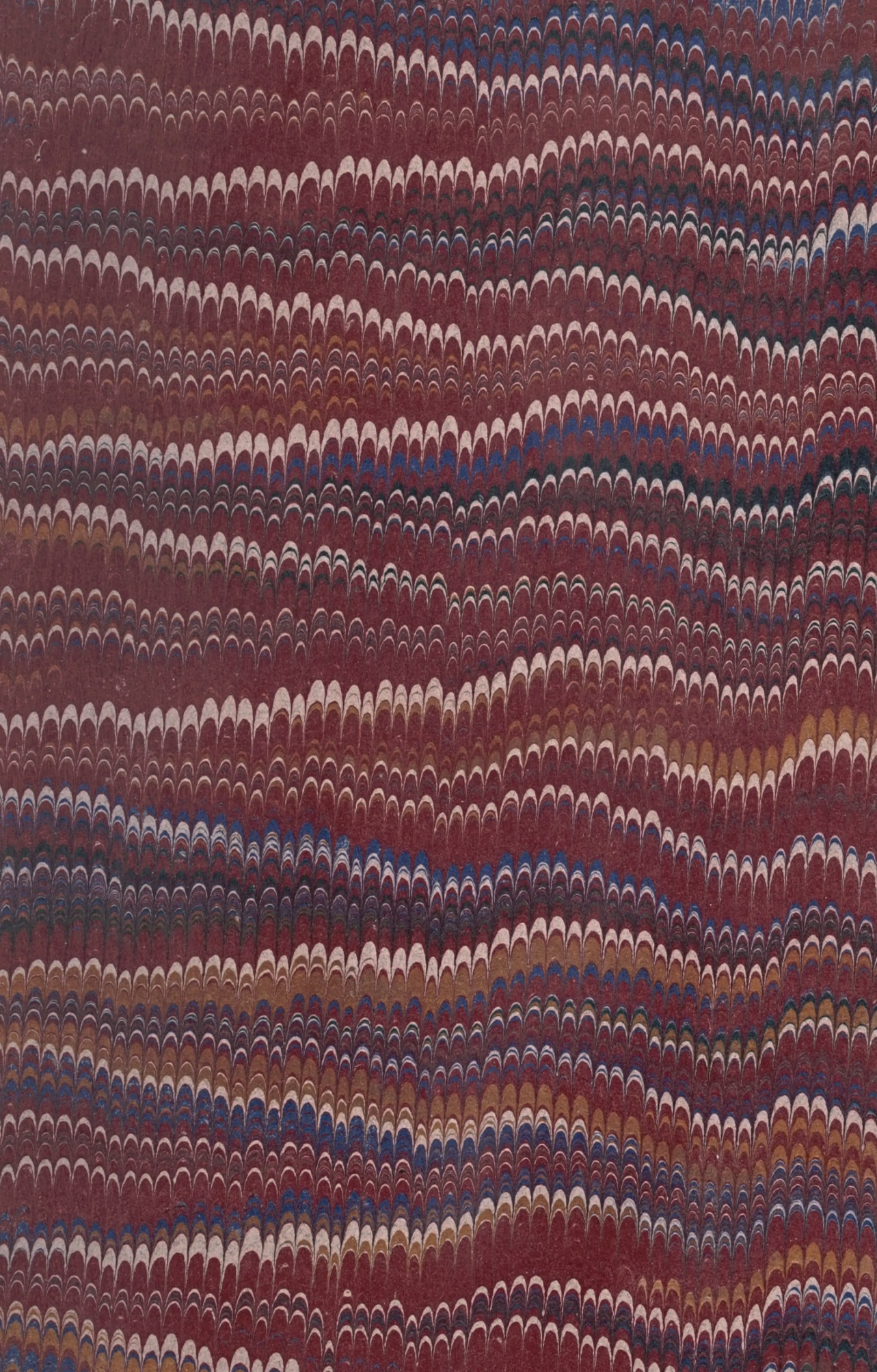

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THE Seaside Library

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MY SISTER KATE.

By CHARLOTTE M. BRAEME,

AUTHOR OF "DORA THORNE."

A RAINY JUNE.

By "OUIDA."

17 TO 27 VANDEWATER ST
NEW YORK

George Munro

PUBLISHER

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MY SISTER KATE.

By CHARLOTTE M. BRAEME,

Author of "Dora Thorne."

A RAINY JUNE.

By "OUIDA."

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CHAPTER I.

We were children of one father; but Kate's mother was a tall stately woman who looked as though she were born to command—mine was a fair gentle English girl who died when I was born.

Our father, Squire Hamber, as he was always called, was well known and much esteemed by all the country people round about us. The Hambers were not a wealthy family, but they were a very old one. No one remembered the village of Clifton without a Hamber living in it. None but Hambers had ever occupied the old Grange. There had never been a title in the family, and there had never been any great amount of money; still in the whole county no one was more looked up to, both by gentle and simple, than my father. His income was sufficient to keep the Grange as a comfortable home where genial, true hospitality reigned, and to find for his daughters every luxury that a young lady could desire. My sister Kate had a maid and a groom; I had a governess whom I loved very dearly. Altogether our home was a very comfortable one, and we moved in the best society.

Our neighbors were most of them "grandees." The Earl of Morven was the chief magnate of the county, and Morven Castle was not far from the Grange. Then there was the Hall, where the Erlesmeres used to dwell, though it was closed and desolate now. There was, besides, Charlton Towers, the residence of young Allan Charlton, one of the richest men in the county. Clifton, taking it altogether, was a very aristocratic little village.

Morven Castle was the center of hospitality. The "noble earl," as the county papers delighted to call him, was never so happy as when his grand old place was full of visitors. Charlton Woods surrounded the village of Clifton. There was many a beautiful view and picturesque glade in them; but the village itself was chiefly

remarkable for its cleanliness and quiet. The Grange, our home, was situated at one end. It was a low, straggling house, full of pretty nooks and corners; a broad green lawn sloped from the house to the high-road.

We were always proud of the lawn, it was so level, and the grass was so green and soft; it was brightened by beds of brilliant flowers —scarlet verbenas, the scented purple heliotrope, fragrant mignonette, and gloriously tinted carnations. Two large iron gates opened on to the road. We frequently saw passers-by stop to admire our beautiful flowers. On each side of the lawn was a row of lime-trees, beneath the shady branches of which was our favorite promenade. At the back of the Grange there still remained what had once helped to form the moat, a lake of clear deep water. Drooping willow-trees grew round it, and their sweeping branches touched the surface. Two stately swans sailed majestically on it, and I was never tired of watching them. At the end of the pleasure-grounds was a gate which led direct to the broad path of Charlton Woods. I do not think a pleasanter or prettier home could have been found.

My father, Paul Hamber, was a thorough student; he seemed to live only in and for his books. I can not tell whether he had always been the same; but, judging from his thoughtful face, his broad intellectual brow, I should say he had always been a student and a scholar. He married his first wife, Kate's mother, when he was very young. I suppose he must have loved her, although in disposition they were very different. She was a magnificent woman, with a figure and face that would have suited an empress. They lived very happily. Kate inherited much of her mother's beauty, although in her it had a softened aspect. When she was six years old her mother died. She lies in the vault of the Hambers, and my dear mother sleeps near her.

Kate was a very high-spirited girl, original, wild, and daring, utterly beyond the comprehension of the pale refined scholar. For a long time he was perplexed to know what course to pursue with her. He continued wondering until she had reached her ninth year; and then it struck him that his only resource was to marry again, and to provide his beautiful little torment with a more fitting guide than himself. This time his choice fell upon a gentle, fragile, delicate girl, the only child of a widow-lady residing near Clifton. Claribel Wynne was my mother's name. I have her portrait now. She was never perhaps what people call beautiful; but she had a sweet patient face, with deep violet eyes and brown hair. My father thinks I am like her; he tells me, however, that I do not look so

good. In her eyes there was the mysterious shadow always seen in the eyes of those who die young.

My fair young mother died when I was born; she rests by the side of the stately lady who first reigned at the Grange. Her death cast a deep shadow over my father's life. He was now worse off than ever; instead of one child, he had two, and the younger was a delicate babe. He procured a nurse for me and another governess for Kate. Miss Hilton has been with us ever since; she will never leave us again. Kate was just ten years older than I. Our birthdays were both in the bright month of June.

At the time of which I write I was just eight and she was eighteen—eighteen and one of the most beautiful girls in the whole country round. Clever, daring, wild, and original, Kate had not lost one of her early characteristics. She was exceedingly fascinating, with a piquant charming manner that no one could resist. She had wonderful natural gifts too, although she was not intellectual; she did not read much, but she sung in a sweet rich contralto voice—a magnificent voice, full of passion and tenderness. She could not, or rather would not, play a piece of music correctly; but she could improvise for hours together and sing songs of her own composing until she drew tears from every eye. She was a daring horsewoman, also one of the most graceful dancers I ever saw. One of Kate's great charms was her wonderful wit: she had a remarkable talent for repartee. No matter where she went, Kate was always the chief center of attraction; her *bons mots*, quizzical but never ill-natured, were often quoted. Kate was beloved by every one. I believe the secret of this lay in the fact that she had a generous nature and kind heart. She was, some people thought, ridiculously morbid on the subject of pain, either mental or physical; she could not endure to see any one suffer. I do not think in her whole life she ever willingly inflicted pain, either by word or deed, upon any creature.

Those inclined to envy Kate could not help liking her. She was too proud to be vain; she was far above all innocent little coquetries and affectations to bring her beauty into notice. She was a grand creature, although she had her faults. Perhaps the chief of these was what she called firmness, and my father called obstinacy; she inherited the iron Hamber will that never bent. If Kate once decided upon a thing, nothing could change her; reason, advice, entreaties were all in vain. If my sister had been guided and trained by a wise and loving mother, I believe she would have been nearly

perfect; her virtues were her own, her faults the result of a want of proper discipline.

This is but a faint sketch of her charming, lovable, original character. Just as faintly am I able to describe her beautiful proud face, with its ever-changing expression, its perfection of feature and grand beauty of color, its wondrous eyes so dark and clear—so haughty, yet so sweet—full of veiled tenderness, yet ever and anon flashing with mischievous mirth; the jet-black fringes of the long lashes swept the exquisite cheeks, the delicate brows were as perfect as though they had been penciled, the queenly head was crowned with coils of shining raven hair, her arm and hand were perfectly shaped.

No one could properly describe my sister's beauty, because it was ever changing, ever new; no one could set down the varied phases of feeling that flitted over her soul-lit face.

Kate Hamber was undoubtedly the belle of the county. Lovers sighed around her; but she laughed at all—she did not seem at all like a subject for the tender passion. I think Allan Charlton loved her best. He worshiped her, if ever man worshiped woman. When she was present Allan forgot every one else; he lived for days on the memory of a smile or a kind word. He was rich, talented, handsome; his position in society was high, his character unblemished; he was brave, chivalrous, and loyal, true in word and deed, simple and trustful as a child, courageous yet tender. He was all that one could wish; but he could not reach Kate's heart. That was safe as yet. He had made her many offers; she had invariably refused him—and yet poor Allan would not despair. After each rejection he seemed for a few days to be utterly wretched; then he took heart again, and again began to hope. He loved her so wildly and so intensely that he could not believe he was to live without her. Kate was fond of him in a quiet kind of way. It is possible that in time she would have learned to love him but for what I am about to relate.

Allan was a great reader, and consequently a congenial companion for my thoughtful refined father. He came to the Grange every day, sometimes more than once. When he had been rejected, I was his refuge. He would nurse me and play with me, only now and then venturing to look at Kate. I have often thought he acted unwisely for his own interest. She had a proud high nature; she required a master, not a lover. Allan was all gentleness and submission; a frown from her made him wretched, a smile from her beautiful lips rendered him supremely happy. Whomsoever Kate loved

she must look up to; and the time had not come yet for her to appreciate this gentle, loving, chivalrous heart.

My father was one of Allan's warmest advocates. I believe he considered Kate very unreasonable because she did not fall in love when he wished her to do so.

It was Kate's eighteenth birthday—a beautiful bright June day. I remember it all so well, although I was but eight years old. After dinner, the evening was so lovely that my father declared we must drink our tea in the little summer house by the lake. Allan had dined with us. He was in radiant spirits, for Kate wore in her hair some of the exquisite and costly flowers he had presented to her in the morning.

As we sat at tea, we heard the sharp ring of a horse's hoofs upon the road—whoever rode that horse rode furiously. My father's attention was attracted by the sound.

"Who is that?" he said wonderingly. "I did not know we had such a daring rider in the neighborhood."

"I fancy," answered Allan, "it is the new tenant of the Hall. Did you not know that the lawsuit is ended and the verdict given in favor of Sir Victor Erlesmere, who took possession of the estate a few days since?"

"No," replied my father; "I have not heard. I am very pleased. I did not like the desolate appearance of the place."

"I never quite understood the matter," said Allan to my father; "I was very young at the time it happened. How was it?"

"It was a very simple business, to my mind," answered my father. "The last Erlesmere at the Hall—Sir Walter—was a childless man. The estates are all entailed; but he hated his next of kin—some remote cousin, not a very admirable character, from all I hear. He tried to cut off the entail, and made a will bequeathing all his fortune to a friend whom he had loved very dearly. Of course the legitimate heir disputed the will. The suit was prolonged by his death, and his son, whom you call Sir Victor, carried it on. In my opinion there should have been no question as to the justice of the thing."

"Miss Hamber," cried Allan, "are you cold or tired?"

He, as well as myself, had noticed the shudder which suddenly passed over my sister and blanched her face.

CHAPTER II.

I MUST relate my sister's story, not as I remember it, but as it happened. Some of the details are impressed on my mind never to be forgotten, others have no home in my memory.

Lord Morven was at home, and issued invitations for a grand ball to be given at the Castle in honor of Lady Morven's birthday. Kate of course was to go. My father promised to escort her, and Allan obtained permission from his imperious lady-love to accompany them. My father was very anxious with regard to Kate's appearance. She came in to kiss me before starting, and I thought she looked like a dream of loveliness. I cannot describe her dress; to me it appeared like a soft fleecy cloud. I saw diamonds shining in the dark hair and on the white neck; I knew then that my father had given her the costly jewels that once belonged to his first wife. A scarlet opera-cloak covered her white shoulders. When she took me in her arms to kiss me, I wondered whether the fragrance that seemed to float around her came from the bouquet she carried or the beautiful hair that waved from her forehead.

I know now that she was introduced that evening to Sir Victor Erlesmere, and that he fell in love with her.

The next morning, child as I was, I noticed something new in my sister's face—a softer light in her brilliant eyes, a sweeter smile on her proud lips. After breakfast she came with me into the garden. She sat in the shade of a large flowering lilac tree; I played near her. She was interested as usual in my amusements; an open book lay on her knee; but her eyes, with a tender musing gaze, were bent upon the clear lake, while a happy smile lingered on her lips.

When we had been there some time, I saw Allan Charlton coming to join us. As I sprung into his arms to kiss him, I saw that his dear face was clouded and pale.

"Good-morning, Miss Hamber," he said, with a stiff bow to Kate. "You do not look fatigued after your exertions last evening."

"There is nothing fatiguing," she answered, with a smile, "in being very happy and dancing to such exquisite music as we had last night."

"I noticed that you danced several times with our new neighbor Sir Victor Erlesmere," said poor Allan, trying to speak indifferently. "Do you like him?"

I believe the sharp plunge of a dagger would have pained him less than the sight of the beautiful glow that overspread her face.

"Yes," she replied, softly; "I like him; he is very different from any one I know."

Just then my father joined us.

"Are you discussing the ball?" he asked.

"We are speaking of Sir Victor Erlsemere," answered Allan.

"Ah," said my father slowly, "I do not quite like him! If he were not an Erlsemere, I should say he was not a gentleman."

"How can you say that, papa?" remonstrated Kate. "He is clever and accomplished."

"So he is," acquiesced my father; "but still there is something in his face that I do not like. He gives me an idea of strength without refinement, of courage without gentleness; and, despite what you say of his accomplishments, Kate, he seems to me to retain traces of having mixed in low society and of having had low habits."

"Some allowance must be made for him," put in Allan generously, "from the fact that his father was but a very distant relative of the Erlsemeres, although he was next of kin. He got his living by betting, or some connection with the turf; his son cannot be expected to fall all at once into the habits of good society."

Kate never looked more kindly at Allan than at that moment.

"It is that very power and strength, papa," she said quietly, "that I like. The most admirable traits of character are lost upon me unless accompanied by such qualities. Strength of mind, of will, and of thought are the characteristics I admire most."

The gentle, refined face looking so wistfully beside her fell as she spoke—perhaps poor Allan realized then that he was not her ideal. A smile crossed my father's face as he saw the footman advancing with a card upon the salver he held in his hand.

"Talk of your neighbor," he said gayly, "and your neighbor appears! Ask Sir Victor Erlesmere if he will join us here," he added, turning to the servant; "the morning is really too beautiful to be spent indoors."

A few minutes later I saw a tall figure coming straight down the garden path.

"Come here, Clary!" called Kate.

She took me into her arms more as a screen for her own blushing face than for anything else. I felt the tumultuous beating of her heart, and I saw the burning flush that mounted to her brow. Ah, me, her heart had never so beaten for poor Allan Charlton, her face had never so changed for him!

Sir Victor bowed low as he touched my sister's trembling hand.

He commenced an animated conversation with my father, and I amused myself by watching his face.

Sir Victor Erlesmere was what some would call a handsome man. He was very tall, with a pair of fine broad shoulders; his face was dark—ah, so different from the refined face of Allan Charlton! He wore a dark mustache and a dark beard; his hair was black, short, and stiff—different again from the soft brown waves that covered Allan's head; his eyes too were black—they were impenetrable eyes—one could not read them; his white shapely hand was indicative of strength.

Kate had a pretty little King Charles spaniel, "a perfect little beauty" everybody called him, and she made a great pet of him. Floss was divided in his affections between his mistress and Allan Charlton; he seemed to love one almost as well as the other. I have often thought since what true instincts Floss and I had. We both disliked Sir Victor. The dog barked and sniffed round him in a perfect fury; he never made friends with him—nor did I, although I knew him for years.

Kate gradually recovered her self-possession, and began to join in the conversation. Soon she and Sir Victor went to see some favorite roses of hers. Allan's burning eyes followed them; he looked wretched. I went to him and climbed upon his knee.

"Allan," I said, "why do you look so? What is the matter?"

"Nothing, Clary," he answered gently; "it is only an old, old pain."

"Will he stay long?" I continued, nodding at the tall figure bending over Kate's flowers.

"I don't know, darling. Why do you ask? Do you not like him?"

"No," I said. "I like you, Allan—no one else."

He clasped me in his arms; and I know that my quiet but deep dislike of his rival made Allan love me better than ever.

He rose presently, and, bowing to my sister, left the Grange without a word. I did not understand his troubles then; but I longed intensely to follow him, and try to comfort him.

Sir Victor prolonged his morning-call far beyond the recognized time. He apologized for it, saying that it was long since he had seen flowers he admired so much, and, as he intended to build new conservatories at the Hall, he was naturally interested. Further than that, he asked my father if he would honor him with a visit and inspect some of the designs he had received; and in requesting this I am obliged to confess that Sir Victor Erlesmere touched

Squire Hamber on one of his weakest points. My dear father had a great fondness for experiments of every kind, and in these new conservatories he saw ample scope for some of his latest ideas. It was, therefore, with great cordiality that he accepted the invitation and promised to take luncheon at the Hall on the following day.

Kate's face clouded and brightened as he did so, for she had listened with the deepest interest to the little conversation.

When I was alone with her, watching the crimson blush fade away from her cheeks after Sir Victor's farewell, I said to her:

"Kate, do you like that tall dark man you have been talking to all the morning?"

"Jealous little Clary!" she answered. "Have I forgotten to speak to my pet?"

"I am not jealous," I replied, resenting the idea. "But do you like that man?"

"Shall you be very angry if I say 'Yes,' little sister?" asked Kate, with a bright smile.

"I should not be angry," I answered sedately—"only sorry, because I do not like him; and I am sure Allan does not."

She kissed me in reply, and whispered that she loved me so much I must try to like all her friends; and so I was bought over.

The next day my father rode over to the Hall. When he returned, Kate and I were alone in the library.

"Well, papa," she said, eagerly, "how have you got on?"

"Very well, my dear," he answered. "Sir Victor has some splendid designs. I advised him to select Hunter's. I have a theory of my own with regard to glass roofs, and I have half persuaded him to adopt it."

"Do you like him better than you did?" she asked shyly.

"Well, I hardly know," was the vague reply. "The man seems all right; but he is not a gentleman, Kate, although he tries hard to appear one."

My sister made no remark. Presently my father said.

"Sir Victor is coming to dine with us to-morrow. I was almost obliged to invite him; he wishes to have the advantage of consulting a lady's taste with respect to his improvements at the Hall. He will bring a whole bundle of plans, *et cætera*, for your inspection."

He watched her face intently as he spoke; he did not look happy when he saw the bright vivid flush.

"How strange!" she murmured. "I have no taste for that kind of thing, papa; he will be disappointed in me."

"That is not very likely," said my father dryly.

Was it jealousy for Allan's dear sake that made me watch Kate so closely, even to begging to remain with her while she dressed for dinner?

One costly dress after another was thrown aside; none would suit. Lisette, the pretty French maid who had been with my sister many years, looked puzzled.

"Will nothing satisfy ma'm'selle to-day?" I heard Lisette muttering from the depths of a large closet containing innumerable boxes.

But, when the simple and exquisite toilet was completed, Lisette forgot her vexation in admiration. Never had Kate looked so beautiful. Her dress was of plain white silk; one gold bracelet shone on her arm, a light gold chain was fastened round her neck, and a white rose nestled in her hair. Even my father, who seldom noticed her dress, smiled approval as she came into the drawing-room.

That evening was to me a weary repetition of the morning on the lawn. My sister forgot me; she was engrossed in Sir Victor. His dark face was all smiling as he listened to her singing and talked to her in the evening gloaming. It may have been very delightful to them; but it was dull enough for us who saw that evening that our darling was no longer our own.

CHAPTER III.

So it became gradually known that Sir Victor Erlesmere was desperately in love with beautiful Kate Hamber. Whether his suit would prosper or not few ventured to say; that fastidious young lady had refused Allan Charlton, who was a richer man and a more attractive one. But Sir Victor was very much in earnest. Whatever might be his deficiency in other matters, he certainly understood how to make love. His attentions were very different from Allan's gentle chivalrous devotion. Never a morning passed without my sister's receiving a beautiful bouquet of flowers with the dew-drops glistening on them. He gathered them himself, not trusting anything so precious to other hands.

Every morning brought him to the Grange. Sometimes he had a new book that he thought would suit Kate, sometimes a sketch or a song; he spared neither time nor trouble in gratifying the lightest wish she expressed.

He had a way too of taking possession of her, as it were. If he stood behind her chair or sat by her side, no one ventured to disturb or to join them. All the homage that could be expressed in look, words or manner, was always forthcoming from him.

It was easy to see that my sister's heart was touched at last. The tones of his voice, the sound of his footsteps, the mention of his name, even by indifferent lips, brought the rich color into her face. What Allan had spent years in trying to win, and trying in vain, the stranger had made his own. Kate loved him.

I should think few men have suffered more than Allan Charlton suffered then. He could not help seeing that the hope he had cherished for so long was blighted now. The girl whose love was the prize upon which every energy of his heart was bent was won by another. His eyes followed her with a look of mingled sorrow and jealousy that was sad to see. Yet he was so noble and brave in his sorrow.

Sir Victor had gradually gained admittance into all the best houses in the neighborhood. He was not so much sought after since he had so publicly shown that he was "one of Miss Hamber's lovers." Mothers with a large family of marriageable daughters did not press him now to "drop in during the evening and hear dear Laura's," or "dear Evelina's," or "dear Amy's," "new song;" but he was a member of the Hunt, he visited at Morven Castle, and he issued invitations for a grand archery *fête* in the beautiful grounds of the Hall. He was rather a favorite than otherwise, still no one seemed to know much of him—he had no intimate friends, and his servants were not so ready to gossip as servants generally are. One or two people said he had a furious temper, and was subject to fits of savage rage, during which he spared no living creature that was in his power. But no trace of this was ever seen on the dark, smiling face, or in the urbane polished manner which distinguished him.

