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THE DANCER IN YELLOW

THE
DANCER IN YELLOW

with
BY
W. E. Norris
W. E. NORRIS

1847-1925

AUTHOR OF A VICTIM OF GOOD LUCK, MADEMOISELLE DE MERSAC,
MATRIMONY, ETC.



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THE DANCER IN YELLOW.

CHAPTER I.

A NAUTICAL HONEYMOON.

WHEN the stormy winds do blow, when the crested billows are chasing one another up or down the grey English Channel, and when many a saddened yachtsman is driven to doubt whether, after all, it is such very good fun to play at being a sailor, there is no more snug and comfortable haven round these coasts to run for than Dartmouth. Sheltered on all sides by those abrupt, wooded hills between which the Dart flows placidly, with depth enough of water to float an ironclad, yachtsmen and others may drop anchor, may smile at the gales roaring out seawards overhead, and may await better times, while appreciating the tranquil beauty of immediate surroundings.

As a rule, better times soon come; for, although the climate of the far West is apt to be ill spoken of by those who have but a slight acquaintance with it, any fisherman plying his trade between Portland and Penzance will tell you that a hard blow of twenty-

four hours is pretty sure to be succeeded by a much longer spell of fair weather. Summer gales, at all events, are brief affairs, and that tiny yawl the *Mon-goose*, which had brought up off Kingswear at night-fall, after a somewhat trying beat down Channel, might very well have resumed her voyage on the following brilliantly sunny day, had her occupants been minded to give the requisite instructions to the skipper. But as they were in no hurry, they thought they would allow the sea time to go down, and in the meanwhile they had themselves pulled across in the dinghy to the opposite shore, whence they started for a stroll along the shady footpath which leads from Dartmouth to the entrance of the harbour and the quaint old church of St. Petrox. Being but two in number, being male and female, and being rendered attractive to the eye by youth, comeliness and very nice clothes, they were made the subjects of interested and sympathetic admiration by the few loiterers who turned to look at them—and who, it may be, would have been more interested and a trifle less sympathetic if the identity of one of the couple had been revealed. For even in remote Devonshire everybody had heard of Daisy Villiers. Everybody, too, must at one time or another have seen her photograph; but since nobody could have expected to encounter her in the character of a modest bride, she escaped recognition here, as she had escaped it elsewhere during the course of the foregoing week.

The curious thing was that this renowned queen of burlesque was actually a bride—duly and legally united in holy matrimony to Frank Coplestone, the tall, soldierly-looking youth in the blue serge suit and white yachting-cap who sauntered by her side; although, to be sure, the skipper of the *Mongoose*, if interrogated, would have said that the lady and gentleman who had hired his little vessel for a month were Mr. and Mrs. Robinson. There had been reasons for the adoption of the above meaningless pseudonym—reasons of a nature similar to those which had deprived the relatives of the bride and bridegroom of the honour of an invitation to attend the marriage ceremony. Frank Coplestone, however, had correctly signed the register, and if the lady's name was not really Daisy Villiers, that made no difference; for, as she explained at the time, she had acquired every right to use it by means of advertisement in the daily papers.

“And who but a born fool would choose to be known as Matilda Black when she can call herself Daisy Villiers by paying thirty bob or so for the privilege?” she had pertinently added.

Miss Daisy Villiers—to speak of her by the style and title which she had assumed, and had no intention of abrogating—was not generally considered to be a born fool, although she often amused herself by doing foolish things; but perhaps a subaltern in the British army who espouses an impossible actress, without a

penny in the world to support her beyond his pay and the annual allowance made him by a rather strait-laced old father, may deserve to be stigmatised as such. Frank Coplestone presently increased all the claims which he already possessed upon that unenviable designation by ejaculating :

“ Oh, Daisy, how heavenly it would be if this could last for ever! I should like to go on sailing about with you and never seeing anybody else to the end of my days!”

The pair had seated themselves upon the warm, dry grass on a promontory overlooking the sea, and the young man's arm was round his companion's waist. If she was aware—as no doubt she was—that he was talking arrant nonsense, she was probably also aware that under certain circumstances the very best thing to do is to talk nonsense; for she only laughed, and answered, “ Dear old boy!”

After a moment of silence, it occurred to her to snatch off his white cap and place it, a little on one side, upon her own curly brown locks, from which she had removed the straw sailor-hat that she had been wearing.

“ How do I look like that?” she asked.

He gazed at her and replied, with fervent conviction, “ You look adorable, Daisy! But then you never do, or could, look anything else. It's a most extraordinary thing, and I never should have believed it if I hadn't seen it, but you positively look charming even

when you are being sea-sick. I wonder whether there is a single other woman in existence who could contrive to do that!"

"Probably not one," answered the recipient of this strange compliment, composedly. "I wonder whether it could be adapted for the stage!—nautical song, with dance and representations of nausea in its severest form as a sort of refrain, you know. The idea would be absolutely original, and it might take. Indeed, I should think it certainly ought to take. I'll consider it."

A cloud passed over the young man's face, and he sighed. "You never forget the stage for very long, Daisy," he remarked, in slightly reproachful accents.

"It would be a bad job for me if I did," she returned, laughing. "Once forget your patrons, and your patrons will precious soon forget you. There are plenty of girls ready and eager to cut me out, I can tell you, and the only way I can keep ahead of them is by taking care to be a bit more up to date than they are. Not that there is a girl in England or out of it who will ever beat me at dancing; only it won't do to let them beat me at anything, and some of them have fresh ideas, you see. That's why I have to be perpetually on the lookout for fresher ones."

The speaker's husband made no immediate rejoinder. He was plucking up tufts of grass and sweet-smelling thyme, which he crushed between his

fingers and flung away. At length he began, "I wish"—but got no farther.

His back was turned towards his wife, who bent forward, placed her little hand under his chin, and forced his head round until their eyes met. "At it again!" said she, raising the forefinger of her other hand warningly.

"No, I didn't," he protested; "I stopped myself. Of course I don't like it—you can't expect me to like it—but I suppose it's inevitable."

"Now, look here, dear boy," said Mrs. Coplestone, quite good-humouredly, "if you are going to spoil the whole fun of the thing by looking like a martyr, there'll be a row. A bargain is a bargain, and you know very well who would have gone to the wall if I had had to choose between you and the stage. I have done for you what I wouldn't have done for any other man upon the face of the earth; you'll admit that, I presume?"

"Oh, yes, indeed I do, Daisy," he answered; "and I shall never cease to be amazed at my good fortune. Still, all these staring idiots in the stalls, and the things that they say—and the cads in the pit and gallery, and—well, all right, I won't go on. It's what I bargained for, and I know there's no help for it. But sometimes I look forward, you know."

"Ah, that's a great mistake to make. What do you see when you look forward? Bald heads, grey hairs, wrinkles, death—all sorts of horrors, which the

future is bound to bring, but which have nothing to do with the present, thank goodness! I am having a first-rate time at present, and I mean to make the most of it. Why can't you?"

He was not unwilling to make the most of it, nor did he doubt the wisdom of so doing; for, as he was very well aware, it could not last long, and was likely to be followed by a considerable period of tribulation and separation. Nevertheless, he did not always find it easy to shake off misgivings which apparently gave Daisy no anxiety at all. This youthful, but rather grave-looking subaltern, who had been invalided home, after a sharp bout of fever in the sweltering heat of Burmah, had, amongst other troublesome possessions, a conscience; and his conscience persisted in assuring him that no man ought either to be or to appear to be ashamed of his wife. Yet it was not he who had made it a *sine quâ non* that his preposterous marriage should remain a profound secret; it was his wife who was answerable for a stipulation to which he had gladly assented—as indeed he would have assented to any condition which she might have seen fit to impose upon him. And of course what she had urged was reasonable enough. He was dependent upon his father, whose indignation upon being requested to acknowledge a lady of Miss Daisy Villiers's notoriety as his daughter-in-law would probably have displayed itself in a most inconvenient shape; Daisy, on her side, was dependent upon the favour of the public,

and she affirmed, truly, that the public does not like its favourites to be married women. In any case, he had no choice but to comply with her behests, being far too madly in love with her to resist them. .

Many men had been, and still were, madly in love with Daisy Villiers; but Frank Coplestone was the only one who had ever succeeded in moving her light heart to a corresponding emotion. That, at least, was what he hoped, and what she had given him the best of reasons to believe that he was justified in hoping. She was not, perhaps, a striking and undeniable beauty, although she was certainly pretty, with her impudent little round face, her dancing blue eyes and a fresh complexion which, alas! compulsory pigments must inevitably ruin ere long. As for her figure, it was as near perfection as any female human figure can be, while her dancing was an unwritten poem. An actress she could scarcely be called, nor was her singing voice of second or even third quality; but she had a way with her which had been found absolutely irresistible by frequenters of music-halls and theatres where burlesque reigns supreme. A year or two before, when the doors of the Temple of Fame had not yet been flung widely open to welcome her, a celebrated artist had taken it into his head to paint her portrait, and, with some dim reminiscence of nursery rhymes, suggested by the costume that she wore, had dubbed his picture "The Dancer in Yellow." The name had clung to her, and she had clung to the

colour, wearing some shade of it thenceforth in all her public appearances.

The British public, essentially conservative, for all its occasional and ostensible radicalism, loves old friends, old jokes, old stories, old tunes, everything which makes no demand for a fresh mental effort. Doubtless Daisy, who was a very clever little woman in her way, had realised that, and knew that when she skipped upon the stage in the hue of the primrose, the buttercup or the daffodil, the mere fact of her being thus arrayed would suffice to secure her an enthusiastic reception.

Frank Coplestone was taken to admire her by a band of juvenile companions who felt it incumbent upon them to show him all that London had to show after his eighteen months' absence on foreign service, and he fell a victim to her charms at first sight. Tommy Fellowes, who knew everybody, as well as everybody else, introduced him to her, and from that moment his course was one of astonishing smoothness and rapidity.

Astonishing it certainly was that Miss Daisy, in the zenith of her renown, should have consented to espouse the younger son of a not too wealthy baronet. She had spurned far more brilliant offers, and she declared that she herself could not account for her behaviour in this instance. Possibly she was touched by the young fellow's simplicity and honesty; possibly—probably, indeed—she loved him for his good looks.

"I adore black hair and grey eyes and long eyelashes," she told him candidly the very first time that he had the honour of an interview with her.

Be that as it may, she married him at the close of the season, stipulating only, as aforesaid, that nobody should be told a word about it; and here they were, embarked upon their honeymoon, which one of them regarded as a most amusing holiday, while the other tried not to think more seriously of the consequences than he could help.

They sat for a while upon that sunny promontory, and then, having satisfied themselves that it was no longer rough outside, decided to return on board the little yacht and get under weigh for Plymouth, which was to be their next port of call. They had no definite plans, nor did they know for certain how long this cruise of theirs would last; the one thing which had to be regarded as inevitable was that Frank, who was now supposed to be at sea in solitude for the benefit of his health, must ere long pay a filial visit to Kent, where his father resided. And when he did so, what was to become of Daisy?

That was a question to which he had several times attempted to obtain some reply; but she had hitherto always responded by throwing a cushion at him and telling him to shut up.

"Do you suppose I don't know how to take care of myself after all the experience that I have had?" she was wont to inquire. "I shall be all right, bless

you! We'll make arrangements as soon as it is necessary to make them. Meanwhile, let's do one thing at a time, please, and just now we are honeymooning."

She decreed that the subject, together with sundry other more or less disagreeable subjects, should be forbidden; and he was fain to obey her, being in truth by no means reluctant to be dictated to, for the time being, with reference to such matters. But that evening, when they were lying becalmed off the Start under a cloudless, starry sky, and when he had stretched himself out on the deck at her feet, he felt impelled to break through rules once more.

"I expect I shall find letters at Plymouth," he remarked, with a sigh, "and it's quite upon the cards that the governor may want me to name some day for going home."

"Tell him you have married a wife, and therefore you cannot come," replied Daisy carelessly.

"You wouldn't like me to do that, would you?"

"No, of course not; but you needn't answer his letter, I suppose. I want to keep up this game until we are tired of it."

"But that would be for ever."

"Not quite so long, I think; it might come on to rain any day, and then one would begin to pine for a change. Don't look so reproachful; I know you are looking reproachful, though I can't see your dear, solemn old face. Well, what do you want me to say?"

I'm perfectly happy, Frank, and I love you! Will that do?"

He gave her, to understand that, delightful as those assurances were, they would not altogether do. He might, no doubt, disregard a summons from his father for another week or ten days, or even longer; but eventually he would have to leave her, and he was most anxious to be informd of what her intentions were and when he might look forward to meeting her again. As her only answer was to blow clouds of cigarette-smoke into his face until she made him cough, he was beginning to urge that a husband, after all, has some right to counsel and direct his wife, when she stopped him by clapping her hand upon his mouth and holding it there.

"What a good thing it is for you," she exclaimed, "that my temper is that of an angel! The idea of your daring to talk to me already as if I didn't enjoy the most absolute freedom! What were the conditions upon which I agreed to marry you, young man? Well, never mind! You can't answer while your mouth is shut, and you can't have forgotten them. They were uncommonly sensible conditions, anyhow, and they're going to be insisted upon. Now get me my banjo, and I'll soothe you with a song. Not that you deserve it, for you haven't been behaving well to-day."

Daisy, as has already been mentioned, had not much of a voice; but her method of utilising what

she had was bewitching—or, at any rate, Frank Coplestone found it so. Rocked upon the slow, gentle swell and listening to the siren-notes which floated away across the calm waters, drawing up presently three red-capped heads from the fore-castle, he forgot or postponed all harassing thoughts and abandoned himself to the enjoyment of the hour. Truth to tell, the songstress's repertoire was a limited one, and was not culled from the works of the best composers; but then her audience was neither cultured nor critical. Her performance amply satisfied their simple souls, and what more was required of it?

CHAPTER II.

A LETTER FROM HOME.

FOR obvious reasons, the hirers of the yacht *Mon-goose* did not send ashore for letters on the following day, but walked up to the Plymouth post-office themselves to claim any that might be awaiting them there. A large supply of these was handed over to Miss Daisy Villiers, while Frank Coplestone, Esq., received about half-a-dozen, and they strolled off to the Hoe together, where, seating themselves upon a bench, they proceeded to examine their correspondence.

“Bills?” asked Daisy sympathetically, after she had torn open the envelopes addressed to her, and had bestowed a careless glance upon their contents. “If they are, don’t let them worry you, dear boy; I’m simply overflowing with coin just now, and I can let you have a hundred, or more if you want it, as easily as sixpence.”

Frank, who was gazing abstractedly out to sea, turned round with a start and a smile. “Oh, no,” he answered, “I don’t owe anything to speak of. Be-

sides, it was a compact between us, if you remember, that you were never, under any circumstances, to offer me money."

"Can't say I do remember; but never mind! When you want it it will be there for you so long as I keep my own head above water. What are you looking so doleful about, then?"

"Was I looking doleful? It's only that the governor writes, as I thought he would, begging me to go home as soon as I can, and I feel that I haven't treated him too well, poor old fellow! I was only with him for a couple of nights before I went up to London, and since then—well, you know what has happened since then?"

"There would be weeping and gnashing of teeth if he knew, I suppose," observed Daisy, laughing. "What sort of a heavy father is he? Old style—family pride, grey hairs, likely to be brought with sorrow to the grave by agricultural depression and the thought of his Benjamin's *mésalliance*—that sort of thing?"

"What I feel," Frank went on, disregarding these irreverent queries, "is that it does look a little bit heartless. He has been awfully good to me, first and last, and he doesn't complain now; only I can see by the way he writes that he is hurt. He says he quite understands that health must be the first consideration, but that the air of Malling is generally considered to be bracing and that, as he can't expect to be

here much longer, he hopes that I shall let him see as much of me as possible before I go off on foreign service again."

"Does that mean that you want to be off to-morrow morning?"

Frank truthfully declared that he did not want to be off at all; that if he could consult his own wishes he would remain with his bride until the sad day should dawn when it would be his duty to re-embark for India. But he knew—and of course she must know too—that it was out of the question for him to consult his own wishes, and that a temporary separation was inevitable. They might allow themselves one more week, perhaps; more than that he was afraid they ought not to take.

"All right; make it a week," said Daisy cheerfully. "We'll run down to Fowey and Falmouth—weren't those the two next places that we spotted on the map?—and we'll have a good time while it lasts. Then the ship's company may be paid off and disperse. When must you rejoin your regiment?"

"In about three months," answered the young man ruefully, "unless I can get an extension of leave—which doesn't seem likely, now that I am getting fitter every day."

"You can manage to be in London towards the end of October, I suppose? The St. Stephen's re-opens then with a brand new burlesque, in which I hope to make the patrons of the drama sit up."

“Of course I can,” answered Frank. “But do you mean that I am not to see you again before the end of October, Daisy?”

She laughed. “Well, I’m afraid your dear papa won’t ask me to stay with him, and I’m afraid I couldn’t accept the invitation if he did. But you’ll find me at my own bijou residence in the Regent’s Park by the 15th of October, or thereabouts, I expect.”

“And in the meantime?”

“And in the meantime I propose to treat myself to a trip abroad. Would you believe that I have never been farther away from London than Paris in all my born days? But now I’ve made a pot of money, and I’m going to Switzerland to meet some friends of whom you needn’t be jealous, because they are old and ugly—though still larky, in a middle-aged way. I daresay it won’t be bad fun.” She broke into a snatch of a burlesque ditty which used to be popular a good many years ago—“‘The Continong, the Continong, oh, I am for the Continong!’ And a good job too! If I were to stay in England, you would be running off to meet me somewhere or other every ten days or so, and the cat would very likely be let out of the bag. You are a darling, Frank; but discretion isn’t your strong point.”

Frank meditatively pulled his moustache. It was as yet but a very small moustache, and the upraised finger and thumb were apt to miss it altogether unless careful aim were taken.

"It's a horrid long time to October," he remarked, in melancholy accents, "and even then there will be only a few weeks, and after that——"

"After that you will depart for the gorgeous East, I presume," said Daisy, briskly.

"Yes, that's inevitable. And I must leave my wife behind me, without ever acknowledging that she is my wife! Daisy—after all—are you sure it is right?"

"I'm sure it's what you are going to do, anyhow," Mrs. Frank Coplestone replied, decisively. "I don't pretend to be much of an authority upon what's right and what's wrong; but I do know the difference between common sense and downright idiocy, and I know that for some time to come it won't suit my book, or yours either, to announce to the world at large what a couple of simpletons we have been. Besides, there isn't the slightest necessity for it."

He hesitated a moment, and positively blushed, before he made up his mind to say what he had been wanting to say ever since their marriage-day. "The necessity may arise, Daisy."

"Oh, we'll hope not," she answered, without embarrassment, and with much apparent amusement. "Even if an unlucky incident should occur, it could easily be kept dark, and even if it weren't kept dark, what would be the odds? Do you really imagine that 'the Dancer in Yellow' has any character left to lose? We're as bad as we can be, the whole lot of us. Why,

there isn't a male creature in London, from a duke to a pot-boy, who wouldn't be knowing enough to wink his eye and assure you of that!"

By the end of her speech her voice had acquired a slight bitterness of intonation which had not been perceptible in it when she began; but this was lost upon Frank, whose straight brows were drawn together, and whose ingenuous blush had been replaced by the pallor of wrath.

"Don't talk like that!" he exclaimed, sharply. "I don't like to hear you say such things even in joke."

Daisy laid her hand upon his shoulder and looked into his angry young face; she would have kissed him if the scene had not been too public a one to admit of such demonstrations.

"Poor, dear boy!" she murmured gently; "I am afraid you will have to hear me say a good many things that you won't like—perhaps to see me do some that you won't like, into the bargain. What can a man expect, if he will insist upon marrying beneath him? All the same, there are worse people in the world than your humble servant, and some fine day we'll go in for rigid respectability. We have made a very fair sort of beginning as it is, I think. In sober earnest, you wouldn't wish me to accompany you to the paternal mansion and ask for the paternal blessing, would you?"

He was obliged to confess that, to the best of his

belief, there would be little use in asking for that. What made him feel uneasy and ashamed was that he had married a woman who was pecuniarily independent of him, over whose actions and mode of life he could exercise no control, and whom he might not improbably be accused, in the sequel, of having deserted. Events might occur, he said, which would render it incumbent upon him, as an honourable man, to come forward and take his proper place at her side.

“I never did meet such a hand as you are at prying into the future and discovering troubles there!” cried Daisy. “You put me in mind of my pious parents, who have been prophesying all manner of evil for me ever since I left them to go upon the stage. They pretend to be thankful that I haven’t fulfilled their prophecies as yet, but I expect they are a little disappointed in their hearts. It’s rather bad luck, after you have been praying hard for a person morning and night, to find that she can get along quite comfortably, not to say decently, without your prayers.”

“How little we know about one another!” Frank exclaimed involuntarily; “it never even occurred to me until this moment that you had any parents living, Daisy.”

“Well, it’s only fair to them to admit that they don’t obtrude themselves. For more than a year we didn’t speak; but now that I am well-to-do they let

me visit them occasionally on Sunday afternoons and groan over me. Perhaps you would like to be introduced to them? Father is a highly esteemed Nonconformist linendraper, whose private residence is in a small street leading out of the Marylebone Road, and mother is a healthy sort of invalid, who lies on the sofa all day and swallows a good deal of weak brandy and water. I should think you would hit it off with them almost as well as I might hope to do with Sir Harry Coplestone."

"Any brothers and sisters?" asked Frank, repressing the shudder for which he instinctively felt that she was looking out.

"Oh, yes, lots. All trying to earn their own living, and none of them too proud to accept a surreptitious fiver every now and then from an erring sister who has more fivers nowadays than she knows what to do with. I needn't tell you that these little tips have to be surreptitious; of course they are very anxious to repudiate any connection with the notorious Daisy Villiers."

"They have no reason to be ashamed of the connection," said Frank, rather fiercely.

"Thanks, awfully—though I don't see how you can be so sure of that. Now don't put on that sulky look; it doesn't become you, and it's out of place. You are Frank and I am Daisy, and we're man and wife—isn't that enough? It must be enough, anyhow; so we won't say another word about the matter.

Come on board again, like a good boy, and let's get away from Plymouth as fast as we can. Garrison towns aren't the safest places in the world for people like me, who are modestly desirous of escaping recognition."

He did as he was bid ; and if he remained somewhat silent and abstracted for a while, he was young enough to have dismissed his cares by the time that the Mongoose had resumed her westward voyage. Daisy was, no doubt, a more practical philosopher than he was. At all events, she knew so well how to give practical effect to her system of philosophy that long before sunset she had a happy man stretched on deck at her feet. Happiness, as we all know, consists chiefly, if not entirely, in forecast and retrospect, and Frank Coplestone was destined to look back frequently upon that breezy run down Channel with a firm conviction that some of the very best hours of his life had passed away from him during the course of it.

CHAPTER III.

FRANK'S RELATIONS.

SIR HARRY COPLESTONE, of Malling Park, in the county of Kent, was, as most country gentlemen are in these days, the embarrassed occupant of a position which, through no fault of his own, it had become well-nigh impossible for him to maintain. Conservative by temperament, inheritance and what he conceived to be duty, he could not without daily pangs of compunction and humiliation resign himself to a reduced style of living. He was determined to hand on the estate to his successor as he had received it, unencumbered; but it went to his heart to give up, one by one, the various forms of hospitality, ostentation and munificence which had been practised by his father and his grandfather. He ought no doubt, as his sister was never weary of impressing upon him, to have married again after he had been left a widower, and to have married a woman with money; but he had been devotedly attached to his wife, he had not at first been able to bear the idea of replacing her, and now he was too old to think of such a thing. If the

family finances were to be restored to a satisfactory footing by an alliance with an heiress, that task must be undertaken by Gerard—who, to be sure, was such a cold-blooded, material sort of fellow that he would probably raise no objection.

That was what Sir Harry was saying, one morning, across the breakfast table to his sister Miss Coplestone, who did not live with him (because they were unable always to hit it off together), but who spent a good deal of her time at Malling Park, and was invariably summoned thither when company was expected. She was a tall, thin woman, with iron-grey hair, an aquiline nose and well-marked black eyebrows. In the early sixties she had been handsome and had received many good offers: perhaps she now regretted having declined them. Residing in a small house in Belgravia, she still kept up her hold upon a kind of society which her brother had long since ceased to frequent.

“I suppose you mean Mrs. Trafford,” she re-remarked.

“Well—why not, Lucy? Of course, I don’t mean at once; that would be downright indecent, with poor Trafford hardly cold in his grave yet. But there it is: she is young and good-looking and charming, and everything has been left to her, I understand. Gerard could not possibly do better for himself. And then, as I say——”

“Oh, you needn’t say it again; one knows what

your opinion of Gerard is. It seems to be a rule without an exception that everybody should hate his heir; otherwise I should be surprised at your finding anything to complain of in an eldest son who has managed to live all these years in the Guards, and to go about like other people, and yet avoid running into debt. But cheer up; perhaps he won't take a fancy to Mrs. Trafford, who, I must confess, seems to me to be a tiresome, priggish sort of woman, and then you will have a genuine grievance against him. By the way, why shouldn't you bestow her upon your beloved Frank? Then the younger brother would be in a position to overshadow the elder—which ought to delight you."

"She doesn't belong to me; I can't bestow her upon anybody," answered Sir Harry, curtly.

The truth was that his heir, whom he did not hate, and to whom he had always striven to be just, was by no means so inexpensive a person as Miss Coplestone was pleased to assume; but Sir Harry never talked about the calls that were made upon him, save in general terms, nor did he ever wrangle with his sister if he could help it. He used to say to himself at times when she was more than usually exasperating, that she was soured, poor thing, and that one couldn't wonder. His own temper, which was a hasty, but not a bad one, was in some danger of becoming soured, and he felt that it behoved him to make allowances. So, instead of saying, as inclina-

tion prompted him to do, that Frank wasn't the sort of boy to run after rich widows, he merely remarked, in a tone of satisfaction—

“Well, we shall have 'em both here this afternoon, thank God! Frank writes from London to say that the sea has done wonders for him and that the doctors assure him he will be as right as ever again after a few more months of rest. He proposes to come down by the midday train. Gerard won't arrive before dinner time, I suppose.”

“I'll take charge of him, if he does,” Miss Coplestone answered, smiling slightly.

She, too, may be credited with some meritorious self-repression; for she knew what her brother was thinking of, and it was upon the tip of her tongue to observe that his anxiety to have Frank all to himself did not seem to be reciprocated by that young man, who had been in England since the early spring, yet had hitherto bestowed remarkably little of his leisure time upon his fond parent. But even Miss Coplestone, who was not tender-hearted, sometimes shrank from distressing Sir Harry. It was easy enough to distress him, as his white hair—white before its time—and the deep lines upon his thin face testified. No one could look at him without seeing that he had taken life hard, and indeed life had in many ways been made hard for him. Once upon a time he had been fine-looking, athletic, sufficiently rich, fond of society, and popular; now he was old, poor, solitary,

and such of his friends as were not dead had ceased to see anything of him. By his neighbours he was respected and, in a certain sense, liked; but he was thought to be—as in truth he was—proud and prejudiced. His eldest son Gerard resembled him in many respects, and was for that reason not much in sympathy with him. If he was understood by anybody (but probably he was not quite understood by anybody, and did not expect to be) it was by his younger son, who duly appeared shortly after luncheon, and who knew very well how welcome he was; although Sir Harry only said:

“How are you, Frank? Can you get yourself something to eat and be ready to stroll down to the home farm with me in half an hour? I can't wait longer.”

Sir Harry was deeply interested in farming, and was under the impression that it might be made to pay. Sometimes he even endeavoured to prove that it did pay; but he had ceased to adopt that line of argument with Gerard, who combined ignorance of the price of stock and cereals with a disagreeably clear head for figures. Frank, on the other hand, hated arithmetic and knew something about the pursuits which his father loved—which made him a pleasant companion to wander about with on that hot summer afternoon.

He wanted to be a pleasant companion, and he realised only too well with what ease he might con-

vert himself into a dreadfully unpleasant one. Suppose he were to blurt out the truth all of a sudden? Suppose he were to say, "I have married a woman who is notorious all over London and the provinces as a music-hall star of the first magnitude, and sooner or later my marriage will have to be openly acknowledged?" Of course, he took very good care to say nothing of the sort; nor was he free from remorse when he glanced at the eager, high-bred, careworn face which was so often turned up towards his (Sir Harry was under the medium height), and heard how nothing but the most extraordinary bad luck had caused his father to drop three hundred, instead of making nearly a thousand, over agricultural operations during the past year. Daisy was undoubtedly right, and reticence was indispensable, and worse luck—very much worse luck—than the total failure of the hop-harvest had befallen the old man who was so entirely without suspicion of his misfortunes. A thought came into Frank's mind which he was ashamed of entertaining, but could not drive away. "Perhaps he will die before there is any necessity to enlighten him."

Sir Harry, leaning over a gate and gazing out at the pleasant English landscape of fields and woods which owned him as a temporary lord, began at that same moment to speak quite cheerfully of his approaching demise.

"You won't find me here the next time that you

come home, Frank," said he. "We are a short-lived stock, you know, and as for me, I've had my day. It hasn't been a bad day, taking the rough with the smooth, and I don't complain; only I wish I could do a little more in the way of making provision for you than will be possible. It would make a difference, to be sure, if, by some happy chance, Gerard were to marry a woman with money; but one mustn't count upon that. I forget whether I ever mentioned Mrs. Trafford to you."

"You told me in one of your letters that old Trafford had taken a young wife to himself," answered Frank. "He must have died almost immediately afterwards, didn't he?"

"Died within the year, and left her all he possessed, I believe. Well, there she is, a charming woman with a large income, and one can't imagine that she can be inconsolable. She is coming to dine here quite quietly in a day or two, and between ourselves, I have asked Gerard to run down on purpose to give him an opportunity of meeting her. Don't say anything to him about it; it's early days yet, and I dare say he may not take to her, nor she to him. Still, if the match could be brought about, a great load would be taken off my mind. In that case I could lie down and die without feeling that I was leaving you a pauper, my boy. A day must come, of course, when you yourself will want to marry, and I don't think you will ever care to marry for money."

“I think it’s rather a degrading sort of thing to do,” said Frank.

“So do I; but that isn’t the general opinion, and Gerard’s opinions are the general opinions—for which, after all, there is something to be said. Well, well! what can’t be cured must be endured. How about present necessities? I have a little money in hand, though it isn’t much. I know you have always told me everything, Frank, so I can trust you to speak out if there are any bills of yours which ought to be paid.”

Frank, sorrowfully conscious of not having told, and not meaning to tell, his father everything, hastened to declare that he had no debts. Perhaps it was by way of making partial and inadequate atonement that he added, “And I sha’n’t have any more expenses either up to the expiration of my leave, for I intend to quarter myself upon you now until the autumn.”

Sir Harry’s face showed what good hearing this was to him; but all he said was, “You’ll find it slow work, I’m afraid. There will be a few partridges to be shot in September, if you will condescend to come out with me in an old-fashioned way, but Gerard would tell you that I have no shooting to offer to my friends nowadays.”

“That depends upon what you call shooting,” said a quiet voice from the background. “Some

people like one thing, some like another; it's a question of taste."

Both Sir Harry and Frank started round, and both simultaneously ejaculated, "Hullo!" The tall and singularly handsome young man who extended a hand to each of them resembled neither at the first glance, although closer scrutiny showed that he personified the family type in its highest form of physical expression. Gerard Coplestone had inherited the black hair and long, curved eyelashes which had been transmitted also to his younger brother, but he possessed what Frank did not, eyes of so dark-blue a shade as to be almost violet, an admirable profile and a mouth shaped like a Cupid's bow. If any exception could be taken to a face which was practically unexceptionable, lack of expression might have been urged against it, but even that deficiency has a possible charm, since it may be due, as in his case it was, to absolute self-control. It was notorious amongst his acquaintances, of whom he had a very large number, that there was no chance of shaking his nerve or causing him to lose his temper. He was always cool, always imperturbably polite, and always inscrutable. This, no doubt, accounted for the fact that he had more acquaintances than friends, and no enemies at all. His father, as has been hinted, was not passionately attached to him; but his brother knew him to be an excellent fellow, though undemon-

strative, and was glad to hold him by the hand once more.

“I thought I should find you here,” he remarked. “Aunt Lucy has gone off in the carriage to pay duty calls, I believe, and as it wasn’t time to dress for dinner, I took the liberty of coming out in search of you.”

“No liberty at all, my dear boy,” answered Sir Harry promptly. “We didn’t expect you by so early a train, or I would have left a message for you.”

The above interchange of commonplace greetings would have sufficed to convince a quick-witted bystander that Gerard was not welcome, and that he was conscious of not being welcome; but the conversation which ensued was entirely amicable, if a trifle strained. Very soon Sir Harry excused himself, upon the plea that he had a word or two to say to the bailiff, and left the two young men together, whereupon the elder asked, in a matter-of-course tone, “Had enough of yachting and Daisy Villiers?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” answered Frank, reddening under the other’s calm gaze, in spite of all his efforts to avoid self-betrayal.

Gerard smiled. “No business of mine,” he remarked. “Perhaps public report is a liar, as public report generally is, and the Dancer in Yellow wasn’t with you on your cruise. I hope she wasn’t, because—that sort of game is apt to prove an expensive one, Frank.”

“If you will kindly favour me with the name of your informant,” said Frank, “it will give me very great pleasure to tell him that he is a liar and—and——”

“To break his bones, eh?” returned Gerard, laughing. “No, I certainly can’t oblige you in that way—especially as my informants were numerous. You shouldn’t have made yourself so conspicuous with that woman and then disappeared at the very same moment as she did.”

