off with a sponge. His eyes brightened and hardened.

"Margaret," he said, half under his breath, "don't be a fool."

Still Margaret did not speak. She could get no further from him because of the wall, but it was evident that she had got as far as she could. Once again that little gleam of puzzlement shone in his blue eyes. His surprise at his reception was honest.

"Margaret," he said again, "don't be a fool. I know, of course, I know, that you had a good deal to complain of in the old days, but—well, I've come back. Is there any sense in antagonizing me to begin with—like this?"

A change, swift and subtle, passed over Margaret's face. It was gone in an instant, but not before Terence Royston had read it. His eyes flickered a little and changed ominously.

"Oh," he said softly, "that's it, is it? You'd rather have that than—the other thing? Well, I wouldn't. Not with a woman as damned good-looking as you."

And he moved, but only a step or two, for Margaret's hand shot swiftly out and covered the little ivory bell-push just within her reach.

"If you come any nearer—any nearer at all, I'll ring for Rybank and have you put out," she said.

The words, level and toneless and low, only just reached him. He stood a moment eying her somberly, moistening his lips with a thin, red tongue. Then he took a sudden stride forward.

"You're trying to anger me," he told her. "You're doing it on purpose, so that I shall—shall throw things about, perhaps, and give you an excuse for doing—just as you say. But I'm not such an idiot. I'm not going to let anything you say anger me, however damnable it may be. This is my

house. Here and now, quite quietly and deliberately, I claim it—and everything in it. It's all mine, and no one knows it better than you do. Money, furniture, servants—and you."

A little French writing table, an exquisite thing of satinwood and silver, was all that was between them now. He leaned his hands hard on the edge and his blue eyes, bright and angry, blazed at her over it. But he did not attempt to come round it. A breathless moment or two assured her that he did not intend. Her thumping heart steadied itself, the tense vigilance of her attitude relaxed. She still watched him, a smoldering spark behind the darkness of her gaze, but she looked less frightened.

"I know," she said very low. "I spoke wildly just now. I have no intention of challenging your identity or disputing your claim. You do own everything here. Everything—except me."

But that was a reservation he was by no means minded to accept.

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "Damn it all! Aren't you my wife?"

"No, Terence. Not again. Never again."

His jaw dropped a little. For three years she had thought him dead.

"You mean," he said, and he spoke a little hoarsely, "that I'm—inconvenient. That you have married again."

"No." Her denial was just audible.

"Then what's all this fuss about? If you haven't married again, and if there isn't any other man, and from inquiries I've made it seems there isn't, what, in God's name, should stand between us?"

Suddenly Margaret stood upright. The support of the wall was no longer necessary. She even lessened by a step or two the distance between herself and that handsome, astonished, evil face thrust out across her little writing-table. Erect she faced him, every gracious line of her aquiver with indignant scorn.

"How dare you!" she said, her voice coming sibilant and low. "How dare you ask that, when you know, when you know! You can, of course, come here. Neither I nor any one else can stop you. The place

is your own, assuredly. But if you come, I go."

He stared at her, genuinely dismayed. He had known, of course, that Margaret—well, disapproved of him, that she had had a good deal to put up with in the old days, that she was angry, justly angry, about a good many things. But that her remembrances had worked in her a horror as strong as this, that the passing years that had so conveniently dulled for him the recollection of anything he might, perhaps, have reason to regret had only hardened her anger and steeled her determination to have no more to do with him—that was a genuine surprise. And he would by no means have it so.

His look flamed into sudden admiration. She was as pretty and to all appearance as young as when he had seen her first, a shy and gentle girl, in her father's vicarage. And in some nameless way that he did not stop to analyze, a thousand times more attractive. And she was his, body and soul, even as he had claimed. He studied her, puzzled and piqued, acutely aware that not only was she his but that she was utterly desirable.

Slowly, one by one, the details of her desirability detached themselves, and slowly one by one, appealed to him. She had always dressed well, even elegantly, managing it, as some women will, on the smallest and most inadequate resources. But he had never seen her dressed as she was dressed this morning. It was of the cost of her clothes that he was first conscious, for he was not without experience in the cost of feminine attire. Then a little chic touch of individuality, almost daring. There was even a trace of coquetry in the twist of cherry color in her dark hair, the velvet swathing, soft and rich and cherry-red, about her waist. Suspicion blazed up in him. What did these things mean?

"You are alone here, aren't you?" he asked, and his blue eyes watched her, narrow and shining, like an angry cat's.

"Alone? Yes, except for Sylvia—and Jack Aveling. Why?"

"Well, you're such a howling swell."

And sick realization swept over her. She had dressed for Carlton, Carlton who

might, just possibly might, be coming to lunch. Helplessly, as though some spring that moved her whole mechanism had broken, she half slid, half fell into the nearest chair. Carlton must not come to lunch. And how to prevent him? How?

But the suspicion was dying out of Royston's face. He had not wasted his time since he had come to Hazelbridge. His inquiries had been exhaustive and not too scrupulous. If there had been any other man anywhere, he told himself, a gossiping little hole like Hazelbridge would have had some inkling of it. No, he had nothing stronger to overcome than Margaret's incomprehensible personal distaste for himself. It would be odd, he reflected, if he could not find means to discount that.

But to do it diplomacy was needed, a diplomacy, that, in his present state of feeling, would not be easy. Margaret had said that if he came to Greenshaws she left. And she meant it. Now without any doubt he was coming to Greenshaws, he had, indeed, already come. He must devise some way to prevent her going. There was only one. He set his teeth on his lower lip a moment, regarding her with puzzled, angry eyes.

"Look here," he said at last, "you've got to be reasonable. I'm going to be. Why shouldn't you?"

She stared at him, doubtful and afraid.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean—that I'm going to behave myself. It's worth while now. No one here knows anything about me. I'm going to begin again—and behave myself. But if you are going to turn me down first thing, to run away from me as though I were plague-stricken, well, you're going to make it damned difficult. Hang it all, when a man wants to turn over a new leaf it's a wife's place to help him and not to make it impossible."

"I am not your wife. I never will be again."

"You needn't be." It was the crux of the whole situation. "This place is big enough for us both. I'll have my own rooms if you like. You need never even see me—if you don't want to."

Margaret listened, her breath coming

slow and hard. For already the difficulty of her position was plain to her. She had no money, not a penny in the world but what was Terence's. Her jewelry was simple and worth little, but even if she sold it, the money it would bring would still be Terence's. And there was Sylvia to think of, Sylvia who also had not a penny in the world. Her first wild idea of headlong flight, flight into an obscurity where no one, not even Carlton, could find her, was impossible. Poverty threatened to chain her fast, even to the house where Terence was. At least for the present. Until she should see Carlton. Royston studied her face, pale, cold and inscrutable. It told him nothing.

"Well?" he said at last with sharp irritation. "*Well?*"

"I don't trust you, Terence."

He crammed his hands into his pockets and turned away with a short and angry laugh.

"Nice thing to say to a fellow," he remarked. "A fellow who is trying to do his best, too."

She looked at him, but her eyes held no apology. She had learned the utter superfluity of apologies.

"But have it your own way," flinging out two remonstrative, carefully manicured hands, "think badly of me if you like. I'm used to it. It would be only fair, though, to give me a chance to prove whether I mean what I say or I don't. Not that I expect you to treat me fairly. I never remember the time when you did. Wasn't it often your fault when I went wrong? Didn't you always discourage and hinder me? I know I haven't always been what I should, but by—if I'd had a different wife I'd have been a different man."

There was a little stir by the window and they both turned. Sylvia stood just inside.

"Aunty," she said under her breath. "*Aunty!*"—and at something in her voice, Royston threw back his head and laughed long and loud, laughed till every perfect tooth in his handsome head was visible.

"Bedad an' it is," he said, as soon as he could speak. "Doesn't she look pleased to see me!"

"And who will you be?" he inquired

presently. "Not Patricia's little brat, surely. Why you were a long-legged filly with your mane in two flaxen tails when I saw you last."

"Hel-lo!" It was Jack Aveling, and his voice held strong surprise and very little welcome. Sylvia stood motionless and dumb. Royston glanced at her once or twice with a sort of puzzled amusement. Then he walked over to Aveling and offered his hand.

"You and I will be wanting a second introduction, I'm thinking," he said with the bonhomie with which he could always cover any moment of embarrassment. "You can tack Royston on to my name now."

"Oh!" said Sylvia, when once again they stood outside alone. "Oh!"

Aveling looked at her, curbing his comments with difficulty. He could not curb them all.

"He called himself O'Connor when I met him in London," he said. "Major O'Connor."

"His name is O'Connor, Terence O'Connor. But he isn't a major."

"And he is Mrs. Royston's husband?"

"Yes," returned Sylvia numbly. "We thought he was dead—but he isn't!"—and oh, the pity of it!

"Do you know anything much about him?" asked Aveling, looking away. "I guess she doesn't know as much as I do," he added to himself, as Sylvia answered nothing.

And inside the quiet room, Margaret was slowly realizing that the circumstances of her life were beyond her power to mold. Suddenly she laughed, a helpless, mirthless laugh sadder than any tears. If Carlton came to lunch, well, he must come.

CHAPTER XI.

BITTER FRUIT.

BUT he did not. Midday found him at an outlying farm absorbed in a difficult and complicated maternity case it was impossible to leave. It was late that night before he got back to Hazelbridge, but he came back tranquil and

content. Stebbings was awaiting him in some anxiety.

"Man," he said with a deep breath, when Earle's report, short and technical, was ended, "it's well you handled it instead of me. There's no one but you could have saved her."

"Oh, rot!" returned Earle, but he smiled, well pleased. Once again his position in Hazelbridge was justified. "And what about you," he went on, for here his skill to save was less assured.

Stebbing's shrugged one big, gaunt shoulder under the bedclothes, the other was helpless and numb. He gave a few quick details, details at which Earle dropped his eyes that the old man should not see how grave he thought them. But he knew.

"You'll not leave me, lad," he said presently, and his voice was hoarse and low and not his own. "I'll not trouble you so very long, now."

Earle took his hand and held it. Assuredly he would not leave him. Stebbings's face softened, and his eyes were comforted.

"I'd like Jack to follow me here," he said presently. "The practise is yours, of course, as long as you care to keep it. You've saved it, and it's yours. But you'll take the youngster in when he's ready, won't you? It 'll be a year or two before he is, and there's a little money, mine; you know, that 'll pay for his half share—"

Earle turned with a gasp.

"Good God, you surely don't think—" he began. "This place is Jack's," he went on steadily, "practise and all, and he'll step into it as soon as he's ready, of course. It 'll have to be kept warm for him until he is. I don't know that I can do it myself, but I'll see that some one does."

"And why can't you do it yourself?"

Earle stared. Could he really have forgotten?

"I'm sitting on a volcano," he said brusquely. "Suppose I'm spotted—and denounced."

"Rot!" returned Stebbings quickly. "Who's going to spot you? Is that all?"

"No, there are—circumstances." Ah, those happy circumstances! He flushed and laughed a little, a quick, boyish, half-embarrassed laugh that wiped all the print-

ings of the last seven cruel years from his dark face. "But I'm not leaving you, Stebbings," and the grave and steady promise of his look was more than his words. "I'm here while you want me, all the while you want me, in spite of the circumstances to which I referred, in spite of the risks I run—"

A sound silenced him, the sharp ring of the surgery bell.

"Lord, who's that, at this time of night?" he muttered, for the church clock had long struck twelve. "You go to sleep, old chap. I don't suppose it's anything much," and he ran briskly down the shallow oak stairs.

He lighted the gas in the surgery, slipped back the bolts, and opened the door—and there, in the June dark, stood Margaret.

He caught her arms and drew her over the threshold and at once she drooped helplessly in his hold. Half leading, half carrying her, he put her in the big, shabby, leather-covered chair facing the light where consulting patients sat. The hood of her cloak slipped from her dark hair, as her head dropped helplessly back against it. It was the same long, gray silken cloak she had worn the day he had first seen her, the day she had so passionately prayed: "Oh, God, *don't!* Oh, God don't *let* him!" out in the sweet April woods. Quietly he set about the preparation of the restorative she needed. Then he dropped on his knees before her and took her slim, cold hands.

"When?" he asked hoarsely. For there was no need to ask what had happened. God, who seems, sometimes, to sit so high above the blue heavens that the wildest supplications of the mortals He has made have no chance of reaching Him, *had* let him come back, and Earle knew it.

"This morning." Under the stimulus of the drug he had given her a tinge of color had come back to her lips. "He was the Major O'Connor who—who followed Jack Aveling here."

He listened in silence, oppressed with an odd conviction that he had known it all the time. For the moment he was not conscious of distress, not even of dismay. What had happened was simply the climax of his long expectation.

And the thing that mattered, the only thing that mattered, was the effect it had had on Margaret. As he studied her with deep anxiety, she sat up, a sudden flush on her cheeks, a sudden flame in her eyes.

"I won't stay," she told him in a breathless whisper. "Not under the same roof with him. Carlton, I have come—to you."

It was then that it struck him with a force that sent the surgery lurching and swinging round him, the blank and crushing realization of what this thing meant to him. He stood up, reaching blindly for the high mantel above the unlovely gas-stove. Their plans, ah, those happy plans! He stared down at the woman he worshipped, not aware for the moment of suffering, only of chaos and bewilderment. She leaned forward and took his hands.

"It need make no difference," she said softly. "Oh, yes," as amazement dawned in his eyes, "I know what I am saying. But there are two sides, always, to a bargain. If one breaks faith, the other is released. I have no duty toward him—none. I acknowledge no obligation. Not legally, perhaps, but morally I am altogether free. You see it, don't you? It couldn't be any other way, could it?"

He checked her, almost with horror. She was pleading with him, she, his lady of dreams, justifying, to his superior scruples, the sweetest gift in the world, herself. He stood before her, bowed beneath the bliss of its bestowing, and she found him justification, reasons for not refusing it! He knelt again on the shabby rug and slipped gentle, adoring arms about her.

"Margaret," he begged, "*don't!* I bless you for what you do. You cannot believe conduct of yours could be anything but right to me."

At which she broke down altogether, resting her clasped hands on his shoulder and her forehead on them in bitter tears. Having carried her point at once she changed it, as a woman will.

"Oh," she sobbed, "and I meant to be such a good woman."

"And so you are," with passionate conviction. "So you always must be, whatever you may be driven to do."

She raised herself, shaking her head, even smiling at his sophistry.

"No," she told him softly. "But I think I could have been—if I had been happy."

"So you will be. So you *shall* be."

"No," she said again, and her eyes grew wide and wistful, for though she might persist in her plans she knew better than to think happiness would come of them. "But I won't stay with him, I *can't!*" with sudden passion. "I can't bear it, the horror of him, the constant fear. You don't know what it is like. Oh, you don't *know*," with a little forlorn shake of her head, like a child's.

"I know you cannot live with him and that is enough. But if he has behaved as you describe, if things are as you say, why not get a divorce? You could, easily."

"Not easily. I have neither money nor proof. It is only that I *know*. And look at the time it would take, and the end uncertain, even then. No, Carlton, I have left him. I have come to you just as I am, with no money and"—her low laugh, with a little hysterical thrill in it, rang oddly in the quiet room—"hardly any clothes. What are you going to do with me?"

But that was a question for future consideration. For the moment all he realized was the greatness, the sacredness of her gift. He raised her and they stood together under the flaring gas-jet, lost in the sublime selfishness of a deep and tender love, in all the universe they themselves the only two.

But no man liveth to himself alone. The claim of love, deep and insistent though it may be, is not the only one he must heed. There are others, of duty and obligation and gratitude, of pledges, spoken and implied. The truth of it, in times of normal feeling so obvious, was already dawning on Earle's subconsciousness, more as sensation than thought. On the surface of his mind details showed themselves and disappeared, like trails of floating seaweed in water, trivial, ridiculous, irritating details that yet must be faced and decided.

Margaret had asked him what he was going to do with her. Truly he did not

know. She could not stay where she was, to the amazement and scandal of the village. The Chequers was the only inn in Hazelbridge and all its occupants were long abed. That she should go there was only one degree less unthinkable.

The last train had gone to town two good hours ago, even if she could have traveled with nothing but a silken cloak over her black dinner dress. He glanced at it, faintly dismayed, noted the flash of something green, glittering, iridescent, through its filmy fabric, the gleam of her arms through its transparent sleeves. She caught her breath with a little sound, half laugh, half sob, at sight of his troubled face.

"It's manageable," she said, "really it is. I needn't go like this. I can get something, the few things I shall want. I have the key of the side door." She showed it in her hand. "I can get back into the house that way, it is the way I came out, and Sylvia—"

Her face changed suddenly, dreadfully. Horror, for an instant, smoldered in her eyes, horror at herself. "I—I had forgotten Sylvia," she said.

Dismayed and ashamed she realized it. She had forgotten her, left her to face alone a peril at which she dare not allow even the eyes of her mind to glance. Her hand fell from Earle's arm as she contemplated her own treachery. Between herself and Sylvia there was no tie of blood, for the girl was the daughter of Terence Royston's sister, but the blood tie is as nothing to the bond of such an affection as theirs. In the morning her mind had been full of Sylvia, but as the night drew on every thought had been erased. She had *forgotten* her.

"How could I?" she asked herself under her breath. "Forget her! My little Sylvia! I must go back now, at once—"

Earle's grasp tightened on her arm. To what kind of a hell was she going back, deliberately and open-eyed, for Sylvia's sake? Quietly she released herself.

"Carlton, I must. I daren't leave her. You don't know. I must go back to her."

"Perhaps. For to-night." He agreed perforce, but grudgingly. "And afterward, to-morrow, something must be arranged, something that includes Sylvia—"

"And you?"

There was a touch of quick anxiety in her tone. The question should have been superfluous, but it was not. It was then that full realization rushed over him, chilling the warmth in his veins, crushing the hope in his heart. No plans could include him while the old man up-stairs, the man who had been good to him in his trouble, lay as he was. He evaded, it was all he could do.

"Dear," he said, "all sorts of plans are possible. I have seven hundred pounds—"

"That is *all* you have?"

He smiled.

"I dare say it sounds very little to you, but no man is helpless who has seven hundred pounds. To us it means everything. Rescue for you from your present intolerable position, the power to start life afresh in a new world. Leave Greenshaws to-morrow, you and Sylvia. Go up to London. Under changed names and in modest surroundings he would find you very difficult to trace even if he made the attempt."

"But you will come, too?"

"I can't." It was said and the shame of it overwhelmed him. But it was the lighter shame. "I feel how horribly I am disappointing you, I can hardly bear to tell you—but I can't leave Stebbings. Not as he is now. You know what my desire must be, but I am under heavy obligations. I—I—my duty—"

"And have you no duty toward me?"

He turned and leaned his forehead on the high mantel with a groan.

"Margaret, it is damned hard on me," he said. "Don't make it harder."

She laughed a little, and her laugh had an edge to it. She had unconsciously pictured them running hand in hand, hatless, almost shoeless, for her satin slippers had split on the rough stones of the village street, headlong for the nearest boat. And now he told her that he could not come, pleaded duties and obligations, said plainly and in so many words that if she were bent on running away she must run away alone. Desperately she fought to be fair, to be just, to see things as he saw them. It was very difficult. The only thing she

could see, the only thing that seemed to exist at all, was his refusal. She had offered him all she had, herself, and he told her politely that circumstances compelled him to decline the gift. That was a fact that no duties, no obligations could excuse—to a woman. With grief and dismay he read her feeling in her face. He laid his hands on her shoulders and they tightened into pain.

"Margaret, be reasonable," he entreated. "Everything is manageable if you will only let me manage it."

"Thank you," she said mechanically, "thank you," and the word pierced like an arrow.

"It is only for a time, a little, little time," in passionate self-justification. "He may go any minute—"

"And he may live years."

The quiet statement stunned him into silence, for he might. Then he saw clearly again.

"That would alter things. There would be time, then, to arrange differently. My obligation is for the present, while he depends upon me for every breath he draws, while everything rests in my hands. Margaret, be *fair!* Why should you take it like this? Why shouldn't you go up to London as I ask you and wait until I can join you? It wouldn't be for long."

She turned from him with a slight shiver.

"I am going back—to Sylvia," she said.

A little sound escaped him, of protest and indignation and grief. Yet in any case, since it was impossible to leave her alone at Greenshaws in Terence Royston's guardianship, she must have gone back to Sylvia. That was a thing she had seen for herself. Slowly, with bent head, she made her way to the door. Mechanically he lowered the gas and followed her.

They went through the sleeping village in silence, not touching so much as a hand. The crescent moon lay on its back, a silver fairy-boat asleep on a faint blue sky. The summer stars followed it, paling already to the coming dawn. His happiness had come to him when that same moon was young. How little had he foreseen that it would be dead before its waning. Suddenly his suffering broke hoarsely from him.

"You think I have failed you."

For a moment she hesitated. Then she spoke with gentle coldness.

"Oh, no. It is only that I propose a plan you—you cannot quite see your way to fall in with. And you propose one I—I cannot quite see my way to accept."

He drew his breath sharply, as though she had dashed cold water over him.

"Oh, Margaret, but you are cruel," he said.

Her eyebrows rose in mute astonished protest and her look altered. Was she? To Carlton? It was possible. When they reached the white gate, where he had first kissed her that happy night not yet a month ago, the night when she had almost forced his declaration from him, she turned, and her arms, in their filmy black sleeves, slid timidly about his neck.

"Oh, I don't want to be," she whispered. "It's only that everything is so different from what I thought it was going to be."

He groaned, softly and to himself, as he held her close.

"Margaret, be reasonable," he begged again.

"I will," she promised him with tears, "Oh, I will."

In the morning came a letter. Margaret was doing her best to be reasonable. She wrote:

I have had time to think. I suppose last night I was mad. I must have been or I should not have left Sylvia. You were wise; you always are. But for you, to-day, oh, how I should have regretted. Now I see my way, my only way. He seems inclined to be considerate. Perhaps he means, really means, to be different. I don't know, but it looks like it. He has had rooms arranged for himself, as he promised yesterday. He offers me full and complete freedom. All he asks is that I will give him a chance; that I will not "blast him to begin with" (the phrase is his) by refusing to stay under his roof. For the present I stay.

MARGARET.

He read it twice, taking in its meaning the first time in a flash, the second studying it, phrase by phrase. His face went a little gray when he had finished it. Margaret was at Greenshaws, absolutely at the mercy of a man she both feared and hated, her husband though he was. And in some vague, inconclusive, inescapable way it was his, Earle's, fault.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK. Don't forget this magazine is issued weekly, and that you will get the continuation of this story without waiting a month.



STUNG

BY DIXIE WILLSON

MY mouth is lost,
 My eyes are gone,
 My nose is neither
 Here nor there!
 They all are such
 An awful shape
 They do not fit
 Me anywhere!

My face is like
 A piece of dough—
 And nothing nice
 Is left of me—
 Because the pretty
 Thing I picked
 Out in the garden
 Was a bee!

Temptation of Carlton Earle

by Stella M. Düring

Author of "The Crooked Stick," "The Loom of Life," "The Sword of Damocles," etc.

PRECEDING CHAPTERS BRIEFLY RETOLD

WHEN Carlton Earle, once a prominent London physician, but who had, seven years before, dropped out of sight, came to the little village of Hazelbridge, he had no intention of staying. But on his first day he saw in the woods a woman who oddly attracted him, and when later he met her at the vicar's, he lingered on. She was, he learned, a Mrs. Margaret Royston, a widow, who with her niece, Sylvia Conyers, had taken a house in the neighborhood. Later when Sylvia, while riding with young Percival Penryan, son of the big man of the neighborhood, was thrown, Earle happened to be near, and attended her. In this way he met Dr. Stebbings, the clever old country practitioner of the town, and a friendship grew up that still further bound Earle to the neighborhood. He knew he should go, however, and when one night in the face of a visitor with whom he had talked he read suspicion, he made up his mind to go at once, but as he was leaving he met Mrs. Royston.

Though he knew, considering his past, that it was not the right thing, he allowed her to see his love and acknowledged his own. Indeed, she practically forced the confession from him, believing that it was his embarrassed financial position that sealed his lips. Even when he further confessed to her that he was just out of prison, after a long term for murder, he having killed his dearest friend when that friend was dying of an incurable and frightfully painful disease, she insisted upon his and her right to happiness.

It was his intention, however, to leave the next day, but when old Dr. Stebbings suffered a stroke, he found it impossible to go at once, and gradually he came to accept his happiness, though feeling all the time that he was doing wrong to allow Margaret to risk the disgrace of his possible exposure as an ex-convict. However, they did decide to conceal the engagement for a time, and fortunately, for, without warning, her husband, an adventurer and gentleman of fortune who had treated her outrageously and whom she loathed, suddenly appeared on the scene, the report of his death in Brazil having been false.

Nearly crazed by fear and horror, Margaret besought Earle to take her away, but his duty to the old doctor held him.

CHAPTER XII.

AT TWENTY-ONE.

"YES, father!"

"I wanted to see you, my boy."

Percival was silent. So he had been given to understand. He "saw" his father twice a day always, spending a few embarrassed moments with him morning and nights—moments punctuated by the old gentleman's "don'ts" as he fidgeted miserably about, unable to find any point of contact or sympathy between himself and his parent.

But this was different. This was an interview to which he had been formally summoned at eleven o'clock in the forenoon. He waited, wondering anxiously what it might mean. His father watched him, his keen eyes under his bushy-gray brows just a little wistful.

Percival was the son of his later middle life, for he was nearly sixty when the boy was born. He was also the one tenderly cherished treasure of his father's heart.

But no one would have surmised the affection between father and son.

"It's about—that girl," he said brusksly

This story began in the All-Story Weekly for July 26.

at last. "You are—as determined as ever?"

"Quite," returned Percival firmly.

"In spite of all that has happened?"

"What has happened makes no difference to her."

"It makes a good deal of difference to me," remarked the old man grimly; "but I suppose that doesn't matter."

Percival said nothing. In a way it made a good deal of difference to him, also. No one could have regretted more than he did Royston's untoward resurrection, nor have been more convinced that people who were safely and satisfactorily buried were in honor bound to stay so. But though it made a difference, a horrible difference, to him, it made none to his determination to marry Sylvia.

"You turned twenty-one, if I remember rightly, some few months ago," his father went on, "and are now, of course, a man." He dropped his eyes to hide the twinkle in them. "You owe me no further obedience, neither are you in any way bound to respect my wishes."

"I never said so, father."

"No, you have only thought so. Don't mistake me; I don't ask it. I don't ask even consideration. What I have to say to you this morning I would have you weigh entirely from the standpoint of your own advantage—or otherwise—"

"But, father, I must always consider you. And to a certain extent respect your wishes."

"Must you?" returned the old man softly. "Now I wonder! And to what extent, Percival"—his eyes rising with a sudden gleam—"would you be willing to respect my wishes?"

"How can I tell," countered the boy quickly, "until I know what they are?"

Mr. Penryan nodded, playing absently with the gold pencil-case in his thin, ivory-white fingers. The boy's attitude was reasonable, more reasonable than he had dared to hope. Suddenly he looked up.

"Sit down," he said sharply, "and don't fidget. It's time you had done with school-boy tricks. I want you to understand me, if it is in any way possible for twenty and

eighty to understand one another. I have no desire to play the cruel parent. I have nothing against the girl.

"She is educated and a lady, and so that my son chooses an educated lady for his wife I don't ask what rank in life he chooses her from. She might be the daughter of a plate-layer on the railway for all I care."

Swift amazement dawned in Percival's eyes and died as swiftly out again. His father's sudden and dramatic conversion to democratic ideals meant the drawing of an effective contrast, no more. As his next words proved.

"But I would like him to be a respectable plate-layer," he went on crisply. "Now, this fellow Royston isn't respectable. I have suspected, as you know, both him and his premature decease. I never quite believed in it; it was too evidently a relief to his wife. I have never spoken to—that charming woman, but I have studied her with an interest she little suspects. Especially since her husband came back. Now, no one—*no* one," with emphasis, "who has been buried three years can safely resuscitate himself. He is bound to be an inconvenience to somebody. But he need not be quite so profoundly inconvenient as her husband is to this poor lady."

"How do you know?" asked Percival quickly; for Margaret's confidence to him regarding Dr. Earle lay often and heavily on his mind.

"I cannot help but know. One has only to look at her. Her bearing, her expression, her very face, is different since that fellow turned up again. At first, I acknowledge, I was not quite sure. My lifelong theories were a little shaken. I thought he was going to be a little pleasant disappointment, the brilliant exception that proves the rule. But he has not been at Greenshaws more than a month, and already my worst misgivings are justified.

"He has been asked out to dinner twice, and each time has signaled the occasion by getting drunk. And the servants up at Greenshaws are talking. Already two of them have left—in a hurry. The village is all abuzz. The man is a rotter, a rotter

all through—the kind of rotter who can't be left alone in a room with a decanter—or a woman. Is that the sort of relative you are anxious to assume?"

For a few moments Percival sat silent, silent and dismayed. For it was not only the village that was talking; he had had hints from other quarters that things were not right at Greenshaws. Yesterday he had been impelled by vague misgivings to put a few questions to Sylvia, a pale and embarrassed Sylvia, who fenced and evaded, and declined in spite of pressure to give him even a hint of what life at Greenshaws was really like, now that Uncle Terence had come home. To reply was very difficult, yet a reply of some sort was imperative. His father, courteous and patient for once, was waiting for it.

"I am marrying Sylvia, not her relatives," he said at last.

"In marrying Sylvia you inevitably marry her relatives. I am not saying 'don't.' I am only begging you to pause and consider before you do."

For a moment Percival sat profoundly still. Then he looked up.

"At present I can't, father," he said. "She won't have me."

Mr. Penryan dropped back in his chair with a little sound of relief he could not stifle. It was good hearing—and it astonished him much.

"Why?" he inquired crisply.

"She says I am not old enough."

"Dear, dear, dear!"—and he hid his amusement with difficulty—"what a truly remarkable reason. To one like me, I mean, who considers youth the most wonderful and the most beautiful thing in the world. And at least it is a disability that mends with every day. Can't she see that?"

"I don't know," with a touch of *brusquerie*. "At present she seems to see nothing but the fact that I am only twenty-one. When she marries, she tells me, it will be some one grave and reverend—and I am not; some one who can guide and control her—she won't let me; some one she can look up to and revere—it seems with me she can do neither."

"Dear, dear, dear!" said the old gen-

tleman again. "I wonder who is responsible for an ideal so mischievous. The lives of half the women in the world are ruined by it. But I am not sorry it is there. It results in my plans, and perhaps the happy consummation of your wishes, being far less opposed than I feared. In fact, they jump together in a quite surprising fashion. I wonder if you will have the sense to follow my advice. I assure you, if you really wish to marry this girl, it is the very best that could be given you."

"And what is it, father?"

"That you should go away for a twelve-month, right away, where no communication with her is possible. Go to Africa, lion-shooting; to Borneo, head-hunting, if you like. Any money you want, in reason, shall be given you. If your affection is the real thing, Percival, it will stand the test of a year's absence.

"In that case, I give you my word I will raise no further objection to your marriage. If it isn't the real thing—well, my boy, in my opinion, so much the better for you. As far as she is concerned, propinquity, it seems, has not done its usual work. Your constant presence has advantaged you nothing. Try what a little absence will do."

Percival sat silent and glum. A year, and of silence. The thought of it sickened his soul. The years are so long when one is only twenty-one.

"And if I—won't, father?"

"If you won't—if, as I fear from your tone—your intention is to do your best to persuade that pretty child to marry you now, and you are unfortunate enough to succeed, then I wish you clearly to understand that I have no idea of helping you to make a fool of yourself."

"You mean—"

"I mean that I have had two wills prepared—one leaving all I have to you, as is just and right so that you prove yourself a good and dutiful son; the other enriching various institutions in which I take an interest. After our conversation of this morning I shall burn one of them—it rests with you which. And the one I burn will not be rewritten."

Percival listened in silence. It never occurred to him even to protest. Other fathers could sometimes be persuaded, melted, brought to see things from their sons' point of view. But not his father.

"How much money have I of my own?" he asked at last.

"You have what your mother left you. It brings in about two hundred and forty a year. You could, of course, if you chose, marry on that. But don't forget what the poet says:

"Love in a hut, with water and a crust
Is, love forgive us, cinders, ashes, dust."

Percival moved an impatient shoulder. He had heard the quotation before, and he did not believe it. Twenty-one never wants to hear the truth.

"One of the most pathetic things about youth," Mr. Penryan went on presently, "is its utter inability to profit by the experience of its elders. All its experience it must gather anew for itself. Well, my boy, I have said all I want to say. Go and gather yours."

A piece of advice which, for Percival, needed no urging. He twitched his cap off its hook in the hall, never even pausing in his stride, and walked straight up to Green-shaws.

CHAPTER XIII.

PAP DECIDES.

PERCIVAL found Sylvia seated on a stone seat in the garden. A Dorothy rose in full flower, a canopy of rich and glowing pink, hung over it, a stately sheaf of white lilies rose at either end. The girl had a basket at her feet and some lacy trifle in her hands.

She looked up with a smile at Percival's greeting, and moved her muslin skirts to make room for him beside her on the seat, but his coming did not assuage for one moment the fury of her industry. He watched her with frowning brows and growing irritation.

"For Heaven's sake, put that thing down and listen to me a moment!" he broke out at last, at which Sylvia raised her eyes as

blue as the cups of the campanulas standing in a smiling row all down the border.

"How can I listen to you when you say nothing?" she demanded pertinently.

"I'm going to say plenty," returned Percival with gloom. "I have something to tell you—and I hope you won't like it."

"What is it?" inquired Sylvia tranquilly.

