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THE DUCHESS

A STORY

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"MOLLY BAWN," "PHYLLIS," "AIRY FAIRY LILIAN,"
"LADY BRANKSMERE," ETC., ETC.

New Edition in One Volume

LONDON
GRIFFITH, FARRAN & Co.
NEWBERY HOUSE, 39, CHARING CROSS ROAD

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THE DUCHESS.



CHAPTER I.

“Except wind stands as never it stood
It is an ill wind turns none to good.”

“BUT who is it, dad?” asks she, leaning her elbows on the breakfast-table and smiling at him over the teapot; “who is the writer of that voluminous letter? As a rule they don’t take so much ink to ask for their just dues.

“Who should it be but your own first cousin, my dear, Denis Delaney, my only brother’s only son, and the head of all the family.”

“Bless me! What titles to honour,” says the girl, with a soft, low laugh. “And what

may our distinguished relative have to say for himself in those four closely written pages? Judging by your face"—saucily—"nothing pleasant. I quite thought it was a bill."

"'Tis worse!" says the Squire, solemnly. In his turn he leans towards her from his seat at the foot of the table, and as the latter is small, their faces nearly meet. "He's coming here to stay some days!" he whispers, with fine impressiveness.

"What! To stay some—— Oh, nonsense! Give me the letter," says Miss Delaney, rising with much characteristic force from her seat; but her father waves her back imploringly.

"Now can't you be patient, my dear? Can't you, now? You know if you flurry me, Duchess, I'll never be able to explain. Wait till I read it to you. Where is it now?"—glancing again at the letter he holds, with its big, crimson crest and its bold, handsome handwriting. "H'm! hah! 'To see you after all these years.' 'Make acquaintance with you and my cousin.' Hah! 'Am on my way here.' Norah," says the Squire, laying

down the letter and regarding his daughter with a tragic air, "that means that he'll be here in about two hours!"

"Two hours! Oh, dad, no!" says the Duchess, lifting her lovely face and gazing at her father with undisguised dismay. All the admirable spirit that had distinguished her a moment since is gone, and abject fear has taken its place.

"Well, my dear, that's just how I feel," says Mr. Delaney, with open sympathy. "I keep on saying it, but here I'm convinced he's coming all the same," with a rather depressed glance round the large, poorly-furnished, comfortless room. "He says he's on his way, and I've no doubt he'll finish his journey. And why shouldn't he, too?" with quite a startling change of front and a reproachful glance at his daughter. "Who should be welcome here, I'd like to know, if it wasn't our own kith and kin? Tut! I'm astonished at you now, Duchess, to be so inhospitable—and your own first cousin, too, my dear."

"Is he very rich, dad?" asks the Duchess, in a rather forlorn tone, though she has shown

no surprise at all at the sharp alteration of his sentiments. Perhaps she is used to it.

“As Cræsus!” with all the noble air of one determined to face the worst whatever the consequences. “My poor brother, The Delaney—a proud title, Norah, as good as any juke’s—well, never mind; but my poor brother—as fine a man, my dear, as ever stepped in shoe leather, though I daresay it isn’t modest of me to say so, considering, ahem! we were considered much alike. However, as I was saying——”

“I wonder you never told me all this before.”

“Well, my dear, he died a great many years ago, more than you can remember, and ’tis hard to talk to the young of those who are past and gone; but before he died he married an English girl with a pot of money and jewels without number”—‘Jools’ I’m afraid the dear old Squire called those precious gems—“Poor Terence, your uncle, had a very handsome property of his own, and he hadn’t been married to Madam three years when she fell in for two large fortunes, left her by some kinsfolk in her own

country, over the water. And all this has come already, or at least will come, to Denis."

"It will be dreadful!" says the girl, looking round the room in her turn, her voice is low and melancholy. "Is he young?" she asks, presently.

"About twenty-seven, I should say, though I'm not much at a guess. He was very young indeed when my poor brother died; quite a little chap in breeches. Though, indeed, for the matter of that," says the Squire, thoughtfully, bent, as it were, on wrestling with the truth and forcing it to the front at all hazards, "he was out of them when that unhappy event happened, as Terence died at midnight; so the child must have been in bed."

"What is his mother like?" asks the Duchess, still melancholy.

"Very handsome she was then, and very charming. *Bong tong*, you know, and all that; and a good soul, too," says the Squire, relapsing into a less fashionable manner. "For she nearly broke her heart when Terence died. She took the boy away then—carried him off to England and had

him educated there, and in fact has kept him there ever since, except on such occasions as he has gone abroad."

"Has he gone much?" asks Norah, timidly—already she is desperately afraid of this half-English cousin.

"I believe so. I hear he has seen a great deal of the world in his time. The last we heard of him he was in Peking. You remember that now, don't you, Norah?"

"I don't. I don't believe I ever gave him a thought," says Norah, petulantly. "But I expect I'll have to give him several now," with a little pout. "Dad," anxiously, "how long do you think he will stay?"

"Let's see," says the Squire. Once again he adjusts his spectacles upon his rather pronounced nose, and takes up the bombshell that politeness calls a letter. "Ah! here it is—'I hope to stay a day or two.' Now, Duchess, don't you be taken in by that," says the Squire, looking at her knowingly over the sheet he holds. "He'll stay a week, to a moral!"

"I shouldn't be surprised at anything he'd do," disgustedly. "It's as good to say a

month when you're about it. But no!" with a sudden pang of remembrance, "a day in our *ménage* will, I daresay, more than suffice him."

"Nonsense, now, Norah; your cousin isn't that sort, I should hope," says the Squire. "But, indeed, I agree with you; I'm afraid he'll find it—er—a bit rough."

"He'll hate it," says Norah.

"I wouldn't care if I was sure of the dinner," says the Squire, nervously. "But what the jeuce will we do if that butcher of ours doesn't give us meat fit to eat? His mutton, I allow you, is all very well, but his beef," says the Squire, with profound dejection, "his beef is the very——"

"Quite so, I entirely agree with you," says Norah, with admirable promptitude. "But never mind," conscious pride in her tone, "I have a fowl in the yard as fat as fat can be, and as to the beef, I think I'll go to Mickey myself and tell him it's a matter of life and death, and that he must give it us good for once in his life."

"Do!" with enthusiastic belief in her plan. "There's nothing like a woman's tongue for

bringing a man to reason, and as for yours, I know by experience that you could——”

“Oh! daddy, now! Come! Am I such a shrew?”

“Coax the birds off the bushes, my dear, I was going to say. Ha! ha! I had you there,” laughs the Squire.

“Turncoat!” says she, shrugging her pretty shoulders at him. “Well, don’t get into mischief whilst I’m away, for I’m off to the village this instant to secure a loin of mutton and warn him about the beef.”

“I say, Norah. I say, Duchess, darling, don’t go off at a tangent like that,” says the Squire, making an ineffectual grab at her gown as she passes him on her way to the door. “I’ve a great deal to say to you yet. This young man will be expecting things grander, no doubt, than we can have them. We can’t help that, of course; but I’d—I’d like him to see us as well as we can be, eh?” He colours a little as he says this and glances deprecatingly at his daughter. “Flowers, now,” diffidently, “flowers on a dinner-table give it quite a little air, eh? And there’s some of the old silver locked up, isn’t there,

in the oak chest? And if you have a white gown, sweetheart, just put it on you for dinner, won't you, now? I wouldn't have him think we didn't know about things even though we can't have them, eh?"

"Just so!" says Norah, taking fire at once, from the brilliant scene he has just conjured up. "I'm quite clever at arranging flowers and I'll give the old silver a rub myself this afternoon while you take him out for a walk. Make it a long one, daddy. And—you think a loin of mutton best—don't you? A leg sits up so high, and there's so much of it, and, of course," with a sigh, "he's dainty; and—and do you think—but no," despondently, "I—I don't think I am much of a hand at soup."

"You are, excellent, my dear, excellent," protests her father—may Heaven forgive him—"but I don't think we'll mind the soup. Just a loin and a pudding. That was a glorious pudding you gave us last Sunday."

"Custard? Very good. And I can make him a jam roll for the next day—and for the day after that—Oh! but I hope he'll go away the day after that. That is, of course,"

mindful of her hospitality, "if he wants to. "He's"—hopefully—"sure to want to."

"I trust," says the Squire, anxiously, "that Bridget won't be drunk."

"Certainly that habit of hers is a great drawback. At all events, if she does have one of her—attacks, I hope it won't be a noisy one. Last time—you remember, dad?—she was so abusive that Mary went into hysterics on the kitchen stairs, and said she couldn't attend table."

"Yes, yes. Mary's a very poor creature," says the Squire, with the utmost gentleness. His manner is abstracted; it is plain his fertile brain is running on some other matter far remote from Mary. "Now where the dickens are they, I wonder?" he said at last.

"What, dear?" asked the Duchess, at once interested.

"The waistcoat I can lay my hand on at once, because I wore it the last time Lord Kilgarriff called, not being able just then to find my Sunday one, and I know the coat is hanging up behind my door; but where on earth are the trousers?"

"Is it your evening suit you are thinking

of? Do you mean to say you are going to dress for dinner every day?" She is so overcome by the magnitude of this thought that she sinks into the nearest chair.

"Of course," says the Squire, with great dignity. "D'ye think I'd let him believe we wern't up to so much? Tut, Norah, you haven't a spark of genius."

"You'll be miserable," declares she, eyeing him with deep commiseration; "they are so dreadfully tight."

"Pride feels no pain," courageously. "And if I suffer it will be in a good cause. And mind you, Duchess, dinner not a minute before seven."

"Seven! Why, Bridget will be hopeless by that time, and Mary will think it is supper."

"It can't be helped," says the Squire, drawing himself up with quite a superb air. "It is absolutely necessary that we should hold up our heads now, and let him see that we, too, are conversant with the niceties of fashionable life!"

This last is too much for the Duchess. Crushed by it, she walks with a depressed air to the door and beats a hasty retreat.

CHAPTER II.

“A proper man as one shall see in a summer’s day.”

HER interview with the butcher must have been stormy and prolonged, because she is late for the important arrival of the head of all the Delaneys. That young man, entirely ignorant of the sensation his coming has provoked, drives up to the door about half-past eleven to be welcomed by the Squire *solus*.

The Squire! who had been fussing and fuming all the morning, and leading the hysterical Mary a horrible life; insisting on the threadbare carpets being brushed over and over again; marching in upon them with muddy boots to enforce this command, and deaf to Mary’s whimper that much more brushing would leave nothing but the floor beneath. It is indeed a reprieve to the long-suffering maid when wheels are heard crunch-

ing upon the gravel outside, and the Squire, forgetful now of all but the approaching guest, rushes forth to greet him.

The guest seems very willing to be greeted. He springs off the outside car, and comes quickly up to this unknown uncle, a pleasant smile upon his face. As for the Squire, after the first glance all is forgotten—the meagreness of his household, the fear of discomfort for the stranger—there is only left the desire to make heartily at home this young man who is so like the dead brother, and who is so tall, so aristocratic in bearing, so well set up, and so—which always comes first to an Irish eye—handsome.

“My dear boy, I’m delighted to see you. ’Tis new life to me. Well, well, but you’re like your poor father. My dear fellow, ’twas very good of you to think of coming to see an old man like me.”

His own handsome old head is well thrown up and he smiles an almost tender welcome on his nephew who, though a good six feet, is yet half-an-inch below him in height.

“Come in, come in,” says he; “and as for you, Larry Finn,” addressing the driver of

the outsider, who is well known to him, as indeed is every soul in the county, "go round to the kitchen and wait for your dinner. My dear Denis," leading the way up the stone steps and into the large, bare, comfortless apartment called by courtesy the drawing-room at Ballyhinch, "what years have rolled by since last I saw you. A little fellow you were then, but not so unlike either. And how is Madam? How's your mother?"

"Quite well, thank you. She sent the very kindest remembrances to you and my cousin, and desired me say she hopes, now we have agreed to stay in Ireland for some time, that we shall no longer continue strangers to each other."

"She was always charming," says the Squire, with a rather old-fashioned but very admirable air. "And you"—laying his hand upon the younger man's shoulders and surveying him with affectionate scrutiny—"how old are you now, eh? I should know, I suppose, but, faith, things slip me. Twenty-seven, eh?"

"Not so bad a guess, and a flattering one into the bargain, as I happen to be twenty-

eight. At that age one begins to wish a year off rather than a year on."

"Tut! What's twenty-eight? When I was that age I called myself a boy—and the broth of a boy, too," says the Squire, with his jolly laugh, than which there was nothing more musical in the next four parishes. "But you must be thoroughly done, my dear boy, and hungry, too, of course. If"—looking rather helplessly around him—"if one only knew where the Duchess—er—Noddlekins — that is — Norah, your cousin, I mean," floundering hopelessly over the many loving *sobriquets* belonging to his darling, "was, we might——"

"Nothing for me," says Denis, quickly. "Nothing at all, thank you. I slept in Cork and breakfasted there, about an hour ago as it seems to me. It is really nothing of a journey here from there. I feel as fresh as a daisy and as fit as a fiddle. A walk to stretch my legs I should like after the train work, that is if you are thinking of going out."

"Well, I generally do take a look round me about this hour to see that the men are keeping up to their work," says the Squire,

hazily. "Desperate lazy fellows, most of them; and if you would really like to join me—but positively you must have something first; a brandy and soda, now——"

"No, thank you," said Denis, laughing and tucking his arm into his uncle's and leading him toward the open window through which it is but a simple thing to drop on the grass below. At this moment it is borne in upon him that it is a possible thing to feel very intimate with the Squire in the space of five minutes or so.

Outside there is a blaze of yellow sunshine, and the wild sweet singing of innumerable birds. A meadow with long grass still standing—because of the heavy rains that had deluged the earth in the early summer—although it is now mid July, is making gentle obeisance to the soft wind that rushes over it.

The short grass on which they are walking widens presently into a garden rather lower down, protected on one side by a high beech hedge. Not an everyday garden, trim and ribbon-bordered, but a gay, delicious mass of all flowers, old and new, jumbled up together

in a delicate confusion — one harmonious whole—thus forming “a very wilderness of sweets.”

“What an exquisite bit,” says Denis, standing still and honestly admiring. “You have a gardener with a fine sense of taste.

The Squire laughs aloud.

“Say that to the Duchess,” cried he, “and you’ll make her your friend for life. Gardener there is none; all you see there is her own work. No hand but hers sows or reaps in that little garden. I tell her the flowers must know and love her, or they would not bloom so; that she must breathe some cunning spell upon them to make them flourish as they do.”

“What! Does she do it all herself?”

“Every scrap,” says the Squire, with loving pride.

“A muscular young woman with a vengeance,” thinks Delaney, and pictures to himself with a shudder the tall, largely-boned girl with—in all probability—fiery locks, with whom he will have to claim cousinship presently. With many fears, too, he calls to mind the errand on which he has been sent

by his mother, to capture and bring back to her for a long visit this young Amazon. He thinks of his mother's patient despair over the entertainment of such a guest, and of Katherine's cultured stare and educated lifting of the brows.

"She has talent," he says, politely, stifling a sigh.

Striking across the fields and getting beyond the trees, a larger view is given to the eyes. The stretching plains, now ripening to their death, the yellowing corn, the waving barley falling wave on wave, the cloud-flecked sky, and beyond all, the silent glittering ocean on which the sun-god's hottest rays are falling, all blend together to form a scene the beauty of which enters into the very soul of the new comer.

He is indeed somewhat lost in contemplation of it, when the wild barkings of a whole kennel, as it seems to him, breaks in upon his tranquil reverie. Barkings they are of the most agonised description, suggestive of a desire for suicide on the parts of the performers.

"By Jove, the dogs! I've forgotten them

and they've found out I've started," says the Squire, conscience-stricken. Then a smile irradiates his jovial countenance. "Aren't they clever?" says he, with a sort of possessive admiration. "The deuce wouldn't be up to them! My dear boy, if you'll go on I'll go back, and I'll catch you up in no time. But perhaps they'll be reasonable. Sh!"

Here the howlings break forth again with renewed vigour, and the Squire, with a remorseful face, gives in.

"You see! I must go back for them—the creatures!" he says, distractedly. "And if you'll just walk straight on up that hill before you, you'll find as fine a view as ever you saw in your life, and I'll be after you before you can say Jack Robinson."

Away he sails, coat tails flying behind him, as light and active as any schoolboy, in spite of his fifty years; and Denis, with an amused smile, continues his walk alone.

He is half-way up the hill pointed out to him, gazing idly from side to side at the clumps of golden furze that deck the hill in isolated patches here and there, when some-

thing on the top of a high stone wall that stands on his left catches and keeps his eyes.

It is a slender, brown hand.

CHAPTER III.

“Is she not passing fair?”

HE has scarcely time to wonder at that before a face follows it. Such a face! And then there is a swift pressure of the hands on the stone wall, and with a movement full of youth, and strength, and grace a slight figure springs into the sunlight and runs eagerly up and down the top of the wall, as it in nervous haste and anxious to find some easy spot from which to jump to Mother Earth beneath.

A slender, childish figure, gowned in a simple cotton frock that beyond all question has seen the washtub many a time and oft, but yet a gown that is fresh and crisp, and cannot, in spite of the eccentricities of the village dressmaker, altogether hide the grace of the form it covers. Just as little can the rough, country-made shoe conceal the beauty

of the small, highly-arched, patrician foot it holds.

To Delaney, this latter knowledge comes farther on. Just now he is blind to all save her face.

Were ever eyes so clear, so grey, so deep? With what a delicate touch do the purple shadows—those alluring supplements to all true Irish eyes—lie beneath them! How long the curling lashes grow! The rippling chestnut hair, showing beneath the huge poke-bonnet, hardly hides the wide, low, capable brow, or the pretty cheeks flushed like the wild rose. But above and beyond all, the exquisite sweetness of her mouth reigns queen; so *riante*, tender, loving, all in one; so arch too, and so soft, and red as roses in fair June.

All this picture is caught, as it were, in a breath; the breathing time it has taken her to decide on where she shall jump. Now she bends forward, at a rather impossible place it seems to Denis, who has had very little to do with any except town-bred girls, and pauses as if about to spring.

A sharp exclamation broke from him.

“Don't attempt it. It is far higher than it looks!”

She starts violently. His voice coming suddenly from nowhere, as it seems to her, has nearly the effect of making her lose her balance. Turning her head quickly in his direction she meets his eyes, and stares at him for a full minute, as if fascinated. Who is he, and what has brought him here? For the time she has forgotten the expected cousin, but even as she looks at him she remembers.

Slowly, very slowly, a rich crimson blush rises and dyes her cheek. Is this tall, handsome, kindly young man the cousin she has so dreaded? Impulsively she bends towards him, a smile quivering on her lovely lips.

“You are Denis,” she says, in a voice very clear, very low, perhaps a little plaintive; at all events, whatever it is, it is a voice that suits her.

“A creditable inspiration,” laughing and looking up at her to where she stands on her very superior ground. He has lifted his hat, and it occurs to her even at this immature

stage that he is, if possible, better to look at without, than with it.

"I knew it," says she, shyly, if triumphantly. "I saw it at once. You—you are like dad—only so very different."

This lucid description she delivers with a charming smile.

"You didn't know me, though," she goes on, nodding her head reproachfully at him. "I am——"

"Her Grace of Ballyhinch!" interposes he. "You wronged me! Am I so lacking in intelligence that I could not see that at a glance?"

"But how—how?" eagerly. "Of course, there are many reasons why I should guess at you successfully. The fact that you were expected; that there isn't a young man in the country except the doctor's apprentice and the organist; and your likeness to dad. But how did you know me?"

"Am I a mere mole, then, that I should be blind to the natural dignity that distinguishes you? Are duchesses so numerous that one need——"

"Oh, nonsense!" interrupts she, with a

little indignant side glance. "If you won't tell——"

"Well, I expect I knew you because you first knew me," confessed he, smiling.

"Ah! Was that it? I'm sorry now I spoke," says she, mischievously, her lovely eyes full of an innocent coquetry. "I could have led you such a dance!" She seems to pine over this lost opportunity.

"You couldn't have led it up there," says he, "there isn't room."

"That reminds me," growing earnest again, "dad must be wondering where I am. There, stand out of my way until I jump."

"Pray don't try to take that wall," entreats he, anxiously. "Let me help you. Come——" going nearer and resting one foot on a projecting stone that lifts him closer to her. "Trust yourself to me and I will take you down."

"Am I china that I should break?" making him a little *moue*. "Well, if you will," shrugging her shoulders. "Let me place my hands upon your arms, so, and that will perhaps save me from a sudden and terrible death. Now, are you ready?"

The charming eyes are smiling with a mocking gaiety into his without the smallest touch of embarrassment, although the two faces are very close together ; and then there is the lightest pressure possible on his arms, and the next moment she is beside him on the soft turf.

“No bones broken after all,” she says, saucily glancing at him from under the big bonnet. Then all at once, as though suddenly recollecting something, she grows grave and extends to him her hand.

“Welcome!” she says, sweetly ; and again, very impressively, “do you know that I am very, very glad you have come.”

“Thank you,” pleasantly, though indeed he is a little surprised at her earnestness. “That is the very kindest thing you could say to me. I have been so afraid I should bore you, or——”

“Oh, no !”

“Do you mean,” says he, still puzzled by her manner, which has something behind it, “that you, yourself, are glad of my coming ?”

“More than I can say,” promptly, and with quite a serious smile at him.

This exceeding frankness almost overpowers him. Does she mean it? Is she really so enraptured, as her words imply, at having him here? This charming, pretty, fascinating child, who——

“For dad’s sake,” says she, softly, knocking all his fine sentiment to pieces in an instant. “He has always been so longing to see again some of his own people, and you especially, the only son of his only brother.” She is silent awhile, and then looking at him intently, “What brought you?” she asks, gently.

“A longing to see him, I suppose,” returns he, smiling; “I should have come before, but as you doubtless know, ever since my father’s death my mother and I have lived in England, and of late years I have travelled a good deal. Three months ago, however, hearing that affairs in Ireland were going with a steady briskness to the bad, I threw up my intention of going to the East again, and came over here instead.”

“Troubles with your tenants?”

“Yes. Or rather with my agents. Same thing. Ever since that terrible tragedy——

when poor Meredith was shot—the last agent but two, you remember—I have had no peace.”

“I remember, as though it were but yesterday. It was an awful murder. He resisted so long—so bravely—and” —she turns white—“they battered in his —— Oh! it was horrible! And for you,” glancing at him, “worse than for anyone.”

“I shan’t forget it to them, you may be sure,” says he, between his teeth. “Well, the man after him—Strong—either lost his nerve or could not manage the people, and after a month or two resigned the post. I didn’t blame him, really. It must be nasty, waiting to be murdered like that. The last man, Monroe, gave in, too; so as I saw no prospect of keeping an agent longer than six weeks at a stretch, I thought I’d take the post myself—with an assistant, of course—and come over and try what I could do.”

“Kerry is such a shocking place,” says the Duchess, with a sigh for that degenerate spot.

“If it could get a good ducking in the sea and have its inhabitants well washed off

the face of it, I dare say it would do it good," replies he, lightly. "In the meantime, as I said before, I'll see what I can do with my particular bit of it. The mother was rather against giving up her town house and coming here in the height of the season, but I persuaded her. got the Castle put into liveable order, and now that she has been here a month she seems to have quite taken to it. Of course, the moment I found a few days I could call my own, both she and I thought of you and my uncle."

"It was kind of you," says she, softly. She has been regarding him nervously for the past five minutes, even whilst he has been speaking to her. Truly he is very far apart from all the other young men of her acquaintance. Even Kilgarriff, who is quite a travelled person for his years, and should be well up in the little delicate touches that distinguish the well-bred society man from the well-bred country gentleman, does not seem to her to come quite up to the mark of this new-found cousin.

Something in his voice, in the unconscious charm of his manner, pleases while it disturbs

her. There is an air about him as of one accustomed always to the soft places of the earth; and how will he take Ballyhinch and all its shortcomings? Serious reflection!

Her mind flies on to the dinner and back again to her just consummated visit to the butcher. There seems to her now something sinister in the fact that he had so persistently, so insidiously, put aside, in the bland Irish way that belongs to him, her request to see the loin she had ordered before leaving. Good heavens! can it be possible that that loin is still alive, that as yet its primal owner is free of knife or thrust?

She grows cold with horror as this fear presents itself, and she sees laid out before her mind's eye the tough joint that, should her fears prove true, will adorn the dinner-table to-night.

Her cousin is still talking, and she is saying "Yes" and "No" in a distracted fashion, her mind running always on the treacherous butcher and the shame that his treachery will bring her, when something is said that requires a fuller answer. It is a mere nothing, but it serves. It rouses her.

“You don't find it slow here, then?”

“Slow? Stupid, you mean? Oh, no. There is always a great deal to be done and not so very much time in which to do it. There are the usual things to battle with every day, and often a startling surprise just to wake us up a little. To-day,” with a lovely, gracious glance at him, “the surprise has been a very happy one.”

He makes her no immediate, at least no spoken answer, but his eyes say as much as need be said—perhaps, indeed, more.

“Now that I see you,” she says, falteringly, as she thinks of the mutton, “I know you are not what I thought you would be; you are another person altogether, as it were.”

“Yet the moment your eyes fell on me you knew me.”

“Yes; that was flattering I admit,” laughing.

“Oh, was it?” says he, laughing too. “Thank you! Then the ideal you had conjured up was of a being very superior to me! Am I to understand that?”

“I'm not going to explain or refute anything,” declares she, with a charming touch

of mutiny about the mouth. "I think your instant recognition by me should suffice you.

"You gave a very sorry reason for that. It showed how you held me; something better than the organist, and a little dearer than the doctor's apprentice."

"I don't remember saying that you were 'dearer than anything,'" replies she, calmly.

There is a suspicion of coming battle in her tone. It lends an additional colour to her cheek, an added lustre to her eyes. Providentially for Delaney the house at this moment comes into view, and with it the Squire, breathless but beaming, a dozen dogs of every age and description clustering at his heels.

"So you've met her?" he cries, cheerily, whilst yet a long way off. "That's all right. She," evidently indicating the Duchess, though his indications are vague, "is worth a dozen of me. I hurried all I knew, but one of those fellows from the Kingston Farm—you know 'em, Norah—caught me, and his tongue, once he gets an opening, is as long as the lane that has no turning."

CHAPTER IV.

“As merry as the day is long.”

It is several hours later. They have lunched, and are now sitting out on the bit of lawn that overlooks the garden, placidly smoking. That is, the two men are; Norah is absent, on hospitable thoughts intent, no doubt.

The Squire has taken up his parable again, and is inveighing against Ireland and the Irish, in brisk and unmeasured language. “Were there ever such people? Were there ever such scoundrels? Were there ever such fools? Led like sheep to the slaughter, without knowing for why or for wherefore! Seduced from their allegiance by a set of demagogues who used them to fill their own purses, and didn’t care afterwards whether they sank or swam.”

“But they are pretty quiet round here, aren’t they?” asks Denis, presently, when he

has a second in which to edge in a word, the Squire being attacked with a fit of sneezing. "We have rather a high opinion of the County Cork people where I live. They are all a steady going lot, eh? Paying their rents and that?"

"Rents, indeed!" says the Squire, with an indignant snort. "Why, what do you take 'em for? Rents, is it? Faith, they would not pay their priest, it's my belief, if they weren't afraid of having to die without him, which would mean purgatory with a vengeance for quite an endless number of centuries. Eh? Is that you, Noddlekins?" as the Duchess steps out from the window on to the lawn, and standing behind his chair, leans on the back of it. "Norah will tell you about them."

"They are very poor," says Norah, with a sigh.

"Never mind that," says the Squire, hastily, as if afraid of being softened. "What I'm telling your cousin now is that they have no sense of honesty. To pay their just dues is the last thing that would ever occur to them. Honesty! Why,

they've forgotten how to spell the word. They've sponged it out of their dictionaries! Look at me. Not a penny have I got this Gale! Of all the da—— h'm— h'm—Norah, my soul, go and get me my other pipe. This won't draw; you'll find it in—er—if you look for it."

Norah, with an irrepressible little glance at her cousin, retires discreetly.

"I hate swearing before a girl, though it's a great relief at times," says the Squire, mildly. "Especially when one gets on the subject of one's tenants. They are such a truculent lot, and so entirely without reason; they hate reason. Once let them see that you have the best of the argument, and nothing would induce them to listen another second. And then their grievances! They fill the pit of Tophet!"

"I suppose they have some," says the young man, thoughtfully. The remembrance of a little flower-like face, and sweet grave lips, and a gentle voice, that had taken their part a moment since, is still with him.

"Pish!" says the Squire, wrathfully, who in reality is the kindest soul alive, and as

a rule shamefully imposed upon by every peasant in the neighbourhood. "That's all you know about it. Such a feeble remark comes of your having Saxon blood in your veins ; you don't understand em. Like the rest of your countrymen, you either run us up too high or run us down too low."

"Don't mistake me there," says Delaney, hastily, "I'm Irish all through. Any English blood I may have has become Irish long ago. I'm a Paddy, heart and soul!"

"Well done, lad! I like to hear you," says his uncle, giving him a mighty slap on the shoulder. "In spite of all our faults, and I grant you they're not a few, and in spite of those rascals who are disgracing us in the House of Commons, I would not be anything else myself. One loyal Irishman is as good as two Englishmen."

"As good as one, certainly," says Denis, laughing.

"No—two, man—two ; and better!" says the Squire, with determination. He is sitting up very straight, looking as though he defies the other to contradict him ; and his hair, which is as thick on his head now as when

he was a boy, has risen in the heat of the argument, and is erect and bristling. It is this assumption of authority, with its accompanying touch of would-be asperity—the very lamest touch—that has earned for him from his laughter-loving neighbours, the title of “Squire,” which, as we all know, is not an Irish one. “I’m afraid you haven’t learned your lessons,” he goes on, laughing. “You’ll have to go down, sir, if you don’t bluster a bit these times. Norah! I say, Duchess! Where on earth has that child gone? She’s for ever disappearing just when I want her.”

“I think you sent her away that time when you wanted to swear,” says Denis, mildly, knocking the ash off his cigar.

“So I did. I remember now. There you are, my Duchess,” as Norah once again comes lingeringly up to them. “And without that other pipe. Never mind, here it is in my pocket after all! But you might have brought your cousin one.”

“My cousin knows better than to smoke pipes,” says the girl, bending over her father and daintily ruffling his hair. “’Tis only a

vieux moustache like you who can do that now-a-days."

"Is it so?" said the Squire, sharply, turning suddenly on Denis, and for the first time becoming aware that he is smoking a cigar. "Bless me, the fools you boys are! Why, you don't know what's good for you; you'll go to your grave, I daresay, without learning the company there is in a pipe. Why, it's twice as good as that weed of yours, and twice the comfort."

Replacing his comfort in his mouth, he leans back in his chair and contemplates the surrounding landscape, with an air of perfect content that might almost be termed superb. From where they sit a glimpse of the ocean may be caught, as it lies serene and placid, basking in the rays of the now setting sun. To their right rise mountains, high, wooded, and tinged now by the purple flames of a dying day, whilst to their left lies, silent and solitary, as "illigant" a bog as the heart of an Irishman could desire. So large it is; so swampy; so suggestive of fevers and agues—and snipe!

"D'ye see that?" demands the Squire,

after a prolonged survey of it. He has removed his pipe from his mouth, and now points with it majestically to the bog in question. "That's mine!"

"Lot of waste ground," says his nephew, lazily, who, after all, has been a long time off his native heath.

"Waste!" echoes the Squire, indignantly, "what do you mean? Why it's the finest snipe bog in Ireland! Waste, is it? Wait till you come here at Christmas time and you'll see how much waste there is about it."

"Oh! looking at it in that light," says the young man, hastily, who indeed is a splendid shot, and very devoted to sport of all kinds, "if that is an invitation, my dear uncle, you may expect me next Christmas."

"I'll hold you to your word. I'm sorry, however, there's nothing for you now save rabbits. But have you brought your gun?"

"No," regretfully.

"Oh! you ought, man! You should never travel without your gun and your toothpick, as my poor father used to say; and faith he might have added a brace of loaded revolvers if he had lived in these days. However

don't forget it at Christmas when you come, and I promise you we'll have many a good day of it in that same 'waste' bit of ground!"

It is evident that he has taken the word hardly.

"I tell you," warming to his subject, "the snipe swarm there like bees. Why, there was one winter here—was it last winter, now?" meditatively—"Norah, what winter was it that the snipe were so plentiful round here?"

"It was five winters ago," says the Duchess, with a little nod.

"Five? Was it now? Well, there's nothing so deceiving as time! Anyhow," turning again to Denis, "whatever winter it was, they were as thick as peas, and so tame you could sweep them off the hall door-steps in the morning!"

This astounding announcement is given without a blush. Denis, who is evidently delighted with it and the teller of it, laughs out loud.

"Ah! you may laugh if you like; but we know, don't we, Norah?" giving his daughter's ear a loving pinch. Norah remains discreetly silent.

“She doesn’t,” says Denis, mischievously, looking at her with such persistency that he gains his point and compels those sweet expressive eyes to seek his own.