“I object to your calling Miss Villiers ‘that woman,’” said Frank, rather angrily; “she isn’t at all what you take her for. As for me, I didn’t disappear; I told Tommy Fellowes and the others that I was going down West for a few weeks to get a little fresh air. And I say, Gerard, I wish, when people say that sort of thing, you would be good enough to contradict them.”

“All right,” answered the other; “I’ll contradict them upon the best authority, if you like. Not that it’s worth while to contradict them, so long as what they say isn’t true. Miss Daisy Villiers may be a paragon of virtue for anything that I know to the contrary; only I wouldn’t see too much of her if I were you. You are uncommonly young, Frank, and she is—well, shall we say experienced? Are you going to make the governor happy by putting in the rest of your leave down here?”

Frank willingly accepted the change of subject;

but he knew very well that he had not deceived his brother, and he was not quite clear in his own mind as to whether he did not owe it to Daisy to explain the true nature of their relations. To set against that apparent duty, however, there was the circumstance that he was under a solemn promise to Daisy to do nothing of the sort. Upon the whole, he deemed it best to hold his tongue and to rely, as it was always safe to do, upon Gerard's reticence and discretion.

CHAPTER IV.

GERARD'S DOOM.

GERARD, having said what he wanted to say, and thinking that he had discovered as much as there was any need for him to discover, made no further allusions to the Dancer in Yellow. It certainly never occurred to him to suppose for one moment that Frank could have disgraced himself and the family by actually marrying a person of the class of Daisy Villiers, nor did the escapade of which he had heard rumours seem to him worth troubling about, now that it was apparently a thing of the past. He was as fond of his brother as he was of anybody, and did not wish the boy to do anything outrageously silly—especially as there really was not money enough to defray the expense of certain forms of silliness—but he was neither inquisitive nor very much interested in other people's business.

Was he as much interested as he ought to have been in his own? This was what Sir Harry, irritated by the young Guardsman's impassibility and by the hopelessness of attempting to pick a friendly quarrel

with him, was inclined to doubt. For surely it was, or must shortly become, Gerard's business to consider by what means Malling was to be kept up and the social position of its owner maintained in accordance with bygone usage. Something, of course, was said about Mrs. Trafford; but Gerard could only be brought to display a very languid curiosity respecting that lady, who was now sole mistress of the adjoining Trant Abbey estate, and whose revenues far exceeded those of her nearest neighbour.

"Married old Trafford as soon as she had satisfied herself that he had a mortal disease, didn't she?" he inquired of his aunt, one morning, after Sir Harry, who had been eulogising the youthful widow with rather more zeal than discretion, had left the room. "I remember hearing her story at the time; but I have forgotten all about it. Cynical sort of young woman, I should imagine."

"I can't say that I share your father's profound admiration for her," answered Miss Coplestone; "but, to do her justice, I don't think she married the old man for the sake of his money. He had been asking her for years, I believe, and she wouldn't look at him, though she was an orphan and desperately poor—just able to support herself by writing children's stories and painting washy water-colours and that sort of thing. He had been a friend of her father's, and he would have been willing to adopt her, they say, if she would have consented to that; but nothing would do

until at length she was touched, as women of her variety are apt to be, by his solitude and his sufferings. So she married him, and nursed him devotedly through his last illness. I should have thought myself that she might have nursed him without marrying him; but no doubt there would have been difficulties. Anyhow, Harry and others pronounce her to be an angel; and so will you, I daresay, after you have seen her. She has been persuaded to dine here in her weeds and in strict privacy to-morrow night."

"I don't believe in human angels," remarked Gerard, "and I hate the sight of widow's weeds. People who feel bound to wear them ought not to exhibit themselves to their friends in such a hideous and unbecoming costume."

Presumably Mrs. Trafford did not feel bound to wear them, for she was not thus arrayed when she was shown into the drawing-room at Malling Park on the following evening at eight o'clock. Frank stepped forward to receive this tall, graceful, fair-haired lady, who wore a very simple, but very perfectly cut, black dress and had a few sparkling diamonds distributed about her person.

"My father and my aunt ought to be ashamed of themselves," said he. "I'm afraid we are awfully unpunctual people. But they will be down presently to make their apologies."

"It will be my duty to apologise to them for being over punctual," answered Mrs. Trafford, smiling. "I

have lived all my life in London, and I had an idea that in the country eight o'clock meant eight, not half-past. My prompt arrival isn't due to greediness, I assure you, only to a nervous anxiety to do the right thing."

She had a pleasantly modulated, well-bred voice; the pose into which she had fallen, with one hand resting lightly upon the back of a chair, was an easy and graceful one. She certainly did not strike the casual beholder as being either nervous or anxious. If she was not exactly pretty she was very nearly so, and her somewhat irregular features were alive with intelligence.

"You are the invalid, I suppose, are you not?" she asked, presently.

Frank explained that he had been an invalid until lately, but that a recovery only too speedy and complete deprived him of any hope that his leave would be extended; after which he was easily led on to talk about his profession and about campaigning in Burmah, until Sir Harry and his sister entered the room simultaneously and began to make excuses for themselves. They were fully twenty minutes late, during which interval Frank had time to become quite well acquainted with Mrs. Trafford, and even to say to himself that she was one of the nicest women whom he had ever met. He had not met a great many women in his life—at all events he had not met a great many nice ones—so that the above encomium

can only be taken for what it is worth ; but, as a matter of fact, Mrs. Trafford was one of those persons of whom it is always said that "they can be charming when they like." That usually means that, being honest, they are unable to conceal their likes and dislikes. Probably she did not like Miss Coplestone, who did not like her, for the two ladies had very little to say to one another. At a later period Frank discovered that Mrs. Trafford always preferred men to women, although her worst enemy could not have accused her of being a flirt.

At the dinner-table Sir Harry made himself extremely agreeable to her, and endeavoured—a little too obviously, perhaps—to ascertain by means of indirect questions what her plans were with regard to the immediate future. She responded readily and openly, but did not give him a great deal of information, having in truth no definite information to impart.

"They tell me it will be my duty to spend most of my time at the Abbey," she said ; "but all my ties and interests are in London, and I am in hopes that I may get at least three months out of every year there. Of course the situation is altogether novel to me ; I hardly know what to make of it yet."

"One soon grows accustomed to any situation," remarked Gerard, who was seated upon the speaker's right hand.

She glanced at him for a moment and answered,

“Oh, yes, I suppose so—if it is not too difficult. At present I feel rather like a fish out of water; but in a year’s time no doubt I shall almost have forgotten what the sensation of being desperately poor was. The one great consolation of life is the ease with which one forgets.”

Miss Copelstone could not repress a disapproving grunt. That Mrs. Trafford had found it easy enough to forget the aged invalid whose name she bore, and to whom she was indebted for her wealth, was evident and scarcely surprising; but better taste would have been shown by less candid language.

“You have many friends in London, I daresay,” observed Sir Harry, tentatively.

“No, only a few; but most likely I shall make more now that I can afford to ask people to dinner. Even in my worst days I met with a great deal of kindness from those who had known my father; but naturally it was impossible for me to see much of them. For one thing, I was too busy; and for another thing, I had no decent clothes to wear.”

She spoke in so matter-of-course and unaffected a way that her male hearers did not inwardly accuse her of the bad taste which shocked Miss Coplestone. However, she seemed to think that she had said enough about herself, and changed the conversation. She was very well informed upon the political, literary and artistic topics of the day, and she had the gift—an increasingly rare one—of inducing her neighbours

to say what they thought, without any apparent effort to do so. But of social gossip she knew nothing at all; so that Miss Coplestone and Gerard, both of whom lived in, and to some extent for, the fashionable world, were fain to accept the part of listeners.

The latter, nevertheless, gladdened his father's heart by taking a chair at Mrs. Trafford's elbow in the drawing-room afterwards, and devoting his whole attention to her for the remainder of the evening. Miss Coplestone executed a succession of brilliant and noisy compositions upon the piano; Frank, as in duty bound, stationed himself behind her and turned over the leaves of her music-book, while Sir Harry dropped off to sleep. It was not precisely a merry or a sociable gathering; but, as far as could be seen, it fulfilled the purpose which it had been designed to fulfil.

When Mrs. Trafford had taken her leave her hostess remarked: "The total abolition of the widow's cap is a new departure. Not a hint of crape either! At this rate we shall soon have the bereaved ones celebrating their late husbands' obsequies by a small and early dance, I presume."

"I don't know that it is fair to gauge the depth of a woman's grief by the clothes that she wears," returned Sir Harry; although the truth was that he also had been slightly scandalised by Mrs. Trafford's disregard of conventionality. "Besides, it's impossible that the poor old man's death can have left her broken-hearted."

“Quite, I should think,” agreed his sister, drily; “still there is no absolute necessity for her to advertise her joy.”

“For my part,” said Frank, “I like her all the better for not pretending to feel what she doesn’t and what she can’t. Where’s the merit of humbug?”

Gerard stretched out his legs before him, contemplated his very pretty little silk-stockinged feet with pensive affection, and said nothing. But in the subsequent privacy of the smoking-room he volunteered a statement to his brother which Sir Harry, had he been present, would have deemed eminently satisfactory.

“The man who marries Mrs. Trafford,” said he—“and it stands to reason that somebody will marry her soon—will get a prize out of the lucky bag. She seems to me to know her own value, without insisting too much upon it, and she isn’t conceited, or a fool, or likely to do anything that will make him wish he had died before he saw her. Which is as much as to say that she isn’t a bit like the general run of girls and young widows whom one meets now-a-days.”

“Go in and win, then,” answered Frank, laughing.

“You think I could, do you?”

“I can’t see any reason in the world why you shouldn’t. Any woman who didn’t fall in love with you would be rather hard to please, I should say; and even if you yourself don’t fall in love very easily,

you ought to be pretty well satisfied with Mrs. Trafford. Besides, there's the money, you know."

"Oh, there's the money; that's it, of course. I quite understand what the governor wishes, and I shouldn't mind obliging him if he wasn't in a hurry. But between you and me, Frank, there's nothing in the world that I hate quite so much—as this idea of marrying. I'm comfortable as I am. I love hunting, and I like racing, and I don't mind a bit of soldiering and a little bit of society; what would bore me to death would be to be tied by the leg down here and to be reminded at every turn of dull routine work which I couldn't escape. It's true that there is no possible escape for me, and that I shall have to settle down to a country gentleman's life some day; but I want a few more years of liberty, and I wish with all my heart that Heaven had granted Mr. Trafford a few more years of existence. The trouble is that I can never hope to get such another chance as this. I suppose, if I did my duty, I should jump at it."

It was not often that Gerard spoke with so much candour about himself and his tastes. He was in evident perplexity, and Frank, half-amused, half-sympathetic, could only console him by saying:

"I should think that, with a little management, you might postpone the evil day. After all, you can't begin at once to make love to a woman whose late husband's monument isn't erected yet. Did she seem to expect it?"

“Oh, no, not in the least; that was one of the things that I liked about her. She talked very much as another woman might have talked, and we got on together uncommonly well. Perhaps, as you say, I may contrive to lie low for a bit; but it’s borne in upon me, somehow, that I am doomed. Oh, dear! why wasn’t I sent into the world as a younger son! Take my advice, Frank, and don’t you marry until you are forty. Above all, don’t be such a madman as to marry for love; I’ve watched the results of that sort of game, and they’re enough to make your blood run cold!”

With this sage counsel, which unfortunately came a little too late to be of practical utility, Gerard rose, yawned, stretched himself, and went off to bed.

CHAPTER V.

CLEVER MRS. TRAFFORD.

A MAN whose view of life and its responsibilities and complications permits him to await events, without making any decided effort to shape them, is perhaps a very contemptible creature. If so, the world must be inhabited by a race of which the vast majority merit contempt; and that this is the case we are frequently and authoritatively assured. We are not, however, forbidden, even by those who profess a religion of which the keynote is understood to be charity, to sympathise with erring fellow-mortals: possibly, therefore, some readers will not be in too great a hurry to despise poor Frank Coplestone, who, it must be owned, had contrived to land himself in a singularly undignified and untenable position, yet who could see no immediate way out of it. Given the actual conditions—given that he had behaved like a lunatic, not to say (as his father would doubtless have said) like a criminal lunatic, in making the marriage that he had made, what ought he to have done? To have avowed the truth; to have distressed and

mortally offended his family; to have claimed a husband's control over the future career of his liberty-loving wife? But to do that would have been to grieve and estrange his family quite uselessly, to break his word to Daisy, and to assert an authority which he was absolutely without power to exercise. Thus, as the result of much troubled reflection, he decided to remain silent, to hope for the best (though he would have been rather puzzled to explain exactly what it was that he hoped for), and to act, if he refrained from actually telling, a lie. But he did not like it, and strict moralists will be glad to hear that he was by no means happy during the summer which he so dutifully spent with his father in his old home.

Gerard's stay was brief. His battalion was at that time quartered in Dublin, and the exigencies of military duty afforded him an excellent excuse for placing St. George's Channel between him and ultimate destiny before he had committed himself to anything more than a proper display of respectful admiration for his widowed neighbour. Miss Coplestone also soon returned to London, whence she departed on a succession of visits to her numerous friends, leaving Sir Harry and Frank to practise economy and to endure the tedium of a solitary country life together as best they could. One of them had no difficulty in enduring a solitude which was, of course, much less complete than that to which he was accustomed,

while the other had never found life in the country tedious, even when neither shooting, hunting nor fishing were attainable. There was no need for his father to apologise to him daily; he would much rather, he declared, be where he was than anywhere else—with a mental reservation in favour of Switzerland, where he could not possibly be.

From St. Moritz, Pontresina, Ouchy and other places Daisy wrote with tolerable frequency to say that she was having “a rare good time.” Apparently she had met with many acquaintances, and incidental allusions seemed to show that their tastes were of a jovial character; but she did not go much into details, although she was constantly begged to do so. As she had a large, bold handwriting, her letters filled many sheets of thick paper; they were couched in a style to which purists might have taken exception; they were punctuated upon a most improbable system, and contained some eccentric specimens of spelling. Still, such as they were, they gave satisfaction to their recipient; for they abounded in expressions of the warmest affection.

“I long for you a dozen times a day, dear old boy,” she gladdened his heart by asserting. “I’m sure you can’t miss me half as much as I miss you, for all your lamentations. But cheer up! I’m due in the little village earlier than usual this year, and we’ll have some good days before you sail. It makes me roar with laughter sometimes to think that I

am a married woman, and that my name is Coplestone!"

Notwithstanding her change of name, she did not make use of it as a signature, nor did Frank find her hilarity with regard to that particular subject contagious. But then his was a somewhat serious nature to start with, and he had been aged and sobered by a form of fever which leaves no man precisely where it found him.

More than once in the course of the summer Frank was prostrated for a few days by a slight recurrence of that depressing malady; and thus it came to pass that the liking which he had conceived for Mrs. Trafford at first sight developed into a strong and grateful friendship. Meeting Sir Harry shortly after one of these attacks had declared itself, and touched by his plaintive avowal that he did not know how to deal with an invalid who was trying to be patient, but could not help being occasionally fretful, Mrs. Trafford drove over to Malling Park and very soon put matters upon a more satisfactory footing.

"If I have no other merit," she remarked, "I can at least claim to be a good nurse."

And certainly she proved herself to be so. She seemed to know intuitively what was wanted; she did what had to be done in such a prompt, matter-of-course way that nobody thought of protesting against her taking so much trouble, and, as preliminaries are

easily dispensed with in a sick room, it did not take Frank long to feel as if he had been intimate with her all his life. Young though she was in years, she was not very young in her ways; she adopted a maternal manner with him which he liked; and if, at the end of a week, she did not know quite all that there was to know about him, she knew a good deal more than his father did.

“It is a good thing that you are not going back to Burmah, and a very good thing that you will soon have to go back to India,” she said, one afternoon, when he had reached the convalescent stage, and when she was sitting beside his long wicker chair in a sunny, sheltered nook of the garden.

“Why do you say that?” asked Frank, rather surprised.

“Only because you are in a state to do something foolish just now, and because, if you were to remain in England, you might do it. By the time that your regiment comes home you will probably have forgotten all about her—whoever she may be.”

Frank straightened himself up in his chair and stared at his neighbour with wide-open eyes of alarm. “What do you mean?” he gasped: “Have I been delirious?—have I said anything?”

“You have said all sorts of things in moments of perfect sanity,” replied Mrs. Trafford, smiling; “but don’t be frightened. All I have guessed is that there is somebody, and that she isn’t—well, perhaps ‘suita-

ble' will do as well as any other word. I am not asking for your confidence, and you may be sure that I shall not betray you ; only allow me to be glad that circumstances are likely to save you from yourself. One wants—almost everybody wants in early life—to do things which are contrary to reason and common sense ; one makes oneself utterly miserable because they can't be done, and then a day comes when one realises that nothing lasts long. First love, at all events, is a very transient emotion."

"That is the sort of thing that Gerard might say," remarked Frank ; "I shouldn't have expected to hear such sentiments from you."

She raised her eyebrows. "Wouldn't you?" she returned ; "most people would."

There was a suspicion of bitterness in her voice which caused him to feel that he had paid her a somewhat clumsy and inappropriate compliment : but she did not pursue the subject, nor was she at any time given to speaking much about herself or her past history. She answered questions unhesitatingly when they were put to her ; on the first evening, as has been related, she had expressed herself with more candour than was absolutely necessary respecting her position and her plans, and sometimes if the occasion appeared to call for it, she alluded without embarrassment to her late husband : but she was not spontaneously communicative. What Frank knew, and rejoiced to know, was that she was very kindly and

genuinely interested in him. He conjectured that her own destiny did not, for the time being, interest her profoundly. Possibly she regarded that as a tale which had already been told, and which admitted of no sequel worth talking about.

Sir Harry, for his part, would have liked very well to talk occasionally, in veiled and discreet terms, about possible sequels; but he was advised by his younger son not to do that.

“She often asks me about Gerard,” Frank said; “and she told me once that she thought him the handsomest man she had ever seen in her life; but I’m sure she isn’t dreaming of a second marriage yet. We should do more harm than good if we let her see that we are.”

It did not occur to this sapient young man that a lady who had already shown herself so apt at drawing unexpected inferences as Mrs. Trafford had done might have surmised without assistance what the hopes of the Coplestone family were; but the astonishing discovery which she had made (and to which she did not again refer) caused him to be a little more guarded in his subsequent utterances, when conversing with her.

Gerard found it impossible, or wrote that he found it impossible, to revisit Malling during his brother’s stay. Perhaps he was not very greatly missed by Sir Harry, who was never free from an uncomfortable feeling that his heir looked down upon the reduced

establishment at home, and who was reassured by Frank's expressed conviction that in due season the fallen fortunes of the house would be repaired after the fashion desired.

And so the days slipped away swiftly, as uneventful days always do, until the woods turned red and brown and yellow, and summer was a memory. It was in October that Frank at length received a letter from Daisy which rendered it at once a duty and a joy to him to announce his impending departure for London.

"The St. Stephen's Theatre is to re-open on the 26th," she wrote from Paris, "with a piece called 'Othello Junior,' in which I am expected to electrify the town. Come up for the first night, like a dear boy, and give us a hand. But don't come before; because I shall be driven mad with rehearsals, and ready to bite the head off anybody who dares to approach me. You may ask me to supper at the Savoy on the evening of the 26th if you like, and I'll get some of the others to join us. Mind you don't look as if you had seen or heard anything of me since I left London."

Well, this was not quite the way in which he would have chosen to meet his wife again after their prolonged separation; but he was so glad to have the prospect of meeting her again upon any terms that his first feeling of annoyance and resentment soon passed off. He even saw that, admitting the desir-

ability of their marriage being kept a secret, it was just as well that the suspicions of "the others" should be allayed by some such entertainment as she suggested. Sir Harry, happily, had no suspicions, and, although he sighed on being told that Frank must run up to town to make preparations for rejoining his regiment, offered no opposition.

"You have been very good in keeping me company all this long time, my dear fellow," he said, "and I should be a churl to grumble at your wanting a few days of livelier society now. Come down for a couple of nights before you sail, that's all; I should like to see the last of you."

Mrs. Trafford, on the other hand, was by no means without suspicions; but she only hinted at them, remarking:

"A month or six weeks seems a rather longer time than can be required for the purchase of sun-helmets and flannels. I wish I were going to be in London, to keep a watchful eye upon your proceedings; but it appears that I can't get into my new house there until after Christmas."

"How could you manage to keep an eye upon me if you were there?" Frank inquired.

"I flatter myself that I have acquired a certain influence over you. Probably that is a fond illusion, though, and you would deceive me as soon as look at me. Men must play and women must weep as long as the world lasts. All I can say is that I hope you

won't bring more tears than you can help into the eyes of your old nurse until you disappear altogether from the field of her vision."

Frank laughed, and replied that he was going to be good. He was touched and not at all offended by this kind woman's solicitude; but at the same time he was rather glad to think that she would be safely down in Kent while he was spending his days where he hoped to spend most of them, at Daisy's little house in the Regent's Park. He had begun to realise that Mrs. Trafford was a lady whom it was more pleasant to look at than easy to deceive.

CHAPTER VI.

“OTHELLO JUNIOR.”

THE busy, prosaic and utilitarian age in which we live feels, as all previous ages have felt, the need for occasional lapses into gaiety, and supplies that need for the most part after a somewhat crude fashion. The art of brilliant conversation, like the epistolary art, has fallen out of cultivation because it has ceased to pay; a wit is only another name for a bore; nobody in these days would be pleased or amused by the elaborate *jeux d'esprit* which our forefathers delighted to quote. Practical joking, on the other hand, makes no troublesome demand on the appreciative intellect; its effects are prompt, visible, satisfying; and this, no doubt, explains the immense popularity of such gilded youths as Tommy Fellowes.

Tommy, to do him justice, was extremely funny both in word and in deed. His round, smooth-shaven face wore an expression of comic gravity which seldom or never varied, and which had been of the greatest assistance to him in carrying out the pranks whereby he had earned an honourable reputa-

tion; his friends were wont to say of him admiringly that you never knew what Tommy would do next, and if this aptitude of his for achieving unexpected successes rendered him a rather trying companion to nervous people, it was a source of endless merriment to those upon whose comfort or dignity he had no immediate designs. Unbounded impudence, unfailing sang-froid and a certain child-like innocence of demeanour had brought him safely through enterprises in which less-gifted mortals must inevitably have broken down. Everybody remembers how, just after a general election, he contrived to make his way into the House of Commons, signed the roll, shook hands with the Speaker and seated himself placidly upon the Treasury Bench, and how, when detection and expulsion followed, he declared that the whole thing had been a very natural mistake—that although he had inadvertently appropriated the name of a member, this was only because he had fully intended to stand for the constituency represented by that member, and had clean forgotten the detail of his having omitted to do so. Everybody knew who it was that called together a mass meeting in Hyde Park to demand the abolition of the House of Lords, addressed the populace in incendiary language for twenty minutes and then abruptly and mysteriously vanished. Everybody could name the hand which, on a celebrated occasion, introduced a cunningly devised emetic into the meat or drink of that very exclusive

confraternity, the members of the Gastronomic Club. These things and many others were known to everybody, because everybody (including the police, who loved him not) knew Tommy Fellowes. Possessed of sufficient means, free from family encumbrances, well connected, and ever ready to make fresh acquaintances, Tommy enjoyed a social position which he was now in no danger of forfeiting, his multitudinous offences being more than covered by his one great virtue of being always amusing.

For more reasons than one, Frank Coplestone, who had the privilege of being numbered among Mr. Fellowes's intimates, would have preferred to dine with anybody else on the evening appointed for the first performance of "Othello Junior"; but he was given to understand by notes from Daisy and from his intended host that his presence at the latter's club at seven o'clock sharp that evening formed part of a pre-arranged programme, and he hardly saw his way to disobey the order. Tommy was, and had been from the commencement of her career, a staunch friend and supporter of the Dancer in Yellow; she was accustomed to assert that she owed a great deal to his patronage; to offend him would very likely have been to offend her: added to which, it had been necessary to invite him to supper at the Savoy, and an hour or two more or less of his company could not make much difference, one way or the other. Only Frank hoped that he would abstain from putting embarrassing queries.

In this respect Tommy, who probably had his own surmises, but who was really a good-natured little man, showed more discretion than his anxious guest had ventured to count upon. He met Frank in the hall, hurried him into the dining-room, where three other young men were already seated, and began at once to relate how he had seen Daisy Villiers that morning, and to quote the account that she had given him of her adventures in foreign lands. He seemed to take it for granted that none of his hearers could know what Daisy had been about during the holiday season, and he wound up by adding :

“I was to tell you, Coplestone, that she is looking forward to seeing you to-night, and that she would have seen you before now if she hadn't been too busy with rehearsals to see anybody.”

“Except you, it seems,” observed Frank, just a trifle jealous, notwithstanding his relief at being spared the inquiries which he had anticipated and dreaded.

“Oh, I'm nobody; I don't count, bless you! If I were to begin making love to Miss Daisy, she'd simply roar with laughing in my face—just as these fellows are doing now. Not that there's anything to laugh at.”

There certainly was no ostensible cause for laughter; but that did not prevent Mr. Fellowes's guests from being convulsed every time that he opened his lips. Penalties attach to all forms of

greatness, and perhaps an inveterate wag may feel it to be a little distressing that he cannot (at any rate, in this country) make the most commonplace remark without having some waggish *arrière pensée* imputed to him. For the rest, it had probably become a second nature to Tommy to play the fool, and during the progress of a somewhat hurried repast he contrived, without apparent exertion, to be as entertaining as he was expected to be. Solemn and humorous requests were addressed to the club waiters, who shook from head to foot with suppressed hilarity; one of the young gentlemen was seduced into tossing off a glass of raw brandy in mistake for sherry; another was caused to subside upon the floor with a resounding crash, his chair having been dexterously whisked away while he was leaning across the table, at his host's request, to examine the last photograph of Daisy Villiers; it was all rather better fun than it sounds, and Frank, at least, was thankful that these choice spirits were too much engaged with themselves and one another to think of asking questions about the yachting cruise in which he was known to have spent a part of his holiday.

But when Tommy and he were seated, side by side, in a hansom, and when the former had with great difficulty been dissuaded from dropping a flaming fusee upon the horse's quarters, an observation was made to him which he did not like at all.

"I suppose you have heard," said his companion,

“that our little friend in yellow has made a brand new captive. The Most Honourable the Marquis of Wednesbury, if you please, no less! Let us hope that his intentions are most honourable—and take odds the other way, if any amiable juggins offers them to us. She picked him up somewhere abroad, I believe, and he is reported to be in an abject condition, poor devil!”

Frank’s attempts to steady his voice were altogether futile, as he answered: “I don’t know who Lord Wednesbury is, and I don’t care; but I do know that nobody has ever yet ventured to insinuate that Daisy Villiers is anything but an honest girl, and I think that, since you pretend to be a friend of hers, you might be better employed than in blackening her character behind her back.”

“Only wanted to get a rise out of you,” returned the other, placidly. “I haven’t blackened Daisy’s character; she’s all right, and so, for anything I know, to the contrary, is Wednesbury; though it’s true that he is awfully gone on her. It’s no fault of hers that she met him and that her charms were too much for him; she has met other people who have found her charms irresistible, I believe. But when you say that nobody has ever dared to breathe insinuations against her, you go a bit too far, my boy, and if you mean to fly into a towering passion with every man who breathes insinuations of that kind in your hearing, you’ll be locked up for the night before you

know where you are. Now, I'm tolerably familiar with the London beak, and if I get into a row—a thing which may happen to the most innocent person—I know pretty well how to get out of it again; but I doubt whether you or your people would enjoy a first appearance of yours in a police court, and for that reason I should recommend you to cultivate philosophy. See what I mean?"

It was easy to see what he meant and impossible to dispute either the wisdom of his advice or the kindly feeling that had prompted it. Slanderous whispers cannot be stifled, nor is there any known means of protecting women who dance upon the public stage from slander. Frank, who had all along been aware that he must of necessity submit to much which would be almost unendurable to him, was vexed with himself for having so readily fallen into a trap not ill-naturedly laid; yet it was all that he could do to refrain from pursuing the subject. What did Tommy Fellowes know, or guess? How much truth was there in that very unwelcome story about Lord Wednesbury?—and was his lordship to form one of the supper-party after the performance?

These questions, which Frank had just self-control enough to refrain from putting into words, prevented him from getting any amusement whatsoever out of the opening scenes of *Othello Junior*, although his reverence for Shakspeare was not so great as to interfere with the enjoyment which he might otherwise

have derived from seeing the personages of a noble tragedy ludicrously travestied. That the piece was going to be a great success was manifest from the outset; but whether it had been good or bad of its class, the vociferous applause which greeted Daisy's entrance upon the scene would doubtless have been the same. She wore, as a matter of course, a costume of the colour with which her name and fame were inseparably associated; diamonds sparkled in her hair and about her neck; she was looking charmingly young, fresh and pretty; she acknowledged the prolonged plaudits of the spectators with a succession of those smiling little nods which they had learned to expect of her; after which, meeting Frank's eyes for a second, she favoured him with a barely perceptible sign of recognition which set his foolish heart beating. He was at least certain that she had not done as much as that for anybody else in the house. Then, having spoken a few sentences in a careless, self-possessed fashion (for she was no actress, and scarcely troubled herself to learn her part), she began to dance.

There are people who profess to despise the Terpsichorean art, and even to deny it that place amongst the arts which it has contrived to hold, through good and evil report, in times ancient and modern; but these supercilious persons, it may be, never had the privilege of gazing upon Daisy Villiers in the zenith of her renown. She must have possessed something more than marvellous gracefulness, perfectly trained

skill and an absolutely correct sense of time. Many of her predecessors, possibly even a few of her contemporaries, might have boasted of a similar equipment, but it is doubtful whether anybody else has ever contrived to rouse a large, mixed assemblage to quite such a pitch of self-forgetful enthusiasm as Daisy habitually did. It would be just as impossible to describe the individuality with which her performance was impregnated as to explain the special charm which is universally felt to belong to certain poets. Analysis in these cases only serves to obscure the issue, and we are driven to sum up feebly by saying that So-and-so was a genius—which scarcely helps to make matters more clear to those who have not seen or read So-and-so. In all probability Daisy herself was unconscious of her own secret, knew no more than that technical proficiency must be kept up by constant practice, and danced like that, as the nightingales sing, because it was her nature to do so.

Be that as it may, she fairly surpassed herself on the occasion with which we are now concerned. An ovation such as is very seldom witnessed within the walls of an English theatre rewarded her when she paused, breathing a little quickly, behind the footlights; a shower of bouquets fell at her feet, and if, amongst the smiles which she distributed on all sides, in acknowledgment of this display of public favour, a somewhat marked one was addressed to a dark young man in the stalls, it was but right that he

should be thus distinguished ; for, indeed, Frank had never loved her more passionately or felt more proud of her than he did at that moment. He did not so much as hear the slang phrases by means of which Tommy Fellowes gave expression to his approval ; he forgot the existence of Lord Wednesbury, whom he had hitherto been furtively seeking to identify in the closely-packed audience ; he was only aware of a triumphant conviction that there was nobody in the world like Daisy, and that Daisy belonged to him.

Unhappily, this ecstatic mental condition could not and did not last long. The piece, though clever and bright of its kind, was, of course, vulgar, and those who took part in it had to be a little vulgar too. It is only fair to the so-called Desdemona to say that she was not, as a rule, addicted to the *abandon* which the taste of the present day is supposed to demand ; still she was made to say some rather risky things and to execute a few evolutions upon which her husband could not look without an involuntary frown. By the time that the curtain fell upon the final tableau he caught himself in the act of wishing, as he had so often and so unreasonably wished already, that Daisy could be removed at once and for ever from surroundings which hardly befitted Mrs. Frank Coplestone.

But he had the forbearance and the common sense to keep these absurd aspirations to himself when he went behind with the others, and when Daisy accosted him in the only manner in which it was possible for

her to accost him. A surreptitious squeeze of the hand he obtained; more he could not hope for or expect. Then he was introduced to Lord Wednesbury, a tall, thin, bald-headed man, no longer in his first youth, who had joined the group.

"Weddy is coming to supper with us," Daisy explained, with easy familiarity; "I hope that little wretch Tommy didn't forget to tell you."

"I was told that we were to be eight," answered Frank; "no doubt it will be all right."

He tried to feel no doubt that everything was all right; he would have been ashamed to admit that the presence of this rather elderly nobleman caused him the slightest disquietude; and yet he could not for the life of him help resenting it as an impertinence that intimacy with his wife should be a thing so lightly claimed and granted.

Presently Daisy went off to change her dress, while Frank, after hesitating a moment as to whether he should wait upon the chance of securing a few words with her in private, was led away towards the Savoy by Tommy Fellowes and his satellites.

CHAPTER VII.

A LIVELY SUPPER PARTY.

A MAN who deliberately places himself in a false position is doubtless a fool; but it is open to him to make his folly even more conspicuous, if he be so minded, by quarrelling with it. Frank Coplestone fully recognised this, and sensibly resolved that he would not interfere with the merriment of a particularly merry party by showing any outward signs of disquietude or sulkiness. Nevertheless, while champagne corks were flying and his guests were chattering and laughing at the top of their voices, and he himself was doing his best to look like what he ostensibly was—a gay young subaltern, with money enough in his pocket to offer a supper to a popular actress and her friends—the falsity of his position was dreadfully apparent to him. He had given, or attended, many previous supper parties similar to this one, and, being young as well as, in a limited sense, gay, had thoroughly enjoyed them; but then he had not on those bygone occasions been married to the lady who was the life and soul of the gathering—which made a

difference. Strange indeed would he have been, and very unlike the rest of mankind, if he had thoroughly enjoyed participating in Daisy's notice of Lord Wednesbury, who received the lion's share of that privilege, and who, although perfectly civil, treated his host rather too openly as a *quantité négligeable*. His lordship, it was easy to perceive, had accepted hospitality merely as a means towards an end. What that end was might be uncertain, but that the means neither troubled nor interested him was disagreeably evident.