"I'm going away, right away, to India or Africa or somewhere—*anywhere*, so that it is far enough—for a year, a whole year!" He paused, that the tragic fact might assume its full significance.

Sylvia's hands rested just a moment from their labors. Then she lifted the one with the needle in it and rubbed with the back of it her rosebud lips, for they felt a little stiff and cold.

"Well, of course, I'm sorry, Pap," she said presently. "I shall miss you a good deal."

"I don't believe it," with bitterness. "I don't believe you're sorry, either. If you were you would stop it."

"But how can I?"

Percival seized the little hand with the needle in it. It pricked him smartly, and he never even noticed it.

"If only you would marry me, Sylvia, I wouldn't go," he said.

Sylvia laughed.

"But I won't," she returned easily. "I've told you so, over and over and over again. I don't want to marry you. I don't want to marry anybody—yet."

Percival listened, silent and glum. It was, of course, exactly what he had expected her to say, but that did not make it any the more pleasant hearing. And it was so short-sighted on Sylvia's part. She was throwing away not only his happiness but her own.

Desperately he tried to prevent so tragic a mistake—for Sylvia.

"I do wish I could make you listen to me," he said, "as much for your sake as for mine. I'm sure I could make you happy, quite sure. If I wasn't I wouldn't dare to marry you. But I *am*. There isn't any one, anywhere, who would care for you and indulge you and understand you like I should. If I thought there was I'd *give* you to him. I love you, Sylvia—

I love you well enough to be glad to see you married to another fellow, if I thought he would make you happier than I should."

The little hand with the needle in it, idle now, rested just a moment on his arm.

"You dear!" said Sylvia softly, and her eyes were misty.

"But I don't think it, I never could! That's why I am going away. Because I hope, when I've gone, and you find out how beastly dull things are without me, you'll know, perhaps better than you do now, just how much you care for me."

At which Sylvia sighed, quite openly and without pretense.

"Life will be cold-boiled veal for me, without you, I know that," she told him. "But if the only way to prevent it is for me to marry you, well, I don't see that you can do anything else but go. Because I couldn't marry you now, Pap. For one thing, your father would oppose it; and for another—"

She broke off. Not for worlds would she have hinted at that other. If the faintest suggestion of it reached Percival, nothing, as she very well knew, would induce him to go away; and to have him away just now, much as she would miss him, would be something of a relief to Sylvia. But the existence of a second obstacle escaped Percival's notice, the first being insurmountable enough.

His earnest endeavor for some months had been to convince Sylvia that there was no serious opposition to their marriage, and that if there was it did not matter—the two halves of which position were a little difficult to reconcile.

Sylvia had again refused him, definitely and distinctly, under the impression that he was laying at her pretty feet all that, as Mr. Penryan's only son, was justly his. If she knew that he could offer her but a modest two hundred and forty pounds a year, supplemented by his own very problematical earnings, it would be impossible to hide from her not only that there was serious opposition to their marriage, but that it mattered very much.

"So I'm going," he told her gloomily. "I think I'm going to-morrow!" If that

didn't move her, he reflected, nothing would! "And I sha'n't write, Sylvia. You won't hear from me once."

"Sha'n't I?" she returned, impressed at last. "Not all the time? But, Pap, if I want you—"

He leaned forward and dared to slip a light arm about her.

"You think you *will* want me?" in eager inquiry.

Sylvia drew back.

"I didn't mean that way," she said soberly.

For a long, long while after Percival had left her Sylvia sat on, her work forgotten. She did not for one moment believe that Pap had gone now, this moment, as he had told her, to Africa or India, or wherever it might be that he was going. She would see him again to-morrow, of course, as she had seen him on all the to-morrows since she and her Aunt Margaret had come to live at Greenshaws.

And suppose she did not! Suppose he really had gone!

"I couldn't have prevented it," she told herself forlornly. "I couldn't leave Aunt Margaret now. I believe my being here makes things better, just a little better, for her. I believe if I wasn't here—"

She broke off, refusing to face even in her own thoughts what might quite possibly happen at Greenshaws if she was not there to support with all her girlish might Aunt Margaret's fight for decency.

For what life was really like at Greenshaws, now that Uncle Terence had come back, was the one thing that Percival must not know.

Percival strode off down the village to see Dr. Earle. He found him hurrying through the early lunch that a doctor with a large and scattered practise finds imperative.

"No, thank you, I've only just finished my breakfast," he said as Earle hospitably offered him his second chop. "Besides, I didn't come down to batten off you; I came to tell you something. I'm going away."

"Indeed," said Earle politely, and did his best to hide his genuine dismay. For with Percival away, the last chance went of Sylvia's accepting the destiny the whole

world seemed to have planned for her, the destiny that had everything in its favor and only one thing against it—her own ridiculous, unfounded, and most disappointing objection to it.

“Yes. Father wishes it. And do you know, really, this time, I believe he is right. You see, Sylvia, won’t look at me now. As a husband, I mean.” Earle dropped his eyes. It was a little difficult to look at Percival as a husband. “But perhaps if I were to go away for a bit, if I were to let her quite alone for—for some months, she would appreciate me a little better.”

“As she ought,” agreed Earle cordially, and the boy nodded in whole-hearted concurrence.

“So I’m going,” he went on. “I’m going now. I’ve said good-by to her. She doesn’t know it, but I have. Earle, you’ll look after her!” His voice broke a little. “That’s what I came down to ask. I’m not happy about things up at Greenshaws. That fellow Royston is a rotter—a rotter and a bounder and a *cad!* One doesn’t know what may happen there. At any moment I might be needed. You’ll let me know if I am, won’t you, if I can be of any use whatever? I’ll see that you always have an address that will find me, and I may not be quite so far away as Sylvia thinks.”

Earle rose and offered a cordial hand.

“Leave it to me,” he said gravely. “I’ll do my best. And I may be very glad to send for you, Penryan; very glad indeed.”

“Then you are not comfortable about things either?”

Earle hesitated.

“I have heard nothing definite,” he said at last.

Which very fact was causing him the most acute anxiety. It was a month now since Royston had come back to a world that had genuinely amazed him by its want of welcome, and during that month he had seen Margaret once, met her by accident in the village, and exchanged with her the polite and meaningless courtesies of a quite casual acquaintance.

He had not heard from her at all. No hint had reached him in all that time of what life was really like at Greenshaws. On the happenings in her household and the

happiness—or otherwise—of her life with her husband, Margaret had been silent. And silence, sometimes, can be more eloquent than any words. Through that month Earle had lived doggedly on from day to day, doing his work and waiting. He dare not go near her; he could not write to her, not, at least, the kind of letter that could fall safely into Royston’s hands. He could only wait until she wanted him and should send for him. It would not, he told himself, be long.

CHAPTER XIV.

“OH, GOD! WHY?”

“STEADY, Duffie!”
Dr. Stebbings’s old gray horse shook his ears, threw his whole weight upon his collar, and mended his pace. The sky hung low and black over a world ghastly and unfamiliar in color. A little fitful wind, hot from the mouth of a furnace one minute, cold as ice the next, drifted in puffs over the hedges into the deep lane. The air seemed to have in it neither life nor refreshment. A storm—a bad one—was imminent, and Duffie and his driver were a long way from home, a fact the significance of which Duffie appreciated quite as much as Earle did.

Earle clicked his tongue at him and shook the reins on his broad and comfortable back, but Duffie needed no urging; he was doing his best already. Earle glanced at the sky and shrugged. Before the storm burst he might, if he were lucky, make Fyfield and shelter. He would not get farther, that was certain.

He did not even get there, though already the gleaming weathercock of the village church was rising over the hill. As Duffie plodded up the rise, a black cloud over them bulged in the middle like a brobdignagian bladder, split with a roar, and the lightning was all round and the rain was over them.

Both man and horse were streaming when Earle pulled up at the door of the Fyfield Arms. The wettest hostler ever seen unbuckled Duffie’s harness and hurried him into shelter, and Earle handed

his dripping coat to the landlord and felt his shoulders and shirt-sleeves.

"Hasn't gone through," he remarked with satisfaction. "Give that coat a good shaking, Perry, and if you've got a kitchen fire—"

"I have a light coat with me," said a lazy, good-humored voice at his side. "Like to put it on while yours dries?"

Earle turned sharply. Lounging in the doorway of the tiny coffee-room was a stranger. And yet not quite a stranger, for he had certainly seen him before. Where, he asked himself, *where* had he seen that handsome, debonair, undeniably attractive face before?

"Thank you very much," he returned, and the stranger lifted his offering from the back of a chair near by and helped him into it with the most cordial good nature.

"Saw this coming an hour ago," he went on, quite evidently glad of any one to speak to in the darkness and gloom of the silent coffee-room. "I was down in the water-meadows, fishing."

Earle looked up sharply. Fishing! That meant he was probably a visitor at the manor, for its lord preserved every bit as carefully as did old Mr. Penryan. Was it at the manor he had seen him?

"When I saw what was coming I scuttled up here," the stranger went on. "Looks like having to stop here a bit, doesn't it?"

"Yes. I'm ordering lunch," returned Earle. "Have to utilize my time, you know."

"Good idea, very. If you don't mind, I'll join you. Jove, I could do with it!"

So the two lunched in amity together on excellent cold beef, new bread, and country butter, and undeniably Earle enjoyed his the better for the companionship of his new acquaintance. For he was a man well read and well traveled, having that close acquaintance with men and things Earle's last few blighted years so conspicuously lacked. His outlook on life, also, was touched by a certain bitter humor, and his comments were shrewd. But he progressed too rapidly. Before the meal was over he began to tell tales that made Earle stiffen and sit straighter in his chair. Why, he asked himself, *why* should this man imagine that

every other man was made in his own image?

So that, moment by moment, Earle's first sense of attraction faded. He was more than relieved when the meal was over and his modést cup of coffee arrived. With it Perry brought in for his companion a foaming tankard of old October, brown and creamy, strong as port and quite as heady. To Earle's dismay, his companion laced it liberally with brandy.

"Lord, man, don't do that!" he said with horror. "Do you want to kill yourself?"

"Kill! It won't hurt me," laughed the stranger. "I'm well seasoned. Oh, Lord, look at the weather! What in the world can one do on such a day? By—there's a pack of cards. Come and play piquet with me. You said you played a minute ago."

"I'm not playing with you if you're going to drink," Earle told him brusquely.

"But I'm not—not another drop. I never drink when I'm playing. Come on. Half-crown points won't hurt you."

"Sixpenny," returned Earle firmly. If he were going to be rooked, as was highly likely, it should not be for much, he told himself. And a game of piquet, of which he was very fond, would pass half an hour very pleasantly.

"Lord," laughed the stranger, "there's caution for you!" and the two sat down.

Earle lost, though he was the better man, but it seemed to him simply the fortune of the game. Watch his opponent's play as closely as he might, he could not detect anything that called for protest. Yet he was not quite comfortable. When the rain rushed away like a curtain that is drawn aside, when the sun came out with a glorious burst and the last thunderclap rattled among the hills, he rose.

"You're not going yet, are you?" said the stranger.

"Must," returned Earle. "I've fourteen more patients to see before I can turn homeward."

"And where's that?"

"Hazelbridge." At which his companion stood up, crammed his hands in his pockets, and laughed till it was sheer delight to hear him.

"Hazelbridge!" he echoed. "Why, you're our own village sawbones! I *thought* I knew your face. And you're a devil at piquet; you're better than I am. Oh, my dear fellow, in charity's name, come up to Greenshaws sometimes and have a game with me."

Earle drew sharply back. What he replied, how he got away, he could never remember. He had been hobnobbing with the man he hated more than any other man on the surface of the whole round world—Margaret's husband.

That night, when Royston was dressing for dinner, there came a low knock at his door. It was Margaret, looking superb in a dress of softly shaded pinks and reds that changed one glowing color for another every time she moved, and gave her a peculiarly exotic and flowerlike beauty. His eyes blazed. She had never yet come to his rooms. What did it mean? The first faint sprouting of the olive branch? The first plank in the bridge that should in the end span the gulf between them? Roubier, his valet—a handsome, dark-eyed Provençal—emptied his face of all expression and went deftly on with his work. Margaret watched him for a moment or two, standing silent just within the doorway.

"Send Roubier away, will you, Terence?" she said at last. "I want to speak to you."

"Get out," ordered his master curtly. "Down-stairs, mind. Oh, rose of all the world," he hummed softly, as Roubier silently effaced himself; and if Margaret had cared for his admiration, she had it in fullest measure.

But she did not even seem aware of it as she stood intent on snapping the bracelet at her wrist, and quite evidently both embarrassed and distressed. At last with an effort she looked up.

"It was about Roubier I wished to speak to you. That was why I asked you to send him away," she said.

"Then will you be good enough to fasten these sleeve-links for me, since I can't possibly do it for myself," he returned, and his eyes shone a little. It would bring her nearer to him, and he knew the value of a lessening distance. "I'm helpless without

Roubier," he went on. "If you deprive me of his services, the least you can do is to offer your own."

But Margaret did not move. What she had to say was very difficult. To say it bluntly and brusquely was the only possible way.

"I'm sorry," she returned, a little breathlessly, "because what I have to say will, I fear, deprive you of his services altogether. I want you to send him away."

"Good Lord! Why?" demanded Royston, dismayed indeed.

"Because, because—" Suddenly the color flew all over her face. She came a step or two forward. "Terence, he *must* go," she insisted. "He—isn't the sort of man that *can* live here. He is behaving abominably."

"Oh!" returned Royston tranquilly. "How?"

"In the village. I have had Cowden up to see me—Cowden, the miller's head man, His wife—he complains—"

"Lord, is that it?" And Royston laughed a little. "Well, you know, Louis is a proper lad. If Cowden's wife has the good taste to prefer him to her lout of a husband—"

"Terence, don't take it so, *please*. That sort of thing isn't tolerated in England; you know it isn't. We owe it to—the people about us not to let men of lax morals— If it were one of the younger women, if he would court her openly and marry her honorably—"

"He can't, poor devil. He's got a wife already—a wife that's treating him deuced badly, too." And his look was heavy with meaning. "What can you expect when things are like that?"

"I expect common decency"—with a touch of fire—"and I look to you to enforce it. Terence, really, he can't stop here for his own sake. You have no idea how high feeling is running. They're threatening all sorts of things. If he goes down the village, he risks the horse-pond—or worse. You will send him away, Terence?"

"No, I'm damned if I will. There isn't another man in England to equal him, nor in France either. Why, I'd be lost without Roubier."

"But if something happens to him?"

"Nothing will, he's quite able to look after himself. Souse him! I'd like to see them try it. If Cowden wants to souse any one he'd better souse his wife."

"But you—we—are responsible—"

"Oh, rot!" he returned sharply.

"Then you won't do as I ask?"

He took a moment eying her somberly.

"Margaret," he said at last, "if you'll ask differently I'll do anything you want me to, anything in all the world."

But she drew swiftly back and her hand slid behind her and found the handle of the door. His appeal had not touched, it had only frightened her. His face hardened as the door opened and that slim, rose-colored figure seemed to melt into the dimness of the corridor.

"Hang it all, she's my wife," he told himself. "How long does she think I'm going on like this?"

He rang for Roubier, who arrived with suspicious promptness, but said nothing to him of Margaret's remonstrances. Terence dined, now, with Margaret and Sylvia every night; dined with decorum and a touch of ceremony that were beginning to sicken his very soul. Decorum, he told himself, was all very well so that it advanced him with Margaret, but when, after two months of it, he stood exactly where he had stood at first, it was, to use his own expression, "a bit too thick." To-night he was conscious of rebellion, deliberate and intentional. Even Margaret could not expect him to keep promises that led nowhere and resulted in nothing.

"If I'm not up-stairs by midnight, come down to the drawing-room and fetch me," he said curtly to Roubier when his toilet was finished.

"Yes, sir," returned Roubier stolidly, and shot a quick look at his master's broad back, for he knew what the order meant.

But at first to all appearance he was much the same as usual, a little more openly bored, perhaps, at Sylvia's efforts to find a topic of conversation that should interest him, a little inclined to study his wife with eyes that held a hint of offense and more than a touch of gloom, but not openly aggrieved or aggressive. It was at

dinner Margaret noticed that he seemed to have set what lately had been his steady abstemiousness on one side.

He drank openly, almost defiantly, mixing wines and whiskies with a fine disregard of consequences. Before the meal was over his eyes were bright and his tongue loose. Very soon a curious whiteness crept about Margaret's lips and a sharp-edged stain of color into her cheek. But the wild-rose bloom on Sylvia's never deepened by a shade, and her deep, soft eyes sought her uncle's with nothing but a puzzled wonder in them. Steadily Margaret sat through that nightmare meal. Remonstrance was worse than useless, only endurance was possible. Soon, soon it would be over, and then Terence would betake himself to the billiard-room and play with Roubier, who was an expert, till the small hours.

But to-night he did not. He turned to Rybank, moving velvet footed about the room.

"Send the tantalus into the drawing-room, Rybank," he ordered, "and a siphon or two."

Margaret started, but she said nothing.

"Play to me, Sylvia, dear," she suggested, almost at once. And Sylvia went obediently to the piano.

She was a finished if rather a mechanical performer, carrying out conscientiously all she had been taught, and far too modest to attempt interpretations of her own. As a rule Margaret soon tired of her efforts. To-night she seemed insatiable. So Sylvia played all the evening while Margaret sat absorbed in her embroidery and Royston, in a deep chair opposite her, drank steadily.

"Aunty, I'm tired," said the girl at last.

"Yes, darling, and it's bedtime," returned Margaret with a sigh of relief.

"She isn't a baby," remarked Royston roughly. "Let her go to bed when she likes."

"But I like to go now," Sylvia told him with a smile. "I have to be up quite early to-morrow. I am going with the Briscoes to a picnic."

"Then come and kiss me good night," and he stood up a little unsteadily. "Margaret won't, so you must."

But Sylvia hesitated. Uncle Terence had teased and played with and petted her, but he had never asked her to kiss him before. She glanced at her aunt for guidance, but Margaret's face was stony and immobile, there was no guidance in it. And there was no reason, Sylvia told herself, why she should not kiss her own uncle. Also she had a vague but profound conviction that Aunt Margaret would suffer for it if she refused. Emphatically she did not want, but there seemed to be no way of escape. And it was nothing, she told herself, nothing. Every girl kissed her uncle. Shyly she raised her sweet face.

Royston caught her to him in a close and painful hold, kissed her again and again, hard and cruelly, as no man but only a brute would kiss a pure and gentle girl. Then, with a push, he sent her reeling from him and laughed at Margaret with a malicious, almost devilish glee. As Sylvia, shaken and terrified at she knew not what, almost ran from the room, Margaret rose.

"Terence!" she said.

"It's your fault," he returned thickly. "Do you understand? *Your fault!* You behave as you are behaving, and you've got to take the consequences."

"Oh, why was not he dead, dead, *dead?*" Margaret whispered as she leaned in her white nightdress against the frame of the open window in the silence and the dark, and all the scents of summer from the garden below wafted over her. "Oh, God, *why* did you let him come back?"

And what would happen in the morning?

CHAPTER XV.

ROYSTON GOES—AND RETURNS.

IT was the unexpected that happened in the morning. Margaret rose late, she had not slept till daylight. As she dressed the large car slid round to the portico and Roubier came out carrying a portmanteau. Sticks and umbrellas strapped in a traveling rug followed it, a second portmanteau. Then Terence came out, looking as fresh as the morning, a light

coat over his arm. He took his seat in the car, and Roubier swung himself up beside the chauffeur. They were gone, both of them. Where?

Biggs brought a message back from the station.

"The master asked me to tell you, ma'am, that he has gone away for a little while. He traveled this morning to London, but he wished me to tell you that he is not stopping there. He will write and let you know where letters will find him, and he may be away some weeks."

He had said a good deal more than that, but Biggs, being the better gentleman of the two, did not repeat it, even in the servants' hall.

"It's a blessing he has gone," remarked Mrs. Henderson, the housekeeper, with fervency. "We're a lot happier without him."

"Blessing!" echoed Rybank, and his face was tense and pale. "The hand of the Lord is in it. It's *time* he went."

"Dear me, Mr. Rybank, do you think the Lord concerns himself all that?" asked pretty Jessie Tylor, the under-housemaid. "I don't! And if he has interfered I wish he wouldn't. I like it better when the master's at home."

Rybank fixed her with a hard and glittering eye, but flippancy was a continual grief to him. But even as he glared at her his look softened. He had lost a little daughter in infancy, who, had she lived, would have been Jessie's age.

"You don't mean all you say, my girl," he returned gently. "At least I wouldn't like to think you do."

And Margaret dared to breathe again. It was a respite, a truce during which she might gather the forces of her soul and arm them against an unendurable evil. The house seemed purged and purified, the very winds of heaven blew cleaner for Royston's absence. Perhaps, *perhaps* he might never come back.

That hope, weak and trembling at first, grew and strengthened as the days lengthened into weeks and she had no news of him. Was he likely, she asked herself; was he *likely* to live a quiet, rural existence at a place like Hazelbridge while he had

money for the asking, and London and Paris, Hamburg and Vienna enticed him to its spending? Day by day her hope grew higher. Light and happiness came back to her glance, spring and buoyancy to her attitude. One thing only troubled her during this time of emancipation and liberty, Sylvia's look of extreme delicacy. When Royston had been away nearly two months she wrote to Carlton Earle.

"I should like to know what you think of Sylvia," she told him. "Don't make a professional visit of it. I do not want her to think she is being discussed, she would at once try to be something like her old self. And I want you to see her as she really is. Will you come to lunch as you used to do? She would think nothing of that and be natural."

"Come to lunch as you used to do"! The color rose darkly in Earle's face as he read it. What did that mean?

To all appearances it meant nothing. Margaret was his courteous and friendly hostess, and no more. He glanced at her sometimes, a trace of wonder in his eyes. Was this, indeed, the woman who had lain in his arms that night, that lovely night in June when the whole world had seemed too small to hold their happiness? Who a week later had come down to the surgery crushed and despairing, silently beseeching his aid in the unendurable evil that had befallen her? It was difficult to believe it. The only cloud on her horizon to-day seemed to be her anxiety about Sylvia.

"Yes, she has altered," Earle agreed, as once again they sat side by side on the stone seat below the terrace. "But I don't think you need be alarmed about her. It may be nothing but the heat. Of course one always a little distrusts the rose and white and gold and blue of a beauty like hers, still—Is she fretting about Pap?" he inquired suddenly.

Margaret's brows drew together in grave consideration.

"If she is she isn't aware of it," she returned at last. "I hoped it might be so, but she told me only yesterday it was a relief to be without him."

"Which sounds to me just a little too pronounced," smiled Earle. "See how

subtle I am growing. I really believe, if that boy has the sense to stay away his full twelvemonth—"

He broke off. Margaret was not listening. Rybank was coming along the walk with letters on a salver, and her every faculty was absorbed in the effort to await them. Earle felt through every nerve the tenseness of that waiting, the rigid control of her hand lest it should snatch her steady determination to be cool and natural and slow and uninterested. But the effort left her marble-pale, and Earle loved her.

"Margaret," he breathed hoarsely, "I can't bare to see you—so afraid. What are you afraid of?"

She smiled, white lipped, and said nothing. He was not coming back, or at least there was no letter to say so. He was not coming back—yet.

"Oh, Margaret," he said, and his voice shook, "why wouldn't you let me help you in the only way that was possible?"

Her eyebrows rose a little, and the eyes under them. "Lonely, moonlighted eyes, tender and deep as the shadow that flies over lonely, moonlighted mountain meres," grew pensive and puzzled. For, indeed, she did not know. All she knew was that it had been an impossible thing for herself and Sylvia to go to London and slowly but surely eat up Earle's seven hundred pounds.

"I don't suppose many of us could say exactly what are the ties that hold us to a certain line of conduct," she said at last. "They may be slender, almost too slender for finding, but if there are enough of them we are held as fast as *Gulliver*."

"Then you intend, you really intend—"

She moved sharply.

"I don't know," she returned. "It depends upon how he behaves when he gets back. So far he has been—endurable, but he is disappointed. He expected results—results that will never, never materialize. He—he taught me to hate him. He can't expect me to love him again now, just because he wants me to. I don't—I can't. I *never* shall. When he realizes that—He let himself go the last night he was at home," she went on somberly. "I don't know what it will be like when he comes back.

If he does it again Sylvia must be kept out of his way."

"And what about you?"

She smiled.

"I don't matter. Nothing that he could say would pollute my ears, they are seared hard. But Sylvia— He kissed her," she finished very low, and shuddered.

Earle sat straight up, his blood running like fire through his veins. That lips like those should kiss *Sylvia!*

"Fortunately he frightened her," Margaret went on steadily. "There will be no difficulty, no difficulty whatever, in persuading her to keep out of his way."

"But Margaret, this can't go on."

Once again her fine brows rose. Unconsciously she shook her head.

"I don't know what else we are to do," she said. "Oh, Carlton," and she laughed a little in helpless perplexity, "why *wouldn't* she marry Pap?"

Carlton shrugged. If a woman won't she won't, and there's an end on't.

"You'll have to take her in hand," Margaret went on. "Talk to her. Persuade her. She would do anything that you thought right."

"I wouldn't persuade any girl to marry anybody living," returned Earle with unexpected decision. "I've seen too much of what it means."

"But you'll help me to keep her out of Terence's way? Then begin now," as Earle signified his profound agreement. "Take her out occasionally with you in your gig. Make a companion of her. Teach her to expect you. Interest her in what you do."

But Earle shrank a little.

"Will she care that I should?" he asked.

"Care!" and Margaret laughed. "She'll be too happy for words," she said.

Then began for Sylvia wonderful days. Once a week always, sometimes oftener, Dr. Stebbings's shabby gig, with Duffle Gray between the shafts, would stop at Greenshaws, the shock-headed village lad Earle took with him to open gates, gates, in the more rural part of his district, being a problem to negotiate and a weariness to his soul, would be sent up to the house with a message. And a few minutes later

Sylvia, soberly arrayed and with a luncheon basket in her hand, would come flying down the drive to spend a long, long day in the open air with Dr. Carlton Earle.

It was the oddest and most bizarre of companionships. The attraction he had for Sylvia, as he was fully aware, was entirely intellectual, their conversation exclusively concerned with the things of the spirit. It filled Earle, his heart seared, his soul well-nigh crushed with experiences of which Sylvia had not the most remote conception, with a grim and bitter amusement. Sometimes his sense of tragic unfitness for his pedestal wrung remonstrances from him.

"Why should you think, my little girl"—Earle was never more sedate and middle-aged than when he had Sylvia beside him—"why should you think that I am the right person to decide points and solve problems of this kind?" he asked her once, when a knotty point in ethics had taxed both their powers of solution. "Your own instinctive sense of right and wrong is a far more reliable lamp to your feet than any crude ideas of mine."

"Oh!" Sylvia twisted her hands hard together and her blue eyes sought his with a pathetic, to Earle an almost dreadful confidence. "I should always be so sure that what you suggested must be best, that what you decided *must* be right."

Earle shook his head in something like dismay.

"I'm a blind guide, I'm afraid," he said, "but"—and his voice dropped to an almost terrible earnestness, "may God punish me as I should deserve if ever I am a treacherous one. I'm not the man you think me, little Sylvia, but I will be if only you will go on."

"Oh," said Sylvia again, "no one knows better than I do what you are. I don't think, I *see!*"

And so a lovely September passed and October came in with a touch of sharpness. And with the colder weather came a marked improvement in old Stebbings.

"I'm on the mend," he announced one day when Earle, coming in tired from his long day's round, to his surprise found him up and sitting in the big, shabby chair by

his bedroom fire. "I believe I'm going to get over it. After all there's no reason why I shouldn't, I'm only sixty-three. Bring your dinner up here and have it with me, old man, and we'll have a wee drappie to celebrate."

"That you won't," returned Earle, laughing, "whisky for me, water for you. That's the way of it while I'm in command. I've seen the improvement in you for some while, Stebbings," he went on gravely, "but, but you've been a long time recognizing it. Jove, old man, but it's good to have you up and looking something like your old self again!"

So Mrs. Grayson, quite flustered with the importance of the occasion, brought up dinner for both of them. It passed in a whirl of problems dear to the medical mind, and Stebbings's tongue was his own again, and his brain as clear as his partner's. Toward the end of the meal he alluded to a subject Earle knew he would never have touched upon if he had not been "on the mend."

"I've been thinking," he said, "naturally I've been thinking, as I lay helpless there, about that theory of yours that a man ought to be allowed to put a period to his sufferings, if they are hopeless and he feels so disposed."

Earle flushed a little and his eyes warmed.

"Then I wish you hadn't," he returned, and his voice was quick with feeling. "It's astonishing," he went on, "what a different complexion theories wear when they are applied to—your ain folk."

Stebbing's laughed a little, but he looked gratified.

"Oh, well," he deprecated, "but all the same there's a good deal in it. Of course there are difficulties in the way. Life! I think the value we put upon it is occasionally ridiculous. Sometimes it is a curse. But if you once strike at its sacredness you open the door to all sorts of horrors. Yet we don't hold it altogether sacred now. We kill the criminal. We are even barbarous enough to decide national quarrels by battle, by the wounding and maiming and killing of thousands of innocent and unconsulted youths. We cannot claim a right

with one breath and deny that we have it with the next. If it is right to kill in war it is right to kill, for just cause, in peace. I would kill those who are hopelessly and incurably ill. Yes, I *would*. It is the truest mercy. I know what most people would say if they heard me, that I was lost to all that is best and highest in humanity, that I had neither sympathy nor pity, that I recognized no law of mercy and cared only for—that basest of results, the utilitarian. But it is not so. In my opinion my way is the more truly humane. I would arrange safeguards, of course."

"How? What would you do?"

"To begin with I'd make quite certain that death is the wish of the patient himself and not of those about him. What I claim for a man is the right to lay his life down *himself*, should he desire to do so. That's a very different thing from giving some one else the right to take it from him. And I'd safeguard him, as I say. For instance, I wouldn't leave him in the hands of his own doctor. I'd have two independent men to decide things—men appointed by the State. As soon as a patient made up his mind that he wanted to die and his relatives agreed that it was better he should, I would let his doctor send for those two. Should they agree as to the desirability of a speedy termination, I am postulating to begin with that the case is hopeless, I would have their report laid before the Home Secretary. On his license both patients and relatives should make a declaration before a magistrate that release is desired. And upon this declaration, legally attested, being forwarded to the proper quarter, I would have a third physician, also appointed by the State, empowered to put a painless end to useless agony."

"It's pretty formal. And your supposititious patient isn't entirely safe even with all that. I have known relatives, burdened, as they call it, by a long and wearisome illness, who would make any poor wretch glad to die and get away from them and their complaining. How will you stop that sort of thing?"

"No one can. But—"

There was a knock at the door, and Mrs. Grayson entered. Held daintily in the cor-

ner of her apron between a black finger and thumb she carried a plate, and on the plate lay a note for Dr. Carlton Earle. He opened and read it. It consisted only of four words, but it changed the face of the world for him.

He has come back.

CHAPTER XVI.

PIQUET.

YES, he had come back so ill that Margaret stood shocked and white at the sight of him, so ill that he had to be carried up the steps under the great, square portico, so ill that at first she believed there were not many days left to him to spend under his own roof. A nurse was with him and a strange man servant, Roubier, evidently, having deserted him in his need. His rooms, by his own orders, had been kept in constant readiness for him. Thither he was taken, helpless and half insensible.

And when a man lies under the shadow of death's wing as palpably as did Terence Royston, no woman who has once been his wife, if she is a woman at all, can see him left to the perfunctory care of paid attendants. Margaret had no love left for him. Bitter and deep was her memory of his many sins against her. Yet she took command of his sick room as a matter of course, and spent herself in his service.

But if she had hoped for anything in the nature of gratitude, even for the decency of formal acknowledgment of her ministrations, she must have been wofully disappointed. He never even flung her the civility of a "thank you." And when his clouded brain cleared a little and connected thought and coherent speech were possible, he exhausted his ingenuity in devising ways to annoy and humiliate her and his vocabulary in the endeavor to find fitting epithets to fling at her.

"Look at her!" he would say. "Wouldn't you think her the sweetest and most delightful of wives! Is she? No, by—" and then would come a long recital of her crimes and shortcomings, ending in a storm of vituperation and floods of tears.

Generally Margaret endured both in silence. Sometimes, when his innuendoes and insinuations were a little more vile than usual, she would turn, pale-lipped, to the nurse with a quiet, "Will you please go down-stairs, Benson." And Benson would go, muttering wrathfully, and once more Royston would be arraigned before the bar of the kitchen parliament and would promptly have been hung, drawn, and quartered had its powers of punishment been equal to its desires.

Through it all he declined to see a doctor. He knew what was the matter with him, he said, and he knew how to get well again. And Margaret, noting the improvement in him day by day, forbore to rouse him to fury by urging it. Rest, good food, and the absence of excitement and evil living would, it was plain, soon restore him to his usual self.

But if the days of his prostration were bad the days of his convalescence were infinitely worse. They passed in an alternation of yawning boredom and bursts of exasperated profanity that made French, his new man servant, tighten his lips and look reams of dumb protest. For French was a stolid and respectable Briton, who might have been presented to his master by Fate as the most complete antithesis possible to the late lamented Roubier.

Oh, how he missed Roubier! No one could tell stories like Roubier—or amuse him by the recollection of escapades, more or less reputable, in which both had taken part, or sing songs or play cards like Roubier! Oh, if he had had some one, any one, with whom to play cards—and not for counters!