“What! Duchess! Turning traitor?” cries the Squire, catching her hand and pulling her forward. “Why, don’t you know yet, after all I have taught you, that when your father tells a tarradiddle it is your duty to back him up? Alas! the hours I’ve wasted on your education! You must excuse her, sir,” turning to Denis with an irresistible air of apology. “She is still sadly deficient in many little ways!”

CHAPTER V.

“And grace that won who saw to wish her stay.”

LAST night some rain had fallen, short and youthful showers, leaving small ruin in their track, and lending a deeper brilliancy to branch, and bough, and waving grasses, that all look the fresher for their midnight bath.

“Green grow the rushes, O!”

Merrily, blithely skim the swallows through the velvet air! Coo! Coo! sigh the wood doves from the dark entrances to the plantations beyond; and through all and above it comes the swish-swash of the waves as they break upon the beach far down below.

A heavy bunch of creamy roses, wet still with glistening rain-drops, is flung by a small but unerring hand, at the casement of Delaney's room. It is as yet early morning, and Denis, coming to the window in answer to this perfumed command, stands revealed

in his shirt sleeves and armed with two brushes that have as yet hardly succeeded in reducing his hair to order.

“Come out! Come out!” cries a fresh, sweet voice. “What! not dressed yet? Why, what do you think I have already done? I’ve been down to the beach. I have had a swim. I have come back again, and am now re-gowned. Oh! what a lazy boy you are!”

Indeed, it may all very well be true. So sweet a picture she makes, looking up at him with her pretty head thrown back, and her face, fresh as the morning, and as a lily, fair.

“I’ll be out in a moment,” says he, not without a thought of his present rather unorthodox costume; but such thought he allows, after a swift glance at her, is a cruel waste of time. There is no mock modesty about her; no *mauvaise honte* anywhere. Is he not her cousin, and is not a cousin a sort of half-brother?

“You should have been out an hour ago. The air then was delicious. Hurry now, do, and put on your coat, and we’ll have a

run before breakfast. Here," flinging him a rosebud, "put that in your button-hole, and hurry, hurry, hurry!"

There is scarcely need for such injunction. Never in his life before did he rush through his toilette in such frantic haste, and presently he has his reward. Long, long years afterwards he can recall to mind the strange, wild, happy sense of utter enjoyment that clung round that morning hour spent with her, ere the dew was lifted from the flower, or the heart of the day was opened.

Then comes breakfast—a merry meal—as neither the Squire nor his daughter can refrain from giving way to a spontaneous gaiety that affects one sympathetically and draws one into the swift current of its own sprightliness. And after breakfast there is half-an-hour with the Squire, who insists upon his guest following him round the extremely untidy farmyard, and giving his opinion upon this and that. And then there is the Duchess to cope with for the rest of the delicious, lazy, sultry afternoon.

"You play tennis?" asks Denis, idly, when they have sauntered through the old-world

garden, and gathered themselves, in a desultory fashion, a very ideal bouquet.

“Yes! Oh, yes!” with a brightening eye.

“You have a court?”

The Duchess colours.

“A—a sort of a one,” she confesses. “I,” hanging her head, “I’m afraid it isn’t the kind of one to which you have been accustomed.”

That this is highly probable, a second’s reflection assures Denis, but he refrains from saying so.

“Lead on!” he says instead, with a severe glance. “You are evidently trying to shirk the contest, and I am bent—I warn you—on giving you a beating that will last your lifetime.”

“Ah! So!” cries the Duchess, her Irish blood taking fire at once, forgetful of her late fears. “Come on, then!”

The court, when he comes to it—half-reluctantly led thereto by the Duchess, whose desire for battle had cooled again as the march commenced, knowing what the intended field looked like—is of so unusual an appearance that it needs all his self-command and good-breeding to keep

him from evincing his surprise. It is indeed meant for a court, because it is portioned off by an extremely rustic railing from the field beyond—a stubbly field—yet but for the railing it might have belonged—been part and parcel of the stubbly field. In fact it was—last month!”

“It is horrid; you won’t like to play on it!” says the poor little Duchess, plaintively, who has been enduring agonies of shame on the way hither. There is indeed such a wealth of misery in her expression as would have made a worse man swear he would play on it or die.

“Is that your plan of getting out of your beating?” says Denis, scornfully, waving his racket on high. “If so, it’s a vain one, my good child; you’ll get it in spite of all your efforts to the contrary. Come! let’s begin. I thirst for the fray!”

If this indeed be the truth, his thirst is considerably quenched after the first draught. The ground may be bad—nay, it is inconceivably so; the balls abominable; but the Duchess, at all events, is an unconquerable foe! Now here, now there she darts, swift

as a flash of lightning, taking his hardest balls as though they were child's play to her ; giving him balls impossible. In effect "taking the shine out of him" altogether, as they say down here.

Is she a spirit, or an imp, or a girl ? Was there ever so light-footed a creature, or one so sure of her stroke ? And was there ever one who at the end of a set—won literally off her own bat—could look so cool, so lovely, so little triumphant ?

"You're a swindle !" says Denis, who is as hot as she is cool, as crimson as she is pale. "You are," changing his tune, "a marvellous creature !" He says this in a panting tone, from where he has flung himself exhausted on the grass. "It is no joke, you see, playing a single game on a hot day in July. Why don't you look surprised ?" he goes on. "You might, if only for generosity's sake. Why don't you jeer at me ? Are you not proud of yourself ?"

"Well, no," says the Duchess, mildly. "To tell you the truth, I generally beat everybody."

Denis, as if amused by this naïve remark,

which is rich in truth, gives way to sudden laughter.

“You’ll bring them down a peg or two at the Castle,” he says, inadvertently. Then—“Don’t sit so far away from me over there; you might as well be in the next county. Come over here and enjoy with me the shade of this hospitable tree. I’d go to you, only you have knocked me up so completely.”

“Poor thing!” says the Duchess, with deep compassion. She comes to him at once and slips down on the grass beside him, and generously pulls out a corner of her gown that he may rest his head upon it.

“Who taught you to play tennis in that masterly style?” asks he, when he has settled himself comfortably, and as close to her as circumstances will permit. “I thought you told me you had no neighbours.”

“What a melancholy thought! We are not quite so destitute as all that. I think what I said to you was, that there were no young men here; but there are plenty of girls. That,” with a little laugh, “is bad enough, isn’t it, without adding to it?”

“I don't think girls could teach you to play as you do.”

“Well, there are some old men, too. Dad can take most balls, and the Rector is no mean foe. And Lord Kilgarriff, when he is at home, gives me lessons ; but he is so often away.”

“Lord Kilgarriff!” turning lazily on his elbow to look at her. “Who is he? Another old neighbour?”

“The oldest we have. ! remember him quite as long as I can remember anything.”

“Old fogey, evidently,” thinks the young man, with an unconscious pleasure in thus thinking. “Where is he now?” aloud.

“Abroad. Somewhere in Germany. I forget the name of the town. There was a Professor of something or other there whom he wished to see.”

“Musty old pedant beyond doubt,” decides Delaney, still carrying out that first satisfactory train of thought. “Bookworm, I suppose,” he says, civilly, if superciliously. “That sort is generally a bore, don't you think? One can hardly fancy an old fellow devoted to his ‘Aldines, Bodonis, Elzevirs,

wielding the frivolous racket. By-the-bye, how old is he? Old enough to be your grandfather—eh?”

“Well, hardly, perhaps,” with a treacherous uncertainty of tone. “Let me see. On his last birthday he was, I am almost sure——”

“Ninety-nine?”

“N—o. Twenty-five!”

“What!” says her cousin, sitting upright and colouring warmly. Then, as though the absurdity of the extreme astonishment strikes him, he sinks back again into his former position and alters the expression of his face. “I fancied him a modern Methuselah. I scarcely know why,” he says, indifferently. “A friend of my uncle’s rather than yours.”

“His father was dad’s greatest chum down here. They were at College together, and when he died a year ago, dad fretted after him very much. Otho is now the Earl.”

Otho! Somehow the word—so sweetly uttered, so plainly familiar—grates upon his ear.

“He is abroad,” he says, abruptly. “For long?”

“No, he returns next week.”

“How do you know?”

“He told me so in his last letter,” replies she, simply.

Silence follows this ordinary answer. Denis, lying back with his hands clasped behind his head, is to all appearance gazing with rapt attention at the pale white clouds floating in the dazzling blue of the sky overhead; and yet—and yet—what is this curious sense of dissatisfaction, this contraction of the heart, that is almost a pain? It is sharp enough, at all events, to rouse him to a clear understanding of his own position, and with the rush of memory comes the knowledge that he of all men has no right to feel anything but unconcern about this girl's affairs. This lovely child who, whilst he is working out the right and wrong of it all, is employing her little idle brown fingers upon the adornment of his head.

Surely it is true that

“Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do!”

Through and through the few short hairs that his barber has left him she is threading pieces of grass, pulling them out again

and re-arranging them as fancy dictates, carelessly, dreamily.

Denis, with this new strange fear at his heart, lifts his own hand, and taking hers from his head, puts it away from him with a Spartan determination.

“Do you know,” he says, sharply, with a rather forced smile, “that—that the effect of your fingers going in and out like that—is—is maddening?”

“Don’t you like it?” asks she, genuine surprise in her tone. She stoops over him and gazes into his half-averted face as if to assure herself that he really can mean it. “Why, Otho loves it! He says it is as soothing as a cigarette.”

“I am not Otho. It does not soothe me,” says Denis, still with that unnatural assumption of pleasantry. “So far from it—that I believe a continuance of it would be dangerous—for me—not for you,” smiling.

As though to place temptation beyond his reach, he seizes upon his hitherto discarded hat, and with quite an heroic air crushes it down upon his head, lo! even to his brow.

“Oh, you needn’t lecture me about it,”

says the Duchess, with a little offended glance from under her long lashes; "and you needn't put on your hat like that. I am not going to touch you. I don't want to stick straws in your hair, believe me. I was merely doing it to please you because Otho says——"

"Oh, confound Otho!" interposes her cousin, impulsively; and a second later he is covered with confusion. What, in Heaven's name, is the matter with him this morning? What must she think of him? The enormity of his misdemeanour is clear to him; but it is not so clear as to how he shall apologise for it; how explain away his unreasonable burst of irritation about what has, or at all events should have, no element of annoyance about it. Whilst, stricken with remorse, he is casting about him for some decent excuse to offer for his conduct, the Duchess, striking boldly into the situation, makes an end of it.

"You are cross," she says, calmly, regarding him with a judicial eye. "You are, indeed," with severe meaning, "extremely queer altogether. Do you think the sun is

too hot for you, or the flies too troublesome? If you think you are going to have a sun-stroke or—or anything of that sort, I should be glad if you would give me timely warning.” It is evident that she is rather disgusted with him.

“I fling myself upon your grace’s mercy,” returns he, with a smile that is very imploring in spite of the lightness of his tone. “If you will believe me I don’t know what is the matter with me.” This is strictly true. “I have, I suppose, a wretched temper, and I lost it, and——”

“And a very good thing, too!” cries she, gaily. “If it is so wretched as you say, you may be congratulated on its loss. There, don’t look so miserable. I forgive you.”

“It is more than I deserve, then. By and by,” taking the little hand he had so rudely repulsed and tenderly smoothing it, “you will remember me only as an ill-tempered fellow who——”

“No! No indeed!” sweetly. “You must not think that. Shall I tell you something?” bending down and looking at him with such a lovely earnest gaze. “I like you already

— already, mind you — much better than anyone I have ever yet met. Always excepting dad, of course.”

“What! Better than Kilgarriff?” asks he, unable to refrain from this question.

“A thousand times better!” frankly. “Though, indeed,” with sudden contrition, “you must understand that I am very fond of Otho, too.”

Delaney, who is watching her with eager eyes, sighs impatiently. Oh! that she were a little less frank, a little more reserved. He would that he could have seen some faint hesitation in her tone, the lightest suspicion of a blush upon her pretty cheek. But there is none—nothing.

And then once more there comes the rush of memory, and with it the new fear and the angry self-contempt.

Why should he wish her less frank? What should be hoped from any new-born shyness? Has he forgotten honour, everything, in two short days and part of a third? It is all a mere touch of folly, a veritable midsummer madness. He will fling the thought of it far from him.

But alas! alas! this is easier said than done.

And in the silent watches of the sleepless night, when most things are laid bare to us, he knows that at last fair love has caught him in its toils, and that for weal or woe—nay woe, for a certainty!—he is a slave for evermore. At the feet of her, who but a few days ago was as nothing to him, his heart lies wounded—stricken—hopeless!

CHAPTER VI.

“My valour is certainly going! It is sneaking off.”

“HIST! Norah!” says the Squire, in a subdued tone, putting his head cautiously outside the door of his own favourite den and beckoning her to come in, great mystery in all his bearing. Drawing her in, he closes the door carefully behind him and regards her with an anxious eye.

It is the next morning, and there is much sign of an embarrassed mind about the Squire. He looks puzzled, “perplexed in the extreme,” and his hair has taken that pronounced stage generally caused by the running through it of nervous fingers.

“He’ll stay the week!” he says at last, getting it out with rather a jerk. “The whole week, to a moral. I told you how ’twould be.”

A little thrill of pleasure rushes through Norah.

“Well? You aren’t sorry, are you?” she asks, reproachfully. “Remember all you said about the duties of hospitality and the——”

“Nonsense, now, Norah! What way is that to speak? Sorry, is it? Why, it’s delighted I am. I wish he could stay a month, only—— Why I never met a nicer fellow——never. Did you, now?”

“Never,” says Norah, sincerely.

“’Tisn’t that, at all, but—but Noddlekins,” sinking his voice to a whisper, “do you think they will hold out?”

“What?” startled. “The chickens—the mutton? Even if they don’t we can get——”

“Oh! bother take the chickens and the mutton,” cries the Squire in a frenzied tone. “Who’s thinking of them? ’Tisn’t the dinner that’s troubling me, Duchess — ’tis the clothes!” Here he grows almost apoplectic in his endeavour to whisper and still give to his words the emphasis they deserve. “Oh! Norah, darling, last night I thought I’d have died in ’em! Specially the coat. I felt bursting!”

“That’s how you looked, too,” says the Duchess, with deep sympathy. “Why not

leave them, off, dad, darling? I'm sure you look ever so nice in your Sunday ones. Quite lovely, indeed, when your hair is cut."

"Never!" says the Squire, heroically. "I've begun and I'll finish in 'em, though they be the death of me. D'ye think I'd let him go back to the Castle, to Madam, my own sister-in-law, and say I dined in fustian?"

"He wouldn't!" says Norah, indignantly. "What do you take him for?"

"It might come out all the same, and then we'd be disgraced for life. But what I was thinking is this," regarding her anxiously. "If I were to ease them a bit! Eh? To give a little snip to the stitching under the arms, you know. It would be a great relief to me—and—and he'd never see it. Eh, now?"

"Not for the world!" declares Norah, vehemently. "Cut one stitch and the whole thing will go. Why, dad, think of their age! They were made before I was born. They must be twenty years old at least."

"Thirty, my love, I think," says the poor Squire, with much dejection. It is a great blow to him that that "snip" has been for-

bidden. "And you really think I couldn't ease them? It's great agony, Norah. I assure you, my dear, there was a moment last night when I felt as if I was going to sneeze! I'll never forget it. If I had all would have been over with me! Not a seam, not a button would have been left! I thought I should have died of fright! It really makes me very anxious, my dear, and it's a thing that may occur again. I'm rather given to sneezing."

"You are. It is a great misfortune," says Norah, sadly. "I wish you could cure yourself."

"I assure you I can't even laugh comfortably," goes on the Squire, with a sigh; "and that's a great loss to me. 'Tis a thing I'm not accustomed to. I don't believe they'll stand a week of it, Norah. I don't indeed; and if they do give, I shan't be able to hold up my head again."

"I'll get a good strong bit of housewife's thread, and sew the seams on the inside wherever they look strained, and then you can laugh," says his daughter, giving him an encouraging pat on his broad back.

“If you do, I’m thinking you’ll sew the suit,” says he, still melancholy. “There isn’t a seam in it that you couldn’t burst with a decent sigh.”

He looks at her as if defying her to deny this, and then, all suddenly, without so much as a second’s warning, he bursts out into an irresistible peal of laughter. His laugh and Norah’s are just the same; musical, hearty, compelling. To hear them is to join in them *volens volens*. Long and loud he laughed, Norah keeping him company, without exactly knowing why; but youth, especially Irish youth, is prone to laughter, and is always thankful for a chance of giving way to it.

“Speak! Speak!” cries she at last. “I can’t laugh for ever without a reason for it. It’s an unsatisfactory sort of mirth.”

“I was thinking,” says he, still choking, “that if I did burst those clothes, what a row there would be. Such an explosion! Just think of his face and yours! and your poor old dad at the head of the table—ha! ha! ha!—with vacancies in his raiment, and—— Oh! my! Oh! my!”

The tears of mirth are running down his cheeks as he pictures to himself the scene that a moment before had reduced him to despair. Norah, too, is laughing with all her heart, when Denis, opening the door, thrusts in his head.

“It does one good to hear you,” he says. “May I know what it is all about?”

“No ; it isn’t good enough,” says the Duchess, hastily. ‘It is too ancient ; a perfectly threadbare joke.’”

“Good for you, Duchess!” cries the Squire, beginning to explode again. “Faith, the subject of it is threadbare enough in all conscience, and ancient to a fault.”

“Never mind dad, you have come to tell us something,” says Norah, addressing her cousin pointedly, as if to turn his attention from the Squire, who is in quite a dangerous mood. “That letter in your hand——”

“Is from my mother, asking me when I intend returning.”

“My dear boy! Why, you have only just come,” exclaims the Squire, forgetful now of the joke, the fragility of the evening clothes, everything.

“Nevertheless, she says she can’t do without me. The house is full of people, and it appears the task of keeping them in a good temper is beyond her. Norah, she wants to know also if you are coming back with me.”

“Back with you! To the Castle! Oh! no! Certainly not!” says the Duchess, in a tone of horror. All the laughter is gone now, giving place to a nervous astonishment. Involuntarily she steps backward until she reaches the wall behind her, as if desirous of getting as far from the Castle in question as possible. No words could be as eloquent as this movement.

“But why?” asks the young man, reproachfully. “My mother is so anxious to make your acquaintance, that she will take your refusal hardly. As you know, she cannot well come to you at present, but if you will go to her——”

“I haven’t thought of it. I didn’t know she wished——”

“I told your father. You didn’t tell her?” looking at the Squire, who is now the picture of guilt.

“I recollect something about it. I believe you did say that Madam would like to see her,” says he, temporising disgracefully; the fact being that he had remembered, but had decided from the first that Norah could never get on without him or he without Norah.

“More than that; I gave you my mother’s invitation. I hope, Norah,” regarding her earnestly, “that you will accept it. You will like my mother, I know; and as there are so many people staying there at present you won’t feel dull.”

“Oh! That’s just it,” miserably.

“What?”

“All those people!” growing quite pale.

“Nonsense!” laughing. “Not one of them will eat you, and some may amuse you. I am quite sure you will enjoy it.”

“I shouldn’t indeed. Dad,” indignantly, “why don’t you speak? Why don’t you say I should be wretched away from you?”

“She would She would indeed, I assure you,” says the Squire, waking to an enthusiastic defence of the position because of that indignant glance. “I assure you, my dear Denis, she would be the most melancholy

creature alive if deprived of my society even for a day!"

He says it in such perfect good faith, and with such an open desire to help her in her extremity, that he is irresistible. Even Norah gives way to laughter.

"It is true, though," she says to Denis, a little defiantly. "We have never been separated, never. Even for the three years I was at school in France he came over and lived there with me."

"Then I wish you would change your mind and come to Ventry too," said Denis, turning to his uncle.

"I wish I could," says the Squire, who indeed would have desired nothing better, "but I'm tied by the heels just now. You know what a worry the tenants are."

He refrains from mention of the evening suit, and the utter inability to order a new one.

"Norah," says her cousin, suddenly, "come out and let us talk it over."

CHAPTER VII.

“Oh, the little more, and how much it is !”

OUTSIDE, the world is so fair, so fresh, so joyous, that it is scarcely to be wondered at if Denis trusted to it to help him with his pleading. Who could prove unkind with such a sun gilding such fleecy clouds. Who be obdurate with all Nature's richest treasures spread on every side of one with such a lavish hand ?

It rather upsets his theory, however, when, on glancing downwards at his cousin, he finds her as hard-hearted as ever.

“Well,” she says, with a little vexed laugh, catching his expression, “what did you expect? I have come out with you, as you seemed to imagine great things would come of such a move, but I warn you, it will not do a bit of good.”

“I wonder why you have so determinedly

set your face against coming to us," says he, a little offended.

"It isn't that," hastily. "Don't think it for a moment. If it were only you and your mother — but the fact is," speaking reluctantly and colouring warmly, "I—I'm afraid!"

"Afraid of what?" incredulously.

"Of all those strangers. When I think of being alone there—amongst so many people unknown to me—without dad—I feel—oh!" —laying her hand upon her bosom—"dreadful!"

"But you wouldn't be alone. I shall be there," says Delaney, the very slightest suspicion of a grievance in his tone.

"Why, so you would," says she, slowly, as if suddenly awakening to a hitherto forgotten fact. "I never thought of that, but still you are not dad, you know."

This is indisputable. Beyond all doubt she has taken up an unassailable position. Acknowledging this fact, Delaney gives up argument.

"I won't listen to another objection," cries he, gaily. "Not one. I insist on carrying

you off bodily and introducing you to the lot of them, whether you will or not. I have set my heart on the doing of this, and I know you will not have the heart to thwart me. What! Do you think I would readily relinquish the triumph of showing you off to them—of exhibiting my captive? My very own discovery, too!”

He is thinking of the sensation her beauty would create even amongst the throng of pretty women with whom his mother ever delights to surround herself. What one of that gay crowd could dare to compare with her? Already, in his fond fancy, he can see her dancing through the grand old rooms at Ventry, or walking sedately through its gardens, the sweetest flower amongst all those myriad blossoms.

The charm of this vision, however—it being a mere mental vagary—being naturally withheld from the Duchess, it so happens that his words fall with a meaning little intended upon her ears. Far from seeing anything complimentary in them, she sees something fatally the reverse. Could so lovely a thing as her face be ever guilty

of showing wrath undisguised now is the time.

“Show me off!” she repeats, in a voice that positively electrifies the ill-fated Denis. “Exhibit me! Am I then, a South Sea Islander? Am I to understand that I really differ so entirely from the rest of your acquaintances?”

“As light from darkness,” replies he, with promptitude, though considerably puzzled by her tone and expression.

“Oh!” says the Duchess.

Great meaning may be thrown into this apparently harmless monosyllable. Miss Delaney makes it so eloquent that her cousin turns sharply to look at her. What can be the matter with her? For an instant their eyes meet; time long enough to let him see that tears are standing thickly in hers.

“Norah! what is it?” he exclaims, stopping short. “Does this visit to my mother make you really so unhappy? If I thought so——”

“It has nothing to do with it, and you know it!” returns she, resentfully. This time the tears are very plain to him, as she lifts two indignant eyes to his. Large and

brilliant they hang upon her lashes, trembling to their fall. "But to be told that one is 'different!' Of course," with a baleful glance at him, "I know I am not as those others—those fashionable friends of yours, who have been everywhere and seen everything, and heard all there is to hear, and I daresay"—with tearful contempt—"a good deal more! I know I am not like them, and"—passionately—"I don't want to be, either. But one may be different from people without liking to hear it said. One may be absurd and old-fashioned without wanting to hear it put into words "

This terrible speech is poured forth with a startling fluency that reduces Denis to a state bordering on *como*. Recovering himself by an effort—

"Norah! is it possible you could so mis-judge me?" he says, flushing hotly. "My dar——er——h'm——" seeking wildly for a compromise—"my dearest girl! can it be that you don't see what I really meant, where the true difference lies? That you are the light—the rest of them the darkness. Oh! Norah, look at me! Say you believe me!"

“I won’t! I don’t!” keeping her gaze studiously averted; and now the two large tears detach themselves at last from the lashes and roll slowly, pitifully down her cheeks. “I’m sure you are saying all that just to please and comfort me.” A little sob breaks from her.

It is by a mighty effort alone that Delaney controls the eager longing that now almost overpowers him to catch her in his arms and press that sad, angry little face against his own. Was ever thing created fairer than this child? Oh! that he were free to woo—perchance to win her! Oh! that he had never seen her!—and yet—not that! He could not wish that! With what a strange suddenness she had fallen into his life—and alas! how much too late!—killing for him the serenity in which he had believed he should live and die, not knowing then the greatest good of all—nor having tasted of love’s draught—that bitter sweet! Now, all that is over; serenity is dead and peace has flown; and here a galling chain binds him secure, and there stands love, uncrowned, waiting, it might have been, for him! A love so sweet;

an eager, gracious thing; careless as yet, with songs on her lips and laughter in her eyes, and no knowledge — as it seems to him — of the cruel fret and fever of the pain that men call passion.

All this, or a vague sense of it, runs through him as he stands there looking on her tears, but when he speaks, his voice, though low, is calm.

“Not I,” he says. “I’ll swear it to you if you will, though my word is as good as my bond. Why, you silly baby, do you think, if I did entertain such a heresy, that I should have had the pluck to say it?”

This appears to be an excellent bit of reasoning and very convincing. The Duchess smiles and earth grows bright again! She even draws a little nearer to him, as if about to speak, and then, as if overcome by a little access of shyness, stops short, and taking hold of one of the buttons of his coat between a slender finger and thumb, twists it round and round and round again without any apparent reason.

“Well?” questions Denis, stifling a sigh. It is very hard for anyone under an anchorite

to have the chosen of his heart so very close to him and feel that he mustn't encourage her to come closer still. "Well?"

"Denis, tell me this,"—with the sweetest blush imaginable. "Really, now mind—honestly, do you think me pretty?"

"It is too poor a word," says the miserable Denis, so far forgetting the stern *rôle* allotted to him as to take the little slim fingers from the long-suffering button, and press them to his lips. If you will say 'lovely,' I can answer you."

"Oh, now!" with a little pleased laugh, "that is going too far. They tell me my mother was beautiful, but that I do not resemble her much; that I am like dad's people. Like," thoughtfully, "your people. You, perhaps. How strange that would be! Am I like you?"

"I daresay I have frequently flattered myself," says Denis, laughing. "We all do it; but I think I can honestly say never to that extent."

"Well," persists the Duchess, positively, "now that it has occurred to me, I am sure I reminded myself of somebody this morning

when I was doing my hair before the glass. It must have been you. Come over here," slipping her hand into his, and drawing him to where a deep pool lies basking drowsily in the sunshine, encompassed by ferns and mosses.

Over this she bends, scrutinising the faint imperfect reflection of her charms it throws up to her. Delicate, vague, unsatisfactory it is, yet sweet withal. Denis, standing behind her, and gazing over her shoulder, can see the quivering image that so maligns her pure and perfect beauty, and turns with impatience to the living original beside him. She is still absorbed in tracing a likeness that does not exist, when a sudden desire to play upon her an old schoolboy trick, and so disturb her thoughts, takes possession of him.

Passing his hands round her waist, from the back, he pushes her well over the brink of the pool, holding her thus for an instant and then drawing her back to *terra firma*.

"There! only for me you would have been in," he says, vain-gloriously.

"Oh, Denis!" she cries, genuinely startled. Then she laughs, and with his arms still

encircling her, looks back at him over her shoulder with parted lips and brightened eyes. Her attitude brings her head almost to his shoulder. She was never yet so near to his heart. Was she ever yet so lovely? His pulses are beginning to beat madly, his eyes grow warm. The laugh is still fresh upon her lips.

“My love, whose lips are softer far
Than drowsy poppy petals are,
And sweeter than the violet.”

But the smile has died from his. There is a quick, irrepressible movement. He bends over her—nearer—nearer still; and then he loosens his hold of her, and stands back, a frown upon his brow, his face a little pale.

“Are you frightened?” asks she, lightly. “Did you think I was really going to fall in? Ha! Did punishment, then, overtake you? But you should know that I am sure-footed as a goat; that I seldom catch myself tripping.”

She is evidently puzzled a good deal by the change in his manner, which has gone from “grave to gay, from lively to severe,” without a second’s warning, and would per-

haps have subjected him to a rather embarrassing cross-examination, but that at this moment the appearance of a woman at the lower end of the path attracts both their attention.

CHAPTER VIII.

“To mortal men great loads allotted be,
But of all packs no pack like poverty.”

SHE is a woman, withered and slightly bent, and wretchedly dressed, as are all poor Irish peasants. Her petticoat, made of thick blue flannel, is short, and patched liberally here and there. No stockings cover her legs, no boots her feet, which though wonderfully small, are hard as the path itself and roughened by work and exposure. An old jacket worn at the elbows, and very much the worse for wear, covers her body, and over her shoulders a dingy little red and black shawl is thrown.

Clothing enough certainly for a hot day in July, but, alas! terribly insufficient for the frosts and snows of winter; and when they come, there will be nothing extra to cover that poor frail body. Poverty has no diver-

sity of costumes wherewith to meet the exigencies of each coming season.

Seeing Norah, the woman quickens her footsteps, already marvellously agile for a woman well past fifty.

“Ah! Biddy, is that you?” says Norah, asking the superfluous but kindly question, with a friendly smile.

“Good morrow, your honour, my lady,” returns the woman, this being a very usual greeting in the south of Ireland to those known to be of “dacent blood.” There is no such ardent admirer of aristocracy as the Irish peasant. “Are ye in a hurry, Miss? Might I have a word wid ye, Miss Norah?”

“What is it now, Biddy?” asks the Duchess, anxiously. “Nothing wrong with little Larry?”

“No, Miss. Glory be to God, he’s betther an’ betther every day. But tell me, alanna, ’tis the masher I want to see. Is he up above?” meaning Ballyhinch, not Heaven.

“I left him there about half-an-hour ago.” It is impossible for Denis, who is standing by, not to become conscious that she has

indeed found time in his society run wonderfully swift. "What do you want from him now, Biddy?"

"Faix, Miss, a bit of a shtick—no more. I thought as how he'd give me wan out of the wood beyant to keep up the house, if he only knew how badly 'twas in want of it. The rafthers is givin' way like, but if I could get something to prop 'em up wid, they'd hould together if only for a year itself. One o' thim young trees, Miss, out o' the plantation, would do. The mather, God bless him! is good to all, an' if ye think, Miss, he'd give it——"

"I know he will. Hurry up, Biddy, because he may be going out. By-the-bye," detaining her, "how's Dan? When did you hear from him?"

"Sure that was partly what was bringin' me up to the house. But"—shyly—"when I saw ye wid the gintleman," with a sly glance at Denis. "Anyhow, Miss, 'twas this mornin a letter came. I've got it here wid me," pulling it out of her bosom, "maybe ye'd like to read it?"

"Of course I should," says the Duchess,

heartily. "Dear me! what a good boy he always was."

"Thru for ye, Miss," intensely gratified. "God bless ye! Ye have the good word always for rich an' poor. D'ye see, alanna," pointing to the letter with ungovernable pride, "'tis all the way from Chayny it has come? Glory be to the Blessed Mother! but isn't it a sight of the world he is seein', an' him the biggest blagguard whin he was at home! Isn't it wondherful, Miss Norah, now? A spalpeen that I was for ever leatherin' him, he was sich a divil all out, wid his pranks an' his thricks, saving your presence, Miss. Even Father Jerry himself wasn't safe from him, an' there he is now as grand as the best of em', servin' aboard a man-o'-war."

"Well, why shouldn't he?" says Norah. "Where's the sailor that's better than an Irish sailor?"

"Fegs, an' that's thru, too," acknowledges the gratified mother. "He sint me a three-pound note, Miss, along wid the letther. There's for ye now! Faix, yes! He'd never forget his oud mammy, he says. D'ye

know, Miss Norah, I'm dead sorry now as ever I bate that boy?"

"Don't," says Norah, laughing. "Perhaps it is those beatings that have made him the burning, shining light he now is."

"'Tisn't, darlin' ; I don't belave in batins nohow. When ye're married, Miss Norah, never bate your own gossoons."

The Duchess laughs again.

"I'll remember," she says, moving on a step or two with a friendly nod as farewell.

"Will your father give that tree?" asks Denis, curiously, when they are out of hearing.

"Why, yes, of course."

"But I thought, from what he said, that he was rather indignant with the people round here ; rather inclined to be hard on them, and—and that."

The Duchess turns upon him a glance filled with fine contempt.

"And have you lived with dad for four days and don't know him yet?" she says. "You haven't found him out. Why, he can't say 'No' to one of them. He is as good as a father to them. He abuses both

the tenants and labourers from morning till night like a pickpocket, but he treats them like a friend. Of course she'll get that tree; and if the men are all employed he will in all probability go out and cut it down for her himself."

"I see," says Denis, thoughtfully. Then—"What did she want her 'stick' for?"

"Did not you hear? To prop up her roof, which is falling in. She does not demand the restoration of the roof, as you may notice, but simply begs a prop for it. Dad will see to the proper mending of it before the winter, no doubt, if—if he has the money; but there are so many roofs, and all out of repair."

She sighs.

"How you take things to heart!" says he, looking at her with some speculation in his gaze.