"Awfully nice of you to wear that little brooch of mine to-night," Frank heard him say in a low voice to his neighbour; "I was quite touched when I saw it—I was really!"

"Brooch of yours!" returned Daisy, in scornful accents which partially allayed the rising indignation of her husband; "I like that! If a brooch doesn't become my property after I have won it in a fair wager, all I can say is you had better go to one of the bookies who make a living out of you and tell him how awfully nice you think it of him to spend your money. Don't you flatter yourself that I ever thought about where it came from when I put it on."

"Have you been making successful bets in foreign parts, then?" asked Frank, striking nervously into the conversation, with a rather forced smile.

"One or two," answered Daisy. "Weddy said I wouldn't drive a pair of donkeys tandem from the

Place de la Concorde to the Arc de Triomphe; but I very soon showed him that I would, if it was made worth my while. Weddy is a little dull; you can't get him to believe anything until he sees it—and not always then."

Lord Wednesbury stroked his moustache, laughed quietly and looked as if a compliment had been paid to him. It seemed quite probable that he might be a little dull.

Perhaps it would not have been altogether unjust to bring the same accusation against three-fourths of those who were feasting at Frank's expense, including the giver of the feast; it is, at all events, certain that they would have had remarkably little to say to one another, had Daisy Villiers and Tommy Fellowes remained silent. But these two between them kept the conversational ball rolling with such vigour that Tommy's three friends and Daisy's faithful companion, Miss Cripps, were not called upon to rack their brains for original ideas. Frank had always liked fat old Miss Cripps, whose good qualities nobody else, except Daisy, seemed to appreciate. She was a plain-featured, middle-aged woman, who wore her grizzled hair in sausage curls, after the fashion of heaven knows how many years ago; at some remote epoch she had been a member of the corps de ballet at Covent Garden, but had failed to realise a sufficient sum at that trade to provide for the necessities of her old age; so that it must have been a glad day for her

when Daisy, moved by compassion, rescued her from penury to preside over the little Regent's Park establishment where she was now the terror of lazy servants. Taciturn, blunt of speech, when she did open her lips, and inflexibly honest, she was a sort of embodiment and guarantee of respectability. Possibly that may have been one reason why Frank liked her and why other people sometimes forgot themselves so far as audibly to wish her at the deuce. Daisy either had, or affected to have, a high esteem for her judgment in theatrical matters, and presently she appealed to it from the compliments which were being showered upon her personally and the congratulations upon the success of the piece, for which an endless run was confidently predicted.

"Oh, you would all of you say that, whatever the truth was," she declared. "Cripps don't talk, but she knows ten times more than the whole lot of you put together. Speak up, Cripps!—was I pretty good? Was the thing a genuine success?"

"I didn't think much of the piece myself," answered the candid critic interrogated; "but I daresay it will go down when they put a little more gag into it. Yes, you were good, my dear, though I've known you better. There's no woman living can hold a candle to you; you may depend upon that. Dancing isn't what it was in the days of Taglioni and The Sylphide, which I daresay the old gentleman on your right may remember."

This was rather hard upon poor Lord Wednesbury, who could hardly have been born at the period alluded to; but if he was not quite so old as he was accused of being, he was old enough to keep his countenance and to take no notice of the burst of laughter which rewarded Miss Cripps's sally. Very likely he was aware that Miss Cripps did not regard him with any special favour.

"Never mind, Weddy," said Daisy, consolingly. "A man's as young as he feels, you know, and nobody who had seen you in Paris could doubt that you feel as young as a kitten. He changed all the boots outside the doors at the hotel," she added, turning to Frank, "and he pretended not to know which his own room was——"

"Oh, come!" interrupted Lord Wednesbury, lifting an admonishing forefinger; "you mustn't tell tales out of school."

"But he did," persisted Daisy. "And we painted his face, and got a red wig for him, so that he shouldn't be recognised——"

Lord Wednesbury's finger was advanced yet a little farther, and laid upon the betrayer's lips. It was, no doubt, a great liberty to take, and the question for a moment was whether Frank would be able to put up with it. Daisy may have realised that; for she retorted with great promptitude by pouring a glass of champagne over the bald head of her mature adorer; whereupon a somewhat riotous scene ensued, which was

quite to the taste of Tommy Fellowes, who took an active part in it.

By the time that order was restored, and that Miss Cripps, without moving a muscle, had risen from her seat to box Tommy's ears soundly, Frank had to some extent recovered his equanimity. After all, Daisy was not behaving so badly; her behaviour, at all events, could not be called bad, if judged from her probable point of view. She was, of course, necessarily playing a part; she was only doing what she had done a hundred times before; it might have struck her friends as odd if she had departed from her well-known habits, and there is nothing wrong in horse play. As for Lord Wednesbury, it would have been both ungenerous and ridiculous to be jealous of that elderly nobleman—who, moreover, it had to be remembered, was not consciously making love to a married woman. The thing to be done was to exercise a little patience for the time being, and to take an early opportunity of reminding Daisy, very gently and kindly, that married women who choose to retain the title of spinsterhood expose themselves to risks which their husbands can scarcely contemplate with satisfaction.

While Frank was thus sagely admonishing himself, Tommy Fellowes had jumped to his feet, and had begun to make a speech.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he shouted; “I feel sure that I am expressing your sentiments and convictions, as well as my own, when I say that we ought not to

separate without drinking the health of one whose geniality, amiability, and other virtues have endeared him to us all. It would be a pleasing task to me to dwell upon these at greater length; but I remember that the night is already far advanced and that some of the younger members of our party, being not yet wholly emancipated from paternal control, cannot remain out of bed in the pursuit of knowledge after a certain hour without laying themselves open to annoyances which I should deplore. For my own part, I will only say that the subject of this toast is a man whom I love, admire, and esteem; I may add without exaggeration that I have no better friend in the world, and I am confident that you will join me enthusiastically in wishing him many years of health, prosperity, and public respect. I need scarcely tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that I allude to—myself.”

After this there was another bear-fight, in the midst of which Daisy got up, kissed her finger tips to the combatants, and made for the door, closely followed by Miss Cripps, Lord Wednesbury and Frank. The latter could not manage to get a word with her until she had obligingly dismissed her other attendants in search of a fan, which she professed to have mislaid in the cloak-room. Then he exclaimed eagerly :

“At last, Daisy! I was beginning to think that this time would never come.”

She laughed, glanced cautiously over her shoulder,

and then, placing her hands lightly upon each of his, kissed him on both cheeks. However, she jumped back at once to avoid the corresponding and less circumspect demonstration with which she was threatened.

"Mind what you are about," she whispered; "they will be back directly. Oh, yes, the time has come at last, and I shouldn't wonder if I had been longing for it as much as you have, Frank. But it isn't going to last more than a minute, worse luck!"

"Mayn't I see you home?" he pleaded, disconsolately.

"Bless the boy, no! What would Weddy and the others think?—not to mention Cripps."

"You haven't told her, then? I always hoped that you would at least tell her. It would make things so very much easier!"

"H'm! I don't know about that. Cripps is an angel; but when a third person is let into a secret, you know—well, perhaps she shall be told some day; not yet. Anyhow, she won't object to your coming to lunch with me to-morrow, and then we'll have a happy afternoon together somewhere or other. As it's Sunday there'll be no beastly rehearsal to attend."

This hurried interview, which was put a stop to by the return of Lord Wednesbury, empty-handed and apologetic, gave Frank some little comfort. He had fully intended, in any case, to visit his wife on

the morrow; but he was pleased (having scarcely ventured to anticipate so much), that she had likewise planned to receive him, and he tried not to be vexed while she descended the stairs in front of him, jocularly abusing Lord Wednesbury, who was full of lamentations over his failure to discover the missing fan, but who promised to buy her another and a much nicer one in its place. It was not agreeable to listen to such an offer and to wait in vain for the refusal with which it ought to have been promptly met; but then, the whole situation was not, and could not be, agreeable.

Daisy's smart little brougham stood at the door. Miss Cripps bundled her into it, followed her, and pulled up the glass, without even wishing the giver of the feast good-night; then the light vehicle was whirled away into the darkness, leaving the two men standing side by side upon the pavement. Lord Wednesbury, more polite than Miss Cripps, shook hands with his late entertainer, murmured something perfunctory, and not very intelligible, and signalled to his own brougham, which was waiting a few yards off. As for Frank, he knew by previous experience that Tommy Fellowes was not a desirable companion, during the small hours of the morning, for those who wish to steer clear of exciting episodes, so he slipped down a side street and escaped.

CHAPTER VIII.

DAISY GIVES REASONS.

"THIS is rather rough on poor old Cripps," remarked Daisy, looking out of the drawing-room window at the steady, persistent rain and the mist which blurred the outlines of the trees in the Regent's Park. "She didn't at all want to go and see her distant relatives at Twickenham, but she said she could stand them, at a pinch, out of doors. Now she will have to do the best she can with them under cover."

"Well, I am sorry for her," answered Frank. "I should have been a great deal more sorry for myself, though, if she hadn't gone, and I'm most sincerely grateful to you, Daisy, for having sent her."

He was smoking, and so was his wife, who had the best cigarettes in London, and refused to tell anybody where she got them. They had partaken of an excellently cooked little luncheon together, and she had made herself so charming in every way that he had not yet had the heart to read her the lecture of which he had carefully prepared the heads on his road to her house. Even now, in this placid hour of

digestion, he felt extremely disinclined to tackle unpleasant subjects, saying to himself that they had still the whole afternoon before them.

"I wish it wasn't raining, all the same," he resumed, presently, just by way of making a remark which could not give rise to any painful difference of opinion; "we might have gone to the Zoo, or somewhere. You aren't very fond of sitting indoors and doing nothing, are you, little woman?"

Daisy threw herself down into a low and capacious armchair and blew a cloud of smoke into the air luxuriously. "Ain't I, though!" she returned. "Shows how much you know about me! Most days of the week I'm bound to be out, rain or shine; but I can assure you, Frank, the happiest moments of my life are when I can sit in this room and look round at everything and say to myself, 'There, my dear!—all that you see belongs to you absolutely, and there isn't a stick or a stitch of it that you haven't earned by the work of your own hands—or rather feet.' I don't suppose you understand the sensation, because you have never known what it is to go hungry and see ruin staring you in the face. I have!"

In a measure he did understand, and could sympathise with her pardonable self-congratulation. That his wife should be so entirely independent of him was perhaps scarcely a matter for personal self-congratulation; but that was neither here nor there.

The labourer is worthy of his or her hire, and Daisy had just as good a right to be proud as if she had been a victorious general or a cabinet minister.

For the rest, the outward and visible signs of her victories were not quite what he would have chosen had he been consulted when she furnished and decorated the room round which her eyes roamed so lovingly. Daisy's taste, it has to be confessed, was (save in the matter of apparel, where she made no mistakes) somewhat crude and florid. Her lot had been cast in a generation which despises gilding, otherwise she would, no doubt, have been extensively gilded. As it was, she had gone in for pseudo-high art in its most appalling manifestations, and the mixture of periods aped and caricatured within the narrow limits of those four walls had something of the effect of a nightmare. Japan, of course—poor, modern, debased Japan—was largely represented; so was the age of Queen Anne, and likewise those of Louis XVI. and of the first Napoleon. Still her little salon would not have been so very much worse than the salons of many people who pretend to a far more exalted level of culture, had she been able to restrain her too exuberant fancy in respect of colour. It was the terrible, insistent, jarring hues of his wife's abode that made Frank long to pull all the blinds down the first time that he was privileged to behold them. However, he had grown accustomed to them now, and to many other things besides. It was a pity that

some things remained to which it was out of his power to accustom himself. One of these he had made up his mind that he must mention that day, and after a time Daisy rendered it easier for him to do so by asking :

“ Well, what did you think of Weddy? Not a bad sort of old duffer, is he? ”

“ Since you ask me,” answered Frank, “ I thought he was a great deal too familiar.”

“ Oh, but not with you, dear boy!” protested Daisy, her eyes twinkling. “ I’m sure he didn’t forget himself so far as to be familiar with you!”

“ He certainly didn’t honour me so far,” returned Frank, unsmilingly. “ All I meant to say was that I should have been better pleased if he hadn’t honoured my wife so far.”

“ Ah!” sighed Daisy, “ now you are going to be a perfect pig! I expected it, and I must put up with it, I suppose. Only please don’t scold longer than you can help, because it’s such a horrid waste of time. If you don’t understand that familiarity and contempt and all the rest of it belong to my position in life just as much as respect and respectability do to yours, I’m afraid I can’t make you. Weddy don’t mean any harm by talking like that. And there isn’t any harm either,” she added, a trifle defiantly.

“ Of course I know that there isn’t any harm,” Frank hastened to reply. “ I’m not so sure about his meaning none. You yourself say that the position

you are in encourages men to be familiar, and—and so forth, consequently——”

“Consequently it behoves me to be very circumspect, eh? And, little as you might suppose it, I really do know how to take care of myself by this time. Anything more?”

Frank looked rather worried. He would have liked to ask for a good deal more, but it was not easy to give expression to his wishes without at the same time giving legitimate cause for offence. At length he made up his mind to say:

“I can’t help feeling that we ought to announce our marriage, instead of concealing it. There are drawbacks either way, I know, but at least if we spoke out, we should be doing the straight thing.”

“Then we must do the crooked thing, and put up with a few drawbacks, that’s all,” returned Daisy, decisively. “You promised me that you would do as I wished about this, and I mean to hold you to your word. As far as that goes, you ought to be quite as much interested as I am in keeping our marriage dark. You have got to go out to India. It stands to reason that you can’t take me with you, and by the time that you come back again all sorts of things may have happened.”

“My father may be dead, you mean?”

“Well, there’s that; and also there’s the possibility that the public may have grown tired of me, which would make me a good deal more inclined for

a humdrum, domestic life than I am now. Can't you understand me, Frank? Poor fellow! I dare say you can't, though it isn't for want of being told. I love my liberty; I love excitement; I love to be admired and applauded; I love to know that, as old Cripps said last night, there isn't another woman living who can hold a candle to me in my own line."

"In short, you love all these things better than you do me."

"No, not nearly as much, or I should never have married you. Only I want to enjoy my little hour of triumph while it lasts, and I know very well that it can't last long. You wouldn't grudge it to me if you knew how hard I have worked for it and what difficulties have been put in my way!"

"I grudge you nothing, Daisy!" Frank declared, touched by the sight of the tears which had suddenly risen to her eyes; "I am proud of your success, and I couldn't think of asking you to give it all up for me. But why should there be any question of your giving it up? Plenty of celebrated dancers have been married women, and I can't see what difference it can make to the public whether you are married or single."

Daisy shook her head. "It wouldn't be at all the same thing," she answered. "Besides, as I said before, I'm consulting your interests quite as much as my own. What would your Colonel say to you—what would your brother officers say to you—if you re-

turned with the news of what you have done? As for your father, I should think it was upon the cards that he would cut you out of his will, rather than forgive you for having espoused the Dancer in Yellow."

"He would be distressed and rather angry, no doubt," Frank was forced to admit.

"Very well, then; we won't run the risk of injuring his health by distressing him and making him angry. My parents won't show much anger or distress, I promise you, when I tell them—if I ever do tell them—that their disreputable daughter is no less a person than Mrs. Frank Coplestone. On the contrary, they will begin to respect me for the first time in their lives, and I shouldn't wonder if they were to discover how much they had always loved me. What a treat it will be for you to make their acquaintance!"

"I want very much to make their acquaintance; I only wish I could!" Frank had the hardihood to affirm.

This was not exactly the truth; yet it was not altogether false. Daisy's relatives, he felt only too sure, must be rather terrible people; but he was resolved that, be they what they might, he would never behave as though he were ashamed of them, and he had a natural enough wish to know the worst. If she had offered to introduce him to them forthwith, he would have assented unhesitatingly. Nevertheless, he

was a good deal taken aback when she abruptly proposed to do that very thing.

“Do you?” said she, with a mischievous light in her eyes, from which the tears had already been winked away. “Well, you have only to say the word and your wish shall be gratified. Father and mother always sit at home, reading good books, on Sunday afternoons, and it isn’t often that I let a Sabbath pass without looking them up, when I’m in London. The rain has almost stopped now: shall we go round there together?”

“Yes, with pleasure, if you are speaking seriously,” Frank made haste to answer. “Only—shall I not be rather difficult to account for?”

“Not a bit; you are a friend of mine who has kindly offered to escort me. In our rank of life that isn’t considered at all an out-of-the-way thing to do. Added to which, I long ago exhausted all possible means of shocking my family. They wouldn’t groan much more deeply if I skipped into their parlour attended by half-a-dozen young men.”

Half an hour later Frank was enabled to hear for himself with what hollow and uncomplimentary groans Mr. and Mrs. Black were wont to welcome their daughter. The gloomy and hideous apartment (rendered hideous by deliberate intention, he could not help thinking) in which the old couple were seated struck a chill to his heart. Small wonder was it that Daisy had found it out of her power to exist

amid such surroundings! But although the glaring coloured prints upon the walls, representing scenes from the Old Testament, the horse-hair furniture, the wax-flowers under glass shades, and the large family Bible which lay upon the centre of the table, supported by a couple of photograph-albums, impressed him as dreadfully significant, they scarcely prepared him for the reception that awaited his wife. Mr. Black, a gaunt, solemn personage, clad from head to foot in an ill-fitting sable suit, and wearing long grey whiskers which met under his chin, made no offer to return the salute which Daisy bestowed upon his bald head. He pushed his chair back, sighed profoundly and said :

“It is many weeks since we last met, Matilda. You will not expect me, as a Christian and truthful man, to tell you that I am made 'appy by your return to London and your sinful course of life.”

“Oh, that's all right, father!” returned Daisy; “goodness knows I don't want you to say you're happy! I should think you were going to die if you said such a thing as that!”

Mr. Black, in sepulchral accents, gave it to be understood that he was one of those to whom to die is gain; but Daisy had already turned away from him and was bending over the little old woman who was extended upon the horse-hair sofa, and who looked as if that statement might be more applicable to her, so comfortless did her posture ap-

pear on the hard, straight-backed couch provided for her.

“ Well, mother,” said she, “ how are all the diseases getting on? I forget what it was last time. Something with a precious long name, I know ! ”

“ I am heavily afflicted,” Mrs. Black replied. “ Suffering from such complications as I do, it ain’t always easy for me myself to remember all that’s wrong with me—let alone them as don’t reckonise no Scriptural command to honour their parents.”

She was an unprepossessing old woman, in a rusty black gown and a dirty cap. Possibly the bottle which stood at her elbow, and of which the contents were obviously not medicine, may have been partially accountable for the rich hue of her nose. “ No need to inquire after you, Matilda,” she added. “ Flourishing like the green bay tree in slippery places, as is easy to be seen.”

“ That’s it, mother ; you couldn’t put the case more truly,” Daisy replied, with unruffled amiability.

All this time not the slightest notice had been taken of Frank, who was beginning to feel a little awkward ; but now Daisy duly presented him.

“ This is Mr. Coplestone—one of the unconverted—who comes to see me kicking up my heels on the stage, and likes it. I thought it would do him good to get a glimpse of a really pious family for once, so I brought him with me.”

Deep disapproval was expressed in Mr. Black's voice, as he said, "Please to take a chair, sir." Mrs. Black only grunted; and after that, conversation was resumed without any reference to the presence of the stranger.

Once or twice only during the succeeding half-hour was Frank appealed to to say whether man or woman had ever before been called upon to put up with such children as Daisy's brothers and sisters, whose conduct appeared to have been as black as their name, although he did not very clearly gather what they had been doing. He responded by the sympathetic murmur which was, he supposed, expected of him—finding it, indeed, easy enough to sympathise with the complainant's victims. As for Daisy, she went on laughing light-heartedly through the whole dismal recital. It was pointed out to her in unambiguous language that if Tom now refused to attend chapel, if Dick had taken up with godless companions, if Jane squandered time and money upon the adornment of her vile body, and so forth, and so forth, all these backslidings could be more or less directly traced to the fatal example of a scandalous sister. But she neither retorted nor defended herself. Evidently she was accustomed to these amenities; evidently she looked for nothing else; there was something pathetic as well as admirable in the practical answer that she made to her parents' accusations.

Possibly her answer was wont to take a form more practical than that of a weekly filial visit; for when she got up to say good-bye, Frank noticed that she deposited an envelope on the table. The contents of that envelope might have been guessed at, even if Mr. Black's swift, furtive, greedy glance had not stimulated conjecture.

"And how do you feel by this time?" was the half-jocular, half-compassionate question which Daisy addressed to her husband as soon as they had effected their escape.

"I feel a very great longing to kick an old gentleman who shall be nameless," he replied, "and a still greater longing to kiss a young lady who honours my name by bearing it—though she won't honour it so far as to bear it publicly."

Daisy dropped a curtsey far more rapid and graceful than is commonly achieved in circles where curtseys are *de rigueur*.

"Very pretty and very flattering; but it wasn't to hear you say that sort of thing that I inflicted half-an-hour of acute suffering upon you, dear boy. If you aren't convinced now that there are more reasons than one for my retaining the name of Daisy Villiers, I've had my trouble for nothing, that's all. But I know you must be convinced in your heart that I'm right. A day will come when things which would matter a good deal now won't matter nearly so much. Certain people are old, whereas you and I are

still young and can very well afford to wait a few years."

"That might have been a reason for deferring our marriage," observed Frank; "it isn't a reason——"

"Yes, it is," interrupted Daisy. "More than that, it's a good reason. More than that, it's the last reason I mean to give you. Now, let's go and dine somewhere."

CHAPTER IX.

LAST DAYS.

It had been hardly necessary, perhaps, to adopt so drastic a method of convincing Frank Coplestone that an immediate proclamation of his marriage would be in the last degree inexpedient. Of that he was already aware, and that, amongst other considerations, was why his conscience had told him that he ought to proclaim it. Nevertheless, it must be owned that, after having seen Daisy's parents, he felt a good deal more reconciled to silence than he had previously done. For such people ever to be acknowledged as connections by Sir Harry or by Gerard was evidently out of the question, and although he had known from the first that Daisy herself was very unlikely to be received in that capacity by these fastidious gentlemen, he had been sustained (when he had thought about it at all) by a vague hope that her manifold attractions would prove victorious over prejudice. His own prejudice against clandestine dealings remained unaltered; but, since

he could not make Daisy see things as he saw them, some solace was to be derived from realising that there was also a good deal to be said in favour of her view. He was, in a word, young; and it may be hoped that there are not many young people, male or female, who, when the present appears a little unsatisfactory, are unable to look forward with much misplaced confidence to the future.

Our hero, therefore, had, upon the whole, a happy time of it during those rough, rainy autumn weeks which concluded the period of his sick-leave. If by the expiration of that period he did not know every word of "Othello Junior" by heart, his ignorance can only be attributable to the fact that the piece, so far as he was concerned, contained but one personage, who, to be sure, took a very small share in its jocose dialogue. Not once did he fail to participate in Daisy's nightly triumph, nor were there many evenings on which he did not subsequently sup joyously with her and some of her numerous friends. As for those friends, he had to make the best of them and their occasional familiarities; after all, it was not such a very hard matter to do that, supported as he was by private assurances, the sincerity of which it was impossible to question. Daisy was very good to him; she gladly gave up to him every moment that she had to spare; they managed to spend more than one delightful, uninterrupted afternoon together, and if only Lord Wednesbury could have been brought to

see the futility of his assiduous pursuit, there would not have been much to complain of.

“Couldn’t you make him understand that his room would be more welcome than his company?” Frank ventured to suggest, after a more than usually severe trial of patience.

“Of course I could,” Daisy replied; “it’s the easiest thing in the world to make enemies. On the other hand, one never knows how soon one may want a friend, and dear old Weddy, with his money and his title and his influence, might turn out to be a powerful sort of friend.”

“In what way?” Frank wanted to know.

“Oh, in a thousand ways! He is part-proprietor of several theatres, for one thing. Besides, I like him; he’s a good sort—and he’s awfully fond of me.”

“That’s just why I wish you wouldn’t make a friend of him. Friendship is all very well, and the more real friends you have the better I shall be pleased, now that I must go away and leave you; but when you say he is ‘awfully fond’ of you, you really mean that——”

Daisy resorted to a time-honoured and always effectual device for closing the lips of the remonstrant. “Oh, you great silly!” she exclaimed; “don’t you know enough yet to know why I have any friends at all? How many of them would remain, do you suppose, after I had had a bad attack

of small-pox and had lost the use of my limbs? Weddy is just the same as everybody else—except that he's more long-suffering than most men—and by this time next year he'll be as fond of some other girl as he is of me now. But that's no reason for sending the poor chap off with a flea in his ear. Unless I offend him, he will always have a kindly feeling for me, and, as I say, he may come in useful some fine day."

"Well, but——"

"There aren't any buts. I'm not going to shout out from the housetops that I love you, Frank, and that I don't care a row of pins for anybody else; but you know it, and that ought to be enough for you."

In any case it had to be enough. There was, no doubt, a great deal of truth in what she said, and perhaps it was, in some ways, as well that she should discern the truth so clearly. Only the truth was not particularly agreeable to contemplate—would probably become a good deal less agreeable when contemplated on sultry Asiatic plains, far beyond reach of such constant consolatory reminders as were now to be had for the asking.

Crossing Pall Mall one afternoon, with his mental powers more concentrated upon dreary possibilities than upon immediate surroundings, he was suddenly gripped above the elbow, while an agonised voice in his ear shrieked, "Take care, sir! take care!"

Naturally he started aside, stepped into an adja-

cent puddle, splashed himself up to the eyes and, perceiving that there was no vehicle near, perceived also who had played this stupid trick upon him.

“Confound you, Tommy!” he exclaimed, “I’ve a great mind to roll you over in the mud. What did you want to make me to jump out of my skin like that for?”

“Dear me!” said Tommy Fellowes, with an air of innocent concern, “I had no idea that your nerves were in such a shattered state. I only advised you to take care, which, in my humble opinion, was sound advice. It’s about time for you to begin taking care when Daisy Villiers quarrels with Wednesbury—a man who can do her a lot of harm if he likes, mind you—just because he ventures to speak disrespectfully of your honour’s worship. Now, Daisy ain’t half a bad little girl in her way; but——”

“Has she quarrelled with Wednesbury?” interrupted Frank, eagerly.

“Yes; had no end of a row with him this morning—gave it him right and left, till at last he turned rusty—which I supposed was what she meant him to do. I’m bound to say that, considering what it was all about, that looks to me deuced significant; so I thought I would take the liberty of putting you upon your guard, old man.”

The brief but very plain-spoken homily which followed gave no offence to Frank, who knew that it was kindly meant, and who deemed it a sufficient answer

to say that he was upon the point of leaving England for two years or more. What was of far greater importance to him than his friend's solicitude on his behalf (which of course could not, under the circumstances, be of any importance at all) was the news of Daisy's rupture with Lord Wednesbury, and he lost no time in applying to her for confirmation of this welcome intelligence.

"Quite correct," she told him, laughing, that same evening. "Poor old Weddy has gone down to the country in dignified displeasure—not angry, you understand, only hurt—and there are to be no more larks. When we meet again, we shall be 'Miss Villiers' and 'Lord Wednesbury,' if you please. Now are you pleased with me?"

"I must confess that I'm glad you are rid of him," Frank answered. "What was it about? Was he—er—impertinent?"

"Well, I told him he was; but it was rather too bad of me, because he has heard much more impertinent things than that said to me scores of times. He began chaffing me about you, if you want to know, and as I had made up my mind to pick a quarrel with him, that excuse did as well as another."

"Made up your mind to pick a quarrel with him!" repeated Frank wonderingly. "But I thought that was just what you had made up your mind not to do."

"So did I; but one doesn't always know one's

own mind. Shall I tell you the whole truth? I wanted to see you looking happy and contented before you went away. So now look happy and contented, like a good boy!"

That was not a very difficult request to comply with. He was all the more touched by the concession that she had made for his sake because he could scarcely have demanded it, and because he knew very well that it had been made against her better judgment. He had fancied that Lord Wednesbury was dangerous—if not in reality, at least in intention—and such was his inexperience that he actually believed the removal of one such danger from his wife's path to be an achievement worth accomplishing. Well was it, no doubt, for his peace of mind that he was bound for distant India!

Meanwhile, the most had to be made of last days; and Daisy was resolved that these should not be wasted in vain repinings over the inevitable.

"*Gaudeamus igitur!*" said she—for somebody had once taught her the sad, cynical student-song, which had taken her fancy, according as it did so completely with her own little theories of philosophy. "There's no time like the present, and my pocket may not always be as full of money as it is now; so we'll do ourselves handsomely while we can."

She was as good as her word; she insisted upon paying for the rather uproarious banquets in which she delighted and which were more largely attended

than Frank, perhaps, could have wished ; what with such festivities and what with her professional engagements, not much margin was left for private colloquies with her husband. Yet a few private colloquies were contrived, and she listened, patiently enough, to the words of entreaty and caution which Frank thought it right to address to her. Very grateful was he to her for bearing with him in this respect—very grateful also to Miss Cripps, who bore the character of a vigilant dragon, but who placed no obstacle in the way of interviews which she might easily have prevented. He really felt as if he ought to thank Cripps, and if he could have thought of any method of doing so without betraying himself, he would have taken advantage of it when she suddenly swooped down upon him in the hall of the little Regent's Park house on the eve of his departure. But before he could say a word she had caught him by the arm and had pushed him into a tiny room which, it appeared, was her own special sanctum.

“Now, young man,” she began, “I know what you would like. You would like me to write you a line every now and then, while you're away on foreign service, and tell you about things that your wife may not think it worth while to mention, eh?”

“You know, then?” exclaimed Frank, in amazement.

“Bless the man! Do you suppose you would have been allowed to carry on with Daisy as you've been

doing if I hadn't known? I knew all about it before your wedding day, and, to tell you the truth, I think Daisy might have taken her best friend into her confidence. However, that has nothing to do with you, and I can make her tell me as soon as I choose. About that correspondence question—am I to write to you?”

“Of course I shall be only too thankful if you will,” answered Frank; “it is most kind of you to have thought of it.” He added diffidently (for Miss Cripps's countenance was somewhat stern), “Do you approve of it all?”

“No I don't,” that uncompromising lady replied. “Take it all round, I think it's a bad business; but I didn't find out about it in time to stop it, and maybe I couldn't have stopped it if I had. All I can do now is to take care of her during your absence and to keep your secret, since it is to be a secret. Oh, there are reasons for secrecy—Daisy has a head upon her shoulders, she knows what she is about—I don't say that, under all the circumstances, it would have been a wise plan for you to announce yourselves in the first column of the 'Times.' Only I give you fair warning that if an announcement of another kind has to be made in that column the whole truth must come out.”

“Certainly it must,” Frank agreed; “that is what I have always stipulated for.”

“Glad to hear it; but I should have acted upon

my own responsibility, whatever your stipulations had been. Well, what more is there to be said? I'm going to write to you sometimes, because I think it's better I should, and because I don't mind doing you a good turn; but you won't expect me to say I'm very fond of you. You're a selfish fellow in my opinion."

Frank meekly accepted this censure. It certainly had not occurred to him before that his conduct had been of a selfish character; but when Miss Cripps scornfully inquired of him whether he thought that he or his wife would be the one to suffer most from the long period of separation which lay before them, he had not the audacity to reply as his convictions would have prompted him to do.

"Two years!" she exclaimed. "Well, to me two years means a couple of summers and winters, twenty-four months—neither more nor less. But at your age—why, it's an eternity!"

"Oh, I know that," said Frank, sorrowfully. "I know very well—though I try not to think about it more than I can help—what two years of a life like hers must be, and what almost inevitable temptations she will have to face."

Miss Cripps broke into a harsh laugh. "I suppose young officers don't have any temptations," she remarked; "or, if they do, of course they resist 'em. You live in a glass house, Mr. Coplestone, and so does Daisy. Don't you take it into your head to shy stones at her, and I'll answer for it that she'll shy none at

you. Now be off, and thank your stars that you're leaving a crusty old Cripps in charge of what oughtn't to belong to you."

Cripps was trusty as well as crusty; he could not doubt that; although she had expressed herself after a fashion which was scarcely to his taste. But then, unfortunately, there were so many things, connected with his marriage, which were scarcely to his taste.

CHAPTER X.

AN UNSOLICITED CONFIDENCE.

THE worst that can happen to us poor mortals—and most of us know by sad experience that some very bad things can happen—is apt to prove a good deal less terrible than we anticipate. Frank Coplestone, as he seated himself in a smoking-carriage at the Victoria Station, on his way down to Malling, felt, and was not a little ashamed of himself for feeling, almost cheerful. The farewell scene which he had been dreading for weeks past had taken place; for the next two years, or possibly more, he would have to get on as best he might without a glimpse of his wife's face or an echo of her voice; they had exchanged their last words, their last kisses; and perhaps it was only human and natural that his unuttered ejaculation should be "Thank God, that's over!"

Daisy, it is true, had done everything in her power to render a trying experience as easy for him as it could be made. A few tears she had not been able to help shedding, but they had been speedily followed

by laughter; she had absolutely declined to treat this necessary separation as a tragic event; she had promised faithfully to write every week, and had made many other promises into the bargain—all that he had required of her, in fact; for how could she grudge the poor fellow anything that he asked for at that supreme moment? If sundry mental reservations were unavoidable, what did that matter, since he would never know of their existence or results?