Sir Victor had a beautiful black retriever called Lion; and a splendid specimen of his kind Lion was. His master was both fond and proud of him; he never went out without his dog; this faithful animal followed him everywhere. Kate, who was fond of dogs, liked Lion better than her own little favorite Floss; the beautiful creature would sit with its bright large eyes fixed on her face ready to do her slightest bidding. Perhaps she liked him so well because he always heralded the approach of his master. When the loud joyous barking was heard, one knew that Sir Victor was not far behind.

One morning, when Sir Victor made his usual visit, Lion was not with him. Kate looked up quite anxiously.

"Where is your dog Lion?" she asked, when she had bidden him "Good-morning."

An uneasy look, which I saw plainly, crossed his face.

"I came out alone," he answered, with a feeble kind of smile; and no more was said about the animal.

The day after, for the first time, he omitted his usual visit to the Grange. When he next appeared, Kate was too anxious concerning him to note that poor Lion was still absent.

So time passed on; bright summer gave way to golden-tinted autumn; and then Sir Victor Erlesmere laid his title and fortune at my sister's feet.

I remember the day quite well. I had been out playing with the dead leaves under the trees, and felt tired and cold. I went into the drawing-room, where I knew I should find a good fire. My sister raised her head from Sir Victor's shoulder as I went in; her beautiful face was wet with tears. Regardless of my presence, he kissed them away. When they saw me, Kate took me in her arms, and Sir Victor held out his, wishing me to go to him.

"Claribel," he said, "will you try to love me? I am going to be your brother."

"Allan Charlton is my brother," I said rudely; "I do not want another."

Sir Victor smiled, and Kate looked angry at my want of good manners. She spoke crossly to me; but her lover interposed.

"Nay," he said; "I like to see how true Clary is to her old friends; when she knows me better, perhaps she will love me more." I felt certain that between them they would make Allan miserable. While I stood at the window watching the whirling leaves, my sister and her lover standing in earnest conversation at the other end of the room, I saw Allan coming up to the house. I ran out to meet him.

"Where is your papa, Clary?" he asked.

"He has gone to Reading," I answered, all anxiety to tell my news; "but that tiresome Sir Victor is here in the drawing-room with Kate. She cried, and he kissed her tears away—I saw him!"

Allan made no reply to this piece of childish indiscretion; but I saw his face grow white even to the lips. He turned abruptly away, and went into the garden. I followed him, and found him standing leaning against a tree.

"Sir Victor," I began; but Allan held up his hand, while a sharp spasm of pain crossed his face.

"Hush, child!" he said. "I can bear no more."

He remained there at least an hour; and I stood silently by his

side, ever and anon kissing his cold hand, and wondering at his wild white face. Presently a musical voice called:

"Clary, where are you? I am all alone now."

There was something new in that dear voice, a fresh ring as of deep happiness and unutterable joy. In another moment Kate saw me and my silent companion.

"Allan," she cried, "I did not know you were here! Why did you not come in?"

"I would not intrude," he said bitterly. "I knew who your companion was. Oh, Kate, be merciful, and let me know the worst at once! Is there no shadow of hope left for me?"

"None," she answered gently. "Dear Allan, why do you grieve me and yourself?"

"Tell me," he said impatiently, "are you betrothed to Sir Victor Erlesmere?"

"Yes," she returned, "I am."

"Thank you for your candor, Kate. Have patience with me one moment longer. Does your father know it?"

"Not yet," she answered. "Sir Victor is coming to see him this evening. Dear Allan, dear friend, do not cloud my happiness."

"Are you so happy, then, Kate?" he inquired mournfully. "Do you love him so much?"

"Yes," she said, clasping her hands; "all my life is centered in my love, Allan."

"Then I pray your happiness may continue, Kate. I shall go away; I could not bear to stop and see what will torture and darken my life. I shall not even come back to the Grange again. Your father will not be surprised; he knows how I have waited and hoped. May I speak a few words to you? May I give you one warning before I leave you?"

"Yes," said Kate, gently. "Say what you will, Allan."

"Then let me warn you, as I would my dearest sister, to be cautious, and to make some inquiries as to Sir Victor's character before you trust him with the happiness of your life. There are strange rumors in Clifton of his savage temper and uncontrollable fury. Remember his training, his constant intercourse with degraded natures; remember the instincts of your father, a man of years and experience, and your sister, an innocent child, are against him. Promise me, by the great love I have borne you, that you will be careful."

"I do promise," she said, with a bright smile so full of tenderness and love that it made poor Allan wince. "I promise earnestly.

How anxious you are for me, Allan! At the same time, I know that neither caution nor care is required. I know there are prejudices against Sir Victor, because he is a stranger and has not been brought up amongst us. I do not share them," she added proudly; "I have full trust in him."

"Kate," said Allan, "will you ask him one question?"

"Yes," she answered—"twenty, if you like."

"One will do," he remarked. "The next time he talks about loving you and making you happy, ask him what he has done with his favorite dog; will you?"

"Yes," my sister answered, with a laugh. Then, seeing his white sorrowful face, she cried, "Oh, Allan, how I wish we could all be happy! It makes me wretched to think of you."

"Then forget me, dear," he said tenderly; "it is not your fault that you can not love me. You are not to blame that the love for which I would have sacrificed my life is given to another."

"Are you really going away?" she asked, the tears dimming her eyes at the thought.

"Yes; it will best for me, for you, for us all."

"Oh, Allan," she cried again, "how I wish you could be satisfied with the love and friendship I give you!"

"I can not," he said. "I ask for bread, and you offer me a stone. Good-by, Kate! If the time ever comes when you want a friend to aid and counsel you, I shall be here. Good-by, Clary! Give this last kiss to your sister for me."

He pressed my lips for a moment; then he was gone; and Kate, even in the midst of her bewildering love-dream, cried aloud for the lost friend who had loved her so dearly.

Before noon on the following day Allan Charlton had left the Towers. Ah, if we could but have seen how and when we three should meet again! That same evening Sir Victor Erlesmere called to see my father. It was nearly nine when he came, and we were just taking tea in the drawing-room when his ring sounded through the quiet house.

"Visitors!" cried my father. "Why, Kate, who can this be?"

"It is Sir Victor," she answered; "he told me he was coming to call on you this evening."

"It is not a very convenient time," said my father. "I am tired after my day's ride. What can the man want?"

A mischievous smile curled Kate's beautiful lips. The footman brought a message to say that Sir Victor Erlesmere requested the favor of being allowed to see Mr. Hamber alone in his study.

"Dear me, how tiresome! Kate, what can be the matter? I expect it is that poaching business again. I shall be quite firm; the Game Laws must be respected."

Kate laughed merrily as my father quitted the room. He was absent some time. When he returned, he looked more anxious and careworn than I had ever seen him look before. He went up to my sister, and held her for a moment in his arms.

"What does this mean, Kate?" he said at length, with quivering lips. "Do you wish to leave me?"

She rested her head upon his shoulder.

"No, papa, darling," she answered tenderly. "You will have one child more, not one less."

"It is so sudden," he said—"to me, at least. I suppose you know that Sir Victor is here asking my permission to make you his wife? What must I say?"

"What I said myself, papa. Say 'Yes,'" she replied, with a smile.

He paced the room in deep thought for a few minutes; then he placed both his hands upon her shoulders and looked earnestly into her face.

"I do not quite like this, Kate," he said. "I hardly know enough of this man to intrust my precious child to him. I have a prejudice against him, a secret instinct that warns me to beware of him. Could you not give him up, or wait another year or two until we see more of him?"

"I shall never give him up, papa."

Her voice was clear, calm, and decided.

"Is your happiness so deeply involved, Kate?" asked my father.

"Not only my happiness," she said, "but my life also."

"Then I yield," replied my father. "So far as worldly prospects go, you have done well, Kate. You will be Lady Erlesmere, and mistress of one of the finest estates in the county. But for your happiness I can say nothing. Sir Victor is a stranger; and report does not speak altogether favorably of him."

"I am satisfied, papa. If he had not one penny, I would rather be his wife than be a queen!"

"If matters have reached that stage, all interference would be useless. Well, Heaven bless you, Kate, and make you happy! Poor Allan! It was to be, I suppose. Go down to Sir Victor, my dear. I promised that you should take my answer."

It seemed strange to me then, and it puzzles me now, how my beautiful gifted sister could prefer a man like Sir Victor Erlesmere

to a noble chivalrous gentleman like Allan Charlton. The little god is proverbially blind, and he was never blinder than in this case.

In about an hour Sir Victor and his betrothed joined us.

We were not a very sociable party. My father sat at his reading-table engrossed with a book; the two lovers were seated at the center-table, to all appearance looking over some rare engravings. I was happy enough at Kate's feet. Suddenly she seemed to remember something, and, turning abruptly to her lover, said:

"Victor, what have you done with Lion?"

If a pistol had been unexpectedly held to his head, he could not have looked more astounded or more afraid. A livid pallor overspread his face. With a violent effort he recovered himself.

"I did not like to tell you before," he said; "the fact is, I was obliged to—to shoot him."

"Why?" asked Kate wistfully.

"He was hurt," he answered. "Do not talk about it. I have grieved over poor Lion."

"And you wished to spare me," said Kate, "knowing that I liked him so well. How good you are, Victor!" Then she murmured to herself, "What could Allan mean?"

Two months afterward my sister Kate was married. It was a grand wedding, grander than anything of the kind ever seen in Clifton before.

The beauty and grace of the bride formed the general theme of conversation. But no one said much with respect to the bridegroom, my dear Kate's chosen husband.

Before the spring blossoms came again Sir Victor and Lady Erlesmere had taken up their abode at the Hall.

CHAPTER IV.

THREE months after Kate's marriage my dear father had a long and dangerous illness. When he recovered, his physicians strongly recommended travel and a winter in Italy; so we bade adieu to our quiet home, and autumn saw us settled in that most beautiful of Italian cities, Venice. There my father quickly recovered health and strength; and we were so happy that our return to England was delayed from time to time until we had been absent nearly four years.

Allan Charlton, who was wandering over the Continent, joined

us. He was delighted to find something like an English home established in one of the grand old Venetian palaces. We talked together long and often, but no mention was ever made of home or of my sister.

Those bright Venetian days! I look back upon them now with lingering, loving regret. They influenced my future life. How little I thought, while luxuriating in that sunny clime, of the dark tragedy even then looming over my sister Kate!

We returned to England after an absence of nearly four years. We had half thought that Kate might be at the Grange to welcome us. We heard from her constantly while we were abroad; latterly she did not often mention Sir Victor. At first her letters had been wearisome, for they contained nothing but praises of him and of his kindness to her; lately all that had ceased, and his name rarely occurred. About a year before our return, my sister's son—little Paul, as he was called, after my father—was born, and then Kate's letters were one long rhapsody over him. I was so anxious to see the little heir of Erlesmere that I could hardly wait with patience until the following morning. My father said we should go over to the Hall the first thing.

I have never forgotten the shock I received when I saw my darling sister Kate again. When we reached the Hall, we found Sir Victor absent. My father told the footman that he need not announce us; we went silently together into Lady Erlesmere's own sitting-room. Kate was writing as we entered; the light fell full upon her face. Ah me, how changed it was! The bright girlish beauty, the arch, half-tender, half-sad expression that had once lingered there, were gone. The dimples that used to appear in the lovely cheeks, the light of the proud dark eyes, were gone too. It was a beautiful woman who rose to greet us, but one on whose brow care and sorrow were written most clearly. She seemed delighted beyond measure to see us. She held me tightly clasped in her arms, and kissed my face as though she could never let me go from her.

"Little Clary," she cried again and again, "it does my heart good to see you!"

"You do not look well, my bonny Kate," said my father. "You are very thin, and your face is changed. My darling, are you happy?"

The crimson flush mounted even to her brow.

"Happy, papa!" she answered evasively. "Wait until you have seen my baby! I will ring for him."

"I suppose," said my father, with a smile, "there is no other child like him?"

"No," she replied; "he is all the world to me."

I never saw a more beautiful child than little Paul. He was, strange to say, quite unlike either of his parents. He had a fair rosy face, with large wondering blue eyes, sweet rosy lips, and a little head covered with curls of the palest gold color. He was unlike them too in disposition. He had neither the spirit of his mother nor the proud temper of his father: he was singularly sweet, gentle and yielding. He could both walk and talk a little. One of the proudest moments of my life was when his little arms were clasped round my neck and his sweet little lips were pressed against mine.

How Kate loved that boy! While he was with us, her eyes never left his face; her whole being seemed lost in him.

"Where is Sir Victor?" asked my father, when we had admired and caressed the child.

"He is somewhere in the grounds with his steward," replied Kate. "I will send word to him that you are here."

Even as she spoke, a loud angry voice was heard in the hall. I saw my sister turn pale when she heard it. I noticed too how anxious she was to get the child out of the room before her husband came in.

I had never liked Sir Victor, and, when for the first time I saw his face darkened with an angry frown, I liked him less than ever. He greeted us kindly, but never addressed one word to Kate.

"I have been in a great rage this morning," he said to my father, as though offering an explanation of his loud tones. "One of my stupid gardeners has cut down a tree that I would not have lost on any account. I think servants become more unendurable every day!" And, to my great surprise and disgust, he ended his speech with a coarse oath.

My father looked as he felt, shocked and indignant. Seeing my startled face, Sir Victor said:

"I beg your pardon, Miss Clary; but it is so annoying—no man could help swearing."

"More apology is due to Lady Erlesmere than to me," I rejoined indignantly.

"Lady Erlesmere, from long habit, has grown accustomed to such little eccentricities." said Kate, with a proud bitter smile.

He turned round furiously, when my father interposed by asking them to dinner that evening; and soon afterward we took our leave.

When we reached home, my father sat for some time with his face buried in his hands. He spoke no word; but I knew his heart was aching for my poor sister, who looked so sad and so wretched in her magnificent home.

"Just as I thought it would be!" I heard him murmur to himself. "Poor child; if she could but have loved Allan!"

But, happy or wretched, Kate never said one word to us. I never saw any one so miserably altered; all her bright gay spirits were gone, the sparkling wit that used to charm and enliven us all had disappeared; in place of my beautiful radiant sister, who had been a queen amongst us, there was a pale, proud, silent woman, whose heart and feelings seemed dead to all save her boy. She never complained, she never named her husband; but one look at her face was enough—heartache was in every line of it. I have seen her sit silent and cold for hours together, her eyes fixed with a yearning wistful look on the clear summer sky, and I knew that sorrow and wrong were making sad havoc in that proud yet loving heart. My father never spoke of her to me; but he looked miserable whenever her name was mentioned.

Strange stories of Sir Victor were abroad. Some of them I heard from gossiping servants who told me of his wild life. In the deep silence of the quiet night, when the villagers had long retired to rest, the furious gallop of a horse would be heard in the deserted streets. People would say, "There goes Sir Victor! Poor wretched horse!" Rumors of his mad orgies and low habits were afloat; but, whatever was said, my sister remained as silent as the grave. What we knew we heard from others or guessed from her face. His name never passed her lips. My father respected her reserve too much to attempt to break through it.

As soon as we were settled once more at home, I went every day to visit my sister and her little boy. I seldom saw Sir Victor, he appeared to spend little time at home. I never inquired for him, and Kate never volunteered any information as to his whereabouts. I often remained all night with her, for at times she seemed so lonely and wretched that I could not bear to leave her.

"Why do you not go out more, Kate?" I asked her one day. "I have heard that you constantly refuse all invitations. Change of scene would cheer you up. You used to be so fond of society."

"'Used to be' and 'are' are very different things," she replied. "I do not accept invitations because I can not give any in return"

"Why not?" I inquired. "You have a beautiful house, splendid

plate, plenty of servants, and ample means. If I were in your place, I would go to parties and give parties too."

She smiled without speaking. I knew afterward that she had been obliged to give up asking people to the house, and the reason why.

One morning—I remember it so well—we were going through the plantation as our nearest way home. Little Paul ran on before us. The plantation was in the private grounds of Erlesmere Park. Kate liked the place, and it was her favorite promenade. I used to wonder at it, for I thought it very dull. The dark tapering firs, through which the wind moaned with a sad wailing music, filled me with awe.

It was here that Kate liked to linger. There was an old trunk of a tree that had fallen years before. It was now covered with soft green moss; and here my sister would sit listening to the moaning of the wind until Paul and I grew impatient and tired of waiting. The little fellow used to call it "mamma's chair," and on this particular morning, as we entered the plantation, he came running back to us.

"Mamma," he said, "some one has your chair—an ugly old woman—and she will not get up."

Sure enough, seated on the moss-covered trunk, we discovered an old woman. When we drew near her, I saw that she was an old haggard-looking gypsy. Kate, who was always kind and gentle to her inferiors, went up to her.

"Do you know," she said gently, "that you are trespassing? This is private ground. If the keepers see you, you may get into trouble."

The woman looked angrily at her.

"And who are you, my fine lady," she said, "to order me off?"

"I am Lady Erlesmere," replied Kate. "I speak only for your own sake. You look very ill and wretched; can I relieve you?"

"Relieve me," said the gypsy. "No; only revenge and death will do that. So you are Lady Erlesmere, are you?"

She fixed her eyes boldly on my sister's pale face.

"You are Lady Erlesmere, and that is your son and his heir, I suppose? My daughter was handsomer than you. She lies with her boy in the depths of the cold river. You are well and happy; but it will be more equal soon—more equal soon!" she muttered.

Kate took a few shillings from her purse, and placed them in the old woman's hand.

"Get yourself something to eat," she said, you look hungry and cold, poor thing!"

"Is this Erlesmere money?" cried the old woman. "If it was your own, bonny lady, I would keep it; because it is his, I fling it where, if there is justice, he will soon lie!"

She threw the money violently from her, and went away. To my surprise, when she rose, there was no appearance of decrepitude about her. Her figure was tall and erect; it was only her face that looked so old and haggard.

"What a strange woman!" I said.

Kate made no reply; her face had grown pale, and there was a proud angry light in her eye.

We overtook Sir Victor just as we came to the Hall gates. He took little Paul in his arms and carried him.

"Victor, is there a gypsy-camp in the neighborhood?" Kate asked.

"I do not know," he answered, looking rather startled. "Why do you ask me?"

"Because we saw a gypsy-woman about, and she seemed so wild that I felt nervous."

Without another word, he put the child down, and strode away in the direction of the woods. Kate looked after him in some surprise, but made no remark; and then we entered the house over which so dark a shadow was looming.

CHAPTER V.

It was beautiful spring weather, and we spent—that is, Kate, little Paul, and myself—the greater part of each day out in the woods and fields.

One morning my father received a letter which seemed to give him great delight.

"Pussy," he said to me, "here is good news for you! Your old friend Allan is coming back to the Towers."

"Papa," I exclaimed, "can it be true? I am so pleased! When will he be here?"

"I should not be surprised to see him some time this morning," he replied; "he was in London yesterday when he wrote this."

I ran away, full of glee, to tell Kate. When I reached the Hall, Lisette told me her lady had gone on to the Hurst Road with the child, and wished me to follow her.

Off I went, wondering why she had gone without me. Between the green budding trees I soon saw the white gleam of her dress. Little Paul ran to meet me, and I nodded to my sister while I kissed and greeted him. Every detail of that scene is imprinted on my mind—the quiet fresh spring morning, the trees unfolding their leaves, the golden primroses and purple violets in their shady nooks. I can recall my sister's face as she stood waiting to speak to me, watching the caresses her boy was showering upon me.

Suddenly a hasty footstep was heard coming from the wood. We both turned quickly, and saw Sir Victor approaching us, his face perfectly furious with rage. My sister turned deadly white; she caught hold of the child and held him in her arms.

"You are here, are you?" shouted my brother-in-law in a loud angry voice. "Why can't you stay at home? I've been searching the house for you."

A light as of gentle patience came into her sweet sad eyes.

"I came out with Paul for a walk," she said softly.

"No excuses!" he growled. "I want to know who spilled the ink in my study this morning; it has run all over that new map of the estate. They tell me you have been writing there. Did you do it?"

"If I did," she replied, gently, "I was unconscious of it. I was writing there this morning, and quitted the room hurriedly. If I did it, Victor, I am really very sorry for it."

"I can never get at the truth in my house, and never shall, I suppose. I believe every servant in it is paid to tell me lies?"

"You are a naughty, bad man," broke in a shrill, sweet, childish voice, "to scold my mamma"—and little Paul clasped his arms round his mother's neck.

"Hush, darling!" said Kate. "You must not speak so to papa."

Sir Victor's anger was transferred in a moment from his wife to his child.

"What is that you say, sir?" he cried. "Come down and beg my pardon, or you will repent it!"

But the little arms were clasped still more tightly round his mother.

"Do not be angry with him, Victor," pleaded my sister. "He did not mean to be naughty."

"I will be master of my own child, madam," he cried, "and make him obey me!"

He seized the trembling little fellow and dragged him from his mother's arms. Sir Victor carried in his hand a slight cane, and

with this he struck the child violently several times. Poor little Paul gave only one cry, and then stood white and still while the cruel strokes fell upon him.

"Victor, Victor!" cried my sister, "do not beat him—do not hurt my child!"

In her frantic eagerness she flung herself down upon her knees and caught hold of his hands.

"Ah," he said, with a sneer, "I have made you come down from your pedestal, my lady. In future, if I want to humble you a little, I shall know how to proceed. Take the boy; I don't want to hurt him. Behave yourself, though, for, if ever I want to punish you, I shall first punish him."

With these cruel words, he thrust little Paul from him. The child staggered as he tried to run to his mother, fell, and struck his temple against a stone that lay in the path. Sir Victor did not see this; he had gone back into the wood again. The whole scene did not occupy more than a few minutes. I ran to pick up the child. To my horror, I saw that the golden curls were stained with blood, and that a dark ugly wound marred the sweet white face; the poor little fellow was senseless from the effects of the fall.

"Give him to me, Clary!" moaned Kate. "Oh, my darling, my darling!"

She sat down upon the grass, and took the little child upon her knee.

"Will he die?" she asked, in such a tone of wild despair that my heart ached when I heard it.

"No," I said; "he is only stunned. Let us get him home as quickly as we can; the nearest way is down the high-road and over the fields. Let me carry him, Kate."

But no—she would not part with him; she held him tightly clasped to her bosom, the golden curls streaming over her shoulder.

We spoke no word of that scene. Ever and anon a deep sob rose to my sister's lips; while her face was whiter than poor Paul's. On the road we heard the sound of a horse's hoofs.

"Here is some one coming!" I cried. "Now, Kate, we shall have help!"

But what words could paint my surprise and joy when I saw Allan Charlton, pulling up his horse, and heard him asking eagerly what was the matter.

"Lady Erlesmere," he cried, in astonishment, "what has happened? What can I do for you?"

"My boy has fallen, and is hurt," said Kate, her lips quivering as her eyes fell upon Allan's pitying face.

"Let me take him home for you," he begged.

"No; I can not part with him. If you will go home for me, and tell his nurse what has happened and ask her to prepare everything, I shall be grateful to you, Allan."

"That I will!" he cried. "Dear Clary, I shall see you this evening at the Grange." And in another moment he was gone.

I dared not speak to Kate after he left us—her face was working so strangely. I was thankful when the little fellow lay at last on his pretty white bed. To our great joy, he soon recovered consciousness; the wound was not a dangerous or even a very painful one. The child's mind was hurt far more than his body.

"Mamma," he said, drawing her head down to him, "please don't tell any one papa beat me."

In a few hours he was playing about again, although the blue marks still disfigured the fair little arms and shoulders. When I saw that there was no further need of my services, I felt a desire to return home, for I was longing to see more of Allan Charlton.

"Kate, dear," I said, "I think I may go now. Allan will dine with us, I dare say, and papa will like me to be at home. If little Paul could go too, I should like you to accompany me."