"Oh! these poor creatures, what they suffer!" cries she, suddenly, with a little touch of passion in her tone. "No one knows it save those who live amongst them, and they not always. Why should I not take it to heart? Am I not flesh and blood

as they are? Must I not feel for them? And every day, every hour, one is compelled to take them to heart. Why, only last winter a man came to dad—a labourer—begging for work; and he told us that the cabin in which he lived had such holes in the roof that the rain came pattering in on them even when they were in bed—he and his wife and three little children. Often, he told dad, when he had to get up at six o'clock on a winter's morning to go to his work, he was so frozen in bed that it was a relief to him to get out of it."

"Good heavens, what a melancholy story!" says Delaney, perhaps only half-believing. He spent little of his time in his native land.

"Why, that is nothing. Hear the rest of it. First one little child died. Then it was he came to dad, beseeching him to give him any cabin he could, and work, on Ballyhinch. We are wretchedly poor ourselves," says the Duchess, tears rising to her eyes, "but we managed the cabin for him; a miserable little hole, comfortless enough, but at all events the rain could not come into it. He came and took possession, but a week afterwards his

wife died—died from exposure and cold in that other dreadful house!"

"But the owner of that other house—what of him? Did he escape scot free?" asks Denis, with some indignation. "What right has any landlord to give his labourer such a miserable hut to live in? Call such a fellow as that a gentleman?"

"I didn't," reasons the Duchess, mildly. "I didn't call him anything; and it wasn't a landlord either—it wasn't a gentleman—it was a farmer. The farmers are always the worst. No landlord would have treated a labourer so, at least not one that I know of. You think this a solitary instance; but indeed they are always so poor and so patient that my heart bleeds for them; and nothing is done for them—nothing. If I was Queen Victoria——"

"What a little rebel you are!"

"I am not, indeed. You mistake me. I quite hate and detest all those wicked men who incite the people to rebellion and to murder. I heartily condemn all those Leagues, and this iniquitous 'Plan of Campaign,' which will help only to pauperise the

already moneyless nation. Indeed," looking at him with large, earnest eyes, "I think of nothing, I dwell on nothing, but only how best to improve the miserable condition of the labourers and their wives."

"They do seem in want of help, I must say; but——"

"Was there ever so mild, so cheerful, so gracious a people? Always a smile for one and a civil word! A gentle, loving, domesticated people, who want so little—so little—so little to make them happy. Day after day they toil; and what are the wages? One shilling and sixpence a day; nine shillings a week. And out of that they must clothe and feed wife and children—sometimes so many children. And rent besides; because those labourers who get a house and a quarter of an acre of ground free, only get six shillings a week. To me it is a marvellous thing how all this is done. Nine shillings a week! What a little sum; and yet all you English people—ah! Denis, I am afraid you are only half a Paddy!—accuse these poor creatures of being thriftless, careless, extravagant! Extravagant on nine shillings a week!"

“I don't believe I ever said it,” says Delaney, pensively; “and I must protest against being Anglicised in this sort of way.”

But she will not listen to him.

“They never save, you cry. Save! With scarcely enough pennies to keep body and soul together. And yet they do, poor souls! They scrape together coin after coin until they have enough to buy their pig, and then it, too, must be fed.”

“I wish you wouldn't look at me like that,” says Denis. “I feel as if I should like to cry. It's rather mean of you, I think, to bring me to this lonely spot, where I am beyond succour, and then ill-treat me as you are doing.”

“Oh! I am not thinking of you,” says she, scornfully. “I am only thinking of the poor around me, and I want to make you and everyone think of them. In spite of all that can be laid to their charge, I believe them to be the most enduring, the most long-suffering race on earth. Do you know that they—I am talking of the poorer class, the labourers, a large class, remember—never taste meat! It is not that they don't have it often, that

they have it only, perhaps, on high-days and holidays — it is that they have it never! From year's end to year's end they never see it. Yet how small has been their complaining. To me it all seems dreadful. I do not wonder at this hateful agitation. I am only surprised that they have borne with their poverty so long without open expression of discontent. Why, one good gown that a woman would buy for a ball would keep an entire family comfortable for a year."

"My dear child, if you were to go into that—— Why, what a terrible little Communist you are!"

"Don't call me names," says she, laughing, though tears are not far from her. "And, indeed, my views are not so sweeping as you would make them out to be. I know quite well that the ball dresses must be bought, and that the poor we must have always with us. But it suggests itself to me that they, the poor, cannot see the necessity for it, and that the injustice of it, alone, must strike them. Why should not *they* be the ones to buy ball dresses, and *we* to starve and endure, if only for a while? Turn about, would seem

to them, I daresay, only the most meagre fair play.

“They are not so miserable as you picture them. You forget they are a happy-go-lucky lot, if they are anything, and that they never think.”

“So you believe. I don’t. And, at all events, they are being made to think now by these demagogues who are going about stirring up their evil passions. I am always sorry when I read the sneers about our poor people in the papers. Crimes, indeed, are being committed—heinous, unpardonable crimes; but let them rest on the heads of those who have incited these foolish, wild, impetuous, passionate creatures to the performance of them.”

“They are, at all events, happy in having found an advocate as impetuous and as passionate as themselves. May I say as disloyal?” asks Denis.

“Disloyal! Oh, you do not understand them if you call them that.”

“I confess I do—and therefore I don’t—which thing is an enigma.”

“I have always said, I always will say,

that they are at heart a very loyal race; a people who would glory in rallying round their Sovereign if—just a little civility was shown them. If their Queen——”

“Oh, come, now, Norah——”

“Well, I won't, then,” smiling faintly. “I don't wish to be disloyal in any way, but it does seem such a pity that so little courtesy is ever shown to Ireland. Every now and then a hand might be held out to it; but England is favoured, and Scotland is rich in its Sovereign's love, and Ireland is left out in the cold. It would be such a little thing to humour them now and again. It might be managed at so small a cost, and it would, I firmly believe, have prevented all this present misery. Besides,” throwing up her pretty head with a little proud gesture, “if I were a Queen, I should think it my duty to be good to all my subjects, and I should remember, too, how many splendid soldiers, how many illustrious statesmen had given me their hearts, and arms, and brains, out of this despised land!”

“Well, you must confess they have given room for contempt of late.”

“They are an impressionable people, and, alas! too easily led; but if the right people had led them, how then? Well, never mind! Out of every great evil some good arises, and perhaps—who knows?—the very poor will at last gain some benefit from this agitation.”

“It will not help their cause to assist in maiming innocent cattle, and beating or throwing tar over defenceless girls,” says Denis, with a frown.

“Everything is wrong now, I know,” sadly. “But you condemn all because of the few. These people round here—how patient, how cheerful they are, and how deplorably poor! Oh, if dad and I were rich we would do something for them; but,” with a melancholy little nod, “we haven’t a penny between us.”

“Yet this seems a good property,” says Denis, looking round him.

“I daresay; but there is nothing to work it. It enables us to live, no more.” Here she laughs involuntarily. “I’m hardly a cheerful companion, am I?” she says, with a swift, sweet glance full of apology.

“The best I know, at all events,” returns Denis, earnestly.

Her late fervour has been a revelation to him. The eager, upturned face, the impassioned tone, the speaking eye, have given him a new insight into the infinite variety of her nature.

“Tell me, Norah,” says he, presently, moved by some impulse he could not have explained, “were you ever—that is—did anyone ever ask you to marry him?”

To some, this would have been an embarrassing question, to others, a rather impertinent one. To the Duchess it is a question pure and simple, nothing more.

“Never!” she responds, promptly. “And I’m just nineteen. Isn’t it disgraceful?” There is, perhaps, a touch of indignation in her tone. Why should she have been thus slighted above her fellows? “And there’s Lily Ffrench, she is younger than I am, yet there she is in India now,” throwing out her hand as though India lies in the recesses of the near bit of wood, “with a husband a year old!”

Delaney laughs.

"A youthful groom," says he.

"Oh!" airily, "you know what I mean. But as for me—— Perhaps, after all," regarding him anxiously, "I'm not that sort of girl, eh?"

"What sort of girl?"

"Attractive, for example. Do you think it likely—I mean—that some time or other someone will ask me to marry him?"

"I think it probable," drily.

"Well," dejectedly, "unless it is the butcher, or the baker, or the candlestick-maker, I don't see who else it can be down here."

"Do you want to be married?" asks he, sharply, a most unwarrantable feeling of anger against her rising in his breast.

"I certainly don't want to be an old maid!" naïvely. "She's a very poor creature in my estimation. I don't believe in the 'could-an'-she-would' theory at all. An old maid, to my mind, is a person whom nobody wanted! I shouldn't like to feel so abject as that. Dad says I needn't be frightened, because it isn't in the blood, and I couldn't catch it! There never was an old maid in

the family, he says, and he can remember down to his great aunts, and a whole tribe of cousins, from a first to a thirty-first."

"That gives a man experience, I must say, and must be a great support to you."

"Yes," with doubt; "but still, it isn't convincing. Every crime must have a beginning, and I feel as if I were going to commit this one; as if I were going to be the old maid of the Delaneys. It's a real grievance in my case, as I shan't ever have the traditional nephews and nieces upon whom to lavish my rejected affections. That's unfair, isn't it? I think if I am to be thus degraded, Nature should have supplied me with marrying brothers and sisters."

At this they both laugh, though Delaney's mirth is decidedly half-hearted.

"At Ventry," says he, slowly, as if impelled to it against his will, "you will see others beside the butcher and baker. You can there make your choice."

"Yes; when I go," doubtfully.

"And you will, Norah?" detaining her on the hall door steps as they are now about to re-enter the house.

“Oh, I don't know. I must think about it,” says she, petulantly, running away from him.”

CHAPTER IX.

“The frank young smile,
And the red young mouth, and the hairs’ young gold.”

WHETHER she does or not is another matter! One would say “not” for choice, taking note of the extremely insouciant expression that marks her face. But if she has disdained to give the matter thought, not so the Squire. Long and deep have been his broodings, and as a result of them he pounces upon her towards the evening, and drawing her into the dining-room proceeds to unburden his mind.

“Noddlekins, I’ve been thinking,” begins he, solemnly, seating himself gingerly on the arm of an exceedingly ancient chair.

“No!” exclaims his daughter, with irreverent meaning.

“I have—about this visit, and I think you ought to go. I do indeed, my dear,” seeing

disapprobation in her glance. "It is only right we should consider your future, and cease to be selfish. I know it will be a tug for us both to part; but your aunt's an influential woman, and she can bring you out and show you off a bit; and I daresay marry you well. Denis seems to think," slowly, "that you ought to marry a rich man."

"Does he indeed?" says the Duchess, with a tilt of her lovely chin, expressive of anger. "I wonder you would let him speak like that, dad! And—and I shan't go either. I can't bear strangers."

"Tut! You would get used to them in no time."

"I daresay; by the time I was half-dead from studying them. Their ways would not be my ways, and if I thought them tiresome they would probably think me odd; and if I were to find anyone laughing at me"—tears rising to her eyes—"I should kill them."

"And quite right, too," says the Squire, pugnaciously, giving her the warmest support. "I'd like to see the one that would dare do it. Just send him to me, that's all!"

“It wouldn’t be a he,” says the Duchess, with a prophetic sigh. “It would be a she.”

“Nonsense, my sweetheart. I’d back you against the lot of ’em. Don’t you be down-hearted. Norah,” turning to her with sudden anxiety, “can you dance?”

“Like an angel!” declares the Duchess, modestly, springing to her feet. “Do you think there will be dancing there, dad? I’m all right, so far, because Otho used to waltz with me all last winter, every afternoon that was wet, in the big hall, don’t you remember? Yes, I can dance, I know!”

“You inherit it,” says the Squire, standing up himself and beaming with pleasurable remembrance. “I was a beautiful dancer myself in my own time. There wasn’t one in the county could hold a candle to me. Not a ball or a rout I wasn’t at, this side of Cork, to say nothing of a run up to Dublin now and then, to show myself at the *leveés* and that. Sometimes I’d be up every night for a whole month at a stretch, dancing till morning peeped in at us; and after that came the drive home with one’s favourite partner through the lovely dawn. And then

up again betimes, and away with the hounds maybe, and back with a rush to dress once more to meet the McGillicuddy girls at a ball somewhere. Such laughing, such tearing as there was, and now and again a duel thrown in, just to give a filip to it. Oh, 'tis those were the divil's own times!" says the Squire, now bursting with joy over his recollections and altogether forgetful of his manners. The Duchess is evidently bent on encouraging him to quite a shameful extent.

"Oh, dad, fie!" says she, shaking a slender forefinger at him. "I doubt you were a regular Mohawk in your day; a right down rollicking blade!"

"Only for a year or two, my love, no more, I assure you," says the Squire, impressively. "Then I met your mother at a ball at the McKenzies, and fell in love with her, and we were married in a fortnight. Ah! 'twas she was the lovely woman!"

"That goes without saying," remarks her Grace, saucily, holding out her skirts with both hands, and dancing up to an old-fashioned mirror, that laughs back at her in answer to her own glance. "*V'la l'effet,*"

she says, making a charming little *moue* at her own image whilst slowly tripping it to and fro before the glass.

“Come, dad,” she cries, casting a glance back at him, “you can’t have forgotten it all yet. Let’s have ‘up the middle and down again,’ if only to warm our blood.”

She places her arms akimbo, and skips up to him, a most entrancing invitation in her eyes. The Squire is not proof against it. He instantly takes fire, and in another moment he, too, is footing it gallantly, with might and main, up and down the well-waxed floor. Indeed, both father and daughter are in the middle of a very finished performance, when Denis opens the door and walks in, to find Norah flushed, panting, laughing, altogether lovely, and the Squire as the boy he really is at heart.

“Wait a moment, my dear fellow, we have just one figure more,” cries he, unwilling to cut short his dance. “Oh, Norah, you rogue, how fast you trip it; you’ll be the death of your dad! Now for a wind up. There! There’s for you! Did you ever see anything that could beat that, Denis?”

How does she dance, eh?" pointing to Norah with fatherly pride. "Will that do for madam, eh?"

"Nonsense, dad," laughing. "But I can assure you, sir," dropping a gay little curtsy to Denis, "that I can dance you something better than a country dance. A waltz, now, an' you wish it; or even a quadrille, at a pinch, though I confess I care not for such foolish measures."

"You will come to Ventry, then?" cries the young man, heedless of all save that hope. "You have made up your mind to come back with me?"

"Oh, not so fast as that!" says she, shrugging her shoulders. "I must get—— There are things that must be seen to before I can go; if," with a hesitation cruelly prolonged, "go I do."

"Do not throw another doubt on it. Come, now, give me your word you will accept my mother's invitation."

"Well, I suppose so," sighing.

"And when? Now," turning to his uncle, "that I have obtained her consent, I think I had better run home and lift the mother

out of her Slough of Despond. Then I can come back again for Norah. When, Norah? In a week?"

"Three weeks. Not a minute sooner."

"That will take us well into August. So be it, then. Let us say on the fifteenth; I shall return here for you, and you will be ready then to start with me for Ventry on the following day."

"As you will," says the Duchess, in a resigned tone. "If you both think it necessary that I should see the world, I succumb to superior force. Though how," looking with growing melancholy at her father, "you are ever going to get on without me is a dark mystery."

"I shan't get on, my love," says the Squire, prophetically. "Don't hope for it. I shall remain where I am—stock still—until you come back to me!"

CHAPTER X.

“And truth and hope are sunlight in your eyes.”

TIME, that runs ever with a swift foot and light, such hours as we are happiest, seems to the Duchess to crawl with a slow and sullen step for the next three weeks. This she will not acknowledge, even to herself; yet never in all her young life did the days hang so heavily upon her hands; never did the daily accustomed tasks show themselves so devoid of interest. But all things end, and tantalizing time is at last conquered, and here dawns the day that brings Denis back again to Ballyhinch.

The Duchess, gowned in a charming cambric of palest pink—a quite new gown, selected from amongst those she has been making for her visit to Madam Delaney—is looking very sweet, very lovely, if a little paler than usual. There is a touch of rest-

lessness about her all the morning, that she strives, but vainly, to conceal, and which betrays itself most frequently in a wild desire to prove that the clocks are wrong.

What ails them? Why don't they go on faster? Has anyone been meddling with them? She is growing positively careworn in expression by the time the ancient eight-day clock in the hall strikes two, proclaiming the hour when he should arrive.

Suppose he isn't coming at all! That something has kept him at home. Her large eyes grow pathetic, her mouth takes a mournful curve. Melancholy marks her for its own. But what is this? Wheels! Surely the sound of wheels! Instantly, as if by magic, the cloud is swept from her face, a brilliant colour springs into her cheek, her eyes grow bright, her step buoyant. Down the hall like a small whirlwind she rushes, pulls open the door, races down the steps, to find herself face to face with him.

Yes, there he is, before her. For a moment she hesitates. There might perhaps be hidden down somewhere in her mind the memory of a dark saying anent the impro-

priety of embracing young men as a general rule, but if so it escapes her now. Her delight, her honest joy is too much for her. Her lips part in a lovely smile, and flinging everything to the winds, forgetful indeed of everything save the one dear fact that he has come back again to fill her days with gladness, she throws her arms around his neck and presses her velvet cheek to his.

“You’ve come!” she says, crying aloud this self-evident delightful truth, as though the very utterance of it is a joy to her. “Oh! come in. Come quickly. Dad will be just as pleased as I am. How nice you look,” drawing back from him, though with her hands still clasped in his, the better to see him. “Those are new clothes, aren’t they, you extravagant boy? Well, so are mine! How do you like this dress? Do I look well in it? Oh! I’ve been so lonely without you. Oh! dear!” with a little sigh of utter content, and a loving smile. “How good is to see you again!”

The openness of her heartfelt joy, the innocence of her lovely eyes, the almost childish fervour of her manner, all betray the

fact that if she does love him, it is a love of which she herself is ignorant. He is her cousin, her dear friend, her "chum," as it were, but as a lover she has not once thought of him. To Denis, this eager greeting, devoid as it is of shyness, or consciousness of any sort, seems to speak only of a heart quite free. To that greeting he had made no answer. It seems to him as though speech is beyond him. After that first wild thrill of passionate delight that had been his, when his arms closed round her, there had come a sense of despair sufficiently keen to render him silent. It is with a pale unsmiling face he now follows her into the hall.

"Why," says she, stopping short and gazing at him, "I don't believe you are a bit glad to see me. How pale, how miserable you look! Is it possible," changing colour, "that you are sorry to come back?"

"No. That would be of all things the least possible," replies he, making an effort to smile. "But—I have got a headache—that is all."

"And bad enough, too," says she, shaking

her head, sympathetically. "Go into the study, you will find dad there; and I will go and get you something after your journey. By and by, if your head is better, I'll take you for a nice cool walk, and that will make you all right again."

She runs lightly away, and Denis, opening the study door, is soon receiving a hearty welcome from his uncle.

"I've something to tell you," says the Squire, about half-an-hour later, leaning forward and assuming an air of deepest mystery. "Such a thing has happened since last you were here; just about a week after you left. 'Tis about the Duchess."

"Yes?" says Denis, regarding him fixedly.

"She's had a Proposal!" says the Squire, making the capital quite enormous. "Think of that now! And the child she is!"

"Well?" says Denis, a terrible tightening at his heart warning him that he had better brace himself to receive the deadly news he anticipates, lest he let his secret escape him. He feels the blood is forsaking his face; so getting up from his seat with what carelessness he can muster, he goes over to

the window and stands there gazing with unseeing eyes upon her garden beneath, "Who is it?" he asks.

"Lord Kilgarriff! No less. They've been a good deal together all their lives up to this, and he evidently thought it a desirable thing to make such arrangements as would keep them together for the remainder of them; and faith, I don't wonder at it," says the Squire, mildly. "It's the biggest grain of sense he ever showed."

"It will be an excellent match," says Delaney, in rather a stifled tone.

"That's what I'm saying. The best match he's ever likely to get."

"Well—and for her too—in a more worldly point of view."

"I daresay it would. Yes, no doubt it would," returns the Squire, thoughtfully, scraping his chin with his hand in a meditative way.

It would! Denis wheels round from the window. "Why, what does that mean? Are you going to tell me that she has—has——"

"Refused him! That's just it!" says the

Squire, tranquilly. "He was well enough as a friend, it appears; but as anything closer—no, thank you! She said all that in her own little pretty way, of course. She'd be sure to let even her worst enemy—if she could have one, bless her!—down easy. So it's off. I pitied the poor boy with all my heart; but he is of that stuff wherein wounds cure quickly. Well, that's my story. A good one, eh? Oh, by-the-bye, how d'ye think that bay colt sold? I took him to——"

"But, my dear sir—my dear uncle—do you know what she has refused?" says Denis, able to discuss the matter now she has refused it. "Four thousand a year and a title! The money is small to keep up a title, certainly; but still, four thousand a year is something!"

"Well, yes. It sounds a pity, doesn't it?" says the Squire, knocking the ashes out of his pipe in a lazy but careful fashion. "But if she didn't like him? Why, that's all about it, you see."

"But did you say nothing to—to influence her—to induce her to think of it?" asks Delaney, studying his uncle as though he

were a new specimen — which perhaps he is.

“Divil a word,” stolidly. Then, after a reflective draw or two from his pipe:— “What for? To induce her to marry a man for whom she doesn’t care two straws? Surely that would be a queer thing to do. No, no, my lad; bad work comes of that always. I’m young enough still to believe in that blessing called love; and old enough, too, for the matter of that. For with age comes wisdom, or at all events it should. My little Duchess shall marry just whom she pleases, always provided he is a gentleman in the fullest sense of the word; or she shan’t marry at all, just as she pleases, too.”

“But such a chance to fling away,” persists Denis, curious now to read the other’s mind on this subject thoroughly.

“Did you ever hear such a fellow? What ails the boy?” says the Squire, regarding him with a humorous and rather puzzled eye. “Why, where is the good of forty thousand a year if you hate the very bread you break with the owner of it? D’ye think I’d see the light die out of her pretty

eyes and her lips grow smileless, all for the sake of making her a fine madam? Would I watch for her steps to become less joyous, and listen in vain for her laughter? I tell you no, man, not for all the money this world holds! And besides, what would it all do for her, my bonnie bird? Shall I tell you? It would kill her; and that would kill me! Tut," says the Squire, contemptuously, throwing himself back in his chair, and putting his pipe once more between his lips, "what folly it all is!"

Denis, coming over from the window, lays his hand lightly on his shoulder. The touch, light as it is, is in a sense a caress, and for a moment the two men look at each other steadily; the Squire with a gentle wonderment but a great friendliness in his handsome eyes.

"Well, I take great pride in the thought that I am your nephew," says Denis, simply.

CHAPTER XI.

“Oh, how the spring of love resembleth
The uncertain glory of an April day.”

It is drawing towards evening, and though the sun still rides triumphant in the heavens, long shadows are stretching themselves here and there, and the voices of the birds are growing faint and ever fainter. A little wind has arisen that the languid morning had not known, and now sighs through the trees and rustles the leaves as it rushes through them. There is a great calm everywhere, and a sense of tranquillity, vague but strong, that has evidently communicated itself to the breasts of the two now walking silently through the scented wood.

Side by side they move, but with closed lips, the first mild attempts at conversation having fallen away from them beneath the langorous influence of the dying noon. All

the sweet wild life of nature seems indeed to be dropping asleep, and scarcely a sound disturbs the mystical quiet of the early evening.

“Only the pattering aspen
Made a sound of growing rain,
That fell ever faster and faster,
Then faltered to silence again.”

The entrance into a broad bit of green open, across which the tremulous sunbeams are still wandering, restores the Duchess to a desire for speech — a desire never far from her.

“I wonder how I shall feel this time to-morrow,” she says, with a little nervous laugh that shows where her thoughts have been roaming. “We shall be at the Castle then, eh?”

“Yes. About five or five-fifteen. Did you get my mother’s last letter?”

“I had one this morning. Such a kind letter; with so many sweet messages in it for dad, that it took my heart captive. As for dad, it has quite turned his head. There is no managing him ever since. Do you know,” glancing at him, “that I am going to stay with you for a very long visit?”

Months! Well, instead of dad's lamenting his fate over this last move—which will leave him, of course, by himself for a very much longer time than he first anticipated — now what do you think is the new *rôle* he has arranged for himself?"

"How could I think?" laughing at the pretended look of disgust on the pretty *piquante* face.

"To be delighted, then; charmed at the prospect of being left solitary until Christmas! Do you believe in him? I don't! I am certain now that he is a dark schemer, and that there is more in this than we can yet see! He declares that it is all for my good; that now at last an opening has been made for me, and that I am very likely to make what he calls 'a good match.'"

"You might do that without stirring, perhaps," says Delaney, slowly.

Has she forgotten all about that late proposal? Has that unfortunate young man's misery—of course he is miserable—passed from her mind? Yet she has undoubtedly led him to his doom. It had all come in his—Delaney's—opinion, from sticking straws

in his hair until he was as mad as Ophelia. Yet now, here she was, apparently oblivious of any straws, any broken-spirited wooer.

The Duchess, indeed, has evidently for the moment forgotten the Kilgarriff affair altogether, in her desire to analyse her father's motives.

"There is something I don't like about his manner," she goes on. "One would think he wanted to get rid of me. Of me, mind you! But if any such wild dream as the hope of shaking me off has entered his head, I can tell him he is making a grand mistake, that's all! If ever I do marry I shall carry him along with me, wherever I go, be it to the Sandwich Islands or the very middle of Central Africa."

"Let us hope, for dad's sake, that your future husband will have no business in either of those delightful spots," says Denis, rather heavily.

"I don't believe he'll have business anywhere," says the Duchess, in an aggrieved tone. "I don't believe he exists; or that I shall ever get as far as even a possible husband."

“How can you say that?” exclaims he, almost roughly. “Have you already forgotten Kilgarriff?”

“Oh!” colouring hotly from chin to brow. “You mean Otho! Did dad tell you about that? Very mean of him, I call it.”

“You forget it was only in me he confided. I am nothing. A cousin would naturally be told anything of that sort; and the news could not, of course, concern or hurt him in any way.”

“No; of course not,” slowly.

“Well, at Ventry, as you say, or rather as your father says, you will perhaps find someone who——”

“At Ventry,” with a little frown, “you won’t know me. I certainly shall not be attractive.”

“But why?” impatiently.

“For one thing, I shall be afraid to speak. I shall,” recovering herself a little—sufficiently to allow an irrepressible laugh to fall from her lips—“be lost in a desire to conduct myself with propriety. I shall be lonely, too,” with a touch of prospective misery; “no one will call me Norah

there. Not a soul will think of me as 'the Duchess.' I shall be Miss Delaney. Oh, how unfriendly it sounds."

"Not worse than Miss anything else."

"Far worse to me. But I know what I shall do," brightening. "The very instant I begin to know anyone a little bit better, I shall entreat him to call me Norah."

"I hope you won't!" hastily turning to her a face full of an angry fear.

"Hope in vain, then," gaily. "I shall, indeed. I shall never feel at home until everyone calls me by my name."

"And is that your idea of conducting yourself with propriety?" with ill-suppressed wrath. "If you persist in that course, Norah—if you permit every man you meet to call you, after a few days' acquaintance, by your Christian name, it is my duty to warn you that there is yet another name by which you will infallibly be called."

There is perhaps rather too much vehemence in his manner.

"And that?" questions she, in a tone that should have warned him that she is making ready for battle.

“A flirt! A coquette!”

He has grown very pale, and there is a frown upon his brow. A frown, however, that sinks into insignificance beside the one that she now makes him a present of.

“A flirt! A coquette!” Not all the italics or notes of admiration in the printer’s power could give an adequate idea of the concentrated indignation she throws into her repetition. “I! Well, I must say you haven’t improved in your manners since last I saw you. So that is what you call me!” The flagrant injustice of this accusation is evidently apparent, even to herself, because she hurries on as if to forbid the protestation he vainly attempts. “At all events,” contemptuously, “you have nothing to complain of on that score. I have never flirted or coquetted with you!”

“Certainly not,” angrily. “You forget I am your cousin”—he clings to this fact with a melancholy strength, as though desirous of receiving a moral backbone from it—“and a cousin, we all know, is quite the same as——”

“No, it isn’t. It isn’t the least bit in the world like a brother,” interrupts the Duchess,

truculently. "I know all about that. There was Kitty French—Lily's sister—she had a cousin who came down here and called himself her brother, and made violent love to her, notwithstanding; and when he went away at last they found out he had been engaged to another girl all the time, and he married her, and Kitty was quite broken-hearted for months and months afterwards. So cousins aren't brothers, you see; and therefore they have no right to be rude, and—and interfering."

There is much righteous anger in her tone, and the glance she deigns to cast at him is full of triumph. As for Denis, it seems to him as though a small, cold, remorseless hand has fastened on his heart. How that story had come home to him. But in his case the tables are indeed turned. He is the one who will suffer; not this clear-eyed, impetuous child. Suffer, not for months and months only, but for ever. Well, thank Heaven, the pain will be all on his side; and—no one the wiser.

They have come to a wide stream, shallow in parts, but always deep enough to give the

unlucky crosser who should miss the stepping stones a severe wetting. These stones lie across the bed of the river at very unequal distances, and are for the most part wobbly and abominably unreliable. Denis, planting a foot firmly on the first of them, holds out his hand in dignified silence to the Duchess.

Her Grace, however, rejects his advances with a scorn unbounded.

“No, thank you,” says she, picking up her pink skirts and preparing to do or die. “I can get across quite well by myself. I feel sure,” with a terrible glance, “it would be more than anyone could expect of you that you should give a helping hand to a—coquette!”

“I didn’t call you that!” indignantly.

“No? I quite thought I heard you use the word. Well, at all events, to look at you”—severely—“it is easy to see that at this very instant you are calling me all sorts of names—secretly. Pray cross over, Denis. Don’t mind me.”

“As you will,” says Delaney, shrugging his shoulders; and stepping briskly from stone to stone, he soon reaches the opposite

bank. There he stands, whistling something from "Ruddigore," and apparently oblivious to the fact that a young lady is somewhere within view attempting with light but nervous steps to cross that primitive bridge.

An "Oh!" however, faint but frightened, coming to his ears, he turns quickly, to see that Norah is standing on the middle stone—a wicked, wily stone—and that her face is by no means so devoid of fear as she fondly believes it to be. Not fear of a desperate character, a merely carnal fear about the well-being of her dainty cambric gown.

"Shall I help you?" demands he, coldly, though in reality he is fairly dying to go to her assistance.

"Certainly not!" icily. "Rather than accept your assistance, I'd a thousand times rather fall in and be drowned."

As the water could not possibly come up to the bald crown of an infant, there is no immediate danger of this.

"Please yourself, of course," says Delaney, calmly.

If annoyed, he still keeps, however, an eye upon her, and at the very last stepping-stone,

seeing her lose her balance and stagger dangerously, he rushes forward, only barely in time to save that charming gown from destruction.

He has his arm round her ; he has drawn her on to the high and dry bank. She is now indeed in perfect safety, but still his arm is round her. It is not always easy to remember—not always—when the face we love is so near our own—the little idolized form lying contentedly in our embrace.

“My darling ! you are not hurt ?” whispers he, in an impassioned tone, holding her still closer to him. All his heart’s yearning, all his unhappy love, speaks in those words.

CHAPTER XII.

“With white feet bruised from no delightful way,
Through darkness and the disenchanted air,
Lost Love went weeping half a winter’s day.”

A SECOND’S silence and then—

“Hurt? No. Oh, no!”

Her voice is a mere sigh. In the charming face uplifted to his, what is it that he sees? Such a swift, sweet, shy glance she gives him; such a tender light there is in the lovely eyes; such a faint happy trembling of the perfect lips. What does it all say?

With a feeling of misery as yet unknown to him, the young man slowly loosens his arm around her and lets her go. Puts her from him, as it were—that innocent temptress.

She knows nothing, however, of the thoughts that sting and torment him. She has recovered herself quickly, and with a girl’s first instinct, seeks to hide the tenderness that had for an instant flashed into

being, startling her almost as keenly as it had shocked him. She flings it all from her by a supreme effort. She is laughing. The tender smile has died; he might almost believe that that strange sweet light had never shone within her eyes.

“Now that you have rescued me from a watery grave,” says she, gaily, “I suppose I am bound in common gratitude to forgive you. But you were cross. Come and sit down here, Denis, and tell me all about the people I am going to meet to-morrow. First, your mother.”

Except that her eyes do not meet his as freely as of old, he could bring himself to think that that revelation of a minute since was but part of a cruel dream. But he had seen; he cannot forget. He knows! And with the wild mad joy the knowledge brings him, there is also a sense of despair and of dishonour. One thought haunts him. He should have told her.

“What is your mother like?” asks the Duchess, giving him a little push with her hand to “wake him up,” as she says. He has flung himself on the grass at her feet.

“She is tall, fair, handsome.”

“Not like you, then?” with some disappointment.

“No,” says Denis, unable to refrain from a short laugh at this naïve rejoinder.

“Do you think,” anxiously, “that I shall get on with her?”

“Spare yourself speculation on that score,” says he, quickly. “Everyone gets on with my mother; and you are sure to love her, because she will love you. She is graciousness itself. She is beloved by all. She is the sweetest woman in the world,” says her son, not with enthusiasm, but with a settled conviction that is clearly the growth of many years, and is not possible to shake.