What may in some measure have helped Frank to put a good face upon present sorrow was the recollection that he was not out of the wood yet. He had still to take leave of his father, and Sir Harry, for some reason or other, had made up his mind that this parting was to be a final one. He would not, Frank knew, say much; but he would be very miserable, and the ugliest part of the whole business was that his son, who loved him, could not but see how far better it would be for the poor old man to die before what he would almost certainly regard as a crushing disgrace fell upon him. With such thoughts as these to bear him company, it will be readily believed that our young man did not look forward with any anticipation of pleasure to the two days which he had promised to spend at home.

Sir Harry, however, was very good. Frank found him living all by himself in a corner of his big house, and apparently resolved to accept all his troubles, actual and potential, as bravely as usual. He dis-

played no inconvenient curiosity (though surely he must have felt some) as to what his younger son had been about in London; he did not grumble at the brevity of Frank's present visit, and was pathetically apologetic over the dismantled state of the establishment.

"You see it's no use to keep fires going in a lot of rooms that one never enters," he explained, "and as your Aunt Lucy couldn't come down to see the last of you, I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind just taking me as you find me."

Frank answered that what was good enough for his father was good enough for him, and that additional fires would certainly not have consoled him for the presence of Aunt Lucy. "We don't want any third persons, you and I," he said.

"Oh, well, Lucy would have been glad to wish you God-speed by word of mouth, and so would Gerard, I'm sure; but they're full of engagements, both of them, it seems. We might shoot the long wood to-morrow morning, if you like; I've been keeping it for you. In the afternoon I shall have to leave you for a few hours, I'm afraid, because there is a political meeting at Canterbury which I'm told I ought to attend; but I daresay you may wish to say good-bye to some of the neighbours. You can have the dog-cart after it has taken me to the station."

Frank more than suspected that that political engagement was only pleaded because Sir Harry was

afraid of being a bore, and he had half a mind to suggest that an excellent excuse for shirking it existed; but he bethought him that common gratitude rendered a visit of farewell to Mrs. Trafford imperative, so he acquiesced in the proposed arrangement.

His father and he had fairly good sport on the following morning—not, perhaps, what Gerard would have called good sport; yet better than might have been expected, considering the impossibility of keeping things up to the level of years gone by. As, moreover, they both shot well—why do we all distinguish ourselves most when we are least eager to do so, and when our hearts are not really in our work?—they were able to part at the luncheon hour with mutual satisfaction and congratulation.

Frank mentioned that he thought of calling at Trant Abbey; to which Sir Harry replied:

“Do, my dear fellow; I’m sure you’ll be welcome. I don’t see much of our fair neighbour; she lives a very retired life, they tell me. Well, that’s quite as it should be. By this time next year, perhaps, we may make some attempt to draw her out of her seclusion, eh? If you should find an opportunity, you might just introduce Gerard’s name and notice whether she appears to be interested in the subject, you know.”

But as matters fell out, Frank clean forgot the diplomatic commission with which he was thus incidentally charged. There was so many other things to be talked about when he reached Mrs. Trafford’s

enviable abode and was shown into her charmingly decorated boudoir that he not unnaturally lost sight of other people's castles in the air while the interview lasted. Her first words, indeed, were of a nature to render the advisability of attending to his own business, rather than that of others, conspicuous.

"I was hoping that you would look in upon me this afternoon," she said, "and that you would bring a good report of yourself. As far as health goes, your face speaks for itself. You haven't wanted any nursing, I see; and I am glad of that, because it occurred to me after you left that an undesirable nurse might possibly be summoned to your bedside. But you have no bad news to give me, have you?"

"None at all; I don't know why you should have expected any," answered Frank, seating himself beside the blazing wood fire in the chair towards which he was motioned, and looking his questioner full in the face, with a half-amused, half-provoked conviction that his air of innocent candour did not take her in for a moment.

"You know so well," she returned, composedly, "that if you had committed any act of irreparable folly, you wouldn't have been able to help avowing it. You would have wanted me to break the intelligence to your father, for one thing. I wonder whether she turned her back upon you, or whether the inherent selfishness of man preserved you from giving her the chance! Don't say that she is a mere figment of

my disordered imagination ; you admitted her existence almost in so many words when you used to talk to me about unequal marriages, and when you tried so hard to make me agree with you that a wife necessarily takes her husband's social position. However, you shall not be teased. So long as there has been no marriage and no engagement, I am content."

"Upon my word and honour," said Frank, "I have neither married anybody nor engaged myself to marry anybody since I saw you last. Will that do?"

"That will do perfectly," answered Mrs. Trafford, "and now I don't mind apologising for my impertinence. My only excuse is that I couldn't have talked to you comfortably while I was in a state of subdued alarm, and I always think that when one is determined to get the truth out of one's friends, the best plan is to ask them for it."

"Oh, yes, I daresay it is," agreed Frank, painfully conscious of having told the truth after an altogether untruthful fashion ; "only perhaps it's hardly fair to ask one's friends questions which they can't possibly answer."

"Fair or unfair," returned Mrs. Trafford, laughing, "the plan generally succeeds, and I have got a categorical answer out of you, you see. What amends can I make? Would you like to cross-question me, in your turn? Any question that you choose to put shall meet with an honest and straightforward reply, I promise you."

“That’s a promise which you can make without much risk,” observed Frank, smiling. “As if anything that you can possibly wish to conceal could have happened to you during my absence!”

“I didn’t mean to limit your right of inquiry to any particular time or place; but of course it’s quite conceivable that you may not be as anxious to hear my rather ugly and commonplace little history now as you used to be in the summer.”

“How do you know that I was anxious to hear your history then?” Frank asked.

“Your wishes and thoughts are never very obscure. You were continually saying to yourself, ‘I rather like this woman; she seems to me to be a good sort of woman in some ways. Yet there is no getting over the fact that she married a rich man who was old enough to be her grandfather, and that she only married him when he had one foot in the grave. She must have some defence to offer for herself.’ In reality, I had no defence to offer, and perhaps that was why I held my tongue. But I always feel that unless my friends know exactly what I am, I am claiming their friendship upon false pretences; so I would rather tell you what there is to be told about me before you go. It won’t take long. I was left dreadfully poor when my father died—much poorer than I had ever supposed that I should be; so that it was necessary for me to earn my living somehow or other, and I did manage to earn just enough to keep

life in me by selling my water-colours, for which I think I got about as much as they were worth, and by writing short stories for cheap magazines, which might perhaps have commanded a higher price. At least, I can't help flattering myself to that extent when I read the contributions of eminent authors to other magazines and hear what their rate of remuneration is. Of course it was a continual and most humiliating struggle, and I had never been accustomed to that sort of thing, and I hated it! All the time old Mr. Trafford, who was as kind to me as I could allow him to be, was imploring me to marry him; but I resisted as long as it seemed worth while to resist. Yes, I know what you suspect, and you are quite right: there was somebody else. I won't mention his name; but as you are not at all likely ever to meet him, I may say that he was a man who was fast making a name for himself in literature, and who is now, I believe, in a fair way to become a prominent politician. Although he could not afford to marry then, I thought his prospects justified us in waiting for one another; but that was not his opinion, and one day he came to tell me that he felt it his duty to release me. I certainly did not feel it my duty to marry Mr. Trafford; but I was tired of misery and anxiety and degradation. It is not true that I knew he was dying when I married him. I knew, of course, that he was in bad health; but I thought he had many years of life still before him, and so did he. I don't say this to excuse

myself—quite the reverse. With my eyes open I became the wife of a man whom I neither loved nor particularly liked, and the only boast I am entitled to make is that I never attempted to deceive him as to my motives.”

After waiting some moments in vain for Mrs. Trafford to continue, Frank could think of no more apposite comment to make upon her narrative than—

“ Well—that’s all over now.”

“ In one sense, it is over—and so is my life. In another sense, both my history and I live on. For the reason that I told you of just now, I wanted you to hear my history. Besides, it may help you to understand why I find other people’s lives, past, present and future, so much more attractive to study than my own.”

“ It is nonsense to talk of your life being over,” Frank declared.

“ No; it is sense and truth. Youth and—well, happiness, I suppose, may be prolonged up to almost any age; but they never can be renewed after they have once been knocked on the head, and I deliberately knocked mine on the head. I am glad to think that you are not yet in a like case, and I want you to say, if you can say so with honesty, that you do not utterly despise me.”

Of course he hastened to give her the assurance that she asked for, and he made so bold as to add that, in his opinion, she was well rid of the fair-

weather lover who had abandoned her in the time of her need; but he was a little puzzled, and although he remained with her for another quarter of an hour, he could not feel altogether at his ease, being conscious that her unsolicited confidence had not been rewarded by any corresponding proof of friendship on his part. It must be admitted, too, that during the summer he had accounted to himself for her marriage by imputing to her somewhat nobler incentives than those to which she had just pleaded guilty. It would be most unjust, he thought, to blame any woman for acting as she had done; still she had to be gently removed from the imaginary pedestal upon which he had placed her.

“And how did you find Mrs. Trafford?” Sir Harry asked him, on his return home. “Pretty cheerful?—beginning to contemplate the possibility of fresh departures?”

“Well, no,” answered Frank; “I don’t think she is contemplating fresh departures. She said her life was over.”

Sir Harry laughed. “Young people are fond of saying that,” he remarked; “old people don’t say it quite so often, because in their case the statement isn’t open to contradiction. I should like to see Gerard married to that dear woman before I die, and I should like to see you once more, my boy, if there were any chance of your returning to the old country in time. But there isn’t; so we won’t talk about it.”

CHAPTER XI.

OTHELLO REDUX.

It was on a grey, gusty morning of early winter that Frank Coplestone, standing upon the deck of an outward-bound troopship, gazed back at the blurred and rapidly receding coastline of his native land ; it was on an equally grey and gusty morning of early spring that, more than two years later, he was able to distinguish from a similar standpoint cliffs and headlands which had not changed during his absence. But if the scene was, at least apparently, unaltered, as much could not be said for the spectator. In the planet which for a brief space we inhabit everything moves—in an upward or downward, forward or backward direction—even the solid earth beneath our feet has its slow, unceasing process of growth and decay ; the times change, and we change with them.

No reflection could be more stale or more trite ; yet, like many other admitted facts (such as, for instance, the rotundity of the globe, which, as a learned and pious man remarked long ago, is an absurd theory upon the face of it, since, if the world were really

round, somebody must be walking somewhere with his head downwards), the inexorable law of change strikes us occasionally in the light of a sudden and most painful discovery. Leaning over the taffrail, with his hands clasped, while the big trooper rolled heavily before a south-westerly wind, Frank tried to recall the sensations of twenty-seven months (only a beggarly twenty-seven months!) before, and found that the task was beyond him. He was not his former self, and could not so much as clearly understand his former self, and he had to realise, as we all must sometimes, that free-will is an illusion, that the control which we exercise over events is but partial, that some force—blind or benevolent, good or evil—shapes the course of our destinies, and makes us what we are. Very often it makes us what we have not the slightest wish to be; and such was the case of this moody and vaguely contrite cogitator.

Yet in strict justice it could hardly be said that he had any cause for self-reproach because the sight of old England, which gladdened the hearts of his brother warriors, moved him to feelings of apprehension rather than exultation. If he dreaded meeting his wife once more, if he would fain have exchanged into another regiment and gone through another prolonged period of exile to avoid meeting her, if he had now reached the point of acknowledging to himself that he regretted a hasty and foolish marriage, the fault was surely not his! He would have remained

true to Daisy—at least, he was almost sure that he would—if she had remained true to him. He thought over the story of their gradual estrangement, of the weeks and weeks which had elapsed without bringing any answer to his long letters, of his remonstrances, his sorrow, his anger, his final resignation and indifference, and it did seem to him that no impartial person could hold him to blame for what had happened. Not that anything definite or decisive had happened; his wife and he had ceased to correspond, that was all. The last letter, dated nearly a year earlier, had, it was true, come from Daisy; but it had been so long delayed and was so insulting in its cool brevity that he had not cared to write again at once. Thus he had allowed mail after mail to go out, waiting at first for her to take some step towards reconciliation, and making up his mind—not so very reluctantly—at last to the obvious fact that no reconciliation was desired by her. They had not quarrelled; they had simply dropped one another—an easy, yet virtually impossible, thing for married people to do.

Matters would, doubtless, never have been suffered to drift into so deplorable a condition if Miss Cripps had been spared to watch over the fate of a couple whose constancy she scarcely trusted; but influenza and pneumonia had claimed amongst the first of their many victims a most excellent and useful woman—irreplaceable, it was to be feared; assuredly unreplaced. “A horrible misfortune has happened to

me," Daisy wrote at the time, in a missive all smudged and smeared with tears. "My dear, good Cripps is dead! She used to say that I should go to the devil without her, and I feel as if I should! Wherever I go now it must be without her, and never will I have any one else to live with me and use her rooms. I have lost my only friend!"

Had the prediction of the threat conveyed in these despairing words been fulfilled? It was impossible to say—not impossible, alas! to surmise. The coolness, the gradual cessation of correspondence above alluded to had not set in immediately after poor Miss Cripps's death. There had been vehement entreaties on Frank's part that his wife would come out and join him in India; there had been sharp and impatient postal injunctions to him not to talk like a born fool; then had come the period of unanswered appeals and disregarded reproaches. Could any husband, situated as Frank was, and absolutely precluded from returning to England, have done more than he had done? Some people, no doubt, would reply to the question in one way, some in another; the subject of it had as yet succeeded in making no reply that entirely satisfied him.

On the other hand, Fate was not so cruel to him but that he had a few grounds for genuine satisfaction as he was borne nearer and nearer to Portsmouth, where his regiment was to disembark. To begin with, his father—all gloomy forecasts to the contrary not-

withstanding—was still alive and well. Then, too, there was the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Trafford to look forward to—Mrs. Trafford, who had not yet married Gerard, but was still expected to do so, Sir Harry having expressed himself very hopefully upon that subject in his latest communications.

Two years is a long or a short time, according to circumstances. It is perhaps rather a long time to wear mourning for a husband whose demise has not been regretted; yet the demands of conventionality cannot be satisfied with any less interval between widowhood and re-marriage. Such, at least, had been, it appeared, the plea for delay put forward by Gerard and allowed, not without hesitation and regret, by his father. But although the hope of the family had shown himself so dilatory and so over-scrupulous, he had fully recognised what his duty was, and had declared that he was prepared to do it at his own time.

“Meanwhile,” wrote Sir Harry, “everything seems to promise well. They are great friends; as far as I know, Gerard has no rival, and I hope that soon after you come home the engagement may be announced. It is pretty generally anticipated, I hear.”

It might be so; but Frank, for his part, could not help feeling some doubt as to whether it was anticipated by Mrs. Trafford herself. Of Mrs. Trafford’s anticipations, wishes and other sentiments he was entitled to believe that he knew something, having

heard from her at tolerably regular intervals during his absence.

This correspondence, initiated by him in a moment of deep depression and craving for friendly sympathy, he had found a source of great consolation. Of course, he had not told the lady who might some day perhaps become his sister-in-law why he was in such low spirits, or why he longed for a rather larger supply of letters than the mails usually brought him; but she had gladly responded to his humble entreaty, and as hers was the pen of a ready writer, she had earned the gratitude of a dejected man on many weary, sultry days of enforced idleness. Frank was probably a good deal better acquainted with her and her mode of life than his father was. She had sent him a full description of her house in Curzon Street, and had brought before him in a few clear, vivid touches the more or less interesting people whom she was wont to assemble round her there—people of whom the majority had distinguished themselves in one way or another, and whose characters and histories their shrewd hostess seemed to find her chief pleasure in unravelling. From certain incidental allusions, Frank gathered that no inconsiderable share of her time and money was devoted to the support and management of charitable institutions; but she did not dwell upon such topics, nor had she much to say about her periodical sojourns at Trant Abbey. Evidently her heart was in London, and almost as

evidently, her heart was in the possession of no one particular individual. Every now and then she mentioned Gerard, praising his good looks, for which she professed the greatest admiration, and his manners, which she called "the absolute perfection of that class of manners;" but she certainly never gave it to be understood that she contemplated what she was supposed to be contemplating. To Frank the charm of her letters (apart from their being amusing, descriptive, and often witty), had consisted in their simplicity, their candour, and a certain unspoken sympathy and comprehension which it was impossible to define.

Therefore it was that he felt happily sure of having at least one real friend in the world; therefore, also, it was that he had inwardly determined to betake himself to London as soon as leave should be granted him, instead of proceeding straight to Malting. His duty to his wife—or possibly to himself—would, in any case, have rendered that course indispensable; but he preferred to think that he was adopting it on less painful grounds.

As his father and brother came down to Portsmouth to welcome him, and as some three or four weeks elapsed before he could be released from regimental duty, he was enabled to carry out his intention without seeming too neglectful of filial obligations. Sir Harry and Gerard remained with him for a few days—pleasant days, during which there was no lack

of questions to be asked and answered. Then the latter departed for Shorncliffe, where he was then, to his sorrow and disgust, quartered; while the former, remarking that he was too old to put up with the miseries of hotel life, returned home.

“We shall all meet again soon, please God!” were Sir Harry’s last words, as he stepped into the railway carriage. “Gerard is a near neighbour now you know, which is fortunate in every way. Mind you look up our friend Mrs. Trafford in Curzon Street, and tell her from me that if she don’t come down to the Abbey at Easter, I shall have a crow to pluck with her. But I shouldn’t wonder if that was arranged already. I know Gerard went to see her the other day.”

Long before he left Portsmouth the daily papers had furnished Frank with information upon a subject as to which he felt some not unnatural curiosity.

“The revival of ‘Othello Junior’ at the St. Stephen’s Theatre,” he learnt from one competent critic, “has been attended by a success which it would be absurd to attribute to the intrinsic merits of the piece. A vulgar and rather tedious extravaganza which, if we remember rightly, ran for some two hundred nights a year or two ago, would hardly have born such speedy resuscitation, even with the aid of the ‘up-to-date’ songs and allusions which have, of course, been inserted into it, had one name

—*clarum et venerabile!*—been omitted from the cast. But the truth seems to be that any piece, good, bad or indifferent, in which Miss Daisy Villiers can be persuaded to appear, is sure of attracting crowded and delighted audiences for an indefinite length of time.”

Then followed a panegyric upon Daisy such as Frank would once have rejoiced to see in print. In her own special line she was, it seemed, an incomparable artist. No one like her had been seen upon the London boards within living memory, nor was there any apparent prospect of her being ousted from the proud position which she had won. The critic thought it a pity that her exquisite gracefulness should be marred by occasional vulgarities of movement and gesture, but admitted (with a visible shrug of the shoulders) that we live in a vulgar age and that Miss Villiers had probably taken the measure of her public. “Large audiences, it may be assumed, get what they wish and deserve to get. The Athenians of 400 B. C. had the plays of Aristophanes; the cultured Londoners of the expiring nineteenth century A. D. have—the *Dancer in Yellow.*”

Huge coloured posters, displayed at every station where the express which carried Frank towards the metropolis stopped, seemed to show that cultured London was at least not ashamed of its saltatory queen. The husband of that celebrated personage,

gazing moodily at representations which did not strike him as being life-like, was perhaps a little more inclined than he ought to have been to be ashamed of his wife. Yet he very well remembered telling her, one day long ago, that her family had no reason to be ashamed of her, and he had spoken with a good deal of honest indignation at the time. Alas! we all change our opinions as we grow older; there is no help for it, nor can any man or woman step back into the past. Shame on that score is permissible—possibly even becoming—but it is altogether useless. Moreover, if Frank did not relish his position as the husband of the renowned Dancer in Yellow, he could tell himself that he never had relished or pretended to relish it, while he had always been willing to acknowledge her. As matters now stood, it would be necessary for him to make certain inquiries in order to ascertain whether Daisy either desired to be or could be, introduced to his friends as Mrs. Frank Coplestone. The prospect was not an agreeable one, and as the smoky curtain of London spread itself over him, he heartily wished himself back beneath those burning blue skies of India which he had so often execrated.

Now, it is needless to say that Frank had no intention of spending his first evening in London at the St. Stephen's theatre. To re-visit that once familiar scene, and to listen, under the changed and sorrowful circumstances, to that too well-known

dialogue would, he felt, be like voluntarily subjecting himself to some hideous nightmare. He had not as yet decided how, when, and where it would be best for him to see Daisy again, but at any rate it should not be in a place swarming with painful memories and associations for him. Nevertheless, readers will scarcely be surprised to hear that he did what he had made up his mind not to do. He had to go somewhere; he did not care to go to his club, not wishing to be recognised and hailed by lively friends; he was in no mood to seek mere amusement—in short, many plausible excuses might have been made for his somewhat hurried and shame-faced entry into the stalls a few minutes before the curtain rose upon the first scene of “Othello Junior.” It was only by a lucky chance, he was assured, that a stall could be offered to him; for seats were being booked weeks in advance.

He had no sooner pushed his way past a stout lady, who glared indignantly at him, than he began to repent of having yielded to a foolish impulse. How terribly the same it all was!—the heat, the noisy orchestra, the diamonds, the white waistcoats, the smiling, vacuous faces! The reality and the unreality of it seemed alike to be urging upon him with pitiless irony what a very small factor he was in the intoxicating life of the woman whom he had married. He had been afraid that she might catch sight of him; but surely there was no need for

alarm on that score. Supposing she did catch sight of him, would her equanimity be upset for a moment by the presence of so insignificant an acquaintance? Presently he overheard his fat neighbour talking about her to the swarthy, Semitic-looking gentleman by whom she was accompanied.

“Oh, I wouldn’t be bothered to come here for the sake of the play; I only come to look at the great Daisy—and her pearls. Have you seen her pearls? Do you believe they are real?”

A reply, of which Frank only caught the first words, was made in a thick, Hebraic voice.

“Bless your soul, yes! She wouldn’t accept Palais Royal jewellery—no fear!”

Then came whispers and chuckles, and the fat lady’s fan went up. “You don’t say so! Well, I heard it for a fact; but one can’t believe all one hears. What is the world coming to!”

The world, so far as a dispassionate observer can judge, is pretty much where it always has been, and varies surprisingly little either for better or for worse. The most improbable occurrences—such as murders, for example—take place almost every day upon its surface, and are mostly brought about by quite insufficient causes. However, the curtain rose in time to preserve Frank from laying violent hands upon a total stranger, who was innocent of any intention to offend him.

CHAPTER XII.

MAN AND WIFE.

How well Frank knew every note of the rather feeble and trivial music which greeted his ears, as the play opened with a chorus, presumably intended to provoke mirth! He had never seen anything particularly funny in "Othello Junior," and the humours of the piece were not very likely to appeal to him now; yet those familiar strains and the jocular dialogue that followed affected him after a fashion which he had scarcely anticipated, reminding him that he still had a heart and that it was still quite capable of aching. "*Vare, Vare, redde legiones!*" the grief-stricken Roman Emperor is said to have exclaimed to a man who, being happily dead, could return no answer to so unreasonable a request. "Absurd, grimacing mountebanks and preposterous nymphs, give me back my youth!" poor Frank was tempted to cry; but he kept the ejaculation to himself, and waited patiently for the tempest of applause which he knew would break out in the course of a few minutes.

When it did break out, and when Daisy tripped up to the footlights in her old nonchalant way, distributing familiar little nods to her patrons, just as of yore, he perceived that, for her at all events, youth had not dropped into the past tense. She looked like a mere child, and behaved like one, too, for the matter of that. As in days gone by, her dancing struck the beholder as perfectly easy and spontaneous; she seemed to be doing these really wonderful and excessively difficult things simply because she liked to do them, because they gave her no trouble and because Nature was her instructress. Her costume, of course, was of the accustomed hue, and to Frank's unlearned eye it appeared to be identical with that which she had worn on the distant and forgotten occasion when "Othello Junior" had first been introduced to an appreciative public, though it had really, no doubt, been modified in many important respects to accord with the prevailing fashion. No sparkle of diamonds was visible in her hair now. (Even in old times he had often longed to ask her where those diamonds came from). But round her neck were five rows of pearls so large and so even in size that an Empress might have coveted them.

"They are real!" exclaimed Frank's neighbour, who had brought a huge pair of opera-glasses to bear upon these jewels; "there can't be a doubt of it. I can see the knots between them."

“Oh, that don't prove anything,” her neighbour rejoined, with an oily, snuffing laugh. “Everybody knows that little dodge. The proof of their being genuine is that Miss Daisy would see her friends jolly well ruined before she'd allow 'em to offer her anything that hadn't cost a good many thousands.”

It was to this sort of thing that Daisy's lawful husband was compelled to listen for the best part of two hours. The experience was not precisely a novel one; often before his blood had been made to boil by assertions which had reached his ears, which he had much ado to restrain himself from openly resenting, and which he had known to be false. Was it because he no longer possessed that absolute certitude that he experienced no return of his first insane longing to clutch a middle-aged Israelite by the throat? That may have had something to do with it; but a far more powerful sedative was applied to his nerves and temper by Daisy's own demeanour. She was so exactly as she had always been! That her words and gestures should jar upon him every now and then was inevitable—they had never failed to do so—but underlying an *abandon* so easily misinterpreted was a suggestion of innocence, mirth, high spirits, which appealed to him only a little less forcibly than it had done in his unfledged period, and made him ask himself whether, after all, she might not have some explanation to offer him. Not, of course, an explanation which would explain everything; yet one which, by a

stretch of patience and charity, might bring an amicable agreement as to future relations within his reach and hers.

It was, at all events, in no irreconcilable frame of mind that he went behind the scenes after the curtain had fallen and the mainstay of the piece had received her nightly ovation. He knew his way well enough, and could have found Daisy's dressing-room, had he been so inclined; but he thought it better not to do that. He contented himself with getting somebody to take her his card, upon which, after an instant of hesitation, he decided to inscribe nothing. The sight of his name would doubtless be sufficiently startling; for he was sure that she had not detected him during the performance.

In a few minutes his messenger returned, and handed him a note, folded in the form of a cocked hat, which he opened with fingers that trembled a little.

"So glad you are back!" were the hastily-scrawled words which met his eye. "Can't possibly see you to-night—I shan't be alone for a moment. Look me up to-morrow afternoon about five o'clock, if you have nothing better to do. The old address. Yours, D. V. (Sounds pious, don't it!)"

Frank had to make what he could of that missive until the hour appointed by Mrs. Coplestone for his reception, and not very much could he make of it. She was not offended, apparently she was not alarmed,

she stated that she was glad. Did she mean him to understand that he was nothing to her—or had her only object been to gain time and to escape the risk of an awkward scene in the presence of witnesses? One thing only seemed quite clear; such a message could not have expressed her actual feelings.

And yet it did! With amazement and bewilderment, he was forced to acknowledge that it did before he was a day older. Sitting in the well-remembered, gaudy little drawing-room, with Daisy opposite to him—Daisy, who certainly did look two years older by daylight, and the bloom upon whose cheeks was unhappily no longer independent of artistic aid—he could not but give her credit for sincerity. He had been warmly welcomed—embraced even; a volley of questions and comments upon his personal appearance had been fired off at him before he had had time to open his lips; he had just been bidden to give a full, true and particular account of himself, although Daisy's loquacity showed no signs of granting him an opportunity to comply with her wish.

"I can't understand you!" he gasped at length. "Is it possible that you have forgotten?"

"Of course I haven't," she returned, laughing. "I never forget people; my memory is an exceptionally good one."

"I didn't mean to ask whether you had forgotten my existence; but do you remember—other things? Dartmouth and Plymouth and Fowey, for instance?"

"Oh, yes—indistinctly. Weren't those the places that you took me to in a yacht ever so long ago?"

"Your memory is indeed remarkable. I wonder whether it extends to a certain ceremony which took place before we set out on that cruise."

Daisy shrugged her shoulders and made a grimace.

"Do you know, dear boy," she answered, "it strikes me that we shouldn't go through that ceremony again nowadays, you and I."

"You speak for yourself, no doubt," he returned, rather bitterly.

Daisy, with perfect good humour, confessed that she did. "I was crazily in love with you when I married you; but time does make a difference, and the people who pretend it don't know very well that they aren't speaking the truth. Come now, Frank!—time has made a little bit of difference to you too, hasn't it?"

"I don't know exactly what you mean by time," he answered. "The experiences that I have been through during the last two years, thanks to you, have naturally made some difference."

"Well, if it comes to that, I have to thank you for some rather disagreeable experiences. When one gets scolding and lecturing letters by every mail, one begins to think that that sort of thing is hardly good enough. All the same, it was you, not I, who stopped writing."

"I gave up writing to you because you made it so

obvious to me that my letters were not welcome. As for what you call scolding and lecturing, all I ever did was to point out to you that you were not treating me very fairly or very kindly. But mutual recriminations won't help us much, I suppose."

"Not a bit," agreed Daisy, cheerfully; "let's drop them."

He gazed at her in despair. That she no longer loved him was plain, and he assured himself that he was not quite such a fool as to be still in love with this heartless and probably unprincipled woman, who was, nevertheless, his wife. What was to be said next? After a rather long pause, he resumed:

"Admitting that we made a mistake when we married, Daisy, the fact remains that we are man and wife, and it seems to me that the time has come when that fact ought to be made public."

"All right; publish it, then. Believe me or not, as you like, it was always for your sake more than for my own that I wanted it kept dark. I knew my father and mother would give you no end of trouble; but they're both dead now—died within a week of one another, poor old souls!—and Cripps is dead, too; so I don't particularly care. As for me, I have never been a burden upon you, and am never likely to be. For choice, I would rather go on as a nominal spinster; but publication of our marriage won't hurt me half as much as it will hurt you."

That was painfully true; and in spite of the in-

jured attitude which he was striving to maintain, Frank could not help being touched by what she implied, rather than by what she said.

“Is it quite impossible for us to make a fresh start, Daisy?” he asked, hesitatingly, at length.

“What?—in double harness? Oh, yes, that’s about as good an impossibility as there is. I like you very much as an old friend; but I couldn’t live in the house with you, and what’s more, you couldn’t live in the house with me. If you ask me, I should say the best thing we can do is to draw a veil over the past, and go on in our respective walks of life as if nothing had happened.”

“I cannot consent to such an arrangement as that,” Frank declared, speaking all the more firmly because he was conscious of an unworthy wish to consent to it. “You need not be afraid of my forcing you to live with me against your will; but I am your husband, and I have a right, at least, to demand of you that you shall not bring discredit upon me.”

Daisy’s face changed; her brows drew together and her lips became more closely set. “What do you mean by that, please?” she asked.

It was neither very easy nor very pleasant to state in so many words what he meant; but it was incumbent upon him to try. He murmured something about calumnious reports, repeated a part of the conversation which he had chanced to overhear

on the previous evening, and ended by inquiring point blank whether those magnificent pearls had been purchased out of her professional savings. The result was prompt and somewhat startling.

“ Oh, that’s your game, is it ? ” cried Daisy, her cheeks aflame beneath her pearl-powder. “ You have an eye on Mr. Justice Butt, have you ? Well, I’m not going to tell you where I got my necklace or who paid for it. More than that, I’m not going to be insulted in my own house by you or anybody else ; so perhaps you’ll be good enough to go now.”

He rose, without a word, and made for the door : he could do no less. But ere he reached the threshold the sound of a choking sob behind him made him look back, and he saw that Daisy, with her hands pressed to her eyes, was crying like a baby.

It was a queer sort of reconciliation that followed. There were tears, there were embraces, there were entreaties for pardon on his side and assurances on hers that she had never done anything to merit his cruel insinuations ; yet it was only as friends that they parted, and she began to laugh again the moment that he hinted at a possible renewal of former and closer relations.

“ Talk about women being humbugs ! ” she exclaimed, pushing him away ; “ why we can’t hold a candle to men ! Don’t be ridiculous, dear old boy, and don’t ever put me into another rage like this. Now be off ! I’ve got to dance at a couple of music-

halls to-night, besides the theatre, and I haven't another moment to spare."

Frank walked away not much happier, and certainly not much wiser than he had come. The situation remained unchanged. What ought he to do? What ought he to believe? Surely not that some respectable old lady had given those pearls to his wife as a Christmas present, or that she had bought them for herself.

CHAPTER XIII.

CURZON-ST.

FRANK'S first waking thought on the following morning was, "Things can't go on like this;" but by the time that he had shaved himself and had had his bath, he had more than once wondered whether, after all, things might not be allowed to drift—at any rate for a little longer. He had told Daisy, somewhat peremptorily, that, in his opinion, the time had come for him to acknowledge his wife, and he acknowledged by her; her reply, rather to his surprise, had taken the form of a release from the promise of secrecy which she had formerly exacted of him, and he was, therefore, free to please himself in the matter. But if the question was to be one of personal pleasure and convenience, not of duty, why should he not hold his tongue? Other men have been secretly married, and have remained silent to the day of their death. He knew of several such cases. Moreover, since his wife declined to live with him, or to be in any way subject to his authority, since she neither claimed the position which, of course, she

would have had a right to claim nor coveted it, it was not very easy to see what he would gain by breaking his father's heart and making a general laughing-stock of himself. Yet there seemed to be something rather cowardly, rather unworthy of a gentleman, in taking her at her word. No doubt, if she had had a child, that would have made all the difference, and his duty would have been clear; but even as it was, he felt that he was her natural protector, and that he ought to give her the protection of his name, whether she wished for it or not. Perhaps there could have been no more decisive proof of his having ceased to love her than that, instead of being angry with her, his heart had become softened towards this poor, gaily painted, universally admired butterfly, who had lost her parents and her only faithful friend, whose day of sunshine must needs be brief, and to whom the spectre of long, solitary years could not always be invisible. As to her solitude, present and prospective, he would not allow himself to doubt about it. Somebody had given her a pearl necklace—well, somebody had given her diamonds in years gone by, he supposed. She was imprudent; she had never been anything else; but he wanted to believe, and almost did believe, that she had never been anything worse. Her indignation at a hint of which he was already half-ashamed had, at all events, been genuine enough.