But my words brought on a passion of tears. Perhaps a picture of the quiet home-life came suddenly before her, perhaps the remembrance of the noble tender heart she had cast from her came back to her in this her hour of distress. I persuaded her to go to her own room and lie down. I took a glass of wine and held it to her pale lips, for I was frightened—Kate was not one of the crying kind. She had shed no tears during her happy girlhood; now the violence, the wild abandonment of her grief distressed and alarmed me. I could only caress the poor face and gently stroke the luxuriant hair with my hand.

"Hush, darling!" I said, at last. "You will make yourself ill. Do not cry so."

"Little Clary," she cried, "little sister, let me open my heart; it will do me good! I am so miserable, so wretched, that I hardly care to live!"

CHAPTER VI.

THIS was the sad story that my sister told me of her married life, although I had partly guessed it before. For three or four months, while the novelty of his love lasted, Sir Victor had been all that was kind and amiable; but gradually old habits regained their influence over him; he grew tired of his self-restraint, and my poor sister soon found that her husband was of a coarse, common, even brutal nature. There was nothing in him to win love and esteem. He was not truthful, he was vain and boastful, his temper was something quite new and terrible to poor Kate. He soon lost the restraining influence of her presence; he swore and cursed until she became terrified even at the sound of his voice. Even then he would have occasional fits of love and devotion; but those became less and less frequent. Nothing restrained him, not even the presence of invited guests. For her own sake poor Kate declined all society; she, who had been a belle and a queen, could not endure to be humbled as he humbled her. When it was all too late, how bitterly she repented not having taken Allan's warning and her father's advice! She had obstinately persisted in placing full trust in this man who was a total stranger to her; she had been obstinate, and would not wait to see more of him before she placed the happiness of her life in his hands.

"Ah, Clary," she cried, "how bitterly I am punished! But for my boy, I could not, I would not, live—life is a dreary burden! I have sometimes to watch nearly the whole night through—he does not like the servants to sit up for him—and then, if he is late and has drunk too much, what have I not to bear! Oaths and curses, and foul words the meaning of which I do not even understand, are showered upon me, who never heard an unkind word from my father's lips! I tremble if he goes near my boy; in his wild way he loves him, yet in his fury he spares nothing and no one. Ah, Clary, I have wept until the fountain of my tears seems dried up? I have borne it all for the sake of that time when I did love him and his love made the whole world beautiful to me; but what can I do, what shall I do if he tries to punish me through my child?"

I could only kiss the weeping face. Then she went on:

"If I had only known the truth about that poor dog Lion, I would never have married Victor. I heard it two years ago—never mind from whom. Poor Lion loved his master, who took a great pride in training him. One day Victor went with his keeper and

dog into Horst Wood. He was trying to teach the poor animal something it could not or would not learn. He flew into one of his fits of furious rage, and actually beat the faithful creature to death, in spite of the entreaties of the keeper. Allan Charlton was near at the time, and, hearing a noise, came to see what was the matter. Victor had vented his fury then; he stood over his dead favorite with the broken stick in his hand, and looked, when Allan saw him, most heartily ashamed of himself. Allan did not quite know the truth of the affair, although he guessed it. Victor accused him of being a spy upon his actions; he was afraid Allan would tell, and for some time he was both ashamed and anxious. Oh, Clary, that one incident reveals his character so plainly that, if I had known it, I should have been spared the misery. Worst of all, I no longer love him; when I ceased to esteem, I ceased to love. I live in unutterable fear—I am more than wretched. I can not believe that I was ever light-hearted and gay. In my home, Clary, there is never a kind or pleasant word spoken."

As I sat listening to my sister, far away in the woods I heard the sound of a pistol-shot. I wondered to myself who was out shooting at that hour, for it was now long past twilight. I longed to go home, and yet I could not, dared not leave the trembling, weeping girl alone. Gradually she became calmer, the violent passionate weeping ceased.

"Clary," she said, "I have opened my heart to you, for I must have spoken or died; but, darling, guard my secret even as I guard it myself—never repeat one word to my father or any one else. Promise me that."

I promised; and, to soothe her, I began talking of our happy Venetian life.

Presently I heard the noise of many footsteps, of doors opening and shutting, of heavy feet tramping up the staircase; then Lisette hastily entered the room.

"Where is my lady? Oh, how is she?" she asked, in great agitation.

"Better now, Lisette," I said, wondering at her hurried agitated manner.

As soon as my sister caught sight of her she sprung up.

"Oh, Lisette," she cried, "what is it—what is the matter? Is my boy worse?"

"No, my lady," was the low reply. "It is not the child; it is—"

"Speak out, Lisette," I commanded; "you are torturing your mistress!"

"It is Sir Victor, my lady," she said. "He has been found shot dead in the woods!"

* * * * * * *

I felt thankful for the deadly unconsciousness that seized my sister. I laid her down gently; and, leaving her to the care of her maid, I went to see what had really happened. I could make out nothing clearly from the terrified domestics, who were grouped together and looked frightened out of their senses.

"Where is Saunders?" I asked—he was poor Sir Victor's valet.

With his assistance I discovered that Sir Victor had left the house about five in the afternoon. He had said nothing of whither he was going, leaving orders for dinner to be ready as usual at half-past seven. Nothing more had been seen or heard of him until one of the keepers, hearing a shot fired after twilight, went in the direction of the sound, thinking there were poachers about. To his untold horror he saw Sir Victor lying on the road path, his dead face upturned to the evening sky. When the keeper examined him he found he had been shot through the heart; so that death must have been instantaneous. The man hastily procured assistance, and the body of the unfortunate baronet now lay in his room, the room he had quitted lately so full of life and strength, The groom had gone immediately in search of a doctor. I sent another servant to summon my father. He came at once, and with him Allan Charlton. The doctor arrived quickly; but he could do nothing. Poor Sir Victor was beyond all human aid.

I shall never forget the horrors of that night. My sister recovered consciousness only to fall into such a wild state of grief and alarm that we could do nothing with her. In the presence of death all her wrongs seemed to be forgotten; the love of her youth had returned to her. Sir Victor, lying still and cold, was once more her chosen love; all the dreary married life was forgotten.

Little Paul, aroused by the unusual noise and confusion, began to cry, as he had done before that evening, for "papa" to come and make friends with him. Alas! "papa" would never hear his child's voice on earth again!

It was strange, too, now that he was dead, how all spoke kindly of him; the servants, who had trembled at the sound of his voice, now remembered all his better qualities. My father, as he gazed on the calm white face, murmured:

"Poor fellow—a wasted life and a sad end!"'

In the first bewilderment of the shock the question of who had

done the deed seemed to have been overlooked. Now it was eagerly debated, and men were sent out to search the woods in all directions. In the pocket of the coat the dead man had worn were found the torn fragments of a letter in which the words "Lena," "child," "river," "revenge," seemed to occur frequently. Nothing could be clearly made out from it. But the story was plain enough in its terrible significance—at least, so Allan Charlton seemed to think.

"Spare her that, Mr. Hamber. Let us destroy this paper," he said.

Rightly or wrongly they burned it. No clew to the murderer could be found; no motive could be discovered for the deed. True, Sir Victor was not much liked; but he had no enemy who could wish to take his life. It was a profound mystery, and the excitement in the neighborhood was intense.

The dreary days dragged on slowly. My father remained with me at the Hall, for Kate required all our care. Allan was busy prosecuting inquiries. A large reward was offered, but without effect. Only one thing was discovered, and that was the pistol with which the deed was done. It was found at the bottom of the ornamental water in the pleasure-grounds of the Hall. There was no name upon it, and no clew was obtained from it as to who had used it.

The day of Sir Victor's funeral was one of the most wretched I can remember. The rain descended in torrents, the wind wailed and moaned through the trees. Some weeks afterward I heard that an old gypsy woman had forced her way through the crowd of mourners, and had stood looking down into the grave where poor Sir Victor slept.

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There was no will. Kate would allow no hand but her own to touch her husband's papers. She must have found some strange revelations there, for at times her grief was pitiful to see. Little Paul was now master of Erlesmere. It was arranged that, as soon as affairs were settled, Kate and her child should leave the scene of their sorrow, and go abroad for a time. They did so. And, all together, we once more resumed our happy Venetian life.

Two years passed away, and still we lingered in our sunny home by the blue sea. We heard constantly from England; but nothing had been discovered as to the dreary tragedy of Erlesmere Hall. People were beginning to forget it, or to speak of it as a thing of the past. At first among ourselves it had been a constant theme. Kate did not avoid all mention of her grief; she often spoke of her

dead husband, and even in his praise. Little Sir Paul prattled away about "papa;" but I do not think he retained much recollection of him.

Allan Charlton wrote at last to say that he thought it was time we returned—he had managed my father's affairs during his absence. So in the spring we went home again. Kate would not go to live at the Hall; she said it would always be haunted for her, and she could not bear it. She made her home once more at the Grange; and, but for the presence of her golden-haired little son among us, the sad past might have been a dream. The Hall was let to strangers until Sir Paul attained his majority; but Lady Erlesmere could never be persuaded to enter it again.

Another year passed on, and one morning there came a letter addressed in a strange handwriting to Lady Erlesmere. Kate opened it with a smile, wondering who her new correspondent was. She neither wept nor fainted when she read it. She gave it to my father, and then went quietly to her own room.

"I am dying now, my lady," this strange letter began, "and I must tell you the truth, or I shall not sleep quietly in my grave. Long years ago, when Victor Erlesmere was a poor man whose father made a scanty living on the turf, he knew and loved my daughter Lena. He met her first on a race-course. She was then about seventeen, and one of the most beautiful girls in the world. She was my only child. I loved her as mothers do an only daughter—no words can tell how dearly. I had been well taught in my early days, and in her turn she was well taught too. No lady ever read or wrote better than my Lena, no lady was ever more beautiful and more gentle. Victor Erlesmere loved her. If he had remained a poor man he would have married her; but fortune and title came to him, and he left her. We heard he had married a beautiful lady in his new district. My daughter almost broke her heart. She vowed she would see him again before she died. He had wealth and a lady for his bride, still he could not forget my child. He sought her out again. The end of it all was that, with her child in her arms, she sought rest in the depths of the cold river, fearing less to face death than to encounter the reproaches of those who loved her. We gypsies are strong in love and strong in hate. I kissed my daughter's dead face, and I swore to avenge her death. When she was buried I had nothing else to live for. I walked many weary miles to reach his home. How the deed was done I need not tell you. I avenged my child! I can not tell if there will

be mercy for me. Hate and revenge are deadly sins, they tell me. Has his sin any name? Before you read this, my lady, I shall perhaps have met him face to face. I tell you this that no one else may be even suspected of my crime."

My father locked that letter in his private bureau. Kate never asked for it nor named it. She did not join us that day, and we respected her sorrow. Never again did Sir Victor's name pass her lips. When the little baronet, as we used to call him, reached his tenth year, my father insisted that he should be sent to a public school. He declared we were spoiling the child and making "an old woman" of him.

When Kate was once more alone, Allan Charlton, faithful and true to the one love of his life, came again. This time he did not plead in vain. It was not the radiant girl whose smile had been a gleam of sunshine who blessed him with her love: it was a beautiful thoughtful woman who had seen much suffering, whose heart had ached with a bitterness worse than death.

Happier days came for her; she is mistress now of Charlton Towers, children playing round her knee. Sir Paul is the most devoted of sons and Allan the best of husbands. I still live with my father at the Grange; and there I intend to remain until I meet with some one as faithful, as loyal, and as noble as the husband of MY SISTER KATE.

THE END.

A RAINY JUNE.

By "OUIDA."

From the Prince di San Zenone Claridge's, London, to the Duchessa dell' Aquila Fulva, Monterone, near Milano, Italy.

"CARISSIMA TERESA,—I have received your letter, which is delightful to me, because it is yours, and terrible to me because it scolds me, abuses me, flies at me, makes me feel like a school-boy who has had a saponata. Yes; it is quite true. I can not help it She has betwitched me. She is a lily made into a woman. I feared you would be angry, especially angry because she is a foreigner, but the hour of fate has struck. You will not wonder when you see her. She is as blonde as the dawn and as pure as a pearl. It seems to me that I have never loved any woman at all in my life before. To love her is like plunging one's hand in cool spring water on a midsummer noon. She is such repose; such innocence; such holiness! In the midst of this crowded, over-colored, vulgar London life, for it is very vulgar at its highest, she seems like some angel of purity. I saw her first, standing with a knot of roses in her hand under a cedar-tree, at one of their afternoon clubs on the river. She was drinking a cup of tea; they are always drinking tea. And she is so white. I never saw anything so white except the snow on the Leonessa. She is not in the least like the fast young ladies of England, of whom one sees so much in the winter at Rome. I do not like their fast young women. If you want a woman who is fast, a Parisienne is best, or even an American. Englishwomen overdo it. She is just like a primrose; like a piece of porcelain; like a soft, pale star shining in the morning. I write all kinds of poetry when I think of her. And then, there is something Sainte Nitouche about her which is delicious, because it is so real. The only thing which was wanting in her was that she ought to have been shut up in a convent, and I ought to have had to imperil my soul for all eternity by getting her over a stone wall with a silken ladder. But it is a prosaic age, and this is a very prosaic country. London

amuses me, but it is such a crowd, and it is frightfully ugly. I can not think how people who are so enormously rich as the English can put up with such ugliness. The houses are all too small, even the big ones. I have not seen a good ball-room; they say there are good ones in the country houses. The clubs are admirable, but life in general seems to me hurried, costly, ungraceful, very noisy, and almost entirely consecrated to eating. It is made up of a scramble and a mass of food. People engage themselves for dinners a month in advance. Everybody's engagement book is so full that it is the burden of their days. They accept everything, and at the eleventh hour pick out what they prefer, and, to use their own language, 'throw over the rest.' I do not think it is pretty behavior, but nobody seems to object to it. I wonder that the women do not do so, but they seem to be afraid of losing their men altogether if they exact good manners from them. People here are not at all well-mannered to my taste; neither the men nor the women. They are brusque and negligent, and have few *petits soins*. You should have come over for my marriage, to show them all what an exquisite creature a Venetian patrician beauty can be. Why should you marry that Piedmontese? Only two things seem to be of any importance in England—they are eating and politics. They eat all day long, and they are always talking of Mr. Gladstone. Mr. Gladstone, *m'embete*. Half of them say he is the salvation of England; the other half that he is the destruction of England. Myself, I don't care the least which he is; only I know they can not keep him out of their conversation, one way or another, for five minutes; which, to an unprejudiced foreigner, is a seccatura. But to-morrow I go down into the country with my primrose—all alone—to-morrow she will be mine altogether and unalterably, and I shall hear nothing about Mr. Gladstone or anything that is tiresome. Of course, you are wondering that I should marry. I wonder myself, but then if I did not marry I should be compelled to say an eternal *addio* to the Lenten Lily. She has such a spiked wall around her of male relatives and family greatness; it is not the convent wall; there is no ladder that will go over it; one must enter by the big front door, or not at all. Felicitate me and yet compassionate me. I am going to Paradise, no doubt; but I have the uncomfortable doubt as to whether it will suit me, which all people who are going to Paradise always do feel. Why? Because we are mortal? Or because we are sinners? *A reverderci, cara mia Teresina!* Write to me at my future Eden; it is called Coombe Bysset, Wiltshire. We are to be there a month. It is the choice of my primrose."

From the Lady Mary Bruton, Belgrave Square, London, to Mrs. d'Arcy, British Embassy, Berlin.

"The season has been horribly dull; quantities of marriages—people always will marry, however dull it is. The one most talked about is that of the Cowes' second daughter, Lady Gladys, with the Prince of San Zenone. She is one of the beauties, but a very simple girl, quite old-fashioned, indeed. She has refused Lord Hampshire, and a good many other people, and then fallen in love in a week with this Roman, who is certainly as handsome as a picture. But Cowes didn't like it at all; he gave in because he couldn't help it, but he was dreadfully vexed that the Hampshire affair did not come off instead. Hampshire is such a good creature, and his estates are close to theirs; it is certainly very provoking for them that this Italian must take it in his head to spend a season in London, and lead the cotillon so beautifully, that all the young women talked of nothing else but his charms."

From the Lady Mona St. Clair, Grosvenor Square, London, to Miss Brone, schooner-yacht "Persephone," off Cherbourg.

"The wedding was very pretty yesterday. We had frocks of tussore silk, with bouquets of orchids and Penelope Boothby caps. She looked very pretty, but as white as her gown—such a goose!—it was ivory satin, with point de Venise. He is quite too handsome, and I can not think what he could see in her. He gave us each a locket with her portrait inside. I wished it had been his. I dare say Hampshire would have been better for her, and worn longer than Romeo. Lord Cowes is furious about Romeo; he detests the religion and all that, and he could hardly make himself look pleasant, even at church. Of course, there were two ceremonies. The cardinal had consented at last, though I believe he had made all kinds of fuss first. Lady Gladys, you know, is very, very High Church, so I suppose that reconciled a little the irreconcilable cardinal. She thinks of nothing but the church and her missions and her poor people. I am afraid the Roman prince will get dreadfully bored. And they are going down into Wiltshire, of all places, to be shut up for a month! It is very stupid of her, and such a wet season as it is! They are going to Coombe Bysset, her aunt, Lady Caroline's place. I fancy Romeo will soon be bored; and I don't think Coombe Bysset at all judicious. I would have gone to Homburg, or Deauville, or Japan."

From the Princess di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, Wilts., to the Countess of Cowes, London.

"DEAREST MOTHER,—I am, too, too, too happy. It is no use writing about it. I would if I could, but I can't. He is delighted with Coombe, and says the verdure is something wonderful. We got here just as the sun was setting. There were all Aunt Carrie's school children out to meet us with baskets of roses. Piero said they looked like bigger roses themselves. He is enchanted with England. It is very fine to-day. I do so hope it won't rain, but the glass is falling. Forgive a hurried word like this. I am going to take Piero on the lake. I know you haven't liked it, dear; but I am sure when you see how happy I am you will say there was never any one like him on earth."

From the Countess of Cowes, Cowes House, London, to the Duchess of Dunne, Wavernake, Worcestershire.

"No, I confess I do not approve of the marriage; it will take her away from us, and I am afraid she won't be happy. She has always had such very exalted ideas. She is not in the least the girl of the period. Of course, she was taken by his picturesque face and his wonderful manners. His manners are really wonderful in these days when our men have none at all; and he has charmingly caressing and deferential ways which win even me. I can not wonder at her, poor child; but I am afraid; candidly, I am afraid. He makes all our men look like plowboys, and it was all done in such tremendous haste that we had no time to reason or reflect; and I don't think they have said two serious words to each other. If only it had been dear, good Hampshire, whom we have known all our lives and whose lands march with ours! But that was too good to be, I suppose; and there ws no positive objection we could raise to San Zenone; we could not refuse his proposals because he is too good-looking, isn't an Englishman, and has a mother who is reputed *maitresse femme*. Gladys writes from Coombe as from the seventh heaven. They have been married three days! But I fear she will have trouble before her. I fear he is weak and unstable, and will not back her up against his own people when she goes amongst them, and though, nowadays, a man and woman, once wedded, see so little of each other, Gladys is not quite of the time in her notions; she will take it all very seriously, poor child, and expect the idyl to be prolonged over the honeymoon. And she is very English in her

tastes and has been so very little out of England. However, every girl in London is envying her; it is only her father and I who see these little black specks on the fruit she has plucked. They are gone to Coombe, by her wish. I think it would have been wiser not to subject an Italian to such an ordeal as a wet English June in an utterly lonely country house. You know even Englishmen, who can always find such refuge and comfort in prize pigs and straw-yards and unusually big mangolds, get bored if they are in the country when there is nothing to shoot; and Englishmen are used to being drenched to the skin every time they move out. He is not. Lord Cowes says love is like a cotton frock—very pretty as long as the sun shines, but it won't stand a wetting. I wish you had been here; Gladys looked quite lovely. Cardinal Manning most kindly relented, and the whole thing went off very well. Of the San Zenone family, there was only present Don Fabrizio, the younger son, a very good looking young man. The terrible duchess didn't come on account, I think, of her sulks. She hates the marriage on her side as much as we do on ours, I am sure. Really, one must believe a little in fate. I do think that Gladys would soon have resigned herself to accepting Hampshire, out of sheer fatigue at saying 'No'—and, besides, she knew that we are so fond of him, and to live in the same country was such an attraction; but this irresistible young Roman must take it into his head that he wished to see a London season, and when once they had met (it was our afternoon at Ranelagh) there was no more chance for our poor, dear, good, stupid neighbor. Well, we must hope for the best!"

From the Prince Piero di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to the Duchessa dell' Aquila Fulva, Palazzo Fulva, Milano.

"CARISSIMA MIA,—There are quantities of nightingales in little green nests at this season. I am a nightingale in a green nest. I never saw anything so green as this paradise of mine. It is certainly paradise. If I feel a little *depayse* in it, it is only because I have been such a sinner. No doubt it is only that. Paradise is chilly; this is its only fault. It is the sixth of June, and we have fires. Fires in the dressing-rooms, fires in the drawing-rooms, fires at both ends of the library, fires on both sides of the hall, fires everywhere; and with all of them I shiver. I can not help shivering, and I feel convinced that in my rapture I have mistaken the month—it must be December. It is all enchantingly pretty here; the whole place

looks in such perfect order that it might have been taken out of a box last night. I have a little the sensation of being always at church. That, no doubt, is the effect of the first step toward virtue I have ever made. Pray do not think that I am not perfectly happy. I should be more sensible of my happiness, no doubt, if I had not quite such a feeling, due to the dampness of the air, of having been put into an aquarium, like a jelly fish. But Gladys is adorable in every way, and if she were not quite so easily scared would be perfection. It was that little air of hers, like that of some irresistible Alpine flower, which bewitched me. But when one has got the Apine flower, one can not live forever on it—*ma basta!* I was curious to know what a Northern woman was like; I know now. She is exquisite, but a little monotonous and a little prudish. Certainly she will never compromise me; but then, perhaps, she will never let me compromise myself, and that will be terrible! I am ungrateful; all men are ungrateful; but, then, is it not a little the woman's fault! They do keep so very close to one. Now, an angel, you know, becomes tiresome if one never gets out of the shadow of its wings—here, at Coombe Bysset, the angel fills the horizon."

From the Duchessa dell' Aquila Fulva, Palazzo Fulva, Milano, to the Prince Piero di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, Wilts., England.

"CARO MIO PIERINO,—Are you sure you have an angel? People have a trick of always calling very commonplace women angels. 'She is an angel' is a polite way of saying 'she is a bore.' I am not sure either that I should care to live with a veritable angel. One would see too much of the wings, as you say; and even a guardian angel must be the *torzo incommodo* sometimes. Why would you marry an English girl? I dare say she is so good-tempered that she never contradicts you, and you grow peevish out of sheer weariness at having everything your own way. If you had married Nicoletta, as I wanted you to do, she would have flown at you like a little tigress a dozen times a week, and kept you on the *qui vive* to please her. We know what our own men want. I have half a mind to write to your wife and tell her that no Italian is comfortable unless he has his ears boxed twice a day. If your wife would be a little disagreeable, probably you would adore her. But it is a great mistake, Pierino mio, to confuse marriage and love. In reality they have no more to do with one another than a horse chestnut and a chestnut horse; than the *zuccone* that means a vegetable and the

zuccone that means a simpleton. I should imagine that your wet English bird's nest will force you to realize this truth with lamentable rapidity.''

From the Princess di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, Wilts., to Lady Gwendoline Dormer, British Embassy, Vienna.