“How you love her!” says the Duchess, looking with approval at him. “Just the same way that I love dad. Well, go on, tell me about the others.”

“Better wait till you see them.”

“No. I should like a portrait or two beforehand. They help one. What of that cousin who stays with you so much? Katharine, is it not?”

“Katherine, certainly. With a K, mind.”

“Does that mean that she is an austere person? Is a Catherine with a C more pliable? I can't take in such frivolous descriptions. Tell me more of her. She interests me in some strange way. Some way that is not pleasant, I think. Well, what is she like?”

“She is English. The most English person in England—or out of it, I'm positive.”

“I don't mean that, though I knew she would be of the precise and frigid order. What I mean is—is she pretty?”

“She is a ‘daughter of the gods, divinely tall, and most—confoundedly fair,’” says Delaney, with a mournful glance of admiration at the dark, brilliant, loving eyes and chestnut locks of the girl beside him. “She is perfect at all points. You could not find a flaw in her, and you could not ruffle her or take her aback to save your life. She always knows exactly what to say, and as a rule she says it, whether you like it or not; and she's a very good girl, you know,” says he, pulling himself up somewhat shortly, as if a little ashamed of his treatment of the case in question.

“Does she live at Ventry?”

‘N—o. Not exactly. She has heaps of money, and can therefore go where she pleases; but generally it pleases her to go wherever my mother chances to be; and at all events she makes our place her headquarters.”

“Why?” asks the Duchess, suddenly. She is looking him fair in the eyes, a little increased brilliancy in her own. Is there something in his manner, halting, uncertain, reluctant, that conveys to her a vague suspicion of the truth?

“Why?” she says again, leaning forward as though to read his face, and he, as if unable to meet at this crisis the gaze of those earnest, honest eyes, turns over on his face and begins to pull up absently the blades of grass before him.

“Why?” repeats she, with gentle persistence; yet there is something in her tone that warns him she will be answered.

“Because, for one thing, she is my mother’s niece, and because”—unsteadily—
“some day I am going to marry her.”

Dead silence! Delaney goes on mechani-

cally plucking up the grasses, whilst the Duchess sits with her small brown hands tightly folded in her lap, gazing fixedly at the beech hedge opposite. She does not see it, however. There is a little mist before her eyes—a sickening feeling at her heart—a wild craving to be alone—but above and beyond all, a sense of shame! Only a few minutes since she had learned the great secret of her life—the sweetest secret the world could ever tell her, as then she dreamed; and now—already—it is a source of disgrace to her, an ignominy, an ever-living reproach. One grain of comfort indeed she has, and to that she clings with a desperate strength. He does not know! He cannot; and he never shall!

He is talking now, and in a dull sort of way she is aware that his voice is very unlike the joyous one that has become to her so fatally dear.

“It began when we were boy and girl together,” he is saying, in a rather monotonous way, like one repeating an abhorred lesson. “It—I don’t know how it began. We drifted into it, I suppose, because we

were cousins, and good friends if you will, but—nothing more!”

“Do you think she would like you to discuss her with—with a stranger?” says the Duchess, gently; but oh! what is the matter with the fresh, glad young voice? “If—if I were engaged to anyone, I don’t think I should like the man I was going to marry to talk so of me to—— But—oh! I forgot,” with a determined but most mournful smile, “a cousin, according to you, is as a brother, and of course one’s brother may say and do what he pleases; and if he cannot make a confidante of his sister—why——”

“Norah!” He has risen to his feet, and she can see that he is deadly pale.

“And why”—hurriedly, and with a little unmirthful laugh—“why do you call her Katherine? Kitty, now—Kitty is a sweeter, a more loving name. Ah! you should mend your manners,”

“Norah, don’t speak to me like that. If you would only let me——”

“I knew a girl once called Kitty,” interrupting him, feverishly, “such a pretty girl

as she was! She died. Many people die; but your Kitty won't die, I hope."

"No! She won't!" shortly,

"With what a certainty you say that! And yet—don't you know it is always those"—wearily—"whom we love best—who—— But," and with a last flickering smile, "what a bird of ill-omen I am! Do not mind me."

"If it comes to talking of her whom I love best," begins he, recklessly, "you must know that——"

"Take care!" says she, in a tone so low, but of such extreme hauteur, that it startles him. Can it be the childish creature standing before him who has given utterance to it? Her lips are white, but her eyes are flashing. A minute later she speaks again in her ordinary tone. "Come home," she says, very naturally—the slight touch of passion has evidently restored in a measure her mental balance. I'm tired, I think, and dad will be wanting me." She stops, as if struck by some thought, and then goes on again. "That is a good thing to remember," she says, "that dad will always be wanting me."

CHAPTER XIII.

“I am sure care’s an enemy to life.”

THE great clock in the western tower is giving out five resounding strokes as the carriage draws up at the hall door of Castle Ventry. The shades of evening are already descending, and a soft mellow glow diffuses itself over the sloping lawns and the gay pleasaunce that lies on the right hand side of the magnificent old house. Peacocks are strutting up and down upon the stone terraces, and a perfume fragrant and drowsy steals up from the gardens.

The Duchess, stepping to the ground, looks round her with an appreciative eye. She is very pale, either from the long journey, or an uncertainty about her next move; but she is perhaps a little upheld by the charming hat she is wearing, a new one, and one quite unprecedented hitherto in

the annals of her wardrobe. A hat rejoicing in delicate plumes, and of as dainty a nature altogether as any young woman ever born in the purple could desire. It is a present from dad, who had drawn upon his very lean resources to get it for her, and who sent for it all the way to Dublin.

She follows Denis into the spacious hall, where he would fain have said some words of welcome to her, but the words refuse to come, and turning abruptly aside, he opens the door of a room on his right.

There is a curtain beyond it, and from beyond that again comes to the tired little traveller the gay sounds of many voices—a laugh or two—the cheerful tinkle of cups and spoons. Denis has pushed aside the curtain, and as he looks into the room all eyes there see him.

“You have come? Well?” cries a gay, rather saucy voice. A voice the Duchess likes.

And then—

“So you have escaped with your life for the second time?” says another voice, low, and sweet, and *trainante*, but with a little

delicate sneer running through it. A voice that drives the blood with a rush to Norah's cheeks. "And have you impounded the little Aborigine? Have you brought her intact? None of the feathers wanting? The war-paint all there? The——"

Denis, with vehement haste, steps back into the hall, closing the door behind him. He has flushed painfully, a dark red, and as he looks nervously at Norah, she sees an expression round his mouth that is new to her. It is hard, almost revengeful.

"The room is full," he says, hurriedly. "You will not perhaps like to go in and see them all until you have rested a little while. My mother is not there, but she will come to you."

"Pray do not be so unhappy about it," says the Duchess, with a little faint smile. "I do not mind it at all. People will jest, you know. Was it Katherine?"

"Miss Cazalet might have been there. I——"

"No, do not say it. Is it worth it?" interrupts she, coldly. "You need not invent anything. There is no necessity for it as I

shall know for myself by and by. Be sure I shall remember that voice always."

"I regret that this rudeness——" he is beginning moodily, when he stops short. What is it he would say? What is the matter with him? Why can he not speak to her as he used to do in those first, glad, sweet, old days, when this shadow that now rests ever between them was unknown? He is still struggling with his effort to say something to her in a more natural manner, when a footstep near startles them both.

It is Madam Delaney. She comes quickly up to Norah, and laying both her hands on her shoulders, looks at her long and earnestly. Something of sorrow deepens her gaze after a moment or two; there is that in the girl's beautiful face that reminds her of the husband of her youth, lost such a long time ago, but never forgotten.

"My dear, dear child," she says, with a soft, long sigh, and placing her arms round her, kisses her with lingering tenderness. It is plain that the little Duchess has in her first moment found a warm corner in that gentle heart.

With the embrace just received, a sense of rest, of support, enters into Norah. There is something in the calm, handsome face of Madam to inspire instant confidence in the beholder, and Norah gives herself up to her without a fear. She may be English—and just of late Norah has begun to hate all English women—she may be Scotch, Welsh, a Hottentot, if you will, but she could not possibly feel more at home with her all at once if she had been an Irishwoman born and bred.

“You are tired, darling. You will come up to your room with me,” says Madam, fondly stroking the girl’s little slim trembling hand.

“Thank you, Aunt Maud.”

“No; not that!” says Madam, laughing. “Katherine and many others call me Aunt Maud, and now I should like a change. That is only natural, eh, Denis? You shall call me Auntie—if you don’t mind?” with the sweetest glance. “I have so pined to be addressed by that name all my life by my numerous English nieces and nephews, but they would none of it. Said I was of too

imposing a build, too majestic for such familiarities; but I think my little Irish niece will not fail me."

"No—no, indeed!" says Norah, shyly; and then more shyly still, but with an adorable smile—"No—indeed, Auntie!"

"She is a witch—a syren!" cries Madam, greatly pleased, appealing to Denis for sympathy. Poor Denis! "And what a little thing she is! Come upstairs, darling, and let me take off your things at once. My maid shall be yours after to-day, but just now I should like to have you for half-an-hour all to myself."

She is Denis's mother, and she has lost the first slender symmetrical curves and outlines, yet there is still an honest youthfulness about her, singularly attractive. Her mouth is large and loving, her eyes blue, and the soft lace cap that rests upon her head hides hair that is as soft and silky as a girl's, and without a thread of grey in it.

"Denis told me so much about you," says she, when she had helped the Duchess to take off her things, "that I feel as if I knew

you. But with you, of course, it is different. I must be more or less an utter stranger to you."

"Oh, no! If Denis talked of me to you, he must, I think, have talked even more of you to me; and all he said was of such a sort that I knew if I did not love you it would be my own fault."

"Did he? Did he really so describe me?" says Madam, a delicate colour rushing to her cheek. "Oh, Norah! if I could tell you what a son he is!" Her gentle face is indeed alight with a lovely gratification. "But you are tired, dear child. You must take a glass of wine."

She fusses over the girl in a mild, kindly way for a little while, taking very evident pleasure in her, and presently, sitting down, takes one of her hands between her own.

"I am glad you have come back to Ireland," says Norah, after a while. "Selfishly glad, I mean. Your coming has made you known to me."

"A pretty compliment," smiling. "Yes, and I am glad, too, for certain reasons; but for the rest—— I confess I am a coward,

Norah, where Denis is concerned, and I dread the results of this visit."

"But why? The people round here—are they so disaffected towards their landlord?"

"What a superfluous question in disloyal Kerry! Have you forgotten the tragic event that occurred within the past two years on this estate? Are you ignorant of the daily, hourly crimes that are being committed throughout the county? When Denis decided on coming over and superintending affairs himself, I felt I dared not try to influence him against the decrees of his conscience, but I felt also that he carried his life in his hands, and that I should never know a happy moment spent amongst these bloodthirsty creatures."

"Still they may respect Denis when they would not a paid agent."

"A vain hope. They have not respected him. Already he has had two threatening letters, and last week twenty-five poor, dumb, defenceless beasts—cows of his—were most brutally mutilated. It sickens me to think of it," says madam, who has grown rather pale. "And if they will not spare innocent crea-

tures that cannot thwart or harm them, how will it be with those who——” She stops abruptly, and a strong shudder runs through her frame. “I assure you I dwell always on the worst side of it,” she says.

“But if Denis were to try to conciliate them?” hazards Norah.

“That is not to be hoped for. You have seen only Denis’s happiest moods, those he keeps for his mother,” with a very loving smile, “and the few he really likes, as he likes you, child; but he can be terribly determined at times, and the death of that poor young man, his agent, still rankles in his mind. There are mutterings in the very air we breathe, warnings in every breeze. It is in terror I seek my bed at night; I scarcely know what it is I dread, yet fear overwhelms me now and then, and I feel certain at least of this, that revenge will be attempted.”

“But revenge for what?” asks Norah, growing anxious. “How has Denis exasperated the people?”

“For one thing, he has refused to accept their terms — very iniquitous ones — with

regard to payments of arrears, that are now, some of them, over three years due. He will give no quarter, he says, to those who gave no quarter to his murdered agent. He will mete out measure for measure, full and perfect. He is wrong, perhaps?" questions the anxious mother, looking at Norah as if for contradiction.

"One can hardly blame him," replies she, with a sigh.

"Not I, for one; but yet I fear that his uncompromising attitude may—may——Dear Norah!" rising to her feet and beginning rapidly to pace the room, "I cannot put my fears into words, but I know and anticipate only evil from our sojourn here. Well, well," making an effort to overcome her agitation, "I have no right to press my troubles upon you in this the first hour of our meeting; and indeed you must be a witch to drag them from me thus, for I confess to you, Norah, I have never yet hinted of them to living soul save you, lest it should come to Denis's ears and dishearten him by making him think I am unhappy here."

"You would not leave?" uncertainly.

“Oh, no! I may be unhappy now for him; but to be away from him when danger threatened would be more than I could endure. You see I tell you all,” smiling. “There must be some subtle sympathy between us to make me thus confide in you.”

She sighs, and again presses the girl's thin little hand lingeringly between both her own soft white palms.

“I am glad you like me,” says the Duchess, slowly.

“It is more than that, I think,” says Madam, in her gentle earnest way. She is looking with a strange fixed expression at Norah. Again she sees in the girl's beautiful face that vivid likeness to her dead—to the lover-husband of her youth.

“Do you know,” she says, leaning towards her, “I am going to make-believe you are my little daughter whilst you are with me. I have often wished I had one really. Not that Denis,” quickly, as if fearful of doing injustice to the beloved son, “ever left me much to wish for; but still, you know, a daughter must be a precious gift.”

“You have Katherine,” says the Duchess, looking at her strangely.

“Yes ; yes. And she is a very dear girl, too. Yes ; of course.” There is a slight suspicion of strain, as it seems to Norah, in madam’s kindly manner. “And Denis—darling, what did you think of him? He is not like me, eh?”

“Oh, yes ; very,” exclaims the Duchess, warmly. “In spite of your blue eyes and fair hair, he is marvellously like you.”

“So people say,” with a pleased air. “More like me than like his father. You,” with a sharp indrawing of her breath, “are like him. Well, and so you are to be my daughter for a while ; and being so anxious a mother, I have ordered some pretty gowns for my little girl to be ready for her home-coming.”

It is impossible to describe the sweetness with which she breaks this intention of hers to Norah. Who could resent it when that sweet smile accompanies the words?

“Oh! Auntie!” says the Duchess, flushing crimson. And then—“But,” in a low tone,

“if dad should not like it? Your giving me clothes, I mean.”

“Tut, my dear ; Neil will like me to do my best for you, be sure of that. He will wish me to care for you as though indeed you were my very own.”

“Neil !” How strange it sounds. To the Duchess it is so inconceivably odd to hear her father thus alluded to by his Christian name, that involuntarily she smiles. Somehow it pleases her ; it seems so friendly towards her dear dad now so far away, and all at once her heart seems to open still farther to her new-found friend.

“Of course, I could not manage about the exact fit,” says Madam ; “but my maid is an invaluable person, a perfect treasure, and as good a dressmaker as I know. Now, will you come downstairs with me and be introduced to the others, or——?”

“I’ll go down, I think.”

‘That is right, dear. Better get the awkwardness over at once ; and besides, you will be able to make a choice as to your partner at dinner later on. Don’t trouble to talk. You are fatigued by your journey ;

that will excuse a little taciturnity. I suppose you would like Denis to take you in to dinner, but——”

“ Oh, no !”

So sharply do the words fall from her, that Madam turns her glance more directly on her.

“ You and he are good friends ?” she says, somewhat of question in her tone.

“ Yes—friends,” says the Duchess, faintly.

Madam’s kindly, keen blue eyes are still searching her face.

“ Everyone likes him,” says the latter, after a minute or two, carelessly, though there is a touch of uneasiness in her manner. “ He is very popular. What I myself shall do without him by and by, when—when he ——”

“ When he is married to Miss Cazalet, you mean ?” puts in the Duchess, divining the uneasiness, and determined to combat it to the death, if only for her own pride’s sake.

“ Yes. When he marries Katherine,” says Madam, relieved in part, but still vaguely troubled as she looks at the proud, cold little face before her that has grown so unmistakably pale. “ Come down with me, and let us see if we can yet rescue a cup of tea,”

she says, rising and drawing the girl's arm within her own. Almost as they reach the door of the library she turns to whisper, softly — "By-the-bye, I had forgotten, darling. There is a friend of yours here. Quite a new arrival. He came yesterday. Lord Kilgarriff"

CHAPTER XIV.

“ Beautiful as sweet !
And young as beautiful ! and soft as young !
And gay as soft ! and innocent as gay !”

ONCE again that soft, low, trained laughter falls on Norah's ears ; the perfume of many flowers stirs the air ; the room seems wrapt in a rich, subdued glow, out of which one face alone looks clearly. His face ! Denis ! After one rapid glance, the cruel pain at her heart grows easier, as instinct tells her it is not Katherine to whom he is speaking in that calm smiling fashion.

Meantime, Madam has led her up to a couch, drawn somewhat apart, on which a pretty, aristocratic-looking young woman is sitting, with two or three men hovering round her. Her face is the most innocent thing imaginable, immobile almost, but for the eyes, which are specially brilliant when you can see them—which is not often. Long lashes,

falling from the upper lids and lying on the cheeks, are educated to be a cover for these charming tell-tales.

“Sophie, this is my niece,” says Madam, standing before her. “Norah, let me make you known to Lady Glandore.”

“Ah!” says the pretty young woman. She sits up quite straight, and lets those bashful eyes of hers study the Duchess for just a second or two. Then she holds out her hand with a wonderfully friendly smile.

“We have been expecting you,” she says, in a peculiarly slow, sweet voice, “but—we did not quite expect all this!” Then she drags her eyes away from the girl’s fresh loveliness, and looks at Madam with a sense of reproach in her manner. “Oh, Madam, this is very hard on us,” she says, plaintively.

Madam laughs, and leads the Duchess a step or two further, to where a lively-looking brunette is engaged in a seemingly warm argument with a young man who is laughing a good deal. With a quick knowledge that she is glad of his presence, Norah sees that it is Kilgarriff. He is a slight man, about five feet ten in height, with a pale face, ex-

tremely dark eyes, and a black moustache, rather Italian in appearance, but with something homely about him that forbids the idea of foreign parentage.

The pretty brunette had given way in the lively discussion, and had centred her attention on the approaching Madam and her companion. She now makes a step forward.

“It is——?” she says, hesitating, and smiling at the Duchess.

“Norah,” replies Madam, smiling, too. Then looking at her niece, “Norah, this is Nancy Blake; I hope you and she will be good friends.”

“Madam’s hopes are our laws,” says the Hon. Nancy, smiling still at Norah, who responds to the smile and then looks past her to where Kilgarriff is standing behind her. That young man has had time to gain a very brilliant colour and lose it again, in a rather remarkable degree, whilst the Duchess has been making her way up the room. She herself grows faintly pink now as she speaks to him.

“How d’ye do, Otho?” says she, rather demurely.

Lord Kilgarriff accepts the hand she holds out, rather nervously.

"This is an unexpected meeting," he stammers, somewhat baldly.

"An unexpected pleasure, you might have said," suggests Miss Blake, with mischievous reproach in her tone.

"How is it you are here?" asks Norah, who is very little embarrassed. "You never told me that you knew my aunt."

"I think it arose more from the fact of *my* knowing her," says Miss Blake, with a little shrug. "I met Lord Kilgarriff on the Riviera some weeks ago, and," calmly, "took quite a fancy to him." Kilgarriff laughed. "I happened to mention his name to Madam Delaney, on my return, and she instantly remembered that his father, or great grand-sire, or somebody belonging to him, had once been the bosom friend of some of her people; so she asked him here, and out of the goodness of his heart he accepted the invitation. *V'la tout.*"

Kilgarriff makes some rather rambling return to this half-mocking speech, and the Duchess, slipping into a chair near Miss

Blake, begins to look with curiosity around her. She passes over most of the women present, until her eyes fall upon a low lounging-chair of saffron velvet, in which, she feels, sits the one for whom she has been unconsciously seeking ever since her entrance into the room.

It is beyond doubt a very handsome picture on which she is now gazing. Miss Cazalet is lying back in the low chair, trifling indolently with a tiny black and tan terrier that lies crouching in her lap, her eyes turned lightly upwards to the man who is leaning over the back of her lounge. Those eyes are large and lustrous, of a rather light blue, swept by lashes that are extremely dark and curl daintily upwards. Her nose is pure Greek, her mouth perfect. The rippling hair, that is drawn back so softly from her broad, low brow, is of a pure and very rare gold colour. One can see that she is tall and slender, and that she is possessed of an ease, an elegance, not to be rivalled. Her voice, as it comes faintly to Norah, who is watching her spell-bound and sick at heart, sounds soft and low as distant music. It would be indeed a most

degenerate man, one lost to all grace, who could dare to find a fault in that faultless form.

The man conversing with her now does not, at all events, come under this head, as his devotion is sufficiently marked to be seen by all who will. He is a middle-aged gentleman; stout, and somewhat scant of breath, with the commencement of a very respectable tonsure on the top of his head. He is, however, bending over Miss Cazalet in a semi-lover-like attitude, and is apparently addressing her with all the ardour of youth.

“Sir Brandrum Boileau,” says Miss Blake, seeing where Norah’s eyes are rivetted. “You know Katherine Cazalet, of course. She is considered the handsomest blonde in the kingdom. Sticky, I call her; but then I’m a heretic and don’t love those *beaux yeux* of hers, in spite of their saintliness. Last season she was staying with the St. Lawrences in Park Lane, and went about a good deal with them, and after a bit she became known as the ‘Virgin Mary.’ She is so seraphic. But if she is an angel, I confess I like the other sort best, the demons—I’m a demon!”

concludes she, pouncing, as it were, upon Kilgarriff, with quite a tragic note in her voice.

“Oh! no!” says he, with a violent start, and in a deprecatory tone. She laughs.

“Now, shall I tell you about the others?” she says to Norah. “They are not of the least consequence, taking them as a whole; but I suppose I had better put you up about them. That little wizened-looking man over there is an author; he is all brain, no body. They say he sold himself to the devil half-a-century ago, consenting to let his body go if his brain might live for ever, and he has been calmly dwindling ever since.”

“Half-a-century! He does it with care,” says the Duchess. Miss Blake looks at her with appreciation.

“I begin to have quite a respect for you,” she says to Kilgarriff, *sotto voce*, and as that young man of course fails to understand her, she gives him a gentle but scornful push, and tells him to bring Lady Glandore to her aid, as Miss Delaney is proving too much for her.

“He is such a muff!” says she, when he,

obedient, has departed. "After all, I dare say you were right."

"Right, how?"

"In refusing him."

"Oh! But how do you know that?" says the Duchess, a little shocked.

"Why, he told me, of course," says Miss Blake, with charming unconcern. "Sh! now; here he comes. Ah! Bless me, what an awkward creature it is."

For Kilgarriff, in his eager haste to return, stumbles helplessly over a little milking-stool in the way, and all but measures his length on the ground.

"What's the good of your steaming up the room at twenty knots an hour?" demands the Hon. Nancy, half-laughing. "Where does the hurry come in? The day is always unconscionably long, spread it out as much as you can."

Lady Glandore, who has come up to them, sinks laughing into her seat.

"Those little stools are the most treacherous things imaginable," she says, "specially when they're black. One can hardly see them; and really of what wonder-

ful use are they after all, that we should keep them at the risk of endangering life and limb?"

"Well, I don't know; they have their use, you know," says Kilgarriff, regarding with a nobly forgiving glance the black and perfidious stool in question. "They give you the free use of both your hands. It was awful, long ago, having to hold your cup and your cake, both. Now you can put your cup down and eat your cake, or you can put your cake down and eat your cup—or—er—ah!—that is——"

"Oh! Never mind!" says Miss Blake.

"Is Nancy letting you into a few of the mysteries?" asks Lady Glandore, in her soft, low, rather drawling voice, turning to Norah. "She is very good at that sort of thing; but I think Mr. Wylding is even better. He is the absurd-looking person, with sandy hair, at the end of the room; and that little tub of a woman on our right is his wife, but she doesn't count. At least he won't let her."

"No, poor little soul! I often wonder why she married him," says a man with a dark, clean-shaven face, who has just

sauntered up—Sir Philip Glandore, as the Duchess afterwards discovers. “I rather like her, in spite of her many defects.”

“Why, yes,” says Miss Blake. “She is better than some. I suppose he had money. By-the-bye who is he?”

“It doesn’t matter in the least, my good child, who anybody is now-a-days; it is what he has. He may be a button man or a vendor of bricks, so long as he can pay his bills and entertain the world at large. Talking of that, what has Wylding?”

“Fifteen hundred a year, and an infernal temper,” says Sir Philip, placidly. “That’s his whole stock-in-trade.”

“Bad for his wife, and not much for anyone else. If it be true what you say, what a fraud the man is. He seems so specially sociable and good-tempered, so exceedingly light in hand. Ah! there is Denis. How severe he looks.”

“Well, I always think I should like Denis better if I weren’t the least bit afraid of him,” says Miss Blake, who never yet saw living thing she feared. “How did you get on with him?” turning suddenly to Norah.

Thus addressed, the blood seems to fly to Norah's heart. She makes a little faint attempt as if to answer, but no words come. Miss Blake, after a sharp glance at her, steps to the rescue.

"I see. He kept you in order as he does the rest of us, and you don't like to say so. A cousin, like a brother, is a true tonic; unpleasant but wholesome. Correctives, you know, are always nasty. Dear Denis! it is a shame for me to say a word against him. It is a sin against my conscience, as I know no one I so sincerely like."

The Duchess involuntarily lifts her eyes to hers—a world of sad gratitude in their depths. If Miss Blake had wanted confirmation of her suspicions, she has it now in full. A touch of genuine regret darkens her *piquante* face for a moment, and in that moment is born a very honest friendliness towards the slender creature by her side. Instinctively she lifts her gaze and turns it on Delaney, who is standing partly within the recess of a window. Thus situated he is rather hidden from the general eye, and Miss Blake's direct glance falls upon

him without disturbing the direction of his own.

Was ever despair more keenly expressed than in those dark eyes that are fixed with such a mournful yet impassionate intensity upon the Duchess? They tell their tale to the attentive watcher—there is no need for further speculation. That Denis loves this little dark new-comer as he has never loved the handsome blonde—as he has never yet loved anyone—as he will never love again—is as plain to Miss Blake as if his own lips had said it. -

And now he starts. His melancholy day-dream is broken in upon by the approach of his mother, who comes up to him with a radiant smile.

“She is charming. Quite a picture. Not one word too much did you say,” declares she with soft enthusiasm. ‘Was there ever such a mouth, such eyes, and her pretty little hands! I must manage somehow to take her to town next season and have her presented. She will be quite the fashion at once, her colouring is so very original, and her manners so fresh. In fact, I predict all sorts of good

things for her. She ought in my opinion to make a very excellent marriage."

Delaney bites his lips.

"How you run away with things," he says, in a tone more impatient than he ever uses with his idolised mother. "Here to-day—and—already married! Let her breathe a moment or two, poor child!"

"Ah, well, we shall see," says Madam, vaguely. The impatience, the touch of pain, in his forced smile, have gone unnoticed by her. "As you say, she is but a child." Then she passes on quickly to greet another guest who has just arrived, and Delaney goes back to his unhappy contemplation of her he loves.

He has made a slight movement as his mother went by, and through it his position has become more known to those immediately within his view. Two cold blue eyes, uplifting themselves from the black and tan terrier, grow very earnest in their expression, and watch him with a studied scrutiny that denies the power to cheat them. When she has witnessed his absorption for quite a minute, a fine cold smile parts Miss Cazalet's lips.

Lifting the tiny creature on her lap, she drops him deliberately, and rather cruelly, with a certain force upon the ground. A squeal is the result of this manœuvre, and Denis, starting, looks in its direction, and straight into Miss Cazalet's eyes. Something in them chills him, but he has hardly time to decide what it is when she rises and moves slowly to where the Duchess is sitting, close to Nancy Blake, and talking to a young man, rather stout and very closely cropped, who rejoices in an eyeglass and the shortest coat that decency will permit, and who seems gifted with quite a fund of light and airy converse.

Miss Cazalet having demanded very prettily, and obtained an introduction to the Duchess, stands by, listening to the idle shafts of talk that every now and then reach her ear.

"I've run down for a week," the stout young man with an inch or two of coat is saying, with a beaming smile. "Madam wrote me word there was a garden party on for next week, so I knew I was safe to meet Mrs. O'Shaughnessy, and as she is at present

the light of my eyes and all the rest of it, I thought I'd come."

"What a name!" says Miss Cazalet.

"Fine old Irish name, I give you my word. There's a good deal of it, I allow, but you can't have too much of a good thing. She says she is descended from a king, or a queen—or several kings and queens—I really forget. At all events, she is the one woman upon whom my affections are at present set."

"Don't be cruel! What on earth will become of the others?" says Sir Philip.

"Well, that's it, you see. What is a fellow to do?" says the stout young man—Mr. Greene.

"I hate garden parties—paltry things," says Miss Blake. "I have fixed my fondest hopes upon the fancy dress ball to come off later on. Which would you prefer?" turning with a little friendly air to Norah.

"The ball, I think," says she, half-shyly. It is an adorable shyness, that brings Mr Greene to her feet in no time.

"Trust the Duchess for that," says Kil-

garriff, with a lingering glance at his old friend and playfellow.

“The Duchess!” repeats Miss Cazalet in her clear sweet voice. “Is that how they call you?”

“Dad does,” says Norah with a rather painful blush—her voice about a whisper.

“The Duchess! A rather — er — pronounced sort of *sobriquet*, don’t you think? But of course very appropriate,” with a polite smile, but in a tone that says plainly that the Duchess in question is in her opinion of very inferior quality indeed.

“And a right good Duchess, too,” says Kilgarriff, resentful of this tone.

“No doubt,” says Miss Cazalet with a steady smile.

“Has your Grace any vacant place in your retinue that you might offer to a deserving varlet?” demands Mr. Greene, humbly. “If so, here he stands. Any post, however low, would be gladly accepted. Scullion—turnspit—anything to serve you!”

“But that your rank precludes the idea, you should feel honoured,” says Miss Cazalet, fixing the girl’s nervous shrinking eyes with

her own cold, mocking gaze. There is a sense of keen pleasure to her in the agony of shyness that has overtaken the poor little Duchess at thus finding herself the central object of this unknown circle.

“Do you know——” Miss Cazalet is just beginning afresh, some subtle cruelty upon her lips, when there is a little stir behind her, and Denis, pale and stern, presents himself. He looks alone at Norah.

“My mother wants you,” he says, curtly, and drawing her hand within his arm, carries her away.

CHAPTER XV.

“The human heart, at whatever age, opens only to the heart that opens in return.”

HOWEVER, the end of a week brings, too, the end of Norah's shyness ; several things helped her to conquer this very natural *mauvaise honte* that had overtaken her on finding herself brought so suddenly in contact with such a number of strangers ; Miss Cazalet's subdued but perfectly unmistakable hostility for one thing—expressed by small impertinences and smiling sneers—and for another, Delaney's evident determination to protect her from it.

This last touched her pride most nearly. His protection she would not have—she would accept no help from him of any kind ; therefore it behoved her to rouse herself, and win a way for herself out of her troubles. Very small, very silly troubles, no doubt, but often very cruel. She had plenty of spirit to

bring to her own aid, and a stout little heart, and very soon, too, she made to herself friends of Lady Glandore, who was amused by her, and of Nancy Blake, who honestly liked her. These two friendships greatly strengthened her hands—specially in the matter of Miss Blake, who was always only too eager to scent battle in the breeze where Katherine Cazalet was concerned.

“A word with you, Duchess,” says this young lady, seating herself in the deep window recess of the room where Norah is scribbling a letter to her dad. “We’ve sworn a friendship, you and I—and if I’m nothing else, I am at least faithful to my bonds. Now, as to Kilgarriff: have you quite done with him?”

“What?” colouring furiously. “I — I don’t think I understand.”

“Then why are you growing so dreadfully red?” asks Miss Blake, with a practicability that does her honour. “However, if you want an explana——”

“No, no,” interrupts the Duchess, in horrified haste. “Only — how did you know?”

“Why, he told me himself. Last summer—a month or two ago, when I met him abroad. If,” laughing, “you could only know how I once execrated your name. It used to ring in my wretched ears morning, noon and night. Young men in that stage ought to be locked up until the paroxysm is over, or else given over to the tormentors. I did my little best in that last *rôle*. But—er—if you are sure you have quite finished with that little affair——”

“It was never an affair of that sort—never. I have known him all my life. I’m fond of him as a sister might be, but——”

“I know. That sisterly touch is always fatal. To his hopes, however; not mine. Well, I’m going to be fond of him, too”—she leans back in her chair and laughs softly but heartily — “infant in all but years though he be. Was there ever so absurd a boy? It is a defect in my nature, no doubt, but I know this — I couldn’t endure a master. They say women like to be domineered over — kept down; that they find their real happiness in being governed by a spirit stronger than their own. If it be so, be-

hold in me the glorious exception to that rule!"

"Yes. But about Otho?" slightly puzzled.
"What is it you mean to do about him?"

"Marry him," promptly, "as you assure me, you, my friend, have no *tendresse* in that quarter. And now, haste thee, haste thee, good maiden. Have you forgotten it is the day of Madam's garden party, and that already the county arriveth. Come, let me put you into your gown."