Thus Frank wavered and hesitated, and, as a

necessary result of such wavering, concluded to take no immediate step. He would see Daisy again in a day or two; perhaps she would write and ask him to repeat his visit. Meanwhile, he thought it would be both polite and agreeable to call on Mrs. Trafford, at whose door in Curzon Street he accordingly rang rather late that afternoon. Mrs. Trafford was at home, he was told, and he was at once ushered into a very modern and very artistic drawing-room of irregular shape, where several other visitors were already assembled round a tea-table. The tall, slender lady, dressed in pale grey, who rose and, separating herself from them, came forward to meet him with a bright smile of welcome, was not quite the Mrs. Trafford of two years ago, although it would have been difficult to say at a glance in what the change consisted. It was perhaps rather a development than a change.

“I was wondering whether you would come,” she said, while she held his hand. “Of course, I heard of your arrival at Portsmouth, and your brother told me that you would probably be in London about this time. Why didn’t you write to me?”

Frank made a rather incoherent reply. As a matter of fact, he had not written because he had felt so uncertain as to what might await him in London, and as to whether it would be possible for him to call upon his friends or not. He was, besides, a little shy and abashed, scarcely yet recognising his familiar correspondent in this fine lady, with her luxurious sur-

roundings and her slightly supercilious-looking companions. She saw his eyes wandering towards the group, and said in a low voice: "Please sit these people out; I want to have a good long talk with you."

Then she introduced him to an old lady, whose name he did not catch, and to two men, the mention of whose names answered the purpose of a biographical sketch, so well known to fame were they. One was an alert, white-haired General, still youthful in figure and bearing, notwithstanding his snowy locks; the other was a statesman of something under middle age, at that time out of office, but certain of holding a very high place in the next administration. They were not at all supercilious, and probably had not really looked so; they at once included the new-comer in the conversation which his entrance had interrupted, and their talk was of a crisp, sparkling character, pleasant enough to listen to. But what was not quite so pleasant was an abrupt change of subject brought about by the old lady who was eating muffins, and who said:

"Didn't I see you at the theatre last night, Mr. Coplestone? If it wasn't you, it was somebody just like you; but all young men are as alike as a box of pins nowadays. I went," she continued, explanatorily, for the benefit of the rest of the company, "to see that woman whom they call the Dancer in Yellow, and I must confess that I was delighted. She is a

vulgar little wretch; but she has a way with her which is downright irresistible."

"A good many people have found it so, by all accounts," remarked the General, drily. "I am not sure that many of them belong to your sex, though."

"My husband celebrated his seventy-fourth birthday last week," returned the old lady, with a laugh. "I can bestow my admiration where I please now without painful misgivings. I daresay I shouldn't have taken him to see Miss Daisy Villiers half a century ago."

Something was said about advanced years being no such certain safeguard; some veiled allusions, unintelligible to Frank, were made, and then the politician observed:

"Lady Wednesbury puts the St. Stephen's theatre on her black list, I am told."

It was evident that these people entertained no very respectful opinion of poor Daisy's character. But it was reserved for Mrs. Trafford to render Frank's humiliation complete.

"No, I haven't seen her," she said, in answer to her military friend's question; "I hate exhibitions of that kind. It makes you angry—doesn't it?—to meet men who wear their hair long and have white hands, and pride themselves upon being effeminate? You feel that such creatures bring disgrace upon your whole sex, and you would like to knock them on the

head, once for all. Well, that is just the feeling that I have about shameless women. They must exist, I suppose, since you find them so fascinating, but I don't care to look at their capers."

This was a most sweeping and unjust sentence to pronounce upon an entire class, and so Mrs. Trafford was at once assured; but Frank did not join in the general chorus of protest. What would have been the use? He himself was of opinion that some of Daisy's capers were shameless; he himself had prejudices which he had vainly striven to conquer; if he had had some half-defined idea of taking Mrs. Trafford into his confidence, he saw now that such a proceeding was out of the question. He could imagine the shudder of disgust with which she would learn that he was actually the husband of the *danseuse* whose very existence was an offence to her.

Consequently, he was a little less inclined to be expansive than she was, after her visitors had taken their departure, and it took him some time to recover from the blow which she had unconsciously inflicted upon his self-esteem. By degrees, however, he began to enjoy hearing her talk, just as he had enjoyed reading her letters during his years of exile. She had the voice of a well-bred woman, which is in itself a very soothing and pleasant thing; there was a sense of repose and refinement about her and all around her most welcome to one whose recent experiences had been of an altogether different order; moreover, the

description which she gave of herself and her mode of life was interesting to listen to. Although she declared that she was not in the least smart or fashionable, she seemed to know everybody who was worth knowing, and to have immensely enlarged her mental and social horizon since the days when she had been a slightly bewildered young widow. She was evidently at no loss for occupations, and Frank gathered that her little dinners (one of which she made him promise to attend) had earned for her a certain measure of celebrity.

“And you are happy?” he took the liberty of inquiring, after a time.

“Oh, yes,” she answered; “as happy as one expects to be, and a good deal happier than one deserves to be. I really think I am of some little use in London—anyhow, I manage to persuade myself that I am. At Trant Abbey I must confess that I still feel rather like a fish out of water. Managing an estate is hardly a woman’s work.”

“Most likely there are many men who would be only too happy to assist you in managing it,” Frank observed.

“Quite a large number,” she agreed, laughing; “but up to the present time I have been able to resist their seductive offers, you see. By the way, shall I find you in Kent when I go down at Easter?”

“I believe so,” Frank replied; “but I thought there was some doubt as to whether I should find

you in your Abbey. My father charged me with a message to the effect that you and he would quarrel if you shirked your duty to the county at that season."

"I never shirk my duties to the county, such as they are; but this time it is my duty to the Guards and I forget what cavalry regiment, which is stationed at Canterbury, that will take me home. At least, your brother tells me it is my duty to be present at a point-to-point race between these horse-soldiers and his battalion. I don't think I told you in any of my letters that I have been seeing a great deal of your brother lately, and the more I see of him the better I like him. He is a thoroughly manly and rather simple fellow when once one gets beneath that somewhat hard, polished surface."

"You won't meet many better," said Frank.

He was very glad—perhaps a trifle surprised—to hear her speak in that way, and wondered whether she meant to prepare him for an even more welcome announcement. That Gerard was willing to marry her he had very little doubt; but it had never seemed to him probable that she would be found willing to marry Gerard. Her tastes and his were so little akin.

He was about to pronounce a very sincere eulogy upon his brother's many sterling qualities when Mrs. Trafford gave another turn to the conversation by asking suddenly:

“What about your old flame? Quite burnt out, I hope?”

“Quite,” answered Frank, without flinching. “I have seen her since I came back, and I must acknowledge that—two years have made a difference.”

He was a little ashamed of borrowing Daisy’s phrase for such casuistic purposes; but he excused himself upon the plea that it was absolutely necessary to throw dust in Mrs. Trafford’s eyes.

“That is well,” she said. “There were moments before you went away when I trembled for you, and there were even passages in your letters which I did not quite like; but I thought I might safely trust to the healing and destroying hand of time. Women often forget; but men always do.”

“I should have thought it was about six of one and half-a-dozen of the other,” said Frank. “You can’t accuse me of having forgotten one of my friends, at all events.”

“No, I don’t accuse you on that score,” she answered, smiling; “nor can you bring an accusation against me. You will remain faithful to me, I hope, because I am not too well provided with friends. Except yourself, indeed, I doubt whether I have a single friend left.”

“You spoke just now as if you had any number.”

“Did I? Well, I know a great many people, some of whom I like, and some of whom like me, I believe; but if I were to be reduced to penury to-

morrow, the workhouse door would hardly be besieged by visitors, I am afraid. Besides, I look younger than I am, and a great deal younger than I feel—which, as I daresay you can understand, makes the nature of certain friendships painfully uncertain. With you I can feel perfectly secure and comfortable. You may grow tired of me, but at least you will never propose to marry me.”

She was protected by better reasons than she knew of against any such risk; but Frank contented himself with remarking:

“After that, I must stifle any extravagant hopes that may come into my head, of course. All the same, I tell you plainly that I shall hate the sight of the fortunate man who does marry you.”

“I was just thinking that I should rather hate the sight of the more or less fortunate woman whom you will marry one of these days,” Mrs. Trafford rejoined, with a laugh. “She is inevitable, I know: and I mean to be nice to her, if I can; only please don’t let her be a garrison beauty or some utterly impossible person of that kind.”

Mournfully aware of having already married an utterly impossible person, Frank soon took his leave. Mrs. Trafford was charming, and she was pleased to call herself his friend; but it was very evident that there was one test which her friendship would not stand and one subject which could never be entered upon between them; so that the sense of isolation by

which he had been oppressed before entering her house was scarcely lessened when he quitted it. He must bear his own burden, he supposed: to be sure, Daisy seemed to be disposed to make it as light a one for him as circumstances would permit.

CHAPTER XIV.

DAISY IS EXPLICIT.

It had begun to rain when Frank walked somewhat sadly away from Mrs. Trafford's house; but he did not call a hansom, not having very far to go, and being, besides, in one of those dejected moods which render small additional discomforts almost welcome. London on a wet day provides as many luxuries of that doubtful kind as the most misanthropic pedestrian can desire, and Frank plodded on through the driving rain and the greasy mud with a sense of misery and ill-usage which was all but complete. What added the finishing touch to it was to be prod- ded violently in the stomach, at the top of St. James's Street, by the open umbrella of a gentleman whose head was concealed thereby and who was advancing against the wind, without any regard to the recog- nised rules of foot-traffic.

"Confound you, sir!" called out Frank, angrily; "why don't you look where you are going?"

"Same to you!" returned a gruff voice from behind the umbrella. "Now then!—right or left, please, which you choose."

Frank jumped first to the one side, then to the other, and of course the opposing umbrella made similar and simultaneous movements, to the undisguised amusement of a policeman in a shiny cape who was looking on.

"Hi! constable," shrieked the invisible one, "remove this obstruction, will you; it's trying to run over me!"

"No fear of that, Mr. Fellowes," returned the guardian of public order, with a chuckle; "you've run over more people since you took to drivin' four in 'and than's ever likely to 'urt you."

"This comes of being known to the police," observed the gentleman addressed, lowering his umbrella; "there's no calumny so outrageous that they won't cheerfully swear to it about you! Well, Coplestone, now that I've succeeded in attracting your attention, perhaps you'll condescend to shake hands with an old friend."

"What an ass you are, Tommy!" exclaimed Frank, laughing.

But he was glad to see the little man again, and not unwilling to be led into the latter's club, where he learnt that the news of his return had already been promulgated by Daisy amongst their common friends. Through the death of a relative, Tommy had recently come into more money, and had, it seemed, set up a drag, amongst other appurtenances of wealth.

"Not that I can drive," he observed calmly.

“The horses do just exactly what they like with me, and the only safe position for a nervous person to take on my coach is the back-step, so as to be ready for prompt disembarkation. But that adds the necessary touch of excitement to what would otherwise be a tedious form of amusement. Come down to Richmond or somewhere with me on Sunday, and we’ll dine soberly at the Star and Garter, if we don’t turn over on the way. No; not next Sunday as ever is—I’ve got something else on then—but the Sunday after. I’ll get Miss Daisy, who enjoys a bit of excitement, to occupy the box-seat, and we’ll fill up with odds and ends of people. Now that I think of it, this was Daisy’s own suggestion. She said you struck her as being in need of a little cheering-up.”

Frank booked the engagement, although he hoped—or at least intended—to see his wife again before then. He tried, by means of careless queries, to elicit some information respecting her from this intimate friend of hers; but Tommy was either ignorant or discreet, and would tell him nothing, except that she was said to be making mountains of money. Yes, he had seen her pearl necklace, and thought it highly probable that somebody had presented her with that expensive token of regard. There were so many born fools knocking about. Lord Wednesbury?—oh, dear, no! Wednesbury was a married man now, and had other uses for his spare cash. He really couldn’t say whether Daisy had any special friend who was likely

to supply her with articles of personal adornment—never made inquiries about such matters, and never believed a word that he heard.

“The older I grow, my dear Coplestone—and I’m very nearly grown up now, I’m sorry to say—the more alive I become to the beauty and holiness of minding my own business.”

The hint was not to be disregarded, nor could Frank persist without implying that what was not Tommy’s business might, nevertheless, be his. Subsequently he heard rumours from other sources in which his wife’s name was coupled with that of more than one well-known personage; but these were mere rumours, neither better nor worse attested than statements to which he had had to listen silently in days when he had been absolutely convinced of their falsity.

It would be hard to say why he allowed day after day to pass without either going or writing to Daisy’s house. Perhaps he shrank from a scene which he foresaw was inevitable; perhaps he really thought, as he tried to think, that it was for her to make the next move; perhaps (but this, we may be sure, he never admitted to himself) he dreaded a reconciliation almost as much as a permanent estrangement.

One evening he saw her at a music-hall, where he had heard that she was to appear for ten minutes; but the experience was not so agreeable that he cared to repeat it. “A vulgar little wretch,” that old lady

had called her. Well, he had never been used to think of her as that; on the contrary, one of the great charms of her dancing in former times had been its freedom from what is commonly understood by vulgarity. But she had changed—or he had changed—or the audience of a music-hall demands something different from what pleases the audience of a theatre. However that may have been, Daisy's husband retired from the promenade gallery, whence he had viewed her performance, with an uncomfortable sensation of heat about the cheeks and ears.

Frank Coplestone in his early youth had been very much like other young officers and gentlemen—perhaps a shade more particular than the average young officer and gentleman; but he had by this time reached an age at which individual character, whether inherited or formed by circumstances, hardens into unalterable shape, and if it had ever been within his power to live happily with a wife of Daisy's description it certainly was so no longer. It might become his duty to live with her. It might, and probably would in the long run, become his duty to acknowledge her; but he was by no means sure that death would not be preferable.

He sought oblivion, and sometimes found it, in the company of Mrs. Trafford, whose entreaties that he would come to Curzon Street whenever he felt inclined, without waiting to be formally asked, were so evidently sincere that he did not hesitate to comply

with them. Twice he dined with her, and on each occasion he was able to forget his sorrows for a few hours. She had an admirable cook ; her servants were well trained ; the flowers on the table, the softened light, the sense of ease and quietness and refinement, which extended even to the conversation of her guests—it does not extend quite so far in the dining-rooms of some wealthy and highly-placed modern ladies—all these things combined to soothe him, to make him feel happy and at home. How could he help contrasting them with the noise, the glare and the empty laughter so dear to Daisy and her associates ?

“ How Gerard must enjoy dining with you ! ” he exclaimed to his hostess ; “ he so thoroughly appreciates luxury, tempered by perfect taste. ”

“ Thank you, ” she answered laughing. “ Yes, I believe he does ; but in reality he is not half such a sybarite as you are. For some time past he has been denying himself all good things, in order to get his weight down and acquit himself creditably in this race. I have an idea that your brother has it in him to make a good soldier, if only he could get the chance. ”

“ And you think I haven't got it in me ? ”

“ Oh, I don't say that ; but ever since I nursed you while you were ill I have known that there are weak points about you, mental and physical. You will have to beware of them. ”

He was, at any rate, aware of their existence—if that was any good. Nothing could have been more evident to him than that his present conduct was characterised by extreme weakness, unless it were that the strongest-minded man in the world would have been unable to hit upon any satisfactory solution of the dilemma in which he was placed. No doubt, however, a strong-minded man would state his terms and take his own line, one way or the other; and this Frank resolved to do.

On the Sunday afternoon appointed for the Richmond excursion Tommy Fellowes, accompanied by numerous light-hearted and gaily-attired friends of both sexes, called for him and whirled him off to Regent's Park to pick up the lady for whom the box-seat had been reserved. The streets being tolerably empty, no collision occurred on the way, nor were the grooms called upon to jump down more than three or four times before Daisy's residence was reached. She was waiting on the doorstep, a neat, spruce little figure, arrayed in the palest shade of her favourite colour, except as to her hat, which was trimmed with daffodils. Frank descended to offer her his assistance, and was greeted with a playful slap on the shoulder.

"Why haven't you been to see me all this long time?" he was asked. "Well, I'm glad you have been persuaded to take part in our mild spree, anyhow. I should have thought you would have wanted to go to evening church."

With much agility she climbed up to her perilous perch, and he obtained no further speech of her during a drive which was diversified by many hair's-breadth escapes. Tommy, of course, played the fool the whole way down, shaving ditches, running his near wheels up banks and affecting extreme dismay, to a continued accompaniment of shrieks and laughter, contributed by all his passengers, save the grooms and Frank. The latter was not to be moved from his attitude of silent resignation, and his neighbour, who, like the other ladies of the party, was a prominent member of Daisy's profession, gave up clutching him frantically by the arm when she found that she might as well have grasped an insentient umbrella. If she and her friends set him down as a dull dog, they were amply justified in doing so. The fact was that he was barely conscious of their existence, and only realised them as noisy and offensive adjuncts of an expedition every incident of which was more or less offensive to him. The days had gone by when such society and conversation as theirs could afford him the faintest amusement; he was going down to Richmond for a certain purpose, and he bided his time patiently. After dinner he would surely be able to find, or make, some opportunity of saying what he had to say.

As it turned out, the opportunity was provided for him in the most direct fashion by Daisy herself, who, on the termination of a prolonged and jovial repast, marched down upon him from the other end

of the table, tapped him smartly on the back and said :

“Come over into the Park with me, and we’ll smoke the cigarette of peace together. Go and play in the garden, all of you,” she added in a louder voice ; “Mr. Coplestone and I are about to start in search of a Salvation Army gathering. He wants to sing a hymn to them while I dance.”

But her manner changed altogether when they had crossed the dusty road in the twilight of a somewhat chilly spring evening, and her voice sounded hard and harsh as she began :

“Now, look here, Frank, this won’t do at all. Everybody notices that you are sulking, and I don’t see the sense of it. Perhaps you’ll have the goodness just to say what you want.”

“I thought I had told you what I wanted,” he answered.

“You’ll have to tell me again then, for I’m quite in the dark about your wishes. I think I can make a pretty shrewd guess at what you don’t want, and as I don’t want it either, we ought to be able to come to an understanding. Only there really isn’t any occasion to look so black about it.”

“I am sorry if I look black,” said Frank, “but I am afraid I can’t treat the subject in quite such a light and cheerful spirit as you do. To me a separation is a serious thing, and I suppose it must come to that. There is no alternative that I can discover.”

“Do you mean a legal separation?” asked Daisy. “Just as you please; but I doubt whether they’ll grant you one, and it will hurt you a good deal more than it will me to make a public scandal. A divorce I can answer for it that you won’t get; so you had better not try. Why can’t you let things be as they are? I don’t cost you anything; I don’t interfere with your liberty; what more would you have?”

“Are you so sure that I could not get a divorce, Daisy?” Frank asked, in a low tone.

He felt rather a brute for putting such a question; yet it was one which he was fairly entitled to put. She stamped her foot, and for a moment he thought that she was going to fly into a passion; but she ended by laughing and replying:

“You won’t make me lose my temper again. I knew we were going to have this talk, and I said to myself before I started that I wouldn’t lose my temper. Yes, I am quite sure that you couldn’t get evidence enough against me to go into the Divorce Court with; but that’s all I shall say about the matter. As for a separation, the law can’t do any more for us than we can do for ourselves. We both want to be free, don’t we? Very well; we are free to do anything we like, except marry. If you want to marry somebody else, I’m sorry for it; but I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“I don’t want to marry anybody else; I want to do my duty, that’s all,” Frank declared. “I am ready

to acknowledge you as my wife to-morrow and to give you a home——”

“What sort of a home?” Daisy interrupted, with a laugh.

“Rather a humble one, of course; because, as I was going to say, I can only do this upon the condition that you at once leave the stage. I have thought it all over, and I have come to the conclusion that I must insist upon that.”

“Ah! that was exactly where I was waiting for you! I daresay you weren't in any great fear that your kind offer would be accepted. It is declined, with many thanks, dear boy, and you can now go your way, feeling that you have obeyed the dictates of conscience. Now there's no use in pretending that either of us has a grievance against the other. Let us meet sometimes as friends; why shouldn't we? For I really am very fond of you, Frank, though I don't think you are very fond of me in these days.”

He could not assert that he was; nor, perhaps, could he assert rights which he was not in his heart very eager to claim. “You are far more fond of your liberty than you are of me,” was the only rejoinder that suggested itself to him.

“Most certainly I am. I am fonder of my liberty than I am of anything or anybody else in the wide world, and I hope to retain it to my dying day. Come, there's enough said. You are going to be rea-

sonable I see, only you don't quite like to confess it. Isn't that the voice of Tommy yelling for us in the distance? It is time to be off. Shake hands, Frank, and don't bite the heads off innocent folks on the way home."

CHAPTER XV.

HAPPY GERARD.

OBEDIENT to the injunctions which he had received, Frank refrained from biting off anybody's head on the return journey, and even took some trouble to make himself agreeable to his fellow-revellers. He was, to tell the truth, in a much better humour than before dinner; he was not only resigned, but relieved—a little ashamed of being relieved, no doubt; yet able to think that he was so by reason of certain not very definite assurances which had fallen from Daisy's lips. She had given him to understand that her conduct had never been of a nature to call for the services of the President of the Divorce Court. Her language, at any rate, had been capable of bearing that interpretation; and why should he not give her the benefit of such doubt as might exist upon the point? That she should stipulate for freedom was only natural, not to say excusable; he himself would fain to be as free as he could be, consistently with duty and honour; upon the whole it did not seem as if anybody could be injured

by the continuance of a state of things which apparently satisfied her. Her husband, therefore, no longer found it out of the question to exchange pleasantries with the lively young woman who was seated beside him, nor did the eccentricities of Tommy Fellowes strike him as being utterly devoid of humour. Despite many narrow shaves, he reached Piccadilly with a whole skin, and on being dropped there, included Daisy in a general and genial "good-night," addressed to the whole party.

He did not think it necessary or advisable to call again at the little house in Regent's Park before going down to Kent, where he was now due within a few days. Daisy had asked that they might meet occasionally as friends; she had not expressed a wish for private interviews, and, incomprehensible as she was in many respects, it was difficult to imagine that she could desire anything of the sort. "If she should ever want me," Frank said to himself, "I presume that she will send for me."

Meanwhile, Mrs. Trafford paid him the compliment of wanting him, and writing to say so.

"Do you make a point of always travelling in a smoking-carriage?" she asked, when he entered her drawing-room in prompt response to the summons conveyed to him.

"I do when I am alone," he answered; "I shouldn't if you were in the train, and if you were charitable enough to put up with my company."

“Writers of begging-letters assure me that my charity knows no bounds, and probably I am going to be in the train. That is, if you start for Malling on Wednesday next, as I hear that you are expected to do. It occurred to me that we might as well trip down hand in hand.”

Frank, of course, replied that nothing would give him greater pleasure. He wondered a little who had supplied her with such accurate information as to his movements; but she did not volunteer to gratify legitimate curiosity upon that point. Presently, however, she began of her own accord to speak of Gerard in terms which sounded hopeful and significant.

“I do trust the Guards will win this race!” she said. “Not that I am personally interested in Guardsmen more than in any other variety of British warriors, or that I can distinguish between a hunter and a thoroughbred when I see them together; but your brother has set his heart upon success, and I don’t want to have to condole with him, instead of congratulating him. He is one of the people who feel failure profoundly, and accept it with an unruffled countenance. One never dares to suggest consolations to that class of mortals.”

“Gerard doesn’t often set his heart upon a thing,” Frank remarked; “but, as you say, when he does he is thoroughly in earnest about it. I hope he will get what he wants in more important matters than a point-to-point race.”

“Oh, I think he will. Most people get what they are quite determined to get—especially if they deserve to get it. I sometimes take the liberty of wishing that you had a little more of your brother’s quiet determination.”

Frank made a deprecating gesture. “I am what I am,” he answered. “I don’t know that there is anything I particularly want at present, except my company, and that will come to me in the ordinary course of promotion, I suppose.”

“There ought to be something.”

“But I’m afraid there isn’t. Anyhow, I should be the last to dispute that Gerard is a much better fellow than I am. You think so, don’t you?”

“I won’t be drawn into making invidious comparisons: but I do think your brother a very good fellow. Perhaps I like him because he likes me, and because he doesn’t honour a great many ladies with his friendship. One isn’t above being reached by delicate flattery of that kind even when one has finally parted from the vanities and ambitions of young-womanhood.”

“I don’t know about vanities and ambitions,” said Frank; “but why should you have parted from anything that belongs to young-womanhood?”

“I remember telling you why a long time ago; but very likely you don’t remember having been told, and the subject isn’t at all pleasant or interesting. I

would rather go on talking about your brother, who is both."

Frank had by no means forgotten the brief outline of her history with which Mrs. Trafford had favoured him prior to his departure for India. Indeed, he had often thought of it, wondering what had become of the selfish and cold-blooded lover who might have been expected to seek her out again in the days of her wealthy widowhood. But the chances were that that prudent person had hastened to espouse somebody else, and it seemed reasonable to hope that a not less prudent, but far more honourable man had now stepped into his vacant shoes.

What was rather unreasonable, as well as rather ungenerous, was to grudge Gerard his good fortune; yet who, after all, has magnanimity enough to congratulate from his heart the man who marries his best friend? It was as his best friend that Frank had learned to regard Mrs. Trafford; and, indeed, he was not far wrong in so regarding her. It would have been a relief to make a clean breast of his troubles to so trustworthy a friend; but that was not to be thought of, and he went away without having given any explanation of a certain apathy and indifference which evidently puzzled her.

As had been arranged, they subsequently travelled down together, in bright weather, to that pleasant, homely county which has been called the garden of England, and which looks rather less like

a garden when the east winds of April are in full blast than at any other season of the year. From the railway-carriage window they looked out upon a parti-coloured, undulating landscape and compared agricultural notes, Mrs. Trafford surprising her companion by the knowledge which she displayed of her subject.

“Oh, I’m learning,” she said. “I have tenants and I have land upon my own hands; it’s indispensable that I should know what weather is wanted for this crop or that, and why no sort of weather that ever was can be satisfactory all round. But I shall always be a square peg in a round hole, I am afraid; I don’t suppose I see half the things that you do. Why are you looking so solemnly at those grass fields now, for instance? Ought we to be having rain?”

“Not for the hay, perhaps; there’s time enough yet,” answered Frank; “but I was thinking that if this wind holds the ground will be as hard as iron for that race.”

“But the ground will be the same for everybody, won’t it? If it is hard for the Guards it will be equally hard for the Lancers or Hussars, or whatever they are.”

“Yes; but one remembers the horses’ legs, not to mention the riders, some of whom are pretty sure to come to grief.”

“I daresay they are all quite willing to take their

chance. I remember your brother telling me that his notion of an ideal death was to break his neck out hunting, and that when he felt inclined to shirk a fence, he put fresh courage into himself by reflecting that if the worst came to the worst, he would be spared the horrors of dying in his bed."

"Racing isn't quite the same thing as hunting," remarked Frank; "but if Gerard said that to you, it was only his way of talking. I never saw him shirk anything in my life, and I'm quite sure he never stood in need of more courage than he has got. Whatever Gerard's defects may be, want of pluck isn't one of them."

A slight tinge of pink mounted into Mrs. Trafford's cheeks and her eyes grew bright. "I like to hear you speak of your brother in that way!" she exclaimed; "and what you say is true, too. But there isn't really any danger of his breaking his neck, is there? If there were, I would rather break my own neck (not that that is saying much) than be present as a spectator the day after to-morrow."

That sounded tolerably conclusive. Happy Gerard!—perhaps, also, happy Mrs. Trafford! Frank may have felt one of those momentary pangs which we are all apt to experience when the inequality with which earthly rewards and penalties are dealt out is brought home to us; but his predominant sensation was one of pleasure, and he hastened to reply:

“Oh, he’ll be all right! I don’t know anything about his mount; but he has ridden in plenty of steeplechases before now, and he understands how to fall. You needn’t be in the least uneasy.”

When he had helped his travelling-companion into the smart victoria which was awaiting her arrival at the station, and had taken his own place in the somewhat shabby dogcart which had been sent to meet him, he said to himself, “I must tell old Gerard how she looked as soon as it occurred to her that he might be going to risk his life. I wonder what sort of a grimace Daisy would make if she were to see in the newspapers, some fine day, that her husband had been killed, steeplechasing. The Dancer in Yellow wouldn’t disappoint the public by failing to appear in ‘Othello Junior’ that same night, I suspect.”

One cannot expect to get more than one is prepared to give, and Frank was fain to acknowledge with shame, the next moment, that it would not break his heart were he to learn suddenly that he had become a widower. It was a melancholy pass to have arrived at; but there was no use in brooding over it, nor in truth was he so very miserable after he had reached the old home and had been heartily welcomed by his father and by his aunt.

Even the latter, who was always inclined to adopt an antagonistic attitude towards him, as being Sir Harry’s favourite without ever having done anything

to merit that distinction, was amiable enough now, and had been graciously pleased to express her approval of what everybody seemed to regard as a foregone conclusion.

“I am not very much in love with Mrs. Trafford myself,” she told Frank; “but, strange to say, I really believe Gerard is, and of course her money would cover a far greater multitude of sins than she can ever have committed. To do the woman justice, she has the sort of qualities that go to make an excellent wife and mother, and so long as she doesn’t bore him, her being rather a bore to other people won’t matter. I only hope you may do half as well for yourself as Gerard is doing.”

“The deed isn’t actually done yet,” remarked Frank, slightly nettled by this absurd description of a lady who seemed to him to be in every respect her critic’s superior. “It is just possible, I suppose, that Mrs. Trafford may decline to throw herself into Gerard’s arms.”

But Miss Coplestone seemed to think that that contingency might very well be left out of reckoning; as, indeed, did Sir Harry, who was already counting unhatched chickens.

“Of course Gerard will have to send in his papers; but that will be no great hardship. It isn’t as if he were at all a keen soldier. Such a fuss as he has been making about his battalion being sent down to Shorncliffe! They have been in disgrace, as I daresay you

know, and this was meant as a punishment—which don't sound over and above complimentary to the other fellows who are quartered there. Well, we must hope that our fine gentleman won't think it too severe a punishment to be condemned to live in such a place as Trant Abbey. Dear me! What wouldn't my poor old father have given to see the two properties united! It would have been worth a peerage in those days, and I don't know but what it may be even now. Well, well! I'm satisfied; and this will make a difference in your prospects too, my dear fellow. I shall alter my will as soon as things are formally settled."

That things were as yet far from being formally settled was, however, the decided opinion of Gerard, who arrived shortly before the dinner hour, and who took his younger brother for a walk round the garden and a confidential chat. He said at once that he had quite made up his mind to ask Mrs. Trafford to marry him, but that he felt by no means certain of her reply.

"She is clever enough to have discovered long ago what we all want," he remarked; "but whether she isn't a great deal too clever to make a one-sided bargain remains to be seen. Why on earth should she? She has absolutely nothing to gain by taking me for her husband, and most people would tell her that she risks losing a lot."

"She will never dream of looking at it from that point of view," Frank declared; "the only question is from what point of view you look at it. If you mean

to propose to her simply because you think it your duty to make a good match, you won't deserve success, and perhaps you won't succeed; but if you care for her for her own sake, I'm ready to back your chances."

Gerard smiled and looked down. "It sounds almost ridiculous to say so," he answered; "one is hardly ever believed when one speaks the truth; but I don't mind telling you, Frank, that I do care for her for her own sake. I didn't begin in that way; I looked upon her as my inevitable destiny, and my one wish was to postpone the fatal day as long as I could. But it must be more than a year now since I discovered that she was the only woman in the world for me—and I suppose a discovery of that sort opens one's eyes. Anyhow, all the conceit has been taken out of me by this time, and if I haven't asked her yet, it has only been because I didn't want to be deprived of my last shred of hope."

"I don't think there is any need for you to be so diffident as all that," said Frank, laughing. "If you had seen her face when I was talking to her about you this morning, you might have felt a little conceited, and nobody could have blamed you. By the way, what sort of an animal are you going to ride the day after to-morrow? If he is at all likely to put you down, I must warn Mrs. Trafford to stay away; for she said she would rather break her own neck than see you place yours in jeopardy."

“Did she say that?” asked Gerard, eagerly. “Oh, no, the old bay will stand up all right, though he’s such a hot-headed old fool that I’m afraid he’ll take it out himself before we have done half the distance. You really think, then, Frank, that—that——?”

“Yes, I really think so,” answered Frank, not a little amused by this unwonted display of modesty and timidity on the part of his self-possessed senior. Presently he clapped Gerard on the shoulder and added, “I wish I were you!”

No wish was ever more sincerely uttered, nor in truth can there have been many men living at that moment more enviable than Gerard Coplestone. To be in love with a woman who is going to accept you, and who, in addition, is a woman whom your family have the best of reasons for welcoming enthusiastically—what more can any human being desire? Sadly different is the position of one who has married an impossible person, who no longer loves her or is loved by her, and whom nothing save death can relieve from the consequences of his own folly!

CHAPTER XVI.

MRS. TRAFFORD'S HEAD ACHES.