"DEAREST GWEN,—I did promise, I know, to write to you at once, and tell you everything; and a whole week is gone and I couldn't do it, I really couldn't; and even now I don't know where to begin. I suppose I am dreadfully *vieux jeu*. I suppose you will only laugh at me and say 'spoons.' How glad I am Piero can not say a word of English, and so I never hear that dreadful jargon which I do think so ugly and so vulgar, though you are all so fond of it. I ought not to have come to Coombe Bysset; at least, they all said it was silly. Nessie Fitzgerald was back in London before the week was out, and doing a play. To be sure she was married in October and she didn't care a bit about him, and I suppose that made all the difference To me it seems so much more natural to shut one's self up, and Piero thought so too; but I am half afraid he finds it a little dull now. You see we know very little of one another. He came for a month of the London season, and he met me at Ranelagh, and he danced the cotilion with me at a good many houses, and we cared for one another in a week, and were married in a month, as you know. Papa hated it, because it wasn't Burlington or Lord Hampshire. But he couldn't really object, because the San Zenone are such a great Roman family, and all the world knows them; and they are Spanish dukes as well as Italian princes. And Piero is such a grand gentleman, and made quite superb settlements; much more, papa said, than he could have expected, so poor as we are. But what I meant was, meeting like that in the rush of the season, at balls and dinners and garden-parties and luncheons at Hurlingham; and being married to one another just before Ascot, we really knew nothing at all of each other's tastes or habits or character. And when, on the first morning at Coombe, we realized that we were together for life, I think we both felt very odd. We adored one another, but we didn't know what to talk about; we never had talked to each other; we'd never had time. And I am afraid there is something of this feeling with him. I am afraid he is dreadfully bored; and I told him so, and he answered: 'Angelina mia, your admirable countrymen are not bored in the country because they are always eating. They eat a big breakfast,

they eat a big luncheon, they eat a big dinner, they are always eating. Myself, I have not that resource. Give me a little coffee and a little wine, and let me eat only once a day. You never told me I was expected to absorb food like the crocodiles.' What would he say if he saw a hunting-breakfast in the shires. I suppose life is very material in England. I think it is why there is so much typhus fever. Do you know, he wasn't going to dress for dinner because we were alone. As if that was any reason! I told him it would look so odd to the servants if he wouldn't dress, so he has done so since. But he said it was a *seccatura* (this means, I believe, a bore), and he told me we English sacrificed our whole lives to fuss, form and the outside of things. There is a great deal of truth in this. What numbers of people one knows who are ever so poor, and who yet, for the sake of the look of the thing, get into debt over their ears? And then quantities of them go to church for the form of the thing, when they don't believe one atom; and they will tell you at luncheon that they don't. I fancy Italians are much more honest than we are in this sort of way. Piero says if they are poor, they don't mind saying so, and if they have no religion they don't pretend to have any. He declares we English spoil all our lives because we fancy it is our duty to pretend to be something we are not. Now, isn't that really very true? I am sure you would delight in all he says. He is so original, so unconventional; our people think him ignorant, because he doesn't read and doesn't care a straw about politics. But I assure you he is as clever as anything can be; and he doesn't get his ideas out of newspapers, nor repeat like a parrot what his chief of party tells him. I do wish you could have come over and could have seen him. It was so unkind of you to be ill just at the very time of my marriage. You know that it is only to you that I ever say quite what I feel about things. The girls are too young, and mamma doesn't understand. She never could see why I would not marry poor Hampshire. She always said that I should care for him in time. I don't think mamma can ever have been in love with anybody. I wonder what she married for—don't you?"

From the Prince Piero di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to the Count Zazzari, Italian Legation, London.

"CARA GIGI,—Pray send me all the French novels you can find and a case of Turkish cigarettes. I am in paradise; but paradise is a little dull and exceedingly damp, at least in England. Does it

always rain in this country? It has rained here without stopping for seventeen days and a half. I produce upon myself the impression of being one of those larks who sit behind wires on a little square of wet grass. I should like to run up to London; I see you have Jeanne Granier and the others; but I suppose it would be against all the unwritten canons of a honeymoon. What a strange institution, a honeymoon! Who first invented it?"

From the Prince of San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, Wilts., to the Duchessa dell' Aquila Fulva, Palazza Fulva, Milano.

"CARA TERESINA,—I ought to have written to you long since, but you know I am not fond of writing. I really also have nothing to say. Happy the people who has no history. I am like that people. I was made happy two weeks ago; I have been happy ever since. It is slightly monotonous. How can you vary happiness except by quarreling a little? And then it would not be happiness any longer. It seems to me that happiness is like an omelette, best impromptu. Do not think that I am ungrateful, however, either to fate or to the charming innocent who has become my companion. We have not two ideas in common; she is lovely to look at, to caress, to adore; but what to say to her I confess I have no notion. Love ought never to have to find dinner-table conversation. He ought to climb up by a ladder and get over a balcony, and, when his ecstasies are ended, he ought to go the same way. I fancy she is cleverer than I am, but as that would be a discovery fatal to our comfort, I endeavor not to make it. She is extraordinarily sweet-tempered; indeed, so much so that it makes me angry; it gives one no excuse for being impatient. She is divine, exquisite, nymph-like; but, alas, she is a prude! Never was any creature on earth so exquisitely sensitive, so easily shocked. To live with her is to walk on egg-shells. Of course, it is very nice in a wife; very 'proper,' as the English say; but it is not amusing. It amused me at first, but now it seems to me a defect. She has brought me down to this terribly damp and very green place, where it rains every day and night. There is a library without novels; there is a cellar without absinthe; there is a *cuisine* without tomatoes or garlic, or any oil at all; there is an admirably ordered establishment, so quiet that I fancy I am in a penitentiary. There are some adorably fine horses, and there are acres of glass houses used to grow fruits that we throw in Italy to the pigs. By the way, there are also several of our field flowers in

the conservatories. We eat pretty nearly all day; there is nothing else to do. Outside, the scenery is oppressively green, the green of spinach; there is no variety, there are no ilexes and there are no olives. I understand now why the English painters give such staring colors; unless the colors scream you don't see them in this aqueous, dim atmosphere. That is why a benign Providence has made the landscape *aux epinards* I think the air here, inside and out, must weigh heavily; it lies on one's lungs like a sponge. I once went down in a diving-bell when I was a boy; I have the sensation in this country of being always down in a diving-bell. The scamp Toniello, whom you may remember as having played Leporello to my Don Giovanno ever since we were lads, amuses himself with making love to all the pretty maidens in the village; but then I must not do that—now. They have very big teeth, and very long upper lips. Their skins, however, are admirable. For a horse's skin, and a woman's, there is no land comparable to England. It is the country of grooming."

From the Princess di San Zenone, Coombe Bysser, to the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, British Embassy, St. Petersburg.

"He laughed at me because I went to church yesterday, and really I only went because I thought it right. We have been here a fortnight, and I have never been to church at all till yesterday, and you know how very serious dear Aunt Carrie is. To-day, as it was the second Sunday I have been here, I thought I ought to go just once, and I did go; but it was dreadfully pompous and lonely in the big red pew: and the villagers stared so, and all the little girls of the village giggled and looked at me from under their sunbonnets. Dear Mr. Coate preached a sermon on marriage. It was very kind of him; but, oh, how I wish he hadn't! When I got back, Piero was playing billiards with his servant. I wondered what Mr. Coate would have thought of him. To be sure, English clergymen have to get used to fast Sundays now when the country houses are full. It is such a dear little yew walk to the church from the house here, not twenty yards long, and all lined with fuchsia. Do you remember it? Even Piero admits that it is very pretty, only he says it is a vignette prettiness, which, I suppose, is true. 'You can see no horizon, only a green wall,' he keeps complaining, and his beautiful, lustrous eyes look as if they were made to gaze through

endless fields of light. When I asked him yesterday what he really thought of England, what do you suppose he said? He said, 'Mia cara, I think it would be a most delightful country if it had one-fifth of its population, one-half of its houses, a tithe of its dinners, a quarter of its machinery, none of its factories and a wholly different atmosphere!' I suppose this means that he dislikes it? I think him handsomer than ever. I sent you his photograph, but that can give you no idea of him. He is like one of his own marble statues. We came to Coombe Bysset directly after the ceremony and we are here still. I could stay on forever. It is so lovely in these Wiltshire woods in mid-June. But I am afraid—just the very least bit afraid—that Piero may get bored with me—me—me—nothing but me. He is an angel. We ride in the morning, we sing and play in the evening. We adore each other all the twenty-four hours through. I wonder how ever I could have lived without him. I am longing to see all he tells me about his great marble palaces and his immense dream-like villas and his gardens with their multitude of statues and the wonderful light that is over it all. He protests it is always twilight with us in England. It seems so absurd, when nowadays everybody knows everything about everywhere, that I should never have been to Italy. But we were such country mice down at dear, old, dull, green, muddy Ditchworth. Lanciano, the biggest of all their big places, must be like a poem. It is a great house, all of different colored marbles, set amidst ilex groves on the mountain side, with cascades like Terni and gardens that were planned by Giulio Romano, and temples that were there in the days of Horace. I long to see it all, and yet I hope he will not want to leave Coombe yet. There is no place like the place where one is first happy. And somehow, I fancy I look better in these homely, low rooms of Aunt Carrie's, with their Chippendale furniture and their smell of dry rose leaves, than I shall do in those enormous palaces, which want a Semiramis or a Cleopatra. They were kind enough to make a fuss about me in London, but I never thought much of myself, and I am afraid I must seem rather dull to Piero, who is so brilliant himself, and has all kinds of talents. You know, I never was clever, and really—really—I haven't an idea what to talk to him about when we don't talk about ourselves. And then the weather provokes him. We have hardly had one fine day since we came; and no doubt it seems very gray and chilly to an Italian. 'It can not be June!' he says, a dozen times a week. And when the whole day is rainy, as it is very often, for our Junes are such wet ones nowadays, I can see he gets impatient. He doesn't care

for reading; he is fond of billiards, but I don't play a good enough game to be any amusement to him. And though he sings divinely, as I told you, he sings as the birds do—just when the mood is on him. He does not care about music as a science in the least. He laughed when I said so; he declared it was no more a science than love is. Perhaps love ought to be a science too, in a way, or else it won't last. There has been a scandal in the village caused by his servant Tonino. An infuriated father came up to the house this morning about it. He is named John Best; he has one of Aunt Carrie's biggest farms. He was in such a dreadful rage and I had to talk to him, because, of course, Piero couldn't understand him. Only when I translated what he said, Piero laughed till he cried, and offered him a cigarette, and called him 'figlio mio,' which only made Mr. John Best purple with fury, and he went away in a greater rage than he had been in when he came, swearing 'he would do for the Papist.' I have sent for the steward. I am afraid Aunt Carrie will be terribly annoyed. It has always been such a model village. Not a public house near for six miles, and all the girls such demure, quiet little maidens. The terrible Roman valet, with his starry eyes and his mandoline and his audacities, has been like Mephistopheles in the opera to this secluded and innocent little hamlet. I beg Piero to send him away, but he looks unutterably reproachful, and declares he really can not live without Toniello, and what can I say?"

From the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, St. Petersburg, to the Princess di San Zenone, Coombe Rysset.

"You are quite in the wrong, my poor pet. If you were only a little older and even so much wiser, you would have telegraphed to the libraries yourself for the French books; you would have laughed at them when he laughed; and instead of taking Mr. John Best as a tragedy, you would have made him into a little burlesque, which would have amused your husband for five minutes as much as Gyp or Jean Richepin. I begin to think I should have married your Roman prince, and you should have married my good, dull George, whom a perverse destiny has shoved into diplomacy. Your Roman scandalizes you, and my George bores me. Such is marriage, my dear, all the world over. What is the old story? That Jove broke all the walnuts, and each half is always uselessly seeking its fellow."

From the Princess di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, Wilts., to the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, British Embassy, St. Petersburg.

"But surely if he loved me he would be as perfectly happy with me alone as I am with him alone; I want no other companion—no other interest—no other thought."

From the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, British Embassy, St. Petersburg, to the Princess di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, Wilts.

"Of course you do not, because you are a woman. San Zenone is your god, your idol, your ideal, your universe. But you are only one out of the many women who have pleased him, and attached to the pleasure you afford him, is the very uncomfortable conviction that he will never be able to get away from you. My dear child, I have no patience with any woman when she says, 'he does not love me.' If he do not, it is probably the woman's fault. Probably she has worried him. Love dies directly it is worried, quite naturally. Poor Gladys! You were always such a good child; you were always devoted to your old women, and your queer little orphans, and your pet cripples, and your East End missions. It certainly is hard that you should have fallen into the hands of a soulless Italian, who reads naughty novels all day long and sighs for the fleshpots of Egypt! But, my child, in reason's name, what did you expect? Did you think that all in a moment he would sigh to hear Canon Farrar or Dean Liddell; take his guitar to a concert in Seven Dials, and teach Italian to Bethnal Green babies? Be reasonable, and let your poor caged bird fly out of Coombe Bysset; which will certainly be your worst enemy if you shut him up in it much longer."

From the Prince di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to the Duchessa dell' Aquila Fulva. Palazzo Fulva, Milano.

"I am still in my box of wet moss. I have been in it two weeks, four days and eleven hours, by the calendar and the clocks. I have read all my novels. I have spelled through my 'Figaro,' from the title to the printers' address, every morning. I have smoked twenty cigarettes every twenty minutes, and I have yawned as many times. This is paradise, I know it: I tell myself so; but still I can not help it—I yawn. There is a pale, watery sun, which shines fitfully. There is a quantity of soaked hay which they are going to dry by

machinery. There is a great variety of muddy lanes in which to ride. There is a post-office seven miles off, and a telegraph station fifteen miles further off. The *ensemble* is not animated. When you go out you see very sleek cattle, very white sheep, very fat children. You may meet at intervals laboring people very round-shouldered and very sulky. You also meet, if you are in luck's way, with a traction engine; and wherever you look you perceive a church steeple. It is all very harmless, except the traction engine, but it is not animated or enlivening. You will not wonder that I soon came to the end of my French novels. The French novels have enabled me to discover that my anger is very easily ruffled. In fact, she is that touchy thing—a saint. I had no idea that she was a saint when I saw her drinking her cup of tea in that garden on the Thames. True, she had her lovely little serene, holy, *noli me tangere* air, but I thought that would pass; it does not pass. And when I wanted her to laugh with me at 'Autour du Marriage,' she blushed up to the eyes and was offended. What am I to do? I am not worse than other men, but I like to amuse myself. I can not go through life singing a *miserere*. I am afraid we shall quarrel. You think that very wholesome. But there are quarrels and quarrels. Some clear the air like thunder-storms. Ours are little irritating differences which end in her bursting into tears, and in myself looking ridiculous and feeling a brute. She has cried quite a number of times in the last fortnight. I dare say if she went into a rage, as you justly say Nicoletta would do, and you might have added you have done, it would rouse me, and I should be ready to strike her, and should end in covering her with kisses. But she only turns her eyes on me like a dying fawn, bursts into tears and goes out of the room. Then she comes in again—to dinner, perhaps, or to that odd ceremony, five o'clock tea—with her little sad, stiff, reproachful air as of a martyr; answers meekly, and makes me again feel a brute. The English sulk a long time, I think. We are at daggers drawn one moment, but then we kiss and forget the next. We are more passionate, but we are more amiable. I want to get away to go to Paris, Homburg, Trouville, anywhere; but I dare not propose it. I only drop adroit hints. If I should die of *ennui*, and be buried under the wet moss forever, weep for me."

From the Princess di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to Lady Gwendolen Chichester, St. Petersburg.

"Coombe is quite too lovely now. It does rain sometimes, certainly, but between the showers it is so delicious. I asked Piero to

come out and hear the nightingale; there really is one in the home wood, and he laughed at the idea. He said 'we have hundreds of nightingales shouting all day and all night at Lanciano. We don't think about them, we eat them in *pasta;* they are very good.' Fancy eating a nightingale! You might as well eat Romeo and Juliet. Piero has got a number of French books from London, and he lies about on the couches and reads them. He wants me to listen to naughty bits of fun out of them; but I will not, and then he calls me a prude, and gets angry. I don't see why he shouldn't laugh as much as he likes himself, without telling me why he laughed. I dislike that sort of thing. I am horribly afraid I shall care for nothing but him all my life, while he—he yawned yesterday. Papa said to me, before we were married, 'My dear little girl, San Zenone put on such a lot of steam at first, he'll be obliged to ease his pace after a bit. Don't be vexed if you find the thing cooling.' Now, papa speaks so oddly; always that sort of floundering, bald metaphor, you remember it; but I knew what he meant. Nobody could go on being such a lover as Piero was. Ah, dear, it is in the past already! No, I don't quite mean that. He is Romeo still very often, and he sings me the divinest love songs, lying at my feet on cushions in the moonlight. But it is not quite the same thing as it was at first. He found fault with one of my gowns this morning; and said I was *fagotee.* 'Fagotee!' I am terribly frightened lest Coombe has bored him too much. I would come here. I wanted to be utterly out of the world and so did he; and I'm sure there isn't a lover's nest anywhere comparable to Coombe in midsummer. You remember the rose garden and the lime avenues and the chapel ruins by the little lake? When Aunt Carrie offered it to us for this June I was so delighted, but now I am half afraid the choice of it was a mistake, and that he does not know what to do with himself. He is *depayse.* I cried a little yesterday. It was too silly, but I couldn't help it. He laughed at me, but he got a little angry. '*Enfin que veux tu?*' he said, impatiently; '*je suis a toi, bien a toi beaucoup trop a toi!*' He seemed to me to regret being mine. I told him so. He was more angry. It was, I suppose, what you would call a scene. In five minutes he was penitent, and caressed me as only he can do; and the sun came out and we went in the woods and heard the nightingale, but the remembrance of it alarms me. If he can say as much as this in a month, what will he not say in a year. I do not think I am silly. I had two London seasons, and all those country houses show one the world. I know people when they are married are always glad to get away from one

another—they are always flirting with other people. But I should be miserable if I thought it would ever be like that with Piero and me. I worship his very shadow, and he does—or he did—worship mine. Why should that change? Why should it not go on for ever, as it does in poems? If it can't, why doesn't one die?"

From the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, St. Petersburg, to the Princess di San Zenone, Coombe, Bysset.

"What a goose you are, you dearest Gladys! You were always like that. To all you have said I can only reply *connu*. When girls are romantic, and you always were, though it was quite gone out ages before our time, they always expect husbands to remain lovers. Now, my pet, you might just as well expect hay to remain grass. Papa was quite right. When there is a lot of steam on it must go off by degrees. I am afraid, too, you have begun with the passion, and the rapture, and the mutual adoration, and all the rest of it, which is quite, quite gone out. People don't feel in that sort of way nowadays. Nobody cares much; a sort of good-humored liking is the utmost one sees. But you were always such a goose! And now you must marry an Italian, and expect it to be balconies and guitars and moonlight for ever and ever. I think it quite natural he should want to get to Paris. You should never have taken him to Coombe. I do remember the rose gardens and the lime avenues and the ruins; and I remember being sent down there when I had too strong a flirtation with Philip Rous, who was in F. O., and had nothing a year—you were a baby then—and I remember that I was bored to the very brink of suicide; that I have detested the smell of a lime-tree ever since. I can sympathize with the prince, if he longs to get away. There can't be anything for him to do all day long, except smoke. The photo of him is wonderfully handsome; but can you live all your life, my dear, on a profile?"

From the Princess di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, St. Petersburg.

"Because almost all Englishmen have snub noses, Englishwomen always think there is something immoral and delusive about a good profile. At all events, you will admit that the latter is the more agreeable object of contemplation. It still rains, rains dreadfully. The meadows are soaked, and they can't get the hay in, and we

can't get out of the house. Piero does smoke, and he does yawn. He has been looking in the library for a French novel, but there is nothing except Mrs. Craven's goody-goody books, and a boys' tale by Jules Verne. I am afraid you and mamma are right. Coombe, in a wet June, is not the place for a Roman, who knows his Paris by heart, and doesn't like the country anywhere. We seem to do nothing but eat. I put on an ulster and high boots, and I don't mind the rain a bit; but he screams when he sees me in an ulster. 'You have no more figure in that thing than if you were a bologna sausage,' he says to me, and certainly ulsters are very ugly. But I had a delicious fortnight with the duchess in a driving tour in Westmeath. We only took our ulsters with us, and it poured all the time, and we stayed in bed in the little inns while our things dried, and it was immense fun; the duke drove us. But Piero would not like that sort of thing. He is like a cat about rain. He likes to shut the house up early, and have the gas lit, and forget that it is all slop and mist outside. He declares that we have made a mistake in the calendar, and that it is November, not June. I change my gowns three times a day, just as if there were a large house-party, but I feel I look awfully monotonous to him. I am afraid I never was amusing. I always envy those women who are all chic and 'go;' who can make men laugh so at rubbish. They seem to carry about with them a sort of exhilarating ether. I don't think they are the best sort of women, but they do so amuse the men. I would give twenty years of my life if I could amuse Piero. He adores me, but that is another thing. That does not prevent him shaking the barometer and yawning. He seems happiest when he is talking Italian with his servant, Toniello. Toniello is allowed to play billiards with him sometimes. He is a very gay, merry, saucy, beautiful-eyed Roman. He has made all the maids in the house and all the farmers' daughters round Coombe in love with him, and I told you how he had scandalized one of the best tenants, Mr. John Best. The Bedford rustics all vow vengeance against him, but he twangs his mandolin and sings away at the top of his voice and doesn't care a straw that the butler loathes him, the house-steward abhors him, the grooms would horsewhip him if they dared, and the young farmers audibly threaten to duck him in the pond. Toniello is very fond of his master, but he does not extend his allegiance to me. Do you remember Mrs. Stevens, Aunt Caroline's model housekeeper? You should see her face when she chances to hear Piero talking and laughing with Toniello. I think she believes that the end of the world is come. Piero calls Toniello *figlio mio* and *caro mio*, just as

if they were cousins or brothers. It appears this is the Italian way. They are very proud in their own fashion, but it isn't our fashion. However, I am glad the man is there when I hear the click of the billiard balls, and the splash of the raindrops on the window-panes. We have been here just three weeks. '*Dio*, it seems three years,' Piero said, when I reminded him of it this morning. For me, I don't know whether it is like a single day's dream or a whole eternity. You know what I mean. But I wish—I wish—it seemed either the day's dream or the eternity of paradise to him! I dare say it is all my fault in coming to these quiet, bay-windowed Queen Anne rooms, and the old-fashioned servants and the dreary lookout over the soaking hay fields. But the sun does come out sometimes, and then the wet roses smell so sweet and the wet lime blossoms glisten in the light and the larks sing overhead, and the woods are so green and so fresh. Still, I don't think he likes it, even then; it is all too moist, too windy, too dim for him. When I put a rose in his buttonhole this morning it shook the drops over him and he said, '*Mais quel pays!—meme une fleur c'est une douche d'eau froide!*' Last month, if I had put a dandelion in his coat, he would have sworn it had the odor of the magnolia and the beauty of the orchid. It is just twenty-two days since we came here, and the first four or five days he never cared whether it rained or not; he only cared to lie at my feet, really, literally. We were all in all to each other, just like Cupid and Psyche. And now—he will play billiards with Toniello to pass the time and he is longing for his *petits théâtres*. Is it my fault? I torment myself with a thousand self-accusations. Is it possible I can have been tiresome, dull, overexacting? Is it possible he can be disappointed in me?"

From the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, St. Petersburg, to the Princess di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset.