It is a day as beautiful as though it were "bespoke," to quote the peasants round about here. "Queen's weather" of a verity, with a gleaming yellow sunshine that scorns to think of autumn, though already one begins to talk of golden September as though it was indeed here, so short a shrift has August now. before it drops into the greedy past.

The Duchess, very lovely in a soft white Indian silk, one of Madam's gifts, glides into the long drawing-room in her pretty girlish way, though with her charming head well up, and becoming at once conscious that some strangers are present, grows faintly pink and

hesitates, until Madam calls to her in the tone she has learned to love.

“Come here, darling, just for one moment. The others are for the most part outside, but I want to introduce you to a very old friend of your father’s—of mine.”

Sitting near her is an old lady whom Norah had not until now seen — a stout old lady with the orthodox corkscrew ringlets and a large, fat, most benevolent face. She seems, indeed, beaming with good-nature, and as the Duchess draws near, she rises, and laying both her hands on her shoulders, kisses her warmly.

“So this is the little niece,” she says. “A veritable and a very charming breath from the old days. You are like your mother, my dear—a little—and she was a lovely woman ; but your eyes, your mouth—— Ah! my dear,” turning to Madam, “have you noticed it? She is so very like your husband.”

“Yes, I see it,” says Madam, in a low constrained tone. Even now, after all these years that have passed, that one unapproachable grief does not bear talking about.

“I suppose your father, Niel Delaney—I

suppose he never told you about me," says the old lady, still holding Norah's hand very kindly, and smiling at her as though pleased by what she sees. "It is years ago, of course. One may well be forgotten. He did not speak to you of Mrs. O'Shaughnessy?"

"Oh, yes! Yes, indeed!" says the Duchess, eagerly. "Often. I think"—with an adorable blush and a soft shy movement of her eyelids—"he used to call you Bessie."

"And so he did," says Mrs. O'Shaughnessy, plainly enchanted by this touch. "And so he still remembers me? That's nice now amongst old friends, and you must tell him from me—when writing, mind," with a soft squeeze of her hand, "that I remember him, too, as well as when I was Bessie McGillicuddy. God bless you, my dear; you are a very sweet child. And now sit here by me for a minute or two. I'd have called on you long ago; but I'm only just back from Italy—yesterday, indeed—and——"

At this instant somebody from behind lays his hands over Mrs. O'Shaughnessy's eyes and surprises her into silence. The same somebody still further adds to his offence by

bestowing a hearty salute upon her plump cheek.

“Now, Denis! And that’s yourself, of course. Not another one would have the audacity. Worse luck!” cries Mrs. O’Shaughnessy, gaily disengaging herself. “Pity it is, the Colonel isn’t here to see. Well, and even if I was twenty years younger, I daresay I wouldn’t say ‘No’ to that kiss, even though I might pretend to. Come, tell me everything; it seems like years since I saw one of you. When is the wedding to be, eh? I’m young enough to dance yet, I can tell you. I’m not betraying secrets, eh?” smiling at Norah. “You know of course of this cousin’s,” laying her hand on Denis’s arm, “engagement?”

“Yes, I know,” says Norah, steadily, who has grown very white. Delaney has turned away to the window, and is apparently lost in contemplation of the exquisite view outside. What dreadful things is this kindly old lady going to say next, who would have bitten out her tongue rather than say anything—had she only known?

“We’re getting quite impatient for a

wedding, I must tell you," she rattles on merrily. "We haven't had so much as a ghost of one in the parish for the last two years. You should come to the rescue, Denis. Come, now, when is it to be?"

"Is it a time for talking of marrying and giving in marriage," replies he, facing round again, and speaking with really a marvellous *nonchalance*, "with wars and rumours of wars afloat? Why, the very air is thick with the odour of rebellion. Never has Kerry been in such a disaffected state."

"Kerry? Say Ireland, and be done with it," says Mrs. O'Shaughnessy.

"Well, whose fault is it?" says the Duchess, suddenly, a little fierily, waking into life. "Who cares for Ireland whether she swims or sinks? Not England. She is a worry, a nuisance; no more. If, honourably, she could be got rid of, there wouldn't be a second's delay about the disposing of her. She is an incubus—a thing at which to shrug the shoulders. But has she ever been shown fair play? You know," looking at Denis, "I have always said that poor Ireland has been slighted — kept at a distance as it were;

whilst the rest of Great Britain, Scotland notably, has been petted *ad nauseam*. And yet I am sure a little, a very little love, would have made her loyal to the backbone."

"There's a rebel for you!" says Delaney, laughing, glad to an absurd degree in that anything has led her to spontaneously address him again.

"Faith, there's a deal of sense, though, in what she says," declares Mrs. O'Shaughnessy, shaking her ringlets vigorously. "A rare good smattering of reason. Only the day's too hot to follow it up. Let us go out and see what our friends in the open air are doing."

CHAPTER XVI.

“Just when I seemed about to learn,
Where is the thread now? Off again!
The old trick! Only I discern
Infinite passion, and the pain
Of finite hearts that yearn.”

Not very much, when all is told. The day is too warm for that. A good deal of tennis, a little sauntering amongst the late roses, a tremendous amount of lounging, and flirtation at will. The afternoon flies by almost before one remembers it has begun, and now everybody is lying about, rather exhausted from doing nothing and drinking tea, and champagne, and divers cups with an unfeigned appreciation of their merits.

Colonel O'Shaughnessy, a large, florid, well-bred looking man, with a dictatorial manner and the kindest heart in the world, is telling an old and thrilling Indian tale—born of his years in Hyderabad—to a select

company. His wife, at a few yards' distance, is giving all the local gossip, collected since her return yesterday, to a pale little woman, who seems rather upset by it. Some of our other friends are scattered around, and Mr. Greene, who makes no secret of his adoration, is lying prone at the feet of the Duchess. The Colonel, having brought his tale to a pitch that is positively appalling, winds it up suddenly with all the knowledge of a clever *raconteur*, and is rewarded by a silence that is half-hysterical on the part of his female audience.

Suddenly says someone—the Rector's wife, I think—the little pale woman—

“Does anyone know how Mrs. Brady is to-day? I heard she was ill, but——”

“Yes. I called there this morning,” shouts Colonel O'Shaughnessy — he always shouts more or less. “She's far from well. They told me she had been confined——” Here a most inopportune fit of coughing overtakes him.

“Confined? What are you talking about, Colonel?” cries his wife in condemnation. “Why they have only been mar——”

Providentially, at this moment, her cup slips along its saucer in the nasty treacherous way cups will at times, and Mrs. O'Shaughnessy makes a grab at it, forgetful in her fear for the prune silk, of the astonishment and horror that possesses her.

"Confined to her bed with a bad cold," roars the Colonel, in a voice suggestive of murder, and with a complexion positively apoplectic.

There is a dead pause; then somebody whispers something into Mrs. O'Shaughnessy's ear, who appears bewildered, and somebody else gives an indignant kick to Mr. Greene's recumbent form, who is plainly on the verge of hysterics.

"A bad cold," persists the Colonel, wildly. "Called there—saw her! Nothing worse than that, I give you my honour."

The "nothing worse than that" is the last straw, and finishes Mr. Greene, who explodes with laughter, and then rolls over and bites the daisies in a last vain endeavour to restrain his ungodly enjoyment. But Mrs. O'Shaughnessy, who has at last mastered the real meaning of the thing, evidently sees no

reason for restraining anything, and leaning back in her chair gives way to mirth.

“And is that it?” says she. “Bless me what a mistake I made!” And off she goes into an unlimited number of cackles, until she shakes again. Then Miss Cazalet is seen to draw gently near, and as mirth has a trick of dying out in her presence, once more a decorous tranquillity holds sway. Mr. Wylding, the author, is with her.

“One can see I scribble,” he is saying, in his delightfully soft voice. “Yet when people look at me they sometimes hesitate—it is a compliment, I assure you — I am always charmed with it, and I can almost hear them say, ‘he is like it, of course, but he is not so *spirituel* as I imagined. And yet——’ You can read the rest for yourself. Is it not? It is all in my nose, I think,” with a delicious frankness, “which is of a goodly length; and on my upper lip—have you noticed my upper lip?—which is distinctly *en suite*.”

Miss Cazalet murmurs some inanity or other quite unworthy of her, her mind being with her eyes, which are far away across the shaven lawn, where stands Delaney. He is

conversing with someone — she cannot see whom—but someone in white. Presently he moves a little, and her pulses grow more even as she sees that the woman in white is not—Norah!

A voice at her elbow makes her start.

“Can I do anything for you, Duchess?” The voice is Lord Kilgarriff’s, and Miss Cazalet, looking abruptly round, finds that Norah is sitting almost exactly behind her.

“Eh? What?” says the Duchess, with a rather absent air, turning to Kilgarriff. It is plain the tone, not the words, have reached her ears.

“Miss Delaney—why this abstraction?” says Mr. Greene, in accents mildly reproachful. “Are all we nothing to you that you thus wander into realms of phantasy? Come back, come back, I entreat you, to solid earth and us, and cease to tread in spirit immaterial space.”

Norah, thus importuned, turns upon him a smiling face.

“I have been thinking,” she says, “that I should like to play one set——”

“With me?” exclaims he, rapturously,

scrambling to his feet. "Consider it done. Now to find two others on playful thoughts intent."

"I was just wishing for a game myself," says Miss Cazalet, amiably. "What do you say? You and Miss Delaney against Mr. Wylding and me?"

"I should be so charmed — so too delighted," says Wylding, "but there is this one trifling obstacle to my bliss. I don't play."

"If I might aspire ——" simpers Sir Brandrum, turning a languishing eye upon the blonde beauty.

"To what?" asks Greene, innocently.

"To—er—to be Miss Cazalet's partner in this projected game of tennis," replies the Baronet, stiffly; and then in a lower tone addressed to the tall, fair goddess at his side, "Oh, that I dared aspire to more—to all!"

Miss Cazalet sweeps her cold eyes across his face with an insolence indescribable. This man—this old man—to presume to hope that she will throw over Ventry and Denis for him!

“Well, is it a match?” says Greene, looking at her with a dry twinkle in his eye.

“If you will,” returns Miss Cazalet, indifferently, ignoring his evident meaning; “Sir Brandrum, as you know, is an excellent—indeed——” with a slow glance at the unfortunate Baronet from under her half-closed lids, “we might say an old hand at it, and I——”

“You are indeed an enemy to fear,” says Greene, with a bow—Miss Cazalet being the acknowledged head of the women players in the county. “Still, if you will deign to give us a beating, I think Miss Delaney and I would like to receive it.”

Norah, catching his eye, laughs a little. As it happens, Katherine and she have never yet played one against the other, and though comments on the excellence of Miss Delaney’s performances on the tennis courts have reached Katherine’s ears, she had treated such praise as a pitiful truckling to the beauty that even she confessed to see.

When therefore the sets come to an end, leaving the Duchess flushed delicately and

undeniably victress, there comes a light into Miss Cazalet's pale blue eyes hardly to be admired. She has been overthrown in public places by this her foe.

"You have triumphed to-day in this matter," she says in a soft undertone, looking with a smile into Norah's large, dark eyes. "It is a sign, you think, an indication that you will triumph always! But I tell you no."

The delicate flush dies out of Norah's cheeks. She grows very pale. It is impossible to misunderstand what has been said, what has been meant. Has this girl—who towers above her like her evil genius, white and fair though she be—can she have guessed her cruel secret? Has she pierced into her soul and read there the love that was reared in pain, and yet thrives with a vigour that defies all hope of death? This sudden fear blanches her cheek, but through it all there runs a horror of the coarseness that has permitted such words to be spoken.

"Always to triumph? No," she says, coldly, and with admirable self-possession, "that is given to few—to none perhaps.

And there are days, I confess, when my serving is a very lamentable failure."

"Miss Cazalet, I think Madam Delaney wants you—if I might be permitted?" says Sir Brandrum at this instant, who generally speaks in half-sentences.

Katherine moves away with him, that curious light still within her eyes, and Norah, feeling tired, dispirited, heartsick, turns round and walks aimlessly in the other direction.

In the centre of the path she has chosen she sees Denis, and as he moves a little to one side to let her pass, he looks full at her with a kindly smile. If she sees it she makes no response to it, and only acknowledges his presence there by a little faint bow. Then she has passed him. And then, a second later, she knows he is beside her, bending down a little as if trying to look into her face.

"May we not be friends, my little cousin?" asks he, gently. She can see that he is pale, and that there is a great weariness in his miserable eyes.

"Friends! Why that we are, surely, replies she, her glance upon the ground,

after that one swift upward look that is now hurting him so fiercely.

“I think not. I fear not. Everything,” sadly, “is so changed. At home, there, in Ballyhinch, where first we met, you were so very different.”

“Ah! there I was in my father’s house,” with a desperate effort at serenity. “Then it behoved me to be civil to my father’s guest.” The words fall from her like stones. Oh! why must they be said? What evil fate has thrust this burden on her? But pride! pride! what is it a woman will not sacrifice for that?

“What do you wish me to understand?” asks he, growing, if possible, a shade paler. “That all those sweet days there were a mere wearying of the flesh to you? That you suffered me, indeed, but that no honest feeling of friendship towards me—that feeling,” hotly, “to which I would have sworn—ever existed in your breast. Norah! Is that the truth? Is that your meaning?”

“Take it as you will,” says she, icily, although her lips are trembling. “You should not have asked the question.”

They had stopped in the centre of a grass plot, rather deserted at the moment, and now she looks restlessly past him, and from side to side as if seeking mutely a way of escape.

“I trouble you. You would leave me,” he says, unutterable despair in his tone. As he speaks he moves a little to one side, as though to let her pass.

“No, no. You must not think that,” murmurs she, faintly. She lifts her gaze to his, and he can see that all at once, as it were, the combative look has gone from her eyes. Riven as he is with counter emotions he can see that.

“Norah!” he exclaims, in a low, piercing tone, catching her hand.

And then it is all over, and nothing is left him but the remembrance of the frown—the passionately contemptuous glance of those grey eyes—the haughty curl of the lips. She is half-way across the lawn now, moving quickly, as if a little frightened, to where Kilgarriff is standing. There is something in her whole air that seems to Delaney—standing there, white, angry, stricken—suggestive of a desire for help, for protection.

To protect her from him! In that lies the sting—the bitterness of it. And to go to Kilgarriff of all men! What, after all, if that old friendship was ripening into something warmer! If—even as she had refused him—the divine spark that lies in every heart had broken into flame. How often does a foolish child, frightened, puzzled by some strange new experience, answer at random, scarce knowing its own mind.

And yet—and yet—— How could he forget? Once again she stands upon the stepping-stones—once again, she sways and trembles--and once again—alas! alas! for the mournful sweetness of a past moment never to be known again—she is within his arms. She lies upon his breast; willingly, he feels and knows; against his heart her heart beats. And then the pretty head thrown back, the eyes—such eyes—looking with that swift, shy rapture into his. It is a momentary glance, indeed—a flash. But, oh! what a world of tender love it holds!

Yes, she loves him. That one sweet glance has betrayed her. Though twenty thousand demons yelled the contrary in his

ear, he would not believe it. So fair a building could hold within it no blot, no falsity. A thrill of passionate joyousness strikes him, as memory holds him captive at her will ; and then all at once she releases him, and the present stands cold and bleak before him, without hope, or chance of escape from the thralldom into which he has sold himself, not knowing. There is Norah, a little way off, smiling into Kilgarriff's face, a touch of positive relief on her lovely face. He feels stunned, inanimate. How can he go on like this ? How live out the long life before him ? He rouses himself angrily, but fails to shake off the dread depression that has seized upon him. It is absurd, ridiculous, he knows ; yet somehow he feels frightened at the length of days stretching out before his mental view ; days colourless, verdureless, void of dew, or any other gracious visitation. What is it—what has happened to him ?

CHAPTER XVII.

“Wherever there is authority, there is a natural inclination to disobedience.”

“For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak.”

THE last guest has departed ; only the house party is left to enjoy the glory of the dying sunset. Lounging about on the shaven grass, or else cosily nestling down in the garden-chairs, they seem one and all loth to leave the sweetness of the evening to go indoors and dress for dinner.

There is an almost unwonted stillness over everything ; a calm that bodes well for the peaceful night, that already shows signs of descending upon them. A little tired, a little languid, they are sitting voiceless—a sense of such pleasurable laziness upon them as forbids the desire for speech—when suddenly, from some unknown distance, sound reaches them ; sound that ever gathers in volume, and at last disperses rudely the

delicious touch of rest in which they have been indulging. Nearer and nearer comes this unpardonable break upon their tranquillity, resolving itself presently into the measured tread of many feet, and the dull muttering of sullen voices. Madam starts perceptibly and grows a little pale, and one swift glance she gives at Denis, as round the curve of the avenue an uncouth crowd of half-frightened, half-angry peasants, comes with a rush, as if pushed on by those behind.

It is one of the very frequent scenes of which some of us have been eye-witnesses, and of which we all have read in the daily papers, the monthlies and the magazines. A band of sullen, ill-looking men, headed by their parish priest—in this instance a well-meaning man, though that cannot be said of others—with no honest entreaty on their lips, but rather a demand for a still further reduction of the rents that already have been most generously reduced.

Delaney seeing them—and that they have come to a halt on the central part of the gravelled sweep before the hall door, that

has full command of that part of the lawn on which he and his guests are seated—moves lightly from his lounging position on the grass and goes forward to meet them. The Duchess, as he passes her, can see that he has changed colour, and a cold, hard expression has settled round his lips.

“Well?” he says, icily, addressing himself exclusively to the priest, and treating the others as though they were outside his vision. His tone is uncompromising; his whole air studiously contemptuous.

And then the priest begins the speech, already prepared, and which it would be useless to reproduce here—the people’s wants and wrongs, set forth in florid language, yet with a keen edge of heartfelt, eloquent compassion to it, that touches Norah, but leaves Delaney as stern and unmoved as before; the demand for redress; the speaker’s conviction that they, his parishioners, have it not in their power to pay the money said by the law to be due, but which in the sight of Heaven and man is an unjust taxation—and so on—and so on.

It is a strange scene, full of incongruities. On one side extreme poverty and general demoralization ; on the other, riches and all the little refinements that go to make up a well-to-do, self-satisfied society. There, the ill-dressed — although each man in it is wearing his Sunday's best—ill-looking crowd, shuffling together in a nervous, treacherous fashion, half-uneasy, wholly vindictive. Before them, their spokesman, as it were, their lean, ascetic parish priest, Father Doolin, a slight, emaciated man with dark, piercing eyes, that now are aglow with fervid eloquence ; facing him, the tall, handsome young man, faultlessly attired, with head well up, and stern, finely-cut mouth, and aristocrat written on every line of him ; and behind all, the fashionably - dressed few, gazing with well-bred amazement at the picture of which they make a part.

Father Doolin has brought his speech to a rather abrupt termination. It is difficult to be diffuse or explanatory or persuasive with those handsome, unsympathetic eyes fixed upon one, as though compelling a speedy finish to one's harangue ; and now

that it has reached its end, Delaney throws out his hand with an openly aggressive gesture.

"It is useless," he says, taking advantage of this unexpected break in Father Doolin's appeal, "your coming to me on this errand. To those," turning cold, angry eyes upon the crowd, "who have shown no mercy, no mercy will I show."

"Take care, sir," says the priest, in a sort of sharp involuntary way, as if a little frightened.

"Do you threaten me, sir?" asks Delaney, turning upon him fiercely. "Nay, then, threaten as you will. What I have said remains. These people," with a light and scornful wave of his hand in their direction, "have chosen to defy me, even to the extent of killing my trusted agent; let them abide by that choice. I shall not abate one fraction more of my just dues. I have said this before, publicly. I say it again. Twenty per cent. has been offered and refused. No other offer shall be made. And I may as well say now, too, as the opportunity presents itself, that it was against my better judgment,

my sense of justice, that such grace was ever shown."

An angry growl rises from the crowd, and the Duchess blanches a little and makes a quick movement, as though she would rise from her seat.

Then a tall man steps forth from the crowd and stands in front of it, as though he feels himself to be their leader—though perhaps an unacknowledged one.

He is a great powerful fellow, with a rather brutal appearance—a heavy, bull-like neck, a lowering brow, and a type of feature that suggests strongly that of the gorilla.

"Say forty per cent., an' we might be listenin' to ye," says the giant, with a threatening air.

"Stand back, Moloney," says Father Doolin, with a frown.

"Why would I, thin? Why shouldn't he hear the truth for wanst in his life? If you won't spake it, I will. Why shouldn't I tell him what we all think of him an' his comerades?"

"Why not, indeed?" says Delaney, with a curious laugh. "There is, however, some-

thing even more than that, that you might tell me." He goes a step nearer to Moloney, and fixes his gaze on him. "The name of him who murdered Mr. Meredith!"

A convulsive shudder seems to run through the ragged crowd. Many angry faces show themselves there; many carefully expressionless.

"Ha! That allusion troubles you," cries Denis, with ill-suppressed passion. "That went straight home. Does there stand one innocent man amongst you, I wonder; one who did not know of, or connive at, that devilish deed! Until the murderer is given up to me, I shan't believe it. I sent that kind, good man amongst you, that lenient, loyal gentleman, my own best friend—who had, I swear it to you," — with growing vehemence—"your interests most honestly at heart. He came—he accepted you as his friends. Oh! if you could have seen his letters to me, how he trusted, how he believed in you, how his heart was wrapped up in a scheme that was to do you and yours a life-long good—— And you! You, for reward, most foully, most brutally, destroyed

him!" He draws a long breath; his eyes are aflame. "His blood," he says, in a low tone, "his blood for ever cries to me for vengeance. I declare to you," throwing one hand Heavenward, "I shall never rest until I bring his murderer to the scaffold!"

"Sir! Think. Consider," says the priest, hastily. "Can you not leave him to time—to his own conscience, for revenge?"

"*His* conscience!"

"Yes, sir. His surely. Be it soon, or be it late, be assured that the memory of that awful crime will sometime seize upon that man and burn into his soul like a red-hot iron. Sir, I entreat you, be content with that certainty, and do not punish the innocent for the guilty."

"No. I shall be content only with a justice that I shall see," replies Delaney, grimly. "A life for a life is but meagre satisfaction in this case, for what dozen lives amongst that sordid crew"—indicating the peasants by a gesture full of withering contempt—"could compensate for the life they took."

"Each man, Delaney," says the priest.

solemnly, reprovngly, "has his own soul. That is as precious to the lowest as to the highest. And you—are you just? Is it justice you seek, or only vengeance? Is it right" — with agitation — "to punish the many for the few? I beg you to hear me, sir, in a kindlier spirit; I entreat you to believe that they are anxious to be reconciled to you—to——"

"I respect you, Mr. Doolin," says Delaney, interrupting him gently, but deliberately. "I honour you, indeed, because I know you to be a good man, who is wasting his life in a vain endeavour to reform a hopelessly vicious people——"

"Not vain, I hope, sir," protests the priest, in a tone of deep distress.

"So I at least believe," with a slight bow, "and yet you would ask me to regard these people as being desirous of returning to their allegiance, to a sense of their duty towards me, their landlord, when you must know what happened at that farm at Grillagh only last week. Was the brutal mutilation of a number of helpless cattle a sign of their desire to be on good terms with me? I

confess it looked to me more like a declaration of war. I really believe," raising his voice so as to be heard by all, "it was meant for a threat. But threats to me," with a short insolent laugh, "are, I assure you," addressing himself with an aggravating air to the people, "idle as the wind."

Again that angry murmur rises from the heart of the crowd.

"The wind isn't always idle. It has overthrown many a strong man before now," says Moloney, ominously, a villainous scowl upon his brow.

"If, sir, you would make some further abatement," goes on the priest, hurriedly, as if trying to drown this mutinous speech, "anything—say thirty, even twenty-five per cent."

"Not a penny," briefly, "as matters now stand. One hope, however, I still hold out. Let them deliver into my hands the man who assassinated Mr. Meredith, and I may—I do not promise, remember—but I then might be induced to listen to their complaints; until then, nothing. You hear, all of you," speaking in a clear, cold, steady voice; "and I

give you notice that you have from this until November, only, to settle your rents ; after that I shall evict the non-payers, man by man."

There is something about his manner that precludes the idea of change. What he has said, that will he surely do. There is no appeal from that sternly delivered fiat. A hoarse cry runs through the crowd from mouth to mouth, partly fear, partly hatred. There is something at once so savage, yet so thrilling, that involuntarily one or two of the men lounging on the lawn get up hastily, and a magnificent old hound that lies stretched at Delaney's feet, springs from the ground with a growl, and stands trembling as if waiting for the word to spring upon the foe.

At this moment Moloney makes a fierce gesture, and the dog, losing all control over its awakened temper, with a bound reaches him. With hair bristling and lips drawn back, showing the fangs within, he looks a more formidable enemy than he really is, and Moloney, yielding to a vile impulse and a longing for revenge, lifts his heavy foot and gives the poor old brute a cruel kick.

With a sharp yell the hound rolls over on the gravel, his leg broken.

“D—— you, you scoundrel!” cries Delaney, forgetful of everything, in his mad rage as he sees the dog lying in mortal pain before him. It is his favourite dog, old now, but a faithful creature who has had a good share of his master’s heart for many a long day. In a second, Denis has flung himself upon Moloney, and, seizing him by the collar, in spite of his powerful struggle, shakes him to and fro as a terrier might a rat, and then dashes him heavily to the ground.

For a minute or two he lies there stunned, Delaney looking down upon him, pale, panting more with passion than fatigue. Then he recovers himself, and rises slowly to his feet. One dark, malignant glance he casts at Delaney, one bitter curse escapes his lips, and then he moves away, followed by the crowd, now grown strangely silent.

Only the old priest remains, and turns in an agitated fashion to Madam, who, with some of the others, has hurried up, looking pale and horrified.

“I wish he had not done that, Madam,”

said Father Doolin, in a trembling voice. "It was most unfortunate. They are already much incensed against him; and—I wish he had not done that."

"I wish he had not, indeed," says Madam, who is very white.

"And I wish he had done more," cries Miss Blake, looking up with flashing eyes, from where she and the Duchess, with Delaney, are kneeling over the injured dog. "I wish he had killed the cowardly wretch who dealt that blow to this poor brute."

Tears are standing thickly in her eyes, and seeing them, Kilgarriff, who is never proof against beauty in distress, goes up to her. The Duchess, sitting on the gravel, has got the dog's head in her lap; warm drops are falling from her eyes on to his handsome old head. The poor brute, more hurt than they at first had thought, is dying; even as Denis calls to him, in the hope of cheering him, and Sir Philip, who is a clever man about dogs, is examining the broken leg, he gives a groan or two, and, with a last vain effort to struggle to his feet and go to his master, drops back dead

It is after all only a very small affair ; the death of a dog only. A mere trifle beside the bloody deeds that night by night, and day by day, are enacted in all parts of ill-famed Kerry, whilst our English protectors talk, and talk, and talk, at the other and safe side of the water, and do nothing. The death of a dog, and the knocking down of his slayer ; yet insignificant as all this sounds, it bears in the future bitter fruit !

CHAPTER XVIII.

“Let it be now, love. All my soul breaks forth.
How I do love you! Give my love its way.

Grant me my Heaven now.”

“NORAH, may I have the pleasure of this dance?” says Denis, gravely looking down at his cousin. The old familiar “Duchess” has long been laid aside.

Madam’s Calico Ball has come off at last in spite of many delays. It is now October; warm and bright on its pet day, lowering and dark enough on the others. To-night, however, is beyond expectation lovely and mild, as though a last breath of the dead summer had been wafted to it by spirit hands. All the gardens are aglow with coloured lamps; poor counterfeits of the myriad stars that deck the firmament above, where, too, Diana sails in perfect splendour. It is an ideal night—balmy and calm as

death itself, with no sound save the whispering of the lime trees under the tender moonlight, and the far-off breaking of the waves upon the pebbly shore.

“With pleasure,” responds the Duchess, coldly, not looking at him. She is staring past him, with unseeing eyes, however; very pale but lovely as a dream, in the quaint costume she wears. She is a very exquisite “Miss Muffet,” in her short-waisted gown of highly æsthetic saffron tint, a very big mob cap, and long, soft gloves that reach up to her white shoulder, and then gently wrinkle all the way down again from that to her wrist. A more admirable picture than she makes it would be impossible to conceive.

She is without doubt the belle of the evening, though Katherine Cazalet, who is supremely lovely as “Queen of Hearts,” in long trailing skirts of white and gold, runs her hard. Miss Blake, too, as “My Pretty Maid,” is charming; and Lady Glandore a thing of beauty as “Mistress Mary.”

The Duchess, indeed, seems quite transformed. A brilliant fire has lit itself in each of her great grey eyes, and though her

cheeks have turned strangely white within the last few minutes, her lips still are crimson.

“But to dance!” she says, still not looking at him. “I am tired of dancing. Is there no place to be found for the sole of one’s tired foot this evening?”

By intuition he knows that she will not suffer his arm round her waist, and a bitter pain beats within his heart; pain mingled with an anger as bitter.

“If you are tired we can sit down in one of the conservatories, or, better still, in one of the gardens,” he says, as calmly as he can. “Will that suit you, or shall I give up my place to another?”

“That is a very rude speech, isn’t it?” says the Duchess, at last turning her eyes on his, “and might almost lead me to believe——”

“No,” interrupting her with a sternness that yet is agitated, “you could never believe that!” He draws her hand with a touch of determination within his arm, and moves towards a door on the left. This leads to a conservatory. Entering it, they come to an open glass door beyond, that opens on to

a verandah. Three or four steps lead from this to the terrace beneath, which in turn gives access to the gardens glowing in the moonlight.

“What a lovely night!” says the Duchess, looking round her, evidently with a view to making conversation. There is a slight touch of nervousness in her manner, a *soupeçon* of uneasiness.

“Yes. I am glad it has turned out fine. Such a mere chance as it was. You are enjoying yourself?” with a steady glance at her.

“So much!” with enthusiasm. “I hardly thought it possible that one could compress such an amount of thorough enjoyment into one short evening. Oh, yes. I am feeling absurdly happy.”

“You should,” bitterly. “The right is all your own. You have the world at your feet.”

“The world! A large statement.”

“Not so large as it sounds. Each of us has a world of his own in which to know grief or joy; your world is a most submissive one, it owns itself captive to your will.”

“Does it?” with a little unmirthful laugh.
“And who are my captives?”

“The question is not like you,” says he, bitterly. “But you are so changed, so different from the cousin I once knew that—— Is it to gratify your vanity you ask it? Shall I speak of Greene — of Kilgarriff—of——”

“Pray don’t, if you want to make yourself interesting; I know quite as much of them as I wish to know.”

“Is that true, Norah? Is that slighting tone honest? Am I really to believe that—they all—that Kilgarriff is of no account in your eyes?”

“Why should you seek to believe anything of that sort?” demands she, coldly, lifting large resentful eyes to his. “Are you my guardian, my—my brother, that you thus speak?”

“You do not deny, then,” exclaims he, recklessly, “that there is now, at all events, something between you and Kilgarriff.” There is such passionate anguish in his tone that, had her own heart been free from care, she must have condoned his words.

“This is an examination to which I refuse to be subjected,” says she, lightly enough, but with an angry glance. Her heart is beating wildly, painfully; a fear of his next words is oppressing her; with that a vehement indignation that he—he—engaged to, and doubtless in love with, another woman, as he is—should dare to take her to task.

“It is true—I have no right to speak,” says Delaney, controlling himself by a visible effort. “But you are very young, and much as you may dislike the idea, I am in a sense your guardian whilst you remain here.”

“You are not my guardian, here or elsewhere. You,” with a cold, steady glance, “are nothing to me. Please understand that at once I am under my aunt’s care, not yours. If I thought otherwise I should not remain an hour longer under this roof. I cannot permit you to interfere with me in any way.”

“Not even for——”

“Not in any way,” haughtily. “Now,” with a slight curl of her lip, “if you have quite finished your impromptu lecture, I should be glad to return to the house.”

“I have not finished,” breaks he out

fiercely, goaded to quicker wrath by that last unfriendly glance. "I have still to ask you by what right you treat me as you do. What have I done that I should be placed beneath a ban—that I should receive from you none but uncourteous words and looks? Not so many weeks ago——"

"Hush!" says she, in a low but peremptory tone.

"No. You shall hear me. Why should I be silent?"

"I warn you," says she, in the same intense way, speaking almost under her breath.

"And I refuse to listen. I tell you I cannot live this thing out; I must end it one way or the other. You know—you must—that if you will say but one word—one—I——"

"Are you mad that you speak to me like this?" exclaims she, recoiling from him, there is horror and condemnation, and—something else—in her glance. Is it despair? She leans heavily against the trunk of a tree, and puts back both her arms as if to hold and cling to it. "I don't pretend to misunderstand you," she goes on, presently, "but what I

really fail to see is, why I should say that word. Do you know?" with a faint and most unkind smile. "Can you tell me?"

"Norah!"