ENVY and jealousy are, of course, not synonymous terms: one may wish with all one's heart that one were Prime Minister of Great Britain or Archbishop of Canterbury without in the least grudging the reward of perseverance and good conduct to the eminent persons who hold those offices. It must, however, be owned that the two emotions specified are somewhat closely akin, and that it does not take a very great deal to convert the one into the other. That was why Frank, while dressing on the following morning, had to repeat to himself over and over again that Gerard was one of the best fellows that ever stepped, and that Mrs. Trafford might consider herself fortunate. What if Gerard was just a trifle limited in his ideas?—what if the intellectual superiority of his destined wife was obvious and the necessity of her suiting herself to him, if she wanted to be happy with him, could not be doubted? She would assuredly take care to suit herself to him, and people whose wives did not happen to be constructed of

equally pliable material were not thereby justified in assuming that she would throw herself away. So Frank went down to breakfast with a smiling countenance and with sentiments as cheerful as he could muster, to be greeted by Sir Harry with :

“ Now, what are you two fellows going to do with yourselves to-day? Gerard says he is bound to walk eight or nine miles, or he won't be fit to-morrow, and if I were you, I would put in a part of the work by marching over to Trant Abbey after luncheon. Then, if you could persuade the fair Abbess to come and join in a family dinner, you would do us all a good turn.”

Frank, after glancing at Gerard, whose countenance remained as inscrutable as usual, remarked that there did not seem to be any particular need for him to take part in the proposed mission ; but he was subsequently assured by the person whom he desired to rid of an encumbrance that his company would be far from unwelcome. It was not until some hours later that Gerard, who tramped off for a constitutional all by himself as soon as breakfast was over, confided to his younger brother that, for choice, he would rather not see Mrs. Trafford alone that day.

“ I must keep my nerves steady and my head cool for the race, you see,” he explained, “ and I tell you candidly that, feeling as I do now, I couldn't quite trust myself to spend half an hour with her, unless somebody else was in the room. I should begin say-

ing things that I don't want to say, and then very likely the whole murder would be out before I knew where I was."

"Would that be such an awful misfortune?" asked Frank. "I should have said you would ride all the better for being relieved from anxiety."

"Ah, you are like the governor and Aunt Lucy; you think I have only to speak the word. The fact is that I know her a good deal better than any of you, and I know very well that the chances are against me. Another thing I know is that I shall be no use at all for at least a month after I have been refused, and I don't want to spoil other people's sport by making a public exhibition of myself. I do want to have a few words with her, I confess; but I made up my mind some time ago that I wouldn't ask her to be my wife until after the race. So come with me and see me through like a good fellow."

In the course of the afternoon, therefore, the two brothers arrived on foot at Trant Abbey, where they met with a very cordial and friendly reception.

"How odd it seems to see you both together!" Mrs. Trafford exclaimed. "I can never quite think of you as belonging to one another, somehow; although there is a decided family likeness when one looks at you side by side."

"From my childhood up," remarked Frank, "it has been dinned into my ears that I am a faint and feeble reproduction of the best-looking member of the

family. Don't make him blush by repeating before his face what everybody thinks."

Gerard did not blush, being constitutionally exempt from that distressing weakness. He smiled slightly, without looking up, and said nothing—conscious, it may be, of Mrs. Trafford's scrutiny, and unwilling to meet her eyes.

"Neither of you has much to complain of in the matter of looks," she resumed; "you are far more alike in looks than you are in character."

"Ah, you think one of us has a good deal to complain of on that score," observed Frank.

"Not to complain of; our characters are what we choose to make them or let them be. At least, I shall continue to think so, in spite of latter-day theories to the contrary. However, in common gratitude, I must allow you both credit for amiability, and since you have proved it by coming to see me, please tell me all about this steeplechase. Where ought I to go? Shall I be able to watch it all from my carriage? And will somebody be good enough to let me know the result after it is over? Because I understand that there is some complicated system of scoring, and that the one who comes in first doesn't necessarily gain the victory for his side."

It was now Gerard's turn to speak, and he gave Mrs. Trafford all the information that she asked for. She would be able to see the greater part of the course from her carriage, but she would obtain a

rather better view if she did not mind climbing up to the top of the drag; it was hoped she would lunch in the Guards' tent; and then there was another, and a more personal hope, which was put forward with perceptible, but not unbecoming hesitation.

"I was wondering," Gerard said, producing a small parcel, wrapped in silver paper, from his pocket, "whether you would do me the honour to wear my colours. It's only a necktie—almost all the ladies will wear ties of one colour or the other, you know, and——"

"Oh, I am afraid I couldn't do that," interrupted Mrs. Trafford. "I always dress in black or grey, as you must have noticed, and I suppose I always shall to the day of my death."

"But just for this once!" pleaded Gerard, as he continued to hold out his modest offering. He raised those long-lashed eyes of his, which for an instant encountered hers; whereupon she shrank back, as if involuntarily, colouring slowly up to the roots of her hair.

All this Frank saw, and drew conclusions which no on-looker could have helped drawing. He was surprised, although he had expected nothing else—surprised in the sense that all of us are when we realise that an estimable but rather commonplace fellow-creature has become a demigod in the estimation of another fellow-creature. However, it was a good thing, not to say a superlatively good thing, that Mrs.

Trafford should be able to so regard Gerard—and, to be sure, he was wonderfully handsome. Musings of a somewhat complex nature were dispelled by the sound of her voice, which betrayed no embarrassment.

“Oh, very well!” she was saying; “if other people are going to do it I had better not be peculiar. The point is hardly worth arguing, anyhow.”

She took the strip of scarlet and blue silk, glanced at it for a moment, and then laid it down beside her. “Of course,” she added, “I should wish for your success, whatever I had round my neck. Considering that I never, to my knowledge, set eyes upon a single one of your opponents, I should naturally hope that you might win.”

“That,” remarked Gerard, in his customary quiet level accents, “is rather a lukewarm way of backing your friends.”

“Would it be more satisfactory if I backed you to the extent of five pounds or ten pounds? Unfortunately I have no acquaintance with bookmakers, and I don’t know how these transactions are effected; but I dare say you or your brother would kindly undertake it for me. Shall I give you the money?”

She was trying to talk naturally, but she was not succeeding very well. It was evident to her visitors that she was not quite at her ease—evident to the elder that she was displeased, evident also to the younger that she would not be sorry when they went away, although he detected no symptom of displeasure

in the unusual and feverish loquacity which she proceeded to display. After a great deal had been said about steeplechasing, and after Mrs. Trafford had repeatedly proved that her interest in the subject was upon a level with her knowledge of it, Frank took upon himself to remark :

“ We ought not to inflict any more horse-flesh talk upon you now—especially as we are hoping to see you again in an hour or two. My father sent us here to beg that you would come and dine with us to-night, if you have no other engagement.”

“ Oh, not to-night, please !” she answered, quickly. “ No ; I have no other engagement, unless a headache can be called an engagement ; but I am like all robust people, I can’t bear the slightest pain without making a prodigious fuss. So, if you will kindly make my excuses to Sir Harry and Miss Coplestone, I think I would rather stay at home and nurse myself. Then I shall feel quite sure of being well and lively again to-morrow.”

It seemed to Frank that she looked rather appealingly at Gerard, who, however, made no response, verbal or other. Gerard had a remarkable gift of silence. As both the young men had risen, and as she did not attempt to detain them, they could but express their sorrow at her indisposition, and depart.

“ I don’t like this at all,” Gerard said, shaking his head despondently, as soon as they had left the house. “ I don’t think it looks by any means hope-

ful for me, and if I hadn't been a thundering ass, I shouldn't have come here to be snubbed."

Frank burst out laughing. "A thundering old ass you most undoubtedly are," he agreed, "if you think that she had the slightest intention of snubbing you. What an extraordinary thing it is that the coolest and shrewdest man loses his wits the moment he falls in love! Why, my good fellow, she has to all intents and purposes accepted you already! Do you mean to tell me that you are so dense as not to have understood why she got so red in the face when you asked her to wear your colours?—or, for the matter of that, why she is suffering from a headache at the present moment?"

Gerard sighed and glanced out of the corner of his eye at his junior in a queer, shamefaced way. "I hope it may be as you say," he answered, "but I don't know—perhaps I am no judge. It struck me that she had discovered all of a sudden what I was after, that she didn't like it, that she was more or less sorry for us all, but that she hoped I would take a hint in time and spare her the discomfort of refusing me. I don't expect her to be on the ground to-morrow; her headache will be worse, you'll see."

These pessimistic anticipations were laughed to scorn by Frank, who said: "I'm ready to lay you any odds you like about her being on the ground to-morrow; if that's all you want to put heart into you, you may count upon getting it. But the truth

is that you are clean out of your senses. You won't see what is as plain as a pikestaff, and you see all sorts of things that don't exist."

"Do I?" asked Gerard pensively. "Well, I must confess that I am not myself, and haven't been since I found that I was in love for the very first time in my life. I suppose one is rather apt to take up mistaken ideas when one is in that condition. There's one idea," he went on, after a short pause, "which has been bothering me a good deal, and which I sincerely trust is mistaken. I know you and she are tremendous friends, and you have been corresponding regularly and all that. I wonder whether I should put you into an infernal rage if I suggested that there might be rather a warmer feeling than friendship—on your side, I mean."

"Suggest anything you like, old man," answered Frank, laughing; "you won't put me into a rage. All the same, that particular suggestion is a little comic."

"I don't see why. In many ways she is better suited to you than she is to me, and I notice that you always seem to understand one another."

"Because we are friends and nothing more, I suppose. If, by an impossibility, we were lovers, misunderstandings would soon crop up. No; I think you're an uncommonly lucky fellow, Gerard, and, as I told you before, I only wish I were in your shoes; but

I wouldn't be your rival if I could, and I couldn't if I would."

"Well," said Gerard quietly, "it's a relief to hear that."

He walked on for some distance before he resumed—"I can't believe that I'm as lucky a fellow as you call me, Frank; yet in a sort of way it's luck to feel as I do. I saw from the first that I should have to propose to Mrs. Trafford, whether I liked her or not; but I little thought that I should ever care for her, or for any other woman, in this way. One has to do one's duty; but one hardly expects it to jump with one's inclinations."

"And you consider it your positive duty to marry a rich woman?" asked Frank, momentarily amused by the seriousness with which this definition of duty was implied.

"Well, yes—for the governor's sake. I have cost him a good deal of money, first and last—I didn't see my way to avoid it—and he hasn't grumbled. You have been a much better son to him than I have, and it's only natural that he should care more for your little finger than he does for my whole body."

"Nonsense!" returned Frank with a pang of conscience which gave some sharpness to his voice; "he knows perfectly well that it isn't possible to live in the Guards upon a small allowance. And at least you have never done anything disgraceful—nothing

that you would have had to conceal from him, or that would have made him ashamed of you if it had come to his ears."

"Oh, of course not," answered Gerard tranquilly. "Nor have you."

After that, it seemed about time to change the subject.

CHAPTER XVII.

ONE OF GERARD'S WISHES IS FULFILLED.

GERARD was up and away before breakfast on the following morning, which dawned bright and clear—an unexceptionable day for spectators and not so bad a one as it might have been for horses and riders; since, with the ground like a turnpike road, rain would only have served to produce a treacherous, slippery surface. The rest of the party were to join him on the course some hours later, he himself having a few final arrangements to see to.

Sir Harry, after having read prayers to the assembled servants in the library according to established use and wont, marched into the breakfast-room, where Miss Coplestone and Frank were already seated, and rubbed his hands cheerfully.

“Did either of you see the absolute winner before he started?” the old gentleman asked. “Feeling tolerably confident, I hope? Confidence is half the battle in these cases, not to mention other cases of greater importance. We shall have to congratulate him upon a double win before sunset, eh Frank?”

“Oh, I think so,” answered Frank, smiling. “I believe he was convinced before he went to bed that Mrs. Trafford’s headache wasn’t such a bad sign as he took it for at first, and as soon as the race is over he will say what he has to say to her I presume. He wouldn’t run the risk before because he was afraid of shaking his nerve.”

“What a cold-blooded young beggar it is!” exclaimed Sir Harry, with a half-vexed laugh. “Imagine a man whose whole future happiness depends upon a woman’s answer deliberately making up his mind to postpone asking her for it until he has won or lost a twopenny-halfpenny race!”

“I shouldn’t have thought,” remarked Miss Coplestone drily, “that the whole future happiness of any man could depend upon an answer from Mrs. Trafford; but as there seems to be no doubt about what her answer will be, we may control our feverish impatience for a few hours perhaps.”

Sir Harry had been patient for more than a few hours, or even a few months; but he did not remind his sister of that. Why mar the opening of a day fraught with good fortune by foolish, causeless bickerings? A much better plan was to eat a good breakfast, and to bear in mind that poor Lucy’s bark was worse than her bite.

For the rest, whatever Gerard might be, Sir Harry was happy enough and confident enough for two that morning. At last all was going to be well! Miser-

able, necessary economies which his soul had always loathed might now be abandoned; Frank could be properly provided for; long-needed improvements to the estate could be undertaken with a clear conscience; and all this by means, not of a mercenary alliance with the daughter of some vulgar upstart, but of a genuine and entirely satisfactory love-match!

When he reached the racecourse, whither the Mall-ing party were conveyed in a somewhat dilapidated wagonette, he wanted to shake hands with everybody—and indeed he did so. The Guards' tent had been pitched upon the edge of a breezy down, whence nearly the whole of the undulating country over which the race was to be run could be seen. Round it were congregated some thirty or more vehicles of all shapes and sizes. Evidently the county had assembled in force, and if both sides had sympathizers, nobody seemed disposed to grudge this exultant old gentleman his anticipated triumph. Probably not a few of those who returned his hearty greeting were aware that he looked forward to a two-fold triumph, and such of them as had no marriageable sons of their own doubtless wished that he might secure it.

Meanwhile there was one equipage for which Sir Harry looked in vain. Gerard, clad like his brother-officers in a scarlet coat—the cavalry men having arrayed themselves in black for the occasion—had for some time been scanning the high-road from between half-closed eyelids in search of that missing equi-

page, and when Frank joined them he remarked calmly :

“She isn’t coming, you see. I thought she wouldn’t.”

“There’s heaps of time yet—more than half-an-hour,” returned Frank, although he himself was beginning to feel a little uneasy. “For goodness’ sake, don’t fret yourself! Even if she doesn’t come, that won’t prove anything.”

“Do I look as if I was fretting myself?” asked Gerard—and, to tell the truth, he certainly did not. “If she makes her appearance, I shall take it as a good omen; if she doesn’t, I sha’n’t despair. There’s no need to despair until one has been refused, and that, as I told you yesterday, is why I have left the thing open so long.”

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when Mrs. Trafford’s victoria came in sight, and off he started at once to meet her, Frank deeming it discreet to follow at a more leisurely pace.

Well, one good omen was, at all events, discernible, inasmuch as Mrs. Trafford was wearing the Guards’ colours. Her well-fitting cloth costume, which was of a light shade of grey, rendered these additionally conspicuous—or so Frank thought—and he said to himself, with a smile, “That’s final!” When he approached, she was talking to the Colonel, to whom she had just been introduced, and a few other men were hovering in the vicinity. She was

a little flushed, she was palpably nervous, she was speaking more quickly and with greater animation than usual. Frank noticed also that she avoided looking at or directly addressing his brother. All these symptoms told their own tale so plainly that, after she had left her carriage, and had been helped up to the top of the neighbouring drag, it only remained to squeeze Gerard's arm and say, "Perhaps you'll believe me next time!"

Gerard shook his head, but could not keep a faint smile from rising to his lips. "I've had the most wonderful good luck all my life," he answered, as he moved towards the improvised paddock. "Some fellows are born like that, I suppose, though heaven only knows why they should be! At the present moment I can't remember that I ever wished for anything without getting it."

Presently Frank was standing beside Mrs. Trafford, to whom he handed his field-glasses, and for whose benefit he criticised the riders and their mounts, as these cantered past them towards the starting-point. Gerard Coplestone's was the figure which attracted most attention amongst the spectators, who were freely predicting that he would finish first. He had an easy, workmanlike seat, and he appeared to be on good terms with his horse, a powerful bay, with black points, the picture of a hunter in hard condition.

"He ought to do the trick," remarked the Colonel,

“if only he doesn’t shoot his bolt too soon; but that brute of his is so violent that he’ll be bound to force the pace, I’m afraid.”

“Does that mean that he will be run away with?” Mrs. Trafford inquired, in a rather apprehensive whisper, of her neighbour.

“Well, you can call it being run away with if you like,” Frank answered, laughing.

“But it must be horribly dangerous to have no control over your horse, with all those enormous fences and banks before you!”

“Oh, he won’t lose control of his horse,” returned Frank, much amused; “he isn’t riding his first or his second steeplechase. I told him that you had fears for his neck, and he assured me you might dismiss them. He isn’t much more likely to come to grief than you and I are to tumble headlong from our present perch.”

Mrs. Trafford said no more. Perhaps she would have preferred that her solicitude on Gerard’s account should not have been communicated to him. “Though really I don’t quite see why she should resent it,” thought Frank, a little annoyed with her for turning her shoulder towards him. “She must have guessed that I should repeat her remark, and I strongly suspect that that was just what she meant me to do.”

This was not very generous; but it is a good deal easier to be generous to one’s friends when they are

in adversity than when they are getting everything their own way. Anyhow, Frank forgot his passing touch of ill-humour, and concentrated his whole mind upon the race which he had come out to see, as soon as a voice behind him called out, "They're off!"

The field was a large, and immediately became a straggling one. Gerard, as had been expected, jumped off with the lead, at a pace which did not strike Mrs. Trafford as excessive, but which more experienced observers knew to be tremendous. When she saw him sailing easily over fence after fence and lessening into the far distance, with neither a red nor a black coat anywhere near him, she lowered her glasses and remarked, in a tone of some disappointment: "This is going to be a very hollow victory, I'm afraid."

But Frank said: "Oh, they aren't racing yet, and won't be for some time to come. This isn't the Derby, you know, nor even the Grand National."

It was, at all events, a tolerably stiff course, and several of the competitors came to hopeless grief in the first mile. For what seemed like a long time the riders passed out of view; but when they reappeared Gerard was still leading, though two of his opponents were pressing him hard. The spectators on the top of the drag now began to display more excitement. Mrs. Trafford raised her glasses again; the Colonel remarked, "The man who gets first over that big bank

ought to win." Then all of a sudden somebody called out, "Coplestone's down!"

A confused babble of ejaculations followed. "He's up again!" "No, he isn't; the horse is off, though! Why couldn't one of those confounded fools catch the brute for him!" "Lord, what a pity! Had the race well in hand, too!" "Oh, he's hurt, or he wouldn't have let his bridle go. Hope he isn't damaged much, poor chap!"

Frank had seen nothing clearly, having lent his glasses to Mrs. Trafford. She turned to him now, with blanched cheeks and dilated eyes, while the men around her were shouting that the Guards would win, after all; but he was already scrambling down. He cared no more to see the finish than she did, and he did not want to be questioned.

"Knocked out of time, that's all. Nothing to be alarmed about," were the reassuring words which he threw back to her, as he ran across the course and joined the crowd which was beginning to stream towards the scene of the accident.

But of course there must always be something to be alarmed about when a man has a fall and does not get up; and it was not only the exertion of breasting the opposite hillside at the top of his speed that set Frank's heart beating. Behind him he could hear the shouts and cheers which greeted the victor; on either side of him men and women were hurrying upwards, spurred on by the eager desire to see some-

body killed or injured which appears to be one of the many agreeable cravings of our common nature; presently a stout man, mounted on a stout cob, cantered past him, heading for the same point, and called out, cheerily, "No work for me under that bank, I hope!"

This was the local practitioner, a kind-hearted old fellow who had assisted both Gerard and Frank to enter the world long ago, and those words were doubtless sincerely uttered. But they seemed to be resented by a red-faced farmer, who panted out, "Tell you I seen the 'oss roll over un twice! Don't tell me there ain't no work for doctors there!"

It was almost impossible that the farmer could have seen anything of the sort, and it was quite impossible—so Frank kept breathlessly assuring himself—that Gerard could be badly hurt. Gerard, who was as hard as nails and as active as a cat; who knew how to fall as well as anybody; who had had numberless spills and thought nothing of them—oh, no; he was sure to be all right. Such cruel, stupid, purposeless catastrophes as one can't help thinking of at times don't really happen.

The worst of it is that they do: they are happening every day. Cruel they may be, and are; but that they are stupid and purposeless is what some people assert and others deny, while nobody upon the face of this globe can prove them to be either the one or the other.

When Frank at last reached the little group for which he had been making, and when the members of it, recognising him, fell silently back, he saw something which he will never forget, but which there is no need to describe here. The doctor who was kneeling on the grass jumped up, caught him by the elbow, and turned him forcibly round, saying, in a hoarse voice :

“Don’t lose your presence of mind ; don’t think about anything, except what you have got to do—which is to take Sir Harry home at once. He mustn’t see the poor fellow ; I can’t allow it.”

“Is he dead ?” asked Frank, with a great gasp.

“He must have been killed instantly—let that be a comfort to you afterwards. The horse either kicked him or trod on his head. God knows I would give my right arm to bring him to life again : but don’t say any more, and don’t upset me. I’ll undertake everything else, if you will only get your father away. He is the chief person to be thought of now—remember that!—and there is no time to be lost. Here, take a pull at my flask. Now be off as fast as you can.”

Frank obeyed mechanically, as most of us do when we are half stunned and when authoritative orders are given to us. And, in spite of all resistance, he accomplished his task, thinking of other people besides Sir Harry and contriving to avert what the doctor had said must be averted. Things which must be done

are done—by this means or by that. But upon such experiences merciful oblivion not unfrequently falls, and by the next morning Frank could have given no distinct account of the quarter of an hour that followed. All he could have stated was that Aunt Lucy had helped him, that the old man had been taken away and that Mrs. Trafford also had been persuaded to go home. His impression was that there had been rather more trouble with Mrs. Trafford than with his father; but he could not have said for certain.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SURVIVORSHIP.

MERCIFUL oblivion, as was said just now, is quick to sweep away the hateful, inevitable details which attend the passage of those whom we love from the known to the unknown, and it is unnecessary to dwell upon the miseries of an inquest, of imposing funeral rites, of interviews with lawyers and condolences, epistolary and other, from which it now became Frank's duty to extricate himself as best he might. Those well-meaning persons who, without much personal experience of sorrow, are wont to urge the afflicted to "rouse themselves," commonly assert that duties of that particular kind are in reality blessings. If so, Frank was highly blessed; for poor old Sir Harry, brave though he was and accustomed to face adversity, had been stricken helpless by the unforeseen blow which had fallen upon him, and silently allowed all arrangements to be taken out of his hands.

"He will never hold up his head again," Miss Coplestone said; "one can't expect it, and I don't see

why one should wish it. What has he left to live for now?"

It was her nature to bite and scratch when she was hurt, poor woman, and Frank, knowing this, forgave her for telling him in so many words that blind Destiny had snatched away the wrong brother. She herself was almost broken-hearted; but she bore up in an obstinate, defiant sort of way, did her best to be of use, and was in truth useful. If it afforded her any relief to snap at the only person who could be snapped at with decency, she was welcome to that sorry solace. At the end of ten days she returned to her lonely home in London, saying—what, unfortunately, could not be denied—that her brother evidently wished her to leave him.

After she had gone Sir Harry asked Frank to go over to the Abbey and see Mrs. Trafford.

"She sent a wreath, I believe, and perhaps she may have written to one of you," the old man said, in that dull, monotonous voice which ever since the catastrophe had replaced his customary cheerful accents; "we ought to thank her. Perhaps you will do so, on my behalf as well as your own, and explain that I am not very well. I should not know what to say if I saw her; until I can get some control over my thoughts and words again I had better see as few people as possible."

He did not appear to realise that Mrs. Trafford's grief might be as great as, or even greater than, his

own; but Frank, who had received a few lines from her, written under the influence of strong emotion, dreaded the mission which he, nevertheless, felt that he could not refuse. "Perhaps," he thought, "she won't admit me; I should almost hope that she wouldn't."

But she did admit him (seeming, as far as he could judge, to consider it a matter of course that she should do so), and he soon perceived that, however deep and real her grief might be, there was no danger of her manifesting it by any of those demonstrations so terrifying to the male Anglo-Saxon. The perceptions of the average male Anglo-Saxon are said to be obtuse; yet when he is a gentleman—sometimes even when he is not—they generally suffice to preserve him from certain blunders which quicker-witted races are very apt to commit. Thus Frank understood that he was not to condole with Mrs. Trafford or to speak of what had happened as if it affected her in at all the same sense as it affected him and his father. He fancied that she was grateful to him for his reticence, and he was sincerely grateful to her for putting herself outside the question as she did.

"I am sure you know," she said, after a time, "how much I have been thinking of you all, and how I have wished that I could be of the smallest help or comfort to you. But of course that was impossible; it always is."

“It wasn’t a bit impossible,” Frank declared, “and the kind little note that you sent me gave me a great deal of comfort, I assure you.”

“Did it? I am glad of that. I shouldn’t have written at all, only I remembered that when my father died, and when I was about as miserable as anybody could be, I had one or two letters from old friends of his which I liked to read over and over again—awkwardly-worded letters, showing no more than that the people who wrote them were sorry, and that they had been very fond of him, and had appreciated him. So I thought I would just tell you what I could say truly, that I did appreciate your brother. He was one of those whom one doesn’t know easily, but about whom there is nothing but good to be found out.”

Frank nodded. “Yes; and he died, without suffering, in the way that he would have chosen to die. That’s a scrap of consolation. There isn’t any other that I know of.”

In almost every conceivable form of misfortune some countervailing modicum of compensation is discoverable by those who are bent upon seeking for it, and a very determined optimist might have pointed out to Frank that it is a little better to be heir to a baronetcy and an estate than to be a younger son, with no expectations worth mentioning; but he had not as yet had time to realise the change in his prospects; nor was it brought to his attention by Mrs. Trafford;

although she had thought of it. Her compassion for him and for Sir Harry was unfeigned and unstinted, and her expression of it was the more grateful to him because she did not attempt to make the best of things. He half forgot, while she was talking, that she was at least as much to be pitied as they were; not until afterwards did he do justice to her unselfishness, remembering also, with some wonderment, that there had been from time to time an almost apologetic tone in her remarks. She had spoken, for example, of his father's "cruel disappointment"—a rather odd phrase to use—and had wished that such disappointments could by any manner of means be made up for.

He mused over this and other similar speeches on his way home, after taking leave of Mrs. Trafford, who, it appeared, meant to go abroad for several months, and the recollection of them caused a flush of shame to rise to his forehead. How well she must have understood what their wishes and motives had been! How obvious it must be to her that the hopes of the family had been dashed to the ground in more ways than one! He had half a mind to retrace his steps and assure her that Gerard, at least, had loved her for her own sake. But probably she knew that, too. Had not she herself said that there was nothing but good to be found out about Gerard?

On his return, he found a letter awaiting him, addressed in a handwriting, the sight of which had been

much more welcome to him once upon a time than it was now. He tore the letter open with a shrinking presentiment, which its contents were not slow to fulfil.

“You will have dried your tears by this time, I expect,” Daisy wrote; “so I won’t set up a sympathetic howl. Of course it’s awfully sad; but so are lots of other things, and tragedy, as you know, isn’t my line. However, I have a pretty quick eye for comic business, and it strikes me as a bit comic that I shall be Lady Coplestone some day soon. Don’t be alarmed, though; it isn’t over and above likely that I shall claim the title. But what an awful sell that that poor fellow should have been killed before he secured the widow’s fortune! Everybody is talking about it up here, and everybody feels for you as much as I do. I don’t suppose you will believe that I am sorry; but I really am—I have always wished you every possible prosperity, Frank, and one can’t call it exactly good luck to become a pauper baronet. What a pity that you can’t step into your brother’s shoes and put it all square by marrying the widow yourself! Well, cheer up, old boy! while there’s life there’s hope, and I shouldn’t wonder if you had more life in you than I have. Some time ago, when I had to consult a doctor, he warned me that I was taking it out of myself at a pace too good to last. So keep an eye open upon Mrs. T. in case of accidents. Meanwhile, you might look me up occasionally. If there’s one thing

that I enjoy more than another, it is a talk with an old pal."

Frank winced and groaned under this gratuitous rubbing of salt into his wounds. The worst of it was that Daisy had probably not meant to be cruel or insulting, but had written, as she was in the habit of speaking, quite simply and truthfully. It was dreadfully true that there had been "an awful sell"—might it not likewise be dreadfully true that the very best thing that could happen to him now would be the death of his nominal wife? Not the less did he feel that a woman who could permit herself such jocularities at such a time must be utterly heartless, and the letter which he hastily tore into fragments and threw away from him served to deepen his sense of amazement at the madness by which he had been possessed when he had bound himself for ever to the *Dancer in Yellow*.

Poor Sir Harry was unconsciously guilty of an offence somewhat akin to Daisy's when he sighed out in the course of the same evening—"Ah, my boy, I wish you and that dear, good woman could have taken a fancy to one another! If you could only have foreseen what was coming! But it's too late to think of such things now, I suppose."

The interrogative accent of the last sentence was too much for Frank, and he answered almost roughly that neither early nor late could a match have been made up between him and Mrs. Trafford.

But it was impossible to be angry with the old man, who indeed was scarcely responsible for his utterances. That Sir Harry was breaking up fast was the opinion, not only of his medical attendant, but of everybody about him. He would sit apathetically for hours without speaking a word, it was with difficulty that he could be induced to eat or drink; he did not perhaps suffer much mentally or physically, but death was written on his face in characters which could not be misread. It was, of course, out of the question for his only surviving son to leave him while he was in that state, and he brightened up a little when Frank announced that he had sent in his papers.

“I am glad of that,” he said. “You would have had to leave the service soon, for I hope you feel, as I do, that we mustn’t let Malling pass into the hands of strangers so long as we can possibly afford to hang on here. Our poor Gerard didn’t like the idea of resigning his commission; but he knew his duty—he knew his duty.”

Gerard, at all events, would never have ignored his duty so far as to espouse an unrepresentable woman: Gerard’s successor, being well aware of that, could only hang his head and metaphorically heap dust upon it. One good thing was that the unrepresentable woman was now most unlikely to embitter Sir Harry’s last days.

Those last days and weeks were not, it may be

hoped, much more bitter than the average last days of average mortals. Long, sad and weary they necessarily were; but doctors always assure us (though they do not explain how they come to know anything about it) that the groans of the dying do not really imply pain, and it is quite possible that Sir Harry Coplestone, with his dulled senses, was no longer capable of experiencing actual unhappiness. From time to time he gave way to feeble lamentations, pathetically at variance with the quiet courage which had never hitherto deserted him, mixing up his son's death with the loss of Mrs. Trafford's fortune after a fashion which might have been found ludicrous by anyone who had had the heart to laugh; from time to time he reproached himself for having been too hard upon Gerard, for having failed to understand the dear fellow and for having held him at a distance. But as a general thing he held his peace, sunk in a sort of patient torpor which was perhaps more distressing to bystanders than to himself. Thus, while spring was followed by summer and chilly winds gave place to heat and thunderstorms, he lingered on, growing always a little weaker, spending more and more of his time in bed, and submitting without murmur to the care of the trained nurses whom he had at first disliked. There was nothing definite the matter with him; only something was coming. We kill our dogs and horses as soon as we are convinced that it is cruelty to keep them alive; we are forbidden to

shorten by one hour the misery of those who are dearer to us than dogs or horses and whose ordeal, we are told, is in some mysterious way beneficial to them after their intelligence has ceased to work.

But to all ordeals an end must come, and then what is over and done with matters no more. One morning the doctor told Frank that there was "a change—a threaten̄ing of weakness on the right side. Perhaps it would be as well to telegraph for Miss Coplestone." So Miss Coplestone was telegraphed for, and when she came her brother knew neither her nor anybody else. A fortnight later one more coffin was laid in the family vault, and the so-called Miss Daisy Villiers was free to indulge her sense of humour by reflecting that she might now, if she liked, call herself Lady Coplestone of Malling Park, in the county of Kent.

CHAPTER XIX.

SIR FRANCIS.

THE manifold ironies of Fate, which render the burden of existence somewhat lighter for a few of us, as affording us an excuse for smiling and shrugging our shoulders even when we are most miserable, are merely exasperating and an aggravation of sorrow to the mass of mankind. If Frank Coplestone had been asked at any time during his youth to state the lot in life which he would prefer, he would have answered unhesitatingly that he would like to be owner of Malling Park, with an income sufficient to admit of his residing upon the property. Now he had obtained all that he could have desired ; he was undisputed master of his beloved home, he was comparatively well off (for Sir Harry's personal estate proved to be a good deal larger than had been anticipated)—and he would have given ten years of his life to be back with the old regiment, an ill-provided-for younger son. Setting aside the tragic events which had brought him to his present position, he had reasons for being dissatisfied which must be acknowledged to be as valid as they

are common. What use is there in gaining the wish of your heart if you are forced to dwell in a desert? Who can enjoy pleasant things when he is condemned to enjoy them alone? The solitude which had been accepted with more or less of philosophy by his father was well nigh unendurable to Frank, who foresaw that there could be no hope of escape from it for him. As time went on and he began to settle himself in the saddle he foresaw also that he would not lack duties and occupations; but these, though they may be made to suffice for an elderly man, will scarcely content a young one, and a big house with no woman or child in it is at best a melancholy abode. He had given dire offence to his Aunt Lucy by declining to let her take charge of his establishment for him. He was sorry that she should be offended; but, for more reasons than one, it would have been impossible to accept her kind offer.

There was, however, another lady to whom he was bound at least to give the chance of sitting at the head of his table and receiving such visitors as might be pleased to call upon her, and soon after his father's death he despatched a letter to Daisy in which he reiterated politely, if a trifle coldly, what he had said on a certain evening in Richmond Park. He was ready to do his duty and to let bygones be bygones, he declared; only his terms were, and must of necessity remain, unchanged. Final abandonment of the stage must be regarded as a *sine quâ non*. Daisy took her

time about replying to the above overtures. It was not until the summer was far advanced that she wrote from Scarborough, where (as she incidentally mentioned) she was amusing herself very well with a large party of friends, to say that her husband's suggestion was "not quite good enough."