"No, it isn't your fault, you dear little donkey; it is only the natural sequence of things. Men are always like that when the woman loves them; when she don't, they behave much better. My dear, this is just what is so annoying about love; the man's is always going slower and slower toward a dead stop, as the woman's is 'coaling' and getting steam up. I borrow papa's admirably accurate metaphor; nothing can be truer. It is a great pity, but I suppose the fault is Nature's. *Entre nous*, I don't think Nature ever contemplated marriage, any more than she did crinolettes, pearl powder or the electric light. There is no doubt

that Nature intended to adjust the thing on the butterfly and buttercup system; on the *je reste, tu t'en vas* principle. And nothing would be easier or nicer, only there are children and poverty. So the butterfly has to be pinned down by the buttercup. That is why the communists and the anarchists always abolish property and marriage together. The one is evolved out of the other, just as the dear scientists say the horse was evolved out of a bird, which I never can see makes the matter any easier of comprehension; but still—what was I saying? Oh, I meant to say this: you are only lamenting, as a special defalcation and disloyalty in San Zenone, what is merely his unconscious and involuntary and perfectly natural alteration from a lover into a husband. The butterfly is beginning to feel the pin which has been run through him to stick him down. It is not your fault, my sweet little girl: it is the fault, if at all, of the world, which has decreed that the butterfly, to flirt legitimately with the buttercup, must suffer the corking-pin. Now, take my advice; the pin is in; don't worry if he writhe on it a little bit; it is only what the beloved scientists again call automatic action. And do try and beat into your little head the fact that a man may love you very dearly, and yet yawn a little for the *petits théâtres* in the silent recesses of his manly breast. Of course, I knew this sort of rough awakening from delightful dreams is harder for you than it is for most, because you began at such tremendous altitudes. You had your Ruy Blas and Petrarca, and the mandolin and the moonlight, had the love-filters all mixed up in an intoxicating draught. You have naturally a great deal more disillusion to go through than if you had married a country squire, or a Scotch laird, who would never have suggested any romantic delights. One can not go near heaven without coming down with a crash, like the poor men in the balloons. You have been up in your balloon, and you are now coming down. Ah, my dear, everything depends on how you come down! You will think me a monster for saying so, but it will rest so much in your own hands. You won't believe it, but it will. If you come down with tact and good-humor, it will all be right afterward, but if you show temper, as men say of their horses, why, then the balloon will lie prone, a torn, empty, useless bag that will never again get off the ground. To speak plainly, dear, if you will receive with resignation and sweetness the unpleasant discovery that San Zenone is mortal, you won't be unhappy, and you will soon get used to it; but if you perpetually fret about it you won't alter him, and you will both be miserable, or if not miserable, you will do something worse—you will each find your amusement in somebody

else. I know you so well, my poor, pretty Gladys; you want such an immense quantity of sympathy and affection; but you won't get it, my dear child. I quite understand that the prince looks like a picture, and he has made life an erotic poem for you for a month, and the inevitable reaction which follows seems dull as ditch-water —you would even say as cruel as the grave. But it is nothing new. Do try and get that well into your mind. Try, too, and be as light-hearted as you can. Men hate an unamusable woman. Make believe to laugh at the *petits théâtres*, if you can't really do it; if you don't, dear, he will go to somebody else who will. Why do those *demi monde* women get such preference over us? Only because they don't bore their men. A man would sooner we flung a champagne glass at his head than cried for five minutes. We can't fling champagne glasses; the prejudices of our education are against it. It is an immense loss to us; we must make up for it as much as we can by being as agreeable as we know how to be. We shall always be a dozen lengths behind those others. By the way, you said in one of your earliest notes that you wondered why our mother ever married. I am not sufficiently *au courant* with prehistoric times to be able to tell you why, but I can see what she has done since she did marry. She has always effaced herself in the very wisest and most prudent manner. She has never begrudged papa his Norway fishing or his August yachting, though she knew he could ill afford them. She has never bored him with herself or about us. She has constantly urged him to go away and enjoy himself, and when he is down with her in the country, she always takes care that all the women he admires and all the men who best amuse him shall be invited in relays, to prevent his being dull or feeling teased for a moment. I am quite sure she has never cared the least about her own wishes, but has only studied his. This is what I call being a clever woman and a good woman. But I fear such women are as rare as blue roses. Try and be like her, my dear. She was quite as young as you are now when she married. But, unfortunately, in truth, you are a terrible little egotist. You want to shut up this poor young man all alone with you in a kind of attitude of perpetual adoration—of yourself. This is what women call affection; you are not alone in your ideas. Some men submit to this sort of demand, and go about forever held tight in a leash, like unslipped pointers The majority—well, the majority bolt. And I am sure I should if I were one of them. I do not think you could complain if your beautiful Romeo did. I can see you so exactly with your pretty little grave face, and your eyes that have such a

fatal aptitude for tears: and your solemn little views about matrimony and its responsibilities, making yourself quite odious to this mirthful Apollo of yours, and innocently believing all the while that you are pleasing heaven and saving your own dignity by being so remarkably unpleasant! Are you very angry with me?. I am afraid so. Myself, I would much sooner have an unfaithful man than a dull one; the one may be bored by you, but the other bores you, which is immeasurably worse."

From the Princess di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, St. Petersburg.

"DEAR GWEN,—How can you possibly tell what mamma did when she was young? I dare say she fretted dreadfully. Now, of course, she has got used to it—like all other miserable women. If people marry only to long to be with other people, what is the use of being married at all? I said so to Piero, and he answered very insolently: *'Il n'y a point! Si on le saviat.'* He sent for some more dreadful French books, Gyp's and Richepins and Gui de Maupassant's, and he lies about reading them all day long, when he isn't asleep: he is very often asleep in the daytime. He apologizes when he is found out, but he yawns as he does so. You say I should amuse him, but I can't amuse him. He doesn't care for any English news, and he is beginning to get irritable because I cannot talk to him in Italian, and he declares my French detestable, and there is always something dreadful happening. There has been such a terrible scene in the village. Four of the Coombe Bysset men, two blacksmiths, a carpenter and a laborer, have ducked Toniello in the village pond on account of his attention to their womenkind; and Toniello, when he staggered out of the weeds and the slime, drew his knife on them, and stabbed two very badly. Of course, he has been taken up by the constables, and the men he hurt moved to the county hospital. The magistrates are furious and scandalized; and Piero! Piero has nobody to play billards with him. When the magistrates interrogated him about Toniello, as of course they were obliged to do, he got into a dreadful passion because one of them said that it was just like a cowardly Italian to carry a knife and make use of it. Piero absolutely hissed at the solemn old gentleman who mumbled this. 'And your people,' he cried, 'are they so very courageous? Is it better to beat a man into a jelly, or kick a woman with nailed boots, as your English mob

does? Where is there anything cowardly? He was one against four. In my country there is not a night that goes without a *rissa* of that sort, but nobody takes any notice. The jealous persons are left to fight it out as best they may; after all, it is the women's fault.' And then he said some things that really I can not repeat, and it was a mercy that, as he spoke in the most rapid and furious French, the old gentleman did not, I think, understand a syllable. But they saw he was in a passion, and that scandalized them, because, you know, English people always think that you should keep your bad temper for your own people at home. Meantime, of course, Toniello is in prison, and I am afraid they won't let us take him out on bail, because he has hurt one of the blacksmiths dreadfully. Aunt Carry's solicitors are doing what they can for him, to please me; but I can see they consider it all *peines perdues* for a rogue who ought to be hanged. 'And to think,' cries Toniello, 'that in my own country I should have all the *populo* with me. The very carbineers themselves would have been with me! *Accidente a tutti quei goulli*, which means, may apoplexy seize these fools. 'They were only the women's husbands,' he adds with scorn; 'they are well worth making a fuss about, certainly!' Then Piero consoles him, and gives him cigarettes, and is obliged to leave him sobbing and tearing his hair, and lying face downward on his bed of sacking. I thought Piero would not leave the poor fellow alone in prison, and so I supposed he would give up all idea of going from here, and so I began to say to myself '*a quelque chose malheur est bon.*' But to-day at luncheon Piero said, '*Sai carina!*' It was bad enough with Toniello, but without him, I tell you frankly I can not stand any more of it. With Toniello one could laugh and forget a little. But now—*anima mia*, if you do not wish me to kill somebody, and be lodged beside Toniello by your worthy lawgivers, you must really let me go to Trouville.' 'Alone!' I said; and I believe it is what he did mean, only the horror in my voice frightened him from confessing it. He sighed and got up. 'I suppose I shall never be alone any more,' he said, impatiently. 'If only men knew what they do when they marry—*on ne nous prendrait jamais.* No—no. Of course, I meant that you must consent to come away with me somewhere out of this intolerable place, which is made up of fog and green leaves. Let us go to Paris to begin with; there is not a soul there, and the theaters are *en relache*, but it is always delightful, and then in a week or so we will go down to Trouville; all the world is there.' I couldn't answer him for crying. Perhaps that was best, for I am sure I should have said something wicked,

which might have divided us forever. And then what would people have thought?"

From the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, St. Petersburg, to the Princess di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset.

"My poor little dear, are you already beginning to be miserable about what people will think? Then, indeed, your days of joy are numbered. If I were to write to you fifty times I could only repeat what I have already written. You are not wise, and you are doing everything you ought not to do. Of two people who are married, there is always one who has the delusion that he or she is necessary and delightful to the life of the other. The other generally thinks just the contrary. The result is not peace. This gay, charming, handsome son of Rome has become your entire world, but don't suppose for a moment, my child, that you will ever be his. It is not in reason, not in Nature that you should be. If you have the intelligence, the tact and the forbearance required, you may become his friend and counselor, but I fear you never will have these. You fret, you weep, and you understand nothing of the masculine temperament. 'I see snakes,' as the Americans observe; and you will not have either the coolness or the wisdom required to scotch a snake, much less to kill it. Once for all, my poor pet, go cheerfully to Paris, Trouville and all the pleasure places in the world. Affect enjoyment if you feel it not; and try to remember, beyond everything, that affection is not to be retained or revived by either coercion or lamentation. Once dead, it is not to be awakened by all the 'crooning' of its mourner. It is a corpse, for ever and aye. Myself, I fail to see how you could expect a young Italian, who has all the habits of the great world and the memories of his *vie de garçon*, to be cheerful or contented in a wet June in an isolated English country house, with nobody to look at but yourself. Believe me, my dear child, it is the inordinate vanity of a woman which makes her imagine that she can be sufficient for her husband. Nothing but vanity. The cleverer a woman is, the more fully she recognizes her own insufficiency for the amusement of a man, and the more carefully (if she be wise) does she take care that this deficiency in her shall never be forced upon his observation. Now, if you shut a man up with you in a country house, with the rain raining every day, as in Longfellow's poem, you do force it upon him most conspicuously. If you were not his wife, I dare say he would not tire of you, and he might even prefer a gray

sky to a blue one. But as his wife!—oh, my dear, why, why don't you try and understand what a terrible penalty weight you carry in the race? Write and tell me all about it. I shall be anxious. I am so afraid, my sweet little sister, that you think love is all moonlight and kisses, and forget that there are clouds in the sky and quarrels on earth. May Heaven save you from both. P. S.—Do remember that this same love requires just as delicate handling as a cobweb does. If a rough touch break the cobweb, all the artists in the world can't mend it. There is a truth for you. If you prevent his going to Paris now, he will go in six months' time, and perhaps he will go without you. Perhaps he would be happier at Lanciano than at Coombe, and he would have all his own people, but he would want the *petits théâtres* all the same. You are not wise, my poor pet; you should make him feel you are one with him in his pleasures, not that you and his pleasures are enemies. But it is no use to instill wisdom into you; you are very young and very much in love. You look on all the natural distractions which he inclines to as so many rivals. So they may be, but we don't beat our rivals in abusing them. The really wise way is to tacitly show them that we can be more attractive than they; if we can not be so, we may sulk or sigh as we will, we will be vanquished by them. You will think me very preachy-preachy, and, perhaps, you will throw me in the fire unread; but I may say just this much more. Dear, you are in love with Love, but beneath Love there is a real man, and real men are far from ideal creatures. Now, it is the real man that you want to consider, to humor, to study. If the real man be pleased, Love will take care of himself; whereas, if you bore the real man, Love will fly away. If you had been wise, my poor pet, I repeat, you would have found nothing so delightful as Judic and Chaumont, and you would have declared that the asphalt excelled all the Alps in the world. He does not love you the less because he wants to be *dans le mouvement*, to hear what other men are saying, and to smoke his cigar amongst his fellow-creatures."

From the Duchessa dell' Aquila Fulva, Hotel des Roches Noires Trouville, France, to the Principe di Zenone, Coombe Bysset, Luton, Beds., England.

"Poor flower in your box of wet moss, what has become of you? Are you dead; and dried in your wife's *hortus siccus?* She would be quite sure of you then, and I dare say much happier than if you were set forth in anybody else's bouquet. I try in vain to imagine

you in that 'perfectly proper' *milieu* (is not that correct English, 'perfectly proper?'). Will you be dreadfully changed when one sees you again? There is a French proverb which says that the 'years of joy count double.' The days of *ennui* certainly count for years, and give us gray hairs before we are five and-twenty. But you know I can not pity you. You would marry an English girl because she looked pretty sipping her tea. I told you beforehand that you would be miserable with her, once shut up in the country. The episode of Toniello is enchanting. What people! to put him in prison for a little bit of *chiasso* like that! You should never have taken his bright eyes and his mandolin to that doleful and damp land of precisions. What will they do with him? And what can you do without him? The weather here is admirable. There are numbers of people one knows. It is really very amusing. I go and dance every night, and then we play—usually 'bac' or roulette. Everybody is very merry. We all talk often of you, and say the *De Profundis* over you, my door Piero. Why did your cruel destiny make you see a Sainte Nitouche drinking tea under a lime-tree! I suppose Sainte Nitouche would not permit it; else why not exchange the humid greenness of your matrimonial prison for the Rue des Planches and the Casino?"

From the Prince di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to the Duchessa di Aquila Fulva, Trouville.

"CARISSIMA MIA,—I have set light to the fuse! I have frankly declared that if I do not go out of this watery atmosphere and verdant Bastile, I shall perish of sheer inanition and exhaustion. The effect of the declaration was for the moment such that I hoped, actually hoped, that she was going to get into a passion. It would have been so refreshing! After twenty-six days of dumb acquiescence and silent tears, it would have been positively delightful to have had a storm. But, no! for an instant she looked at me with unspeakable reproach; the next her dove's eyes filled, she sighed, she left the room. Do they not say that feather beds offer an admirable defense against bullets? I feel like the bullet which has been fired into the feather bed. The feather bed is victorious. I see the Rue des Planches through the perspectives of the watery atmosphere; the Casino seems to smile at me from the end of the interminable lime-tree avenue, which is one of the chief beauties of this house, but, alas, they are both as far off as if Trouville was in the moon.

What could they do to me if I came alone? Do you know what they could do? I have not the remotest idea, but I imagine something frightful. They shut up their public-houses by force, and their dancing places. Perhaps they would shut up me. In England they have a great belief in creating virtue by act of Parliament. In myself this enforced virtue creates such a revolt that I shall *tirer sur le mors*, and fly before very long. The admired excellence of this beautiful estate is that it lies in a ring-fence. I feel that I shall take a leap over that ring-fence. Do not mistake me, *cara mia Teresina*, I am exceedingly fond of my wife. I think her quite lovely, simple, saintly and truly womanlike. She is exquisitely pretty and entirely without vanity; and I am certain she is immeasurably my superior morally, and possibly mentally, too. But there is always such a long and melancholy 'but' attached to marriage—she does not amuse me in the least. She is always the same. She is shocked at nearly everything that is natural or diverting. She thinks me unmanly because I dislike rain. She buttons about her a hideous, straight, water-proof garment, and walks out in a deluge. She blushes if I try to make her laugh at Figaro, and she goes out of the room when I mention Trouville. What am I to do with a woman like this? It is an admirable type, no doubt. Possibly, if she had not shut me up in a country house in a wet June, with the thermometer at 10 R. and the barometer fixedly at the word Rainy, I might have been always charmed with this St. Dorothea-like attitude, and never have found out the monotony of it. But as it is—I yawn till I dislocate my neck. She thinks me a heathen already. I am convinced that very soon she will think me a brute. And I am neither. I only want to get out, like the bird in the cage. It is a worn simile, but it is such a true one."

From the Duchessa di Aquila Fulva, Roches Noires, Trouville, to Prince di San Zenone, Coombe, Bysset.

"PIERO MIO,—In marriage the male bird is always wanting to get out, when the female bird does not want him to get out; also she is forever tightening the wires over his head, and declaring that nothing can be more delightful than the perch which she sits on herself. Come to us here. There are any quantities of birds here who ought to be in their cages, but are not, and manage to enjoy themselves *quand même*. If only you had married Nicoletta! She might have torn your hair occasionally, but she would never have

bored you. There is only one supreme art necessary for a woman; it is to thoroughly understand that she must never be a *seccatura*. A woman may be beautified, admirable, a paragon of virtue, a marvel of intellect, but if she be a *seccatura*—*addio!* Whereas, she may be plain, small, nothing to look at in any way, and a very monster of sins, big and little, but if she knew how to amuse your dull sex, she is mistress of you all. It is evident that this great art is not studied at Coombe Bysset."

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From the Princess di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to the Lady Gwendolen, Chichester, St. Petersburg.

"OH, MY DEAR GWEN,—It is too dreadful, and I am utterly wretched. I can not tell you what I feel. He is quite determined to go to Trouville by Paris at once, and just now it is such exquisite weather. It has only rained three times this week, and the whole place is literally a bower of roses of every kind. He has been very restless the last few days, and at last yesterday, after dinner, he said straight out that he had had enough of Coombe, and he thought we might be seen at Homburg or Trouville next week. And he pretended to want every kind of thing that is to be bought at Paris and nowhere else. Paris—when we have been together just twenty-nine days to-day! Paris—I don't know why, but I feel as if it would be the end of everything. Paris—we shall dine at restaurants; we shall stay at the Windsor; we shall go to theaters; he will be at his club, he belongs to the Petit Cercle and the Mirilton; we shall be just like anybody else; just like all the million and one married people who are always in a crowd. To take one's newborn happiness to a hotel! It is as profane as it would be to say your prayers on the top of a drag. To me it is quite horrible. And it will be put in 'Galignani' directly, of course, that the 'Prince and Princess San Zenone have arrived at the Hotel Bristol.' And then all the pretty women who tried to flirt with him before will laugh, and say: 'There, you see, she has bored him already!' Everybody will say so, for they all know I wished to spend the whole summer at Coombe. If he would only go to his own country I would not say a word. I am really longing to see his people, and his palaces, and the wonderful gardens with their statues and their ilex woods, and the temples that are as old as the days of Augustus, and the fireflies and the magnolia groves, and the peasants who are always singing. But he won't go there. He says it is a *secca-*

tura. Everything is a *seccatura.* He only likes places where he can meet all the world. 'Paris will be a solitude too, never fear,' he said very petulantly; for there will be all the *petit théâtres* and the open air concerts, and we can dine in the Bois and down the river, and we can run to Trouville. It will be better than rain, rain, rain; and nothing to look at except your amiable aunt's big horses and big trees. I adore horses, and trees are not bad if they are planted away from the house, but viewed as eternal companions, one may have too much of them.' And I am his eternal companion, but it seems already I don't count. I have not said anything. I know one oughtn't. But Piero saw how it vexed me, and it made him cross. '*Cara mia,*' he said, 'why did you not tell me before we married that you intended me to be buried in a box under wet leaves like a rose that is being sent to the market? I should have known what to expect, and I do not like wet leaves.' I could not help reminding him that he had been ever, ever so anxious to come to Coombe. Then he laughed, but he was very cross, too. 'Could I tell, *anima mia,*' he cried, 'that Coombe was situated in a succession of lagoons, contains not one single French novel, is fifteen miles asunder from its own railway station, and is blessed with a population of day-laborers! What man have I seen since I have been here except your parish priest, who mumbles, wears spectacles, and tries to give me a tract against the Holy Father? In this country you do not know what it is to be warm. You do not know what sunshine is like. You take an umbrella when go you into the garden. You put on a water-proof to go and hear one little shivering nightingale sing in a wet elder bush. I tell you I am tired of your country, absolutely tired. You are an angel. No doubt you are an angel: but you can not console me for the intolerable emptiness of this intolerable life, where there is nothing on earth to do but to eat, drink and sleep, and drive in a dog-cart.' All this he said in one breath, in a flash of forked lightning, as it were. Now that I write it down, it does not seem so very dreadful; but as he, with the most fiery scorn, the most contemptuous passion, said it, I assure you it was terrible. It revealed, just as the flash of lightning would show a gravel pit, how fearfully bored he has been all the time I thought he was happy!"

From Lady Gwendolen Chichester, St. Petersburg, to the Princess di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset.

"Men are very easily bored, my dear, if they have any brains; it is only the dull ones who are not."

From the Princess di San Zenone to the Lady Gwendolen Chichester.

"If I believed what your cynical letter says, I should leave him to-morrow. I would never live through a succession of delusions and of insults."

From the Lady Gwendolen Chichester to the Princess di San Zenone.

"Where are your principles? Where are your duties? My dear little girl, you have married him as he is. Marriages wouldn't last two days if, just because the man yawned, the woman ran away. Men always yawn. Hitherto, all San Zenone's faults appear to consist in the very pardonable fact that, being an Italian, he is not alive to the charms of bucolic England in rainy weather, and that, being a young man, he wants to see his Paris again. Neither of these seem to me irreparable crimes. Go to Paris and try to enjoy yourself. After all, if his profile be so beautiful you ought to be sufficiently happy in gazing at it from the back of a baignoir. I grant that it is not the highest amatory ideal—to rush about the boulevards in a *daument*, and eat delicious little dinners in the *cafés*, and laugh at Judic or Chaumont afterward; but *l'amour peut se nicher* anywhere. And love won't be any the worse for having his digestion studied by good cooks, and his possible *ennui* exorcised by good players. You see for yourself that the great passion yawns after a time. Turn back to what you call my cynical letter, and read my remarks upon Nature. By the way, I entirely deny that they are cynical. On the contrary, I inculcate on you patience, sweetness of temper, and adaptibility to circumstances; three most amiable qualities. If I were a cynic, I should say to you that Marriage is a Mistake, and two capital letters could hardly emphasize this melancholy truth sufficiently. But as there are men and women, and, as I before observed, property, in the world, nothing better for the consolidation of rents and freeholds has, as yet, been discovered. I dare say Krapotkine in his prison could devise something better, but they are afraid of him; so we all

jog on in the old routine, vaguely conscious that we are all blunderers, but indisposed for such a drastic remedy as would alone cure us. Just you remark to any lawyer that marriage is a mistake, as I have said before, and see what answer you will get. He will certainly reply to you that there is no other way of securing the transmission of property safely. I confess that this view of wealth makes me, for one, a most desperate Radical. Only think, if there were no property we should all be frisking about in our happy valleys as free and as merry as little kids. I shouldn't now be obliged to put on all my war paint and beads like a savage, and go out to a dreadful court dinner, four hours long, because George has a "career," and thinks my suffering advances it. Oh, you happy child, to have nothing worse to do than to rattle down the Bois in a *milord* and sup off a *matelote* by the lake with your Romeo!"

From the Princess di San Zenone, Coombe Bysset, to the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, St. Petersburg.

"We are to leave for Paris and Trouville to-morrow. I have yielded—as you and mamma seemed to think it my duty to do. But my life is over. I shall say farewell to all happiness when the gates of Coombe Bysset close upon me. Henceforth we shall be like everybody else. However, you can not reproach me any longer with being selfish; nor can he. There is a great friend of his, the Duchess of Aquila Fulva, at Trouville. She writes to him very often, I know. He never offers to show me her letters. I believe the choice of Trouville is her doing. Write to me at Paris at the Windsor."

From the Lady Gwendolen Chichester, St. Petersburg, to the Princess di San Zenone, Hotel Windsor, Paris.

"My poor child! Has the green-eyed monster already invaded your gentle soul because he doesn't show you his own letters? My dear, no man who was not born a cur would show a woman's letters to his wife. Surely you wish your hero to know the A B C of gentle manners? I am delighted you are going into the world; but if you only go as a 'duty' I am afraid the results won't be sunshiny. 'Duty' is such a very disagreeable thing. It always rolls itself up like a hedgehog, with all its prickles out, turning forever round and round on the axle of its own self-admiration. If you go to Trou-

ville, and wherever else you do go, *en martyr*, my dear, you will give the mischievous duchess, if she be mischievous, a terrible advantage over you at starting. If you mean to be silent, unpleasant and enwrapped in gloomy contemplation of your own merits and wrongs, don't blame him if he spends his time at the Casino with his friend, or somebody worse. I am quite sure you mean to be unselfish, and you fancy you are so, and all the rest of it, quite honestly; but in real truth, as I told you before, you are only an egotist. You would rather keep this unhappy Piero on thorns beside you than see him enjoy himself with other people. Now, I call that shockingly selfish; and if you go in that spirit to Trouville, he will soon begin to wish, my dear child, that he had never had a fancy to come over to a London season. I can see you so exactly!—too dignified to be cross, too offended to be companionable, silent, reproachful, terrible!"