Margaret would have played with him had he desired it, though she was not the kind of woman to whom cards appealed. But she was a mediocre hand, and, anyway, there was no fun in winning her money. He had given it to her, and, if he chose, as he did not scruple to remind her, he could take it all away again. He had not hesitated to play with Roubier. Roubier was a knowing old bird with a well-feathered nest, and Royston had taken a malicious pleasure in recouping himself at the card-table for his many robberies. But even

Royston could not play with any of his present household.

He was sitting one evening in early December wearing out his soul for the want of something to do when a brilliant idea occurred to him.

"God, what a fool I am!" he cried suddenly. "Here am I, wearying, aching, sick for want of a game, and there's the best piquet player I've come across in years not a mile away. Send for the village sawbones!"—and he brought his hand down on the little polished table in front of him with a smack that made Margaret start. "You're always worrying me to see a doctor. I'll see him! Send for him now. Tell him I'm ill, lying at death's door. Tell him anything that ever you like, only get him here, somehow. Send for him, I tell you. What are you standing there for, looking like Lot's wife in all her glory? Send for him *now*."

But Margaret never moved. The pillar of salt itself could not have been stiller. Her husband—and Carlton!

"But"—she said at last—"when I urged you to see some one I meant a physician, a specialist, not an ordinary, village—"

"You said a doctor—and he is one, isn't he? Good Lord, what a woman! Worries me for weeks to do a thing, and as soon as I agree objects to my doing it. Here, you needn't bother. I'll see to it myself." And, helping himself by chairs and tables, for his weakness was still profound, he made his way over to the electric bell and pressed it long and viciously. Jessie Tylor, the under-housemaid, answered it.

"Hello, pretty one," he said, staring at her, "this isn't usual. What does it mean?"

"French is out, sir," explained Jessie, blushing beautifully, "and Manners is lying down with a headache."

"Good, I hope she'll never get up again," returned Royston with a short laugh. "Here, p'tite, see that a groom takes this down to the village at once," and he scribbled a hurried note. "I want the doctor. What's his name? Earle? So it is. Tell him it's urgent, he's to come at once. What do you send me a gargoyle like Manners for"—turning on Margaret as Jessie went

out—"when there's a girl like that in the house?"

"I have nothing to do with the maids and their duties. You should speak to Henderson, not me."

"Damn Henderson!" returned Royston violently. "Aren't you mistress in your own house?"

Earle got the message in the middle of his dinner. It was urgent, it was in a masculine hand that he did not know, and it brought his heart into his throat with a sudden gasp of terror. Margaret! It must be Margaret, or why should her husband write? What—*what* had happened to her? He pushed away his plate and almost ran up to Greenshaws.

And Margaret herself met him in the hall, a little paler, a little more willowy than she used to be, but with a gentle smile in her somber eyes, well and unharmed. The relief of it was so great that he caught at the corner of the great hall eupboard to steady himself.

"I—I thought it was *you*," he said hoarsely.

"Come in here!" She opened the door of the morning-room and put him with gentle force into her own chair, for he was badly shaken. "Oh, Carlton, I am so sorry! I had no idea he would frighten you." And for a moment her hand rested like a benediction on his hot forehead. "It is Terence. He wants you to play piquet with him. It seems you did once at Fyfield—"

Earle interrupted her with an abrupt movement and an indescribable sound oddly compounded of indignation and fury. He had suffered half an hour's agony because Terence Royston wanted to play piquet with him!

"Then—is no one ill?"

"No one but Terence. And he is getting better. And inaction tries him so. There seems to be nothing that he is strong enough to do—nothing, at least, that he cares to do except play cards!"

Once again he silenced her almost abruptly. For his whole soul revolted against this thing that he was asked to do. To sit and drink, for Royston would certainly want him to drink, and play piquet, and chatter, and "hobnob" in pretended amity with a

man he hated as he hated Terence Royston! He was not built that way, he told himself.

And yet the whole house, even the atmosphere of the pretty room in which he sat, with its wood fire, its shaded lights, its plentiful flowers, was redolent of something strange and threatening. The very air of Greenshaws was evil now that its master had come back. Was it not as well that he should know something of the currents flowing strong and sinister under the placid surface of life there? Banished, as he had been lately, shut out altogether from the companionship of the woman he worshiped, he had felt his ignorance, his helplessness acutely. Was it not advisable to make good his footing at Greenshaws, even at the expense of friendship, or what would pass for friendship, with its master?

He pondered it, his look, steady, tender, and wistful, on Margaret's face, that dear face with the shadowed eyes, the new, faint lines about the gracious mouth that told such terrible tales. And she was watching him, mutely understanding, deeply sympathizing with the struggle in his mind. It seemed to him that her look held a trace of appeal. One thing—and one thing only—would render it possible for him once again to hobnob with Terence Royston.

"Margaret," he said, "would it make it any easier—for you?"

She hesitated, for she knew what she was asking of him.

"It might," she conceded slowly. And then terror seized her, sudden terror whence and of what she could not have told. "Oh, Carlton, I ought not to have said that!"

"Why?"

She was silent a moment, very straight and very still, and it was as though an icy hand, heavy with caution, were laid upon her. "It is dangerous," she said at last.

Earle laughed shortly.

"Are you afraid I shall do him a mischief?" he demanded. "I certainly shall—if he is rude to you where I am."

"No. I am afraid he will do you what you call a mischief. You do not know what he is like, how violent and irresponsible. If you say something he does not quite like, if things go wrong with the game, anything might happen—"

She broke off with a slight shudder, and to Earle came a dreadful understanding. She was afraid, not only for him but for herself. *Anything* might happen! The words had a wider significance than she would have had him realize. He rose. At all costs he must establish—and keep—his footing at Greenshaws.

"Will you take me up?" he asked.

What was it that came to her as she turned at his request? A dread. A foreboding. A premonition? She turned, putting out her hand so that her fingers rested lightly against his chest and stayed him as he would have followed her.

"Carlton, I won't. It is—not advisable. I'll tell him that you could not come, that you have no time for card-playing. I won't take you to him, *I won't.*"

He took the slim hand and held it in a close, hard clasp.

"Dear, you must, now," he said.

She made no further protest, only led the way up the curving stair, her soft, silken dinner-gown clinging about her, her whole spiritual force absorbed in confronting and denying the sense of peril, foundationless, hysterical, absurd, that seemed to palpitate about her. It was not there, she told herself. There was no reason for its existence, therefore it did not exist. She raised her head and stepped resolutely, confident and reassured. It was Earle's feet that lagged.

For no mental state is more contagious than fear. And swiftly, subtly, Margaret's fear—fear of she knew not what—had communicated itself to him. On the threshold of Royston's room it was as though something actual, something tangible, barred his entrance, something definable, almost visible, whispered audibly of peril and forbiddance. Consciously, deliberately, Earle defied it.

"Go on," he said, almost sharply, as Margaret paused uncertain, her hand on the door. She opened it and went in.

Royston greeted his new medical man with a shout.

"So you've come, then, you—after all," he said.

Earle drew a chair forward, sat down and studied the wreck opposite him. It was noticeable that he did not shake hands.

"Well, of course," he returned a little curtly, "I could hardly disregard such a summons as you sent me. I'm ready to do my best for you, of course."

But Royston flung himself back in his chair and exploded into picturesque profanity.

"Lord, man, not that way!" he protested. "I don't want you to look at my tongue and feel my pulse and poke me in the abdomen and all the rest of the solemn flapdoodle. I want you to *play* with me, piquet, like we played that day at Fyfield."

"You'll understand one thing," interrupted Earle, "either I come here as your recognized medical adviser or I don't come at all," whereat Royston flung irritably away from him and was silent.

"Get me something to drink, Margaret," he ordered presently. "I'm as dry as a lime-kiln. And none of your confounded barley water, mind you. All right"—turning sullenly on Earle—"have it your own way. You can send up your damned pills and potions, if you like. I'm not obliged to take 'em."

"And you'll understand that if I play piquet with you it's as a recognized part of my treatment, because it is advisable that you should have change, recreation of some kind."

It was the purest sophistry, aimed at the silencing of his protesting sense of decency, and he knew it. Royston stared.

"Lord, man, what a fuss!" he said irritably. "I sha'n't care to play at all directly."

Which, Earle discovered, somewhat to his surprise, was not what he wanted. To be near Margaret, to see how things were really going with her, had become an imperative necessity. To it he was ready to sacrifice even his sense of decency. He drew the little silver box holding the cards toward him with a smile.

They played till midnight, Margaret passing softly and unobtrusively in and out the while. Royston would have played till morning, but Earle was firm.

"You're not fit for it," he said at his patient's protests, "and if you were, I am not. I've got my work to do to-morrow and I'm going."

"Lord, I feel better!" Royston told him. "It's done me good. You'll come again, old chap—to-morrow?"

"No, not to-morrow. I can't spare the time. I'll come the day after, if you like."

"Like!" echoed Royston irritably, "of course I like."

Earle laughed a little, nodded and left him.

Margaret was waiting for him in the hall. She smiled a little wanly.

"Thank you," she said softly, and that was all.

After that the two played regularly three times a week—Earle always a little silent, a little grim, but not without interest in his game. He never pretended friendship for Royston; he did not try to hide his intolerance, indeed his detestation, of a good many of his ideas. The result was an odd one.

"Jove, old chap," Royston told him again and again. "I like you. You're as straight as they make 'em. I may not be quite straight myself, the circumstances of my life have rendered it impossible, so far, and I suppose to be a bit shifty has become a habit. But I like a fellow that is straight. I don't think you like me, though. Gad, one would think you hated me sometimes the way you look at me! I believe you do."

"I hate the things you say," Earle told him bluntly, "often."

"Oh, if that's all," returned Royston, much amused.

And his own liking was not only proof against, it seemed to thrive on Earle's curt outspokenness. The evenings on which he did not come were to Margaret one long misery, her relief at the sight of him refused to be hidden. For the gratitude in her dark eyes Earle would have sacrificed his sense of decency ten times over.

And, at least, he saw her, if it were only for a few moments, every second night, touched her hand in conventional greeting, searched with anxious questioning the veiled eyes that told him nothing. Never by even a look did he try to cross the barrier her husband's return had raised between them. No word passed that the whole world might not have heard. There was no treachery, Earle told himself, even if treachery to

Royston had been possible in relations so correct as theirs. It was the old story of fires driven underground.

And no suspicion, not even the most remote, dawned upon Royston that, had he not decided upon his own resurrection just when he did, Margaret and Earle would have been man and wife. Instead, his ideas took a course as odd as it was unexpected. His liking for Earle inclined him sometimes toward confidences. He would, for Earle's benefit and to his wondering horror, dissect, and not without skill, a soul, or what had once been a soul, wholly given over to evil. The fact that he shocked his companion lent piquancy to the process. Once his attempted unravelings of his obscure spiritual processes touched Sylvia.

"I don't know how it is," he said a little plaintively one night, his fingers laid lightly about the stem of his wine glass, his clear blue eyes widened and wistful. "I suppose I must be about as bad as they make 'em—but I *hate* what is generally known as a good woman. There's that little Sylvia now. Spotless as a lily, isn't she? I'd like her heaps better if she wasn't. I haven't any of the ordinary reverence for that sort of thing, it just irritates me, irritates me past bearing. I'm afflicted, positively afflicted, with the desire to—well, you'd say, to smirch. I can't help saying things. I've said quite a few things lately, just by way of experiment. This morning I said—" and he told him what he had said.

Earle sprang to his feet, overturning the card-table, sending the cards in a scattering pale shower half across the room. Royston's glass flew out of his fingers and shivered musically into a hundred fragments on the hearth. Never till that moment had Earle understood what the word anger might mean. It swept over him, white-hot, the righteous fury of the man whose best instincts are outraged.

A wild impulse to slay, to utterly destroy this polluter of the wells of life, shook him to the core of his soul. Never before had he felt the primitive impulse to kill, but now it took all the self-control he had to hold his hands from crushing the life out of the startled scoundrel opposite him. No weapon would he have needed, his bare

hands and his indignation would have been enough. But the moment of madness—it was madness—passed. It was not his to slay, only to scorn.

"You devil!" he said below his breath. "You *devil!*"

Then he turned and went half blindly out, and Royston's rich and hearty laughter followed him.

"Gone on little Sylvia!" he chuckled, slapping his thigh in huge delight. "Gone on little Sylvia—a dry old stick like that! Well, I *am* damned!"

Margaret came quickly from her own room as he stumbled down the stairs. He stood a moment, holding to the carved newel of the banister and breathing hard.

"Margaret," he said hoarsely at last, "I—I sha'n't have to come here."

CHAPTER XVII.

OUT OF TEMPTATION.

"THAT'S the master's bell," said Manners with a sigh.

"I'll go," said Jessie, jumping up.

Manners nodded, gratefully acquiescent. There were two long flights of steps and one short one between the kitchen and the master's room, and Manners was anemic. Mr. Rybank leaned his fine hands on the spotless deal of the great kitchen table, and with keenly questioning eyes regarded the pretty maid deftly laying a small tray.

"And why should you do Manners's work?" he demanded. "It's Manners's duty to wait upon the master, not yours." Jessie tossed her head and bridled.

"I don't see that it has anything to do with you, Mr. Rybank," she said, and no one else in the house dare have said as much. "It's Mrs. Henderson who decides what's my work and what's Manners's—not you."

"Well, anyway, here's the beef-tea," said cook crisply. "And you mind your tongue, Jessie, and mend your manners. That's not the way to speak to Mr. Rybank."

"Bring your tray and I'll give you the brandy," said Rybank gently, for a coldness between himself and Jessie made life salt and arid as the plains.

Flushed and a little sullen, Jessie followed him with her tray into his pantry at the back of the great hall. He lifted down from a shelf a bottle of liqueur brandy and filled from it a tiny gold and white glass. But he did not give it to her.

"Jessie," he said, and his voice was wistful and low, "you know I'm a true friend, don't you? You know that anything I may say is said in your best interests and with a single eye to your immortal welfare. You'd believe, wouldn't you, that if I did take upon myself to advise you it would only be as I'd advise and caution a girl of my own."

"Why, yes, Mr. Rybank," she replied, more impressed than was quite to her liking.

"Then don't you be quite so ready to wait upon that devil up-stairs!"

He spoke with sudden fire. His eyes glowed in his thin, ascetic face. "Why do you want to go near him? Why can't you let Manners do her own work and you keep away from him?"

Jessie shrank, for the old man's look was fierce, almost threatening. She would not have believed that Mr. Rybank ever could have looked so. Then indignation and anger sent their crimson all over her.

"I don't know what you mean," she said. "I'm not interested in the master, one way or another. I only thought I'd help Manners a bit. She often helps me."

"Well, so you say. Of course it's all right, if that's all, Jessie."

"If that's *all*, what do you *mean*, Mr. Rybank?"

"I don't know that I mean anything, my dear," returned Rybank, dropping suddenly back into his usual mildness. "Only that your soul is precious in the Lord's sight, Jessie, and in mine."

Jessie laughed, but a little uncertainly. The glimpse she had had of quite another Mr. Rybank than the gentle idealist of every day had astonished and startled her.

"Oh, Mr. Rybank, but you are funny," she said. "My soul! Why, I don't even know that I've got one."

Rybank listened, astounded. *Funny!* Was it so that the deepest and gravest concerns of one generation appeared to the next?

"Don't you ever think about it?" he asked.

"Haven't time," returned Jessie brightly, relieved that the conversation had shifted its channel.

"Because it's worth thinking about," he assured her somberly. "We are here for seventy years, more or less, but we're in eternity for ever and ever!"

"Yes, we're a long time dead, everybody says so," agreed Jessie cheerfully. "And I've been a long time talking here. If the master's beef-tea is cold when he gets it, we shall all of us know all about it, sha'n't we?" and Jessie caught up her tray and ran up-stairs.

Rybank's gaze followed her, gravely concerned. Was it "all right," even as she said? *Was it?*

The sickening doubt persisted, like a ghost refusing to be laid. His look, the look of the man who yearns over souls and takes little account of bodies, followed her all that day. Jessie knew the symptoms, she was "in for a sermon." When the spirit moved Mr. Rybank to speak, he would speak, however unwelcome to his hearers his words might be. Escape was impossible. There was nothing for it but to sigh and submit.

So that when tea was over in the servant's hall that evening his grave, "Sit down again a moment, Jessie. I want to speak to you, my dear," did not surprise her. With the best grace she could she complied, and one by one the other men and maids slipped away. Every one knew what was toward—Mr. Rybank was about to "wrestle" for a soul and preferred to be alone with its possessor. But his opening sentence was not quite what Jessie expected.

"You'd like to be a good girl, wouldn't you, Jessie?"

"Ye-es," she returned soberly. "But I think I am. I never tell lies, it's cowardly. And I always keep my promises, don't I, now, to the very letter? And I'm honest—I never took a pin's-worth that wasn't justly mine. And I'm straight as the day. I've got to be, because of mother. I would not disappoint mother—turn out different from what she thinks I am—no, not for all the world."

"But do you read your Bible?"

The girl pursed up a doubtful, most whimsical little mouth.

"It's so uninteresting," she said.

"And pray, Jessie?"

"Who listens?" she inquired shortly.

"No one, as far as I can tell."

Rybank's breath caught a little, but he persevered.

"You'll pray with me, won't you, Jessie?" he said. "Maybe you'll realize then that some one listens."

Jessie plumped obediently down on her knees beside the rush-bottom chair she had sat on at tea, put her elbows on the seat, made a cup of her hands, rested her round chin in it, resigned herself and prayed with Mr. Rybank. It is a painful truth that the religious phraseology of one generation is almost unintelligible to the next. It was with a touch of wonder in her eyes and no sort of response in her heart that Jessie listened to Mr. Rybank's impassioned supplications. Half he said was meaningless to her. He talked about seas of glass and golden crowns and great beasts of unimaginable ugliness. He described himself—and Jessie!—as yearning and athirst for a heaven in which these things were commonplace, and from whose dreadful and intolerable glare the girl turned away dazzled and afraid.

He talked about smoking flax and brands snatched from the burning, and his fellow suppliant listened, puzzled and utterly unmoved. To her it was, as a religious performance, bizarre, almost ridiculous. She simply endured till his sounding periods came to an end. Then she jumped up with a relief she could not hide. Rybank studied her, his eyes dark with concern.

"You feel better, don't you?" he inquired wistfully at last.

She gave him a flashing, bewildering, wholly unregenerate smile.

"I felt quite good before," she told him.

He shook his head a little when she had gone.

"She's young," he said indulgently. "I mustn't expect too much of her. She's only young."

And for Margaret the December days as they passed were peaceful. Terence was

amenable—almost, for him, amiable. He neither swore at nor insulted her. He ceased to exact from her constant attention, unwearying ministrations, seemed, in fact, rather to suffer than to wish for her society. He forbore to afflict her with endless complaints of unutterable boredom, even though Earle, shocked at the glimpse he had had into the depths of his own heart, no longer came to play piquet with him.

"He is getting better," Margaret told herself—"better in every way."

Life, even with Terence, might prove endurable if the improvement went on.

So that the shock was the greater to find Rybank waiting for her in the hall as she came down from her husband's room one misty winter morning.

"Might I ask for a few moments, ma'am?" he said, and on her acquiescence followed her into her room.

"I have to request, ma'am, that Jessie Tylor be dismissed."

Margaret leaned back in her chair and regarded him with slightly darkened eyes. His manner was deeply respectful, but his words were plain. He stood looking down, his fine, thin hands clasped lightly in front of him, Rybank, whose very attachment to her establishment stamped it as irreplaceable. But this morning he was gravely exceeding his duty.

"Isn't that more a matter for Henderson than for you, Rybank?" she asked. "If Tylor is not satisfactory, Henderson has every authority to deal with her."

Rybank hesitated, coughed discreetly behind his hand and spoke without raising his eyes.

"I believe, ma'am, as far as her work is concerned, Mrs. Henderson finds her quite satisfactory."

"Then is it Tylor herself who is not happy here? If she wishes to leave she has only to say so."

Rybank hesitated again a long and dreadful moment.

"Tylor herself does not wish to leave, ma'am," he said at last.

"Then, if Mrs. Henderson is satisfied with her, and Tylor herself does not wish to leave, why, Rybank—"

Rybank looked up, and his eyes, deep-set and full of light, silenced her. Presently he spoke in a voice hoarse with feeling:

"I beg you to believe, ma'am, that I understand my own presumption and—and impertinence, and deplore it. I think you know that at heart I am your deeply respectful servant, that I would not overstep limits I have always been taught to recognize and obey—without reason."

Margaret listened, cold and still. This from her butler, her trusted and trustworthy butler. For inevitably she understood.

"Send her to me," she said steadily.

But Rybank never moved and his eyes implored. In spite of herself Margaret answered their anguished appeal:

"No, Rybank, I am not angry," she said.

Quite simply he took out his handkerchief and wiped away tears.

"And may I ask at the same time, ma'am, for three days' leave of absence for myself?"

"Certainly, Rybank, certainly," she returned. It occurred to her to wonder, when the door was closed, how long she had gone on saying, "Certainly, Rybank, certainly."

Half an hour later a feminine whirlwind in pink-print rushed into Rybank's pantry.

"She's sent me away! She's given me my month's money and ten shillings a week board-wages and she's sent me *away!* She won't give me any reason. She says she's no fault to find. She'll give me a good reference and help me in every way to get another place. But, all the same, I've got to *go!*" she panted.

Rybank said nothing—only the wine-merchant's circular he had been marking shook in his hand. Certainty sprang into Jessie's wet eyes.

"It's *you,*" she flashed. "I thought so before, and now I'm sure of it. Oh, I hate you, tale-bearer and spy!"—and the girl covered her face with her hands and burst into wild weeping.

Still Rybank said nothing. There was nothing for him to say. All too often there are daggers in young hands, and the hearts of the old lie defenseless before them. To Jessie he would be, forever, just a tale-bearer and a spy.

So Jessie "packed," to the accompani-

ment of sniffs from the older servants and glances of awed admiration from the younger. "You'll write to me, Jessie, wherever you are, won't you?" said Manners in a kind of ecstatic whisper when she came down-stairs to say good-bye. Jessie stared.

"How do you mean—wherever I am?" she demanded. "I'm going to Exeter to my mother."

Biggs, the chauffeur, drove her to the station to catch the morning express up to town. And on the same up-platform, to her extreme surprise, stood Mr. Rybank. He came up to her as though nothing whatever was wrong.

"I happen to be going to London by this train, also, Jessie," he said. "We may as well go together," and Jessie's indignant refusal died on her lips. There was a big box of chocolates in Mr. Rybank's hand and all the illustrated papers under his arm. After all, as they must go in the same train, they might just as well go together. It was only as far as Paddington.

But at Paddington his embarrassing and most unwelcome escort persisted.

"Come along, my dear," he said briskly. "I believe the Exeter train is in. We have only just time to change platforms."

Jessie gazed at him over her modest box. It was of yellow tin, its uncertainties of hasp and hinge reinforced and fortified by a length of unblushing clothes-line. And the destination of that box had not been Exeter.

"I—I'm not going on yet, Mr. Rybank," she said. "I'm breaking my journey. I—I have friends in London that I want to see. I'm not going on by this train."

But Rybank's long, thin, cool fingers fastened like a vise on her wrist.

"Jessie, you *are*. You are going to Exeter now with me," he said. "Come along! I have your ticket!"—and before she could protest again a waiting porter had slapped a label on the yellow tin box, trundled it off on a truck, and she and Mr. Rybank were following it.

And this was too much. Jessie sat back in her corner, tears of disappointment hopping openly down her pretty cheeks and fury blazing in her pretty eyes. Mr. Ry-

bank read his paper with calmness and deliberation. Jessie's unashamed anger mattered nothing. They were going express to Exeter.

Charlcombe Chase, where Jessie's mother was lodge-keeper, was five miles from Exeter, but Mr. Rybank was nothing, if not thorough. He had telegraphed forward and a "fly" was waiting for them. Also, Mrs. Tylor had been advised of their coming. She was waiting for her girl by the lodge gate, and her kind, good face looked anxious and worn.

"Jessie," she asked the moment they were alone in the tiny bedroom they must share together, since Mr. Rybank had been cordially invited to occupy the only other one, "what does it mean, Mr. Rybank, a bringing of you home like this?"

"He's an interfering old thing," said Jessie with bitterness, and that was all she would say.

But in the morning she seemed to have forgiven him. She was as bright and gay as ever; she indulged him with all the little attentions he loved—she even called him "Uncle Joe." On the whole, for Rybank, as much happiness was crammed into that one day's holiday as would have fairly filled a fortnight.

The great topic of conversation, of course, was Jessie's future. But it seemed almost to have arranged itself.

Mrs. Besborough, the housekeeper up at the Chase, was, it appeared, in want of a still-room maid and would certainly "jump" at Jessie.

"To be sure, she has a bit of a temper, and she don't allow no followers. An' it's a bit quiet up at the Chase, for the fam'ly isn't at home more 'n two months in the year, at most. But Jessie 'll be well taught and well cared for and near me. An' that's the great thing, isn't it, Mr. Rybank?" said her mother.

To go up and be still-room maid to Mrs. Besborough, who had "a bit of a temper" and allowed no followers! It might have seemed a rather gray destiny. But Jessie, to all appearance, was quite resigned.

Altogether, it was for Rybank a golden day. As he stood smoking on the step that night in the misty December moonlight his face was tranquil and his mind at rest. Almost audibly a sentence from an old, old Book rose to his lips, a sentence rich with the realization of a good work accomplished, a trembling hope fulfilled:

"And he delivered the young child to its mother."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK. Don't forget this magazine is issued weekly, and that you will get the continuation of this story without waiting a month.



RECONCILED

BY MARX G. SABEL

INDIGNANTLY I left,
 Contritely I return
 For love has wrought a miracle,
 And I have learned

That love can know no evil,
 And love can know no wrong;
 For love is great as God is,
 And love is strong,

And not a thing for judgment,
 Nor yet a thing to weigh,
 But something sweet and wonderful
 Naught can gainsay!

Temptation of Carlton Earle

by Stella M. Düring

Author of "The Crooked Stick," "The Loom of Life," "The Sword of Damocles," etc.

PRECEDING CHAPTERS BRIEFLY RETOLD

WHEN Carlton Earle, once a prominent London physician, but who had, seven years before, dropped out of sight, came to the little village of Hazelbridge, he had no intention of staying. But on his first day he saw in the woods a woman who oddly attracted him, and when later he met her at the vicar's, he lingered on. She was, he learned, a Mrs. Margaret Royston, a widow, who with her niece, Sylvia Conyers, had taken a house in the neighborhood. Later when Sylvia, while riding with young Percival Penryan, son of the big man of the neighborhood, was thrown, Earle happened to be near, and attended her. In this way he met Dr. Stebbings, the clever old country practitioner of the town, and a friendship grew up that still further bound Earle to the neighborhood. He knew he should go, however, and when one night in the face of a visitor with whom he had talked he read suspicion, he made up his mind to go at once, but as he was leaving he met Mrs. Royston.

Though he knew, considering his past, that it was not the right thing, he allowed her to see his love and acknowledged his own. Indeed, she practically forced the confession from him, believing that it was his embarrassed financial position that sealed his lips. Even when he further confessed to her that he was just out of prison, after a long term for murder, he having killed his dearest friend when that friend was dying of an incurable and frightfully painful disease, she insisted upon his and her right to happiness.

It was his intention, however, to leave the next day, but when old Dr. Stebbings suffered a stroke, he found it impossible to go at once, and gradually he came to accept his happiness, though feeling all the time that he was doing wrong to allow Margaret to risk the disgrace of his possible exposure as an ex-convict. However, they did decide to conceal the engagement for a time, and fortunately, for, without warning, her husband, an adventurer and gentleman of fortune who had treated her outrageously and whom she loathed, suddenly appeared on the scene, the report of his death in Brazil having been false. Nearly crazed by fear and horror, Margaret besought Earle to take her away, but his duty to the old doctor held him.

Meanwhile Royston's caddish conduct became worse and worse, until he suddenly left, only to return in a few months a physical wreck from dissipation. In spite of his actions, however, Margaret, conceiving it her duty as a wife, set about nursing him back to health. It was then that Royston, in a fit of perversity, and because the doctor could play cards, insisted upon Earle attending him, and it was thus that Earle's greatest temptation came upon him. He held the man's life in his hands—the life of an utterly worthless brute and bounder, who not only separated him from all he loved, but daily made Margaret's life a hell.

And then one day a maid in the household was forced to leave, under circumstances at least suspicious. Rybank, the old butler, himself took her away, and, greatly against her wishes, delivered her to her mother in another town.

CHAPTER XVIII.

KILL! KILL!

IT was on the morning of the day Rybank spent at Charcombe in Devon that Earle, driving out toward Fyfield, saw a little figure in blue waiting for him by the white gate of Greenshaws. The weath-

er was cold and raw, with a bitter north-easter blowing, but Sylvia wore no wrap of any kind.

She stood, her golden hair raying out in the keen wind, her lovely face looking nipped and cold and blue.

Earle drew up at sight of her.

"What's amiss?" he inquired curtly.

This story began in the All-Story Weekly for July 26.

The girl came up to the gig and laid a light hand on its shaft.

"I th-thought I should c-catch you," she said, stammering a little in evident excitement. "I knew you went to Fyfield today. It's Aunt Margaret. She has cut her cheek, and it won't stop bleeding. Will you come?"

"Cut her cheek?" echoed Earle, springing down.

But Sylvia's little feet, in their ridiculously inadequate shoes, were already flying up the drive, leaving shapely little water-logged prints behind them. Earle could only hurry after her. At the foot of the steps he caught her and held her fast.

"Sylvia, tell me what has happened. Tell the *truth*," he said.

The girl hesitated; then impulse mastered caution.

"It was Uncle Terence. He threw his cup at her, and it broke and cut her cheek."

But Margaret lied heroically.

"It was my penknife," she said. "I was opening letters, and it slipped—upward. Really I don't quite know how."

"You mustn't talk," said Earle curtly, and busied himself with antiseptics and dressings, his pulses thundering the while. The missile had been thrown with brutal force, for the cheek was bruised and discolored—the dear cheek where his adoring lips had rested so often during the happy, dead summer that seemed so long ago. His skilled fingers trembled as they touched it. Only once Margaret disobeyed him and spoke.

"Will there be a scar?"

"Inevitably." He spoke hoarsely and with difficulty. "A little one," he added; for the tragedy of the woman marked for life at her husband's hands had sprung into Margaret's eyes.

He rang for brandy when the dressing was over, for she was faint and pale. Then he began to walk up and down the room, standing every now and then, his whole frame atremble, as though he were actually at grips with a corporeal adversary. Truly he was.

He could not see, but he could hear him whispering insistently, "Kill! Kill!" Al-

most he could feel him, compelling with a force that was actual, physical. "Kill!" whispered the almost audible voice. "Kill!" And why not? He had killed before, and felt himself no criminal. Would he not be, in this case, even more abundantly excused?

It could be so simply and easily done, and he would be so blameless in the doing. He was not aware of any shrinking from what he was contemplating, consciously contemplating. It did not present itself to his mind as a crime at all. Already he had emancipated himself from the thralldom of obedience, in any and every circumstance, to the law. That first little break in the dam that confines the flood of evil in the human soul appreciably weakened his moral defenses now.

But he was conscious of danger, if only dimly. Blindly he reached out for support. At least one other should know of the slippery place on which he stood—offer, it might be, a helping hand.

"Margaret," he said hoarsely, "I shall kill him. I know I shall."

What was it that sprang into Margaret's face? Agreement! Approval! Almost hope? Whatever it was, it was gone in an instant, but not before Earle had seen it. It left him quivering. With a sharp little breath Margaret rose.

"I—I'm better," she said; and certainly the brandy had brought a tinge of color to her face.—"I—I won't keep you any longer; I know something of what your day's work means. Will you be too tired to come up to-night? I think Terence would like a game of cards."

Her tone was easy, self-possessed, almost light, the tone of a woman whose life held neither shadow nor dread. What did it mean? That she attached no importance to his words, regarding them as the irresponsible utterance of wild anger, or that she condemned, even welcomed—

Earle checked his racing thoughts with horror. Yet he knew that his soul had been thrown back upon its own resources, that of moral support she had offered him none. Was he shocked, disappointed, repelled? Not repelled. Certainly not repelled. Disappointed? Was he disappointed? He

turned away, almost shuddering, from such undesirable inquiries.

He would make one more attempt, he decided, to let Margaret see where he stood, to make her realize the advisability, the necessity, of keeping her husband and himself apart.

"I don't think I had better," he said a little hoarsely. "I think, perhaps, it would be safer in every way, unless"—in quick and horrified understanding—"it is likely to make things harder for you. Will it?"

"I'm afraid it may."

And once again it decided him. Whatever the risk, it must be taken. To fail Margaret was the impossible thing. To the necessity of helping her he had already sacrificed his sense of decency. It was a little thing that he should brave, for her sake, his dread, almost his foreknowledge, of impending moral catastrophe.

And was not his action, whatever his action might be, abundantly justified? Suddenly he pointed to her cut cheek, the dear cheek whose disfigurement sent his blood throbbing through him hot with grief and anger. To speak quietly, calmly, as though the matter was of no moment, was his only chance of stemming a torrent of fury unfit for a beloved woman's ears, even though her own wrongs were the cause of it.

"That, Margaret. I know part. Tell me all," he said.

Margaret shrugged and resigned herself. Sylvia, of course, had betrayed her.

"He found out something—something that vexed him. I would rather not tell you what."

Earle nodded. What did it matter? The fact remained that Royston was vexed, and that he, Earle, in his cowardice, had contemplated leaving Margaret to bear alone the result of that vexation.

"I'll be up to-night, just after eight. Tell him so," he said steadily. "And you go and lie down. You are not fit for any more just yet."