"I like your high and mighty style of laying down conditions, though," she added. "What is there to prevent me from packing my trunks to-morrow and going off to Kent to claim my rights? Nothing that you can do or say, unless I very much mistake the law of the land. Moreover, I doubt whether the law of the land would back you up if you attempted to restrain me from fulfilling my theatrical engagements for next winter. But you will be glad to hear that I don't propose just at present to give you an opportunity of setting the law in motion. I may at some future time think that it would be rather good fun to present myself to an admiring public in an entirely new character; but for the moment I look to myself decidedly bigger as Daisy Villiers than as the wife of a country baronet. Seriously, dear boy, I prefer my crust of bread and liberty. Added to which, I don't want to make you hate me more than you do already. I should say that your secret was tolerably safe in my keeping, and that it was about a hundred to one against your ever being bothered with me again; only you had better bear in mind that you are not exactly in a position to dictate terms."

Frank inclined to a different view, being strongly of opinion that a legal separation may be granted to a husband whose wife persists in dancing upon the stage in defiance of his prohibition ; but he did not care to consult his lawyers upon the point. His wish—as Daisy evidently understood—was to be left in peace, after having acted in accordance with the dictates of honour, and to avoid, if possible, scandalous disclosures. We fall instinctively and inevitably into our parts, whatever they may be, and Frank, who had at no time been a particularly wild young soldier, was now a respectable squire.

Nevertheless, it is—if the reader will kindly try to realise it—a dreadful thing to be condemned to play the part of a respectable squire, while deprived of the customary adjuncts and aids to respectability. To live all alone in a vast, echoing house, to know for certain that your loneliness must be permanent, to shrink from the insinuating advances of neighbours whose daughters are still upon their hands, to be haunted continually by memories of happier days and absurd hopes, foredoomed to disappointment—would not the waters of Lethe and the material comforts of a private lunatic asylum be, upon the whole, preferable?

“Don’t be so down-hearted,” Mrs. Trafford wrote from the Italian lakes, whither a despairing missive had been forwarded to her ; “you are not the only luckless being upon the face of the earth, nor are

you going to be unhappy for ever because you are unhappy now. While health and strength remain, the world is a pleasant place, in spite of everything. I can assure you that is true, and I ought to know. I mean to be godmother to one of your children yet: perhaps—who knows?—I may even contrive to find the mother of your unborn children for you. Anyhow, you must not cut your throat before next November, when I shall be back in Curzon Street, and shall expect an early visit from you.”

These and other subsequent words of encouragement, proceeding from the same source, cheered Frank up, although Mrs. Trafford knew so little of his sad circumstances as to speak of finding a wife for him. Her courage had at least the effect of making him ashamed of his own despondency; for if he had troubles which could not be talked about, was not she in a like case? Troubles, whatever their nature, have to be endured; decent people endure them without groaning aloud; and those who are fortunate enough to possess a real friend have, at any rate, one great blessing to be thankful for.

When the month of November came (and a very long time it was in coming), Sir Francis Coplestone announced to those whom it concerned that, having paid unremitting attention to his duties for some months past, he was now about to grant himself a few weeks' leave of absence; and it was with some-

thing not far removed from exultation that he set out for London to open verbal communications once more with the lady whom he believed to be his only real friend. From Daisy he had received no communication at all, since that which has been mentioned, but he had seen her name pretty frequently in the papers of late, the autumn theatrical season having been inaugurated by a fresh triumph on her part about which, it appeared, all the world was talking. Skirt-dancing was at that time a novelty, and Daisy, ever on the watch for the rising of a rival star, had made haste to be first in the field with an accomplishment which somebody else might have appropriated, had the right moment been allowed to slip. Having now practically introduced it to the British public, and made it her own (for a swarm of inferior artists scarcely counted), she was drawing enthusiastic audiences every night to the new Embankment Theatre, and as the train in which Frank was seated approached its destination he was repeatedly enjoined, in enormous capitals, to "See Daisy Villiers at the Embankment! A vision of wonder and delight!" At one of the stations he expended sixpence upon the purchase of a weekly paper, the first page of which was filled by a full-length portrait of the celebrated danseuse, floating apparently in mid-air and swathed in a mist of diaphanous drapery. Overleaf was a long account of an interview with her "at her charming and refined residence in the Regent's Park, where

the very atmosphere breathes of luxury, tempered by admirable taste, and where priceless works of art, collected from every quarter of the globe, testify alike to their fortunate owner's wealth and to her discrimination."

This description did not tally with Frank's reminiscences of his wife's abode, but perhaps she had been educated up to a higher level, or possibly the interviewer was not a skilled judge of artistic workmanship. The usual summary of impertinent questions and ridiculous answers followed. "You are devoted to your vocation, Miss Villiers, I believe?" "Most people find it necessary to be devoted to something or somebody."—"Quite so; but do you not find it a very fatiguing one?"—"So fatiguing that a few more years of it will probably make an end of me. At least, that is what my doctor says."—"His apprehensions are exaggerated, I trust. But, pardon me, Miss Villiers, it is a matter of common knowledge that more than one noble lord has been eager for the privilege of placing a coronet upon your brow. May I ask whether you have never felt tempted to retire from the stage and indulge your many cultivated tastes in a position of dignified ease?"—"I don't know whether you call love of freedom a cultivated taste. It is one with which I have no intention of parting, and I do not find that it deprives me of the society of the noble lords whom you mention. Marriage is a useful institution; but I long ago dis-

covered that, personally, I could get along very well without it.' ”

Frank flung down the paper in disgust. “She may have been pulling the fellow’s leg,” he muttered; “but what was the use of saying such a thing as that! She makes herself altogether impossible!”

If she had heard him, she might have retorted that he had no reason to complain on that account, seeing that he was not in the least desirous of making her a possible Lady Coplestone; and certainly he was free from any such desire. His boyish passion was so dead that he could not now comprehend its ever having existed. He knew, as a matter of history, that he had once been madly in love with the Dancer in Yellow, and we all know, as a matter of history, that we were once squalling infants; but we cannot imagine ourselves in long clothes, nor can we recall the satisfactory sensation of sucking our thumbs. The present, that deadly enemy of the past, claims us, whether we will or no, and it cannot be said that we are, as a rule, very reluctant victims.

In any case, Frank felt no reluctance about betaking himself to Curzon Street on the ensuing afternoon, save such as arose from a harassing uncertainty as to how far he might venture to speak freely of poor Gerard to Mrs. Trafford. She had loved the man and would have married him if he had lived; that much might be taken as proved. But did she wish this to be ignored or acknowledged? Frank hoped that she

would not mind something being said upon the subject; for he was conscious that, in their correspondence, he had played an entirely selfish part, and he wanted her to understand that he had not been so blind to her sorrows as he had appeared. He wanted to tell her that Gerard had truly and honestly loved her—would have loved her even if she had not been the mistress of Trant Abbey; he wanted also to tell her that, if his father had been eager for the match, that eagerness had amounted to no more than a very natural wish that the affections of his heir should be fixed upon a lady of fortune. There were so many things that could be said if only needless reticence might be dispensed with!

There was, however, plenty to be said without risk of treading upon forbidden ground. Frank found Mrs. Trafford alone, and had the pleasure of hearing her give orders that no other visitor was to be admitted; so that for a quarter of an hour or more he surrendered himself to the luxury of watching and listening to her, as she sat beside a crackling wood fire, with her elbows on her knees, and held up her slim, jewelled fingers to the blaze. He felt, as he almost invariably did in her presence, a sensation of repose and ease and of being in his right place which Daisy, even at the time of his greatest infatuation, had never been able to confer upon him; he was contented just to sit still and put in a word every now and then; it was her personality and her surround-

ings, rather than what she said, that soothed and comforted him.

Yet she was saying some very kind and sympathising things. She was talking quite quietly and naturally about the two deaths whereby the whole course of his life had been changed; she was not displaying "tact"—that terrible quality of which those who possess it are so inordinately proud, and which is so much harder to bear than honest clumsiness; she was simply treating him as a friend, whom no directness of speech could hurt or alienate. Thus he was presently encouraged to imitate her and to give utterance to what was in his heart respecting those who could no longer plead their own cause.

"Oh, I know," she answered, gently. "I saw, just at the end what the truth was, and it made me very unhappy. Up to those last days I had thought—and I believe I was right—that your father merely wished his son to make a good match, and that your brother was ready to do what seemed so sensible. Not that I in the least blamed either of them: there was nothing to blame them for, and if there had been, blame would have come rather inappropriately from a woman with my history. Only it would have been a good deal easier to disappoint them if there had been no question of love in the matter."

"Do you mean that you would have refused Gerard, then?" Frank asked, in some surprise.

“I could not have done anything else. You seem to think that I was in love with him. That was not so; I only liked him and, in some ways, admired him. But in any case it would have been, and always must be, out of my power to marry again. Can't you understand why?”

“Not in the least,” answered Frank, with wide-open eyes.

“Because you are a man, perhaps. Yet I told you how and why I married Mr. Trafford. I, on my side, can't understand anyone wanting to marry me ‘*pour le bon motif*’—of course hundreds and thousands of people want rich wives. I am sure a great many women must feel, as I do, that there are certain smudges upon the leaves of one's history which can't be rubbed out; but men, I know, are of rather coarser fibre. Anyhow, it doesn't matter now. Don't give me more credit for fortitude than I deserve, that's all. When your brother was killed I lost a friend whom I valued more the better I knew him; but I didn't lose one who could ever have become my husband.”

Frank attempted for a time to protest against a view of her first marriage which struck him as false and overstrained; but she laughed and refused to be drawn into an argument upon the subject.

“You feel in one way and I feel in another,” she said; “if we were to discuss our respective feelings from now to Doomsday we should find it as impossible to alter them as to alter facts. Tell me a few

facts about yourself, now: that will be a good deal more interesting and more profitable.”

It might perhaps have been both if he had confided to her a fact which she was evidently far from suspecting. But he lacked the necessary pinch of courage. After all, what advice or help could she give him? If the leaves of his history did not contain what could fairly be called a smudge, there was an inscription upon them which could by no possibility be rubbed out. It was an easier and pleasanter plan to expatiate upon the somewhat tedious duties of his new position and to ask what he was to do with himself during play-hours. He was told that he must spend as many of them as he could at Curzon Street; he was promised a share in those palliatives which his hostess herself professed to have found effectual, and nothing more was said on this occasion about discovering a wife for him; so that he went away cheerful and comforted.

Why it should have added to his happiness—as it did—to know that Mrs. Trafford had never loved poor Gerard, he did not pause to wonder. Had he done so, there would have been no difficulty in finding an answer: he was, of course, glad that her sorrow was not of the nature that he had supposed.

CHAPTER XX.

A PRIVATE PERFORMANCE.

WALKING along Pall Mall one afternoon, Frank was accosted with much warmth and geniality by his county member, who promptly asked him to dinner—the political support of a considerable landed proprietor being still worth securing, in spite of the reign of democracy and the ballot. He did not particularly want to dine with this spruce, elderly bachelor, who complained bitterly of having been summoned up to London for an autumn session, while other people were happily and healthily shooting pheasants, but, as he had no excuse ready, he accepted, and thus it came to pass that he encountered an old acquaintance in the person of Lord Wednesbury. His lordship did not at first recognise Frank, but, on being reintroduced to him at the club where the dinner took place, remembered him very well, and said so. He was, indeed, unexpectedly cordial—perhaps because the sight of the young man reminded him of his own somewhat protracted youth, and of gay doings which had been brought to a close by his

marriage a year or two before. After dinner he left his place at his host's right hand, transported himself and his cigarette to Frank's neighbourhood, and asked :

"Do you see anything of our old friend, Miss Daisy, in these days? Well may she call herself Daisy, for I'm sure she remains as fresh as one!"

"I saw her in the spring," answered Frank, "when *Othello Junior* was revived. For two years before that I was away on foreign service, and since then I have been down in the country."

"But you have looked in at the Embankment, of course?"

Frank shook his head. "No; not yet. I have only just come up to London."

"Then let me advise you to lose no time in going there. It's the most extraordinary performance you ever saw in your life—fifteen minutes, with scarcely a pause to take breath, and every movement as easy and graceful as if it gave her no trouble at all. How the deuce she does it I can't comprehend! I used," continued Lord Wednesbury, "to take a good deal of interest in that sort of thing, and I was pecuniarily concerned in several theatres, so that I know what tremendous exertion she must go through every night. Just you try dancing about the room for five minutes as hard as ever you can lay legs, and you'll have some faint idea of it. The public can't realise

it, or they would never have the cruelty to make her repeat herself as they do."

"What is the name of the piece?" Frank inquired.

"Upon my word, I forget. She hasn't anything to do with it, you know. She comes on between the acts, and they turn the lime-light upon her, and she executes feats which, to tell you the truth, I can't enjoy as much as I should if I didn't know how infernally difficult and painful they are. But it's worth seeing. There never was anything like it before, nor ever will be again. Only, as you are a friend of hers, I wish you would warn her that she will kill herself if she goes on. No human constitution could stand such a strain much longer."

"But you also are a friend of hers. Couldn't you give her the warning yourself?" Frank suggested.

Lord Wednesbury responded by a slightly embarrassed laugh. "Oh, well, I was a friend of hers once upon a time," he acknowledged; "but I'm a married man now, you see, and I have had to drop a good many of my old friends. Not that Lady Wednesbury objects to receiving Daisy Villiers in a professional capacity—in fact, she is coming to our house to-morrow evening, after the theatre, to give an exhibition of that skirt-dancing which all the women have gone wild about—but I think I shall keep out of her way. She's so abominably mischievous and indiscreet that one can't tell what allusions she mightn't

indulge in, and although I'm as innocent as the driven snow so far as she is concerned, I would rather not be made to look foolish. Would you care to see her dance in private? If so, I'll tell them to send you a card. It's mere child's play, of course, compared with what she does upon the boards; still it's pretty."

Frank was so illogically grateful to this elderly and reformed nobleman (whom he had secretly suspected of being the unknown donor of Daisy's pearls) for speaking as he did of the Dancer in Yellow that he gladly accepted the proffered civility, and on the following morning he duly received a printed intimation to the effect that Viscountess Wednesbury would be at home in Belgrave Square at 10.30 p. m.

Lord Wednesbury's house was a very big one; yet, spacious though it was, there seemed to be hardly room enough in it to hold his acquaintances, who might have been expected to muster in less imposing numbers at that season of the year. Frank, who knew scarcely any smart people, and who purposely delayed his arrival until close upon midnight, had some difficulty in making his way up the broad staircase, at the top of which a tall, sleepy-looking woman, with projecting blue eyes, a long nose and a diamond tiara, was receiving her guests. She evidently had not the most distant notion of who he was; but she summoned up a welcoming smile, and remarked—

“ You are like everybody else ; you won't trouble yourself to put in an appearance until five minutes of the time when this dancing woman is to be upon view. Dancing men would have been useful for the last hour ; but I suppose you will say, like the others, that you aren't a dancing man. You had better shoulder your way into the ball-room at once if you want to see anything.”

Frank did as he was advised, without stopping to mention that he had not been made acquainted with the fact that Lady Wednesbury's party was supposed to be a dance, and, being carried on with the stream, found himself presently upon the fringe of a densely packed crowd. His stature enabled him to survey over the heads of his neighbours a bare, oblong space of polished flooring, flooded with the soft brilliancy of the electric light, a profusion of floral decoration, and a many-coloured, expectant throng, partly seated, partly standing. Somebody close to his elbow said “ Here she comes ! ” Then Daisy, arrayed in flowing robes of the hue to which she had always remained faithful, suddenly appeared at the farther end of the room and stood for an instant, calmly taking stock of the spectators, one or two of whom she favoured with a nod of recognition.

She knew, it had to be assumed, how to suit herself to her public ; for the performance which immediately followed had nothing in common with what Frank had seen (and had not liked) at a music-hall

once before. There were no objectionable features in those light rhythmical movements, those deft and charming manipulations of drapery, that perfectly-rounded little poem in pantomime. The drawing-rooms of Belgravia have become so catholic and tolerant that objectionable features might perhaps have been introduced without much risk of giving offence; still a combination of modernity with decency is entitled to all praise, and Daisy was doubtless well advised in exhibiting herself upon this occasion as an artist, pure and simple. By doing so she earned the approval of two, at least, amongst those who watched her proceedings. Frank, for once, was able to refrain from blushing on his wife's behalf, whilst Lady Wednesbury, who had advanced at the last moment, and for whom a space had been cleared just in front of him, added a little inaudible tribute to the loud clapping of hands which announced that the spectacle was at an end.

“Really quite nice! I must call the girl and thank her,” Frank heard this lymphatic lady murmur; and when Daisy, in obedience to a signal, composedly approached the mistress of the house, a short colloquy ensued which was assuredly meant to be gracious on the one side, and which was perfectly good-humoured on the other.

“So glad you were able to come, Miss Villiers! I never saw anything so beautiful as your dancing. If I were a few years younger I should be tempted to

take lessons from you. But you don't give lessons, I believe?"

"No, not yet. It pays me better at present to dance in public—and sometimes in private, as I did just now. I haven't a minute of spare time, except for eating and sleeping."

"Ah, I suppose not. How wearing it must be! I am sure you are dreadfully tired now—and hungry too. I will find somebody to take you downstairs to supper."

Lady Wednesbury glanced round, and her eye fell upon Frank. "Perhaps," she began hesitatingly, "Mr.—Captain——"

"Sir Francis," corrected Daisy, with a smile. "Oh, yes; I daresay Sir Francis Coplestone, whom I have had the pleasure of meeting once or twice already, will be kind enough to get me a sandwich and a glass of champagne."

Sir Francis and Lady Coplestone descended the staircase arm in arm, eyed with curiosity by those who stood aside to let them pass and exchanging never a word until they had reached a secluded little smoking-alcove, divided from the great dining-room by Oriental hangings, towards which the latter, who seemed to know her way about the house, silently guided the former.

"Now go and bring a bottle of champagne," she said, as she sank down upon a divan. "I don't want anything to eat; I'm too dead beat for food."

He did not take her at her word; but she shook her head when he returned, and refused to look at the plates of mayonnaise and galantine that he brought with him. However, she swallowed a good-sized tumbler of champagne at one draught, which apparently revived her a little.

“I am afraid you are working yourself to death, Daisy,” he said—being unable to think of anything else to say. “Lord Wednesbury told me that you were overdoing it.”

“Did he really? How touching of him! Poor, dear old Weddy!—did you notice his extreme anxiety to get behind somebody, so as to avoid having to speak to me? I suppose he was afraid I should remind him of certain hilarious gatherings which used to be held in this house before the reign of her ladyship. Her ladyship is rather impertinent and would like to be more so; but she didn’t succeed in getting a rise out of me, you see, even when she talked about taking dancing lessons. Can’t you see her holding up her petticoats and trying to do a skirt-dance under my tuition! After all, I may have to come to it—who knows?”

“You will never give dancing lessons except by your own choice, Daisy; you know that well enough,” said Frank.

“You mean that it will always be open to me to keep house for you and your friends at—what’s the name of the place?—Malling Park? Thanks awfully,

but I am not sure that the dancing lessons wouldn't be preferable. However, we shall see. One thing is beyond question, and that is that I shall not be able to keep up this show at the Embankment much longer. You haven't patronised it yet, have you?"

"Not yet. Do you think I should be likely to enjoy it?"

"I am almost sure you would. You always did appreciate my professional successes, and in this thing I'm simply superb: everybody says so. Only you must look sharp, because, as I tell you, it will have to come to an end soon. It's humiliating to be compelled to make such a confession, but the truth is that I am not as young as I was, and I don't want to break down publicly. You know what happens to broken-down racehorses. They are all right, though the public forgets them; they go to the stud and end their career luxuriously and usefully. Unfortunately, the same system hasn't yet been applied to the case of broken-down *danseuses*, and it isn't considered moral to put a bullet into our heads when we are past our work. I am really very sorry, for your sake, that it isn't."

"That is a very cruel thing to say, and I don't think I have deserved it," Frank remonstrated.

"Poor old boy! Well, perhaps you haven't, and I'm sure I don't want to hurt your feelings. I am not really going to break down yet awhile either; only I have a fit of the blues to-night. I get like this sometimes when I am tired out and when I think of the

hateful, dismal, tedious future which is coming a step nearer to me with every tick of the clock. Oh, I'm an enviable woman, I know; thousands would give their ears to change places with me. I have saved a snug little sum of money; I sha'n't starve, whatever happens. But for all that, it makes my blood run cold to think of retiring from the stage. You don't understand, of course."

"I think I do," answered Frank, with a sigh: "it isn't difficult to understand that excitement may become a necessity of existence to some people. But—how can I help you, Daisy?"

She glanced at his forlorn, perplexed face and burst out laughing. "You can go and get my brougham for me, anyhow," she said. "And I'll tell you what you might do in addition, if you wanted to be very amiable; you might breakfast with me about twelve o'clock to-morrow. I feel as if I should like to have a quiet, comfortable chat with you, for the sake of auld lang syne."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE UNDER SECRETARY.

TWELVE o'clock is rather a late hour for breakfast, and Frank, whose military training had accustomed him to be up early whether he had spent a long or a short time in bed, had disposed of and digested that meal when he pulled his wife's door-bell. But indeed he was not there with any view to satisfy a regular and tolerably robust appetite. She had stated that she wanted to have a quiet, comfortable chat with him, and although he could not anticipate much comfort from anything that she might have to say, he had felt that the seclusion and quietude of her own abode would at least be better suited for confidential intercourse between them than a corner in a crowded Belgrave Square mansion. His heart was moved with compassion for her; in some degree he understood her solitude and the craving for excitement which was its natural outcome; he was willing to do all that he could for her, willing to waive his own very substantial grievances, a little ashamed, perhaps, of the undeniable fact that she had

lost all charm and attraction for him. She must, he supposed, regard him with some sort of affection still, or she would hardly have asked him to grant her that tête-à-tête interview. But to his surprise and displeasure, he found, on being admitted, that their interview was not to be of that description. Three young men whom he had never seen before in his life were already seated in the painfully meretricious-looking little drawing-room which he knew so well, a fourth followed closely upon his heels, and when Daisy, arrayed in a delicately-tinted, lace-trimmed tea-gown, made her appearance it was evident that a night's rest had had a restoring effect upon her spirits. She was, as usual, vivacious and unceremonious: she had a jocular form of greeting for each of her guests, whom she addressed by their Christian names; with a rapid sweep of her hand she introduced them to Frank—Lord Somebody Something, Captain This, Mr. That—what did it signify to him who they were?—then she announced that she was ravenously hungry.

“Come and eat, all of you! Not a morsel has passed my lips since an early dinner yesterday, nor a drop of drink, except some inferior champagne which Sir Francis Coplestone was good enough to get for me at Lady Wednesbury's hop last night. That's why he is here now, and that's why he looks so morose. The wine has disagreed with him, poor fellow, as I knew it would: but he's so beastly polite that he didn't like to shirk breakfasting with me—which I

invited him to do in a moment of mistaken gratitude. Cheer up, Sir Francis, you won't be poisoned in this humble house, I promise you."

Certainly Frank was not poisoned, the repast which was presently set before him being the work of a very excellent cook, and the champagne (which everybody present chose in preference to tea or coffee) being above all praise; but he did not cheer up, nor did he make much effort to hide his vexation. For what imaginable purpose, he wondered, had Daisy placed him in this false and absurd position? What satisfaction could she expect to derive from forcing him to listen to a style of conversation which had not even novelty to recommend it, and which, situated as he was, must of necessity make him writhe with annoyance and humiliation? Why should she think it worth while to emphasise so offensively what he already knew—that he was the husband of a woman to whom every juvenile *viveur* considered himself at liberty to be impertinent?

At her own time Daisy answered these questions, which had been silently and indignantly addressed to her for an hour and a half without evoking any response. She would not let Frank go when he endeavoured to make his escape; she insisted upon detaining him until the other men had departed, and he yielded to her behests, thinking that she must surely have some explanation to offer of conduct which had the appearance of being inexplicable. And

so, in truth, she had; although it could scarcely be deemed a satisfactory one.

“Tonic and corrective combined,” she said, laughing heartily, as soon as she was left alone with her husband and his face of wrathful interrogation; “that’s the analysis of the dose which is going to do you such a lot of good, and which is making you feel so sick for the moment. Last night we were both of us dangerously near a melting mood. Now don’t deny it; because I admit that I was. I often am when I get over-tired, and I could see that you were. It wouldn’t have taken a great deal to make us fall into one another’s arms, agree to let bygones be bygones and sketch out a plan of future humdrum, respectable existence down in Kent, where, after a time, your friends might even have consented to call upon me. Well, you know, Frank, that would never do, and I had the happy inspiration of inviting you to breakfast to show why it would never do. Are you convinced?”

“Really, since you ask me, I think I am,” answered Frank, coldly.

“I thought you would be. To be sure there are other reasons—such as, for instance, the trifling detail that the very sight of me makes you shudder. But that probably wouldn’t have weighed against your sense of duty.”

“If what you do and say makes me shudder,” began Frank, “it is because——”

“Quite so; you needn’t go on. I remember that you once put me into a rage by a speech of that kind, but you won’t repeat the success—especially as I was quite aware of what you would think about the amiable noodles who have just left us.”

“What was I to think? What could anybody think?” Frank demanded. “Noodles they may be, and I daresay you find them amiable; but it is very certain that no man who had the slightest respect for himself would have allowed them to be as familiar as they were with his wife.”

“Yet you didn’t feel called upon to arise and smite them.”

“You are so little my wife!” Frank could not help exclaiming.

It was not perhaps a very dignified retort, but he was exasperated beyond all regard for his personal dignity. Was he to be sneered at now for his patience and because he had refrained from making a scene in her dining-room? It was really the last straw!

“As little as possible, my good friend,” agreed Daisy, composedly; “that is exactly what I wanted you to realise. As for me, I fully realise that you would be prepared to act the part of a martyr to duty, if necessary; but, luckily for you, it isn’t necessary. Last night you were so very kind as to inquire how you could help me—though I don’t remember having asked you for help. Well, you

know what the eccentric old chap who lived in a tub said to an Emperor of the period who put the same question to him."

"Alexander the Great," observed Frank, "got out of the light, I believe, and covered his retreat by saying something civil and epigrammatic. Not being Alexander the Great, I shall be forgiven, I daresay, for omitting the neat speech, provided that I take myself off. I think I may safely promise that you will not be in any way molested by me for the future."

He walked away in a white heat of anger, assuring himself that he was more than justified in washing his hands for ever of his wife and her affairs. He had, however, to make these assurances very positive, because of an irritating impression that he had not come out of this final encounter as well as he might have done. After a fashion, Daisy had scored—or had seemed to score. "I decline your conditions," she had said in effect. "Very well, but you also decline mine. We live apart by mutual consent, and neither of us is entitled to assume airs of superior virtue in dealing with the other. You don't even pretend to love me, and I have never requested you to contribute to my support. By what right, then, do you presume to call yourself ill-used if I choose to preserve my independence?" That was a plausible sort of position to take up, and Frank found it necessary to dwell upon the gratuitous insults to which she had sub-

jected him in order to maintain the requisite pitch of self-respecting wrath.

To this effort he was not unequal, and he was still as indignant as there was any occasion for him to be when he reached Mrs. Trafford's house in Curzon Street, whither unconscious cerebration guided his steps in the course of the afternoon. He wanted (as indeed he almost always did want after talking with Daisy) an alterative, and he sought it in the accustomed quarter, just as animals who have swallowed poison are led by instinct, it is said, towards neighbouring antidotes. Regarded in that light, Mrs. Trafford sufficed by the mere fact of her presence, and by the atmosphere of refined repose which she diffused around her; so that Frank was quite satisfied to learn that she was at home. Her having other callers with her at the moment did not greatly signify, although, of course, it would have been pleasanter to find her alone. To one of these only did she introduce him soon after he entered, remarking, as she did so :

“ Like the rest of the world, you know Mr. Lister already by name and fame. If you don't know him by sight, it isn't the fault of the illustrated papers, or even the caricaturists.”

Portraits of this much-talked-of personage had, in truth, come under Frank's observation frequently enough of late. As younger son of a well-known sporting magnate, as ex-editor of a clever little evening paper, and as present Under-Secretary of State

for War in a Conservative Ministry, the Honourable George Lister had gradually earned for himself a reputation which, if not unique, was at all events unusual. He was a good platform speaker, and had made his mark in the House, he was believed to be ambitious, and was generally regarded as the coming man. He had many friends, and (by reason of his caustic tongue) at least an equal number of enemies; so that he was well equipped for success in public life, which seems to demand the one possession as much as the other. In outward appearance he was rather good-looking than otherwise, with keen blue eyes, a clearly cut profile and a hairless face; everybody spoke of him as young, although he was nearer forty than thirty, and he was always carefully dressed. He knew perfectly well who Sir Francis Coplestone was—some appreciable portion of his success may have been due to the pains which he gave himself to ascertain and bear in mind who everybody was—and it pleased him to make a few flattering remarks about the loss which the service had sustained by the premature retirement of a promising officer.

“There are a good many promising officers scattered about in different regiments,” answered Frank, laughing. “If some of us didn’t resign our commissions, promotion would come to a standstill.”

He perceived that the man was insincere; but there is a species of insincerity which is not wholly unpleasant, and this Mr. Lister proceeded to display,

speaking in admiring language of an insignificant little frontier expedition the brunt of which had been borne by Frank's late regiment, and adding: "You may say what you like about promising officers being common, but I can assure you that they are not numerous enough to be cheerfully dispensed with. You will have opportunities of serving your country in less exciting ways, though, I daresay. Why don't you go in for Parliamentary life? Everybody says it isn't worth the trouble, and I agree that for the mediocrities it isn't; but then you are not a mediocrity. You wouldn't be a friend of Mrs. Trafford's if you were."

This concluding observation, which was made in a slightly raised tone, drew a faint smile from the lady alluded to.

"Sir Francis is not much interested in politics," she said, "but your clever right and left shot tells all the same. We both feel a little taller than we did, and I am more than ever proud of counting somebody so very far removed from mediocrity as you are amongst my friends."

"If you do me the honour to include me in that select list, it is I who am proud and happy," Mr. Lister hastened to declare.

He looked as if he meant what he said. Frank noticed that his eyes brightened as he spoke, and noticed also that Mrs. Trafford immediately turned away.

She took no further part in a colloquy which was soon concluded by the departure of Mr. Lister, who lamented the necessity of hurrying down to the House to listen to long-winded Radical members; but Frank knew intuitively that she was listening with one ear, while turning the other, as well as her eyes, towards the visitors whom she was entertaining, and he could not quite make out whether she liked the brilliant Under-Secretary or not. For his own part he thought that he did, notwithstanding a natural prejudice against Mrs. Trafford's suitors. That Lister came under that denomination it seemed safe to assume, seeing that he was unmarried, ambitious and, in all likelihood, desirous of increasing his income. A certain diffidence of manner in taking leave of his hostess, and asking whether he might call again when he could snatch a free hour, was perhaps put on. Mrs. Trafford responded a little curtly, saying that she was sometimes at home between four and five o'clock, but more often out.

"Well, how did the future Prime Minister strike you?" she inquired of Frank half an hour later, by which time everybody else had gone away.

"I should think he was clever," Frank replied, "and he would be good-looking if it wasn't for his mouth. He was uncommonly gracious to me; so I suppose he ought to be called well-bred. Graciousness to nobodies is a sure sign of good breeding, isn't it?"

“ Oh, he is well-bred and gracious and clever, no doubt. What is wrong with his mouth ? ”

“ I couldn't tell you exactly. Something that gives an impression of untrustworthiness, I think.”

“ As if any rising or risen politician could afford himself the luxury of being trustworthy ! But you are really a very skilful physiognomist. Now tell me, do you know who Mr. Lister is ? ”

“ I know what all the world knows,” answered Frank. “ Is there anything more ? ”

“ I was wondering whether you had heard or guessed that he is the man about whom I told you long ago, before you went out to India—the man whom I should have married, if circumstances hadn't put that out of the question.”

She spoke so calmly that Frank had no reason to be startled and shocked, although, as a matter of fact, he was both. He said it had not occurred to him to identify Lister with the man of whom she spoke, and she went on :

“ Yes ; he was younger and a good deal less celebrated in those days. I have not seen him since, until about a week ago, when he accosted me at the theatre.”

“ And now he has come back again ? ”

“ And now he has come back again. I rather wanted to have an unprejudiced opinion from you.”

“ That, I am afraid, you will never have,” Frank replied.

She laughed. "I suppose not. Still you have committed yourself to the statement that he looks untrustworthy, which is a good shot, to say the least of it. At the same time, I ought to have made you understand that he didn't, strictly speaking, jilt me. Our marriage was an impossibility, and he was justified in refusing to bind me down to a long engagement. You must remember that, if you want to be perfectly fair."

"But I don't want to be perfectly fair," Frank returned. "I am not a judge, and he isn't being tried before me. If he has anything to say for himself, let him say it to you."

"I sincerely trust that he will never be guilty of such a breach of good breeding as that. The past is quite dead and decently buried; it was only as a matter of historical curiosity that I asked what effect he produced upon you. In all probability, we shall neither of us see any more of him. Let us revert to the present. What have you been doing since you were here last?"

But Frank was far from being sure that they had seen the last of the Under-Secretary for War, and much less inclined to give an account of himself to Mrs. Trafford than he had been earlier in the afternoon. There were moments when she froze him, as there were moments when he longed to make a clean breast of everything to her, and he went away without breathing a syllable respecting his personal mis-

eries. There was no ostensible cause for these being increased by the circumstance that his friend was in a fair way to become the Honourable Mrs. Lister; although, to be sure, Mr. Lister had an untrustworthy mouth.