"Nay, hear me out. Now, once for all. It seems to me that you are labouring under a delusion that I would gladly dispel. Is it indeed the matter of life and death with me, the speaking of 'this word,' that you," with a chilling emphasis, "seem to think? Am I so madly desirous to see you free, that I—— Oh!" breaking off suddenly, as if suffocating, and making a passionate movement with her lovely naked arm, as if flinging from her some hateful thing, "it is insufferable!"

"Don't go too far!" says Denis, in a curiously compressed tone.

"I could not," vehemently. "To say enough, that is the difficulty. But who could find words sufficient for such a cause? Has my manner, the manner of which you so sadly complain, not taught you that—that——"

"What?" catching her wrist.

"That I hate and detest you!" cries she, with a sudden burst of indignation, wrenching herself free. Her eyes are aflame, her lips

quivering. Never, even in her loveliest moments has she ever looked so beautiful.

“So!” says he, bitterly. Her beauty is lost to him just then, though in a sense he sees it, and afterwards remembers and recalls every charm; but now such wild rage governs his heart, that only the keen hatred that is always so near allied to a keen love surges within his breast.

“Has it never occurred to you,” says he, his own eyes flashing, “that you might teach me to return that feeling?”

“Return it as heartily as you will. The more heartily, the better I shall be pleased.”

“It has come to this, then. It to be open war between us?”

“I don't know about the coming, the newness of it. I have thought of you for a long time as I think now.”

“In the old days, at Ballyhinch?” His tone has again softened. There is even eager appeal now in the eyes he turns on her. Both the appeal and the altered tone only serve to madden her. Alas, alas! for those old dead days!

“At Ballyhinch,” says she, growing deadly

white, but still regarding him with an unwavering gaze, "you believed I was in love with you. Is not that so? You thought"—with a little, low laugh—"that you were a hero, a being from another, a fashionable world, in the eyes of the little, simple, country girl with whom it pleased you to wile away the tedious hours. Come"—standing back from him with her arms still clasped behind her, and a mocking smile upon her lips that hides from him the misery of her eyes—"confess you did not know me then—that I was a silly country baby, if you will, but that, at all events, I was not foolish enough to bow down and worship you."

Oh, the terrible self-contempt that awakes within her as she says this! The burning pain at her heart! Had she not bowed down and worshipped—and given, unasked, all the first sweet love of her life into his keeping? Her breath is coming quickly through her red, ripe lips; her eyes are blazing with an unnatural brilliance; the moonbeams falling on her light up each separate charm, clinging softly to her as though loth to let her slip from their embrace

—as though well aware that never yet did goodlier sight stand here revealed in this old, time-honoured garden.

The insolence, the beauty of her, rouses in Delaney an anger uncontrollable, but with it a passion more uncontrollable still. As she stands thus before him, defiant, lovely, he makes a sudden step forward and catches her in his arms. There is a second's deadly pause—heart beating against heart—a last touch of remorse—and then he kisses her as he never yet kissed any woman, as he will never kiss another.

He loosens his arms—too late! A sense of horror at his own act, a knowledge that he has sinned beyond redemption, so overpowers him, that he can find no words in which to excuse himself. As he stands silent, stricken with regret, a low, sobbing breath falls upon his ear.

“Oh, that I could kill you!” exclaims the Duchess, in a tone so intense as to be almost inaudible.

They are thus standing, facing each other—she trembling, unnerved; he silent, remorseful—when a light footstep sounds upon their

right. Involuntarily both raise their heads and move a little further apart, as Miss Cazalet comes, with her usual slow, undulating step, from out the shadows that lie thickly on the eastern walk.

CHAPTER XIX.

“Hopes and fears ; belief and disbelieving.”

“Is it a rehearsal ?” asks she, sweetly, smiling upon Denis. “If so, it hardly needs a repetition, I think. It will bring down any house. You are both, so far as I am a judge, perfect in your parts.”

The Duchess, pale as death, stands motionless. How much does she know ? What has she seen ?

“Don’t be frightened. I shall not betray you,” says Miss Cazalet, staring straight at her, with an abominable little laugh. “It is a secret, as yet, I suppose—this very lively entertainment of yours, and I shall take care not to mention it unless—— You have kept it quite to yourselves so far, have you not ? How clever of you !”

“Katherine !” begins Delaney.

“No, not a word. What should there be

to explain to me? Secrecy is the principal thing in a matter of this kind, is it not? It is always more amusing so, eh? At least, so I have been told. It adds a piquancy to the affair." It is impossible to describe the smiling insolence of her whole manner.

"You had better hear me, says Delaney, coming a step or two forward, a look of eager excitement on his face, nay, more—an intense hope! "If you think——"

"I don't, I am sure," interrupts she, with a clever haste. "But if you wish to insinuate that the extremely animated scene I just now witnessed was not acting, I fear it must mean a very serious quarrel between you and your cousin." She looks quite concerned. "May I act as mediator?" She fixes her gaze on Norah, who breathes a little more freely. Is that all, then? Had she only heard those last angry words of hers, only seen the indignation of her look and gesture? Is she entirely ignorant of what gave rise to them?

"I think not. As I begin, so must I finish my feuds for myself," she says, sententiously. Then, "Have you no one with you?" peering

into the darkness behind, where Miss Cazalet is standing just on the moonbeam's edge.

"No," a little taken off her guard by this prompt question.

"Ah! Then you can take Denis off my hands," says the Duchess, with a swift movement that at once separates her from the other two. She steps lightly past them, and a second later is swallowed up by the shadows. With her goes Miss Cazalet's assumed indifference and smiling unconcern.

"You and your cousin are better friends than I have been led to believe," she says, turning a searching, a rather contemptuous glance on Denis.

"My cousin hates me," replies he, gloomily

"You say that? Well, I should not have thought it."

"You, of all others should!" retorts he, hotly. "You saw more than you pretend, Katherine; you saw all. And——"

"All! Oh, no!" says she, with an inexplicable smile.

"You saw enough, at least, to prove to you that Norah was in no wise to blame to-night, that I—I only——" he stops, as

though it is impossible for him to proceed, and a heavy sigh breaks from him. "I behaved abominably to her," he bursts out at last.

"I am not thinking of her—of the injury done to her fine feelings," coldly. "I am thinking of myself."

"I know; I understand that you have much to complain of. I can quite see that after this you will wish to put an end to——"

"I shall put an end to nothing," steadily. "Do you think," with a glance supposed to be fond, and that makes his heart die within him, "that I could not forgive you so much, and that I have not formed my own opinion of this unpleasant matter? I believe the truth to be that you were led into it by a consummate coquette—a heartless, unprincipled flirt!" The words seem to come from between her clenched teeth. Her eyes grow vindictive.

"One word, Katherine!" says Delaney, sternly. "You shall say no slanderous thing of my cousin. Remember that. It is impossible, having seen Norah, that you should so think of her."

"I have my own views, as I told you before," with a curl of her thin lips, "and I leave it to time to prove me right. Meanwhile," coldly, "it would be in better taste, I think, if you were to refrain from defending her in my presence. However, I have no intention of quarrelling with you on such worthless grounds. Come. Let us return to the house."

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"Well, I don't know that I ever enjoyed myself more," says Lady Glandore, in her languid way, alluding to the joy of the past night. It is now once more a new day, and some of them are wandering aimlessly down the pathways that lead to the shrubbery, discussing the good and evil of the dead dance.

"I'm sure I didn't," says Mr. Greene, who is, as usual, Norah's shadow. "But Miss Delaney is ominously silent. What cloud lies upon your brain, Miss Delaney?"

"Norah? Nonsense!" says Lady Glandore, coming good-naturedly to the girl's rescue. "Don't believe her if she pretends to melancholy. To my certain knowledge she danced

holes in her stockings. What could any well-regulated girl desire more?"

"Unless it might be stockings impervious to holes, I don't know," responds Mr. Greene, meekly.

"Oh! one might desire more than that," says Miss Cazalet, with a little subdued smile.

"As for Nancy Blake——" Lady Glandore is beginning, when suddenly, the two in advance cry "Hush" simultaneously, and come to a dead stop; their eyes are rivetted upon a little blank space in the laurel hedge before them, through which a back can be distinctly seen. Surely it is the back of Nancy Blake herself, and surely, too, that other back so close to her belongs to Lord Kilgarriff. All this might be as nothing; but, what is that obscures the dainty roundness of Miss Blake's waist?

With one consent the advancing army right about face and turn and flee—Lady Glandore, who is specially delighted by th' little glimpse into her friends' preoccupations, laughing immoderately all the way. The Duchess, perhaps, is in a degree surprised. It is always a surprise to a woman to find

that a man can see any charms in another, having once seen charms in her.

“Isn't Nancy delicious?” says Lady Glandore. “So exquisitely simple, I call it.”

“So do I,” says Mr. Greene, innocently misunderstanding. “I've always said he was the dearest and simplest fellow I know.”

“I didn't mean that,” says Lady Glandore, a little warmly, who can make fun of a friend herself, but won't hear others do it; “what I said was——”

“That Nancy was ‘delicious,’” puts in Sir Philip. “And who shall gainsay you? She is one of the few charming people still left upon the earth.”

“Is she so charming?” questions Miss Cazalet, with a delicate lifting of her brows. “I suppose she must be, but I confess it is always a matter of wonder to me what it is you all see about her.”

“It can't be a wonder this time, at all events,” says Mr. Greene, mildly. “You saw it yourself.”

“What?” sharply.

“Why, Kilgarriff's arm. That was about her, wasn't it?”

Whilst Miss Cazalet is betraying her very natural contempt for this mean joke, Delaney, going up to Norah, touches her lightly on the arm.

“Come this way, I want to speak to you. I must,” he says, pointing to a side-walk that leads to the right. Something in his whole air induces her to accede to his request, and turning aside, she goes with him down the shaded unfrequented pathway he had indicated to her. A sudden turn in it effectually conceals them from the others on the upper walk, who by this time have swept on beyond hearing.

“Well?” asks she, coldly, stopping short and looking at him. What she sees sends a sharp pang to her heart. He is pale, haggard and wretched-looking. Dark shadows lying under his eyes tell of a night passed without sleep, and his face is drawn and dejected.

“Norah, forgive me,” he says, eagerly, trying to take her hand. “Is my sin so unpardonable a one that I dare not ask for mercy? Think—have pity on me. To you, who do not care, all this is as nothing, but

to me—to me, who love you so madly, so miserably, your anger is as death. Say you forgive me !”

“ No ; it is impossible,” says the Duchess, slowly. The colour has faded from her cheek and she has turned her eyes upon the ground. She cannot bear to look at him. And yet it is true ; forgiveness she cannot grant him.

“ Do not say that,” entreats he, gently, but with a fierce undercurrent of agitation. “ You should weigh well your words before saying such a cruel thing as that. See, I am going away this afternoon—in an hour or so—and I shan’t be back until to-morrow ; do not send me from you with this horrible weight upon my heart. Do not, I beseech you. I have been so many hours—so many sleepless hours — brooding on this thing, that,” with a heavy sigh, “ I would entreat you to give me a kindly word to lighten my remorse somewhat.”

“ A word—what can I say ?”

“ That you forgive me. It is a great deal to ask, I know, but——”

“ I will not ; I cannot,” exclaims she, hurriedly, her eyes always on the ground.

“Well, so be it,” says he, wearily. He moves away from her, and then as suddenly comes back again, and raising her face with one hand, compels her to return his regard.

“What a face!” he says. “All love and tenderness, and sweetness; yet how hard, how unforgiving you can be. Are you flesh and blood, that you thus coldly renounce me? A moment since I said all this was nothing to you, because you did not care; but,” passionately, “I spoke against my better judgment then—I believe against everything—that you do care. You were my friend once, you cannot be so altogether changed.”

“And yet I am. I,” with a little quick frown, as though something has hurt her, “I hardly know myself since I came here. Call me capricious, what you will, but only believe,” eagerly, “that the girl you knew at Ballyhinch is not the girl you know now. All my tastes are altered. What I liked then I think worthless now; what then contented me seems now of the poorest value. Perhaps this may explain the change in me of which you complain; it must—it should,” with a vehement desire to convince, “because

there is no other reason, not one, for the—the dislike that now I feel for you.”

She has said this rapidly, with a nervous haste; and as she finishes, looks almost on the point of fainting. Delaney, who has been watching her whilst listening, with a curious light in his eyes, now draws back a step or two as if to go.

“I must accept your explanation, of course. There is nothing else left to me. Well, good-bye,” says he, raising his hat.

“You are not going to this theatrical entertainment to-night, then, at the Barracks?” says she, with an evident effort at ordinary conversation.

“No. I am going to nothing pleasant—not even to the devil,” says he, with a short laugh. “Some fellows in my case might find a poor consolation in taking that road, but to me even such paltry comfort is denied. Will you come back to the house, or will you join the others?”

“Neither. I should like to remain here alone,” replies she, turning rather impatiently away from him.

To be alone, however, is denied her. The

last sound of Delaney's departing footsteps is still upon the air, when Norah, glancing apprehensively to her right, sees Miss Cazalet advancing towards her from the upper walk.

CHAPTER XX.

“Whither shall I fly?
Where hide me and my miseries together?”

“How fortunate!” says Katherine, seeing from the distance a desire on Norah’s part to escape, and thus cutting it short. “I had no idea you were here and I wanted so much to see you. There is something,” with a peculiarly unpleasant smile, “I wish to say to you.”

“Yes?” says the Duchess, faintly, instinct warning her that her hour is come.

“When next,” begins Miss Cazalet, in her clear, cutting tones, standing opposite to the girl and fixing her with her light pitiless eyes, “when next you want to kiss a young man, do not choose the shrubberies as the scene of action, and—do not choose Denis!”

“You cannot—you *cannot* know what you are saying,” gasps the Duchess, turning

ghastly pale. The poor child is trembling in every limb—too horrified, too frightened, to make any further protest.

“I do, perfectly. I always know what I am saying,” says Miss Cazalet, calmly. “I saw you last night with Denis; I saw him——” she pauses and casts a glance of vivid hatred upon the shrinking girl before her. “Would you have me repeat it?” she says, contemptuously.

“Do not speak to me like that,” says the Duchess, in a tone so low as to be almost inaudible. “If—if indeed you were there last night, you must have seen that I did not—that,” stammering painfully, “I was not in fault—that I did not do this thing of which you so cruelly accuse me. I,” with a sudden uplifting of her tone, “I could not. He—the affianced husband of another woman—Oh no, no,” covering her eyes with her hands, “it is not like me. It would not be me if I could do such a thing. You *must* know that.”

Her breath is coming heavily from between her parted lips. All her natural, honest courage has forsaken her. She has fixed her

eyes, which have grown large and wild, upon Katherine, and even as the latter watches her, two heart-broken tears roll down her cheeks.

"You must know it," she says again, absolute entreaty in her tone.

"I know only what I see and hear," returns Miss Cazalet, unmoved. "And—I saw you in his embrace. Your pretended anger, afterwards, did not deceive me in the least. It was a mere part of a well-arranged whole. However," carelessly, "there is really no reason why we should dwell on such a rather vulgar episode. I only spoke of it at all to warn you, to"—repeating her words with cold, meaning emphasis—"warn you to avoid Denis in the future."

"To warn me!" says the Duchess, recovering her courage at this insult, and flushing haughtily.

"Quite so," calmly. "If you interfere with me and Denis again, I tell you openly that I shall inform everyone here of what I saw last night."

"No one here would believe your version of it—no one!" passionately.

“Still,” with an unpleasant smile, “such stories damage. And besides, I hardly think you would care for me to make the experiment.”

The Duchess makes a slight gesture with her little trembling hand. She cannot speak. A sensation of positive sickness is overpowering her. Oh! to get away from this horrible woman; anywhere, only away.

“You understand?” says Miss Cazalet, remorselessly, enjoying, with an only half-concealed amusement, the girl’s agony of shame.

“There is no reason why you should speak to me like this,” says the Duchess, making a supreme effort to be calm. “Denis is nothing to me—nothing—and I am less to him. You mistake altogether.”

“And last night; did I mistake then, too?”

“Denis was in fault, then, I admit,” pressing one hand tightly over the other as a help to sustain the difficult calm. “I told him so—just now.

“I know,” says Miss Cazalet, with a peculiar glance.

“But you should remember,” with a foolish, generous desire to exonerate him in part, “that it was only a moment’s folly—a passing temptation.”

“Were you the temptation?” with a short laugh. Then all at once a touch of passion breaks up her icy composure. “See! Once for all,” she says, coming a step nearer, “don’t imagine that you can ever impose upon me. Act your part to the others, blind them if you will, but don’t hope to take me in. From the very first moment my eyes lit on you, I have seen through you. Your pretended avoidance of Denis, your carefully assumed coldness towards him, your clever little *rôle* of petulant dislike, all has been clear to me; and beneath it—what? Do you think,” insolently, “I could not read your eyes? And what eyes you have!”—with a gust of bitter hatred—“they tell for you what you dare not put into words; they woo, silently, the man you know to be in honour bound to another; they say such shameless things as you are afraid to utter. Do you think,” vehemently, “that watching you daily, hourly, as I have done, that I have not read

your secret in them? Yes, cower away from me as you will, you shall hear what I have learned—that you—love him.” Norah puts out her hand as if to ward off a blow. “Hah! Does that make you shrink? Does that hurt you? I,” vindictively, “am glad of it. Now go! And—remember!”

The insolence of this dismissal rouses in the Duchess a feeling of intolerable indignation.

“I shall remember you—for ever,” she says, breathlessly—childishly, perhaps, yet with a withering contempt that cuts deep into the haughty woman before her, “as the most ill-bred person I have ever met.”

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Heartsick, and wearied by this addition to the secret grief she always carries, and crushed by a sense of bitter humiliation, it is because of no feigned headache that the Duchess declares her inability to accompany the others to the military theatricals at Clonbree that take place this evening.

“What has Katherine been doing to you?” asks Miss Blake, looking down upon a very pale little Norah, who is sitting languidly

in a huge arm-chair in the library, where they have all assembled, whilst waiting for the carriages. She is dressed in a pretty white gown, made high to the neck but with no sleeves, and her face is as white as her frock.

“Katherine! Why should you think that?” growing crimson. “I am not well; my head aches, but——”

“Never mind. I’ll let you off the rest. Fibbing isn’t much in your line,” says Miss Blake, with a sapient nod. “I can wait and get it all out of you to-morrow.”

She moves away with a little provoking glance over her shoulder at Norah, as she sees Madam Delaney approaching with a rather anxious expression on her face.

“I hope you won’t feel lonely, darling,” she says, tenderly, bending over Norah.

“Oh, no. I am too tired,” with a smile, “to feel anything.”

“The carriage is waiting, Aunt,” says Miss Cazalet in measured tone, sweeping up to them in an exquisite gown of black and gold.

“Very well, my dear,” placidly. “Now, Norah, turning again with a fond glance to

her other niece, "you will promise me, won't you, dearest, to go to bed at once."

"An easy promise to give. I wish I was in it this moment."

Madam laughs.

"To confess a terrible truth to you," she says, "I wish with all my heart that I too was in mine."

She kisses the girl affectionately, and soon afterwards they have all gone out of the room; there is the last sound of their footsteps in the hall, a faint far-off laugh—that was Nancy—and now even the roll of the carriages up the avenue has ceased upon the air.

What a curious scene of loneliness has fallen upon the house. Almost it seems as though the very servants had left it. There is certainly nothing to sit up for, and yet in spite of that promise given so readily to Madam, Norah cannot bring herself to go to bed. The spirit of restlessness has taken possession of her, and rising from her chair, she wanders in an aimless fashion about the library, touching a book here, trifling with a set of rare prints there, now stirring the

already glowing fire, now staring idly at the large well-filled bookcases, but always and in every case without interest.

One of the servants brings her presently a cup of tea, which she accepts gladly, yet after all forgets to drink; and after that no one comes to disturb her solitude, which is perhaps the worst thing that could have happened to her. Left thus, entirely alone with her thoughts, they turn to, and dwell with a most unhappy persistency upon, the events of to-day and the past night, painting them in their blackest colours, until finally, worn out with grief and misery, she sinks upon a low lounge and bursts into bitter weeping.

And then, wearied by her emotion, her head droops heavily upon the soft cushion of the lounge, and rests there gratefully, with a vague but happy sense of relief; and after a while that sense of relief changes to kindly sleep, which growing on her, she draws up, half-unconsciously, her feet to this welcome restful couch, and with a few faint, lingering sobs, falls into a profound slumber.

CHAPTER XXI.

“Now all is hush’d, as Nature were retired,
And the perpetual motion standing still.”

THE night is dark, and moist, and windy
Low, thunderous sounds come up from the
shores below, and are swept inland by the
heavy force of the wind.

Now and again the moon bursts forth from
behind the leaden clouds, that almost over-
weight the sky, giving a brilliant if evanescent
glory to the shivering earth beneath. For
the most part, however, it lies hidden behind
this pall of dense watery cloud that lies
across the heavens, and only a general dark-
ness draws everything into one universal net.

Sometimes a star or two peeps forth
through a chink in the black wall, breaking
the inky dulness ; but a more sure and certain
irradiation comes from the lighthouse, the
lamp of which shines out every other moment

with a fervid power—to disappear, certainly, but then as certainly to appear again.

To the solitary horseman, riding along the road that stretches like a grey ribbon on the right, the coming of this lighthouse star brings a sense of comfort—foretelling, as it does, the nearness of his home. The road is a narrow one, hedged in on either side by thick warm masses of yellow furze, still aglow with its golden bloom, though the season is so far advanced. Delaney, breathing the fragrant perfume of its flowers, thinks with a feeling of rather fatigued satisfaction that he is now close upon his journey's end.

It is long past midnight, and cold with a deadly chill has grown the air. Now once again the moon bursts its bonds and lights up the surging, glittering waves away over there, that dance, and heave, and roar in the moonlight, whilst on this side it shows up the grey misty vapours that rise from the bog. Grey, and cold, and colourless as his own life is bound to be—so Delaney tells himself, gazing with heavy eyes upon the impure vapour—grey as the melancholy thoughts that have been his during his twenty mile

ride—thoughts not altogether devoid of self-contempt, for had he not declared his intention of not returning to Ventry until the morrow—that is already, to-day?

He had fully intended not to return when setting forth upon his journey, but time had destroyed that resolution. To stay away from her he found would be impossible to him. He could not. He must return—to see her, to plead with her afresh for the pardon she had so cruelly denied. He thought, he honestly believed, that if she had forgiven him he could have stayed away, but she had refused him absolution, and always that pale, small, sorrowful, unfor- giving face was before him.

He could not rest. It was madness, no doubt, but she drew him to her with a force he could not resist.

There was no train to be had at that late hour, when he had felt that overpowering desire to see her again grow upon him with a strength not to be conquered, so he had borrowed a horse from his host, urging instant business as an excuse, and had set out upon his long ride to Ventry, with a

feverish impatience that rendered him impervious to cold, or rain, or fatigue.

Now at last, as the miles grow fewer, he confesses to himself that he is in a degree tired ; two nights without sleep will tell on most men, be they never so happy, but with a gnawing pain for ever at the heart, the loss of those precious hours of forgetfulness is sometimes worse than death itself.

Everything seems to recur to him with a startling vividness as he rides on his silent way—everything connected with his ill-advised engagement to Katherine Cazalet. His first meeting with her years ago, when she had come, a tall, slender, wonderfully self-possessed orphan, to share her aunt's home till she should be of age. He remembers now, with a rather idle wonder, how lovely he then had thought her ; he, a very young man at that time, a mere stripling, only one or two years her senior. Then there was the cousinly relationship between them that ever seemed to draw them closer together, and the natural pleasure he had felt when it dawned upon him that she was warm and tender in her manner to him alone, whilst

cold to all the rest of the world. And after that there was the insensible drifting into that closer tie — the knowledge, vaguely, but certainly, conveyed to him — how, or by whom he hardly knew then—that a marriage between the cousins was a matter widely discussed and looked forward to by the world at large. To draw back now would be to bring down on Katherine the sneers of their many friends, to subject her to much unpleasantness, nay, to leave himself open to a charge that touched his honour.

There was but one thing to be done, and he had done it with a sufficiently good grace. It seemed to be the most natural thing in the world—Katherine so evidently had expected it, and so had his mother. There was no chance for withdrawal, and besides, it had really seemed a very usual finish to a long friendship ; so the engagement was speedily made public—with a rapidity indeed that had astonished him at the time, and things had arranged themselves, and everything had settled down into the usual and good commonplaceness of an orthodox betrothal. And then—came Norah !

How loud the wind roars ; what a sullen cry uprises from the sea ! Delaney, who is more worn out in body and specially in soul than he at all believes, reels a little in his saddle, and then pulls himself together again, with a fierce, vain wish that it might all end now, here, this moment ! Life ! What a worry, a turmoil it is ! So much labour of spirit, so little rest. Little ! none, it seems to him.

What a flash was that ! So blue, so vivid yet no thunder. There is strong promise of rain for the morrow to come out of those lowering clouds. Delaney hardly heeds the tempestuous signs of coming storm, riding ever onwards in a half-dazed fashion, and conscious only of a passionate longing to see Norah once again.

The moon again ! How clear, how wildly brilliant it makes all things seem ! To his disordered fancy it lights the dark and gloomy earth with a radiance almost supernatural ; and somehow, too, at this time he cannot help thinking that something is running by his side ! But what ?

He looks down involuntarily, and—it is

absurd of course—he almost laughs aloud at this fantastic trick his eyes are playing him—but is it a little child that is clinging to his stirrup leather? A little dead child, with white uplifted face, and wide unseeing eyes!

The moon goes out again, leaving the world once more to its darkness, but still Delaney has seen that little form, and feels certain it is there, running with him, always with the tiny stiff fingers entangled in the stirrup leather, and always with the little dead face uplifted.

And now at last he reaches the gates of Ventry, and passes through them down the long avenue, the dead child entering too, and clinging to him.

All at once a horrible certainty smites upon him; a certainty that it, the sad corpse face, is like Norah. Norah! What madness! He can reason still, yet a strong shudder shakes him as the thought declares itself. It follows him all round to the stables, where he dismounts and with that wild fancy still strong upon him actually in the darkness brushes down that side of the saddle where the small

stiff hand had seemed to be—to find, of course, nothing.

He breathes rather more freely after that, and presses his hand to his forehead, which is throbbing to an agonising degree. The whole thing was ridiculous, he tells himself, as he flings the reins to a sleepy groom; and yet it was a powerful bit of imagination, like a presentiment—a presentiment of death. But death to whom? A hideous fear thrills him. Yes, the face, he is sure now, resembled Norah's.

Entering the house by a small side door, heavily clamped with iron, of which he has the key, he goes softly up the staircase that leads to the hall above. If anything should have happened to Norah! Perhaps even now, as he stands here useless, some accident may be taking place. Oh, to be certain that she is safe at Clontree with the others! He has opened the door of the library, and is standing just inside it, his mind full of one thought only—one longing to see Norah again, alive, safe. His eyes wander carelessly round the room, and then all at once he starts convulsively. What is that lying over there?

Almost it seems to him it must be Norah's lifeless body—the realisation of his fears and his presentiments—so still, so death-like is her repose. But a second later what a wild rush of relief is that that overwhelms him! She is only sleeping, and with that blessed certainty all his fatigue vanishes with that curious dulness of the brain that had been troubling him, and his senses grow bright again, and a great wave of joy breaks over him.

Bending over her, he watches the soft breath coming from between her parted lips. Unevenly it comes, with every now and then a little sobbing sound that tells of tears but lately shed, the traces of which are even now lying sadly upon the long silken lashes that sweep her cheek.

How fragile, how white she looks! Almost as one might sickening for death. Her right hand, drooping a little with the soft pink palm uppermost and half-unclosed in the languour of slumber, touches him with a sense of helplessness. Stooping, he presses his lips to it, very softly, lest he shall awaken her. A great longing to kiss her—her cheek, her

lips—possesses him; but she looks so tranquil, so child-like, so unconscious, that such a deed would be impossible. So calm she lies, she might almost be dead, and therefore sacred.

Even as he gazes on her, roused, perhaps, by that gentle caress upon her hand, she wakes; the white lids unclose, and the large dark eyes look up at him, filled with a soft wonderment.

CHAPTER XXII.

“He looked at her as a lover can ;
She looked at him as one who awakes ;
The past was sleep, and her life began.”

NOT coldly, not scornfully now, do they meet his, but with a tender welcome in them. Softly she turns to him, with a little loving gesture, and with her lips parted by a happy smile. She has forgotten everything in this supreme moment, save those old sweet days when first they met ; and still half-wrapt in the tender dream that had carried her back to them, she whispers fondly, sleepily, as a child might—“Denis.”

It is all so unexpected, so terrible, because of the hopelessness that must follow it, that Denis stands beside her as one stricken dumb. All his being had rushed to her as the sound of that loved voice calling on him, fell upon his ear ; and it is by a superhuman effort alone that he now stands beside her,

irresponsive, motionless. Oh! the sweetness of those parted lips! The lovelight in the deep grey eyes! Once again it is the old Norah who is with him—his darling—his Duchess.

And then there is an end of it. He drops her hand and turns away, and leaning his arms upon the chimney-piece, lets his face fall forward upon them.

“You here!” says the Duchess, now in a tone that trembles. She has sprung to her feet, and is wide awake, staring at his back with astonishment that is half-fear shining in her eyes. “I thought you were in Bandon?”

“I could not stay there. I could not rest.”

“But at this hour,” glancing at the clock, which points to two. “There was no train.”

“No. I rode.”

“Twenty miles in the middle of the night? What madness,” cries she, angrily. “Well, you must be tired indeed, so I will wish you good-night.”

“Stay one moment,” exclaims he, turning his haggard face to her. “You know what brought me back. You know why I could not rest. Your ordinary coldness was bad

enough to bear, but to feel that I had angered you, wounded you past forgiveness—that you had actually denied me pardon—was intolerable. I have come back to you again, to entreat you to put your hand in mine, and try to forget what I have done.”

“Let it be as you wish, then,” says she, with a sad, cold little glance, and with a touch of weariness in her tone. “I shall try to forget. But——” turning suddenly up to his her large mournful eyes, “if only I might go home!”

A pause.

“You are unhappy here?” asks he, at last.

“I am. I confess it. I,” with a desperate attempt at an everyday manner, “miss dad, I think. I want him, oh, so badly!” with a sharp burst of grief.

“Well, you shall go, Norah. We have no right to keep you. But you know your father is coming here the day after to-morrow, and after a little while you can return with him.”

“That will all take too long,” cries she, feverishly. “I don’t want him to come; I want to go home to him—to be alone with him.”

“But,” questioningly, “must it be at once?”

“As soon as possible. At once, yes; I mean—to-morrow,” in a nervous, uncertain way, trifling absently with an ornament on the table near her.

‘Not to-morrow, I’m afraid,” coldly. “You must try,” with a rush of reproachful anger, “to curb your mad haste to be rid of us for a day or two. I can telegraph to your father in the morning to expect you, but there are one or two things I must see to before I can take you back to Ballyhinch.”

“You take me! You! Oh, no; you must not; you shall not,” vehemently. “I can go back alone.”

“Certainly you can not,” decidedly. “I brought you here, and I am responsible for your safe return. I shall most undoubtedly accompany you.”

“I tell you, you shall not,” in sore distress. The cruel meaning in Katherine Cazalet’s face recurs to her like a stab at this moment. “Do not insist on this, Denis. Understand me when I say,” going nearer to him, and speaking in a low voice, but with intense excitement, “that rather than have you as

my escort home, I would even prefer to remain here."

"Even! I thank you for both my mother and myself," says he, with a bitter laugh. "We may, indeed, congratulate ourselves on the success of our efforts to make your stay a happy one."

"Do not say such things to me," says she, her eyes filling with tears. "You know well how I love your mother."

She is standing close to him, looking upwards, with a grieved expression on her charming face. Her pretty, naked, rounded arms hang loosely before her, the fingers interlaced; her eyes, still large, and heavy and drowsy with sleep, are full of unshed tears; and the hair upon her brow is a little ruffled, as if from slumber. Her white gown clings to her lissome form. Never has she looked so lovely.

"I hardly know what to say," says Delaney. "Sometimes I am mad, I think; I know that——" Suddenly he falls on his knees before her and buries his face in her gown. "My darling! My beloved!" he breathes, passionately.

“ Oh, remember ! Oh, shame !” cries she, in a low thrilling tone.

“ I do remember all — everything ! Do you think I could forget ?” He has caught her hands now, and is kissing them feverishly. “ I know what you would remind me of—my engagement, the hour, the fact that we are alone. But,” recklessly, “ I don’t care. I will speak !” Then, seeing how pale she grows, and how she draws back from him, “ My love, my sweetheart, forgive me. All I would say is, that I will break this engagement with Katherine, and——” confusedly, “ perhaps then——”

“ Why will you break it ? What will you gain by so doing ? It seems to me that you have too quickly believed that I—I——” putting up her slender, trembling hand to her throat, “ love you. What cause have I given you to think that ? Oh, dad ! Oh, to be with you , to be near you !”

“ Why, none,” says he, dejectedly. “ And yet,” with sudden fire, “ there have been moments for which I would barter all that I possess—when——”

“ When you were vain enough to imagine

otherwise," interrupting him, hurriedly, and with a painful flush. "Well—you were wrong—wrong."

She is telling her lie with such a miserable passion that he does not dare openly to disbelieve her, but yet he knows. Those large, sad, honest eyes cannot withhold the truth, whatever the cruel lips may do.