From the Lady Mary Bruton, Roches Noires, Trouville, to Mrs. d'Arcy, British Embassy, Berlin.

"July 15.

"—Amongst the new arrivals here are the San Zenone. You remember me telling you of their marriage some weeks ago. It was quite the marriage of the season. They really were immensely in love with each other, but that stupid month down in the country has done its usual work. In a rainy June, too! Of course any poor Antonio would emerge from his captivity bedraggled, dripping and disenchanted. She is really very pretty—quite lovely, indeed—but she looks fretful and dull. Her handsome husband, on the contrary, is as gay as a lark which has found the door of his cage wide open one morning. There is here a great friend of his, a Duchessa del' Aquila Fulva. She is very gay, too. She is always perfectly dressed, and chattering from morning to night in shrill Italian or voluble French. She is the cynosure of all eyes as she goes to swim in rose-colored *maillot*, with an orange and golden eastern burnose flung about her artistically. She has that wonderful Venetian coloring which can stand a contrast and glow of color which would simply kill any other woman. She is very tall and magnificently made, and yet uncommonly graceful. Last night she was persuaded to dance a *salterello* with San Zenone at the Maison Persane, and it was marvelous. They are both such handsome people, and threw such a wonderful *brio*, as they would call it, into the affair. The poor pretty little princess, looking as fair and dull as a primrose in

a shower, sat looking on dismally—stupid little thing!—as if that would do her any good! A few days ago Lord Hampshire arrived off here in his yacht. He was present at the *salterello*, and as I saw him out in the gardens afterward with the neglected one, sitting beside her in the moonlight, I presume he was offering her sympathy and consolation. He is a heavy young fellow, but exceedingly good-humored and kind-hearted. He would have been in heaven in the wet June at Coombe Bysset—but she refused him, silly little thing! I am quite angry with her; she has had her own way and she won't make the best of that. I met her and her rejected admirer riding together this morning toward Villerville, while the beautiful prince was splashing about in the water with his Venetian friend. I see a great many eventful complications ahead. Well—they will all be the fault of that Rainy June!"

THE END.

THE MAIL-CART ROBBERY.

By MRS. HENRY WOOD.

PART THE FIRST.

An incident savoring strongly of romance occurred many years ago in one of the midland counties of England. It is a true story.

There stood one morning in the post-office of the chief town of Highamshire (as *we* will call it) two gentlemen sorting letters. The London mail had just come in, bringing its multiplicity of business. They were the postmaster of Higham and his son. The former, most deservedly respected by his fellow citizens, and well connected, had held the situation for many years; the latter, a handsome young man, looked forward to holding the situation after him.

"Ready," cried out Mr. Grame, in a loud tone; and the side-door opened, and four men entered, and ranged themselves in front of the counter. They were the town postmen, and each receiving his separate freight, departed for his allotted quarter of the city. It was striking half-past nine as they left the post-office; an hour considered to be good time in those days.

Mr. Grame and his son continued their work; that of making-up the bags for the cross-country towns and villages. Upon one letter, as it came under his observation, Mr. Grame's eye rested rather longer than on the rest.

"Here's Farmer Sterling's letter at last, Walter," he observed to his son.

"Has it come?" cried the young man, in a lively tone, while he suspended for a moment his own employment, and leaned toward his father, to look at the address of the letter in question. "'Mr. Sterling, Hill House Farm, Layton, Highamshire.' Ah! he need not have been so fidgety over it; I told him it would be all right."

"He has never been otherwise than fidgety over this yearly letter."

"Because of the money it contains," rejoined Walter.

At that moment somebody's knuckles came rapping at the glazed window; and Mr. Grame, who stood next it, pushed back the wooden slide from an open pane and looked out. But, first of all, he dropped the letter for Farmer Sterling safely into the Layton bag.

"Is that there letter come yet, sir?" inquired the voice at the window.

"Oh, is it you, Stone? I don't think it is. What was to be the address?"

"Miss Parker, Post-office, till called for."

"Ay, no, it is not arrived. Better luck to-morrow, perhaps."

"It's my belief it won't come at all. The young woman, you know, replied to the advertisement for a housekeeper, which was in the 'Higham Herald' last Saturday week. I tell'd her yesterday that perhaps she'd have no answer. Did you hear of Ned Cook's shop being broke into last night, sir?"

"No," shortly answered the postmaster. "I am busy now, and can't talk."

And the board slid sharply back again, nearly shutting up the end of Mr. Stone's nose with it. "Good-day, gentlemen," said that discomfited applicant, as he moved away.

A little more work in the post-office, and then Mr. Grame called out as before, "Weirford and Layton bags ready!" And a tall, fine young man with an open countenance, looking much more like a gentleman than like the driver of a village mail-cart, came in.

"Not a heavy freight this morning, John," observed Mr. Grame, as he handed over the bags, secured only with string, the careless practice of the Higham post-office in those days, and of other post-offices, also. "Have you had your horse rough-shod?"

"All right and ready," responded John Ledbitter, with a pleasant smile.

"Or I don't know how you would get to Layton; the roads must be dreadful. Take care that you start back in good time, or you may be too late for the evening mail."

"I'll take care," answered the young man. "As to the roads, if anybody can drive over them I can, let them be what they will. Any commands"—dropping his voice as he spoke to the son—"for the Farm, Mr. Walter?"

"Are you going there this morning?"

"If I don't change my mind. Can I carry any message, I say?"

"No," sharply replied Mr. Walter Grame, and John Ledbitter laughed to himself as he went out with the bags.

Locking them into the box of his cart, an open vehicle, and

taking his seat, he drove out of the town toward Layton, as fast as the dangerous roads would allow. It was the month of January, and Jack Frost had come down with all his severity; snow on the fields, icicles on the trees, frozen snow and ice lying in wait to break limbs on the road. But John Ledbitter's horse had been prepared for the state of affairs, and he drove him cautiously.

"It's too bad of me, but I do like to nettle him," he said to himself, as he laid the reins on the dash-board, and began to beat his arms, to bring a little feeling into them. "'*Are you going there?*' cries he so sharply, when I mischievously asked him if he had any commands for the farm. Many a day does not pass over my head but I do go there, Master Walter, and that you'll find out, soon. Now, Saucy Sir! hold up!"

"The idea of *his* making up to her," continued Mr. John Ledbitter, tightening the reins. "She's a mile and a half too good for him. Why is it I never liked the fellow? *She* has nothing to do with the dislike; he always repelled me years before I thought of her. He is a handsome man, an agreeable companion, has plenty of intellect—yes, all that. But, there's a turn in his expression that I don't like, something crafty, not genuine; other people may not see it, but I know it repels me. And look at the fellow's vanity where women are concerned! He thinks that he has only to ask Selina and have her. Not so fast, Mr. Walter Grame; Selina cares more for my little finger than she does for your whole self—as the old song goes:

> "'Despise her not, said Lord Thomas,
> Despise her not unto me,
> For I love thy little finger
> Better than her whole body.'

Gently, Saucy Sir! keep your feet if you please to-day, of all days in the year."

Finding his whole attention must be directed to the care of his horse, John Ledbitter put off his reflections to a more convenient season. At length he reached Layton, a small town about seven miles from Higham, having left the other bag at Weirford on his way. He drove straight to the post-office, unlocked his cart, and delivered the Layton bag to the postmaster, Mr. Marsh.

"A sharp day," remarked the latter.

"Sharp enough," replied John. "I have had some trouble with the horse, I can tell you."

"It's a wonder he kept his feet at all. Sir Geoffrey Adams'

bailiff was coming down yonder hill last night on the bay mare, and down she went, and broke her leg. Had to be shot."

"No!"

"I stepped up and saw her lying there in the road, Mr. Ledbitter; her groans, poor thing, were just like a human creature's. Sir Geoffrey was called out from his dinner, and shot her with his own hand. He was awful with Master Bailiff over it, and told him if he had been human enough to lead her down the hill, it would not have happened. He was cut up too, and didn't offer a word of excuse to Sir Geoffrey. Good-day, if you are off to put up Saucy Sir."

The mail-cart and Saucy Sir being comfortably deposited at their usual quarters, John Ledbitter took a sharp walk of twenty minutes, which brought him to Hill House Farm. Taking off his great-coat and leggings before he entered the sitting-room, he appeared in morning attire usually worn in those days by gentlemen.

"Here's a morning!" he said, as a fair, quiet looking girl rose at his entrance, the farmer's only child. Many would have called Miss Sterling's features plain, but in her gentle voice and truthful earnest eyes lay plenty of attraction.

"What a journey you must have had!" she exclaimed, giving him her hand.

"Ay, indeed. I thought once it would have come to my carrying Saucy Sir. Where's Selina?"

Before Miss Sterling could reply her father entered. "Ah, Master Ledbitter, is it you?" he said. "Well, d'ye think you have brought that letter of mine to-day?"

"I don't know," laughed the young man. "I have brought the bag. I cannot say what letters are in it."

"Well, I can't account for the delay. If that letter's lost, there's fifty pounds gone. And fifty pounds are not picked up in a day, Master Ledbitter."

Some few years before this the sister of Mrs. Sterling, who had married a Mr. Cleeve and settled in London, died, leaving one only daughter. Mr. Cleeve married again, and then the child was consigned to the home and care of Mrs. Sterling, Mr. Cleeve forwarding every Christmas a £50 note to cover her expenses. It was this note that Farmer Sterling was so anxious to receive; and each year, from the moment Christmas-day was turned until the money was actually in hand, he never ceased worrying himself and everybody about him, with conjectures that the note was lost. It had been pointed out to him several times that to have the money conveyed

in a letter was not a very safe mode of transit. But the farmer would answer that it had always come safely hitherto (though with delay), and he had no time, not he, to go driving into Higham to receive it from the bankers there. So that Mr. Sterling continued to expect and receive this important letter and its inclosure every year; a well-known fact to all Layton, and to half Higham. This was the letter noticed by the postmaster that morning, as he sorted it into the Layton bag.

Selina Cleeve, now grown up, and about the age of her cousin, was a tall, well-educated, handsome, dark-eyed girl, full of fun and laughter; she played and sung like the nightingales in Layton Wood (as people were wont to express it), rode her horse with ease and grace, and took everybody's heart by storm. All the bachelor farmers were quarreling for her; and many a fine gentleman from Higham wore out his horse's shoes riding over to Hill House Farm. They might have spared themselves the trouble; the farmers their quarreling, and the gentlemen their steeds, for the young lady's heart was given to John Ledbitter; but, woman-like, she kept this to herself, and evinced no objection to the universal admiration. As to Anne Sterling, no fine gentleman noticed her; her attractive cousin was all in all. The housekeeping and other household management devolved on Anne; who had been as well-educated as her cousin, except in the matter of some accomplishments. Mrs. Sterling was an invalid, and sometimes did not leave her room for days together.

"Shall you be able to come to-night?" said Anne Sterling to Mr. Ledbitter, as her father left the parlor.

"With this weather, Anne?" he returned, half jestingly.

"But the moon will be up. Do try."

"You unreasonable girl! the moon will not dissolve the ice on the roads. What is it you are doing there so industriously?"

"Cutting papers for the candlesticks," rejoined Anne. "This is the last. And now I must hasten into the kitchen. I have a thousand-and-one things to do to-day, and the maids' heads seem turned."

"Can I help you?"

"No," laughed Anne, "you would be a hinderance, I suspect, instead of a help. Selina will be here directly."

She entered the parlor as Anne Sterling left it. A stylish girl, in a rich plaid silk dress, her black hair worn in heavy braids round her head. Selina's private allowance from her father was liberal, and she dressed in accordance with it. Upon her entrance, John

Ledbitter's manner changed to one of deep tenderness. He closed the door, and drew her fondly to him.

"Oh, John!" were her first words, "what unfortunate weather for our party to-night! You will never be able to come."

"My darling! Had I to walk every step of the way, here and back, and could remain but time to snatch one word with you, I should not fail to come."

"But you will have both to come and return in the night! Others can choose the daylight."

"The first dance, remember, Selina, after I do get here. Who comes from Higham? Walter Grame, of course."

"Of course. And his sisters come, and several others: all the young lawyers and doctors in the town, I think. Walter Grame has engaged me for the first and last dances: you will not be here at either. And as many more as I would accord him between, he said."

John Ledbitter laughed, a meaning laugh, and his eye twinkled mischievously. "Selina," he whispered, "I fear his case is desperate. What say you?"

She understood him. And though she did not say it in words, he read the answer in her bent, happy countenance.

Delaying his departure as long as was prudent, and still talking with Miss Cleeve, John Ledbitter at length rose to go. In the kitchen, where he went to don his overalls and rough coat, he met Molly, carrying out a tray of mince pies and small tartlets. Molly had lived in the family for twenty years; and tyrannized in consequence over the other servant, Joan, who had been in it only ten.

"Don't they look first-rate!" cried Molly to the young man, who was coolly helping himself. "But they be nothing, Mr. John; just please step in here." Opening the door of a large room, she proudly disclosed to view the long supper-table, already laid out with its tempting dainties, and decorated with holly and laureltinas. A magnificent twelfth-cake stood in the middle, for it was Twelfth Day. A bright fire of wood and coal blazed away in the grate.

"Grand! Glorious!" exclaimed John. "Why, you must have had half the pastry-cooks in the parish here to prepare all those sweets and jellies!"

"Pastry-cooks! what next?" cried the offended Molly. "Miss Anne and me did 'em all ourselves. You won't find Miss Anne's match in this county, Mr. Ledbitter; nor in any other. My mistress has brought her up right well. She don't play the pianer, it's true; and she don't spend hours over her hair, a setting of it off in out-

landish winds about her head; and she don't dress in silks the first thing in a morning," satirically added Molly, with an allusion to somebody else, which Mr. John perfectly well understood, and laughed at. "But see Miss Anne in illness: who tends a sick body's bed like she?—hear her pleasant voice a-soothing any poor soul what's in trouble—look how she manages this house, and gives counsel to master about the farm out-doors! No, Mr. John: you young gentlemen like to please your eye, but give me one who has got qualities inside of 'em that will shine out when hair's gray and pianers is rusty."

John Ledbitter turned away laughing. He ran against the farmer in the kitchen.

"Are you coming to their fine doings to-night, Mr. Ledbitter?"

"If I can get here."

"Bless the foolish women, I say; putting things about, like this, for a night's pleasure! I don't know our house upstairs, Mr. John; I don't, I assure you. They have made the big best bedroom into the dancing-room, and covered the walls with green leaves and sconces for candles, and chalked the floor. *I* won't be candle-snuffer."

"There won't be no snuffing wanted, master," interposed Molly, tartly. "The candles is wax."

"Wax! I said I'd have no wax candles in the house again," retorted the farmer. "The last time we had one of these affairs, I got my best blue coat covered with its droppings."

"Never you mind the droppings, master," cried Molly, "the room will look beautiful."

"It had need to," rejoined the farmer. "I shall stop in the kitchen and smoke my pipe. Good-day, Mr. John, if you are going."

Mr John had to go, though no doubt his will would have inclined him to stay. In half an hour's time he was driving Saucy Sir back to Higham with the Layton and Weirford letter bags for the evening mail, which was made up at Higham in the afternoon.

A merry scene that evening at the Hill House Farm! It was the custom in the neighborhood for the more wealthy farmers to hold annually one of these entertainments, which were distinguished by great profusion of dainties, a hearty welcome, and thorough enjoyment. Dancing was kept up till daylight, then came breakfast, and then the guests dispersed. At Mr. Sterling's the party had been omitted for the last two years, in consequence of Mrs. Sterling's precarious state of health; now, as she was somewhat better, it was

renewed again. Mr. Sterling was highly regarded by all. In spite of his rustic mode of speech, he was a superior man.

The ball began with a country dance, always the first dance at these meetings, the Vicar of Layton opening it with Miss Sterling. He had just been presented to the living—a very poor one, by the way—and as yet knew but few of his parishioners personally; he was a young man, and enjoyed the dancing as much as anybody. Next to them stood young Mr. Grame and Selina Cleeve, by far the handsomest couple in the room. Mrs. Sterling sat in an arm-chair by the fire, looking pale and delicate, and by her side sat the new vicar's mother, who had come to Layton to keep house for him. The farmer, as he had threatened, was in the kitchen smoking his pipe, a knot of elderly friends round him doing the same and discussing the state of the markets; but as they were all in full dress (blue frock coats with brass buttons, drab breeches and gaiters, and crimson neckties), their presence in the ball-room might with certainty be looked for by and by.

It was nine o'clock when John Ledbitter entered, in evening dress. Some of the young farmers nudged each other. "He's come to take the shine out of Grame," they whispered. He *did* take the shine out of him; for though young Grame could boast of his good looks and fine figure, he was not half so popular as John Ledbitter. John made his way at once to Mrs. Sterling and spoke with her a little while. He had a pleasant voice, and the accent and address of a cultivated man. Mrs. Cooper, the clergyman's mother, looked after him as he moved away to take his place in the dance. She inquired who he was.

"It is John Ledbitter," said Anne Sterling.

"I thought—dear me, what an extraordinary likeness!" said the Reverend Mr. Cooper, following John with his eyes—"how like that gentleman is to the man who drives the mail-cart! I was noticing the man this morning as he drove into Layton, he appeared to manage his horse so skillfully."

"John Ledbitter is the driver of the mail cart," interposed Walter Grame, drawing himself up, as much as to say that *he* would not stoop to drive a mail-cart.

"I must explain it to you," said Mrs. Sterling, noting the perplexed look of the clergyman. "Old Mr. Ledbitter, John's father, was an architect and land agent in Higham. He had the best business connection in all the county, but his large family kept his profits down, for he reared them expensively and never laid by. So

that when he died they had to shift for themselves. John, the third son, had been brought up an agriculturist, and obtained a post as manager to the estate of a gentleman who lived much abroad. However, the owner sold the property and John lost his situation. This was—how long ago, Anne?"

"About four months, mother."

"Yes; and he had held it about three years. Well, poor John could not immediately get into anything: one promised him something, and another promised him something, but no place seemed to drop in. One day he had come over to see Sir Geoffrey Adams on business, and was standing by the post-office here, when the driver of the mail-cart fell down in a fit, just as he was about to start, and died. There was nobody to drive the cart back to Higham; the afternoon was flying on, and the chances were that the Layton and Weirford letters would lose the mail. So John Ledbitter said he would drive it; and he did so, and got the bags to Higham in time."

"He drove to and fro the next day, and for several days," interposed Walter Grame, who had appeared anxious to speak, "nobody turning up, at the pinch, to whom we chose to intrust the bags. So my father, in a joke, told Ledbitter he had better keep the place; and by Jupiter! if he didn't nail it! The chaffing's not over in Higham yet. Ledbitter can't walk through the streets but he gets in for it. And serve him right: the fellow can expect nothing but chaff if he chooses to degrade himself to the level of a mail-cart driver."

"It is not the pay he does it for, which is trifling, but he argues that idleness is the root of mischief; and this daily occupation keeps him out of both," said Anne, looking at Walter Grame. "He has only taken it as a temporary thing, until something better falls in."

"Ledbitter's one in a thousand," rang out the bluff voice of George Blount, a keen-looking young farmer who had just come up from the card-room; "and there's not one *in* a thousand that would have had the moral courage to defy pride and put his shoulder to the wheel as he has done. Is it not more to his credit to take up with this honest employment and live on the pay while he's waiting for a place to drop from the clouds, than to skulk idly about Higham, and sponge upon his brothers? You dandy town bucks may turn up your noses at him for it, Master Grame, but he has shown himself a downright sensible man. What do you think, sir?" added the speaker, abruptly addressing the clergyman.

"It certainly appears to me that this young Mr. Ledbitter is to be commended," was the reply. "I see no reflection that can be

cast upon him for driving the mail-cart while he waits for something more suitable to his sphere of life." And Anne Sterling's cheeks colored with pleasure as she heard the words. *She* knew the worth of John Ledbitter: perhaps too well.

"He'll get on fast," cried young Blount; "these steady-minded, persevering fellows are safe to rise in the world. In twenty years' time from this, if John Ledbitter has not won himself a home and twenty thousand pounds, it will surprise me."

"I am glad to hear this opinion from you, Mr. Blount, for I think you are capable of judging," observed Mrs. Sterling. "People tell me there is an attachment between John Ledbitter and my niece: so that we—if it is to come to anything—should naturally be interested in his getting on."

"I hope that is quite a mistaken idea, ma'am; and I think it is," fired Walter Grame. "You would never suffer Miss Cleeve to throw herself away on him! There are others—"

Mrs. Sterling made a motion for silence, for the quadrille was over, and the two persons in question were approaching. Selina seated herself by her aunt, and the clergyman entered into conversation with John Ledbitter. Presently the music struck up again.

"It is my turn now, Selina," whispered Walter Grame.

She shook her head in an unconcerned manner, as she toyed with a spray of heliotrope "I am engaged to Mr. Ledbitter."

"That is too bad," retorted Walter Grame, resentfully. "You danced with him the last dance."

"And I have promised him this. How unreasonable you are, Mr. Walter! I have danced with you—let me think—three times already."

Mr Ledbitter turned from the vicar; and without speaking, took Selina's hand, and placed it within his arm. But after they moved away, he leaned down to whisper to her. There was evidently perfect confidence between them.

"I think it is so—that they are attached to each other," remarked Mrs. Cooper, who was watching them. "I hope their prospects will— Oh, goodness! my best black silk gown!"

"It will not hurt, it is only white wine negus. Anne, get a cloth; call Molly," reiterated Mrs. Sterling. For Mr. Walter Grame's refreshment glass and its contents had fallen from his hand on the skirt of Mrs. Cooper's dress as it lay on the floor. Anne said nothing, then or afterward, but her impression was that it was *thrown* down, and in passion. The glass lay in fragments.

Higham great market was being held; the first in the new year. This was only a few days after the party. Amongst other farmers who attended the market was Mr. Sterling. About three o'clock in the afternoon, when his business was over, he went into the post-office. The postmaster and his son were both there, the latter sitting down and reading the newspaper. It was not a busy hour.

"Good-day, Mr. Grame," said the former. "Good-day, Master Walter. I have come about that letter. I do think it must be lost. It never was so late before, that I can recollect."

"What letter?" inquired the postmaster.

"Why, that letter—with the fifty pounds in it. I don't expect any other. You are sure you have not overlooked it?"

"The letter went to Layton days ago," responded Mr. Grame. "Did you not receive it?"

Farmer Sterling's eyes opened wide with perplexity. "Went to Layton days ago!" he repeated. "Where is it, then?"

"If you have not had it, there must be some mismanagement at the Layton office. But such neglect is unusual with Marsh."

"Good mercy! I hope it has not been stolen."

"Which morning was it the letter came, Walter?" cried Mr. Grame, appealing to his son. "Oh—I remember—the day you and the girls were going over to the Hill House Farm. It was the very morning of your wife's ball, Mr. Sterling."

"The morning before, or the morning after?" asked the bewildered farmer.

"The same morning, the 6th of January. When Walter and the two girls went over in the evening."

"Now why didn't you tell me that night that it was come, Mr. Walter?" expostulated the farmer.

"I never thought of the letter," replied the young man. "And if I had thought of it, it would only have been to suppose you had received it. You ought to have had it that afternoon. Had you happened to mention the letter, I could have told you it was come."

"Now look at that!" groaned the farmer. "What with the people, and the eating and drinking, the letter never came into my head at all. Are you quite sure, Mr. Grame, that it was the very letter?"

"I am sure that it was a letter addressed to you, and that it came from London. I made the remark to Walter that your letter was come at last. I have not the slightest doubt it was the letter."

"And you sent it on to Layton?"

"Of course I did."

"But Miss Cleeve called at our post-office yesterday, and Marsh assured her no letter at all had arrived for me."