It was a curt, almost a brusque, farewell, unaccompanied by so much as a handshake; but it seemed to satisfy Margaret. There was nothing in her look but a yearning tenderness as she stood in the window and watched him hurry off down the drive.

She stood a long, long time after he had passed out of sight, her hands lightly linked together before her, her disfigured face lifted to the brooding, snow-filled, winter sky. Suddenly she dropped to her knees, rested her elbows on the cushioned window seat, and hid that sad, disfigured face in her hands.

"Oh, but I am a wicked woman!" she breathed. "A wicked, wicked woman!"

When Earle reached the white gate opening into the lane, Sylvia was there waiting for him. Her delicate little face gleamed flowerlike among its dark furs.

"Take me with you to Fyfield," she coaxed. "I'm well wrapped up, and Aunt Margaret doesn't want me; she told me so. Oh, do take me, Dr. Earle!"

"Jump in," he said, and the next moment Sylvia, cosily tucked up, was snuggled close against his side.

And had she been contented to sit restfully beside him, letting the fact of her gentle presence, the subtle sense of her faith in his integrity, her belief in his inability to do anything but what was right, pour its own comfort and strength over his soul, she might have been, to a sorely tried man, a help she would little have suspected. But there was nothing restful about Sylvia this morning.

She bristled with ethical problems, for every one of which Earle was expected to find an all-embracing solution. To his overstrained nerves and dulled moral sensibilities it was just endurable—until her innocent perplexities concerned themselves with Margaret.

"Do you think," she began in a half whisper, though they were alone, "do you think a wife ought to stay with her husband *however* he behaves to her?"

Earle stiffened, shrinking mentally from the coming rasp.

"To what particular wife are you referring?" he asked, and he asked deliberately.

"To Aunt Margaret. Oh, Dr. Earle, I must tell somebody, and after this morning it almost seems as if I might tell you. It is awful! She never goes near him but he hurts her in some way, and if she keeps out of his way, as indeed he has

taught her, he throws things at her. Quite heavy things sometimes.

"I wonder he hasn't killed her before now. Surely, surely she need not feel bound to stay with him when he treats her like that! Why does she? Why doesn't she leave him and live happily and safely somewhere else? Why?"

A sharp little sound escaped him. His arms jerked convulsively, so that Duffie, astonished, pulled up short between the shafts. He turned, his eyes on fire in his gray face.

"And why, in God's name, Sylvia, do you torture me with questions like that?" he broke out, at the end of his tether at last. "She ought to leave him; she would have left him long ago and been living happily, as you suggest, somewhere else, with me, but for—"

You! The word was on his lips, but, to his eternal thankfulness, it stayed there. Once again, to his shame, his resentment against the innocent block to his plans seated so happily by his side had blazed up in his heart.

But for Sylvia, the woman he loved would have been peacefully, safely awaiting the moment when he could have joined her and planned both their lives afresh; but he was shamed everlastingly if he should tell her so.

The imminence of the slip, a slip for which he could never have forgiven himself, turned him cold. His sense of escape sang in his ears so loud he hardly heard Sylvia's shocked: "Oh, Dr. Earle, I *am* so sorry! I never knew—I never guessed! Oh, Dr. Earle, I *am* so sorry!"

But the words penetrated his intelligence at last. He laughed—a curt, embarrassed, most unmirthful laugh.

"There," he said ruefully, "now I've told you. You won't say anything, Sylvia?"

"No, indeed. But, oh, I am surprised! Then would you have been *married* if Uncle Terence had not as yet come back?"

He sighed with relief when he heard it. She had antedated the difficulty, had seen in it not her own most innocent self, but a ten-year-old ceremony that, since it was

discredited and profaned, to Earle now meant nothing.

"Yes," he agreed, blushing like any schoolboy. And then again, "You won't say anything, Sylvia?"

"Not for worlds," she assured him and fell silent, for it was as though around her had shone a great light. Of love, as love is understood between mature men and women, flower-faced Sylvia, at nineteen, understood nothing. To her, love was an affair entirely of the spirit.

Her love for Dr. Earle, for shyly to herself she called it love, was an airy temple, compounded of the fabric of dreams, inhabited by her soul alone. A breath, and it was down, and Sylvia sat, sad-eyed, among its gossamer ruins. But in her sweet mind was no room for grief for herself.

"Oh," she said again, "I am so sorry, so sorry for Aunt Margaret. She would have been so happy with you, you are so good. She could have looked up to you so. God had given her what every woman longs for, the man she can worship, and then He took him away. Why did He?"

"I'm afraid," with a difficult laugh, "because He knows me better than you do; because He sees in me a poor, sinful wretch not worth any woman's worship."

"Ah, no," returned Sylvia softly. "Not *you!*"

And Earle sat beside her in sackcloth and ashes. He—with seven years' prison taint upon him! He who had, throughout the last hour, been toying, and deliberately, with one suggestion after another culminating in murder! *He* was the man, blackened and unworthy, that Sylvia had elected to deify.

"Why," she went on softly, as her ideas developed, "you would have been my uncle! Oh, if only you had been, instead of Uncle Terence!"

Earle laughed—he could not help it—but his eyes were very tender. How easily she had invested him with his new relationship! Little Sylvia, who thought she loved him!

But her steadfast faith in him had done its work. He could look forward now with

calmness to an evening spent in Terence Royston's company. He did not even fear the shrouded little devil who whispered so insistently: "Kill! Kill!"

CHAPTER XIX.

TEMPTATION.

EARLE walked up to Greenshaws through the crisp and frosty dark. Rybank admitted him, and Margaret, as was her wont, met him in the hall. She drew him into her own room for the few minutes' blameless conversation on which, unknown to themselves, both of them were living, and at once he saw that fresh trouble lay in her eyes.

"What is it?" was his inquiry, curt and anxious and all on fire with a tenderness he imagined entirely hidden.

Margaret shrugged one white shoulder ever so slightly and then laughed, a little, peculiarly mirthless laugh.

"He has been drinking steadily all day," she told him. "He isn't fit for cards, he isn't fit for anything. I think he is asleep."

"Where does he get the stuff from?"

Margaret spread two slim and helpless hands.

"What can I *do*?" she protested. "The house is his, the brandy is his, the servants are his! If he gives orders they obey them. Of course they do."

"Dearest, I wasn't blaming *you*!" His voice was quick and moved and low.

"No; but I blame myself. Yet I don't see how to prevent it. I can't even rely on Rybank. He seems willing, more than willing, to give Terence all he asks for."

"Wise man," said Earle somberly; but Margaret demurred.

"Oh, I don't think that of Rybank. He really is a good man," she said.

And then they talked of other things, simple, impersonal things—village happenings, births and marriages; there had been no deaths for some time, a fact Margaret ascribed, with touching faith, entirely to Earle's skill as a doctor. It was sweet to stand with his adoring eyes upon her, thrillingly aware of her own extreme correctness. But moments like these held for

Earle too much suffering. To-night the sight of Margaret's strapped cheek sharpened it to agony.

"Well," he said, and his tone was abrupt almost to rudeness, "I suppose I had better go up and have a look at him."

Margaret's face hardened. She nodded.

The room up-stairs was hot and close and smelled of brandy. Royston was asleep. He lay face downward on his sofa, his head resting on one curved arm and hanging uncomfortably over the sofa's edge. He was in his pajamas and dressing-gown, and both were loose about his throat. Earle stood and studied him—the bright burnish of his crisply curling chestnut hair, the back of his beautifully molded neck, full and round and strong in spite of his illness, bronzed to his collar line, white as milk below, the first two or three articulations of his spine, softly rounded, so deeply embedded in muscular tissue as to be barely perceptible.

It was like a flash of white fire before his eyes, the realization of how easy, how *easy*, it would be. A swift stab by a strong, skilled, and unerring hand—a thin, keen blade between two of those small, softly rounded hillocks that marked the line of his spine—an incision not more than half an inch long—a drop of blood that could be wiped away with his handkerchief!

He knew, none better, where the nerves controlling heart and lungs ran down. Sever them, and heart and lungs would slowly, gradually, to all appearances naturally, cease their working. Collapse, quite understandable, almost to be expected in Royston's present state of health, would follow; and death, the death for which every one in the house was more or less consciously looking.

In Earle's pocket there was at this moment a little case holding shining steel, the steel he knew so well how to use. He stood, remembering it.

And the dread of discovery that so often emasculates temptation was wholly absent. One blow, swift and sudden, with the tiny instrument of shining steel the devil himself had arranged should be ready to his hand, only one! Then he would go down-stairs and talk quite easily and naturally to Margaret, as he could—oh, yes, he could—

delay until French's duties should take him to his master's room; wait for the summons that would quickly reach him; remark quite easily and naturally, as he could, that sudden death was a contingency he had foreseen for some time. He was Royston's medical adviser.

No one would dream of calling in a second medical man. There would be his signed certificate, the very terms with which he would fill it rose in his mind. There would be no inquest, only a stately funeral. Margaret would be chief mourner—Margaret, who would never dream—

And if she did! Even if she *did*, she would not blame him. Not quite consciously, but none the less really, she was looking to him for relief, for emancipation from a bondage that, if he lacked faith in his own impulses, might be lifelong. Never by so much as a look had she suggested it to him, but he knew it—oh, he knew it!

The law! What, after all, was the law? Men had made it, and men were forced again and again, out of expediency, for their own safety, in sheer equity, to break it. He himself had set it aside once, to his own undoing, but never once, through all the sharp suffering his action had brought upon him, had he lost faith in his own essential rightness. Surely, if that first moral lapse, which was no moral lapse but the truest justice, were justifiable, this was a thousand times more so.

He gasped a little, conscious of moral fogs that stifled him. A sudden distrust of his own judgment afflicted him. The thing was too near, too personal, too immense in its implication of intense joy or overwhelming misery, for the cool, sane appraising of spiritual values. Eyes that were younger than his, or even Margaret's, clearer, less blinded by fierce emotion, eyes like Sylvia's—

And suddenly Sylvia's eyes, wide and worshipful, lambent with trust and confidence in his unshakable integrity, were looking into his own, Sylvia's voice saying, "I should always be so *sure* of you, so certain that whatever you did must be right!" sounded in his ears. If Sylvia ever knew that Terence Royston, vile as he was, had died at his hands!

With a little sound, something between a gasp and a groan, he turned away from that prone and bestial figure with the heavy-hanging head, strode over to the window, flung back the curtains, and threw the casement wide. The clean December wind rushed in, swirling papers about and swinging draperies, sending with its rude and boisterous breath the white ash in puffs from the rose-red coals in the grate, even rousing with its icy, wholesome touch the besotted sleeper on the couch. He moved a little, making uncouth noises, like a beast. Earle went over to him and laid on his shoulder a none too gentle hand.

"Here," he said, "you turn over. Bad position to lie in. Dangerous, very."

An acute appreciation of the special and peculiar danger that had attached to the position paralyzed his tongue. He stared down at the man under his hand as though he were something monstrous, strange, outside experience. Was it possible that he had contemplated, almost intended, with difficulty saved himself from compassing, that man's death?

As he stared at him, Royston rolled over, settled the pillows under his bright head, smiled up at him most engagingly, and went to sleep again like a baby.

Earle tiptoed down-stairs, took his hat and coat from the stand without making even a rustle, let himself noiselessly out of the door, and put them on as he went down the steps. At the bottom he paused, staring at the familiar and beautiful garden, lightly rimmed, bathed in misty moonlight, stared as though it were bitumen pits, lurid, terrible, and strange. There he had stood, but for the grace of God—and Sylvia—once again a murderer.

But though his heart stopped beating when he realized the force of his temptation and the narrowness of his escape, he could not stay away from Greenshaws. "My only chance is to keep away," he would tell himself sometimes. Yet he could not do it. The scene of a crime will draw back to it again and again its committer, though he risk his own neck by the visit. Just so will the scene of a crime that is as yet uncommitted, if that crime is felt to be inevitable and in its essentials just. And that

was a mental standpoint to which every day brought Earle appreciably nearer. The thing was inevitable—and just. It was written that he should go up to Greenshaws.

And as his ostensible and only reason for going up to Greenshaws was to play piquet with its master, play piquet he must. It was an odd experience to play cards with a friendly, almost an admiring, adversary, mark points for and against him, pocket his money with chuckles, and hand over his own with a grin, and plan all the time how best and most safely that friendly adversary could be put out of existence.

One can imagine a man lost to all human feeling, a vampire, a fiend incarnate, capable of it, a lost soul, a blackened and amorphous spiritual monstrosity, shaming God and man. Earle was none of these things, yet he did it. He would wake from a momentary fit of abstraction, while he drank Royston's claret and listened to his voice recounting with devilish glee some entirely disgraceful episode in his varied experience, to the shocked realization that he had thought of yet another way in which, with no suffering to himself and absolute safety to his—effacer—he could be promptly and permanently effaced. And then, awfully aware of the precipice on the edge of which he tottered and shook, he would refuse to stay with him longer, no, not though Royston besought him with tears, and would go down-stairs to find Sylvia, in raiment as white as her soul, waiting to greet him, greet him with soft and trustful eyes that told him yet again, "You are so *good!* I should always be so *sure* of you!"

Margaret had no such solace for him. Margaret's tortured look held nothing, to his diseased imagination, but "How long, O Lord, how long!" Yet it was to Margaret that the whole current of his being set in adoration fierce as fire.

Undoubtedly at this crisis in his history Earle was not quite sane. There are those that say none are who overstep the hedges of convention, morality, right dealing, call it what one will, between which most of us walk, in timid safety, to our life's end.

Lately a new element of bitterness had been introduced into his evening's enter-

tainment. Royston had taken to confiding to him his indignation, his positive sense of outrage, at the relations still persisting between himself and wife. Earle would listen, silent and dour. It was not necessary, he discovered, to say anything. Royston was altogether assured of his sympathy. He had only to listen, and watch drawing nearer and nearer the fast-coming day when he would rise in his anger and crush the life out of the dishonored wretch who still called himself Margaret's husband. He felt the day coming; he knew it was near. He could almost have counted the days intervening between this, when he sat and listened, and that, when Royston should surely die. And yet he went up to Greenshaws.

One more effect, furious and futile, he made to deliver himself from the obsession of the idea that was slowly worsting him. It was a few days before Christmas, the Christmas that should have been for Earle the tenderest of all, the first man and wife to spend together. He had gone up as usual to play cards, and deciding that as he intended, and very shortly, to end the time during which Royston would be able to play, some compensation was necessary, had deliberately allowed him to win. The stakes were never very high, but to-night bad cards and Earle's bad play combined had resulted in laying a quite respectable little pile of gold and silver by Royston's side.

He fingered it with laughing, almost boyish, pleasure. His luck was in, he said. Which brought to his mind a circumstance in which his luck had been markedly, unprecedentedly out—his failure to make any progress with Margaret.

But he would, he told his companion. He had tried patience, kindness, affection, prayers, and they left her still triply entrenched behind the coldness, hardness, cruelty of her own disposition. Now he would vary his methods. And, being a man without reticence or decency, he proceeded, with chuckles, to explain the trap he would lay for her, and portray in detail its results. Earle listened, cold and grim, stemming as best he could the white-hot flood of his own uncontrollable fury. Slowly it mastered him. He rose.

"You skunk!" he said, almost in a whisper. "You damned, unutterable *skunk!*"

It is said that a man always and unerringly recognizes a moment of imminent peril. Royston's life had held peril before, he had had his share of moving accidents by flood and field; but he had never before faced such peril as he faced now. Yet he entirely failed to recognize it.

"Why? W—what? Good Lord, man, what's the matter?" he spluttered. But Earle was gone. Next morning came a note:

Get a man from London to play with you. I am not coming up any more. C. E.

He meant it. He struggled as fiercely as any gladiator of old when the rotarius flung the baffling folds of his net about him. And as vainly. His own arguments worsted him. Must Margaret suffer for any desire of his to save his wretched soul? The question made him laugh. He did not, he knew, concern himself at all about any such problematical possession. What, then, stood between him and his desire to kill Royston? Fear of punishment? He had no fear of punishment; his safety was profound. An age-long tradition of morality? To his mind, the highest interests of morality would be served by Royston's death. His professional integrity? He was startled to discover that, in contrast with Margaret's safety, he valued it at less than nothing. The shrinking of a healthy, normal, morally-minded man from crime? Only that. And day by day it lessened.

He would, he knew, within measurable time, once again go up to play cards with Terence Royston. And when he did go, it would be to carry out plans that had been ripening and hardening for months, that had been born that summer night in the surgery when Margaret had come to him whispering: "God has let him come back, and I can't *bear* it!"

The days rolled by, leaden-footed, while he waited for the summons from Margaret that would surely come, the summons that he had decided should be the signal for Terence Royston's death. It failed him. No word from Margaret came. Three days before Christmas he met her, driving her cream ponies through the winding lanes.

She was heavily veiled, but even through the veil he could see the jagged purple line of the scar across her cheek. Also he saw that her eyes were sunny and her smile unafraid. Her voice, too, was all athrill.

"He has gone away to Brighton," she said. "Something happened—I don't know what—that pleased him—and cured him. Really, he made a most marvelous recovery, all in a day. He was quite fit to go. I don't know when he will be back."

"H-m," said Earle, and no more.

For he would come back. He had lengthened the tale of days—a little. He had postponed his end—for a while. But he would come back—and bring his death-warrant with him.

CHAPTER XX.

CHRISTMAS DAY.

"SYLVIA, the ice on the river bears. Stubbs has just told me so."

"Oh!" said Sylvia listlessly.

"Yes; and old Mr. Penryan is being decent for once, and opening his park to everybody. All Hazelbridge will be down there to-day. You will go, won't you?"

"I suppose so," said Sylvia without enthusiasm.

Into Margaret's eyes there crept a little gleam, shrewd and tender. Sylvia's difficulty in finding life enjoyable was so very patent and so very satisfactory. She offered such solace as was available and rejoiced in its inadequacy.

"I think Jack Aveling will be there. I know he is coming down for Christmas."

Sylvia moved an indifferent shoulder.

"I don't like Jack Aveling. He makes himself so silly."

"What about?"

"About me," said Sylvia succinctly. Margaret laughed.

"Well, dear; you ought to be used to that by this time," she returned. "And if I were you I should go down to-day. Old Mr. Penryan is coming out in his donkey-chair to receive his guests—it is sufficiently remarkable that he should have any—and it might be—well, noticed if you stayed away."

"Oh, I'll go," said Sylvia resignedly.

But she would go with the definite intention of being bored. Margaret smiled to herself as she saw it. A little boredom just now was the best possible thing for Sylvia.

But as a prescription it was beginning to pall. Sylvia, lately, had had all too much of it. This bright December morning offered her no escape from her daily dose, and it was as bitter and as unpalatable as ever. Jack Aveling was eagerly awaiting her, and he was by no means the only young man who yearned for the privilege of putting on Sylvia's skates. But Sylvia rather curtly declined all assistance, and put them on herself.

Neither would she skate with him, nor with any of those whom, with girlish insolence, she lumped all together as "the others." Her "Oh, no, thank you, Jack; I do much better alone," was distinctly repressive. The worst of it was that she proceeded to make good her words, cutting circles and figure eights with precision and skill and an utter absence of satisfaction in her own proficiency. Jack sighed and left her to skate alone.

But skating alone is dull work. The little chain of trout-pools was uncomfortably crowded, and the wild sprawling of the less skilful among her fellow skaters soon made anything spectacular impossible. It had been very different last year, Sylvia told herself, when she and Percival had had the river all to themselves, and had skimmed white ice like swallows and ignored alike danger-boards and Mr. Penryan's fiat that until two horses and the garden roller had safely crossed the stream, no skating whatever was to be allowed. A swift suspicion did cross her mind that if Percival had been with her to-day even the crowds and the sprawling incompetents could not have spoiled her pleasure. But she dismissed the idea as ridiculous. Nothing, she told herself, with the acute and conscious melancholy youth does so deeply enjoy, could give back the glory of the days that were dead. Certainly this day had no glory to speak of.

Being a docile and obedient little soul, she waited until Mr. Penryan, in his don-

key-chair, came down to the bank, and she blushed rose-red as she saw his keen old eyes duly note the fact that she was there. Then, long before Aunt Margaret expected her, she took off her skates and went home.

Christmas Day passed in a blissful *solitude-à-deux*, Margaret breathing deeply of liberty, Sylvia, according to herself, utterly content.

"I am always so perfectly happy when I am alone with you, Aunt Margaret," she said, clasping her hands about Margaret's silken knee and resting her head against it.

Margaret leaned over and pinched her cheek.

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much," she quoted mischievously. Sylvia frowned, a puzzled little frown.

"Do you think I don't mean it?" she asked.

"Oh, no, my dear, you mean it," returned Margaret quickly, at which Sylvia looked more puzzled than ever.

On the day after Christmas Day Mrs. Briscoe always arranged what she called a Christmas gathering. The vicar would have invited all his parishioners, rich and poor, gentle and simple alike, to tea and a Christmas-tree in the schoolroom, but his good lady would have none of such equality and fraternity as that. "You can't ask people like Mrs. Royston and Mr. Penryan to tea in a schoolroom!" she would say with horror, and proceed to grade her guests as sharply as apples.

So that four o'clock the next afternoon found Margaret and Sylvia entering the shabby vicarage drawing-room. Mrs. Briscoe welcomed them, all athrill.

"He has come," she announced with pride.

"Who has?" inquired Margaret.

"Mr. Penryan. I have asked him every year for years; but he has never come before. I can't imagine why he should this time, but he has!"

"Perhaps he thinks it is time he did," said Margaret, laughing; but her eyes brightened. For she knew why he had come. He had come to look at Sylvia.

He did more than look at her, he talked to her, so simply and genially that Sylvia found herself talking, too; smiling at him,

even daring to enjoy a little girlish fun with him; rallying him, in the end almost mothering him—and for Percival's sake, though she would have been the last to suspect it. And Mr. Penryan, to everybody's amazement, seemed to like it. He devoted himself exclusively to Sylvia. It was to Sylvia and not Mrs. Briscoe to whom he offered his arm when the move was made to the schoolroom and the waiting Christmas-tree.

And there, gravely regarding its bulky and incongruous fruit, mittens, cross-overs, flannel petticoats, articles even more intimate, made in the scratchy gray calico some vicars' ladies think so eminently suitable for "the poor," was Dr. Earle. Sylvia flushed with pleasure as she saw him, but he never even knew that Sylvia was there. The sight of Margaret's gracious, dark head in the doorway filled the room with light—for him. He gravitated toward her as resistlessly as an acorn falls.

"As an occasion of heart-burning and bitterness, of mortification and chagrin, warranted to last the whole twelve months till Christmas comes again, commend me to a function of this kind," he murmured, as his hand closed warm over hers. "In the drawing-room peace and contentment, I have no doubt, reign supreme; but here—I have been trying to neutralize some of the acids good Mrs. Briscoe's methods invariably precipitate by the alkali of my own most unworthy companionship. I have been busy smoothing asperities and solving problems as difficult as any Sylvia ever propounded. Why, for instance, should Mrs. Cole, who keeps the draper's shop in the middle of the village, be asked to tea in the drawing-room, while Mrs. Goodchild, who keeps the baker's shop at the end, must be contented with a sloping and uncomfortable desk in the schoolroom? Why—"

"Oh, don't," laughed Margaret. "It is beyond me. I view with astonishment and admiration the methods of the good; but I never pretend to understand them. It is a tradition in the village that Mrs. Briscoe has thirty-five different bows. By the one you get, you know exactly the place you hold in her estimation. Her invitations to

tea, I should imagine, are an even more reliable guide. And yet, even gatherings like these have their value. Look there!" And with a glance she indicated Mr. Penryan, who, having drawn as his prize from the tree a gorgeous magenta scarf, was gravely insisting that Sylvia should arrange it round his neck. "Would you ever have thought the old man could look so human?"

"Sylvia's eyes would humanize anybody," he returned, smiling. "Good Lord!" he went on with a sharp breath, "but I hope Pap won't take it into his head to come home just yet. He was wild to be here this Christmas-time; I only just managed to prevent it. I told him it was six months too soon. If he could see that, he might believe me."

"You told him! Did you see him?"

"No, but I write to him, and pretty regularly."

"Where is he?"—with interest. "I thought no one knew."

Earle smiled.

"Not so far away as he is generally supposed to be. He is helping to run a stud farm in Ireland, and is much interested in his work. The lad has grit in him. Old Penryan puts a hundred to his credit every quarter, but he never touches it. He lives on what he earns, and it isn't much."

"Poor Pap!" said Margaret softly. "I am glad I know where he is—and I'm glad Sylvia doesn't."

"You think she would send for him?"

"I'm sure she would. She misses him horribly. Twice lately I have caught her in tears, and when I ask her what is the matter, she says she doesn't know. I believe she would jump at the chance of getting him home again. And when he came, she would be as cool and as elusive as ever."

"He isn't coming," returned Earle with decision. "It would be six months too soon. Margaret, what about—"

"Terence?" Margaret's eyes dropped. "He isn't coming either, as far as I know. And now, Carlton, go and talk to some one else. People are beginning to look—interested."

He went, as he would have gone at her bidding across the single thread that spans Tophet. She smiled a little smile, sad and

tender, at his unquestioning obedience; but she accepted it. It was not to be desired that people should look—interested.

CHAPTER XXI.

DR. CARR.

THREE weeks passed before he saw her again. January was more than half gone. The new-year sunshine, chill and bright, lay over a world in the talons of the blackest of frosts. Hobnailed boots rang like bells on the cobble-stones of the village. Every cart-tire was musical. He met her in the High Street one morning, and her eyes were as hard and bright, her soul as frost-bound, as anything in the wintry world about her.

"I shall quarrel with Mrs. Briscoe, I know I shall," she said abruptly as they shook hands. "She will get those horrible gray blankets for the blanket club, and the people hate them. Of course, it is very reprehensible of them to be so extravagant, but if they would rather have one white one than two gray ones, why in the world shouldn't they? I don't see that because charity supplements their savings, charity should have the exclusive right to decide what they shall buy with them."

He brushed the superfluities away with an impatient movement of his dark head. The cause of the shadow on Margaret's face was far removed from Mrs. Briscoe and her blankets.

"He has come home?" he said. Margaret nodded.

"A week ago. And he has brought such an awful man with him. He says he is a doctor; perhaps he is. Terence calls him his medical adviser, and pays him two hundred a year. But the only qualification he seems to have concerned himself about is his ability to play piquet. I doubt if he can. I doubt if he can do anything—but sleep. He is the most dreadful man to look at. His complexion is dead grayish white, like putty; his eyes are exactly like a fish's. He speaks in a thin, high, monotonous voice, with no modulation in it—that is, when we can get him to speak at all. As a rule he sits as silent as a mummy.

He nearly frightens Sylvia to death, and yet she can't help laughing at him. He really is a most awful man!"

"What is his name?"

"Carr."

"Where does he come from?"

"From China. He lived there some years."

"Then I know what is wrong." His voice was somber and low. What a household! A drunkard for its master and a morphomaniac for his boon companion! "Does he ever wake up? Approach the normal, I mean?"

"Yes, at night. At night he is sometimes, oh, quite lively. He and Terence seem to enjoy themselves. What they are doing I don't know, but they seem as though they were dancing. I don't go in. I daren't."

"Don't you go in, ever!" Earle's voice was heavy with warning. What a home—for Margaret! "And Margaret, that man must go."

But Margaret's eyes were dubious.

"It isn't in my hands," she said. "If Terence wants him to stay—" And her little shrug finished the sentence.

But Earle could not shrug away the deep disquiet her information had left with him. One rascal by himself was bad enough, but two rascals—and both half mad!

And he, in his folly, had renounced his footing in the house; thrown away his sole chance of keeping at least a partial control on the forces twisting Margaret's life awry, thrown it away out of sheer panic at his own impulses. His impulses! In the light of Margaret's intelligence they seemed to him not only excusable but commendable. What did his professional integrity, his claim to morality, his position in eternity matter to him in comparison with Margaret! Eternity! Why, he was not sure that he had any part in it to speak of! And if he had, would he not sacrifice it a hundred times over—for Margaret? The tortures of the damned! The wicked old phrase swept through his mind and brought a grim smile to his lips. If he were damned to all eternity he could hardly suffer more than he suffered now.

And not because he was guilty, but be-

cause he was not. It is bitter to repent of a crime committed, but it can be even more bitter to repent of one uncommitted. If he had seized the opportunity when it had been so securely his! If he had dared all to deliver his darling from the power of that dog when he so easily might have done it! A hazy realization that, if Margaret chose, she could at any moment deliver herself, that it would be quite possible for her to take Sylvia and live in modest comfort for a considerable time on his seven hundred pounds while he thought out a way of escape for all of them did dawn on his mind. But only to be bruskiy dismissed to the limbo of the impossible.

"She won't," he told himself half aloud. "She won't—and there's an end on't."

And to leave her to face, day and night, personal peril at the hands of the two lunatics up at Greenshaws, to one of whom she belonged! That also was impossible. It was then that the dyke defending what had been the fair garden of his soul went down before the flood of evil that at times threatens to overwhelm every one of us.

"I'll wait," he told himself, "until she sends for me again. When she sends for me again I will go, and I'll go—prepared."

He had not to wait long. It was barely ten days before his summons came. Two lines only from Margaret:

Could you possibly come up to-night? I am frightened.

M. R.

He finished his day's work with his usual precision and thoroughness. He ate his modest seven-o'clock dinner with appetite, and talked quite cheerfully to old Stebbings, now nearly himself again. At eight o'clock he went up to Greenshaws—and he went prepared.

Rybank admitted him, and there was something strange in the look he gave Earle, a trace of appeal, almost of remonstrance. It was as though he would say: "You have forsaken us! Left us to bear alone, and as best we could, unendurable ill." Earle's eyes flashed an instantaneous reply. He had come back. He was going to help them, to put a stop to the further bearing of unendurable ill. Margaret met him in the hall, as she usually did, and beckoned

him into her own pretty room without a word. She shut the door and turned, both hands still pressed against it, as though she feared its being forced open from without, and her face shone white as chalk against the dead-black of her velvet dinner-gown.

"Carlton, I'm frightened," she said, and her voice came quick and low. "Things are getting worse—and I'm frightened. They quarrel—*dreadfully*. The last few days they have fought. That poor wretch, Carr, always gets the worst of it. He gets out of it as soon as he can, and goes crying and sobbing and moaning to his room, and ring and rings and *rings* for Mrs. Henderson. She goes to him always, and wipes his tears and butters his bruises and gives him brandy and sits by him, I believe, until he goes to sleep. And in the morning he seems to have forgotten all about it. But one day Terence will kill him. He ought to go away. I'm frightened."

"They never come here, do they?" he asked, for Margaret still looked over her shoulder with both hands pressed hard against the door.

"No, but I never know when they will. Terence chases him all over the house. Sylvia locks her door and I lock mine—and we sit and tremble."

Earle went to her, took her ice-cold hands, led her to the fire, and placed himself between her and the door.

"Sit down, my own, and calm yourself," he said tenderly. "This must be stopped. I'll get Carr away somehow, and handle him myself again. Are they playing now?"

"I think not. They never start until between nine and ten. We all dine together decorously enough, for Terence seems quite well since he came back from Brighton. Then there is an interval of blessed quiet, like this—and then the fun begins."

"Where is Carr now?"

"I don't know. He has his own rooms. I suppose he is there."

"I'll go up. I'll lock this door if you like, and take the key with me. Shall I?"

"It wouldn't make any difference." Her voice was toneless and level. It might have been the voice of a ghost. "If he wanted to come in, he would break it down."

"I should hear the noise, anyhow," said Earle grimly, and locked the door and put the key in his pocket. It suited him well that Margaret should be a prisoner in her own room for the next half-hour.

He knew the house, and he guessed where Carr's rooms would be. Instinct guided him aright. The lights in the corridor were low, and under one of the doors lay a brilliant line of yellow. He knocked. "Come in," said a voice, an alert voice and clear. He went in and closed the door behind him.

Carr stared at him in blank surprise, a stare Earle returned with interest. The man he saw was not unpleasing. There was something graceful in his tall slenderness, and his face, but for the ravages of his vice, would have been a good one. Earle walked up to the table and spoke to him across it.

"I am a stranger to you, but you will have heard of me. My name is Earle. I am G. P. here in the village. I used to attend Mr. Royston before you came. To-night Mrs. Royston sent for me," he said.

"Yes?" returned Carr, on an upward inflection that held a hint of offense.

"Yes. She wants you to go."

"She wants me to go?" with strong annoyance. "Why?"

"Well, she thinks it would be better if you did. As for the reason—you must be well aware of it. She has asked me to—arrange it with you. She will see that you do not want for money—anything in reason—"

"She is very kind; but my arrangements are made with Mr. Royston, and I have no wish to leave him. I would not *dream* of going"—with a touch of heat—"unless he sent me away."

"But—" Earle stammered and hesitated. Nothing is more difficult than to rescue a man who resents the interference of his rescuer. "You force me to be plain with you," he went on rapidly. "Mrs. Royston says you are not safe here. She is—is afraid of what may happen to you. And, naturally, she does not wish—"

"She is *very* good." The hint of offense and anger was stronger. "But I should be obliged if you would convey to her my assurance that I am perfectly well able to

take care of myself. I understand Mr. Royston. We are much attached to one another. We—fall out a little occasionally; all friends do, but it means nothing."

Earle stared. A picture of the man before him, mishandled, disheveled, and sobbing, with Mrs. Henderson wiping away his tears, buttering his bruises, comforting him with brandy, and sitting by him till he went to sleep, rose incongruously in his mind. Even now he had a discolored patch on his temple, and his lower lip was swollen and cut. Should he happen to offend Royston at cards to-night, he would run like a rabbit all over the house, with Royston, armed with any lethal weapon that came handy, whooping and shouting after him.