"Still, I shall break with Katherine," says he, after a pause. He had risen to his feet some time ago, and is standing before her, watching her, gravely. "And then, perhaps," very humbly, "in time you might let me tell you all that is in my heart to-night."

"Never, never. I shall not listen. What! do you think I have no pride? Do I want another woman's lover? Would I have one who had sworn allegiance here and there? No, no."

"So be it. I shall end this farce between Katherine and myself, nevertheless," replies he, steadfastly.

"That must be as you will. Good-night," says she, holding out to him a slim, little hand, that trembles. Her eyes are downcast, but even as he looks at her, two large tears

fall from beneath her lids and travel slowly down her cheeks. In a moment his arms are round her, he can feel the quick beating of her heart on his ; for a cruelly short time she lies passive in his embrace, as though tired and beaten, and then she rouses herself, and with slender palms, pushes him from her, and without word or glance leaves the room.

Swiftly she goes upstairs and locks herself into her room. That one moment of weakness — of indecision — has frightened her. She had lain in his arms without protest of any sort. Nay more—she dares not deny it to herself—she had been happy there. She had been glad to have them round her. Even now, when released from the influence of his presence, she knows that she feels no anger towards him. Anger! Where is there place for anger in the warm, loving, miserable heart that is beating so wildly in her breast? But what is to be the end of it all? She must go. She must leave him. Never, never, never can he be anything to her save worse than a stranger. Oh! that he were indeed a stranger. Oh! that she could tear him from her heart! But it is too late for that.

All her long miserable life he must lie there, cherished secretly, wept over in private, loved with a fervour grown strong from sad thoughts indulged when no one can see her.

No, she could not listen to that proposal of his to end his engagement with Katherine. And yet had she done so, would it not have been for the welfare of all, even of Katherine; for wherein lies the good to be derived from a loveless union? She covers her face with her hands and walks swiftly up and down the silent chamber. But no hope comes to her. His face rises before her—sad, reproachful, passionate, entreating. He is hers, hers only, by all love's laws, and yet she must thrust him from her with all her might. Oh, how miserably ill he looked! Oh, Denis! Oh, darling, *darling!* Oh, Denis!

She has thrown herself on her knees beside the bed and buried her face out of sight.

CHAPTER XXIII.

“But now the hand of fate is on the curtain,
And gives the scene to light.”

IN the morning that tiresome headache is worse than ever. Norah manages to get down to breakfast, but only to play with her toast and to refuse with a glance of distaste anything offered her.

“How ill you look, darling,” says Madam, some hours later, meeting her in one of the ante-rooms, equipped for walking. “Like a little pretty ghost. I am so distressed about it; and your father coming to-morrow, too! It is dreadful; he will say I have not taken any care of you.”

“Who could have taken more?” says the Duchess, sweetly, slipping an arm round her neck. “You have made me feel always that you love me.”

“Have I?” very pleased. “That is as it

should be, then, and only the barest truth. Every mother should love her own little daughter." She smiles and kisses the girl with a lingering fondness, and smoothes back the soft, ruffled locks from her hot brow.

"You are quite feverish, darling. Do you know I am growing really uneasy about you."

"It is this headache."

"But what a persistent one. Will you see Doctor Morgan?"

"No, no, indeed," laughing. "What nonsense, Auntie. I'll tell you, though, what I think of doing. Of going out, and staying out for quite ever so long. Make an excuse for me at luncheon, and don't expect me again until you see me. I feel as if a good dose of the strong wild wind outside is the one thing that can blow these cobwebs out of my brain."

"Then go, by all means, dearest. Try your own medicine first, mine afterwards," says Madam. "But, before you go — a biscuit and a glass of Madeira. Come now, I insist, and for reward, I'll tell any pretty fib you like about you at luncheon."

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The dull and cheerless sun, that all day long has been making so poor a pretence at jollity, has at last sunk behind the hills. Already daylight wanes, and the heavy gusts of wind that, rushing through the fir tops, stirred the wide air since early dawn, have now gained in strength, and are roaring sullenly with a subdued force that speaks of a violent outburst later on. One or two heavy drops of rain fall with a quick soft sound at Norah's feet.

They rouse her from the reverie in which she has almost lost herself; rouse her, too, to a knowledge of the fact that day is nearly dead, and that the air is full of signs of the coming storm.

So busy have been her thoughts during her long, swift ramble through the woods and over the hills, and thence into unknown woods again, that to her it seems as though it is but a little while since she walked from the broad stone steps that lead to the entrance door at Castle Ventry; and yet, in reality, how long has it been?

She pauses to look round her to notice for the first time how swiftly the darkness is

beginning to fall ; to see, too, with a vague yet sharp touch of fear, that the place wherein she now stands is strange, unknown to her. Whither have her restless feet carried her ? All the landmarks by which she has been used to guide herself are now behind her, lost to her, unless she can retrace her steps to some spot familiar.

A huge black cloud has gathered overhead, and is covering all the heavens. A little fine, white mist begins to fall, a shadowy sort of shower, that presently declares itself more openly, and becomes an honest downpour. Larger and larger grow the drops, darker and darker the atmosphere ; and now that first mild sense of fear gathers in force and becomes uncomfortably definite.

Turning, she begins to walk briskly in the way she believes she has come, but which in reality is only taking her the more decidedly from Ventry ; when she has walked in this direction about twenty minutes, she pauses and looks round her, only to find herself hopelessly astray.

Blacker grows the leaden sky above, as seen in irregular patches through the arching

branches over her head. Slowly, steadily rises the storm; already the wind begins to rush past her with a fierceness that makes her limbs tremble. Standing still, with her arm round a sapling oak for support, and feeling a very natural thrill of terror as she acknowledges to herself that she scarcely knows where to turn, she happens to lift her head, and there on her right she sees an old broken-down cottage, or hut rather—close to a tall fir-tree, that appears to bend over it as if offering protection.

It will give shelter at least. Running towards it she steps quickly, thankfully, into the miserable one bare room of which it can boast. Dead leaves blown in by many winds strew the earthen floor. A wide open chimney holds on its hearth the grey ashes of dead fires old and gone.

The Duchess, with a sense of rather uncanny loneliness, looks with ungrateful backward glances at this spot that alone has held out to her the arms of pity. How long has it stood here a prey to ghosts? Not so long, apparently. In one corner stands a pile of rotten fir logs, and near it a bundle

of twigs, or "kippens," as the peasants call them, that suggest a desire on the part of the late tenants to light one more fire before they should leave this dilapidated home for ever.

Through two large holes in the thatched roof the rain is falling with a quick steady drip, and Norah, avoiding it as best she may, leans disconsolate against the open doorway and gazes with many misgivings on the dismal scene without. It must be now about five o'clock according to her calculation—in reality it is considerably later—and they will all be now in the library, some gathered round the welcome tea-tray, others lounging in pretty tea-gowns in the softest chairs to be found.

Denis, too, will have come in long ago from his shooting, and perhaps—perhaps will now be thinking of her and wondering where she is. A little uneasy, too, it may be. She can almost see his handsome—of late, rather melancholy—face, with the eyes turning so constantly to the door.

Well, well; why think of it? He may wonder and watch, and long for her coming; but of what avail will it all be? There is no end to it but one. She will not dwell upon

Let her rather turn her thoughts to the fact that she is imprisoned here until the storm shall cease, and that even after that she will not know what direction to take to reach Ventry.

How dark it grows! Blacker and blacker frown the heavens. The dimmest twilight is all that is left of the day just done. What will they think of her at the Castle? With what a contemptuous sneer Katherine will hint at the barbarous bad taste of those who can plunge so unreasonably a whole household into a state of apprehension for the sake of their own idle whims! And besides—

Great Heaven! what is that?

Only the report of a gun. But coming through the gathering darkness of the descending night, it strikes with a cold terror at her heart. And then all at once, she scarcely knows why, that past scene upon the gravel sweep stands out before her mental gaze once more. Once again the dog's yelp of agony sounds on the air; once again Moloney is felled to the ground; she sees him rise, and marks again the deadly threat of vengeance in his eyes.

A fear, born of nothing, as true fears sometimes are, becomes strong within her. Her heart beats fast, her hands grow cold, her cheek pales. How if that murderous, though silent threat has been even now fulfilled! If even now he, her soul's beloved, lies powerless, dead, with the heavy cruel pattering rain falling, falling always on the dull insensate body!

It is but a little thing after this to picture the white, ghastly, upturned face, with the dead staring eyes, the parted lips showing the gleaming teeth just a little. Oh, Heaven! Oh, no! Oh, no, no, no!

She shudders violently, and flings out her hands as though to ward off the awful sight, and as she thus stands trembling all over, again that sharp sound rings through the darkness. She clutches the doorway, and with dilated eyes stares outwards, straining sight and hearing.

Again!—close at hand it now sounds—rings out the sharp crack of a revolver, and following on it, the bang of a breech-loader. To her unpractised ear both sounds are alike, but for all that, instinct is alert within her

and holds up a warning hand, and not for one moment is she deluded by the reasonable solution of the problem that Denis on his homeward way has knocked over a brace of cock.

Conquering a sickening sensation, that comes very near to fainting, she rushes impetuously out of the house, and through the blinding rain makes her way to the spot from whence the sounds have come. To her surprise, a very short run brings her to a rise in the ground that betrays to her the fact of a road that lies just below where she is standing. A high bank, topped by furze bushes, hides that part of the wood where she now stands from the public way, though a dilapidated gateway lower down permits her to see where the road runs. As she draws nearer to it she becomes conscious that broken sounds are beginning to fall upon her ear—panting breaths, muttered curses, the swaying movement of feet. In this moment she knows, as well as though she can already see him, that Denis is on the road, close to that broken gateway, and that he is fighting fiercely for dear life.

All at once her faintness leaves her. A cold chill rushes through her, hardening every nerve. Springing to the top of the high bank, she looks through the furze bushes down on to the road beneath and sees—

CHAPTER XXIV.

“Courage is a sort of armour to the mind, and keeps an unwelcome impression from driving too deep into perception.”

IT is Denis she sees first. He is facing her ; whilst his opponent—who has grasped him by the throat with a savage grip, and is straining every muscle to bring him to the ground—has his back to her. He is a powerful-looking man, and even as Norah looks on, frozen by horror, he makes an effort to bring down the handle of the revolver he carries upon Delaney’s head, with the intent to hammer out his brains.

It is evidently a struggle that cannot last long. Delaney’s face is already death-like, rendered the more ghastly because of the heavy drops of blood that are running down it from a wound in the forehead, and his coat is torn away from one arm that hangs helplessly by his side. With the other arm he

still holds his would-be murderer, and with the tenacity of his race is still holding his own, when another would be lying spent and insensible.

To Norah—who is of his own blood, and who can see for herself that unless succour is prompt the end is very near—this sight gives fresh courage. Her spirit rises within her; she sets her teeth and looks swiftly, keenly, around her. A short, heavy stake, part of the broken gateway, catches her eye; she loses no time, she moves quickly towards it; to seize it noiselessly, to spring once again to that high part of the bank that brings her right over the assassin's head and within a foot of him, takes her but a minute, and then!

With all the strength of her strong, young arms she lifts the heavy piece of wood well above her shoulder, and brings it down again with unerring precision right upon the scoundrel's pate!

Like a stone he drops, half-dragging Denis with him, but the girl, jumping into the road, catches Denis as he falls, and holds him upright still with loving arms. Even now, as insensibility at last overpowers him, as deadly

stupor benumbs his every sense, he knows her.

“My beloved! My own little girl!” he breathes faintly, with but a poor attempt indeed at the old fond smile, yet with love unspeakable in his fast-closing eyes. He makes a vain effort to hold out his hands to her, and then falls inertly against the bank.

And now it comes to Norah to do what she never afterwards can remember doing, or understand how she had the power to accomplish it. But

The God of love, ah! *benedicte!*

How mighty and how great a Lord is He!

Surely He helps her now. Looking at Denis, lying there in that awful swoon, it seems to her that she dare not leave him alone with the murderer beside him whilst she runs for help. What if the man were to recover whilst she was away! What if he be not dead! Poor, little, tender-hearted Duchess. Let her not be thought unwomanly if in this supreme moment she hopes passionately that she has killed the man who would have slain her lover, and only fears that she has not done so.

What if he should rise and finish his ghastly work whilst she ran blindly along an unknown road to gain that assistance she might never meet! Moisture rises to her brow as she thinks it all out, and then all at once she abandons that idea of gaining help, and with one quick indrawn breath steadies herself down for the work she is determined to do this night, or die in the attempt.

Stooping, she encircles Denis with her arms, and presently has drawn him, first towards the broken gateway, then through it; through the blessed opening that permits her to drag him out of view of that cruel figure on the ground, into the safer shelter of the woods beyond.

Yard by yard—sobbing—panting—with her fear and her fatigue pressing sorely on her, yet never discouraged, she slowly and ever more slowly, as the willing arms grow so deadly weary, drags him to the protection of that lonely hut close to the fir-tree.

Even when she has got him in, and laid him softly downwards, with the poor broken arm as comfortably settled as she can manage it, her zeal for his welfare does

not relax. Off her own tender body she strips her sealskin coat, a present from her Auntie, to make a pillow for his head, and then, not thinking it high enough—careless of cold, of discomfort, nay dead to them—she slips off her flannel petticoat and adds that to the coat.

Not until she has done all this does she permit herself to kneel beside him and look into his face.

Is it his face, that calm, still, motionless mask, all streaked and dyed with blood—blood still flowing? She has been so engrossed hitherto with her terrible task of bringing him here, that the idea that her labour might be in vain—that death might already have robbed her of what she most values upon earth—has not suggested itself; but now it comes, and a very agony of despair takes possession of her. Nearer she leans over him, still nearer; her miserable eyes clinging to his death-like face. What a horrible pallor is that upon his cheek! How sunken are the eyes within their sockets! How cruelly calm the mouth! Is—is he dead?

Oh! no, no, no! Not dead! Hurt, hurt

nigh unto death, if it must be, but oh! not dead, indeed! Her very soul uplifts itself in supplication. Maimed, suffering, broken let him be—but grant that life still lingers within his bruised body.

“Oh! Thou loving Lord! by whom all prayers are heard; hear mine.”

Softly, tremulously, she entreats; and now with nervous fingers she loosens his coat and feels for the heart that should beat beneath. And after a minute—who shall say what ages lie in it?—a faint pulsation rewards her. He lives! As yet, at least, the vital spark is in him.

But how to keep it there? Deftly she tears first her own handkerchief and then his into strips, and binds them round his brow. The search for his handkerchief has brought to light a small flask, which, to her joy, contains brandy; but though she tries, even with her fingers, to get some between his lips she fails to make him swallow it.

And now again terror drives her almost wild. Can she do nothing! Will no one ever come to his aid? She runs to the doorway, with a vehement determination to rush

through all the blinding storm in search of help. But as she crosses the threshold she looks back, and, seeing him lying there so quiet, to all appearance so lifeless, her heart grows weak within her, and her courage fails. Alas! too, even if she were to venture forth, whither could she go? The place is strange to her; she would not know which way to turn; and if she were to wander too far in this gathering darkness and fail to make her way back again, what might not happen to him before morn—in her absence, alone, untended, deserted——? Oh, no, she cannot leave him.

A vague hope that they will be rescued later on by messengers from Ventry gives her some wavering comfort, but in truth her present fears are so many that comfort in the future is quickly ousted. It is so cold, too—so bitterly chill. She looks longingly at the dry sticks lying on the hearth, but even though she knows that by the aid of the vestas she had found in his pocket when looking for the flask, she can set fire to them, she shrinks from doing so, a nervous horror lest the smoke should betray

his resting-place to his enemy restraining her.

She takes one of his hands in hers, and feels it is cold as ice—his very lips, as she lays her fingers on them, seem frozen. She draws off her sole remaining petticoat, and wraps it round him, with despair fast gathering at her heart. Oh, to light that fire!

And now a determination enters into her that is only part of the great courage that has all through supported her. Silently she leaves the cabin, and cautiously, with her heart in her throat, steals down to that high bank that overlooks the road. Some faint light shows beyond the depth of the wood, and cautiously she peers through the furze bushes to that spot whereon the man had lain. It was Moloney, she knew, at that first awful moment, but now she looks for his stalwart frame in vain. No man is there! She casts her eyes quickly up and down the road for many yards—as far, indeed, as her eyes can pierce the gloom, only to find that it is empty.

It is plain then that she had not killed

him! He had evidently recovered sufficiently to enable him to make his way home, and terrified by the thought that succour in some unaccountable fashion had come to his victim, had hidden himself away as far from the spot of his attempted crime as possible.

With a lightened heart, Norah runs back to the cabin, and seizing the matches, sets fire to some dry leaves, that easily igniting, presently coax the large bundle of sticks into a flame. Cheerily they blaze, throwing out a delicious glow that warms whatever it touches. She draws Denis as close up to it as prudence will permit, and once again tries to force the brandy between his lips—this time with some success. And at last, at last, he moves a little and sighs, and finally opens his eyes.

“You, my love!” he says, very low, with a faint smile, and as though not at all surprised. So near to the gates of death has he been brought, that all emotions, save the one absorbing passion of his life, are forgotten by him; and indeed so weak is he that almost as she believes she has gained him back again from the portals we all dread for those we

love—even as she tries to answer him—he faints again, leaving her once more to watch out the long dark hours of night alone.

CHAPTER XXV.

“I feel a tightness grasp my throat,
As it would strangle me.”

It is now far past midnight, and still the storm rages overhead. Heavy bursts of thunderous rain dash against the walls of the cabin, and through the open doorway the inky blackness of the night looks in upon her, as she sits cowering, shivering, by the hearth, her eyes ever fixed upon the motionless figure beside her.

Every now and then she rises to chafe the uninjured hand, to listen for the faint breathing, to wash away the marks of blood upon the wan face. Little by little she has made him swallow most of the brandy the flask contained, and now, with a sad heart, she sits watching for the dawn.

Will he last till then? And even then is she sure she can make her way home in a

hurry? And—and—when she gets there what will her welcome be—what will she say—how give an account of herself? How is she to tell them that she has spent the night—the long, long, terrible night, alone with him in this hut? Katherine's face rises before her once again—the bitter scorn of it—the cruel contempt—the wicked meaning!

A thousand times she assures herself that no one can dare say a word to her prejudice when the truth, in Denis's shattered person, lies before them; and yet for all that she knows that unkind comment will be made, and shrinks from the thought of it with a rather undue horror. In this dark hour she remembers how Katherine is mistress of her secret; remembers, too, little meaning kindly smiles and innuendoes from Nancy and Lady Glandore, and knows full well that her unhappy affection for her cousin, if not shouted, has, at least, been whispered on the house tops.

Yes; it is all over. This melancholy night spent here in this desolate cabin will never be forgotten in her world—never! It seems to her, in the morbid state into which

she now has fallen, that for the future she will be a sort of outcast, an Irish pariah as it were, amongst her tribe. One little drop of comfort falls into her cup of misery. To-morrow—nay to-day, her dad is coming to Ventry. To this thought, which is the very sweetest imaginable to her sorely troubled spirit, she clings eagerly; in it she has indeed “great store of bliss”—for when did her dad ever think evil where no evil was?—and if all the world were against her, would not that be, to him, one reason the more for declaring himself more openly upon her side? Dear, darling dad!

A heavy sigh falls from her, and moving uneasily upon her seat—a heap of sticks—she suddenly becomes aware that Denis has his eyes open and is looking at her.

“Is that you, Duchess?”

The voice is low, so faint indeed as to be half-inaudible, but ‘lovers’ ears are sharp to hear, and Norah, rising, bends eagerly over him.

“Yes. I am here,” she whispers, tenderly. She kneels upon the ground beside him, and softly, lovingly, lays her cool hand upon his

forehead. It is throbbing violently ; but the wet bandage has evidently been of some use, as the blood has ceased to flow. Feebly lifting the uninjured arm, he draws down the little comforting hand until it touches his lips.

“ My beloved, this is a bad thing for you,” he whispers, with difficulty. “ Can you not go home ? You are giving up too much for me.”

“ Not so much as you imagine,” whispers she back, smiling. “ I have lost my way, do you know ? I can't go ; so you see I am not doing much for you after all.”

“ I know better than that”—the words come slowly, disconnectedly, and as if the utterance of them hurts him—“ but I shall explain. I'll make them understand if I last till then — if ——” He breaks off with a heavy sigh that is almost a groan, and makes a vain effort, that is very pitiable in one so strong, to change his position.

“ You are in pain,” says Norah, miserably.

“ No. But tired — tired,” murmurs he, wearily. Then seeing her about to rise, he clasps her hand closer. “ Don't go. Stay with me. Oh ! darling — if I am to die now

—after this—with the knowledge that you love me, it will be hard—hard !”

“Do not try to talk,” entreats she, raising him with all her strength, and so turning him that he will find relief. “Do not ; you are only wasting the little power left you. Now, are you better, more comfortable ?”

“I am happier than I have ever been in all my life. Oh ! Duchess, what shall repay you—not I—I cannot. But——” He pauses as though he has lost himself, and a sad wild light grows within his eyes. “You should not be here. You must go—go—or else she will have her jibes—her sneers—she—she——”

He has wandered again, but mercifully those cruel imaginings soon come to an end, as he sinks once more into the old lethargy, and lies as if dead, save for the faint breathings that make themselves heard now and again.

Beside him, her hand still clasped in his, Norah sits quietly, her head bent upon her knees. And presently on tired thought kindly sleep descends, and conquers it, and soon all is forgotten. Oh, blessed, health-giving unconsciousness, where would the

tried ones of the earth find rest if thou wert withdrawn?

It is dawn, as with a pang of acutest fear she wakes. Nay, more than dawn. The day is well awake, and on the mountain tops the first fine clouds of coming morn are dissolving beneath the sun's warm rays. Springing to her feet, Norah turns a terrified glance upon Delaney, to find that he still breathes, and with a rush of thankfulness she bends over him and presses the last few precious drops of brandy between his lips. She knows perfectly the task that now lies before her, and having heaped the few remaining sticks on the still glowing embers, she prepares for departure, and a return to the place where a severe cross-examination, as she believes, awaits her.

At the door she looks back, and something—is it the helplessness of his attitude or the utter forlornness of him?—touches her. In a moment she is by his side again; she is leaning over him; softly her loving fingers brush back the short hair from his brow; long, long she gazes at him, as one might upon their dead, with, in her case, an inten-

sity born of the fear that it may be for the last time. Those wretched ones, whose beloved are already dead, may be counted happy in comparison with those who still wait upon their dying, fighting each minute with the Tyrant who conquers all things—love and hate, and pride and lust, and jealousy and envy and all uncharitableness.

Norah, kneeling beside him, feels as though indeed this were a last farewell, and at the thought her heart fails her and she bursts out crying. She dares not believe the terrible idea that so obstinately forces itself upon her, or else—she knows—she will never be able to summon the courage to leave him; yet go she must, for his sake.

She presses her lips to his hand, and then, emboldened by his unconsciousness and strengthened by the innocent love she bears him—it is, after all, but a little the more—she stoops and gives him soft, gentle, loving kisses upon cheeks and hair and forehead, and, at last, after some faint honest hesitation, his lips, too! Cold, unresponsive lips! but all the dearer, because of the sad reason of their coldness.

Then, now bitterly weeping, she runs out of the cabin, and gaining the road, turns, without knowing why, to the right. All roads, indeed, are alike to her, so great is her ignorance of her locality, but, fortunately, instinct, if one may call it so, has in this instance led her aright. It has stood to her so well, that half-an-hour's brisk walking brings her within view of the gilded vane of Ventry, glittering gaily in the morning sunlight.

CHAPTER XXVI.

“Back-wounding calumny
The whitest virtue strikes. What king so strong
Can tie the gall up in the slanderer’s tongue?”

AT Ventry the utmost consternation holds full sway. During all the past evening, questions had been rife, first as to the strange non-appearance of Norah, and later on about the continued absence of Delaney, and presently, as the evening wore on, everyone, as if bracketting them, began to wonder in a rather aside sort of way, as to where they could be.

Until dinner was over, however, no very great alarm was felt, even by Madam. The night was so inclement that probably Norah had been kept at the Rectory, and Denis, who had gone shooting in that direction, would in all probability have been compelled by the hospitable O’Shaughnessys to stay and dine with them. At least, so argued

Madam up to nearly eleven o'clock, with intent to allay the nervous fear that already was beginning to find a home within her breast.

But when midnight came and neither Norah nor Denis had returned, her assumed calm broke down, and she gave way openly to the terror that was consuming her. Messengers were at once sent out, to the Rectory first, and then on to the O'Shaughnessys', and as the two houses were many miles apart, much time was lost in this vain quest. When the men returned, with Major O'Shaughnessy, who was always eager for the fray, and the kindest soul alive—a regular “emergency man” if ever there was one—to say nothing was known of either Norah or Delaney at either of the houses, Madam's fear grew to agony, and the whole male portion of the household was turned out with lanterns and overcoats to search high and low. Major O'Shaughnessy undertook the command; but the night, as we know, was terrible, and unfortunately Madam was under the impression that Norah had gone in a direction diametrically opposite to that she

had really chosen. As for Denis, who shall say where a sportsman's feet will take him?

The servants, too, and the outdoor contingent, were only half-hearted in their search for the missing pair. Nothing so sharp as an Irishman, if you can get him to put his heart in a thing; but the Irish peasantry, as a rule, have a fatal knack of forming conclusions for themselves—on every topic under the sun that is at all known to them—and worse still, acting on them; and as the specimens employed on this occasion had come to a unanimous decision that “Misther Denis an’ Miss Norah” were far too “cute” to lose themselves in any storm, the search, though seemingly vigorous, and indeed very kindly, if protestingly, conducted, was in reality but poorly carried out, and—as we all know—resulted in nothing.

The grey morning brought to Madam no tidings of niece or son. All night long she had spent pacing up and down her room, and from her room down the broad staircase, and through the spacious hall to the entrance door, where, having ordered it to be flung wide open, she would stand a while, silent, motion-

less, listening as one might for a cry from afar for help. But none came, and nothing was left her but the slow, hopeless journey back again to her desolate chamber. With the first flush of the dawn, despair seized upon her.

It is now seven o'clock, and the dull daylight is putting the lamps to shame. One by one the footman extinguishes them in the library, where Madam, with Lady Glandore, Miss Blake and some of the others, is walking up and down, waiting, waiting always, as she has waited since ten o'clock last night. She is still in her dinner dress of black velvet, and her face is ghastly pale; from one side of the room to the other she walks incessantly, not talking, but always with that terrible look of expectancy upon her face. What is it she expects?

To her, as to Norah, the face of the man Moloney has stood out clearly, with a horrible persistency, all through the changes of the past miserable night.

Lady Glandore, who has risen out of her languour and her rather hot-house style to quite an extraordinary degree, has ordered

coffee, and now tries to induce her to partake of it. But Madam repulses her with a harshness hitherto unknown to that sweet and kindly nature.

“No, no,” she says, hoarsely, almost pushing Lady Glandore away from her.

“But, dearest Madam, consider,” says that spoiled beauty, taking her rebuff with the utmost mildness. “This may be, after all, only a dreadfully mistaken affair all through, and when presently they come back, we——”

“They!”

Madam looks at her strangely, questioningly, as if not understanding, and then all at once a slow red burns like fire upon her cheeks. She is expecting them, of course, but something in the way Lady Glandore has spoken has widened her vision, and shown her a solution of the problem hitherto unthought of.

“He—Denis,” stammers Lady Glandore, colouring in turn and altering her mistake a little too late.

“You think?” says Madam, fixing her with her large bright gaze, grown brighter since her unhappy vigil.

“And even if so—dear Madam, would it not be better than——” Lady Glandore pauses, a little frightened and confused, yet sure that there has suddenly come into Madam’s despairing face an expression that is nearer hope than anything she has seen there since yesterday. She is still struggling with a desire to say a little more to the same effect, when the necessity for it is removed by the abrupt entrance of someone.

All eyes are turned to the door, and a little breathless hush falls upon those who form an audience to what suggests itself as being very likely to create a scene of a rather tragic order. There is a clear promise of it, indeed, in the very way Katherine enters the room. For one thing, she is remarkably pale, and it must be some powerful emotion indeed, something worse than mere anxiety, to create emotion of so high an order in that well-regulated mind, and, besides this, for once the calm, supercilious mouth is a little from under control.

It hardly takes her a moment to get from the door to where Madam is standing, quite still now and as miserable as human being

can be. The opening of the door that had brought no tidings had been one disappointment the more. For a little while the two women regard each other critically, uncertainly, and then Madam by an effort breaks the silence that has become almost painful.

“You have heard some news,” she says, with dry lips, “of Denis.”

“Of Denis? No; I don’t expect any.” Then, with a cold uplifting of her brows, and a colder smile, “Do you?”

“What else is there to expect?” says Madam, tremulously, her eyes dilating.

“A great deal, as it seems to me; but you must wait for a post or two. As for me, I have been thinking—the night has been long—and I have quite thought it all out.” Her voice is so clear as to be positively grating. “There is, in my opinion, no longer room for conjecture. As I tell you, the post-bag is the one thing to look forward to. I felt it to be my duty to come down and warn you of the truth. Don’t look for Denis—look for the post.” A low contemptuous laugh escapes her. Madam, drawing back a step

or two, looks with such heartfelt unhappiness around her, that Lady Glandore at once steps into the breach.

“You are pleased to be enigmatical,” she says, turning rather bellicose eyes on Miss Cazalet, between whom and herself, indeed, little love is lost. “But if you could explain yourself, and put what you have so evidently come to say into language adapted to our intellects, it would be, I think, a kindness to—Madam. As you see,” sharply, “she is suffering; come, let her know at once what you think the post will tell her.”

“Of her son’s marriage to that little adventuress,” returns Katherine, with a venomous flash from her blue eyes; “I warned you,” turning to Madam with a touch of rage that all her cleverness cannot conceal—“I told you what the end would be if you persisted in keeping that wily wretch here; I showed you what she would do with him when the time was ripe, but you would not listen. You permitted her to deceive you, as she has deceived him, but,” facing round upon the room, and speaking with slow, deliberate enunciation, “I tell you all that she has

never deceived me, nor has he jilted me. Here," laying a letter slowly and with care upon the table, "is a letter from Sir Brandrum Boileau—who you know left last night when the truth of this disgraceful elopement first dawned upon us—asking me to throw up my engagement to—to my cousin."

She beats her hand slowly upon the table as she says this in a curiously compressed fashion, and then goes on again as if no pause had occurred.

"Asking me also to marry him. As I have already said, I have thought out this—this vile affair—during a long night, and to-day I have sent Sir Brandrum an acceptance of his offer. You are all witness," lifting her head and gazing defiantly around her, "that before I heard whether Denis was dead or married, or"—she laughs shortly, cruelly—"merely gone for a tour with her, I decidedly gave him up, and accepted Sir Brandrum. You all hear! You are all witnesses!"

The poor, miserable, egotistical pride of her, that rises above and crushes under foot all womanly feeling for the terrible grief of

the unhappy mother, strikes a chill to the hearts of those present. Mrs. O'Shaughnessy who had come over with the dawn, is the only one equal to the occasion.

"Well! You're the poorest creature I know!" says she, with an emphatic shake of her head. Miss Cazalet takes not the slightest notice of her.

"You hear? You will remember!" she repeats, despotically, with a little stamp of her foot.

"It is difficult to remember anything just now, except Madam's grief and anxiety, and this wearing suspense," says Miss Blake, gravely, with a cold stare. "Pray try to remember that—you have some small consideration for her!"

"What consideration is there for me?" demands Katherine, turning upon her as though she would annihilate her. "Am I nothing? Am I not to be considered, too?"

"Afterwards. If this idle imagining of yours should prove true," drily.

"If! Have you still a doubt, then? But you have not!" triumphantly. "Your eyes

betray you! It is as clear to you as it is to me. 'Do not expect me till you see me,' she said to Madam, her 'auntie,' whom she so loved and caressed and," savagely, "played upon! Yes, you, too, know that she has run away with him."

"Well, at least, I hope so," returns Miss Blake, composedly.

Katherine would have answered this, but a touch upon her arm checks her.

"Do you really believe it? Do you think it is true?" asks Madam, in a low, unsteady tone, her tired eyes seeming to burn into the other's, as though with a determination to force her real meaning from her. Something in their extreme earnestness, yet apart from it—something quick and bright, and altogether different from the misery that shone in them a while since, betrays itself to Miss Cazalet. She flings off her aunt's clinging fingers with a passionate gesture.

"You are glad," she says, in an indescribable tone. "You hope it may be so. The very idea has given you new life. Is that what I am to learn now, after all these years? You would gladly take this girl to your heart.

You would condone this odious offence on hers."

"Oh, that I could know that he lives," falters Madam, clasping her hands.

"You would sacrifice all to that — his honour — mine. Whilst I," she draws her breath quickly, "I wish I could see him now, this moment, dead at my feet." She looks on the ground as she says this, and spreads out her hands, palms downwards, as though picturing him to herself there. His mother with a little sharp gasping cry, shrinks away from her.

"Oh, no, no, no!" she says, faintly. "Anything but that! Oh! to see him once again alive—alive! Oh! Denis. Oh! my son —my child!" With this she falls a-sobbing as though her heart must break.