"I put it into the Layton bag myself, and secured the bag myself, as I always do," returned Mr. Grame, "and the bag was never out of my hands till I delivered it to John Ledbitter. My son was present and saw me put it in."

"I was," said Walter. "When my father exclaimed that Mr. Sterling's letter had come at last, I looked over his shoulder at the address, and I saw him drop it into the bag. They must have overlooked it at the Layton office, sir."

"Old Marsh is so careful a body," debated the farmer.

"He is," assented Mr. Grame. "I don't suppose he ever overlooked a letter in his life. Still such a thing may occur. Go to the office as soon as you return, Mr. Sterling, and tell him from me that the letter went on to Layton."

"It's a jolly vexatious thing to have all this bother. If that £50 note's gone, it will be my loss. Mr. Cleeve objected to send in that way, but I told him I'd run the risk."

And perhaps here lay the secret of Farmer Sterling's anxiety about the safe arrival of these letters—because he knew that the forwarding of the money in this way was in defiance of other people's opinion.

The letter never reached Layton—so old Mr. Marsh, the postmaster there, affirmed, when applied to by the farmer. He remembered perfectly the 6th—why it was not a week ago—the day he told Ledbitter of the accident to the bay mare. No soul but himself touched the letters; nobody but himself was present that day when he opened the bag; and he could swear that the letter for Farmer Sterling was not in it. Mr. Marsh's word was a guarantee in itself: he had held the situation two score years, and was perfectly trustworthy.

So the suspicion fell upon John Ledbitter. Indeed, it may not be too much to say that the guilt was traced home to him. The postmasters of Higham and Layton were known and tried public servants, above all suspicion: the one had put the letter in and secured the bag; the other, when he opened the bag, found the letter gone; and none could *or did* have access to the bag between those times but John Ledbitter. He was dismissed from his situation as driver; but, strange to say, he was not brought to trial. Mr. Sterling declined to prosecute, and no instructions were received on the subject from the government; but John Ledbitter's guilt was as surely brought home to him as it could have been by twelve jurymen. Of course he made protest of his innocence—what man, under a similar

accusation, does not?—but his crime was too palpable. Neither the letter nor its inclosure could be traced. Mr. Cleeve furnished the particulars of the lost note; it was stopped at the London and country banks, handbills describing it were also hung up in the different public-houses; but it was not presented for payment, and was never heard of. "Saucy Sir must have ate it up with his hay," quoth the joking farmers of Layton, one to another: but if they accidentally met the gentleman driver—as they were wont to style John Ledbitter—they regarded him with an aspect very different from a joking one.

John Ledbitter entered Mr. Sterling's house only once after this, and that was to resign Selina Cleeve; to release her from the tacit engagement which existed between them. However, he found there was little necessity for doing so: Selina released herself. He arrived at the Hill House for this purpose at an inopportune moment; for his rival—as he certainly aspired to be—was there before him.

It was Sunday, and when Mr. Sterling and his family got home from church in the morning they found Walter Grame there, who had ridden over from Higham. He received an invitation to remain and partake of their roast griskin and apple-pie. After dinner the farmer took his pipe, his wife lay back in her cushioned arm-chair on the opposite side of the hearth-rug; and while Anne presided over the wine—cowslip, sherry and port—and the filberts and cakes, Walter Grame watched Selina. The conversation turned upon John Ledbitter and his crime.

"I do not see how he could accomplish it," exclaimed Mrs. Sterling, "unless he stopped the mail-cart, and undid the bag in the road."

"Well, what was there to prevent his doing so?" responded her husband.

"But so *deliberate* a theft," repeated Mrs. Sterling. "I can understand—at least, I think I can—the being overcome by a moment of temptation; but a man who could stop his horse in a public road, unlock the box, and untie the letter-bag for the purpose of robbing it, must be one who would stand at scarcely any crime."

"Why, that's just what I told him," cried the farmer, "when he came to me at Higham, wanting to make a declaration of his innocence. 'What's gone with the letter and the money,' I said, 'if you have not got it, Mr. Ledbitter?' And that shut him up; for all he could answer was that he wished he knew what *had* gone with it."

"Ah," broke in Walter Grame, "Ledbitter was a great favorite, but I did not like him. And Higham never noticed until now the

singularity of his having taken to drive a mail cart. It is the opinion of more than one man that the robbery was planned when he secured the place."

"What, to take that same identical letter of mine?" gasped the farmer, laying his pipe on his knee, while a startled look of dismay rose to Anne Sterling's face.

"Not yours in particular, Mr. Sterling. But probably yours happened to be the first letter that presented itself, as bearing an inclosure worth the risk."

"The villain! the double-faced rascal!" uttered the farmer. "That's putting the matter—and himself too—in a new light."

At that moment Molly entered the room with some silver forks and spoons, large and small, and shut the door behind her.

"It's him," she abruptly said, coming up to the table, with a face of terror. "He says he wants to see Miss Selina."

"Who does?" demanded everybody in a breath.

"That dreadful young Ledbitter. He come sneaking in at the kitchen door: not the front way, or you'd have seen him from this winder, but right across the fold-yard. I was took all of a heap, and asked if he'd walk into the parlor—for I was afeard of him. 'No,' says he, 'I'll not go in. Is Miss Cleeve there?'"

"'Yes, she is,' I said, 'and the mistress, and Miss Anne, and the master, and Mr. Walter Grame; and Joan's close at hand, a-skimming the cream.'" For I thought he should know I was not alone in the place, if he had come to steal anything.

"'Molly,' says he, quite humbly, 'go in and ask Miss Cleeve if she will step out and speak a word with me.' So I grabbed up the dinner silver, which, by ill-luck, was lying on the table, and away I came."

Miss Cleeve rose. "Selina!" said Mrs. Sterling, in a reproving tone.

"Aunt," was the rejoinder, "I have also a word to say to him."

"But—my dear! Well, well, just for a minute, if you must. But remember, Selina, we can not again admit Mr. Ledbitter."

"I'd as soon admit the public hangman," declared the farmer.

Scarcely had Selina left the room, when Walter Grame darted after her. He drew her into the best parlor, the door of which, adjacent to their sitting-room, stood open.

"Selina! you will never accord an interview to this man?"

"Yes," she answered. "For the last time."

"What infatuation! Do you believe in him still?"

"That is impossible," she murmured, looking wretchedly ill,

and also wretchedly cross. "But, from the terms we were on, a last interview, a final understanding, is necessary."

"What terms?" he asked, biting his lips. "It can not be that you were engaged to him?"

"Not really engaged. But, had it not been for this, had Ledbitter remained what I thought he was, we should soon have been."

"I am grieved to hear it. It is a lucky escape for you."

"Oh! and it is this which makes me so angry," she bitterly exclaimed. "Why did he monopolize my society, seek to make me like him, when he knew himself to be a base, bad man. I, who might have chosen from all the world! Let me go, Mr. Grame: I shall be more myself, when this last interview is over."

"You can have nothing to say to him, Selina, that may not be said by a friend," he persisted. "Suffer me to see him for you."

"Nonsense," she peevishly answered. "You can not say what I have to say."

She walked, with a hasty step, along the passage The two servants were whispering in the kitchen; but Selina could see no sign of Mr. Ledbitter. Molly pointed with her finger toward the door of the best kitchen, and Selina went into it.

In the middle of the cold, comfortless room, which had no fire in it, stood John Ledbitter. She walked up, and confronted him without speaking, her action and countenance expressing both anger and scorn.

"I see," began Mr. Ledbitter, as he looked at her. "I need not have come from Higham to do my errand this afternoon. It has been done for me."

"I feel it cold in this room," said Selina, glancing round, and striving, pretty successfully, to hide the agitation she really felt under a show of indifference. "Be so good as to tell me your business—that I may return to the fire."

"My business was, partly to see how this false accusation had affected you toward me: I see it too plainly now. Had it been otherwise—"

He stopped: either from emotion, or from a loss to express himself. She stood as still as a statue, and did not help him on.

"Then I have only to say farewell," he resumed, "and to thank you for the many happy hours we have spent together. I came to say something else: but no matter: I see now it would be useless."

"And I beg," she said, raising herself proudly up, "that you will forget those hours you speak of, and which I shall never reflect

on out with a sense of degradation. I blush—I *blush*," she vehemently repeated, "to think that the world may point to me, as I pass through the streets, and say, 'There goes she who was engaged to the man, John Ledbitter!' I pray that I may never see your face again."

"You never shall—by my seeking. Should I ever hold converse with you again willingly, it will be under different auspices."

He quitted the room, stalked through the kitchen, and across the fold-yard into the side-lane, his breast heaving with passionate anger; for she had aroused all the lion within him. Molly and Joan pressed their noses against the kitchen window, and stared after him till he was beyond view; just as they might have stared had some extraordinary foreign animal been on view there, and with quite as much curiosity. Whilst Selina Cleeve, repelling some softer emotions, which seemed inclined to make themselves felt within her, strove to shake John Ledbitter out of her thoughts, and to say to herself, as she returned to the sitting-room, that she had shaken him out of them forever.

The years passed on, nearly two, and the postmaster at Higham became stricken with mortal illness. His disease was a lingering one, lasting over several months, during which time he was confined to his bed, and his son managed the business. One evening just before his death, when Walter was sitting in the room, the old man suddenly addressed him.

"Walter," he said, "I shall soon be gone, and after that they will no doubt make you postmaster. Be steady, punctual, diligent in your daily business, as I trust I have been; be just and merciful in your dealings with your fellow-men, as I have striven to be; be more urgent than I have ever been in serving your Maker, for there the very best of us fall short. You have been a dutiful son to me; a good son; and I pray that your children, in your old age, may be such to you."

Walter moved uneasily in his chair.

"There is only one thing in business matters which causes me regret for the past," resumed Mr. Grame—"that the particulars connected with John Ledbitter's theft should never have come to light. It is a weight on my conscience, having suffered him to assume a post for which his position unfitted him. If he sought it with the intention of doing wrong, my having refused him the situation would have removed the temptation from his way."

"You need not worry yourself over such a crotchet as that, fa-

ther," responded the younger man. "I can not think why he does not leave the country. The thing would be done with then, and pass from men's minds."

"He has his punishment," observed Mr. Grame. "Abandoned by his relations, scorned by his friends, shunned by all good men, and driven to get his living in the fields, as a day laborer! Many a man would sink under it."

"He is a great fool to stay in Highamshire."

"No harsh names, Walter: John Ledbitter did not offend against you. Leave him to the stings of his own conscience."

Walter muttered some reply, and quitted the room. He never liked to be found fault with, in ever so small a degree.

During his absence, Mr. Grame dropped asleep and dreamed a vivid dream. So vivid, that, in the first moments of waking up, he could not be persuaded it was not reality. Its subject must have been suggested by the previous conversation. He dreamed that John Ledbitter was innocent: he did not see or understand how, but in his sleep he felt the most solemn conviction that the fact was so.

"Walter, Walter," he gasped forth, after his confused relation of it, upon the return of his son, "when his innocence is brought to light, do you try and make it up to him. I would, if I were alive."

"When his innocence—what do you mean, sir? You must be asleep still. A dream is but a dream."

"Well—if it comes to light, if it shall be proved that John Ledbitter is an innocent and injured man, do you endeavor to compensate him for the injustice that has been heaped on his head. It is a charge I leave you."

"The old man is wandering," whispered Mr. Walter to the nurse, who was then present.

"Like enough," answered the woman: and it was through her that this dream of the postmaster's got talked of in Higham. "Like enough he is, poor gentleman. Let me give you your composing draught, sir."

A goodly company were wending their way to Layton church, for the fairest flower in Layton parish was that day to be taken out of it. A stranger, who happened to be passing through Layton, stepped into the church with the crowd.

"She is a bonny bride," he observed to old Farmer Blount, who stood in the porch looking in.

"Ay, she is that. Some of the young men about here have been

wild after her; but Walter Grame has distanced them. He is not bad-looking either, for a man."

"Extremely handsome, I think. Who is he?"

"The postmaster of Higham; as his father was before him. The old man died a year ago, and left a goodish bit of property behind him; but it turned out that Master Walter there had anticipated his share; and how the young fellow had kept his creditors quiet was a matter of wonder. But he has sown his wild oats now, they say; and unless he had, Miss Cleeve, I take it, would have seen him further before she'd married him. Her father's dead also, and there's fifteen hundred pounds told down with her this day."

"He is a lucky dog."

"It is sheer luck with him, for he was not her first fancy. Young Ledbitter was; and she was mighty fond of him. But he ran his head into trouble—robbed the Layton mail-bag. Of course, no decent young woman could stand that, though he slipped out of a prosecution. Since then he has been thankful to any farmer who would give him a job of work. He is on my grounds now."

The stranger gave a low whistle, forgetting he was in the porch of a church. "Is it not hazardous, sir, to employ a thief even on your outdoor land?"

"Well, you see, the Ledbitters were so much respected; people can not help feeling for them A likelier, steadier young fellow than John was, one could not expect to meet. I say it must have been a moment of sudden madness, or some other sort of temptation But he has got his treadmill on him: there's not a mad dog in the parish more shunned than he. Hush! Here they come."

Mr. Walter Grame and his bride, no longer Selina Cleeve, walked first; next came Anne Sterling with her father. Several friends followed. The two young ladies were dressed alike, in lavender silk, it was the custom then, the bride wearing orange-blossoms in her white bonnet; Anne, lilies of the valley. They brushed the stranger as they walked through the porch, so that he—to use his own expression—had a good look at them.

"She's a regular beauty," he remarked to Farmer Blount; "but for my choice give me the one that follows her, the bridemaid. The first has a temper of her own, or I never read an eye yet: the last has goodness written on her face." Mr. Blount grunted forth an inaudible reply. None were more aware of Anne Sterling's goodness than the Blounts. George had proposed to her in secret the night of the ball, three years before, and she refused him.

But another person was also looking on at the bridal party; a man

in a smock-frock; looking through a gap in the hedge, from an obscure corner of the church-yard. It was John Ledbitter. Oh, what a position was this unfortunate man's! Guilt does, indeed, bring its own punishment—as all Layton, and Higham too, had repeated, with reference to him, hundreds of times. Hunted down by his own class in life, condemned to labor hard for common sustenance with the hinds who tilled the ground—for in any more responsible situation, in an office, or where money would have passed through his hands, none would trust him—there he stood, a marked man, watching her, whom he had once so passionately loved, led forth, the bride of another. A bitter word rose in his heart for that hour when he had first ascended the mail-cart to drive it to Layton; and with a wild cry, which startled the air, and seemed to be wrung from the very depths of his spirit, he leaped the stile at the rear of the church-yard, and rushed back to his labor in the fields.

This statement, of the obloquy thrown upon John Ledbitter (as he is here called) and the manner in which he was shunned, is not exaggerated in the slightest degree. As those who are old enough to remember the circumstances well know.

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PART THE SECOND.

A FEW years had gone by.

It was the dinner hour at Hill House Farm, an hour after midday. Mr. Sterling and his daughter sat down to it alone. Latterly the farmer had been ailing in health and could not look much after his outdoor pursuits. People thought it singular that the farmer's only child, who was admired wherever she was known, and who would be the inheritor of his substance, no small one, should have gained her six-and-twentieth year without having changed her name; but she laughingly answered, when joked about it, that she could not afford to leave her father and mother.

"Shall I carve to-day, father, or will you?" inquired Anne.

"You carve, child. Cut for your mother first."

But Anne chose first of all to help her father. The dish was boiled beef, and she was careful to cut it for him as he best liked it. She then rose to take up her mother's dinner.

"Why are you leaving the table, Anne? Where's Molly, that she's not waiting on us?"

"Molly has Martha's work to do to-day as well as her own," replied Anne. "I shall be back directly."

When dinner was over, the farmer drew his arm-chair close to the fire. Anne gave him his pipe and tobacco, set his small jug of ale and glass beside him, and then went up to her mother's chamber. She smoothed the bed and pillows, changed her mother's cap for a smarter one, in case any neighbors dropped in, put some lavender-water on her handkerchief, and gave her her usual glass of wine.

"What else can I do, mother?"

"Nothing, my dear. Sit down and be still. You must be tired, helping Molly so much this morning. Unless you will read a psalm. The book is here."

Anne Sterling took the Prayer-book, and read the evening psalms for the day in her clear and pleasant tone. She then sat talking. After a while, her mother seemed inclined to sleep; so Anne softly left the room, and went down to the kitchen. It was then four o'clock.

"Well, Molly, how are you getting on?"

"Oh, pretty well," crossly responded the old servant, who was not so active since a hurt she had given to her knee. "Martha hadn't need to go gadding for a holiday every day."

"Is my father gone out?"

"I have not seen anything of him since dinner, Miss Anne.

Anne went into the dining-room. Soon a wild cry echoed in the passages. Molly ran in as quickly as her lame knee would permit.

Mr. Sterling was in a fit. His pipe lay broken on the ground; his head had fallen on the elbow of his chair; froth issued from his lips. Molly screamed out that it was apoplexy.

"He will die, Miss Anne, unless something can be done. How in the world can we get the doctor here?" For the in-door man was absent: and no laborers that they knew of were near the house.

Anne Sterling, pale as a sheet, gathered her scared senses together. "I will run into Layton for the doctor," she said; "you would never get there. Hold his head up, Molly, and rub his hands while I am gone."

She darted off without bonnet or shawl across the fold-yard into the lane, which was the nearest way to the little town of Layton, flying along as if for her life. It was dirty, and the mud splashed up with every step. A stalwart laborer, at work in a smock-frock in an adjacent field, stared at her with astonishment, and then strode to the stile.

"Oh," she cried, as she darted up to him, her heart leaping at the

sight of a human being, one who might perhaps be of service, "if you can run quicker than I, pray go for me into Layton. My father—I—I did not notice that it was you," she abruptly broke off; "I beg your pardon." And, swifter if possible than before, she flew on her way down the lane.

He was scarcely more than thirty years of age, yet lines of care were in his face, and silver was mixed with his luxuriant hair, but his countenance was open and pleasant to look upon. A tall, agile man, he leaped the stile at a bound, and overtook Anne.

"Miss Sterling! Miss Sterling!" he impressively said, as he came up with her, "you are in some distress." And, strange to say—strange when contrasted with his dress and his menial occupation—his words and bearing were those of an educated and well-bred man. "Though it is I—myself; though I am a banned, persecuted outcast, need that neutralize any aid I can render? Surely no curse will follow that. What can I do for you?"

She hesitated; feeling that she could not run as quickly as he could. What though John Ledbitter *was* pointed to among his fellow-men as a criminal who, by luck, not merit, had escaped the galleys, was not her father dying for want of aid? Yes, she would waive prejudice at this time of need.

"My father is in a fit," she panted "If you can get Mr. Jelf to him quicker than I can, we should be very thankful to you. I fear it is apoplexy."

"Apoplexy!" he repeated; "then no time should be lost in the treatment. It must be half an hour before Mr. Jelf can be with him, even should he be at home. Mr. Sterling must be bled instantly. Is there any one in the house who can do it?"

She shook her head as she ran on. "Not a soul is in the house but Molly. Except my mother—who is bedridden."

"Then I had better go back to your house—if it may be permitted me to enter it;" and he spoke the last words with conscious indecision. "I may be able to do something: if you can go on for Mr. Jelf."

"Be it so," she answered. "Lose no time."

He sped back swiftly, and entered the house by way of the kitchen. He knew the locality well. There was no one about; but he heard the voice of Molly—he remembered that well, also—calling out, in a sobbing tone, to know who had come in.

She started when she saw who it was. A look of blank dismay, not unmixed with resentment, overspread her countenance.

"What do *you* want, Master Ledbitter? What brings *you* here?"

"I am come to render aid—if any be in my power. By Miss Sterling's desire," he added distinctly. "By the time the doctor can get here he would be past aid," he continued, looking at the unfortunate man. "Get me a washhand-basin, and some linen to make a bandage. Have you any hot water?"

"Plenty of it," sobbed Molly.

"We must get his feet into it then. Bring in all the mustard you have in the house, while I take off his shoes and stockings. Make haste. We may restore him yet."

John Ledbitter spoke with an air of authority; and Molly to her own astonishment obeyed, much as she despised him. Little time lost he. There was no lancet at hand, but he bared the farmer's arm, and used his own sharp penknife. He was an intelligent man, and knew something of surgery; and when Anne Sterling returned she found her father had been rescued from immediate danger. Mr. Jelf was not with her; he was on the other side of Layton, visiting a patient, but they had sent after him. A neighbor or two returned with Anne.

"He is not in favor with honest folk, that John Ledbitter," remarked Molly, when she came in, "but, as sure as we are sinful creatures, you may thank him, Miss Anne, that you have yet a living father. The master was at the last gasp."

He did more, besides restoring him. He was strong and active, and with a little help from the women he got Mr. Sterling upstairs, undressed him, and placed him in bed. "I will remain and watch him, with your permission," he said, looking at Anne, "until the surgeon comes."

"If you will kindly do so," she answered. "I am very grateful to you; indeed I am," she added, through her tears, as she held out her hand to him. "My mother will not know how to thank you, when she hears that to you, under Heaven, he owes his life."

Mr. Ledbitter did not take her offered hand. He extended his own, and turned it round from side to side, as if to exhibit its horny, rough texture, bearing the impress of hard, out-door work, while a peculiar smile of mockery and bitterness rose to his face.

"It is not so fitting as it once was to come into contact with a lady's," he observed; "these last six years have left their traces on it. *You* would say also, as the world says, that worse marks than those of work are on it—that it bears the impress of its crime, as Cain bore his."

She looked distressed. What was there that she could answer?

"And yet, Anne—pardon me, the familiar name rose inadvert-

ently, not from disrespect; I used to call you so, and you have never since, in my mind, been anything but *Anne* Sterling—what if I were to assert that the traces of rough usage are the worst guilt of which that hand can righteously be accused; that it is dyed with no deeper crime? What then?"

"I don't know," she faltered.

"I do," he answered. "You would throw my assertion to the winds, as others threw it, and leave me to toil and blanch and die in those winds, rather than accord me the sympathy so necessary from man to man, even though it were but the sympathy of pity. A messenger from Heaven might whisper such to a fallen angel."

The reproach of crime had lain upon John Ledbitter for more than six long years. Suitable employment would be accorded him by none; nobody would look at him or trust him. His motive for remaining in the locality could not be fathomed. Had he gone elsewhere, abroad for instance, he might have assumed his former standing and got on. But he did not go.

Mr. Sterling got better. But only for a short time; hardly long enough, as the old gentleman himself said, to make his peace with his Maker. He never left his bed again. Mrs. Sterling, whose disorder appeared to abate, and her strength to revive with the necessity of the case, now managed to reach her husband's room, and to sit with him for several hours daily.

About three weeks subsequent to the farmer's attack, his daughter went to Higham by the morning coach, to see her cousin, Mrs. Grame. As she entered the passage of the house the office was on her right, and Mr. Grame was there, stamping letters. He had succeeded to the postmastership when his father died. Anne waited a moment, thinking he might see her, and she observed that his eyes were red, and his hands shaking.

"Good-morning, Walter," she said. "Is Selina upstairs?"

The postmaster looked up. "What, is it you, Anne? You have just come, I suppose. How is your father?"

"He is better, but gains no strength, and does not get up. This is the first day he has seemed sufficiently comfortable for me to leave him, or I should have been in to see Selina before."

"And I have been so bothered with one thing or other that I have not had a minute's leisure to ride over. What tale's that, about Ledbitter having saved his life?"

"He certainly did save it. My father must have been dead before the surgeon came, had it not been for John Ledbitter. He

applied the necessary remedies, and bled him, as handily and effectually as Mr. Jelf could have done."

"Ah, women are easily frightened," carelessly repeated the postmaster. "We heard that you came across Ledbitter as you were running into Layton for Jelf."

"It was so."

"Well, then I must tell you, Anne, that I contradicted that report. For I never could have believed you would permit yourself to hold speech with the man, still less admit him inside the house."

"Not to save my father?" returned Anne. "I would use any means, any instrument, when his life was at stake."

"You did not know it would save his life," persisted Mr. Grame. "I am astonished at your imprudence, Anne."