"Then you really don't *want* to go?" he said, wondering.

"Go!" The word leaped at him. "Go! Why the devil should I go? If I *wanted* to go, I could walk out any minute of the day. I *like* being here. I'm *comfortable* here, more comfortable than I have been for years. And why I'm telling *you* all this I don't know. What the hell has it got to do with you, anyway?"

Earle backed a step or two, convicted of intrusion, even impertinent intrusion.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I didn't understand. Mrs. Royston—"

"Mrs. Royston does not understand, either," said Carr loftily.

"Then, are you going to Mr. Royston now?"

"I never go until he rings for me."

"Thank you," said Earle; though why he should have said "Thank you," he could not have told, and went out and closed the door.

There was no need to lock this one. Carr trembled perceptibly with the little excitement of the interview. Earle knew that he would drop into his chair the instant he was alone. He would not leave it again readily. The impulse that would move him must come from without. He would wait, Earle told himself, for Royston's ring.

Ten minutes later he put the key into the lock of Margaret's door, turned it, and went in. She was lying in her chair, her head

resting against its back, her arms laid supine along its padded sides. At Earle's entrance she leaned forward, grasping the carved ends of the arms with her hands.

"Well?" she said in an eager whisper. "Well?"

"He refuses to go. Says he was never so comfortable in his life as he is here. Poor devil, he must have had a rotten time so far."

He spoke with a curt laugh, and his eyes flickered. Margaret studied him curiously. He was generally so scrupulously careful of his language. He had never said even so much as "poor devil!" where she was before.

"Did you quarrel with him?" she asked.

"No. Why?"

"You look—shaken!"

"Oh, I'm all right," he returned; but he took out his handkerchief and wiped the moisture from his face, and the hand he held it in shook.

He sat down opposite her, and silence fell, the heavy, brooding silence of those that wait—and with dread. Margaret sat tense and still, leaning forward, her hands shut hard on the carved arms of her chair, listening, *listening* for any sound from above. Earle listened, too, consciously breathlessly, his eyes on Margaret's face, within them, behind their adoration, a kind of dumb and horrified wonder. The sound that Earle was listening for came first, the sound of some one running. The footsteps—a man's footsteps—came muffled along the thickly carpeted corridor, more audible down the stairs, crisp and clear across the marble floor of the hall. Then came a knock at the door. Before Margaret had time to speak it opened.

"Please, is Dr. Earle here? Would you please come a moment, sir," as Earle rose.

It was French, Royston's man servant. Earle walked toward him, and his movements were those of a wooden figure worked by a spring. He glanced back into the room as French closed the door behind him. Margaret had not moved. She sat like one frozen beside the leaping fire. French turned, and his eyes were glassy in his pale face.

"I'm glad you are here, sir. I've no sort

of confidence in that other chap. I'm glad you're here, sir," he said again.

"Why? Is there—anything wrong?"

"It's the master, sir. I—I think he's dead," said French, and hurried him up the curving stairs.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE WAGES OF SIN.

YES he was dead, dead—and nearly cold. He lay half on, half off the sofa, his head drawn backward and burrowing into the couch's padded end, one foot, in its scarlet morocco slipper, pressed against the floor, the other drawn up under him. Earle stood looking down at him, his hands locked lightly together, his quiet, dark face inscrutable and calm. Royston's eyeballs gleamed through the half-closed lids, his lips were drawn back from his teeth in a grin of pain, one hand clutched his heart as though the pain were there—and already the fingers were stiffening. He was a ghastly and unnerving sight, from which French turned away, aware of physical nausea. But Earle looked down at him quite unmoved.

"Call Dr. Carr, French, will you?" he said quietly. "I should like another opinion."

"Then you think he is—dead, sir?"

"Dead? Certainly he's dead. Has been for some time. Fetch Dr. Carr, there's a good fellow."

"Hardened! That's what they get—hardened. They see so much of it," said French to himself as he went shivering from the room.

Earle turned as Carr, with French just behind him, entered. To all appearance he had not moved since French left the room.

"Look here," he said quietly; and Carr looked.

"Good God!" he said under his breath. And again, "Good God!"

"How long?" asked Earle quietly.

Carr lifted the dead man's hand and lightly touched his cheek.

"Nearly an hour, perhaps quite," he said in a whisper. "Must have happened directly after dinner."

Earle nodded.

"Yes, that's what I thought," he returned quietly. Carr's eyes sought his, wondering.

"It's sudden," he said slowly; "awfully sudden. He was all right at dinner. I never expected anything of this sort to happen. No one would have done."

"Still you must have known it was possible—at any time. That is, if you know anything about those cases."

"Possible, of course; but imminent, no."

"Yet you see it has happened," returned Earle quietly. "You'll sign, of course. Better avoid an inquest. Painful thing for Mrs. Royston. And there is no need for it with you in the house. If you are properly qualified, that is."

"My qualifications are of the highest, sir," returned Carr stiffly. "Of course I shall sign."

"Much better," agreed Earle tranquilly. "It isn't as if there were any doubt."

"There couldn't be any," returned Carr, still stiffly. "As you say, death has been possible at any moment for some time past."

"Then you had better notify at once, hadn't you? Coulson is registrar; next door but one to us. You know where he lives, don't you, French? I want you to go and fetch Mrs. Briggs; the women here won't touch him. You could take a certificate to Coulson at the same time."

"I haven't a form." Carr spoke with a touch of awkwardness.

"I have. I always carry one or two; one never knows when they may be wanted." And Earle took a printed slip from his pocket-book and laid it on the table, his fountain pen beside it.

Carr sat down and filled it in, and Earle watched him. His diagnosis was correct, and so was his terminology. Earle nodded to himself. He was not only a qualified, he was a clever man. He signed it and handed it to French. Earle drew a long, long breath as he did it.

"Some one must tell Mrs. Royston. You are the person who ought," he said, and he blushed as he said it, for Carr was in a condition to respond almost automatically to suggestion, and he was deliberately

making of it every use he knew how. But this time Carr rebelled.

"Mrs. Royston doesn't like me," he said quickly. "You are a friend. She would take it much better from you."

Earle hesitated. Which was wiser? Which?

"You'll come down with me and back me up?" he said at last; but Carr objected.

"I—I would rather you manage it alone, much rather," he demurred.

"Oh, but you must," returned Earle sharply. "You can't possibly leave me to get through a communication of this sort alone!"

So the two went down together and went together into Margaret's pretty room. She was sitting as still as stone. She had not even moved her hands from the carved ends of the chair-arms. She did not seem to see Earle; to all appearance she saw nothing but Carr, advancing, reluctant and all a tremble, toward her. But it was Earle who spoke.

"Mrs. Royston, I want your attention; your full attention," he said, and there was a note of warning in his voice. "Dr. Carr has something to tell you."

Carr gave him one reproachful look.

"Madam, I—I regret—I regret to have to inform you that your husband is dead," he said.

He spoke without either feeling or expression. He might have been an automaton wound up to say the words. They seemed to turn Margaret to stone. Her dark and luminous gaze swept past him, rested a horrified moment on Earle's face, and came back again to Carr.

"When?" she asked in a tense whisper.

"This evening. I should say about an hour—I don't know. Since dinner," he stammered.

"It is, of course, the natural development of his illness. You have known for some time that a swift and sudden ending of this kind was possible, haven't you? I told you so more than once," said Earle, and there was in his quiet voice an odd suggestion of a tutor endeavoring to recall to the mind of an unwilling child a half-learned lesson.

"Yes," returned Margaret. Just the

dull, dead syllable; no more. Earle turned to Dr. Carr.

"Thank you. That will do," he said; and Carr bowed and went out.

But in the middle of the hall he stood, biting the knuckle of his bony forefinger. It was for him the brightest hour of all the twenty-four; and he was a little puzzled.

"She took it oddly," he ruminated, half aloud. "Didn't seem at all surprised. It was almost as though she expected it. I suppose she did," he concluded, and with a heavy sigh betook himself up-stairs.

And inside the room Margaret sat, the semblance of a woman turned to stone, not by grief, but by horror. Earle watched her, fear in his eyes. He came slowly forward.

"Margaret, my dearest," he began. But she put out a quick hand and stayed him.

"Don't come any nearer," she said.

"But, sweetheart, that is ridiculous," he protested, still advancing. She sprang out of her chair and backed away from him.

"Don't!" she said in a tense whisper. "*Don't!*" and Earle checked instantly. For there are notes in the human voice that a doctor trained in the study of the human brain unerringly recognizes.

"Control yourself," he said almost sternly. "You must be careful what you say."

She was instantly docile.

"Yes," she returned with a little gasping sob. "We must be careful, both of us, mustn't we?"

He drew a light chair forward, sat down across it, and folded his arms on the back.

"Come back to your seat. I won't move," he said, still in the same tone of gentle command. "But there are—orders to give. A good many things have to be arranged, seen to. At any moment French or Rybank or somebody else may come in for directions, and you must try and look natural."

She nodded, passing the filmy scrap of lace she called her handkerchief over dry and shaking lips.

"But, Carlton," she said in a sudden whisper, "you can't *stay* here!"

"Why not?"—in genuine surprise. "I must stay, at least for to-night. Who will see after things if I don't? You are not fit

for it—and that semilunatic up-stairs is no good. I *must* stay."

"Oh, but it is *horrible!*" she said, staring at him with dilated eyes.

"Is it?" he asked dully, for if it was, the horror touched him lightly, left him strangely unmoved.

"Shall I tell Sylvia?" she asked presently, still in the same tense whisper.

"No. The child is asleep by this time." For a little, hurrying French clock on a bracket near was close on ten. "The morning is soon enough."

Then, as he had expected, came a knock at the door. He glanced at Margaret, but she was sitting in her chair again, and looked fairly natural. It was French.

"Will you please come a minute, sir?" he said.

"They have done everything, I think, sir," he went on as they stood in the hall together. "Would you like to come up-stairs again?"

"No, there's no need." In spite of himself, he could not suppress a shudder. "Lock the door and bring me the key. Nothing else can be done till morning. Oh, and send Mrs. Royston's maid. Her mistress must go to bed at once."

"Yes, sir. I'm glad you're here, sir. No one down-stairs is much good; even Mr. Rybank seems all shaken to bits by what's happened. And if you hadn't been here there would not have been any up-stairs any good, either."

"I'm glad I was, too, French," said Earle with curious intensity; "very glad. You'll send that girl?"

"Yes, sir; at once, sir," said French, and vanished through the double baize doors kitchenward.

Earle spent the night on the library sofa. The man he had come prepared to kill lay dead in the room above him; yet he slept soundly. By seven he was up and busy, and when Manners brought him his breakfast at eight, he pushed quite a little pile of letters over to her.

"See that these are posted, Manners, will you?" he said. "And tell Mrs. Royston's maid that her mistress is not to be awakened; let her wake of herself. That draft I gave her last night— What in the world

is that noise?" he broke off, for through the open door came wailing and sobs that turned him cold.

Manners looked down, and blushed as deeply as the want of red corpuscles in her blood would let her.

"It's that Dr. Carr, sir," she said. "He has been crying all night, and Mrs. Henderson has been with him. He's crying about the master, sir. He says it's such a disappointment, just when he thought he was settled for life an' all, for him to go sudden this way. He says—"

"Good God!" interrupted Earle sharply. "Here, you go up-stairs and tell him to stop that noise. If he doesn't, I'll come and make him."

But the last thing he heard, as Rybank helped him into his overcoat in the hall, was a muffled wail from above: "I was so *comfortable!* And it was for life. He *said* it was for life! And now I've got to turn out again. Face—" A door shut softly, and the rest was lost.

The next few days were full of the awful and indecent bustle that always follows death. The notification to acquaintances—Royston had no friends. The arrangements for the funeral, the choosing of mourning garments, the capable activities of fitters and needlewomen. Margaret went through it all like a woman in a dream. Sylvia watched her with wide and tender eyes. Before long—very soon—she would begin to look happy again; for now, *now* she could marry Dr. Earle.

The day before the funeral Earle walked up to Greenshaws. The machinery he had set in motion worked almost of itself. In all probability, he told himself, there had been nothing for Margaret to appeal to him about; yet it disturbed him that three days should go by and she send him not so much as a word. Yet, perhaps, he decided, it was better so.

But her greeting this morning puzzled, almost distressed him; it was distant, almost chilly. For one shocked moment a definite fear that what had happened might set a gulf between them that even his love could not bridge stilled his very heartbeats; the next he had dismissed it as impossible, absurd. Yet her attitude re-

mained, with its suggestion of aloofness, withdrawing. It must be explained—and Earle's methods were always straight-forward.

"Margaret, are you not pleased to see me?" he asked.

The stony calm of her face broke up, and it quivered into tenderness and feeling. For a moment the old glow shone in her dark eyes.

"Oh, Carlton, I am always pleased to see you. It isn't *that*," she said.

"Then what is it?"

She drew a little away and her breath caught. How could he, how *dare* he, ask that?

"You know," she whispered with white lips. "You *know* what it is."

He moved almost impatiently. Margaret, as a rule, evinced a mind so eminently reasonable. Was she going to be unreasonable—*now*? The impulse to speak out, to combat feminine exaggerations and inconsistencies, was almost irresistible, but he checked it. The moment had not come. After to-morrow he dare speak plainly. After to-morrow!

"It is to-morrow, isn't it?" he asked, continuing his unspoken thought aloud. "What time?" he added as Margaret acquiesced.

"Two o'clock. We shall reach the churchyard about a quarter past."

"We! *You* are not going, are you?"

"I must. There is no one else. Sylvia and I are both going."

He stared at her in blank surprise. That the arrangement dismayed, almost astounded, him was plain. Margaret glanced at him and quickly away again.

"You are thinking it a pretense, hideous, almost revolting," she said steadily; "but it won't be. I shall pretend nothing. People may think what they choose."

"But," he objected, almost in a whisper, "it isn't safe. The strain will be too much for you. You will say, or do, something foolish. For God's sake, Margaret, think better of it, and stay at home."

"Oh, no, I will be—careful. I can't stay at home; there is no one else to go. You needn't be afraid, Carlton. I am quite to be trusted."

But was she? Was any woman, highly strung, emotional, to be trusted, burdened, obsessed by such thoughts of horror as would be hers to-morrow?

"I don't like it," he said somberly. "I don't like it at all. I am, I tell you frankly, afraid. One never knows—with a woman. But, at least, I can keep an eye upon you."

"You! Will you be there?"

"Of course. Like you, I must. It would be remarked at once if I stayed away; and—and I'm not taking any risks, Margaret."

She nodded and shuddered a little. Her eyes veiled themselves, and once again that indefinable suggestion of chill, of distance, fell between them. And it angered him. It was so unnecessary, so overstrained. Suddenly his impulse toward honesty, toward openness of speech, mastered him.

"Margaret, my dearest, try to see things reasonably, *sanely*," he begged. "This that has happened—"

But she backed away from him, pushing the soft, dark hair from her temples with both her hands.

"Don't say it," she said, in a sharp and sibilant whisper. "Don't! Haven't you learned yet the danger of saying things? We both know. Leave it at that!"

He shrugged and was silent. She was a little off her mental balance. It hardly surprised him, and he could only indulge and humor her. He would say no more now. The time for plain speaking had not yet come. Would it ever come? Was Margaret right? Had there better be no plain speaking at all? Would the situation be easier so? In any case, he could not, he

must not, force issues to-day. He would, he must, wait until Royston was safely buried.

The funeral was what the village called a grand one. Every one of any standing in the neighborhood—in their satisfaction at the news that this time Terence Royston was unquestionably dead and would soon be indubitably buried—sent a representative, or at least a carriage. Never before had Margaret known she had so many friends. She went through the ceremony proud and pale, Sylvia, looking, in her new black, more frail and flowerlike than ever, beside her.

There was the usual little crowd of villagers in the churchyard, watching, with its usual avid interest, the function that, more than any other, "evened up" the gentry with themselves. From among them, half hidden, Earle watched the woman he worshiped—and marveled. She showed no tremor. When all that was mortal of Terence Royston had been consigned to the dust from which it was made, she walked without a falter to her waiting car. She had shed no tear, and it was evident she sought no sympathy. Earle lingered while old Bowman, the sexton, and the village lad who helped him, shoveled, with the utter callousness and detachment that is born of their trade, the earth back upon the coffin. When a little mound was shaped over Terence Royston, and the wreaths, of which there had been many, hid its raw newness, he moved from the shadow of the friendly bush that had hidden him.

"Thank God," he said a little brokenly. "Oh, thank God!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK. Don't forget this magazine is issued weekly, and that you will get the continuation of this story without waiting a month.

NATURE'S MUSIC

BY CLINTON SCOLLARD

HARKEN! How sweetly from dull inanition
Sudden are born alluring harmonies!
It is the wind, that gipsying musician,
Playing upon the woodland's stops and keys!

Temptation of Carlton Earle

by Stella M. Düring

Author of "The Crooked Stick," "The Loom of Life," "The Sword of Damocles," etc.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE GULF BETWEEN.

IT was the first week in February. Already the rising sap was coloring the hedges, so that they looked less starved and thin. In the gardens at Greenshaws the snowdrops were pushing up little thickets of green and silver spear-heads, every one of which would open in a day or two and show a trembling bell. There was a smell of green things growing. The earth had given itself that marvelous little shake in its sleep that gives us such blissful assurance of the new day at hand.

Even Earle felt through every nerve the thrill of waxing courage and budding hope born with the baby year. As he walked he struck the nut-boughs in the hedges with his stick, and smiled to see the golden clouds of pollen from their thickly hanging catkins float out into the cool, pale sunshine. Terence Royston had been buried now a fortnight, and he was going up to Greenshaws.

Yet below his pleasure in this, the very first sweet spring day, he was conscious of a deep disquiet, for through all that fortnight he had had no word from Margaret. He had waited loyally the expression of her wishes, shrinking from anything that might look like intrusion or the pressing of an advantage. But this morning a sudden horrified realization that she might think he was intentionally staying

away had driven him into instant action. He had asked Dr. Stebbings, now nearly himself again, to take the more outlying patients, had made the few absolutely necessary visits nearer home, and hurried up to Greenshaws.

Rybank admitted him, but Margaret, though she must have been aware of his coming, did not meet him in the hall. She rose as Rybank announced him, and shook hands with him as though he were the veriest stranger. He studied her, baffled, astonished, almost indignant. He hardly knew this pale, cold woman with the level voice and the veiled eyes.

"I came," he said, "to—to—well, just to see how you are going on." He broke off, coloring angrily. It ought not to have been necessary to give any reason for his coming and he felt it keenly. "Dr. Carr, for instance," he went on as Margaret sat silent. "I should like to know what has become of him. I haven't seen him lately."

"He has gone. I suppose to London—where he came from. I gave him fifty pounds and asked him to go—and he went."

"And—Sylvia?"

"Sylvia is quite well, thank you."

"And—and you?"

"I also am quite well, thank you."

Then a cold, blank silence fell again. He stared. Almost he could have laughed. Then the desperate, the tragic seriousness of it all stabbed him. He leaned forward, his eyes on fire.

This story began in the All-Story Weekly for July 26.

"And is that all you have to say to me?"

The icy calm of her face broke up. For a moment she had to fight hard for composure.

"Carlton, what else can I say? What else *dare* I say?" she asked in a whisper at last.

He nodded in hurried acquiescence. She was right, perhaps, to dread any crystallization of thoughts into words.

"We've got to accept facts," he said a little doggedly. "We may regret them—I don't know that I do—but we can't alter them. When you—"

But she covered her face with two trembling hands.

"Oh, Carlton, don't," she breathed in a shaken whisper. "I can't bear to talk about it, really I can't."

He studied her with a kind of tender irritation. In the twenty-one days that had gone by since Terence Royston's death, he had managed to adjust himself. He had known it would be a more difficult matter to persuade Margaret to adjust herself, also, but not that it would be as difficult as it threatened to prove.

"That is so *feminine*," he said at last. "Bury a thing, cover it up and pretend it isn't there. We should do much better to talk this thing out."

But once again came that thin and broken whisper, "Oh, Carlton, *don't*. I can't *bear* it!"

"Then forget it," he counseled gravely. "Put it utterly and entirely behind you and forget it."

She took her hands from before her face and looked at him, her lips quivering and her eyes full.

"Can *you*?" she asked wondering.

"Of course. Why not? Margaret"—and suddenly he was bending over her, both her cold hands covered with his close, warm one—"you don't think, you can't think that I should let this that has happened part you and me!"

She shook her head forlornly. She had the air of a lost and frightened child.

"It must," she said, and her voice was dead and low. "It must."

He straightened himself with a jerk, as though the word had galvanized him.

"No," he said almost violently. "*No*." But she shook her head again.

"It must," she repeated in a whisper. "It *must*. We could never be to one another what we hoped to be, what we might have been—before. There would always be—that awful grave between us."

He was silent, suddenly, dreadfully aware of a man's helplessness before a woman's determination. Yet with all his soul he rebelled against this thing that Margaret, in her wrong-headedness, decreed. He would beat it down. He would overcome it utterly. But first he must understand it.

"Then I suppose," he said a little hoarsely, "that during these days when you have not allowed me to see you, you have arrived at decisions of which I know nothing. Do you mind telling me what they are?"

For a long moment she sat silent. Almost it seemed as though she had not heard. Then the same little quiver, ripple of emotion passed over her still, cold face. Impulsively she gave him her hand.

"Carlton, I don't like, I can't *bear* to hurt you, and yet I must," she said.

"Go on," he returned a little grimly, and his grasp of her hand tightened to pain. She could hardly hurt him more than she had hurt him already, yet he dreaded her next words.

"I shall wait until Sylvia is married and then I shall give up this place," she said.

"Sylvia married! You think she will marry Pap?"

"I am sure she will. She is acutely miserable without him. He has only to come home."

"But, my dearest, we settled that before," he interrupted with tender haste. "If Sylvia married you would sell Green-shaws. We settled that *before*."

She looked at him with gentle, almost reproachful eyes. Did he really not see the tragic difference between these plans and those they had made in the dear, dead summer that seemed such long eons ago? Could he possibly think that things were going to be as they were—before?

"I shall not touch Terence's money, it is blood-stained," she went on. She spoke with a slight shudder, her wide, strained

eyes filled with some inward vision of wo. "I shall wait until Sylvia is safely married, and then I shall give it all away."

"To Sylvia?"

"No, to charity. Sylvia shall have enough to save her from absolute dependence on her husband, which is a thing no woman should be called upon to endure. The rest shall go to other children, children who are left with no one to care for them, like Sylvia was."

He nodded and his eyes were glad. He had hated the thought of Terence Royston's money. Margaret was a woman of simple tastes. He was young and strong and he had seven hundred pounds. The world, to a man who cares nothing which little patch upon it he inhabits, is wide. It must be that somewhere would lie his chance, that somehow he could provide for all Margaret's simple needs. If she would let him. He caught his breath sharply as once again he realized the blank denial with which she had just faced him. But she did not mean it, she *could* not mean it. His best plan was to ignore that blank denial altogether.

"I'm glad," he said simply, "very glad. It is impossible that we should—benefit. We couldn't, of course."

Her dark gaze swept up at him, luminous and steady.

"*We!*" she repeated with emphasis. And then deliberately, "It has nothing to do with you."

His whole frame jerked as the stab went home, but he took it gamely.

"Oh?" he said. "And why not?"

She pushed the soft, dark hair back from her temples. Its weight seemed to confuse and stifle her.

"Carlton," she said in a quick whisper, "do you mean that you can't—or that you won't—*see*."

"I don't see anything, anywhere, that could ever make me think that what concerns you does not concern me," he said.

She covered her face with her hands again and broke into bitter, soundless weeping.

"Oh, but you make it hard for me," she said through her tears. "I hoped you would understand. I thought you would

see. I hate to have to be cruel to you, but you make me—because you won't *let* yourself understand. But you must, Carlton, you must. I—I don't blame you for anything, I love you as much, as devotedly, as ever I did, but we can't *marry*, now. We must each go—our separate ways. After to-day we must never see one another again. It is the only way to—bear things. It is the only way to live at all."

He listened in silence. She was, then, in earnest. She meant that what *had* happened should definitely and entirely separate them. For a moment he contemplated the life she offered him, the only life, she said, that was possible to them at all. Then with all his soul he rebelled.

"No," he said again in passionate protest. "No. I won't *have* it so. It is not long since you told me that what the law would call crime could be justified, that it should not come between you and me. Now I tell you so. This that has happened can be justified, more than justified. We shall marry just the same, in spite of it."

She dropped back in her chair, faint, white, exhausted. Her arms fell listlessly, helplessly beside her.

"Oh," she breathed, "but you make it very hard for me, *very* hard."

He rose. He had defined his position and he meant to maintain it, but further contention was inadvisable just now. He took her cold hands and held them in his warm ones. Then he pressed them a moment hard against his lips.

"You understand," he said steadily, "that all this talk of separation between you and me is nonsense. I refuse to listen to one word of it. We shall, of course, let a decent interval go by, and then you will marry me, as you promised."

She snatched her hands away, crossed her arms on the side of the chair and hid her face in them, shuddering. He laid a light hand an instant in tender benison on her soft hair and then he left her. He knew when he had said enough.

In the hall Sylvia was waiting for him, looking like a wild rose swathed in crêpe.

"I—I s-saw you come," she told him, stammering a little with excitement, "and

I wanted to speak to you. Dr. Earle, what is wrong? Why should Aunt Margaret say that all is at an end between herself and you? I—I whispered to her last night that I knew something about it, that you had—told me, and she said quite sharply, 'Be quiet, Sylvia. All that is over, now.' I th-thought, now Uncle Terence is dead, she could marry you and be happy, but she says she can never be happy again. What does she mean?"

He stood a moment silent and thoughtful, his kindly gray eyes, gravely concerned, steadily meeting Sylvia's blue ones. To whom else had Margaret said words of wild un wisdom? Who shall put shackles on a woman's tongue?

"She has had a shock," he said at length. "You must be very gentle and wise with her, my little girl. Try and interest her in something. Gardens, greenhouses, anything will do."

Sylvia put her head on one side and looked like a contemplative child-angel dressed in black by mistake.

"I might try and persuade her to take some photographs. She used to be so fond of it, and so clever at it."

Earle started, perceptibly. It was evident the suggestion was disturbing.

"I—I don't think I would do that just yet," he demurred. "Photography, well, it's cold work in winter."

"But she likes that best," returned Sylvia, with the touch of obstinacy that showed in her sometimes.

"You are not to mention it now," said Earle with decision. "Anything else, Sylvia. Don't leave her alone. Tell her plainly I say it is not good for her. And don't take too much notice of anything she may say. For she may say things that will surprise you. It's nothing, if she does. She isn't quite herself, and little wonder."

"Oh," said Sylvia, with a long breath of relief, "is that all?"

"That's all," returned Earle gravely.

Margaret listened to the murmured colloquy, to the clash of the great door, to Earle's footfall, crisp and steady, going down the drive. She rose from her chair and stood, her hands clenched beside her, her head thrown up.

"And I want to marry him!" she told herself half aloud. "I want to marry him—after all. If I see him often I shall let him persuade me to marry him—in spite of everything. Oh"—catching sight of her reflection in the little Florentine mirror above her writing table and regarding it with accusing eyes, "but you are a wicked, wicked woman."

How best shall one "amuse" a woman whose soul sits in sackcloth and ashes? The problem was beyond Sylvia. But she attacked it valiantly, striving, even as Dr. Earle had bidden her, to bring a gleam of interest to Margaret's stony face, a smile to eyes that looked as though they would never smile again. And all her sweet and simple wiles evoked was weariness, astonishment, in the end exasperation. For at last Margaret turned on her, goaded past bearing.

"Oh, Sylvia, *don't!*" she said.

Sylvia drew sharply back. In all her life, Margaret had never spoken to her so before. Compunction struck like a dagger at Margaret's heart as she saw her face. With a little inarticulate sound of grief she opened her arms. Sylvia flew into them and the two clung together with tears.

"Oh, Sylvia, you must forgive," she said brokenly. "You don't know, dear, you don't *know*."

Sylvia answered her with kisses, kisses sweet with sympathy and condonation. But all the same the little incident left its sting.

"I am very lonely," she told herself that night in a passion of self-pity. "Aunt Margaret thinks only of Dr. Earle, he thinks only of Aunt Margaret. Pap never comes—or writes—nor anything. No one wants *me!*"

CHAPTER XXIV.

CARR TALKS.

THAT same evening, in the smoking-room of the Travelers' Club, Dr. Stephen Whitworth sat alone. He was thin and brown, and he looked older than the nine months that had passed over his head since the May evening when he

had dined with Margaret warranted. But he had spent that nine months in Mexico, where he had had a strenuous time. He smiled sometimes as his gaze wandered round the warm and familiar room. He doubted if he would ever see it again.

A letter from his sister had recalled him. He was a man in whose scheme of life domestic and family concerns took a secondary place. But this was a domestic happening of some magnitude. Bertha was going to be married—and to a dean. She wrote pointing out the extreme undesirability of being married without a relative of any sort to grace the ceremony, and begging Stephen, as her only brother, to make a special effort to be back in time. He had managed it, with only an hour or two to spare.

Bertha had been married that morning and he had given her away. A hint of festivity still clung about him, decorous festivity, as became the wedding of a dean. It was fading into an unexpected realization of loss. The happy couple had gone to the Riviera for their honeymoon. When they came back, Bertha would live with her distinguished cleric in the cathedral close of a venerable city, where her brother had not the least doubt she would be completely happy. It was his own happiness that, for the first time in his life, was giving him some concern to-night.

For up to now there was no denying the fact that he had been a very happy man. He was rich enough to indulge his taste for travel in the wilder places of the world, and at the same time to keep up in more than modest comfort his handsome house in the better end of the Cromwell Road. That house had been admirably managed. No matter at what time he might drift in from the ends of the earth, he found the domestic machinery running smoothly and Bertha waiting to welcome him. The weirdest illness he could bring with him, and he had brought a good many, could not upset the household peace. Unexpected demands on her hospitality found her calm and unruffled and always able to meet them. She saw him come with a smile and let him go without protest. Truly he had been a happy man.

And now she was married. She had left him—and for good. The handsome house in the Cromwell Road must be left to servants and hirelings, who would swathe it in brown holland when he was away and be flustered and incompetent when he came back. He shook his head, for the prospect did not please him. A household run entirely by servants can be very vile.

There was, of course, one way out of his difficulty. He might marry. He had glanced, sometimes, at the possibility—what man past forty has not—but always he had put the idea from him. A wife! What did he want with a wife? She would be a superfluity and a nuisance. To-night he glanced at the possibility again and did not find it so easy to put the idea from him. A wife, now that Bertha had left him to be cared for by servants, might be a nuisance, but she was no longer a superfluity. Unless it was to be dismantled and closed altogether he must have a head of some sort for his house in the Cromwell Road. The fact that on this the very first night of Bertha's absence he should have found a solitary dinner unendurable and taken refuge at his club proved that.

And he had not liked the experience. He had no fault to find with the dinner; what he disliked was the loneliness. And loneliness, now, would be his portion for ever—unless he married.

Idly he began to develop the idea, face its possibilities more fully. He knew a good many charming women, for he was a favorite in his own circle and it was a good one. But not one of those he could call to mind appealed to him as the ideal woman, the woman he would wish to see managing his servants, taking the head of his table in the big, lonely house in the Cromwell Road. Clever women, he told himself with a sigh, were as a rule such incompetent housewives. Domestic women so tragically uninteresting. He shook his head a little hopelessly. It was going to be a difficult thing to find just the right woman.

And suddenly there rose in his mind a memory, the memory of a gracious, dark-eyed woman whom no one could call incompetent and whom he had found deeply,

even disturbingly interesting, a woman so comfortably provided for that no irksome retrenchment on his part would be called for, a woman who would certainly be capable of managing his servants and whom he would be proud to see at the head of his table. He had made her acquaintance in Japan, and been sufficiently attracted to follow it up, and with eagerness, as soon as he reached England. She had charmed him afresh on the one evening he had spent at her house. He had thought about her for long afterward, in fact it was only lately that the stress of unexpected events had pushed her from his mind. He had both admired and respected Margaret Royston. Why should he not marry her?

The idea was undeniably attractive and it was not new. He had, he remembered, had it in his mind as a definite possibility the night he and Bertha had gone down to Hazelbridge and dined at Greenshaws. But for the chance that had fallen in his way almost immediately afterward of going on an exploring expedition to Mexico in most congenial company it might quite possibly have developed, and very pleasantly, before now. To be sure there had always been against it his dislike of disturbing Bertha, of putting a mistress over her head in the house she had so admirably managed.

Now Bertha was mistress in her own house and his was without a head of any sort. But it should not be long. He must put some one in Bertha's place. And there was only one woman in the world, he told himself, he could see with pleasure in Bertha's place and that was Margaret Royston. He would at least go down to Hazelbridge and renew his acquaintance with her. That, he decided, pledged him to nothing.

He was rising to get an A.B.C. from the book-shelves when he heard a thin, high, monotonous voice indulging in what sounded like a monologue at the other end of the room. While he had been sitting, thinking, other diners had come into the smoke-room and it was nearly full. A little group of men had gathered round a chair at the further end of it, so that he could not see the occupant, but it was cer-

tainly from the occupant that that thin, high voice came.

"I was so comfortable," it wailed. "I had everything a man could want. My own rooms, the best of cooking, a good salary and nothing to do, *nothing*. And it was for life, he said it was for life. I was provided for, *abso-lutely*. And I liked him. We got on together. We were like brothers, Royston and I."