"Well, so you will," says Miss Cazalet, with a fine contempt; "not only him, but her too. The daughter you were always wishing for in one guise or another. I hope you will like her when you get her. At all events, she will give you scope for the superfluous sentiment that must be such a trouble to you."

She laughs again insolently, and moves towards the door. Nancy Blake, who happens to be standing near it, draws away as she approaches, with an unconscious but very eloquent display of condemnation. But of this Katherine takes little heed. Opening the door she steps out into the hall and there comes face to face with—

CHAPTER XXVII.

“ I find she loves him much, because she hides it,
Love teaches cunning even to innocence.”

SUCH a poor, little, forlorn, draggled, frightened girl, that for a moment she scarcely knows her. Can this be the dainty Duchess ?

It is ! With a quick exclamation she goes forward, and lays her firm white hand upon the shrinking Norah's shoulder, and twists her round so that the light may fall more fully on her.

“ So you have come home ! I wonder you weren't ashamed,” she says. “ And in such a plight, too ! Where is your beauty gone, I wonder.” She seems to find a rich enjoyment in the girl's miserable appearance. “ Come, you have now to explain,” she says, and using a little—a very little is all that is needed—of the strength that belongs to her, she compels the worn-out child to follow her,

and enter what seems to her sad, terrified, half-dulled brain, a room crowded with condemnatory eyes.

When she left Denis she had been fortunate in taking at first the path that led direct to Ventry. At the gates she had met two of the stable men, whom she had at once despatched to the cabin where lay the unconscious Delaney. A third man she had sent off for the doctor; and having, as she felt, done now for him all she could do, the strain at last relaxed and she gave in. It seemed to her as though something had given way within her head, and she lost thought for most things, being only desirous of getting away from everyone, that she might be alone, beyond the view of prying eyes, able to give herself up to the deadly lethargy that is so surely overcoming her.

Then Katherine had seized upon her as she was endeavouring, like some wounded thing, to creep upstairs unseen to her own room, and now she puts up her hands as if to shut them all away from her.

“Norah! Norah!” cries Lady Glandore, rushing to her; but she is not first—Madam

is before her, and has caught the girl by both her shoulders, and is, in her agitation, swaying her gently to and fro.

“Norah, where is Denis? Where is my son?”

The poor child, bewildered, gazes from one to the other. A feeling of faintness is overpowering her, mingled with that terrible dread of what they will say of her—of public censure—that had tormented her all through the past interminable night. Oh, to escape—to get away! She looks round her helplessly, and makes a feeble effort to shake off Madam's detaining grasp.

“Norah, speak,” says Lady Glandore, in a kind, conciliatory tone. “Where have you been since last night?”

“In the wood,” says the Duchess, trembling, repeating half-unconsciously the words she had drilled herself to say in the lonely hours spent beside the insensible body. He is safe now. The men must have found him. She cannot lay herself open to the cruel insinuations of Katherine Cazalet. How if she were, in her fury, to tell them all of that scene in the garden! Oh, no, no!

“I lost my way,” she stammers, foolishly, that horrible pain in her head beating with maddening force. “I went on—on. I could not come back. There was rain. It was very dark. I——” She breaks off this incoherent speech, trying in a little piteous way to collect herself, and only succeeding in repeating again the words she had impressed upon her tired brain in a more lucid moment. “I lost my way,” she says, slowly.

Miss Cazalet laughs out loud.

“Did Denis lose his way, too?” she asks. “It is really refreshing, in such a material age as this, to hear of two beings so charmingly unsophisticated. Two veritable babes in the wood!”

“Be silent, girl!” cries Mrs. O’Shaughnessy, with honest indignation.

“No. I shall not be silent. What! Is all her path, however depraved, to be made smooth for her?”

“What path?” demands Nancy Blake, quickly. “Confess, at least, that your first surmise was a false one. There has been no elopement.”

“I am, nevertheless, as firmly convinced as ever that she, and she alone, knows why Denis is absent from his home.”

At the sound of Delaney's name, Norah starts violently.

“Ha! do you see that?” cries Miss Cazalet, triumphantly. “Deny now, if you can, that she is hiding something from us.”

“Norah, dearest, try to explain,” says Lady Glandore, going nearer to the half-fainting girl and passing her arm round her.

“Yes, do. Do, my dear! Sure, a word will settle it one way or the other,” says Mrs. O'Shaughnessy, giving her an encouraging pat on the back.

“Oh, Duchess! If there is anything to tell, *tell* it!” entreats Miss Blake, in deep distress, being evidently on the verge of tears.

But Norah is past understanding now.

“I lost my way,” she murmurs, foolishly. “It was so dark, so cold. I went on, on; I lost my way.” She looks round her with darkening eyes and an agonised expression.

“Why!” exclaims Miss Cazalet, creeping slowly up to her, with her head bent and

gaze fixed on Norah's gown, "what is this?" She lifts a corner of it. "It is blood!" she cries, shrilly. "Blood! She has murdered him! Look at her, look! It is blood, I tell you. She has killed him!"

"Don't be a fool!" says Mrs. O'Shaughnessy, with more force than elegance. But even as she says it her tone trembles.

That awful word has penetrated the mists that trouble Norah's intellect; staggering to a table, she leans against it, and turns her miserable eyes on Madam. All is forgotten now, save the memory of how she left him; all that natural desire to shield herself, if possible, from cruel censure is dead within her.

"Send for him," she cries, hoarsely, holding out both her hands. And then, with sharp remembrance, "Do not blame me! Forgive me! I could not help it. I—— He would have died."

She is leaning rather heavily against the table now—her face is ghastly. But they are all so puzzled, so terrified by her extraordinary speech, that they forget to notice her.

Then there is a sound at the door, a quick

footstep—would she not know it amongst ten thousand?—and the Squire enters the room. Oh! the joy of this moment. A sharp exclamation breaks from her.

“Oh, dad! Oh, dad!” she cries, wildly, and falls senseless into his arms.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

“But the soul

Whence the love comes, all ravage leaves that whole.
Vainly the flesh fades—soul makes all things new.”

“WHY, how is this? Look up, my lamb; my precious. Why, Norah! Why, Duchess!” The Squire, as he holds his daughter’s insensible body to his heart, appears at his wits’ end. He is bending over her, and is looking with heart-broken anxiety into the white, worn face. Then suddenly he lifts his head and gazes sternly at Madam across her body.

“What have you done to her?” he asks, fiercely. “I lent her to you. I trusted you. And you—— Is this the way you give her back to me?” He pauses here and looks so indignantly round him that, as Nancy Blake afterwards expressed it, they all went into their shoes. “Had none of you compassion on her, after all she had just gone through?”

This, of course, is not understood by any of them, and he turns back again to Madam. "Answer me," he says. "What have you done to my daughter?"

Nancy Blake and Lady Glandore are doing what they can for Norah, whilst Madam takes a step forward and confronts her brother-in-law.

"Oh, man!" she cries, in broken accents, "you have her. She is there within your arms. But I —— Where is my son?" There is tragedy in her whole air.

"Have you not heard, then? Has she not told you?" exclaims the Squire, startled. "They told me to break it to you, but I thought Norah would have been able to—— Why, they are bringing him here. He has been hurt—and——"

"He is dead!" says Madam, in a low but piercing tone.

"Bless me, my dear creature, no. Not a bit of it. Far from it, I hope. He—— There now, Norah!" as the girl opens her eyes. "Come, now, there's a good girl! That's right, now! Look up at your old dad. He," turning again to Madam, "was

attacked, it appears, by one of those d—— Land Leaguers. I really beg your pardon, my dear Madam—but—er—anyway,” with an airy gesture, “it was one of those d—— rascals who fired at him, and the bullet hit him, and his arm—— There, now, that’s my own girl again. Why, Noddlekins, to think of your fainting at the sight of your old father.”

“Oh, his arm. What of his arm?” asks the poor mother, distractedly.

“It—I’m afraid it’s broken,” says the Squire, gently. “But hasn’t Norah told you?”

“Norah? No.” They all draw closer together. “What does she know of it?”

“Why, bless my heart, everything,” says the Squire, looking proudly down upon the Duchess, who now, safe in the shelter of his embrace, and somewhat fortified by the wine that Lady Glandore has insisted on her drinking, is listening with some composure to her father’s tale. “Why, it was Norah who found him in that ruffian’s grasp, and somehow saved him. I don’t quite know all about it myself yet, but, anyhow, she must

have succeeded in dragging him into a sort of hut that is in the woods, and there she stayed with him all night, nursing him and binding up his wounds, and—and—covering him up from the cold with her own poor little petticoats. 'Pon my soul!" says the Squire, two tears stealing down his cheeks, "she's a heroine, that's what she is; though I say it of my own flesh and blood."

"Oh, Norah! But why didn't you tell us, darling?" says Madam, taking the girl in her arms, and kissing her somewhat reproachfully. "To know he was alive——"

Here the door is pushed open very gently, and the butler thrusts in his hoary head.

"If ye plaze, Madam, they've brought the mather," he begins, genuine fear and sorrow in his tone.

"Bring him in here," says the Squire, hastily. "And send another messenger for the doctor."

He is quite conscious, as they bring him in on his improvised couch—a door covered with coats—and his first word is for the mother who bends over him in speechless grief.

“Dear mother! It might have been worse,” he says, feebly, with a touching attempt at the old lightness of manner; and then his gaze wanders. “Norah?” he asks.

“She is here,” says Madam, drawing her eagerly forward; and indeed, no pressure is needed. She is at his side almost as her name passes his lips, love, unforbidden in her eyes. It seems to her now as though nothing matters, and that for this one supreme moment he is still her own. The influence of the past night, when he was given so utterly into her keeping, is still strong upon her, and regardless of all eyes—they are very kindly ones—she kneels down beside him, and presses her lips to his hand.

“You are better,” she says softly, joyfully. The morrow may give him again to Katherine. The morrow may, nay it shall, take her away for ever, back to her old home, but just now, now, she will hold him as her own.

“Mother!” says Denis, turning to Madam with some excitement, “she is worn out, exhausted. Don’t you see it? Take her

away ; I give her into your charge. See to her as you love me. But for her, I——”

He ceases somewhat suddenly, and falls backwards, whereupon the doctor, who has providentially arrived at this critical instant, puts them all out of the room, save Madam and the Squire, who proves a most efficient surgical help.

Lady Glandore has carried off the Duchess and induced her to go to bed ; and indeed it is not until long afterwards that the Squire learns how very near to brain fever his little daughter had been. Thanks, however, to the unremitting care of Nancy Blake, who devoted herself to her, and to Lady Glandore, who surprised even herself on this occasion, the danger was tided over. Soothing, judicious answers were given to the wild, incoherent questions—spoonfuls of beef tea were administered every now and then—a sleeping draught was procured from the doctor, and thus the tired and over-excited brain was calmed, and finally towards midnight a heavy sleep falling on her, saved her.

But a terrible cold arises out of those hours when she had sat in the cabin, only

half-clothed ; and for weeks she lies prostrate, fondly tended night and day by the Squire, whose very soul seems wrapped up in her, and whose only comfort lies in such moments as when he can cradle her in his loving arms, and feel her head nestling close against his heart.

And there, too, she loves to lie and whisper to him, when her cough permits it, all sorts of things about Denis. There is no shame, no thought of hiding anything from her dad, in her gentle breast. He is dad, and therefore he will understand. She knows that he will believe nothing, save that every thought, and word, and deed, of his little Duchess is the very purest, and sweetest, and best.

None but those who have experienced it can comprehend the divine comfort that lies in a love like this !

And then there comes a day when she is really better, and though but a phantom of her former sprightly self, still it is Norah who speaks to them, moving about, languidly enough, Heaven knows, but able to talk without having to pause between every word,

for the terrible paroxysm of coughing to go by.

Her recovery, after all, has been slower than Delaney's, who has pulled through rapidly, to the admiration of his doctor and nurse, and who, though he has not yet been out of the house on account of the inclemency of the weather—it is now close to Christmas—has very nearly passed the bounds of invalidism. Yet, though the time has been long since he was struck down by that revengeful hand, Norah and he have never yet met face to face. Indeed, Dr. Morgan and the great man from Dublin have been rigid in their determination to keep Denis from seeing anyone except his special attendants; but to-day, Katherine, whose inquiries all through his illness have been unceasing and very touching, and who has apparently forgotten all about that acceptance of Sir Brandrum, so boldly declared on a certain occasion, has wrung a rather reluctant permission from Madam to pay him a visit.

A hope that he has heard nothing of that unpleasant declaration of hers yet warms Katherine's breast. A hope vain, indeed! as

Lady Glandore, who loves a little mischief, has been at particular pains to make him thoroughly acquainted with it. To do her justice, she has given a very striking and graphic description of that past scene to Denis, having fought her way into his room to do it. Unaware of this, and full of a determination to establish the old relations between them—the Delaney rent roll being very considerably in advance of Sir Brandrum's—Katherine one morning lays aside her work in a rather ostentatious manner, and rising, declares aloud, in a rather premeditated tone, that she is going to see Denis.

“Are you? Lucky mortal!” says Lady Glandore, quite beaming upon her. “Now, here are all we longing to get a glimpse of him, yet are denied; whilst you——”

“Well, you see,” says Miss Cazalet, with what is meant to be a sentimental air, “I suppose they would concede the prior claim to me!”

“Oh, naturally. To be sure. How could I have forgotten that!” exclaims Lady Glandore, with so much *empressement* that even Katherine regards her with a little

suspicion. As for the others—it is a wet day, and the drawing-room is full of men and women—they all stare at her as if lost in amazement at her duplicity.

“Why, I thought——” begins Miss Blake, looking coldly at Katherine, “that on the morning when we were all so upset by the fact that Denis couldn’t be found, that you——”

“Tut, my good Nancy!” whispers Lady Glandore, catching her frock behind and pulling her down on the ottoman beside her. “Fie, fie, now! One should never remember such little mistakes as that.”

“You are a disgraceful hypocrite,” says Nancy, after a pause, during which she has studied her friend with unusual severity.

“I am worth my weight in gold,” responds Lady Glandore, unabashed. “Wait till you see! She is going up to Denis with that elephantine air of sentiment fixed on her chiselled features, and when she finds out what I have done—in about twenty minutes from now, I should say—there will be such another little game as you have never dreamt of.”

“I wonder when we may see the Duchess,” says Mr. Greene at this moment.

“Duchess! What a name that is!” says Miss Cazalet, with a curling lip. “Doesn’t it seem to you—er—there is almost a little touch of impropriety about it?”

“About where, now?” asks Mr. Greene, leaning forward as if positively athirst for information.

“No, it doesn’t seem like that to any of us,” says Nancy Blake, a sudden fire in her eyes. “I should have to be born all over again — born a cleverer creature — a you, perhaps—before I could understand how to associate such a word as that with our dear, brave, little Duchess.”

Miss Cazalet shrugs her shoulders very slightly, very gracefully, very superciliously, implying somehow by her gesture that of course it is impossible to carry out an argument with such an unfortunately-mannered person as Miss Blake, and leaves the room.

“What a way she talks of Norah,” says the latter, her charming eyes still aflame, turning to Lord Kilgarriff, who, as usual, is

at her elbow. They are walking towards the conservatory.

“She is abominable,” says Kilgarriff, warmly.

“Who?” demands Nancy, with pardonable puzzlement, standing still beside a giant palm.

“Why, Miss Cazalet, of course. Surely you did not think that I meant the dear Duchess!”

“No.” She seems rather taken up by the shape of the palm leaf nearest her for a moment or two, and then says, slowly—

“You would take Norah’s part, of course?”

“Well, why shouldn’t I? She is one of the oldest friends I have.”

“More than that,” thoughtfully, resting a piercing glance on him; “you don’t forget, do you?”

“Forget what?”

“All you told me when we were abroad last summer.”

“About Norah!” desperately. “No, why should I forget? It is all over now, and no harm done to her or to me.”

“Are you so sure of that—the last, I mean?”

“You ought to be a very good judge. You who know how I——”

“Pouf! you’ve said all that so often. But —about Norah, now——” edging round the palm, and glancing at him every now and then through the parted leaves. “You once asked her to marry you, didn’t you? And,” provokingly, “she wouldn’t have you, eh?”

“Well, I couldn’t help that,” defiantly. “That wasn’t my fault, though you may despise me for it. And, as I said before, it is all over now, and”—taking a turn round the palm with an agility that brings him very close to Miss Blake, before she can manage a second escape—“the real question is, what you think of it all!” He has imprisoned her hands, and is looking into her face with sufficient anxiety to satisfy most women.

“I think she was a fool!” says Miss Blake, with charming simplicity, and the very coyest little glance in the world.

That settles it!

CHAPTER XXIX.

“ But certain points, left wholly to himself,
When once a man has arbitrated on,
We say he must succeed there, or go hang.
Thus, he should wed the woman he loves most
Or needs most——”

So tender, so careful is Miss Cazalet's footstep, that almost one might believe she walks on tiptoe as she enters Delaney's room.

“ Dear Denis, I am so grieved to see you still so enfeebled,” she says, bending over him with as much lover-like ardour as she can manage. “ I have so longed to come to you, to minister to you. But——” She makes a dramatic pause.

“ Well, Katherine?” asks he, in a most uncomfortable matter-of-fact tone.

“ So many things were to be considered—so many things had happened.”

“ True,” says he, determined to treat the interview as a purely friendly one, if possible.

“There was the arrest of the man Moloney, for example, who it appears has confessed himself the murderer of poor Meredith—a thing I suspected all along.”

“Ah! you are so clever!” interposes she, sweetly.

“Father Doolin, I suppose you heard, wrote to me about it. Good man!—he is that!—though shocked at the discovery of that black sheep in his fold, he was, I believe, at heart glad at the thought that on his arrest I would redeem my promise and show mercy to the rest of the flock.”

“But you disappointed him?” says she, smiling blandly. “I know the stern justice that distinguishes you. You were not taken in by his jesuitical letter; you felt that those ill-conditioned tenants should be taught a lesson that——”

“No, I didn’t,” says he, calmly. “I consider that their punishment has gone deep enough; and of course, I kept to my word. I remitted all past rents, and gave further reductions to most; and now all is peace and harmony between me and my tenants, so long as it lasts.”

“This new bill,” begins she, to carry off a certain feeling of defeat that is hot within her.

“The breakage of leases, you mean. Well, it won’t ruin me. I thank my stars I have better irons in the fire than Irish acres. But indeed we do seem to have come to that socialistic pitch in this greenest of green isles when no man may dare to call his soul his own, lest he be required to divide it with his neighbour.”

“True, true,” says Miss Cazalet, hastily. It was hardly to listen to uninteresting speeches of this sort that she had made her way to his room. “But pray do not let your mind wander to such disturbing topics. I am sure,” sentimentally, “it must be so very bad for you; and as I am here, installed as head nurse for the moment, as it were,” with baby playfulness, “I must insist on my patient being very careful, lest I should lose the precious chance of visiting him again. Dear Denis, you cannot conceive how I have pined to come to you. I felt how you must be missing me, but they said it would be imprudent my coming, above all others”—

this is a bold stroke—"so sure to excite you, and—and I would not of course even wish anything where your valued health was concerned."

This awful speech, so laboured, so plainly pre-arranged, draws a sound that is suspiciously like a groan from the luckless Denis. He turns his head suddenly and fixes his eyes on hers with an expression in them that startles her.

"I was right, was I not, dearest?" she goes on rather uncertainly, puzzled by that new expression. "I did long to be with you, but—but no doubt you have heard——"

"Yes, I have heard a good deal," interrupts he, calmly, "of your engagement to Sir Brandrum, for instance, among other things!"

For once her *savoir faire* entirely forsakes her.

"Who told you?" she exclaims, as artlessly as might a maiden of fifteen, and then collecting herself with a very admirable audacity, attempts to give a satisfactory ending to her deplorable beginning. "Ah! that was the work of a moment, of one

miserable moment, when—I confess it all to you, Denis, with deepest remorse — I had actually dared to doubt your—your honour.” Immense telling stress on the last word. “But, come now,” shaking off the penitent mood and making a heavy attempt at harshness, “confess in your turn. Say at least that I had some cause for my foolish jealousy. Though,” magnanimously, “of course, that absurd little affair is of no moment, really, and you must know, you must think, that——”

“What I think and know is that you will keep to your latest engagement,” says Delaney, immovably.

“Ah, you are angry with me!” exclaims she, plaintively, clasping her hands in the most approved fashion. At this instant the solid coin of The Delaney seems to her incomparably more to be desired than the comparatively empty coffers that accompany the title of Sir Brandrum.

“One word, Katherine,” says Delaney, grimly. It is to be now or never, he tells himself. “You, of your own accord, smashed the extremely heavy chain that bound us, and

I think it better to let you understand once for all that I decline to forge it again."

"You mean——?" says she, choking with suppressed rage, indignation and supreme disappointment.

"Exactly what I have said."

"A little more, I think," vindictively. "You mean to marry that girl, that ad——"

"Not a word about Norah!" interposes he, with a frown so stern that it checks her. "Of yourself," recovering himself, and smiling lightly, "as much as you will. When," with a direct glance, "do you marry Sir Brandrum?"

"Next month, in all probability," with a defiant curl of the lip.

"So soon?"

"To forget you, you would say?" with a bitter laugh. "But believe me, my dear cousin, it will be an easier task than perhaps you imagine. Oh, yes, I accept the inevitable," with a shrug. "I shall not pose even in private as the love-lorn damsel!"

"My dear girl! To have even a doubt on the subject would be indeed not to know you. I quite understand that all through our—our

knowledge of each other—I was regarded by you—and very properly too—as one distinctly beneath your level. I honestly believe,” pleasantly, “that you regard this turn of the affair as a happy release from——”

“Well, I wish you joy of Norah, at all events,” says she, interrupting him with a brusqueness foreign to her. She has risen, and is looking down at him, a distinctly venomous gleam in her pale eyes.

“That’s so like you! Thanks, very much!” returns he, graciousness itself. “One naturally likes to be congratulated on occasions such as this. It is very good of you, but of course old friends, cousins, as we are, it is only what I might have——”

The door slamming with a rather undue haste terminates the sentence.

“I thank my stars that’s over!” says Delaney, with a heartfelt sigh.

.

He goes back to his reading, but somehow the flavour has gone out of it. A sense of discontent, of impatience, seizes hold of him and troubles him to such an extent that finally he flings away his paper, and gives way to

the one thought that for days has been tormenting him. If Katherine—if the others—are permitted to see him, why may not Norah come, so that he may see her? Oh! the tender joy of that thought. To see her face to face, to look again into her eyes, with no hateful barrier to check the lovelight in his own. She is so very much better, so nearly strong again, that it seems to him she might be trusted to visit him for a few short minutes, half-an-hour or so. It is altogether absurd, the way in which these doctors are domineering over him, forbidding him to move except at stipulated moments, or else he would go and find her, were she ever so jealously guarded. But as it is, and as Madam has told him only this morning that she is so far herself again that she is to go downstairs to-morrow, surely, surely, of her grace she will come to him if he petitions her. Not to-day, perhaps—not even to-morrow—but——

To ring a bell, to bring the devoted mother to his side, to explain to her his hopes and longings, to give her over to his views, is but the work of a few minutes.

“She is not very strong yet, darling ; you must remember that. I am afraid you will be a little troubled by the change in her. And if she comes, Denis, you must be very, very careful not to unnerve her in any way, because she is still—well—rather unstrung, you know, since that awful night.”

“I know. Perhaps, after all, mother, it would be better for her not to come. I can wait. In a few days, at all events, I shall be able to go to her, and——”

“I don’t think I am afraid of her meeting you, only I would have you be careful ! Indeed, I was talking to Dr. Morgan yesterday, and he agreed with me that if she were to see you it might have the effect of allaying this dangerous nervousness that is retarding her recovery. So, if you think, dearest, that she might come now, it would be worth while, I think, to try the experiment.”

“Now ! Now ! This moment ! Oh, mother ! do you really mean that ?”

“Certainly not,” severely, “if you are going to work yourself into a fever over it.”

“Nonsense ! I’m as cool as a cucumber ! The only thing that could bring on a fever

now would be your going back of your blessed suggestion ; so hurry, if you love me, and give Norah this message from me 'that I shall never be a bit better than I am now until I look upon her face again.' "

It is a message that touches the Duchess. Perhaps she had been secretly longing for some such token, because when she gets it she rises up out of the deep lounging-chair in which her little fragile form is almost hidden, and with a silent embrace bestowed upon the gentle Madam, she slips her arm into hers, and goes with her down the long southern corridor, and past the gallery into the western wing where Denis perforce dwells.

Here, Madam, stopping at the door of his sitting-room, presses the girl's arm fondly and walks deliberately away. They must settle matters in their own fashion without her or anyone's interference.

And Norah, opening the door of her cousin's room with a trembling hand, walks slowly in. In the heavy close-fitting gown of white serge she wears, and with her pale little face, spiritualised by illness, she seems

almost an angel visitor as she stands just inside the door, uncertain, motionless, hardly knowing what to do.

CHAPTER XXX.

“Oh, what a dawn of day!
How the March sun feels like May.
All is blue again
After last night's rain.”

.

“Flower o' the broom,
Take away love and our earth is a tomb.”

“Ah, at last! At such a long last!” cries Denis, holding out to her his hand—the left one—the other is still bound up, but one can see that it has made great strides towards recovery. He makes an effort to rise as if to go to her, but with a little exclamation Norah checks him. A soft flush springs into her cheek, but as it dies away and as she draws nearer to the couch on which he is lying, he can see, by the fuller light that now shines on her, the sad ravages that illness and nervous depression have made on her charming face.

She looks so fragile, so pale, such a little thing, that almost it seems to him as if an idle

breath of wind might blow her away for ever. But her smile is brilliant as she turns it on him, and the eyes are the same as of old, so sweet, so tender, so loving.

“You are looking very ill still,” she says, gently, gazing gravely down at him. “Yet they told me you were almost well.”

“They told you the bare truth. So I am. Better than you are, my darling, I fear. But time will work wonders for us both. As for me, I should have been quite well by this had you been able to come to me. Well, never mind, I have you now, at all events. Come here and sit beside me.”

He moves inward on his couch, making room there where she may sit, so that his good arm may comfortably go round her slender—alas! now how terribly slender—form. She takes no notice of this friendly arrangement, however, but drawing up a chair to a discreet distance from the couch, seats herself thereon.

“Not there! Why, I can scarcely see you there!” exclaims he, in an aggrieved tone. “And besides, that chair—why, it is the only uncomfortable one in the room.”

"It will do. It is very nice indeed, thank you," replies she, hurriedly.

"For you, yes. But for me? Norah, don't let me learn for the first time that you are by nature selfish. I tell you I can't exist if you stay over there. I shall have to get up and bring you over here, and any exertion in my present state, as you may have heard, would be fatal. The doctors have made a very special point of this. Well," rising on his elbow preparatory to standing, "of course if you won't come, I——"

"No, no, don't stir," says the Duchess, nervously, who, though only half-believing him, is still a little frightened. She gets up from the discreet chair and seats herself this second time where he would have her be. He lifts one of her little hands, now no longer brown as autumn berries, but white as a flake of snow, and would have pressed it to his lips. She shrinks from him.

"Oh, have you forgotten?" she says, reproachfully, tears rising to her lovely eyes.

"Indeed, no. Nothing. I shall never forget anything connected with you."

“Never mind me. There—there is still Katherine.”

“So there is, and ‘long may she wave; but she will never again have anything to do with you or me, my sweet. Why, have you heard nothing, then? Has the *mater*, that, most womanly of all women, actually kept a secret? You really don’t know, then?”

“Know what?” faintly.

“Of Katherine’s new matrimonial scheme. Why, she has thrown me over,” with a happy laugh, “and is now engaged to Sir Brandrum Boileau. She is to be married to him, I hear, next month.”

The lips of the Duchess grow a little white.

“Oh, is it true?” she cries, clasping her hands. There is a honest hope in her eager voice. Her eyes dilate.

“As true as that you and I are here together now, and that we shall be together for the rest of our lives,” says he, gently.

“Oh, then I may indeed love you now,” cries she so innocently, with such a sweet, glad tremor in her tone, that all his heart goes out to her.

“If you only will, my beloved,” he answers softly, with subdued but earnest passion. He draws her closer to him, and, as if a little tired, she yields to his embrace and lays her head upon the silken cushion where his head lies, her little pale cheek resting contentedly against his.

“Are you happy?” asks he, presently, in a low whisper.

“Happy!” scornfully. “No, that does not explain it. There is no word in any language that can tell you how I feel.” There is the sweetest abandonment in her manner.

“My darling!” Then he laughs a little out of the fulness of his heart, and presses her closer to him. “I do think you are the most satisfactory little sweetheart in the world,” he says, with a touch of reverence in his tone, born of the innocence that marks each word and action of her. “But,” regarding intently her little wan face, “how thin you are, my love! I don’t like to see you look like this. It makes me feel as though I had killed you. By-the-bye, Norah,” impulsively, as though the thought has just returned to him, “do you ever

think of that night when you saved my life?"

The moment the words are uttered he regrets them — but too late. She starts hurriedly into a more upright position, and her white face grows almost ghastly.

"Don't," she says, laying her hand upon his chest as though to keep him from her. "Don't speak of that. I can't bear it. It hurts me here," catching the bosom of her gown in a convulsive grasp. Rising abruptly, she moves away a little, and her eyes grow strangely bright.

"Never mind, darling. Don't think of it," says Delaney, in a low, quick tone; something in her whole air has frightened him.

"Oh! that I couldn't think!" cries she. "But it is always there. Always! It stands out before me just as it happened. I see—I hear—everything. The ring of the bullet — the man's grasp upon your throat — that murderous weapon uplifted — the blood trickling down your face, and the rain—the rain falling ceaselessly——"

She stops short; a strong shudder runs

through her frail frame, and her breath comes in little gasps from between her parted lips.

“And then that long, awful night. When there—living through it—it seemed nothing, but now I wonder how it was I lived.”

“Norah! Come here,” says Delaney, authoritatively.

“No. Let me speak. All this time I have felt that I must give voice to my past misery, but there was no one to whom I could unburden my mind.”

“Was there not my mother?”

“I tried, but I could not. There was nobody but you, I suppose,” says she, with mournful simplicity. “But what troubles me is this,” cries she, turning her large soft eyes wildly on him, “why I must speak at all; why it is not permitted to me to forget. Oh! the cruel agony of remembrance. Those moments when I thought you dead; when I half-feared to lean over you, lest I should find your breath was indeed gone—that you were gone—for ever; they remain with me, I cannot drive them from me. They do not come all together, those moments, but one by one, dragging my very heart from my breast.

At night," panting, "I lie awake and go over it all, bit by bit, listening to your laboured sighs, waiting for your last breath, until I sometimes think it will kill me."

She is trembling convulsively in every limb, and her eyes, large and brilliant, are filled with a strange fire. Delaney, who has by the aid of his stick brought himself to a standing position, now goes over to her, and placing his good arm round her, draws her back with him to where he had been sitting. Still quivering, and totally unnerved, she obeys his unspoken request, and sinking upon the couch beside him, makes a violent effort to control herself.

"I know," she says, in a voice of deepest contrition, "I know I should not agitate you. I should be calm for your sake ; but——"

"Just so," says he, gravely, "I am naturally the one person to be considered. If you agitate me any more I won't answer for the consequences."

"Then do not talk to me of that," says she, with a little plaintive sob.

"Certainly not. We shall talk of something altogether different," says he, quietly,

fixing an observant eye on her. "There are many other subjects are there not? You can tell me, for example, of the world outside. It seems quite an age since I saw it, except from the window, which is but a poor way of doing things."

"You forget I have not been out much either. This troublesome cough has kept me prisoner. But yesterday and one day last week, dad took me for a little stroll, just we two, you know, round the inner garden."

"Ah! But even so, you are better off than I am. However, a secret for you! I am to go out to-morrow, and next week I am to be shifted off to the South of France, simply, I firmly believe, to satisfy the mother, who still thinks me at the point of death, and because the doctor must order me something. By-the-bye, Duchess," smiling, whilst still regarding her keenly, "will you come there with me?"

"Oh, how can I? I am afraid dad would never go so far as that."

"Let us leave him at home, then, and the mother, too. I have reasons for knowing that she would positively hate going abroad

at this time of the year. What I mean is, will you marry me in a hurry, darling, and come with me to that nice, soft climate—which they say is sure to set us both up again in no time—and help to nurse me?"

He is growing rather anxious now. Will she consent? As for the nursing, it seems to him that it is he who will have to do most of that. But will she consent?

"To nurse you; to be always with you," says she, in a soft, low, dreamy voice. "Oh! Denis, do you think dad will let me?" A quick sweet flush has risen to her cheeks; there is a wealth of loving joy in her eyes.

"He shall, if only you consent. You will come with me, then," bending towards her, a world of delighted surprise in his glance.

"Come!" reproachfully. "Why? Did you think I wouldn't, then? There is, however, one other thing more," says she, presently, a little troubled frown on her brow. "When people get married, you know—they also get a *trousseau*, and—in a week——"

"Is that all? Tut!" cries he, with a happy laugh, drawing her head down upon

his breast. "Let them send our *trousseaux* after us, it will give them something to do."

THE END.



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