"My father was dying for want of assistance," she retorted, warmly. "I am thankful that Providence threw even John Ledbitter in my way to render it."

"Providence?" sarcastically ejaculated the postmaster.

"Providence," quietly repeated Anne. "The longer I live the more plainly do I see the hand of Providence in all the actions of our lives. Even in those which to us may appear insignificantly trivial."

"You will avow yourself a fatalist next," rejoined the postmaster.

"How is the baby?" inquired Anne, to turn the conversation.

"Oh, it's well enough, if one may judge by its crying. I never heard a young one with such lungs. I think Selina must manage it badly. You will find them all upstairs."

She went up to the sitting-rooms, and then up again to Mrs. Grame's bedchamber, and knocked at the door. But there was so great a noise within of children crying that she had little chance of being heard, and opened it. Mrs. Grame sat in a rocking-chair, in an invalid wrapper and shawl, her countenance pale and worn, presenting a painful contrast to that of the once blooming and lovely Selina Cleeve. The infant in her arms was crying, as if in pain; another little fellow, of two years, stood by her knee, roaring with temper.

Anne went up and kissed her. "What are you doing here, with these crying children, Selina?"

"Oh, dear, do try and quiet them, Anne!" Mrs. Grame helplessly uttered, bursting into tears; "my very life is harassed out of me. Since the nurse left I have the trouble of them all day."

Anne threw her bonnet and shawl on the bed; and, taking a

paper of home-made cakes from her pocket, drew the elder child's eye toward them. The tears were arrested half way; the noise ceased.

"These cakes are for good little boys who don't cry," said Anne, seating the young gentleman on the floor, and putting some into his pinafore. Then she took the infant from its mother, and carried it about the room. When soothed to silence and sleep she sat down with it on her knee.

"Selina," she began, "I am not going to tell you now that you are a bad manager, for I have told you that often enough when you were well. But how comes it that you have no nurse?"

"Ask Walter," replied Mrs. Grame, a flood of resentment in her tone.

"Now be calm, and speak quietly of things. I heard your children's maid had left, but you surely purpose taking another."

"*I* purpose!" bitterly retorted Mrs. Grame; "it is of very little use what I purpose or want. Walter squanders the money away on his own pleasures, and we cannot afford to keep two servants. Now you have the plain truth, Anne."

"I have thought," resumed Miss Sterling, after an awkward pause, "that you have sometimes appeared not quite at your ease as to money. But this is a case of necessity; your health is at stake. It is Mr. Grame's duty to provide an additional servant."

"Listen, Anne," resumed Mrs. Grame, speaking with an excitement her cousin in vain endeavored to arrest. "You thought I married well; that if Walter had been living freely, as a young man, and anticipated his inheritance, he was steady then, had a good home to bring me to, and a liberal salary. You thought this—my uncle and aunt thought it—I thought it. But what were the facts? Before that child was born"—and she pointed to the little cake-eater—"I found he was over head and ears in debt; and the debts have been augmenting ever since. His quarter's salary, when paid, only serves to stop the most pressing of them, and to supply his private expenses, of which he appears to have an abundance. Such expenses are shameful for a married man."

"Be calm, Selina."

"Calm! how can I be calm? I wish I had never seen him! I wish I had been a thousand miles off, before I consented to marry him! I never did love him. Don't look reprovingly at me, Anne; it is the truth. I loved but one, and that was John Ledbitter. When he turned out worthless, I thought my heart would have broken, though I carried it off with a high hand, for I was bitterly

incensed against him Then came Walter Grame, with his insinuating whispers and his handsome face, and talked me into a liking for him. And then into a marriage—"

"Selina," interrupted Anne, "you should not speak so of your husband, even to me."

"I shall speak to the world, perhaps, by and by; he tries me enough for it. Night after night, night after night, since from a few months after our marriage, does he spend away from me. He comes home toward morning, sometimes sober, sometimes staggering from what he has taken. Beast!"

Anne could not stem the torrent of passion. Selina had always been excitable.

"I should not so much care now, for I have grown inured to it; and my former reproaches—how useless they were!—have given place to silent scorn and hatred, were it not for the money these habits of his consume. Circumstances have grown very poor with us; of ready money there seems to be none: it is with difficulty we provide for our daily wants, for tradespeople refuse us credit. How then can I bring another servant into the house, when we can hardly keep the one we have?"

"This state of things must be killing her," thought Anne.

"What it will come to I don't know," proceeded the invalid, "but a break-up seems inevitable, and then he will lose his situation as postmaster. In any case, I don't think he will keep it long, for if he could stave off pecuniary ruin, his health is so shattered that he is unfit to hold it. I now thank my dear aunt that she was firm in having my £1500 settled on myself. The interest of it is not much, but, when the worst comes, it may buy dry bread to keep me and these poor children from starvation, and pay for a garret to lodge in."

"Oh, Selina!" sighed Anne Sterling, as the tears ran down her cheeks, "how terribly you shock me!"

"I have never betrayed this to a human being till now. You may have thought me grown cold, capricious, ill-tempered—no doubt you have, Anne, often, when you have come here. Not long ago, you said how marriage seemed to have altered me. But now you see what I have had to try me, the sort of existence mine has been."

"What can I do for you? how can I help?" inquired Anne. "I would take little Walter home with me, and relieve you of him for a time, but my father's state demands perfect quiet in the house.

Money, beyond a trifle, I have not, of my own, to offer: perhaps my mother, when she knows, will—"

"She must not know," vehemently interrupted Selina. "I forbid you to tell her, Anne—I forbid you to tell any one. As to money, if you were to put a hundred pounds down before me this minute, I would say throw it rather into the fire, for he would be sure to get scent of it, and squander it. No, let the crisis come. The sooner the better. Things may be smoother after it, or at any rate quieter; as it is, the house is dunned by creditors. Oh, Anne! if it were not for these children I would come back and find peace at the farm, if you would give me shelter But now—to go from my own selfish troubles—tell me about my uncle. To think that it should be John Ledbitter, of all people, who came in to his help! Walter went on in a fine way about it, in one of his half-tipsy moods. He has an unconquerable hatred to him, as powerful as it is lasting. I suppose it arises from knowing I was once so much attached to him."

"Selina," returned Miss Sterling, lowering her voice, "you will say it is a strange fancy of mine; but, from a few words John Ledbitter spoke to me, the evening of my father's attack, I have been doubting whether he was guilty."

"What can you mean?" demanded Selina, with startling fervor.

"What grounds have you for saying this? Did he assert his innocence?"

"On the contrary, he seemed rather to let me assume his guilt. He said, that of course I believed him guilty, as the rest of the world did, but then followed a hint that he *could* assert his innocence. His manner said more than his words. It was very peculiar, very resentfully independent, betraying the self-reliance of an innocent man smarting under a stinging sense of injury. I do believe—"

"Don't go on, Anne," interrupted Mrs. Grame, with a shiver. "If it should ever turn out that John Ledbitter was accused unjustly, that I, of all others, helped to revile and scorn him, my sum of misery would be complete: I think I should go mad or die. I suppose you have seen him but that once."

"Indeed we have. He called the next day, and Molly let him go up to see my father."

"In his smock-frock," interposed Mrs. Grame, in a derisive tone.

"We have never seen him in anything else, except on Sundays, and then you know, he is dressed well. He comes every day now."

"No!"

"He proffered his services to me and my mother, if he could be of any use about the farm. We were at terrible fault for some one to replace my father, and a few things he undertook were so well executed that they led to more. Now he is regularly working for us."

"Not as bailiff?"

"No, not exactly as bailiff; but he looks after things generally during the bailiff's prolonged absence. He is no better, by the way, Selina: people often fall ill when they can be least spared."

Mrs. Graame leaned her head upon her hand and mused. "Is John much altered?" she asked.

"Oh, yes. His hair is going gray, and his countenance has a look of care I never thought to see on one so smiling and sunny as was John Ledbitter's."

Anne Sterling returned to Layton that evening with sad and sorrowful thoughts; the more so, that she was forbidden to confide Selina's troubles to her mother. But she had little leisure to brood over them in the weeks ensuing. A change for the worse occurred in her father's state, and it was evident that his thread of life was worn nearly to its end. The farmer held many an anxious consultation with his wife and daughter, touching his worldly affairs. It was intended that the farm should be given up after his death, but several months must elapse before that could be effected—and who was to manage the land in the meantime? One Sunday evening, in particular, Mr. Sterling seemed unusually restless and anxious on this score. His wife in vain besought him not to disturb himself—that she and Anne should manage very well, and that perhaps the bailiff's illness might take a turn.

"I should have died at ease could I have left a trustworthy manager," he persisted. "If Ledbitter had not the mark upon him, there's no one else I'd so soon have appointed. He is a first-rate farmer."

"Father," spoke Anne, timidly, 'I by no means feel sure that John Ledbitter was guilty. A doubt of it lies in my mind."

"Now, why do you say that, Anne?"

"I judge by his manner and by some words he let fall. Of course—There he is," broke off Anne, seeing John Ledbitter advance, from her seat by the window. "I dare say he is coming to inquire after you."

"Let him come up," rejoined the farmer.

Mr. Ledbitter entered. None, looking at him now, could suppose he had the brand of a thief upon him, still less that he was a com-

mon day-laborer. For he bore the stamp of a gentleman in his dress and manner—in his manly form and countenance. One of his sisters had died lately, and John went into mourning for her, though she, as the rest of the family, had cast him off. Mr. Sterling invited him to take a chair.

"John Ledbitter," began the farmer, "since I lay here I have had a great many things in my mind; that old business of yours is one of them; and a remark of Anne's has now brought an impulse over me to ask you, if you can, or will, make things clearer. It's all over now, however it might have been, but I should like to know the truth. I am a dying man, John Ledbitter, and it would be a rest to my mind."

A deep crimson dyed the face of John Ledbitter. Once, twice, he essayed to speak, and no words came, but when he did find speech it was that of a truthful, earnest-minded man.

"Six years ago—more now—when that happened, I denied my guilt to you, Mr. Sterling. I told you that I was innocent as you were; but you answered me derisively, making a mockery of what I said, and sneered me into silence. I *was* innocent."

"What!" gasped the farmer, whilst Mrs. Sterling rose into a more upright position on her pillowed chair.

"I have not often been guilty of telling a lie: never that I can now recall to my recollection," he resumed. "But I could no more dare to assert one to you, hovering, as you are, on the confines of the next world, than I could, were I myself on its confines. Sir, as I said then, I repeat to you now—I never knew what became of the letter or the money; I never saw or touched either. In the presence of God I assert this."

"Then who did take it?" inquired the amazed farmer.

"I can not tell; though my nights have been sleepless and my hair has grown gray with anxiety over this very question. Old Mr. Grame affirmed the letter was in the bag when he delivered it to me; Mr. Marsh affirmed it was not in the bag when I delivered it to him. They were both to be trusted; they were both above suspicion: but I will affirm that the bag between those points was never opened or touched, or the box of the mail-cart unlocked, except to take out the Weirford bag. It is a curious mystery, but a certainty has always rested upon me that time will unravel it."

"But why not have proclaimed your innocence then, as you have now?" inquired Mrs. Sterling.

"Dear madam, I did proclaim it," he answered with emotion. "To my relatives, to my friends, to the postmasters, to Mr. Ster-

ling; as earnestly, as solemnly, as I now assert it this day. Not one listened to me. I met, even from my family, with nothing but disbelief and contumely. They were impressed with the conviction that my innocence was an impossibility. I do not blame them: I should myself so have judged another, accused under the same circumstances: and even she, who was more to me than my own life, joined in the scorn and shook me off. I took an oath, a rash one, perhaps, that I would never leave the spot until my innocence was established. So I have lived since, shunned by and shunning my equals; never ceasing, in secret, my endeavors to trace out the lost note: but as yet without success. I have spoken truth, Mr. Sterling."

"I do believe you have," murmured the dying man. "May God make up to you the persecutions you have endured, John Ledbitter!"

Farmer Sterling died a man of substance, worth a great many thousand pounds, and John Ledbitter discarded his smock-frock when he was appointed manager of the farm by Mrs. Sterling. And thus a few weeks went by.

The post-office at Higham was closed for the night, and its master sat drinking brandy-and-water in his sitting-room. It was only ten o'clock, and very early for him to be at home; but he had come in saying he was not well. Mrs. Grame sat by his side in a sullen state of rebellion. He had received his salary two days before, had locked it up in one of his iron safes, and had given her none of it. A desperate resolution was stealing over her—and the reader may justify or condemn her according to his judgment—that as soon as her husband should sleep she would go down to the office, and *take* some of this money for her pressing necessities.

"Where's the sugar?" inquired Mr. Grame.

"I have no sugar for you," she resentfully answered. "I told you this morning there was none for the baby."

The postmaster, in a jocular tone, for he had taken enough to drink already, consigned his wife and child to York, drank some brandy neat, and pulled open the sideboard-cupboard in search of the sugar-basin. There it stood, full of moist sugar. So he paid his wife another worthy compliment.

"It is not yours," she exclaimed, "or meant for you. My Cousin Anne was here to-day, and brought it for the baby."

He answered by dropping a full teaspoonful of it into his glass. "And what news did Anne Sterling bring?" he said, in a mocking

tone, as he lighted a cigar. "Fresh praises of their new manager, the thief Ledbitter?"

"It was not Ledbitter who was the thief; she told me that news," Mrs. Grame replied, in a raised, almost an hysterical voice; for Anne Sterling's information had had its effect upon her. "John Ledbitter was innocent: the crime was committed by another. *I* ought to have known that from the first."

A curious change came over Walter Grame. His face turned to a deadly whiteness, his cigar fell from his lips, his teeth for a moment chattered. "Ledbitter innocent!" he cried. "Did she say who took it? How did it come to light?"

"What is the matter with you?" asked his wife. "Are you so full of hatred to John Ledbitter that hearing of his innocence should affect you in this manner?"

"Woman!" he retorted, in agitation, "I asked you how it came to light!"

"Nothing has come to light; except that just before my uncle's death Ledbitter *convinced* him of his innocence. I wish the real criminal was discovered," she impetuously continued; "I, for one, would aid in prosecuting him to the death. Whoever he may be, he has been hugging himself under the ruin of poor John Ledbitter."

Mr. Grame laughed a forced laugh, and stooped to pick up his crushed cigar, for he had put his foot on it when it fell burning to the carpet. "That's his sort of innocence, is it?" he derisively observed; "his own assertion! Honest men want something else, Mrs. Grame."

But Selina saw that his teeth chattered still, and his hand shook so as scarcely to be able to lift the bottle, draughts from which he kept pouring into his glass. "How very singular!" she repeated to herself. It was not at all unusual for Walter Grame to be shaky and tottering; but this emotion, telling of fear, was unusual.

The spirit at length told upon Mr. Grame, and he sunk down upon the sofa and slept, an unconscious man. Then, her lips pressed together with angry resolution, Mrs. Grame possessed herself of his keys and the key of the private office, which he always kept in his pocket, and stole down stairs.

She stood before the iron safe, the smaller safe—his, in his father's time—and tried the keys, several of the bunch, before she came to the right one. The moment it was unlocked, the door flew open and struck her on the forehead. A large bump rose instantly; she put up her hand and felt it. At any other time she would have been half stunned by the shock; it was not heeded now.

Two cash-boxes and three small drawers were disclosed to view, and she had to try the keys again; each drawer opened with a different key. The first drawer was full of papers; in the second, as she drew it open, she saw no money, only one solitary letter lying at the end of it. An old letter, getting yellow now; still folded, but its seal broken. Its address was, "Mr. Sterling, Hill House Farm, Highamshire." A powerful curiosity excited her; she had recognized the writing of her own father; what should bring a letter of his, addressed to her uncle, in this secret safe of Walter Grame's? As she opened the letter, something fell from it, and Mrs. Grame sunk almost fainting on to a chair.

It was the long-lost letter and money, which John Ledbitter had been accused of stealing, the bank-note for fifty pounds. Had the letter been mislaid by old Mr. Grame, and overlooked till this day, she asked, in the first bewildering moment of discovery. Or had Walter acted the traitor's part to bring disgrace upon Ledbitter? "The latter, oh! the latter," she convulsively uttered, when reason asserted its powers; "and I, who once so truly loved John Ledbitter, discarded him for this man!"

She made no further search for the gold—this discovery absorbed every care and thought. Securing the letter and note upon her person, she locked the safe again, sped upstairs, and shook her husband violently, pouring forth her indignant accusation. He struggled up on the sofa and stared at her: she herself was a curious object just then, with that dark mound standing out on her forehead, and her dangerous excitement. Then he began to shake and shiver, for he misunderstood her excited words, and apprehended that the officers of justice were after him. The fright partially sobered him, but he was half-stupefied still.

"Nobody can prosecute but you, Selina," he abjectly stammered, in his confused terror. "You will not refuse to hush it up for your husband."

"Tell me the truth, and you shall *not* be prosecuted," she vehemently answered, humoring his fears. "Did you do it on purpose to ruin John Ledbitter?"

"No, no," he uttered. "I was hard up; I was, indeed, Selina. I did not know where to turn to for money, and if my debts had come to the knowledge of the old man he would have disinherited me. So when this fifty pounds came before me, like a temptation, I took it. That's the whole truth."

"You took it," she repeated, "after it was given to John Ledbitter?"

"It never was given to him. As the master dropped it into the bag, some man came to the window with a question, and my father turned to answer him. It was Stone the barber, I remember. I twitched the letter out then, and the master closed the bag and never knew it. But I did not use it, Selina; the money's there now; I could not find an immediate opportunity of changing it away, and then such a hubbub was struck up that I never dared to change it. But I never thought then to harm Ledbitter."

"And I could make this man my husband!" she muttered—"the father of my unhappy children! Traitor! Coward! how dared you thrust yourself into the society of honest people?"

His only answer was to stagger to the table, and drink a deep draught of the spirit still standing on it. It revived his courage.

"Ha! ha! my old father had a dream a night or two before he died. He dreamed that Ledbitter was innocent, and charged me to make it up to him. *Me!* as if some inkling of the truth had penetrated to his brain. I did not like that dream; it has subdued me since whenever I have thought of it—and now it has come out. But there's one part, Selina, which is glorious to think of still—that it lost you to him, and gained you for me."

She might have struck him had she remained in the room longer, for her feelings were worked up to a pitch of exasperation bordering upon madness. She went upstairs, bolted herself in the chamber with her children, and threw herself, dressed, on the bed. Her husband did not attempt to follow her.

The next afternoon she was at Layton, entering the Hill House Farm. At the front gate she encountered John Ledbitter. "It is you I have come to see," she said.

Not for years had they met; and she spoke and looked so strangely that, but for her voice, he would scarcely have recognized her. He followed her in. Anne Sterling, who was in the parlor alone, rose from her seat in surprise and inquired if all was well at Higham.

"Examine this, Mr. Ledbitter," was Mrs. Grame's only answer, drawing from her pocket the fatal letter. "Do you recognize it?"

Not at first did he understand; but when a shadowing of what it was burst upon him, he was much agitated. All three were standing round the table. "Am I to understand, Mrs. Grame, that this has been lost—mislaid—all these years?" he inquired. And it was a natural question, seeing the note intact.

"Mislaid!" burst forth Mrs. Grame, giving way to her excitement. "It was stolen, John Ledbitter; stolen from the bag before it went into your charge. And the thief—thief and coward—trem-

bled at his act when he had done it, and dared not use the money. He has kept it since from the light of day. Look at it, Anne."

"And this thief was—?"

"Walter Grame. To you I will not screen him, though I am his wretched wife. To the world it may be allowed to appear as was your first thought now--if you, Mr. Ledbitter, will show mercy where none has been shown you. I would not ask it but for his innocent children. I have not seen him since last night. He is nowhere to be found. Everything is in confusion at home, and the letters this morning had to be sorted by a postman."

"Where is he?" inquired Anne.

"I know not: unless this discovery has so worked upon his fears that he means to abandon his home and his country. I pray that it may be so: I shall be more tranquil without him."

"You are not going? You will surely stay for some refreshment," reiterated Miss Sterling, as Mrs. Grame turned toward the front door, in the same abrupt manner that she had entered it.

"I can not remain, Anne, I must go back to Higham; and for refreshment, I could not swallow it. A friend of ours drove me over in his gig, and is waiting for me at the gate. You will explain things to my aunt. I have only one more word to say, and that is to you, Mr. Ledbitter. Will you—will you—"

John Ledbitter took her hands in his, looking down compassionately upon her, for her emotion was so great as to impede her utterance, and the corners of her mouth twitched convulsively.

"Will you forgive *me?* it is that I want to say," she panted—"forgive my false heart for judging you as others judged? In our last interview—here, in this house—you said if we ever met again it should be under different auspices. The auspices *are* different."

What he answered, as he led her to the gig, was known to themselves alone. Her tears were flowing fast, and her hand was clasped in his. It may be that in that brief moment a trace of his once passionate tenderness for her was recalled to his heart. Anne Sterling was watching them from the window, but she never asked a question about it, then or afterward.

It was rare news for Higham. Walter Grame, what with his unfortunate debts and his unfortunate habits, had found himself unable to make head against the storm, and had started off, poor fellow, and taken ship for America: and in the search, which followed, his wife had come upon the missing letter and money, amongst some old valueless papers. In what unaccountable manner

it could have been mislaid, was useless to inquire now, since old Mr. Grame was dead and gone: but that no fraud was committed by any one was proved by the money being found safe. Probably the old gentleman had inadvertently dropped the letter amidst some papers of his own, instead of into the mail-bag, and never discovered his mistake. So reasoned the town, as they pressed into the post office to curiously handle the letter and note.

But John Ledbitter? Higham went very red with shame when it remembered him. How on earth could he be recompensed for all he had endured? Three parts of the city, rich and poor, flocked over to Layton in one day; some in carriages, some in gigs, some on horseback, some in vans, and the rest on their two good legs. When Mrs. Sterling saw the arrival of these masses from her bedroom window, she screamed out to Molly and Martha, believing the people must see a fire on the farm, and were coming to put it out. John Ledbitter's hands were nearly shaken off; and many a voice, bold at other times, was not ashamed of its own emotion, as it pleaded for forgiveness and renewed friendship. Everybody was for doing something by way of recompense, had they only known what. Some few were for asking the king to knight him; and John's brothers—who had got on in the world—whispered that the money to set him up, in any farm he chose to fix on in the county, was at his command. John good-humoredly thanked them all; and when the last visitor was got rid of, he turned to Miss Sterling.

"They have been speaking of a recompense," he said to her, in a low tone. "There is only one thing that would seem such to me; and that is not in their power to give. It is in yours, Anne."

Anne's eyes fell beneath his; a rich, conscious color rose to her cheeks, and there was the same expression on her face that John Ledbitter had never seen but once before, many years ago, ere he had declared his love for Selina Cleeve. He had thought then—in his vanity—that it betrayed a liking for him; and he thought it—not in his vanity—again now.

"Anne," he tenderly whispered, drawing her to him, "that dreadful misfortune, which, when it overwhelmed me, seemed far worse than death, was certainly sent for at least one wise purpose. But for that, I should have linked my fate with your cousin's, and neglected you—most worthy, and long since best loved. Will you forgive my early blindness—which I have lately wondered at—or will you shrink from sharing that name which has had a brand upon it?"

Closer and closer he held her to him, and she did not resist. No

words escaped her lips; but she was inwardly resolving, in her new happiness—a glimpse of which had recently hovered on her spirit—that her love and care should make up to him for the past.

"It is good," said old Molly, nodding her head with satisfaction when she heard the news from her mistress. "We sha'n't have to give up the farm now, ma'am, for Mr. John can take it upon his own hands."

Mr. John did so; and he took his wife with it.

As to poor Selina Grame, Mrs. Sterling and other relatives made up her income to something comfortable. But when a few months had elapsed, they heard with surprise that she was about to join her husband in America. One and all remonstrated with her.

"Walter wants me," was her answer. "He writes me word that he has put all bad habits away and is as steady now as heart could wish: and he has a good post in an office in New York. One's husband is one's husband, after all, you know."

THE END.

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