"H'llo, Whitworth. Glad to see you back. Had a good time?"

It was a little, round, cheerful man oddly resembling a robin, a man whom Whitworth genuinely liked. Yet his greeting was hurried and his manner detached and preoccupied.

"Capital, thanks. I'm glad to be back, though. I say, Bunce, what's the matter, over there?"

"It's that fellow Carr. Talk about being a button short! *He* hasn't any buttons at all." Bunce spoke with strong annoyance. "Perfect nuisance he is. Goes on like this every night. I wonder some one does not complain to the committee."

"Why don't you?" asked Whitworth. "It must be intolerable, every night."

"Oh, well, you see, some of the fellows are interested. He's always hinting that things were not quite straight down at Hazelbridge and they want to hear more of his tale. Got bets on, some of them have, who'll piece it together first."

"Where did you say?"

The name Royston, breaking in so oddly upon his thoughts, had already arrested his attention. That, he told himself, might have been a coincidence. But a Royston who lived at Hazelbridge!

"Hazelbridge, in Gloucestershire. Prettiest, greenest little Sleepy Hollow ever you saw."

"But the Mrs. Royston who lives at Hazelbridge was a widow. I know her well."

"That's what everybody thought, only she wasn't. Husband turned up again. Nine-day wonder. But he's dead now all right. Carr, there—"

But Whitworth was gone, to join the little circle of listeners round the complainer's chair.

"I loved him," he was saying with sobs. "I loved him like a brother. And he ought not to have died when he did, I shall always say so. He was all right at dinner, quite all right. And dead an hour after. But he ought not to have been. I shall always say so. I can see him now, with his head drawn back and his eyes half open and his teeth bare. He ought not to have looked like that. No man who dies of heart-failure, quickly and naturally, ever looks like that. *Poisoned* he was, poisoned like a dog. I shall always say so."

"Who signed?"

The question fell sharp and clear. The little group of men listening turned to look at the tall stranger with the leonine head who had put it. Carr straightened himself, his hands shut hard on the arms of his chair.

"I did," he said with dignity. "I was in charge of the case."

"And then you come here and say openly that his death was not a natural one! Don't you think it is a bit late for that? Don't you think, if you had any suspicion of that sort, you ought to have taken steps to clear the matter up before you allowed him to be buried?"

Carr's slim figure seemed to shrink together and collapse. He sat huddled up and silent.

"Earle was in such a damned hurry," he muttered at last.

The little circle of listening men looked at one another. Bunce spoke.

"Is he mad? Or did something fishy happen?"

Whitworth answered nothing, his brain was working too rapidly. Earle! The dark-faced fellow Mrs. Royston had found so much too interesting. He was there yet, was he? He shook his head. Bunce's question was one he could not as yet answer.

"It's no business of mine," he said at last. "But all the same I think I shall run down to Hazelbridge and—and look into things a little."

"I would," returned Bunce cordially. "It's time some one did, if all that fellow says is true."

Whitworth sat long over his study fire

that night. The little incident at the club, coming so oddly into his thoughts of Margaret Royston, had disturbed him. Her husband, then, had returned to her, altogether, he shrewdly suspected, to her dismay. But now he was indisputably dead, and buried in Hazelbridge churchyard—and Carr said he had been poisoned.

He moved uncomfortably as he remembered it. If Carr's opinion was worth anything then Carr himself had very gravely failed in his duty. It was his business, if the cause of a patient's death were not absolutely clear, to have the matter thoroughly sifted before a coroner and a jury. As he had not done that it was his business, now, to hold his tongue.

Instead of which he talked—and that plainly. There was, of course, no excuse whatever for his talking. What excuse did he offer for his grave dereliction of duty? The fact that Earle had been in "a damned hurry."

Earle! Once again his good-looking, dark face rose before Whitworth's mental eyes. Earle! That was the man whose memory of the last seven years failed him so unaccountably, though he was of considerable attainment and one would have expected him to be fully aware of all that happened with regard to medical science. *Earle!* He was the man who did not even know that his own father was dead and that Gerald, his brother, evidently his younger brother, had stepped into that father's shoes. Now why should a younger brother step into a father's shoes? Only because for some reason or other the elder has been adjudged unfit to wear them. What, then, had Earle done to be adjudged unfit to wear *his* father's shoes? What had he done to cut him off, utterly and entirely, from all the other members of his family?

Slowly Stephen Whitworth heaved himself out of his comfortable chair and took down from his shelves a medical directory of eight years ago. Here he was: "Earle, Carlton, 19 Osnaburgh Street, W. Author of 'Brain Lesions.' Junior Consulting Surgeon to St. Ives." He, a man not thirty! Already, though he was not yet thirty, he had made his mark in the medi-

cal world. He had a career before him. All men, as Whitworth remembered, spoke well of him. What could have happened?

And then a misty memory rose in Whitworth's mind. He took down another book from his shelves, a book of newspaper cuttings, records, mostly of law cases likely to interest the medical mind. He was not long in finding what he sought, and as he read the long slips, so carefully pasted into his book of cuttings, his face grew darker and darker. *Poisoned!* Carr said Royston had been *poisoned!* Why, Earle had once before poisoned his man!

And he, this man already once convicted of crime, this man, Whitworth had no doubt whatever, now guilty of a second, had had the insufferable, the damnable impudence to raise his eyes to Margaret Royston. Worse even than that. It was because he had raised his eyes to Margaret Royston—

Far into the night he sat and considered the situation, and his thoughts were long, long thoughts.

"I'll go down to Hazelbridge," he decided at last. "I'll go to-morrow. I can save her from *that*, at least."

CHAPTER XXV.

WHITWORTH TAKES A HAND.

AS Margaret and Sylvia sat at tea the next afternoon, Rybank announced him. Sylvia jumped up, flushing delightfully. Here, at last, was something, some one, who would, who must, interest Aunt Margaret. But there was little either of interest or of welcome in her face as she shook hands with her visitor. He was quick to sense the chill, the unexpected chill, in her greeting.

"Is it too early?" he asked with apology. "I found myself in your neighborhood, and I—I could not resist—"

"Dr. Whitworth, of *course* not. I should have been disappointed indeed if you had been anywhere near and had let considerations of that kind keep you away. You are always welcome, you know you are."

"Thank you," he said mechanically, stirring his tea round and round and round.

"Thank you!" She was doing her best to bring some little warmth into her manner. Why could she not quite manage it? "I—I was surprised at more than one piece of news that greeted me on my return from Mexico," he went on.

"Yes, you would be," returned Margaret quietly. "When I saw you last I was convinced of my husband's death, wasn't I? It was a—a great surprise when he came back to us—last June."

"Yes, indeed. And it must have been a great sorrow to lose him again so soon."

"Yes," said Margaret automatically. "Yes." Her dark eyes, inscrutable and steady, lifted a moment to his and dropped again. "And you—did you have a successful time in Mexico? Have you solved any more problems for us?"

He laughed a little, though his glance, sharply interrogative, swiftly removed, betrayed a good deal of wonder and some disquiet. It was so plain, so very plain, that she did not desire to discuss either her husband's return or his death, that she deprecated condolence and shunned sympathy.

"I enjoyed it," he said simply. "I had what pretty Sylvia here would call a high old time." And he plunged into a recital of his experiences that even Margaret, preoccupied and heavily oppressed, found interesting. Sylvia listened entranced, plying him with cakes, of which, in his absorption, he ate a prodigious number, refilling his cup when he was not looking, doing all she knew to lengthen reminiscences that were slowly warming Margaret back into some semblance of the woman she used to be. She was ordering yet more cakes for him when he took the opportunity to say to Margaret: "Can we have a few moments alone before I go? There is a matter of some importance I should like to talk over with you."

What was it that sprang into her eyes at his words? Amazement? Terror? Terror so profound that it took from her the power of even thinking coherently? A baby must have recognized it. Twice she essayed to speak and twice her dry lips refused to form any sound that was articulate. She gazed at him, her eyes frosty and wide and full of dumb and dreadful

questions—gazed and said nothing. He studied her, deeply disturbed. Of what was she, of what could she be, so terribly afraid? Out of sheer pity he managed to smile at her.

"It is—our little Sylvia," he went on in the same quick undertone. "I cannot speak openly before her. And what I have to say must be said before I go."

Yet what he had to say to her might have been anything but terrifying. He might have wished to ask her to marry him, as he had so nearly decided only the night before. He might have wished to say to her a hundred different things. Yet the suggestion that he had anything to say had been sufficient to take the color from her lips and deprive her of the power of answering him. She only nodded, and Sylvia, reenforced with many and varied cakes, once more claimed his attention. But his appetite and his story were both at an end. Would Margaret Royston afford him the opportunity for which he had asked, or would fear, unexplained but overmastering, prevent it? It was not easy to tell stories and eat cakes with a question as insistent as that in his mind.

But to his surprise she showed no desire to put off the hearing of what he had to say to her. Rybank had hardly removed the tea-tray before she suggested to Sylvia that if she had letters to write and wished to catch the post it would be well to write them now. Sylvia was quick-witted. Her "Oh, I must!" was commendably emphatic. She dropped a kiss like a butterfly on Margaret's hair and gave both her hands to Dr. Whitworth.

"You won't go till I have finished, will you?" she said.

"I hope not," he replied with a touch of disquiet he could not hide. "I hope not."

"Mrs. Royston," he began without any preamble almost as Sylvia closed the door, "it is about your husband's death that I wish—that I find myself compelled—to speak to you. Most unpleasant things are happening," he finished abruptly.

Once again that paralyzing, soul-deadening fear shone frosty and bright in her eyes. But with an effort that showed in

every line of her body she recovered herself. She even managed to speak in a voice that betrayed nothing but a quite natural surprise.

"My husband's death! Unpleasant things! What things, Dr. Whitworth?"

He hesitated a moment. Then he spoke, and plainly.

"It is being suggested, more than suggested, that he was poisoned."

He heard the quick indrawing of her breath and noted the tense stillness of her attitude. His bluntness had perhaps been a little brutal, but at least it had settled for him one point as yet undecided in his mind, settled it forever. She was not surprised at the accusation, she had expected it. But she faced it finely.

"Poisoned!" she echoed. "But that is—impossible. My husband died of heart-failure, the result of—of—oh, I can't remember technicalities"—with the sudden irritation of intense excitement—"of his state of health at the time. Everybody knows that," she said.

"But it is suggested that he didn't. That he was poisoned."

Again he heard the quick indrawing of her breath as though the word was more than she could bear. She leaned forward, her dark eyes burning in her pale face.

"Who suggests it?" she asked.

"Dr. Carr."

She fell back helplessly. It was plain that the name had both amazed and dismayed her.

"But," she said faintly, "it was Dr. Carr himself who signed the certificate, who told us all that he had died of heart-failure. Why did he do that, if—if—"

"He says that Dr. Earle hurried him into it."

At which color rushed over her in a lovely carmine flood. It died down, leaving her paler than ever, but not before it had told its tale to Dr. Stephen Whitworth. He knew, now, of what she was so dreadfully afraid.

"But," she said faintly, "that is ridiculous. Why should Dr. Earle hurry him at all? He was in the house when it happened. He knew as well as Dr. Carr. They agreed, they saw what Terence had

died of. Hurry! Why should he hurry him? What reason had he?"

To which Dr. Whitworth answered nothing. Much may be learned, sometimes, by letting a woman talk. But Margaret fell silent, realizing as well as Dr. Whitworth the danger that might lie in words.

"Of course," he went on presently, "Carr's position is indefensible. If he had any doubt at the time he ought not to have signed. If he had no doubt at the time he ought not to let doubt make him vocal now. But the fact remains that, as I said, he is suggesting most unpleasant things, and that, if he can't be stopped, painful results may follow."

"But what results could possibly follow? My husband is buried."

And oh, the consolation of that undeniable fact, the comfort that existed in the recollection that a good ten feet of earth hid Terence Royston's body and all the tales it might have told. Try as she would she could not keep it out of her voice. Dr. Whitworth hated himself for destroying it.

"But if the police move in the matter that will amount to very little. They will soon—"

"Dig him up again," was on his tongue, but he kept it there. After all the man whose death they were discussing had been Margaret's husband. Presumably she had loved him once. Margaret stared at him, the color draining out of her face till it was deathly pale.

"You think the police *will* move in the matter?"

"I am sure they will, if Carr goes on saying openly and in public the things he was saying yesterday."

After which Margaret sat silent a long, long time, her shoulders moving unconsciously with her labored breathing, her face expressionless, her eyes guarded. Anger rose hotly in Stephen Whitworth's mind as he watched her, but not against Margaret.

"She knows—and she is shielding him," he told himself. "The cur! The despicable *cur*—to let her know! But I think I've got him. I believe I can save her yet."

For oddly enough the fact that she was

shielding the man who had killed her husband, even the fact of her evident love for him, did not render her less desirable in Whitworth's eyes. He had learned, he told himself, not to expect an unyielding morality from women. High-minded, innocent of reproach, absolutely blameless as long as they are left to themselves; let their affections complicate moral issues, and morality, in nine cases out of ten, goes by the board. For the abstract crime of secret poisoning, Margaret, he had no doubt, had the same detestation as all the rest of the sane world. But for the concrete secret poisoner, who in utter devotion to her had quietly put out of existence the man who was making of her life an undiluted hell, she would cheerfully have lost her soul. And he was not sure that he did not like her the better for it.

Certainly it did not diminish her attraction for him, an attraction of which he was more and more conscious as the minutes passed. He could not, of course, marry her as soon as he had hoped, her mind was too full of the criminal he was about to denounce. But once banish Earle from her life by bringing his guilt home to him and her infatuation for him would die a natural death. Then he, Whitworth, would surely marry her and count himself a happy man.

But first he must eliminate Earle as a factor in the situation. It ought not to be a difficult thing to do. He rose and offered his hand.

"I regret," he said gently, "I could never tell you how much I regret that circumstances have compelled me to do—what I have done to-day. I hate to cause you further grief and annoyance. But that I foresaw even worse trouble ahead I would never have told you anything about it."

"Oh, but I am glad to know!" Her answer was quick and most evidently sincere. "I can only thank you for letting me know. It—it is most painful that Dr. Carr should be spreading abroad unfounded accusations of that sort. As you say he must be stopped. I—I—are you staying in Hazelbridge?"

"Yes. At the Chequers."

"Then I shall see you again?"

"I will call, if I may."

"Do. I—I shall always be pleased to see you," she said.

But she could not quite sound as though she meant it, neither could she hide her dismay at the news that he was staying in Hazelbridge. He went down the steps with a little flame of anger in his eyes.

"The cur!" he said again. "The cur—to let her know!"

Now he was going to see him, to startle him with his knowledge of his crime and confront him with its consequences. But it was not possible yet—a doctor's day is a long one.

"And I'll let him get his dinner," he said, with very much the same pity as moves authority when it arranges that a man shall have what breakfast he desires before he is hanged. "He had better have his dinner first."

To fill in the time he went for a long walk. On returning to the Chequers for his own dinner he passed the village post-office. He hesitated and then went in.

"I want to telegraph to Dr. Carr," he said pleasantly. "Of course if Mrs. Royston has already done so I needn't bother, but if she hasn't—"

"She has, sir," returned the smiling post-mistress. "A groom came down from Greenshaws about an hour ago."

"Thank you," he said. "Already!" he added to himself with a grim smile.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AN AMATEUR'S WEAPON.

BETWEEN eight and nine that evening, Earle and Stebbings were sitting together, each in a Windsor chair, one at either side of the fire. The last call was made, surgery hours were over, boots had been changed for slippers, Stebbings had his clay and Earle his brier. The red curtains were drawn over the two flat windows flush with the village street, a glass with a few snowdrops in it was on the table. An atmosphere of restfulness and peace enveloped both hard-worked men and even Earle was daring to be happy.

The days, those first days following Roy-

ston's burial, every one of which brought its own peril, were passing, calm and undisturbed. Royston in his grave slept soundly. Already the fact of his unexpected return and early decease were fading into the background of people's minds. Soon the vivid happenings of every day would crowd out the memory of it altogether. Royston would have all he deserved, forgetfulness, and when the year of her widowhood was over, perhaps before, Margaret would feel herself free to marry again. Why not?

To-night a sense of serene confidence in the future wholly possessed him. Margaret's attitude of rebuff and withdrawal was understandable, of course, but these were early days. Before long his devotion, his tenderness, his unremitting care would restore balance to her judgment, clarity to her mind. She would see, he would convince her, that to raise what had happened into an impassible barrier between them would be a ridiculous and impossible proceeding born of hysteria and the ill-balance of the feminine mind. She was too sensible, too sane. He sat, his quiet eyes on the fire, his mind busy with the happy plans that were once again possible, when there came a sharp ring at the surgery bell.

It was, of course, that bane of a doctor's existence, a night call. Earle rose, so did Stebbings, but Earle put him back into his seat with an authoritative hand.

"Sit still, you are not fit for night work yet," he said. "It may not be much, but whatever it is I'll see to it."

He lighted the gas in the surgery. Then very deliberately he unlocked and opened the surgery door. A man stood on the step, a tall man with a beard and leonine hair just touched with gray. He looked like a professor, a savant, an actor, perhaps, but not in the least like a patient. Earle could not remember that he had ever seen him before.

"Will you come in, please?" he said with the curtness of a tired man. The stranger walked in and took off his hat—and Earle recognized him.

"Dr. Whitworth! I am pleased to see you again. I thought you were in Mexico," he said, and offered a cordial hand.

But Whitworth ignored it, pointedly.

"Not yet," he said and his voice had a hint of menace in it. "Better hear what I've got to say first."

Earle stiffened. He felt his muscles set tense and taut as the shock of Whitworth's words ran over him. He raised his head, looking not at but past Whitworth, and there was about him a subtle suggestion of an animal listening, gathering its forces, prepared for peril though it does not yet know from what quarter the peril comes. For the moment Whitworth pitied him.

"Come and sit down," he said, forgetting that the invitation should not have come from him. "We may as well talk comfortably. And I want you to understand, to begin with, that I don't come here with any fixed ideas in my mind. I'm open to conviction. I simply want to talk things out."

It was not quite the truth and he knew it, since nothing could have been more profound than his conviction that Earle was guilty of Royston's death. But he would let the fellow say what he could for himself. When one has a beetle held firmly beneath one's foot one pities before crushing it. Earle faced him, his eyes wide and clear.

"Oh!" he said on a note of profound inquiry. "What things?"

But Whitworth did not answer him. Mechanically Earle moved two chairs and the men sat down with the corner of the table between them. Then Whitworth spoke.

"It is, of course, this matter of Royston's death," he said at once, for there was nothing to be gained by beating about the bush and much by a direct attack. "You were, I believe, his medical adviser."

A peculiar stillness settled over the man sitting opposite him. It had come, then, the thing that he had dreaded every night except to-night, the touch of suspicion, born only Heaven knew how, that would awaken inquiry and bring discovery. The necessity for caution oppressed his very breath-

sake. Danger lurked in every word he might say. Yet a reply of some sort was un-
That he. That he. That he.
you have.
possible

Since Christmas he has been attended by a man named Carr," he said at last.

"Ah." Unconsciously Whitworth ticked off a point on his fingers. Earle's tale and Carr's agreed so far. "Dr. Carr is a member of the Travelers'. So am I," he added quietly.

"You are wondering, perhaps, what possible connection that fact has with Royston's death," he went on as Earle sat silent. "You'll see directly. Last night, at the Travelers', Carr was talking. He was talking about what happened here."

Still Earle said nothing, but suddenly his face lost all expression and became mask-like and still.

"Talking as he shouldn't," Whitworth said deliberately. "For whether he is right or wrong he shouldn't be saying the things he is saying now. Frankly he is suggesting, more than suggesting, that Royston did not die a natural death. He says, and quite plainly, that he was poisoned."

A little tremor, quite perceptible, ran over Earle's whole frame. He sat stricken dumb under the shock, but only for a moment.

"The man is mad," he returned, and though it was evident that he controlled his voice with an effort he kept it steady. "He did not think so at the time. At the time he saw clearly the cause of death. I was there and we both agreed that it was heart-failure. French, Royston's valet, was in the room. He heard what Carr said. He saw him fill in the certificate. If he suggests anything different now it is because he is the victim of a diseased imagination. He's mad."

"There's a good deal of method. He describes accurately what Royston looked like as he lay dead—and it doesn't sound like heart-failure."

Whitworth's tone was decided and his eyes were keen. Evidently he was in no mood to accept a ready-made solution of the puzzle. Yet all Earle could do was to insist upon it.

"Royston died of heart-failure," he said, and his voice was level and expressionless, like a parrot's.

"And you are going to marry his widow."

Earle started so sharply that the legs of his chair squeaked on the tiled floor. But he recovered himself instantly.

"And why not?" he asked quietly.

Whitworth rose. Long and lean he towered over him, his eyes ablaze with righteous anger.

"You know, you scoundrel, you know," he said passionately. "You poisoned Royston, you know you did, and it isn't the first time you have—removed—a man who was inconvenient. "I—I'm not vindictive," suddenly regaining his hold on himself. "I don't want to punish you. Carr makes no secret of what life at Greenshaws was like. He talks a good deal, at the club. I understand something of what your temptation may have been, and to a certain extent I sympathize with—with the fact that you succumbed to it. But I am going to prevent your marrying Margaret Royston."

"And how?"

For Whitworth's accusation had passed him by. He swept it aside as a thing of no account. What he wanted, what he must have, was a knowledge of Whitworth's plans. He rose, also, and they faced one another under the gaslight like a couple of watchful dogs.

"You will give me your word of honor before I leave you to-night that you will never see or write to her again—or I put Carr and the police in communication."

Earle drew away from him, horror-struck and gray.

"You'll do—*what?*" he said in a sharp whisper. Whitworth studied him with merciless, avenging eyes.

"You can prevent it," he said at last, "by giving the promise I demand. I have no wish to be hard on you—but you are not going to marry Royston's widow."

"But I can't. I *can't!*" Earle backed a step or two farther and clutched at the high mantel to steady himself. "You don't know what you are asking. I *can't* promise that," he said.

"Then I shall acquaint the police with what I have heard and tell them that I consider the matter requires investigation."

"And regret it to the bottom of your soul!" Earle's voice rang in the quiet

room. "Yes, you will. I'm not speaking wildly. I know what I am saying. You do that—and you'll wish you had *died* before you came to Hazelbridge to-day."

In silence the two men faced one another, Earle desperate and white, Whitworth slowly digesting, assimilating, realizing the full meaning of the words he had just heard. At last he understood them, fully, completely, and his scorn and contempt for the man opposite him scorched.

"I—I can't pretend to misunderstand you," he said. "You cur! You damned, unspeakable cur! To seek to save your own wretched neck by implicating her!"

"But I don't." Earle's look was steady. A tinge of color had come back to his lips. "So little do I seek to save myself that, if you persist in carrying out the threat you have just made, I will go straight up to London and give myself up to the authorities. I should call it misadventure, of course, though I might find it a little difficult to explain how I came to have cyanid of potassium where I could use it by mistake—"

"Cyanid of potassium! Then he *was* poisoned!"

"He was poisoned, and the drug used was cyanid of potassium. Do you think any medical man outside a madhouse would use cyanid of potassium? Would you? With all the poisons know to science to choose from would you choose *that?*"

Whitworth was silent, whitely impressed. Cyanid of potassium was the agent of the amateur, a choice almost as crassly stupid as salts of lemon or carbolic acid. No man with even an elementary knowledge of poisons would choose it. Who, then, had? For Earle acknowledged that it was the cause of Royston's death.

"And you are mean enough, base enough, to suspect—" he began. Earle silenced him.

"I don't suspect. I *know*. And I don't blame her. If you had seen her life during the last six months neither would you. If it comes to punishment I blame her a little that I will take it for her, and glad. But she poisoned him. Now you

Whitworth said nothing. He sat into stillness. Earle went on.

"I had to tell you—because of your threat. And because, things being as they are, I could not give the promise you required of me. What would she have thought if I had left her now? I couldn't do it. You see I couldn't, don't you?"

"Come and sit down," said Whitworth hoarsely, "and tell me exactly what happened."

"You won't—use it against her?"

"Good God! No."

Earle dropped into his chair and passed his handkerchief over his damp face.

"I'll tell you what happened," he said, "hiding nothing, not even my own guilt. For if she had not killed him I would have done it. You don't know what she went through. You don't know what a rotter he was! It just got that she could not bear it any longer. And I knew it. I meant killing him. I went up prepared to kill him."

"Then how was it you didn't?"

"He was dead already. When I went into his room he lay dead—and nearly cold. And from the look of him there wasn't much doubt in my mind as to what had killed him. His coffee cup was on a little table beside him. I smelt it, and then I was sure. I did a foolish thing. I washed the coffee cup and saucer in the lavatory basin just outside his door. I often wonder if Manners noticed it."

"And what did you do then?"

"I came down-stairs and tried to look as if nothing had happened. It wasn't long before French, his man-servant, fetched me."

"And after that?"

"I sent for Carr. He was fairly all right, as far right as a man who takes morphia as he does ever is, but he was open to suggestion. I am not ashamed to say that I made use of it. I told him not only what he ought to do but what he ought to think. I would never have believed he had enough independent judgment left to—come to a different conclusion afterward."

"Yet he has, and for Mrs. Royston's sake his mouth must be stopped somehow. That is, of course, if— It seems to me you have been very ready to jump to impossible conclusions," he broke off indig-

nantly. "You have no proof. As far as I can see you have no *foundation* for—the thing you have dared to believe."

But Earle shook his head.

"You don't know," he said drearily. "You haven't heard the things she has said, at different times, to me. Besides, who else is there?"

"How did she get it?"

"She had it. She and Sylvia are keen photographers. They have a dark room fitted with everything they can possibly require. I know they have cyanid there because I have cautioned them more than once to be careful how they handled it."

"But some one else may have known it was there—and got at it."

"Who else is there?" said Earle again. "The door of the dark room is always locked, and Mrs. Royston keeps the key. Besides, it isn't to any one's *interest*. Who else is there?"

Whitworth put his elbows on the table and his chin on his hands and stared at the man opposite.

"I don't believe it," he said at last. "I *can't* believe it," he repeated in a whisper. But he believed it sufficiently to have lost all desire to marry Margaret Royston. Earle shrugged.

"You must please yourself," he said at last. "All I ask is that you hesitate before you let the matter go out of your hands, before you give a hint to the police that may have consequences you would deplore."

"Oh, I sha'n't do that *now*."

"Then you do believe it," said Earle quietly.

Whitworth's brows drew together in a distressed frown. He did not believe it, he told himself; he could not. But all the same he had, now, no intention of giving gratuitous information to Scotland Yard. Which was his duty, his plain and undeniable duty. Never before that he could remember had he turned aside from the performance of his duty.

"We are—compounding a felony," he said quietly.

"Of course," returned Earle almost irritably.

"And what is to be the end of it all?"

"I am going to marry her. Marry her

and take her right away, probably to the Western States. It will be difficult. She has separated herself from me utterly. She has forbidden me the house. She is behaving as every other woman with high ideals and an overstrained sense of honor would. But I take little notice of it. I am going to marry her all the same. I don't—benefit—by Royston's death. She intends to free herself of his money."

"She has said so?"

"Yes. If I had needed any further proof that would have been sufficient. But I have a little of my own, enough to start afresh on, modestly."

Whitworth nodded. It amazed him to find how entirely his objection to Earle's pretensions had died in the last ten minutes. He rose and stood staring down at him.

"Well," he said under his breath, "you have amazed me. Amazed and shocked me beyond words. I need hardly say that what you have told me is safe. But there is one thing essential. You have got to silence Carr."

Earle nodded, though how he was going to do it was far from clear.

"And now I'm going. Shake hands."

Earle looked at him as their grasp closed and his eyes were uncertain and afraid.

"I've trusted you—" he began hoarsely.

Whitworth silenced him.

"Haven't I told you you need have no fear," he returned, and was gone.

But he did not take Earle's misgivings with him. All the long night he lay awake, pondering, with ever-deepening dismay, this thing that he had done.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MR. PENRYAN PAYS A CALL.

THE next afternoon the unprecedented happened: old Mr. Penryan paid a call. Sylvia was sitting in the window, some lacy trifle of needlework in her rather listless fingers, when his car slid up to the door. Two correct and elderly men servants half lifted him from it and supported him up the steps. Sylvia turned, almost awed, to Margaret.

"Auntie, here's dad," she said.

"Who?"

"Pap's father, Mr. Penryan," amended Sylvia, blushing like a rose, and that moment Rybank opened the door and announced him. Margaret went forward to meet him, her eyes alight.

"Mr. Penryan, this is good of you," she said in gentlest welcome, but for the moment the old man did not even see Margaret. His whole regard was for Sylvia, standing startled and sweet and all athrill with pleasure. He took first one of her hands and then the other, if she had given him the faintest hint of encouragement he would have kissed her. Then with an effort he remembered Margaret.

"My visit is to you," he said with a tinge of apology, "though it looks as if, for the moment, I had forgotten it. I offer my excuse," laying a light hand on Sylvia's shoulder. "Surely the fairest a man ever had. I *hope* I am not too early. It is not yet—a month. But when one is as old as I am, Mrs. Royston, time presses. What I have to do I must do quickly."

"Oh, I am glad to see you," said Margaret, and with evident sincerity. But a touch of apprehension sprang into her eyes. Was he bent on condolence, on sympathizing with a grief he knew was non-existent? Yes, he intended both. It appealed to him most exquisitely to condole with Margaret Royston.

"I heard of your bereavement," he began, "as of course we all did. I am come to tell you that I feel for you—and deeply."

"Thank you," said Margaret mechanically, and braced herself to endurance.

"I need hardly assure you of my heartfelt sympathy. I know something of what such a loss as yours must mean," he told her, and his hard, old eyes studied her relentlessly. "To lose the dear comrade of half a lifetime, whose every thought has been for your happiness, whose every endeavor has had your welfare for its aim. I know, none better, what the appalling loneliness is that follows the taking from one of one's nearest and dearest and best. I know—"

Margaret moved sharply. Her glance swept upward and caught and held the old man's keen gaze.

"Mr. Penryan," she said, "my husband's death did not mean to me—quite all that. I think you know it."

He gave an odd little grunt of satisfaction. The woman was honest. He would bait her no more. He put away his handkerchief and his condolences together.

"Then?" he said, and his voice was as different as though another man were speaking, "we will not pretend with one another. I will not any longer presume to pity you. Instead, I will ask you to pity me. I, at least, am lonely, with the dreadful loneliness of those who know that the time in which they may enjoy the companionship of those they love is tragically short. Your candor, dear lady, has brought me more rapidly than I expected to the real reason of my visit, which was not so much to offer you sympathy as to ask it for myself.

"I am an old man, separated by circumstances which I genuinely regret from the society of my only and well-beloved son. My days are passed in solitude and bitterness, largely, I fear, of my own creating. Will you, dear lady, mitigate the one and help to disperse the other by coming sometimes to see me, and"—he stretched a hand like an ivory claw over the side of his chair, caught Sylvia's wrist and held it fast—"bringing this pretty child with you?"

His sonorous, early-Victorian periods ceased. The very atmosphere seemed poorer without them. Margaret's only answer was a quick, vexed sigh. Why does fate, destiny, Providence—whatever we may choose to call that which shapes our rough-hewn ends—give us the things we most ardently desire always a little too late?

"Mr. Penryan, I shall be only too pleased," she said at last. "I have"—once again she decided in favor of a desperate honesty—"often wished that I could."

He smiled and lifted Sylvia's hand to his lips.

"My little girl, will you go away?" he said. "I want to talk to Aunt Margaret."

"Mrs. Royston, you know what I desire."

He spoke almost before the door closed. Margaret looked at him, her hands twisted hard together, her eyes aglow.

"Mr. Penryan, you cannot desire it more ardently than I do," she returned.

He leaned forward and offered a delicate old-ivory hand. Margaret took it in both her own. Never was there a more completely buried hatchet.

"And there is nothing in the way? Absolutely nothing?"

He watched her with eyes like gimlets made of bright, blue steel. What vague misgivings his mind held he could not have told, but misgivings were there. Margaret faced him, unafraid.

"Absolutely nothing," she said. "The one thing was—your opposition."

"It exists no longer," he returned softly. "And now tell me something of her history, her upbringing. If she is to be my little daughter."

"It is a simple one. Her mother was an Irishwoman of good family, my husband's sister. Her father was the son of a Ceylon tea-planter. Sylvia was born in Ceylon. He died of snake-bite before Sylvia was a year old. The old man, the grandfather, behaved justly but not generously to his widow. He allowed her three hundred a year. When she died her allowance died with her. He never did anything for Sylvia."

"Then what happened to her?"

"We took her, Terence and I. It was the one—it was among the good deeds of his life. We brought her up and educated her."

"You mean that you did, your husband not objecting."

But Margaret brushed the point away. It was of no importance. An obstacle to Sylvia's marriage even more insuperable than Mr. Penryan's objection had just occurred to her. It was a little odd that it had not occurred to her before.

"But Mr. Penryan, she has refused him over and over again."

Old Penryan nodded.

"I know," he said. "They manage these things better in France, don't they? It seems a pity that an arrangement of this kind, desired by every one"—he paused a moment and then repeated deliberately—"desired by every one, should lie at the mercy of a girl's whim. How can she judge

where her true happiness lies? What does she know about it? It is ridiculous to leave powers so profoundly dangerous in her inexperienced hands. The mating of young people should be in the hands of their elders."

"Oh," said Margaret a little startled, "surely not altogether."

"Altogether"—with decision. "And this time they have been. Sylvia, as you say, has refused my boy more than once, but I don't think she will again. It is difficult to persuade young people that the cruelties of their elders are perpetrated in their best interests, but sometimes they are. My sending Percival away as I did last summer must have seemed to him a piece of wanton brutality. But I know it was his one chance of winning Sylvia."

"And you wanted her?"

His eyebrows lifted whimsically.

"I want her now," he said.

Margaret flushed, but she uttered no protest. He wanted her now. It was enough.

"I beg," said the old man, rising, "that you will honor me by a visit—and soon. My house is not without interest, and I wait to lay it and all that it contains at Sylvia's pretty feet. When my son returns—"

"Oh, not yet, Mr. Penryan," interrupted Margaret quickly. "You won't send for him yet?"

"I can't," he said brusquely. "I don't know where he is. Do you?"

It was the crux of his visit. He had come not to offer cynical sympathy to a griefless widow, not even to sweep away obstacles to Sylvia's happiness, only to get, if by any means he could compass it, some hint of the whereabouts of his boy. Margaret's eyes softened.

"I believe I could find him," she hesitated.

He heaved a long sigh of relief, of thankfulness.

"I thought so. I hoped so," he said. "Mrs. Royston, I am an old man. Be merciful, and send for him."

And at the wistful longing in his voice Margaret's heart melted. Not even her conviction that it was too early, her remem-

brance that it lay in Sylvia's power to ruin and bring to naught all that her elders had with such difficulty brought to fruition, and that if Pap came home too quickly she certainly would, could steel her to refusal.

"I will tell Dr. Earle," she said. "You shall hear from him, and quickly."

"Earle! The doctor! * He knows where my boy is!"

"He writes to him regularly."

"Writes? He can write to Earle and not to me?"

"Mr. Penryan, you forbade him."

"No! Never! I forbade him to write to Sylvia, but not to me. However"—and his voice sank to a weary resignation that almost hurt Margaret's ears—"I shall have to forgive him. He has brought me to the point at which I am ready to forgive him anything."

"Even his marriage with Sylvia."

"His marriage with Sylvia! I welcome it—and her."

"She brings him nothing"—with a touch of depreciation.

"She brings him happiness—and that is everything," said the old man gently.

Yet the light died out of Margaret's face before his car was through the gate. Why, oh, why does fate give us the things that we crave—so often a little too late?

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WHO DID IT?

THAT evening between eight and nine Earle was dressing to go up to Green-shaws, dressing with heavy shadows in his eyes and chill misgiving at his heart. It was imperative that he should see Margaret. Carr must be silenced and only Margaret could do it. But she had forbidden him the house. She had told him plainly that, if she could help it, she would never see him again. And he had told her that he would not have it so, that not even what happened a month ago should separate her from him, that they would marry in spite of it. Some days had elapsed since then, days in which she had given no sign of relenting. Would she refuse to see him to-night? He would soon know. In spite

of her forbiddance he was going up to Greenshaws.

"Don't worry if I'm late, for I may be," he said to Stebbings. "I hope things will be quiet whilst I'm gone; that there will be no beastly call. Put them off if there is. Tell them I'll be back before midnight, and I'll come at once. But perhaps nothing will turn up. I don't know of anything likely to."

The sharp ring of the surgery-bell silenced him. "Damn!" he said, and went to see who was there.

It was Biggs, the chauffeur from Greenshaws, and he brought a note.

Will you please come up as soon as possible?
I must see you. M. R.

He stood staring at it. He had doubted his admittance, and she sent for him with urgency.

"I was coming anyhow," he said, forgetting that Biggs would not understand his phrase. "I was just starting. Have you got anything with you, Biggs?"

"The small car, sir."

"Then come along. It's all right, old chap," he shouted to Stebbings, and the door clashed behind him.

As they slid through the crisp, cool air of the February night he sat and marvelled. To go up to Greenshaws in Margaret's car, and at her pressing call! What did that mean? He had no time to solve the puzzle. It seemed that almost at once they were turning in at the white gate.

Rybank received him with his usual solicitude and announced him with his usual respect. He did not allow the younger men to wait upon his mistress. That was his privilege, and he guarded it jealously. Margaret rose as he entered, but she did not come forward to greet him. Her eyes were full of wistful grief, but an insurmountable barrier stood between the man she knew she still loved and herself. On the one side she—with her memories. On the other he—and his hopes. How dare he, she asked herself, reading them in his face, how *dare* he still hope!

"Carlton," she began, "I—I have had to see you again, though I did not intend. I have had—a shock."

And instantly he knew what had happened.

"You have seen Whitworth?"

"Yesterday afternoon." And then, with a sudden grasp of possibilities, "Have you?"

"Last night," he returned quietly, and waited. With a little fluttering gesture Margaret's hand went to her throat.

"Then he would tell you—about Carr."

"Yes," he said, adding, "He must be silenced, of course."

She faced him, desperate and white.

"I have done my best," she said almost in a whisper. "I telegraphed for him yesterday. This morning he came. He is leaving England. I have made it well worth his while. But he fears he has done irreparable mischief."

"Irreparable mischief! How?"

"By the things he has said. He seems sincerely sorry, but it is a little late to be sorry now. I told him so."

"You—*told* him so! What else have you told him?"

"Nothing definite. I pointed out, of course, the unpleasant results for me, for us all, that might very well follow his—his insinuations. He seemed shocked and sorry. He is ready to do anything. I had no difficulty whatever in persuading him to leave England. But I fear it is—too late."

"Too late!"

He sat down suddenly, for his strength seemed to go out of him. Margaret took a quick step forward, she feared that he would faint. But he shook his head almost impatiently, reading her thought, and the new fear died out of her eyes, and the old one took its place.

"Carlton, you must go away," she said, and her words came quick and low. "You must go away at once—until all this blows over. It is the only possible thing for you to do."

At which, amazement sprang into his eyes, an amazement so profound, or so well simulated, that Margaret caught her breath to see it.

"I!" he echoed under his breath. "I must go away? Why?"

She turned away with a little distressed sound, half moan, half sob.

"Oh," she said in a shaken whisper, "why will you talk like that? Why *will* you pretend—with me? What is the use? It isn't as if I blamed you"—half unconsciously her hands went out to him—"I don't. I take my full share of responsibility. I know how I influenced you—for evil. I am as guilty—far, far more guilty than you are. But you are the one who would pay. It is you they would punish. And I can't, I won't allow it. These things, evil things, bring their own punishment. But for this that has happened, you and I dare have looked forward to something like happiness together, for, Sylvia once safely married, I would not have stayed here. But now we can never be happy together—never. There is always that dreadful grave between us. And it is enough. You are punished enough—and so am I. Carlton, you *will* go, won't you? Now, while there is time."

He sat silent, her words thundering about him, each one a blow. And if the amazement in his look were acted, he could act indeed.

"Margaret, what are you saying? Do you *know* what you are saying?" he demanded at last.

She hid her face with tears.

"Know! Of course I know! It is horribly cruel to have made me say it, but you did," she said.

He rose and came slowly toward her, close enough to touch her though he did not do it.

"You think," he said hoarsely, "that I poisoned Royston?"

"I don't think, I *know*!" Her dark eyes blazed at him behind their tears. "Oh, Carlton, *don't* deny it. Why should you, when I own myself more guilty than you! You begged the last time I saw you for honesty between us. Now you have it, on my side at least. Carlton, for the sake of my respect for you, be honest, too."

"I will," he returned steadily. "I will tell you now what I ought to have told you at first, exactly what happened the night Royston died. I went up-stairs, as you remember, leaving you here locked in. I went to speak to Carr, to get him, if I could, to go. You know the result: he

would not go. When I had satisfied myself that he was in earnest, that he really did not intend to go, I didn't come straight down here to you, as always up to now I have let you believe. I went to your husband's room. I went prepared to kill him if I had any opportunity. I had had opportunities before, and had made no use of them. I did not intend to let another go by. I intended to use it. I *meant* to kill him if I got the chance.

"When I went into his room I thought he was asleep, that my opportunity had really come. Margaret, he was dead, dead already and nearly cold. He must have been dead almost an hour. By the look of him I suspected at once what he had died of. His coffee-cup stood on the table by him. I smelt the cup, and then I was sure. I washed the cup and saucer in the lavatory basin in his bath-room, so that no one should ever be certain but me, and then I came down to you."

"But—why didn't you tell me?"

He drew back sharply. "I—I—" he stammered, and stopped. She stood regarding him with wide and woful eyes.

"I *ought* to have been told," she said, and at something in her tone, sudden, horrified fear swept over him.

"Margaret, don't you believe me?"

"No." Her lips framed the word, and it was unmistakable, though no sound came.

"But as God is above me—"

She silenced him with a gesture almost fierce.

"I'll show you," she said, and her voice was tenseless and low. "I'll show you—why."

Swiftly she turned, dropping on one knee beside her writing-table. She took a tiny key from the purse that lay upon it and unlocked a drawer. She lifted out of it a hypodermic syringe and a little bottle and laid them in his hand.

"I found that," she said in the same level, tenseless voice, "in the pocket of your overcoat in the hall. What made me look there, Heaven only knows. I think I was afraid. I know I wanted to reassure myself, to convince myself, that you had nothing with you, that you had had no hand in his death. And I found—that."

He stood staring down at the bright little syringe and the tiny bottle, turning them absently over and over in his hand. He had always been aware of an uneasy doubt as to whether he really had returned them to their places in the locked cupboard in the surgery. The fact that he had no recollection of having done so had worried him a little, though not to the extent of turning out the cupboard and making sure. He might well not remember putting them away. *Margaret* had them. He raised his head and looked at her.

"I know," he said steadily. "I will hide nothing of my own culpability. You shall realize my guilt—as far as it goes. I brought these up. I meant to use them if I had an opportunity. I have already told you so. Whether I should have done it or not—I think I was mad. But I don't think I was mad enough to have really done it. I hope not. But there was no chance. He was dead already. Good God, you *really* don't believe me."

"I—I can't. Oh, Carlton, it kills me to say so, but I can't! If things had been as you say you would have done differently. You would have told *me*. You would never have allowed Dr. Carr to sign that certificate. You would have insisted that the guilty person should be found—and punished. Why *didn't* you?"

He faced her, helpless and dumb. Why *didn't* he? Desperately he tried to gather up his scattered ideas, his shaken wits. How was he to stand before this woman that he worshiped and say "I believed you were a murderer, the most despicable kind of murderer existing, a secret poisoner. If I had not believed it I should have done differently." Could he expect forgiveness? Could he hope that she would ever allow her eyes to rest upon him again—if he told her that?

"But—what I say admits of proof," he said at last. He was ignoring her question, taking up quite other issues, and he knew she must notice it, but he dare not do anything else. "Royston did not die of this stuff that I brought, he died of cyanid poisoning. An exhumation would prove it."

"Cyanid? Cyanid of potassium? The same that I use for my photographs?"

"The same."

"Then—do you suggest that he has taken it himself?"

Earle drew sharply back before a blinding possibility.

"Could he get into your dark-room?" he asked.

"No. I have the key here. I always keep it. Besides, there isn't any there. When you told Sylvia she must be careful how she used it I got frightened and threw it all away. That was, oh, months ago. In the summer."

"Do you remember what you did with it? Try and remember *exactly*."

"I can't; not exactly. I think I gave it to one of the maids and told her to put it in the dust-bin. That is what I should be sure to do. There was nothing else I could do—in the summer."

"Well, that was what he died of. It was given him, as I told you, in his coffee. I washed the cup in the lavatory basin. Who brings his cup down-stairs?"

"Manners, as a rule. But any one may have brought it down—that night."

"Whoever did must have noticed the washed cup. Ask them. Make inquiries."

Margaret dropped her head in her hands.

"Carlton, I daren't," she said in a whisper. "You *know* I daren't," she added.

Once again he faced her, helpless and dumb. Slowly the truth was clear to him. Any argument that he could bring forward would leave her belief unshaken. So it seemed to him—at first. There was one proof of his innocence that she could not help but accept.

"If what you tell me is really true, find the real murderer," she said in a quick whisper. "Put it into the hands of the police, as you ought to have done at first. Why didn't you? Oh, Carlton, why *didn't* you? Then I could have believed."

Why didn't he? He could not tell her. If ever she even dimly suspected what his reason had been, no place of forgiveness would ever be found for him, though he should seek it bitterly and with tears.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK. Don't forget this magazine is issued weekly, and that you will get the conclusion of this story without waiting a month.

Temptation of Carlton Earle

by Stella M. Düring

Author of "The Crooked Stick," "The Loom of Life," "The Sword of Damocles," etc.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"FIND THE MURDERER!"

IT was late that night before Earle let himself into the little gray-stone house in the High Street. Where he had been he never knew; he had simply wandered, deaf and unseeing, lost to his surroundings, walking in a maze of agonized repentance. Not only had he believed the unbelievable against Margaret himself, he had practically denounced her to Stephen Whitworth. He had done it, of course, to save her, to shield her from a danger that he believed only an entire honesty on his part could avert. Nevertheless, he had done it uselessly and, it seemed to him now, almost without excuse. How could he, how dare he have believed that her husband's death lay at Margaret's door! Should he not have searched the whole world for a solution before he accepted that one!

His sense of treachery—for his conduct had magnified itself by this time to an almost deliberate treachery—crushed him to the earth with shame. He spent an hour or two of restless misery in bed, and then, very early in the wild February dawning, he dressed and took the first train to town.

Shortly after ten he was at Stephen Whitworth's door. A man servant admitted him and, being assured that the matter was urgent, showed him at once into Dr. Whitworth's study.

Whitworth had just breakfasted, and, in

his dressing-gown and slippers, was lying back in a big chair enjoying his first pipe. He rose at sight of Earle, his lean, brown face lengthening in genuine surprise.

"You!" he said. "You're an early caller. Good thing you are if you want to see me, for I'm going down to Yorkshire by the midday express. Sit down, man, and recover yourself." For Earle's haggard face twitched and his frame, stalwart as it was, trembled. "What's the matter with you? What does this mean?"

"It means—that I have come to correct a—a misstatement I made the other night. I gave you a wrong impression. Mrs. Royston had nothing to do with her husband's death. I ought never to have suggested it. I don't know how I came to."

The few plain, bald sentences were as much as he could achieve. Whitworth put down his pipe, and grasping the arms of his chair, leaned forward, studying him with slowly hardening eyes.

"You gave me a wrong impression—deliberately?" he said at last.

"No, not deliberately. I honestly believed at the time what I said. I don't know now how I could have done so; but I did. I have, however, seen Mrs. Royston. I find I was altogether mistaken. There is nothing left for me to do but come to you and say so; assure you of my deep and undying regret that I should ever have suggested to you—anything so utterly impossible."

This story began in the All-Story Weekly for July 26.

After which he sat silent, meeting with quiet endurance the wonder, the suspicion, the blasting scorn in the eyes of the other man.

"You have repented, of course." Whitworth's tone was razor-edged. "You had no grounds whatever for the accusation you brought against an innocent woman. You saw, in vilifying her a way to save your own worthless neck—and you took it, you hound, you took it!"

Earle passed his handkerchief over a gray face and dry lips.

"That is not so," he said quietly. And again: "That is—not so."

Whitworth made an indescribable sound of fierce contempt, almost loathing.

"As an advocate of your own innocence you are—peculiarly unsuccessful," he said. "Is it worth making a denial as futile as that? Do you think I can't see things as they are? You guessed my—interest—in her, and you deliberately used it to burke an inquiry that you dare not face. You needn't have been afraid. I wouldn't have hanged you—you are not worth it. I would only have swept you out of the way. But I'll hang you now! By God, I will! It would have been better for you if you had told the truth from the first."

Earle sprang to his feet. He had borne as much as he could.

"Whitworth, I did!" he said passionately. "I told the truth as I saw it, and I am speaking the truth now. I believed what I said to you, and I had grounds for my belief. She had talked to me, told me things she had felt—and wished—and nearly done—in the dreadful years she had lived through before. She had the stuff that killed him in her possession. There was no one anywhere with an interest in his death except herself—and me. I was innocent in fact, if not in intention. Do you wonder if, for the moment, I was mad enough to believe—"

He choked and was silent. It seemed so amazing now that he ever could have believed. Whitworth's face altered. One may be uncertain when a man is lying, but truth has accents that are unmistakable. They brought a shade of doubt into his eyes now, and Earle was quick to see it.

"I don't want to labor the point," he said. "I can't convince you if you won't be convinced—and I don't know that I care to. I don't mind—much—what you think of me. What I had to do was to make such amends as are possible—to her."

Whitworth sat silent, doubtful, uncertain, unwillingly impressed.

"It looks fishy," he said at last. "You can't blame me for thinking that it looks damned fishy."

Earle made an impatient movement. His task, his most difficult task, was done. All he wanted now was to end the interview.

"You must think what you please," he said dully.

"And I'm not going to let the matter drop here!"

Earle looked sharply up. His mind had been so entirely occupied by the one imperative necessity of doing justice to Margaret that he had never glanced at further possibilities.

"What will you do?" he asked.

"I shall place it in the hands of the police, as you ought to have done at first."

Earle sat silent, thinking deeply, realizing slowly and by degrees what this that Whitworth threatened would mean.

"You must do what you think necessary," he said at last. "But I would like to point out that if you do what you propose, you will inevitably hang me."

Whitworth watched him. In his own mind he was inclined to think that he deserved it. But he was not quite sure.

"You know what our police are," Earle went on. "They work, not so much to find out the truth as to get a conviction. In me they have a criminal ready to their hand. Record, motive, opportunity—all are there. They would regard it as one of the strongest and clearest cases with which circumstances ever presented them. I shouldn't have a dog's chance. And I'm as innocent as you are."

"Then who is guilty if you are not?"

"God knows; I don't," said Earle bitterly. "I can't even make a guess. There doesn't seem to be any one in the very least even *likely* to have done it. It must, of course, have been some one who was in the house at the time."

"That narrows it down considerably."

"Yes."

"It should not be impossible to find the guilty parties."

"I suppose not."

"Then you have got to find them."

But Earle recoiled from the very suggestion.

"I can't. I shouldn't know where to begin to look. And emphatically, I don't want to," he added. "Whoever did it—saved me. If they had not killed him, I should have. I won't lift a hand to find them. I don't want to."

"There," said Whitworth quietly. "What do you think that sounds like?"

"It won't do, Earle," he went on as Earle said nothing. "There is something wrong somewhere. You say you are innocent—in everything but intention. I don't believe you. But I don't disbelieve you thoroughly enough to dare to risk hanging you when you *may* be innocent. At the same time, your suggestion that things shall be left as they are is ridiculous and impossible. As a decent man and a law-abiding citizen I could not agree to that. Your story, I don't deny, has sufficiently impressed me to make me unwilling to move in the matter myself. But if I don't, you must. If things are as you say, I don't see why you shouldn't."

"Don't you? You are asking me to fasten a halter round my own neck. I think you forget that."

"But, damn it, man, one must do something! Murder is a matter that concerns us all."

He was silent, all his suspicions alive again. Surely, surely, if Earle were innocent, as he said, he would not take things quite like this! Earle moved uneasily, seeing himself with Whitworth's eyes.

"I can't wonder if you don't find me quite—convincing," he said at last. "In your place, I shouldn't be convinced myself. I can only assure you on my honor, on any oath you like to put to me—"

But Whitworth silenced him, and with something like contempt.

"Spare me protestations," he said. "*Do* something. Find the one who is guilty. Then I will believe that you are not."

It was the same test that Margaret had put to him, a test the entire reasonableness of which he could not deny. Yet he rejected it, and almost with passion. The scandal, the excitement, the nosing out of all that he would have kept secret and sacred that would inevitably follow any attempt to solve the mystery of Royston's death. The hideous publicity! The open discussion of his history, that painful history on which those modern ghouls, the newspapermen, would be so delighted to batten! The danger to himself, though, to his honor, he put that last! And on the top of all the fact that he was called upon to find—and punish—the man or woman who had saved him from himself; but for whom he would have been an outcast, barred from happiness to his life's end.

For the madness that would have rendered it possible to take Royston's life was over. He saw now with horrible clearness both the crime and its consequences. And the task laid to his hand was to find—and punish—the unknown some one who had saved him from the guilt of it by taking it upon himself. He faced it with growing revolt.

"I won't," he told himself, as the mid-day express rushed him back to Hazelbridge. "Let some one else do the beastly business. I *won't*."

Yet only so could he win back his place by Margaret's side; only so could he kill her suspicion, her conviction, that for her sake he had steeped his soul in crime. That very night it was clear to him that the impasse into which his life had drifted would force him into action. Banishment from Margaret was more than he could endure.

Yet banishment would be his portion until he could go to her with proofs, convincing proofs, of his innocence in his hands. And the one proof, the only proof she would accept would be the conviction of some one else. That some one must have been under the roof of Greenshaws the night of Royston's death. Feverishly his mind ran once again over the list of those who were: Margaret and himself, Sylvia and Dr. Carr, French, Rybank, and Mrs. Henderson; Cook and Manners, the upper housemaid, Biggs, the chauffeur, and MacDonald, the

gardener. There were others whose names he did not know.

And suddenly a plan came to him. There was one man whose judgment he could respect, whose word he could rely upon, who knew all the little undercurrents sweeping and swirling beneath the placid surface of life at Greenshaws, one man who would possibly, almost certainly, be able to give him the tiny hint, the new idea, that would lead to the discovery of the guilty man or woman he was compelled, though assuredly he did not want, to find.

"I'll send for Rybank," he said half aloud. "I'll tell him everything. I'll get him to help me. Why in the world didn't I think of Rybank before?"

CHAPTER XXX.

EARLE DECIDES.

"YOU sent for me, sir."

It was Rybank, looking smaller, sparer, much less important in a neat, gray suit and a Trilby hat than he did in the well-padded coat and breeches of violet cloth, the well-padded white silk stockings in which Earle was accustomed to see him. Earle welcomed him cordially.

"Come in, Rybank. Yes, I sent for you," he said. "I want to talk to you. Take off your overcoat and sit down, will you. I won't be a moment."

Rybank took off his coat, folded it neatly, and hung it over the back of a chair. Then he drew another nearer the gas-fire, crossed one neatly shod foot over the other, and looked about him. He was a small and wiry man, eminently healthy. He did not remember that he had ever been in a doctor's surgery before. It interested him greatly. The book-shelf filled with well-worn books, all medical. The glass case, holding bright, steel instruments suggesting doubtful and dangerous experiments on all-too-sensitive human bodies. The cupboard, half open, on whose shelves were many and various liquids, each one offering, to the lay mind, a hideous chance of mistake and mishap.

"And healing," said Rybank to himself, for he was anxious to be just. "Healing,

of course. It's a wonderful thing to be a doctor—a grand thing. I think if there had been any chance of my being brought up to a profession, I should have liked to be a doctor."

Earle came in and he half rose.

"Sit down," said Earle quickly. "Sit down." And took another chair on the other side of the fire.

After which it seemed difficult to find anything more to say. Rybank looked at him and away again, coughed discreetly behind his hand, and glanced at him again. Earle laughed, a short and mirthless laugh.

"What did you think of my letter, Rybank?" he asked.

Rybank's rather bushy, gray brows rose deprecatingly. He put a slim hand over each spare knee and stared at the fire.

"Well, sir," he returned slowly, "I won't deny that it surprised me. I could understand that you might, perhaps, wish to see me; but why you should ask me to come with secrecy, to keep the fact that you wanted to see me entirely to myself, was not clear. It surprised me, sir, a good deal."

"I'm going to surprise you worse than that in a minute or two, Rybank," said Earle curtly.

"Indeed, sir?" returned Rybank. But quite evidently he doubted it. He had lived a long life—so his mild look conveyed—and it was not easy to surprise him now.

"Yes. I'm in a difficulty; a very grave and serious difficulty, and it struck me yesterday that the one person likely to be able to help me out of it was you. I'm sure you will if you can."

"Very certainly I will, sir," said Rybank earnestly.

"Then I am going to confide in you." Earle's eyes, full of appeal, met the old man's gentle inquiring gaze. "I'm going to tell you exactly what is troubling me. And to begin with I want you to forget that you are Mrs. Royston's butler; to remember only that you are a man much older and probably much wiser than I am, for whose character and intelligence I have a genuine respect."

"Thank you, sir; you're very kind, sir," said Rybank, evidently gratified.

And then came silence. Earle broke it with an effort.

"Things have happened lately, Rybank," he said. "Serious things. Grave things."

"Indeed, sir," returned Rybank, with the same detachment, the same inimitable respect. Earle moved sharply. He had got to tell him somehow.

"I am speaking of Mr. Royston's death," he said plainly. "Did it ever strike you that it was a little—just a little sudden?"

"Yes, sir; it was, sir; sudden and awful. It was a dreadful thing to contemplate—a young man cut off in his sins like that. But his way of life was not one to conduce to length of days, sir. I don't think it surprised any of us that his end should be sudden."

"And it never occurred to any of you that it was not, perhaps, quite—natural?"

"Natural!" Rybank looked up sharply. "How do you mean, sir?" he asked.

Earle leaned forward. The time for speaking out had come.

"Rybank, Mr. Royston did not die a natural death; he was poisoned," he said.

Rybank leaned slowly back in his chair. His mouth dropped a little open; his eyes darkened and widened as astonishment, incredulity, horror, followed each other swiftly through them.

"*Poisoned!*" he echoed under his breath. "Well, sir, this time you have surprised me; surprised and shocked me, too. Who poisoned him?"

"That, Rybank," returned Earle curtly, "is just what we should like to know."

Rybank grasped the arm of his chair, and raised himself again.

"And don't you, sir?" he asked softly. "Have you no suspicion? No idea?"

"Not the ghost of one. That's where I thought you might be able to help me. I thought you could, perhaps, lead me to an idea."

"And how, sir?"

"I don't know," returned Earle blankly. "I only hoped that perhaps you might be able to, somehow."

But it was evident that Rybank hardly heard; he was thinking too deeply. Slowly

his mild and wondering eyes left the gas-fire and fixed themselves on Earle's face.

"When did you find it out, sir?" he asked. "If I remember rightly it wasn't thought so at the time. Dr. Carr said the death was due to the heart, sir. I always thought you agreed with him."

"Well, I didn't." Earle's voice was still curt. No man likes to confess a grave dereliction of duty. "I knew at the time that he had been poisoned."

"Then—" Rybank stopped, his life-long training in the deference due to his "betters" rendering him dumb. But if his tongue was stilled, his eyes were eloquent. Earle answered his eyes.

"Why didn't I say so? I ought to have said so. I ought to have insisted on a thorough investigation of the whole circumstances there and then. But I fumbled it, Rybank. I thought of the upset, the scandal, the sensational articles in the papers, the detestable newspapermen that would come nosing around, sniffing about for things that were evil. I realized how acutely Mrs. Royston would suffer under it all. And for her sake, for her sake alone, I swear, when Dr. Carr put it down as heart-failure, which he did at once, I said nothing. I let him—though I knew it was a lie. Wouldn't you have done—in my place?"

Rybank shook his head.

"I think I should have realized, sir, that these things have a little way of cropping up afterward. I think I should have been all for thrashing it out at the time. But since you thought differently, sir; since you thought it better at the time to let things slide and say nothing, may I ask, sir, with all proper respect to a gentleman who understands these things far better than I do, why you feel called upon to move in the matter now? No one can in any way regret the fact that that wicked man is dead. Whoever killed him, took upon himself to mete out a punishment that we may be sure was well deserved. Whoever killed him, sir, has had good reason for killing him; for men don't kill for nothing, nor women, either. Considering, sir, that nothing we can do can bring him back to life again; considering also that the person who killed him, in both our opinions, for I see yours in

your face, sir, was, in all probability, not without justification, don't you think it would be as well, sir, seeing that by moving in the matter you risk all these unpleasant experiences for Mrs. Royston that you were so anxious to avoid before, to leave things as they are?"

Earle twitched an impatient shoulder.

"I can't, Rybank. I *can't*," he said.

"And if I might ask why, sir?"

There was a touch of insistence in the old man's voice, a hint of astonishment in his face. To be ready, culpably ready, to let things slide when it would have been easy to investigate them and reach definite knowledge; and to be determined, now that investigation was difficult and the discovery of the truth almost impossible; to try to probe the affair to the bottom was not reasonable. His face showed his opinion plainly. Earle drew a sharp breath. If he wanted Rybank's active cooperation and ungrudging help, there was only one way of getting it.

"Rybank, Mrs. Royston thinks I poisoned him," he said.

Rybank half rose from his chair and sat heavily down again. "Good God!" he said faintly. "Good God!" Earle got up and began to pace restlessly up and down the room.

"I sent for you," he began hoarsely, "to tell you the truth and the whole truth. Only so can I hope to get from you the help I—I most earnestly desire. Your mistress and I, Rybank, love one another. But for the—accident of Mr. Royston's return we should have been married long before now. You know, all Hazelbridge knows, that her husband, after his return, did not treat her well. You will understand what that knowledge meant to me. I suffered, Rybank, I suffered damnably. She thinks it was too much for me. That for her dear sake I made use of my undeniable opportunities—and killed him."

"Good God!" said Rybank. And again, "Good God!"

"I tell you solemnly and on my honor that I didn't," he went on. "I am as innocent as you are: I have told her so, too. But she doesn't believe it. There is only one thing that will convince her and clear

me, and that is to produce the man who did. It is here that I thought you might be able to help me."

"And how, sir?" asked Rybank again. "For certainly I will, sir, if I can," he added.

"Then we'll get to work." Earle sat down and drew a sheet of note-paper toward him. "The possibilities, fortunately, are narrow. It must have been some one in the house. I propose to begin by making a list of all those who were in the house that night, and then crossing off the names of those whose guilt is impossible.

For the next few minutes he wrote rapidly, putting the names of the inmates of Greenshaws one below the other. When his knowledge failed Rybank gravely added to the list. When it was complete to the last stable-boy Earle began to cross out.

"Mrs. Royston, Miss Conyers, Dr. Carr, myself, you—were you there, Rybank? I thought you were away on a holiday just then."

"I had been, sir. I came back that same night."

"Ah, yes; so you did. You let me in, I remember. Very well, then. You, Mrs. Henderson, French—all these are impossible. The one who is guilty must be among the rest." He stared a moment at the simple and undistinguished names. "Do you know of any one—is there any one here who had a grudge against him?" he asked.

Rybank shook his head.

"I don't know of any cause of offense in the mind of any one of my fellow servants, sir," he said. "They were all quite comfortable and happy. Their wages were good and their duties light, and we one and all adored our mistress. The master, sir—well, he had his faults, and we deeply disapproved of them. But none of us came much into contact with him except Biggs and French, and Manners, the upper housemaid. I see no point at which we can even begin to see light on his death, sir."

Earle bit his pencil hard.

"It's going to be a difficult business, Rybank," he said.

"It is, indeed, sir," agreed Rybank, and there was a long pause.

"We shall have to get help, that's all," decided Earle crisply at last. "I had hoped to be able to avoid it, but I don't see that I can."

"What kind of help, sir?"

"A detective. Not a police official; I'm not going to call the police in if I can help it. One of those private chaps that nose around and find out things."

"And where, sir?"

"In the house, of course. It is the only place where he is likely to find out anything."

Rybank half rose from his chair and sat heavily down again.

"Oh, but that would be very dreadful, sir," he said aghast.

Earle nodded.

"I know, Rybank; I know," he returned. "I hate the idea every bit as much as you do. But I've got to clear the matter up; you see that, don't you? And it's the only thing I can think of."

After which both men sat in profound silence. Rybank broke it.

"Private detectives cost a deal of money, sir."

"I know," said Earle again. And his modest capital of seven hundred pounds would not go far under the strain. Also, it was not only his money he was preparing to spend, it was his chance of making good in life, all his hopes of being able to rebuild his future. With money, even a little money, a man has his chance. Without it, he is as powerless as a puppy in a sack. Yet, without Margaret's belief in him, neither money nor future were of any value; neither hope nor ambition existed.

"And might I ask, sir, how you propose to get him into the house?"

Earle frowned and hesitated. No man ever hated a task worse than he hated this one.

"I thought it just possible that—that one of the servants might be leaving," he said at last. "These businesses, private agencies, you know, have people ready to take all sorts of places. They have both men and women ready for anything—in more senses than one. I thought that if one of the men or maids up at Greenshaws did happen to be thinking of making a

change, you would be likely to know about it, and that we might possibly be able to—arrange something."

Rybank smiled, a gentle and deprecating smile.

"Funny enough, sir, I was thinking of leaving myself at the month end," he said.

"You!" Earle's astonishment and dismay were profound. Rybank had always seemed to him as integral a part of Greenshaws as the porch or the chimneys. "What in the world are you leaving for?"

"Well, sir," said Rybank, blushing like a schoolboy, "I'm thinking of getting married. The time comes, sir, when a man is tired of living in other people's houses, however desirable they may be; when he wants a little place of his own, sir, and a kind and cheerful companion to look after him."

"Oh, but you mustn't leave yet," said Earle quickly, and then, blankly aware of his own selfishness, "she'll wait for you, won't she?"

"Oh, dear me, yes, sir, she'll wait for me," returned Rybank with the same gentle smile. "There's no hurry at our time of life. And I should not think of leaving now, sir. Not till this trouble is cleared up."

"And is there no one else? Thinking of leaving, I mean."

"Well, sir, there's Biggs, the chauffeur. He was saying the other day that he had had the offer of a better place, a livelier one, I mean, sir, with a young military gent that's out and about a good deal. Mrs. Royston, she hardly goes out at all, now, and he finds it a bit dull. He was saying only the other day that if he could leave the mistress with a good steady driver he'd like to take this other place."

"The very thing!" Earle sat back in his chair, acutely relieved. "I suppose, if you—happened—to hear of a suitable man you could insure his getting the post?"

"Oh, yes, sir, easily, sir. Mrs. Royston would take any one on my recommendation. As a rule she leaves the engaging of the men-servants entirely to me. But I don't like deceiving her, sir."

"It is for her own good," said Earle quickly. "And you should tell her the whole truth—later. She would hardly find

it impossible to forgive a thing that had rendered it possible for her to be happy."

"No, sir, I suppose not," conceded Rybank slowly. "But all the same I don't like it, sir. I don't like it at all."

"Good Lord! man, do you think I like it?" demanded Earle with a sudden burst of irritation. "I hate the whole thing. I told you so."

Nevertheless it had to be done, because, as far as Earle could see, there was nothing else to do.

About a week later a very apologetic Biggs sought an interview with his mistress. With a smile and a sigh, Margaret listened to his story of the young military master whose services promised livelier times than any now possible at Greenshaws.

"And what am I to do without you, Biggs?" she asked, whereupon he told her of the entirely respectable and trustworthy chauffeur of whom Mr. Rybank had been fortunate enough to hear, a chauffeur who was willing to utilize his spare time "helping" in the gardens and who did not mind dullness.

"Oh, if Rybank has found some one satisfactory in your place I should not think of standing in your way, Biggs, though I am sorry to lose you," she said. "Dear me, how life changes," she reflected with a sigh, as Biggs, half glad and half regretful, bowed himself out. "I don't like fresh faces. I hope none of the others will go."

By the end of the week, Biggs had vacated his seat at the long table in the servant's hall and Williams, the new chauffeur, had taken it. He proved himself all that Rybank had painted him. Margaret had no fault to find with his service, but she missed Biggs.

By the end of the month she was threatened with another loss even more serious. Rybank himself came to her, deeply respectful and much distressed, to tell her that he contemplated leaving, also.

"But why, Rybank?" asked Margaret, dismayed indeed. Life at Greenshaws without Rybank was unthinkable. "Aren't you happy here?"

"Indeed, yes, ma'am. We all of us are. It isn't *that*," he said.

"Then is your health failing? Your work too much for you?"

"No, ma'am, thank you for your kindness. My health is very good."

"Then what is it, Rybank?"

"I'm thinking, if I may mention it, of getting married, ma'am," and Rybank flushed faintly pink. "A widow of my acquaintance and myself, well, ma'am, we have decided to settle down together. We have both saved a little money in service, ma'am, and I have bought a little cottage in the country. We thought that with our joint savings invested in a joint annuity—"

"I see," said Margaret as Rybank, aghast at his own garrulity, checked his too personal explanations. "Is it any one I know?"

"I think not, ma'am. She is a Mrs. Tylor. Her husband was head gardener at Charlcombe Chase in Devon."

"Tylor! Is she any relative of the Jessie Tylor who was under-housemaid here?"

"Her mother, ma'am."

"Oh," said Margaret, and there was a dead silence. "And Jessie, Rybank?" she went on with a slight effort. "Where is she?"

For a moment Rybank did not answer. He raised his face a little and his eyes filled with light.

"She is in a good place, ma'am, and I believe perfectly happy," he said at last.

"I'm glad of that, Rybank, very glad," said Margaret cordially. After which there was nothing to do but agree to his respectful request that he might be allowed to leave in order to get married at his month's end. Margaret sighed as he left her. The old garments of life seemed to be dropping away from it one by one. She would hardly recognize it, re clothed.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"FOUND DROWNED."

THE weeks wore on. The daffodils came and took the wind with beauty.

Margaret wandered in her wild garden amongst them, lonely and just a little bitter for all their sweet companionship. Earle, smarting under his sense of subtlety

and deceit in having planted a spy in her household, kept a somber silence. Sylvia, now, was always up at the manor.

For old Mr. Penryan, having once capitulated, capitulated with touching completeness.

"My time is short," he would say to Margaret in wistful apology. "Let me have the child while I can."

Margaret acquiesced with pathetic readiness. No one would have drawn closer the tie that bound the two together more cordially than she. But without both Earle and Sylvia life was blankly empty, so empty that her friendship at the vicarage, a friendship that had languished a little during the strenuous months just over, woke up into feverish activity.

And when the two ladies were alone together, Sylvia and the brilliant future which seemed to be opening before her were, of course, the chief topics of conversation.

"Oh, it would be such a relief to me," sighed Margaret for the hundredth time, "such a satisfaction, such a happiness to know her in the keeping of a dear boy like Percival. You see Sylvia isn't what one could call brilliant. Youth, beauty, and sweetness, that is all she has. With some girls it doesn't matter. One can watch them let youth slip by and know that it will be all right, that they will marry well, perhaps brilliantly, in middle life. But with Sylvia—"

"I see. It's now or never." Mrs. Briscoe had no intention of saying anything in the least objectionable. "But why should you be afraid? Surely, with his father's opposition more than removed—"

"Yes, but one never knows. With regard to Sylvia, I mean." Margaret laid the hard and unlovely flannel petticoat whose seams she was herring-boning down on her lap and looked up with troubled eyes. "She doesn't want to marry. She would be contented, if only Pap were home to be her constant companion, to go on as they are now, oh, indefinitely. Naturally, Pap wouldn't—and she doesn't understand. How is it that girls don't understand?"

"They should be told. Things should be explained to them."

"You can't," said Margaret with decision. "I've tried—and you *can't*. I like a girl to have a soul, of course, but I don't like them to be *all* soul, like Sylvia. It means disaster, later on."

"Not with Percival. He's such a dear boy."

"That's what I feel," agreed Margaret feverishly. "I could trust her to Percival."

And up at the manor old Mr. Penryan, to his dismay, had made the same discovery, that, though Sylvia longed for Percival's return, she by no means longed to marry him.

"But you would if he asked you, wouldn't you?" he inquired aghast, for the possibility that Sylvia's objection to marriage was perhaps a serious one had never so much as occurred to him.

"I don't know," she returned. "I don't want to. I think it would be so much nicer to go on as we are, don't you?"

Whereupon the old man tempted her. With money first.

"You would be rich, little Sylvia, *rich!*" he said. "Percival knows he will have money, but he has no idea how much. And money means power, little Sylvia, the power to do anything that ever you wish."

But the prospect left Sylvia cold.

"I don't think I care to be rich," she told him. "Aunt Margaret and I were much happier when we were poor. We lived in a dear little cottage in the country, and did our own housework and made our own dresses and were busy from morning to night. We had heaps and heaps of the sweetest little chickens, and I fed them myself. We did all the gardening, and the potatoes and cabbages one grows one's-self are so *much* nicer than those other people grow for one. There isn't enough to do, now. I am bored half my time. If I had to choose I would rather be poor. It's much nicer."

And then with jewels. He had them sent down from his bankers by special messenger, a messenger who carried a revolver in his pocket, for the old man was a collector of capacity and some of his stones were fine. Sylvia admired them, but with detachment. The only thing that woke her to an almost anguished desire of posses-

sion was a necklet of coral and silver and mother-of-pearl, a dainty trifle, product of some Turkish bazaar, worth a few shillings.

"Oh, *will* you? Will you *really*? Oh, isn't it lovely!" she said ecstatically when he promptly gave it to her. "I think I never saw anything prettier in all my life!"

"But I would give you this if you wanted it," said the old man, dangling on its slender gold chain a great cabochon ruby, a pure pigeon's blood, whose value was fabulous. But Sylvia flicked it with a disdainful finger. It was ugly and she would have none of it. Old Penryan was both piqued and puzzled. Was she simply a little fool, he asked himself, or had she attained the highest wisdom?

And once again he tempted her, with his last and greatest treasure.

"My little girl," he said one afternoon when Sylvia and he were just sitting down to tea together, "will you go into my study and fetch me the pencil-case lying on my blotting-pad?"

Sylvia went obediently, and there, on the hearth-rug, a typical and arrogant young Briton, stood Percival.

"Oh, Pap!" she gasped. And then, "Oh, Pap, I *have* been so miserable!" and she flew into his waiting heart.

The two went back to the old man, their arms wreathed about one another, and Percival's lashes, as well as Sylvia's, were wet. Which seemed conclusive. It was some days before Percival discovered, with a sense of outrage and indignity very difficult to bear, that even yet Sylvia was not sure that she meant to marry him. It was monstrous, it was abominable, it was past all bearing.

"I'll go away again," he threatened.

"Oh, *Pap!*" said Sylvia with a little gasp.

"I'll marry some one else!" he told her.

But Sylvia looked at him and laughed.

"No," he agreed though she had not spoken. "I wouldn't do that, I *couldn't*. But I won't stay here. Sylvia, if you are going to treat me like this. Are you going to marry me or are you not? Because if you are *not* I am going back to Ireland."

Sylvia made a little anguished clutch at him.

"*Will* you?" he insisted.

"Oh, well, if you talk like that I suppose I shall have to," she pouted.

"Now? At once? Before the end of April?"

"If you think I—ought. If I really must," she conceded with a frightened catch in her breath.

So the matter was settled, and during the hurried preparations for the ceremony there is no doubt that Sylvia was perfectly happy. It was to be the simplest of weddings, her dress an inexpensive affair of white silk crape and silver, her only flowers primroses. Katie Briscoe was to be her only bridesmaid and, owing to Mrs. Royston's recent widowhood, there could be no reception. The day before the ceremony Earle met the two at the wood gate, both carrying great baskets of the primroses that would be needed on the morrow. Just a year, he reflected, since he had met them, two charming children, for the first time. How much had happened, how much, in that short year! He took Sylvia's hand in both his own.

"My little girl," he said tenderly. "My little girl!" and stood silent, all the wishes for which he could not find words shining in his eyes.

Sylvia deliberately put down her basket and, with a half-laughing, half-defiant look at Pap, raised herself on tip-toes and kissed him.

"Now you can marry Aunt Margaret," she whispered.

"Sylvia!" said Earle aghast. "You are not doing it for that, are you?"

"No. I'm doing it because Pap says he will go away and leave me again if I don't," returned Sylvia with a pout, and Earle laughed and told her it was quite a good reason.

Down at the little gray church, Margaret and Mrs. Briscoe were busily decorating with the wild-flowers that Sylvia loved.

"I do so dislike the marriage service," sighed Mrs. Briscoe, skilfully hiding with moss some tins holding fairy branches of cherry-blossom. "I'd do away with it if I could. I think it's horrid."

"I don't," returned Margaret sturdily. "I think we need it, all of it. It's very

direct and rather brutal, but we are in danger of getting too refined. Before long, if we are not careful, our young people will refuse to marry at all. I don't know why we should set ourselves up as superior to, purer-minded than, the Almighty—but we do."

And the realization frightened her. Out of the depths of her fears she startled Sylvia that night.

"People have bodies as well as souls. Do you realize it?" she said, putting her hand on the girl's slim shoulders and giving her a little shake. "God made them so, Sylvia. Do you *know*?"

"Why, aunty, of course I do," laughed Sylvia. "How could I help it!"

But Margaret was not satisfied. Did she know? *Did* she?

Never, surely, had Hazelbridge church seen a prettier wedding, a sweeter bride, a prouder bridegroom. Fears, even to Margaret, seemed ridiculous as she watched them. Yet they shook her again as she saw them start together on that life journey that would lead them only God knew where. They were to spend their honeymoon in Devon. Travel had no charms for Sylvia, she had traveled enough. And nowhere, she told Pap, had she found a land lovelier than her own. Margaret laid her hand on Pap's arm, as he would have followed his wife into the waiting car.

"Pap, I have trusted her to you," she said a little wildly. "She is only a child if she *is* turned twenty."

"Oh, Aunt Margaret, indeed, indeed you can," he assured her, his eyes misty and his voice athrill.

And here beginneth the story of Sylvia.

That night Earle sat smoking alone in the little parlor with the two flat windows. His whole being ached for Margaret, but he dare not go near her without excuse. All that was possible was to sit and think about her, to see her again as he had seen her in church that morning, her dark eyes softened and aglow, every line of her graceful body eloquent of love and pride as she watched the youthful pair kneeling at the altar steps. For at last Sylvia was safely married, *married*—and to Percival!

Earle gave a short, sharp sigh as he re-

alized it and his look was touched with bitterness. If she had yielded earlier! If she had married Pap when he first asked her a year ago! Then Jack Aveling would never have come to Hazelbridge and Royston would never have followed him. He and Margaret could also have married in all innocence, and been living, now, a new life in a new world. If Sylvia had listened a year ago!

Once again the whirr of the surgery bell broke up his moody musings. He rose, not sorry to have it so, and went, as at night he must, to answer his own door. A tall man stood there, a man in a chauffeur's livery.

"You, Williams!" said Earle and there was a catch in his voice. "Come in. What is it?"

"I have heard something, sir, something that may be of importance. I thought I had better come down and tell you at once."

"And what is it?"

Williams put his cap on the table with maddening deliberation.

"You remember a pretty girl that used to be under-housemaid at Greenshaws? Jessie Tylor?"

"Yes, quite well. Nice little thing. Royston took too much notice of her and she had to go."

"She's dead, sir."

"*Dead!* How? When?"

"In January, sir, just before Mr. Royston was killed himself. I hadn't been at Greenshaws long before she was referred to, and in such a way that I thought she might be a valuable clue. So we set another man on to trace her. He went down to Charcombe, near Exeter, where her mother lives and he traced her from there to Brighton. In January she was found drowned just before Mr. Royston himself was killed. No one knows how she came by her death. The verdict was simply 'Found drowned.' Of course it may have no connection with what happened at Greenshaws, but, as I said, it may prove a valuable clue."

"*He* went to Brighton," said Earle slowly. "It was in Brighton he met Carr."

"Well, as I said, sir, it seemed to me a clue. It may mean nothing, of course."

"But it does, Williams." Earle's tone held certainty. "Follow it up for all you are worth. Never mind what it costs. I believe it means everything. Poor little Jessie!" he added under his breath.

And he must see Rybank, who would certainly appreciate the full significance of what Williams had just told him. He must see him to-night. He scribbled an urgent little note and handed it to Williams.

"Give that to Rybank as soon as you get back, will you?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Then we are to spare no expense?"

"Damn it, no!" said Earle fiercely. "I'll spend every penny I have to clear this up."

Half an hour later Rybank came. Earle was on the watch for him.

"Williams gave me your note, sir," he said with his usual respectful smile.

Earle studied him, his neat attire, his precise manner, his composed face, and gave a short vexed sigh.

"I'm afraid I am going to grieve you, Rybank," he said.

For, as he waited for him, misty memories had detached themselves from the sharper, more painful impressions of his own personal experiences. Echoes of life below stairs have a little way of floating upwards. He remembered having heard that Rybank took a keen interest, entirely spiritual, in pretty Jessie Tylor. It seemed hard that he should be the one to have to tell him of her death.

"Indeed, sir?" returned Rybank, adding on a more human note. "I'm sure you wouldn't if you could avoid it."

"I'm sure I wouldn't," agreed Earle somberly, and fell silent. For he liked Rybank and it was hard to have to hurt him.

"You look very pale to-night," he said presently. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, yes, sir, thank you, quite all right. It is only that—well, sir, the luncheon to-day, after Miss Conyers's wedding, is the last time I shall officiate as butler, sir, at Greenshaws. And I suppose I have felt it in one way. In another, sir, I'm glad I'm going, for the house won't be the same without Miss Sylvia in it. We all of us feel that."

"But you are glad she is married?"

"Yes, sir, indeed, sir, especially to Mr. Percival, who is— If you would be good enough to tell me, sir, what it is you think may grieve me!" And Rybank passed a cambric handkerchief far finer than Earle's own, over a damp brow.

Earle gave his broad shoulders an impatient twist.

"I was playing for time, Rybank," he said brusquely. "I don't like telling you and that's the truth, but I suppose I've got to. You remember Jessie Tylor, a pretty girl, who used to be under-housemaid at Greenshaws? Left a little while ago, rather hurriedly."

"Just before Christmas, sir, to be exact. I took her home to her mother in Devon myself. It was then that I first met her mother, who is shortly to be my wife, sir."

"Yes, I know. That makes it worse," said Earle somberly. "I have to tell you, Rybank, with genuine regret, that she is dead."

"Dead!"

"Yes. You took her to Devon, to her mother, as you say, but she cannot have stayed there long. She died at Brighton, early in the new year. I have only heard of it to-day."

"Died, sir! How?"

"She was drowned. Whether it was an accident or whether she drowned herself no one, now, will ever know. There was nothing to guide them at the inquest. 'Found drowned,' was all that they could say. She was found in the water by a fisherman—"

He broke off, for Rybank was not listening. His spare frame seemed to droop and fold itself together. As Earle put out his hand to save him he slipped quietly from his chair to the surgery floor in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XXXII.

CONFESSION.

WHEN he came to himself he was lying on a long, padded mattress, trestle supported, under the surgery window. A strong smell of restoratives was

in the air, his collar and shirt were open at the throat and Earle stood by him, his stethoscope in his hand.

"Better?" he asked.

"You couldn't help it, sir," said Rybank faintly.

"Ever done this before?"

"No, sir, never before. I'm sorry, sir," and he would have got up but Earle put him back on the mattress.

"Lie still. You mustn't try to move yet," he said. "Sorry! I'm the one who ought to be sorry, Rybank, but I had no idea you cared all that."

"You couldn't help it, sir," said Rybank gently.

But Earle was profoundly disturbed. Rybank's faint had been a long one, long enough to alarm him, and though it had yielded at last to strong measures Earle knew that he might at any moment lapse into unconsciousness again, and as the old man had slowly recovered Earle had made a discovery, a discovery so grave that he must be told of it. But not yet. He dare not tell him yet.

"Always been a healthy man, haven't you, Rybank?" he asked presently.

"Always, sir, I'm thankful to say."

"No special trouble lately?"

"Well, sir, I've had a good deal of pain here." And he put a thin, pale hand on his left breast. "Indigestion, I suppose, sir. At least that is what I have always told myself."

"H-m," said Earle shortly, and something in his face attracted Rybank's attention. He looked from it to the stethoscope in his hand.

"I hope it's nothing more serious, sir," he said with a touch of anxiety.

"Well, you have got to take care of yourself," said Earle quietly. "And I'd rather you didn't talk just now."

But Rybank was not to be silenced. He was a man of quick intelligence, and the hint Earle had given him, cautious as it was, had disquieted him.

"It's rather a serious thing, sir, isn't it. to go off like I did just now?" he remarked presently. "It's after eleven, I see. I must have been unconscious over an hour."

"It was entirely my fault," said Earle

with acute self-reproach. "I ought to have been more careful how I told you—bad news. But I didn't know it would shock you all that, Rybank."

"It didn't shock me, sir. Really there is no need for you to reproach yourself. It didn't shock me at all. I knew."

"You—*knew*?"

Earle's look was one of blank amazement. Rybank's face when he had first told him of poor Jessie's death rose in his memory. The grief, horror, astonishment of it! And he knew all the time! What a consummate actor the old man must be!

"But—you fainted," he objected, unable to accept such a reversal of his ideas. "I thought it was shock!"

"So it was, sir, but not quite the shock you are thinking. It's a long story, sir. Some day I'll tell it you." And he put the tips of his fingers together over his spare chest and stared at the ceiling. His attitude, his fine profile, sharply cut, ivory white, reminded Earle of the effigy of a crusader in the old, gray church among the Cumberland hills where he had worshipped as a boy. He started at him, puzzled and wondering.

"Tell me now," he suggested, but Rybank shook his head.

"Before I do that, sir, I should like to know a little more about my state of health," he said. "You needn't be afraid to tell me, sir. I shall worry about it far more if I am—uncertain. Besides, I am going to get married. I don't think a man ought to get married with—anything hanging over him. Considering that I am contemplating getting married I think I have the right to know, sir, exactly how things are."

"Undoubtedly, Rybank, undoubtedly. But not to-night," said Earle quickly.

Rybank's mild eyes studied him, a hint of tragedy in them.

"That means that it is—serious, sir."

"Well, yes," agreed Earle perforce. "It is serious. There is no denying it."

"And that it may be—fatal? If you would please tell me the truth, Dr. Earle."

Earle nodded. The truth was best now his suspicions were aroused. Nothing would do him more harm than worry.

"And soon?"

"Well, it might be, Rybank," agreed Earle with real regret. "It might be. But one can't say. You might live years."

"But you don't expect it. I see it in your face. Come, doctor, man to man. How long do you give me?"

"Six months," said Earle quietly.

"And it may be less?"

"It may be less."

For a few moments Rybank lay very still. Then he took his handkerchief out of his breast pocket and quite simply and openly wiped his eyes.

"It is a blow," he said softly, "a heavy blow. I was looking forward, no one will ever know how much, to my own little place in Devon. I was going to grow my own roses and have a couple of canary birds. I always loved canary birds. And Mrs. Tylor liked me. She would have made me a capable and an affectionate wife. I was looking forward to being happy, really happy. I had every chance. But it isn't to be. I suppose it's just," he finished.

"Just!" echoed Earle almost indignantly. "How do you mean? How can it be just, man, to cut you off like this?"

Rybank turned his mild eyes on him.

"I poisoned Mr. Royston, doctor," he said quietly.

Slowly, step by step, Earle backed away from him. The surgery table brought him up. He put his hands behind him and rested them on the solid oak top, for he needed the support. Rybank, whom he had liked and respected and even looked up to! Rybank, upon whose entire morality and uprightness he would have staked all he had! *Rybank* had done this! And even worse than this, for he had said nothing and allowed an innocent man to bear the odium of his crime, to suffer as Earle had suffered through the last three months. Even now, but for the accident of his discovery to-night, Rybank would have said nothing, would have allowed him to carry, perhaps all his life—

"No, sir," he said softly, reading the younger man's face like an open book, "I should not have done that. It was my intention to leave Greenshaws, to marry and settle down in Devon, and then to place a

full confession in Mrs. Royston's hands. I was not afraid she would use it against me, not when she knew everything. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. We have scriptural authority for that, sir, and that devil's life was forfeit. And I was not doing you any serious injury by a little delay, either, sir. Mrs. Royston was not in the least likely to marry you—or any one else—until her year of widowhood was up. Long before that I should have told her the truth. You see, sir, I guessed something of the interest you and my mistress took in one another, we all did, but it didn't seem to me that I injured either of you seriously by considering my own safety to a certain extent. I didn't put it first, sir, I never meant to do that. What risks had to be taken I was prepared to take, so that you might be cleared—and happy, sir."

Earle's face altered. Rybank was guilty of murder, but he was innocent of treachery, to Earle's mind the greater sin. Of course, as a murderer, he was a criminal, and as such Earle should unhesitatingly have condemned him. But he did not. In intention he himself was every bit as great a criminal. To Rybank alone he owed the cleanness of his own hands. So that any assumption of superiority on his own part was ridiculous.

"Tell me all about it," he said huskily. "I should like to know. And—you needn't be afraid, Rybank. I wouldn't give you away for worlds."

"I'm not afraid, sir, and I should like to tell you. I think you ought to know. It was over Jessie, sir, that it happened. She was a good little girl, loving her mother and anxious to do right. She would always have been a good girl—but for his cursed money and his cursed smile. Oh, he could smile—and smile—and be a villain. What happened, sir, I don't rightly know. No one will ever know, now. But she left her mother's cottage and went to Brighton. She wrote from Brighton to her mother, telling her not to worry for she was quite well and perfectly happy. Her mother sent the letter to me. I knew that devil of a Royston was in Brighton too, and I got leave of absence and went down there, expecting I don't quite know what. She was

taken out of the water, sir, the morning I got there."

"Then — you have no real evidence against him? Nothing conclusive?"

"Nothing. But I knew, sir, oh, I knew. There was a torn envelope in his hand writing in her little bedroom at Charlcombe. She had his photograph in a locket round her pretty neck. Just as he was responsible for her being in Brighton so he was responsible for her death. There are some crimes sir, for which the law provides no adequate punishment. The driving of a young girl to her death is one of them. What would have happened if all the facts as I see them had come before a jury? He would have been 'severely censured,' sir, and that would have been all. As it was, there were no facts known. The only possible verdict on the evidence before them was the one they gave—'Found drowned.' But I knew more than they did, sir. When I came back to Greenshaws, after I had buried my poor little girl, that devil Royston's hours were numbered."

"Go on," said Earle hoarsely.

"I had thought it all out and I knew exactly what I meant to do. I had something that would kill him in my possession and I meant to use it."

"What was it?"

"Cyanid of potassium. When my mistress turned out her dark room in the summer she sent it down-stairs by one of the maids. It was a full bottle, unopened, and I had always been taught to be thrifty. It came into my head that I might, perhaps, one day like to try my hand at photography myself, and that, if ever I did, that and one or two other things my mistress had done with might come in useful. So I took them out of Manners's dust-pan and put them on the top shelf of my pantry, right out of sight. When I was wondering how I was to get rid of the man who had sent my little Jessie to her death I remembered the little bottle of dark, ribbed glass and the word 'Poison' in red letters on the label. I went into a chemist's while I was in Brighton and made a few inquiries with regard to its uses and dangers. I came home intending to use it as soon as I got the opportunity."

"And you did get it?"

"That very night. After dinner Manners put the tray with his coffee-cup on it on the hall table and went into the kitchen again for something she had forgotten, I think a spoon. I had his liqueur ready, and when Manners was safely gone I came out of my pantry with that in one hand and the little bottle labeled 'Poison' in the other. I uncorked it and poured some, I don't know how much, into the cup. He liked his coffee black and very strong. I knew he had had quite a considerable quantity of wine at dinner and that he was intending to play cards afterward. I counted on him drinking his coffee off to clear his head. I can only suppose he did."

"He must have done. The cup was empty when I went into the room and he was dead. That cyanid, Rybank! Where is it now?"

"I buried it, sir, in the woods, that and all the other things. I shall never want them, it seems."

After which there was a long, long silence. Rybank broke it.

"I should like to know, sir, if you don't mind telling me, what you are going to do," he said.

"Do?" echoed Earle stupidly.

"I mean with regard to my mistress. You will, of course, tell her. You must. But—I may not live long, sir. I don't think, really, that you expect it. I can see in your face, sir, that it won't be long. I love my mistress—and I have always had her good opinion. If you *could* put off telling her, sir, until after I am dead! I would like to feel that her kindly thoughts followed me to my grave."

"If I can help it, Rybank, I won't tell her at all," he returned, and his voice was moved and low.

For he had reached that swift decision. He might be obliged to tell Whitworth, but if he could help it he would never tell Margaret.

He sat by the old man all night, listening as he told over and over again of his grief for Jessie and his hatred of her betrayer. "Men like that *should* be killed, sir," was his steady contention, and Earle, in his heart, agreed with him. Of his dis-

appointment that his life should end now, when liberty and leisure and happiness were all within his reach, he said nothing, but Earle knew that it was bitter.

In the morning he was removed to the cottage hospital, for his collapse was alarming and his disinclination to return to Greenshaws profound. There Margaret would have visited him, but Earle steadily dissuaded her.

"You will only agitate him," he said. Rybank's hands were soiled. The thought of Margaret tenderly holding them was more than he could bear. "No, he won't think you unkind. He knows you would like to come and that I forbid it. At least wait a little. I'll let you know when a visit is advisable."

"Poor Rybank!" she sighed. "I always thought so much of him. He was such a good man."

"Yes, indeed," said Earle, and he said it sincerely though he knew everything.

But, though he forbade Margaret's visit as likely to be too exciting he sent for Stephen Whitworth. Together they took down from Rybank's lips a full account of what had happened that January night at Greenshaws, and why. Both witnessed the old man's signature.

"What are you going to do with it?" inquired Earle, as Whitworth folded up his copy of the confession and put it carefully away in his pocketbook. Whitworth shrugged.

"One can't make any use of it, he's doomed," he said. "Pity that he should escape justice this way, isn't it?"

"It wouldn't *be* justice," said Earle hotly.

"Oh, well, that's the way you are sure to see it," he returned with a rather acid smile.

And what was he to do, Earle asked himself, with regard to Margaret? To keep her in ignorance was to risk a latent but living suspicion of himself, a thorn in her heart, an abiding bitterness in his, an evil, unjust thing that might keep them apart forever. To tell her was to betray Rybank. She obeyed Earle's injunction to keep away from him, but she sent him wine and jellies and fruit and flowers, all accompanied by a

little slip bearing: "For my good and faithful servant and friend." Was he to permit or to stop them? He did not know. To permit them revolted him, to stop them might loosen altogether Rybank's frail hold on life. Earle did neither.

Then came Mrs. Tylor, quiet and respectable in her new black, firmly insisting that she must be allowed to marry him and take him with her down to the little cottage waiting for him in Devon.

"I can save you, I know I can," she told him with tears. "You only want your own place an' me to take care of you."

"Let him," said Earle curtly, when a perplexed matron consulted him. "Let him do anything. It makes no difference."

But under the stimulus of the new idea Rybank revived so wonderfully that it almost looked as though Earle were wrong. Special permission was obtained and to the intense interest of the whole hospital he was married in the matron's sitting-room. Then Williams took him and his wife in Margaret's own car by easy stages into Devonshire.

"Williams!" said Earle to himself with a curt laugh when the plan was explained to him. "I suppose, if I did my duty, I should tell Williams what he really is. I suppose, if I did as I ought, I should acquaint the police with his misdoings and have him hanged as soon as the matter could be arranged. But I'm not going to."

It was on the evening of the day Rybank started for Devonshire that Earle took his courage in both hands and went up to Greenshaws to win or lose all. He had seen Margaret several times. He had spoken to her once or twice, at Sylvia's wedding, when she came down to the surgery to ask if she might see Rybank, but since the night when she had told him he must produce the real criminal before she would be convinced that it was not himself, he had never been up to Greenshaws. To-night he knew the whole story of Terence Royston's death. He could, if she insisted upon it, produce the real criminal. Would she insist upon it? *Would she?*

Changes hurt. To-night there was no Sylvia, to come running out, sylphlike and white, her eyes alight with welcome and

what, to Earle's shrinking consciousness of his own unworthiness, was painfully like worship. There was no Rybank, exuding solicitude and deference, with his little air of blessing all that Earle might say and all that he might do. It only needed that Margaret should refuse to see him, he told himself bitterly, to make the change between the old and the new complete.

But she did not. She rose to receive him, she even gave him her hand. It was cold and trembled perceptibly. Earle held it fast as his eyes swept over her. She was thinner and looked older, older than her thirty-five years warranted. Suddenly he hated the somber black of her clinging garments, lying symbols, wretched pretenses of a non-existent grief. Would he ever see her again in the rich colors that she loved? As he longed for them, for the sunshine and happiness and glow for which Margaret was made, her hand tightened on his.

"You have something to tell me," she said with a little catch in her voice. "If you hadn't you would not have come—here."

"Yes," he agreed quietly. "I have something to tell you. But I don't want to tell it to you unless you insist on my doing so."

"Why?" she asked in a whisper.

"Because it would distress and disappoint you. Because it would destroy—"

"Your trust in your fellowmen," was on his tongue, but he kept it there. He was not dealing with Sylvia but with Margaret, and at the faintest hint of the truth her keen intelligence would grasp it. She sat down a little heavily, clasping her pale hands about her knee and looking up at him.

"You know who poisoned Terence?" she asked, still in the same tense whisper.

"Yes. I have in my pocket a full confession, signed before witnesses. If you really desire it I will give it to you now. But, my dearest, I beg of you—"

Her face quivered a little. It was sweet to hear "my dearest" from his lips again. He sat down opposite her. To the casual observer they would have seemed just a well-bred man and woman, more attractive, perhaps, than most, discussing every-day topics of ordinary interest, even the

weather. But the tones of Earle's voice held tragedy.

"Margaret," he said, "I ask you to be guided in this matter by me. You would have let me guide you once. You loved me—once. I believe, I honestly believe, that you love me yet in spite of what you—suspect—against me. And no woman loves a man unless, to a certain extent, she trusts him. I ask you to trust me now, not a little but fully, to accept my absolute denial of any complicity whatever in your husband's death—and not to ask to see the proofs of it. If you love me ever so little, if you ever loved me at all, you will."

She did not speak. Only her eyes, wide and wistful, rested on his. In them, now, lay no accusations. Earle drank thirstily of their dark sweetness, but he was full of fears.

"I am not a blameless man," he went on as she was still silent. "I have killed once—and nearly again. Even now I am helping to hush up and hide a crime. But in every case I have done what seemed to me the right thing to do. Man-made laws do not fit all circumstances. Sometimes it is better to break than to keep them, even if one suffers all the consequences. I killed Brandon—and I did right. But I should not have done right to kill Royston. I contemplated it, because I was mad with anger. But God—and Sylvia—saved me from doing it. For the one who did do it, it was no crime. To him Royston's life was justly forfeit."

"And will he never be punished? Is he to go—scot-free?"

"Am I to bring him to an unjust justice?" he demanded. "Would you?"

Margaret sat very still. Did she guess? Earle asked himself. *Did she?*

"I don't know," she said at last. "I don't understand. Perhaps, if I was told everything! Carlton, *tell me.*"

"If you insist. If you do not trust me. If you cannot accept my denial without proof that I am speaking the truth."

"Oh," and her hands went out to him, "it isn't that! You *know* it isn't that!"

"You believe me? *Really* believe?"

"Oh," she hid her face, sobbing, "I have believed you all the while, ever since you

first denied it. If you had come you would have found it out."

"But"—in blank surprise—"you told me not to come."

She gave a little sinuous writhe of her whole body.

"I *told* you?" she whispered with scorn.

He dropped on his knees on the white rug and wreathed his arms about her.

"Is a man *always* a fool who obeys a woman?" he asked softly, and Margaret, dazzled by the light of her dawning happiness, hid her eyes upon his shoulder with a little sobbing laugh.

(The end.)