CHAPTER XXII.

ENLIGHTENMENT.

ONE notices with amazement and admiration how much spare time statesmen have upon their hands. Other people who consider themselves hard-worked are apt to grumble at social demands, declaring that considerations of health render it imperative upon them to eat their food in peace and retire to rest at a reasonable hour; yet nothing can be more evident than that the duties and responsibilities of statesmanship far exceed those which ordinary toilers have to bear. The explanation of an apparent anomaly is, no doubt, to be found in the vastly superior brain-power of politicians, which enables them to accomplish and dismiss in a few hours what would cost the rest of us days and nights of anxious thought; and indeed everybody must have observed how lightly the cares of office weigh upon these gifted mortals. The Honourable George Lister, for example (not yet Right Honourable, but going to be), managed, in spite of all that the nation and the Tory party expected of him, to see a good deal of his friends, and it was evident

to all who had the privilege of meeting him that he found neither routine labours nor harassing attacks in the House of Commons more than he could cheerfully bear. The privilege of meeting him in Curzon Street was accorded to Frank Coplestone with somewhat greater frequency than the latter desired—as was also that of ascertaining from his own lips that he did not take himself too seriously.

“Government by party,” Mr. Lister remarked on one occasion, “is a game like another. The rules are soon learnt, and by the time that you have elbowed your way to the front it has become rather more exciting than most games. It has its drawbacks, of course, but an exaggerated sense of its importance is not one of them. We can’t blunder very badly—though some of us, I must admit, do our best—because there are invaluable permanent persons whose hands are always outstretched to guide us along our grooves and catch us when we fall.”

Mrs. Trafford seemed to be much interested in and a little puzzled by utterances which may have been intended to interest and puzzle her; but Frank thought them rather disingenuous. He likewise thought it pretty cool of Mr. Lister to renew, without having been in any way pressed to do so, an intimacy which had been broken off under circumstances scarcely creditable to himself.

“But it’s no business of mine,” he reflected. “If she still cares for the man—and she evidently does—

nothing that I could say would make her despise him; and after all, he isn't so very despicable, perhaps. He turned his back upon her when she was poor, and he would like to marry her now that she is rich: it sounds ugly, but I don't know that my own story sounds a great deal prettier. When I relate it to her, she will probably say that I have been acting a lie ever since she first made my acquaintance, and I sha'n't be able to contradict her."

It was after a sojourn of a week or two in London that Frank arrived at this sensible and philosophic acquiescence in coming events which he was powerless to direct. During that time he had dined repeatedly with Mrs. Trafford, had escorted her to picture-galleries and afternoon concerts, had been treated by her as a valued friend, and would doubtless have been very well contented with the kind of life that he was leading in her society if the amiability which was extended to him had not been shared in equal degree by Mr. Lister. That he should distrust and, in a certain sense, dislike Lister was surely natural enough. Had the conditions been different, he would not at all have disliked that eminent gentleman, who was always pleasant to him and who, by all accounts, did not take the trouble to be pleasant to everybody; but if poor dear Gerard had not been quite worthy of Mrs. Trafford, how much less so was this selfish, well-bred, cynical man of the world, with his determination to get on at any price and his absolute control over all

scruples, emotions or affections which might stand in the way of that paramount necessity.

Aunt Lucy, whom Frank, as in duty bound, visited every now and again, spoke with some bitterness of an engagement which, it appeared, was commonly anticipated.

“Your friend the widow is going to do well for herself,” she remarked—“a great deal better than she would have done if things had fallen out in the way that we hoped for once upon a time. Mr. Lister is sure of a place in the Conservative Cabinet, they say, and her money will give him the lift that he needs. Well, I wish him joy of his bargain, and I am glad that I don’t stand in his shoes. If I did, it wouldn’t reassure me to think of that woman’s first marriage or to know—as I presume he must—what a short time it is since she contemplated a second one. But he is said not to be over fastidious.”

“We have hardly the right to say that she would have married Gerard,” Frank ventured to remonstrate.

“I am not in the habit of saying so,” returned Miss Coplestone, tartly; “but I take it that I have a right to think just exactly what I have always thought about your friend Mrs. Trafford.”

Frank for his part could not boast of the same consistency. He found Mrs. Trafford perplexing, and even a little disappointing. She had distinctly told him, not so very long before, that she could

never marry again, and had given reasons which, if slightly fantastic, had at least not been unintelligible. Yet she was now holding out every encouragement to a man whose motives her shrewdness should have enabled her to see through at a glance, and whom it was difficult to believe that she could have entirely forgiven. Perhaps she was blind to any defect of his, or perhaps her purpose was to avenge herself upon him by refusing him point-blank when the time should come. Either way, her behaviour seemed to lack dignity, and accorded ill with preconceived ideas of her.

It was a mere trifle that eventually upset all Frank's preconceived ideas, not so much with regard to Mrs. Trafford as to himself in relation to her. He was sitting by her fireside, one dark, gloomy afternoon, and congratulating himself upon the fog, which was likely to prevent any intruder from putting a stop to their comfortable, desultory talk, when she said abruptly :

“All this time I have been searching in vain for the future Lady Coplestone. I don't know a great many girls, and those whom I do know seem unsuitable for one reason or another. Can't you give me some notion of the sort of person that you require?”

“Quite easily,” answered Frank; “and I am all the more glad to do so because it will save you the trouble of looking out for what doesn't exist. That

sort of person would have to be an exact reproduction of yourself."

He had not intended to say that, nor could he tell what had made him say it; but his own words enlightened him far more completely and startlingly than they did his hearer. It was quite true; the woman who sat facing him, who was his intimate friend, and whose intimacy and friendship had been accorded to him by virtue of a rather absurd tacit understanding to the effect that she was his senior by a long way, was the only woman in the world whom, under happier conditions, he could have loved. Nay—for indeed there was nothing to be gained by mincing matters—she was the only woman whom he did love. The discovery was queer and unexpected, but scarcely painful. The acknowledgment of it explained many things, cleared the air and could harm nobody; since, of course, no verbal acknowledgment of it could ever be made. Mrs. Trafford fortunately seemed not to have the slightest inkling—how could she?—of what his flattering statement might imply. She laughed and remarked:

“What a pity it is that I haven't a younger sister, with all my little good qualities and none of my serious shortcomings! If I had, your fate and hers would have been sealed long ago. As it is, I must continue to keep my eyes open; though I don't suppose you will be guided by me when I have made my choice. Seriously, it is essential that you should

marry soon. You are one of those men who are inevitably destined, not only by circumstances, but by temperament, for matrimony, and I live in a constant state of terror lest you should be snapped up by some designing little wretch whose first act will be to quarrel with me."

"You may dismiss all fears of that kind," said Frank. "No wretch that I know of has designs upon me, and no designs would have the remotest chance of success."

He was upon the point of adding that her own danger was considerably more imminent than his, but thought better of it, and held his peace. Lister, taking him all round, was not a bad fellow; Lister, when all was said and done, was her first love. At any rate, nothing could now be urged in deprecation of a marriage which was likely enough to bring her happiness by one who was obliged to admit to himself that he was no disinterested judge.

He left the house and groped his way to Piccadilly, feeling rather sorry for himself, yet not altogether sorry that he was at last face to face with the truth. From a strictly moral standpoint, it is doubtless wrong for a married man to be in love with anybody except his wife; but it cannot be pretended that Frank's conscience upbraided him very severely on that score. The Law and the Church might pronounce Daisy to be his wife; but she herself had no wish to be so regarded, and he really could not feel that he was bound

to her by any other ties than those which the Law and the Church forbade him to break. Mrs. Trafford was probably right in declaring that he was a man of uxorious temperament. So much was this the case that the mere fact of knowing that there was a woman in existence with whom he might, under conceivable circumstances, have been perfectly happy, made him feel a little less lonely than he had done before. *Quand on n'a pas ce que l'on veut, il faut se contenter de ce qu'on a*, says the French proverb. Frank, unlike the majority of mankind, was so constituted that this did not strike him as downright nonsense. He looked forward to a future which should at least not separate him from the woman whom he loved; he did not think that there was any risk of Mr. Lister's picking a quarrel with him; one risk, and only one, he did foresee: it was within the limits of possibility that Mrs. Trafford might some day discover why the task of attempting to provide him with a partner for life would be labour lost. And he had not at all forgotten what Mrs. Trafford had said so emphatically about Dancers in Yellow and their like on a certain afternoon in the spring of that year.

It was, consequently, a far from agreeable surprise to him to be informed, a day or two later, that he was to accompany her to the Embankment Theatre. He was dining in Curzon Street at the time, together with Lister and a young married woman who had been invited, for the sake of symmetry, to join them in a

subsequent visit to one of the theatres. The engagement was one of comparatively long standing, and the selection of the theatre had been left to Mr. Lister, from whom the suggestion had originally emanated. The Embankment, it seemed, had been chosen partly because there had been some difficulty about procuring a box elsewhere, but chiefly because a performance was now to be witnessed at that place of amusement which Mr. Lister was of opinion that nobody ought to miss.

“I suppose,” Mrs. Trafford remarked, when she mentioned to Frank whither they were bound, “you have seen this Daisy Villiers, as she calls herself, scores of times; so it will be no novelty to you. Personally, I have prudish sort of prejudices which have hitherto prevented me from setting eyes upon her, and which I am assured that it is my duty to overcome.”

“I doubt whether you will,” answered Frank, rather gloomily; “but you will admire her dancing—I never yet met anybody who didn’t.”

“Oh, very likely! At any rate one will be glad to have seen such a celebrity for once, and I daresay it won’t be necessary to repeat the experience.”

“A professional dancer is not invariably a monster of iniquity,” Frank felt bound to plead.

“Oh, dear no! and this one may be a model of propriety in private life, for anything I know to the contrary; only I don’t like such exhibitions. It is, after all, a matter of taste.”

Frank smothered a sigh and changed the subject. One small comfort was that they were not going to the stalls, but to a box; so that he might hope to secure a position which should render him invisible from the stage. If Daisy were to catch sight of him, escorting two unknown ladies, she would be quite capable, he thought, of making signals to him out of sheer *diablerie*.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SOMETHING GOES WRONG.

IT was a little odd, Frank thought, while he was being driven at a rapid pace towards the Embankment Theatre, that Mrs. Trafford, of all people in the world, should be taking him to see his wife in a part with which he had not as yet had the curiosity to make himself familiar. It was odd and it was not very pleasant ; but there was no help for it, nor, unless he had very bad luck indeed, were any awkward results likely to follow from this practical joke on the part of Fate. Mr. Lister, who was seated beside him with his back to the horses, was giving a succinct account of Daisy in reply to the questions of the ladies.

“The most finished artist in her line that has ever adorned the British stage ; I am sure you will say so when you have seen her. Vulgar? Oh, well, of course, she is occasionally that ; but you won't think her vulgar to-night. No ; I can't tell you much about her life off the boards. One has heard authoritative statements, but the truth, I should im-

agine, is that she is neither better nor worse than the rest of them. Somebody told me that her father is a respectable tradesman whom she declines to acknowledge. She is often to be met with in the Park, in a spick-and-span victoria, drawn by a pair of high-stepping cobs, which her enormous professional earnings may have enabled her to purchase. After all, what does it matter who she is? Nobody thinks of inquiring into the antecedents of his tailor or his hatter or his bootmaker. We pay these people for what they can do, not for what they are."

The play had already begun when the party entered their box, where Frank at once selected a back seat on the side nearest to the stage—a comic opera, it was called, and inasmuch as there was a good deal of singing in it, while the dialogue was of a sprightly order, the designation was perhaps accurate. It seemed to amuse the lady behind whose back Frank had placed himself; so that he was relieved from any obligation to talk to her and could notice the fact that Mrs. Trafford and Lister kept up a whispered and apparently interesting dialogue throughout the first act. More interesting dramas are enacted off the stage than upon it every night of the week, no doubt; only one must not play a part, however subordinate, in these, if one wishes to enjoy them comfortably. Frank's part in Mrs. Trafford's life-history was at least sufficiently important to interfere a good deal with his comfort, and resigned though he was

to a dénouement which he recognised as inevitable, he would fain have been spared watching the slow processes by which it was approached.

He breathed a little more freely when the curtain fell, and when Mr. Lister asked him whether he was going to smoke a cigarette. "Daisy Villiers doesn't come on for another ten minutes; so there will be plenty of time."

The two men returned, on the first sound of the orchestra striking up again, to find both theatre and stage completely darkened. Presently a brilliant flood of light was shed upon the latter, in the centre of which appeared a gently swaying form, clad (for once) all in white, and manipulating clouds of filmy drapery which scarcely seemed to belong to her, and which alternately concealed and revealed her exquisitely modelled limbs. The effect produced was so strange and unreal that it was difficult to recognise a being of flesh and blood in that aërial dancer—difficult even to realise that she was dancing at all. She seemed to be floating, rather than moving; no idea of physical exertion was conveyed by those endless variations of pose, executed in perfect time to the slow, dreamy strains of the music. The hues of the light thrown upon her changed rapidly—crimson and azure and so, through countless intermediate tints to a bright yellow, which was maintained for several consecutive seconds, and which called forth a hoarse, appreciative murmur from the audience. And all the

time those strange gauzy coils were kept revolving around her, taking as many shapes as mists on a mountain side, drifting this way and that, as though in obedience to some invisible controlling force.

“It is marvellous!” exclaimed Mrs. Trafford, in a low voice—“and most beautiful too! I had no idea that skirt-dancing was such a fine art as this.”

“Ah, I thought you would find that there was rather more in it than you had supposed,” remarked Lister, with quiet triumph. “But this is nothing; it is only the theme of the symphony, so to speak. You will see what she will make of it presently.”

What she made of it, while the musical time grew brisker and brisker, was something weird, fantastic and fascinating in a sense altogether beyond the power of descriptive language to seize or transmit—something that caused the spectator to catch his breath involuntarily and draw his brows together. There are plenty of educated musicians who are ready to tell you precisely what a given symphony means (although composers of symphonies are not much in the habit of doing this) and an expert might perhaps have furnished some lucid explanation of that wild Terpsichorean display; but the truth is that in neither case are explanations required. The art of the composer, the art of the interpreter of music, the art of such marvellous dancers as Daisy Villiers is to rouse emotions which demand no analysis, to sweep away crowds of ignorant as well as cultured mortals,

to abolish for a brief space those reasoning faculties which are at best so circumscribed and upon the due exercise of which depends what we call sanity. That whirlwind of motion, that extraordinary figure, the very embodiment of agility and grace, leaping, wheeling, soaring in a blaze of light—dispassionate criticism might take the whole thing to pieces subsequently and point out, as in duty bound, the essential trickiness of it; but while it lasted the Dancer in Yellow held absolute sway over her little world.

The spectacle went on and on, aided by changing scenic effects, at an ever increasing rate of speed until the tension of watching it became painful, well-nigh unendurable. Frank, who had clean forgotten all the good reasons that he had for remaining out of sight, had risen and was craning his head over that of Mrs. Trafford's friend. Mrs. Trafford herself, with parted lips and cheeks which had lost their colour, had fallen back in her chair and was staring distressfully and compassionately at the madly-revolving form upon the stage.

"Oh, I wish they would stop!" she ejaculated under her breath; "this has gone on too long!"

Almost as she spoke the climax was reached. Once more a cataract of yellow glory was shed upon the spot towards which all eyes were strained, and upon the shining central figure, which suddenly faltered, staggered and fell prone, although the music continued. But this, too, ceased somewhat abruptly when

the curtain was lowered, and then, after a second or two of absolute stillness, broke forth round after round of cheering, stamping and clapping of hands. The British public is, as a rule, unemotional; but on those rare occasions when it does lose its self-consciousness there is no public to compare with it for enthusiasm.

“Does she always end like that?” Mrs. Trafford asked, turning quickly round to Lister.

He shook his head. “No; I never saw her drop down before, and she generally repeats the last movement when they ask for it. Something must have gone wrong.”

Something had indeed gone wrong, as the manager at length stepped before the curtain to announce, in response to shouts which he probably felt that there might be some danger in ignoring. He very much regretted to say that Miss Villiers had been seized with sudden indisposition, and would be unable to re-appear that evening; he begged the ladies and gentlemen present to remember that the exhibition which they had just witnessed entailed great exertion and fatigue upon the sole performer, and he ventured to claim their indulgence and sympathy on behalf of one who had never grudged any effort to satisfy her patrons. The play would now proceed.

This little speech was well received, and, after a brief interval, the curtain rose upon the second act of a musical extravaganza which probably not one in

ten of the spectators had paid their money to look on at.

Mrs. Trafford, glancing over her shoulder to beckon to Frank, and beg him to find out, if possible, whether that poor woman had been taken seriously ill or not, became aware that he had vanished, and guessed that he had gone off to obtain information without waiting to be asked. He had in truth done so; he could do no less. But neither knowing nor being known by the attendants at the theatre, which he had never visited before, he was experiencing some difficulty in making his way behind the scenes, when, in the nick of time, he encountered Tommy Fellowes, who, it appeared, had just come up from the country on a flying visit, and who, after some preliminary greetings and explanations, said :

“ Well, old chap, you can’t keep away from our little friend in yellow, eh? By Jove! wasn’t she magnificent to-night? It’s too much of a good thing, though—downright cruelty, I call it. I’ve been talking to her like a father, and telling her that when she takes to fainting dead away upon the stage, it’s about time to pull up. That business ought to be cut short by five minutes at least.”

“ It was nothing more than a fainting fit, then? ” asked Frank, somewhat relieved.

“ What more would you have?—sudden death? Well, that’s what it may come to, if she persists in performing impossibilities. I’ve used what influence

I have with her, and you ought to do the same. We're all of us aiding and abetting in manslaughter; I've a jolly good mind to write to the 'Times' about it."

"Could I see her for a moment, do you think?"

"Oh, not to-night; she has gone off home, looking like a corpse, poor little woman! But you might look her up to-morrow, and add your entreaties to mine. I couldn't say all I wanted to say, because she was inclined to be hysterical; so I let off steam by telling the manager what I thought of him. He said he was very sorry, and had remonstrated with Miss Villiers already, only she wouldn't stand being interfered with, and he couldn't afford to lose her—which I dare say was true. All the same, this must really be stopped, you know."

Frank agreed that it must, and added that he would make a point of calling upon Daisy, the next day, for the purpose of telling her so. "Though I don't know why she should listen to me if she won't listen to you," he thought it prudent to remark.

"I expect she'll listen to you," said Tommy, rather drily. And then—noticing perhaps that this observation was not received in very good part—he hastened to explain that, by his way of thinking, every friend of Daisy's was bound to expostulate with her. "The more the better, that's all I meant," said he. "Get her to give herself a holiday, and we'll

make up a party to go to Paris or somewhere for a week on the spree. When will you dine with me, old chap, and talk it over?"

Frank was sorry that his own plans being so uncertain, he could not fix any date for the proposed Amphitryonic council. He suspected Tommy of knowing a little too much; he was rather unreasonably vexed with Daisy for having given him a fright without sufficient cause, and he was even more unreasonably angry with himself for having quitted the box and rushed behind the scenes so precipitately. What conclusion was Mrs. Trafford likely to draw from such uncalled-for evidence of agitation?—Mrs. Trafford, who was quite clever enough to put this and that together, and whose insight into the causes of other people's actions seldom led her astray.

But he was fain to admit, on returning to his post, that he had disquieted himself in vain, so far as she was concerned. She beckoned to him at once to seat himself behind her, requesting Mr. Lister to make room for him, and she seemed to think it the most natural thing in the world that he should have hurried away to obtain information as to Miss Daisy Villiers's state of health.

"No wonder the poor girl fainted," she said compassionately, "for quite five minutes before that mad performance ended I was expecting every moment that she would drop down exhausted. You didn't see her, did you?"

"No, I didn't see her," answered Frank; "I was told she had gone home."

"I wonder whether she has a mother, or any other relation to take care of her. There was something that I liked in her face, and I am sure she isn't a bad girl, whatever people may say. I wish I knew her!"

As Frank made no reply to an aspiration which could by no possibility be gratified, Mrs. Trafford resumed presently: "You told me that she wouldn't give me any help in overcoming my prudish prejudice; but you are wrong. Women understand one another—though no man that I ever met really understands us at all—and I am certain that that poor child's whole soul is in her art. She is only about eighteen, by the look of her."

"She must be rather more than that," said Frank, "considering that she has been at the top of the tree for a matter of four years."

"Well, it would make no difference if she were eight and twenty, or even eight and thirty. You think she does those exquisite and wonderful things for the sake of pay, or for the sake of captivating you. You are mistaken; she does them because she loves them, and she knows very well that the money and the admiration could be obtained with infinitely less trouble."

"You really believe that you could see all that?" asked Frank, a little incredulous, yet not ill-pleased.

“I really do. Moreover, I could see enough to make me feel thoroughly ashamed of my wholesale, ignorant condemnation of all public dancers. I shall know better for the future, and, as I said before, I only wish I knew her, poor thing! Because, unless someone can bring her to her senses, she will end by killing herself, like a moth in the flame of a candle. And the candle, as usual, is so very far from being worth the game! Do you think I might go home now? We are none of us particularly interested in this idiotic farce, are we?”

Frank, for his part, went home with a heart greatly softened towards his wife and with a sensation of self-reproach which was quite new to him. That Mrs. Trafford's vision was keener than his own he was well aware, but he had scarcely been prepared for such discoveries as she professed to have made, and he felt that he ought, perhaps, to have been prepared for them. One sees, alas! what one wants to see; one believes what one wishes to believe; he had to acknowledge to himself with shame that he had almost wished to believe his wife what Mrs. Trafford so confidently declared that she was not. Anyhow, it was clearly incumbent upon him to seek an interview with Daisy on the following day.

CHAPTER XXIV.

POOR DAISY.

HUMILIATING and discreditable though the confession may be, we must all of us, if we have any wish to be honest, admit that our behaviour, our actions, our very thoughts and opinions depend in a greater or less degree upon the condition of the bodies which we inhabit. A good digestion fosters optimism, a touch of suppressed gout suffices to distort the whole mental vision. Even when there is nothing particularly wrong with the machine we are very apt to wake up with views altogether opposed to those which we might have been generous enough to enunciate just before going to sleep. So Frank, who had closed his eyes in a mood of semi-contrition, of complete compassion for his poor little wife and of gratitude to Mrs. Trafford for having divined things which he had hitherto been too dull to perceive, opened them upon an essentially prosaic world and recalled the incidents of the preceding evening with annoyance, not far removed from disgust.

It was by no means a subject for rejoicing—it was anything but that, he thought, as he rose and proceeded to shave himself by gaslight, that the woman whom he loved had been brought into touch with the woman whom he had ceased to love and had been moved to sympathetic and fanciful ideas respecting her. That Daisy was a slave to her art might, in one sense, be true; very likely it was true. But to assume that she was a good woman and, by implication, that she had been a good wife was an impulsive and unwarranted assumption, besides being a sort of premature condemnation of one who had at least endeavoured to do his duty to the best of his ability. In short, common sense—that inexorable common sense which always has things its own way before breakfast—rendered it manifest that hard facts are not altered by a situation which has chanced to appeal to the emotions, and that an attack of syncope proves nothing at all, except that the unfortunate victim thereof has made too great a demand upon her physical powers. Furthermore, Frank had an intuitive conviction that if ever Mrs. Trafford could obtain her fantastic wish and make acquaintance with the so-called Miss Daisy Villiers, justice would be denied to him in the very quarter where he had the best right to look for it. Justice and the love of it are, indeed, exclusively masculine attributes, and that is one small reason why the Modern Woman of whom we hear so much in these days

will eventually discover that she is but a transient phenomenon.

It was, however, in the last degree improbable that two women who dwelt so very far apart from one another as Mrs. Trafford and Daisy would get a chance of exchanging words. The best plan was to cease worrying about and mentally arguing with the former, and to consider what practical measures could be taken for the benefit of the latter. If practical measures meant the providing of money—and that is what practical measures generally do mean—Frank was ready and willing to hasten to the rescue. Not by him would the duty of relieving his wife from any necessity of earning her own living ever be disputed.

A hansom deposited him at her door soon after mid-day, and inquiry elicited the prompt reply that Miss Villiers was not feeling well enough to receive anybody. As, nevertheless, he insisted upon sending in his card, he was presently ushered into the drawing-room, where he was kept waiting for rather more than a quarter of an hour. He paced restlessly up and down the little room, noting, with somewhat unreasonable displeasure, the mingled smell of stale cigarette smoke and hothouse flowers, examining the photographs (what a number of them there were, in frames of silver, silk and brocade, and what highly aristocratic signatures many of them bore!) wondering whether, after all, it would not have been a great

deal better to write than to pay this unasked-for visit, trying hard to be patient, and resolving that, at all events, he would not be discourteous.

But when at length the door opened and Daisy entered, unsmiling, with heavy eyelids and colourless cheeks, upon which neither rouge nor powder had been bestowed, her appearance gave him such a shock that he straightway forgot every grievance that he had against her and, hurrying to meet her, seized both her limp hands.

“My dear girl,” he exclaimed involuntarily, “how ill you look !”

“I suppose I look what I am,” she said curtly. “You have heard already of my breakdown at the Embankment, last night, then ?”

“I saw it,” answered Frank. “I was in a box with—some people, and I went behind as soon as I could ; but there was some delay, and then I met Tommy Fellowes, who told me you had gone home. You mustn’t attempt this sort of thing any more, Daisy.”

Daisy had seated herself upon a sofa and, with her chin supported by one hand, was gazing listlessly over his head at the yellow-grey prospect outside. “Oh, I know that,” she returned ; “the doctor has just been here, and I’ve sent down to the theatre to tell them that it’s all over. I’ve danced my last dance ; the public will have to get on without me now.”

“ Did the doctor say that ? ”

“ He says my heart is all wrong—he has been saying so ever since the beginning of the year. By way of letting me down easy, he pretended to think that some months of complete rest might set me up again ; but he doesn't really think anything of the sort. He knows that I shall either die soon or be an invalid for the rest of my days. It's a cheerful look-out, isn't it ? ”

It was so terribly sad, and withal so obviously true, that the tears rose to Frank's eyes, although there were none in hers. He dropped on one knee beside her, took her hand in his and squeezed it—having no adequate words at command.

“ For God's sake, don't pity me ! ” she said sharply ; “ I don't want your pity. If you came here to make a pathetic scene, you might as well have spared yourself the trouble. I can bear what I've got to bear without anybody's help. As for you, it stands to reason that the sooner I am dead and buried the better you will be pleased ; so we needn't have any humbug about it. ”

The woman's voice was as harsh as her language ; neither seemed to have anything to do with Daisy Villiers—a heartless little animal, maybe, yet a good-humoured and merry one, who never intentionally gave pain to others and who had always hitherto, in fair weather and foul, shown herself a disciple of the laughing philosopher. Frank, it is needless to say,

felt no resentment against her for spurning his compassion, but what comfort or attempt at consolation had he to offer her? Assuredly not those very material ones with which he had equipped himself at starting and which would have sounded like downright insults in the presence of such despair. All he could manage to plead was, "It really isn't humbug, Daisy!"

She turned her dull eyes upon him, as he knelt there, and broke into a short, unmirthful laugh. "My manners aren't quite up to the mark are they?" said she. "But you shouldn't have forced your way into the house so soon; you should have allowed a poor devil a few hours to recover from such a knock-down blow."

"I wouldn't have intruded upon you," he began, eagerly, "if I had supposed for one moment——"

"Of course you wouldn't," she interrupted; "pray don't apologise. It is my own fault for having said that I would see you; but you would have had to be told about this some time, and I thought, as you were here, I might as well get it over."

Then, all of a sudden, she started up, raising her hands to her head. "Oh, my old Cripps!" she moaned—"my dear, good old Cripps!—why did you die and leave me all alone! I never had anybody but you!"

Frank's arms were around her in an instant and

he was trying to draw her head down upon his shoulder. But she pushed him off violently.

“Don’t!” she exclaimed; “you make me sick!”

There was a brief pause, during which the husband and wife stood silently surveying one another with haggard faces. Presently Daisy said, in something a little more like her ordinary voice, “Frank, old boy, I can’t talk to you now; an angel from heaven wouldn’t get a civil word out of me to-day. Come again to-morrow afternoon, and you’ll find me in my right mind. You know your way to the front door, so I needn’t ring.”

Perhaps the best thing that he could do was to leave her. There might conceivably have been a better thing; but it was clean out of his power to do that. It was out of his power to tell her that he loved her still, as he had done in days gone by, to entreat her to go down to Malling with him forthwith and begin a new life under altogether new conditions. Although his heart bled for the poor woman, another woman now held that organ in fee simple and could by no means be evicted. The utmost concession that he felt able to make to duty and conscience was to resolve that he would see that other woman no more—or at least not oftener than considerations of neighbourly courtesy were likely to render imperative upon him for the future. So he did not call in Curzon Street that afternoon, nor did he expose himself to the risk of encountering Tommy Fellowes and other

inquisitive persons; but on the morrow he returned to Daisy's house, prepared to be very patient—prepared also to make such propositions as could yet be made.

His patience was subjected to no severe trial: as for the propositions which he hastened to put forward, they were good-humouredly laughed out of court at once. For Daisy's good humour had returned to her, together with the artistic bloom upon her cheeks and a sufficiently plausible imitation of the devil-may-care manner which had always been considered one of her principal attractions. Of the sullen despair which she had manifested on the previous day not a trace remained; she greeted her husband in the old friendly fashion; she began by apologising for having behaved "like a bear with a sore head," and then, as has been said, she declined, with laughter, his suggested self-sacrifice.

"It's awfully kind of you," she declared—"yes, I mean what I say, I'm sure you intend to be awfully kind—but I don't want to saddle you with an invalided and rather disreputable Lady Coplestone, and, if one must needs tell the whole truth, I doubt whether I could endure the situation for a month. I should bolt with the butler or the coachman or somebody; my tastes and habits are of that vulgar kind that I can't breathe out of a crowd. So I'm going down to Brighton, upon the doctor's recommendation."

“All by yourself, Daisy?”

“All by my little self. That is, unless you would like to come and keep me company.”

“Would you like me to go with you?” Frank asked.

She scrutinised him for a moment before replying, “Well, yes; I think I should. Oh, not to live in the same house with me, not to announce yourself to the world as my husband; that’s a finished chapter. But if you could put up at one of the hotels for a week or two, and if you would meet me on fine afternoons, and walk beside my bath-chair—good lord, think of me in a bath-chair!—I should appreciate the attention. The fact is that I’m very lonely and very ill.”

“You shall never be lonely again, Daisy, if I can do anything to prevent it,” Frank promised, “and I hope you are not as ill as you think. You look ever so much better than you did yesterday.”

“Oh, I’m bad. It catches me sometimes in the middle of the night, and almost always in the morning—a pain fit to make one screech. I expect I’m going to die; though the doctor won’t say so. Now, don’t pull a long face, or you’ll make me repeat some of the nasty speeches that I made yesterday, when you were doing your very best to be sympathetic, poor old thing! Perhaps I sha’n’t go off the hooks yet awhile, and even if I do—well, you see, Frank, I haven’t got a very great deal left to live for, because it’s quite certain now that I shall never dance again.”

For some time she went on talking in this strain, and he did not check or contradict her, perceiving that she found relief in so doing. At length something put it into his head to repeat what Mrs. Trafford had said about her; whereat her eyes grew bright.

“That woman is no fool!” she exclaimed. “I should like to shake hands with her once, in spite of her wealth and her sanctity, and all the other etceteras. Yes, it’s true enough that I loved my art for its own sake, not only for what it brought me; if I cared to blow a loud trumpet, I might say that I had sacrificed my life for my art without telling any lie, mightn’t I? Your widow is going to marry the great Lister, I hear. What a pity! She would have done so nicely for you—after a decent interval, of course. All right! I won’t say that again, if you won’t make faces. And, Frank—will you kindly promise not to allude any more to our being husband and wife? We can’t be friends, and I sha’n’t enjoy having you at Brighton at all, unless that is agreed upon.”

Upon this point she was so firm that he ended by giving in—after protests which were not altogether formal. It was his plain duty, he thought, to acknowledge her; yet, since she absolutely refused to live under the same roof with him, such an acknowledgment would be of little benefit to either of them, while it would render friendly intercourse additionally difficult. Of pecuniary assistance she declared that she

stood in no present need. Should she ever require any, she would not hesitate to apply to him.

“Now send off a wire to the Hôtel Métropole at Brighton, and order a couple of rooms for yourself. I shall go down to-morrow to a house in Eaton Gardens, which I have taken for three months just as it stands. I didn't want to stay in London an hour longer than I could help; you may imagine what a time I have been having of it with disconsolate managers and irrepressible newspaper men!”

CHAPTER XXV.

THE ATTRACTIONS OF BRIGHTON.

GARDENERS, fishermen and others who have reasons for watching the vagaries of the weather year by year, are aware that the seasons are almost invariably separated by periods, lasting from ten days to a fortnight, of calms and high temperatures. These commonly follow the autumnal and precede the vernal equinox; so that during the early part of November and the latter part of February everybody whom one meets is pretty sure to remark how wonderfully mild it is for the time of year. It was on a soft, sunny February morning that a lady who was being slowly dragged along the sea-front at Brighton in a bath-chair, turned to the maid who walked beside her and said, in somewhat fretful accents :

“This is intolerable! I shall get out and walk. Tell the man to go away and come back in about half an hour—and you had better do the same, Johnson. You will find me sitting down somewhere.”

The woman glanced at an approaching masculine figure, bent down to loosen the apron and replied,

with a scarcely perceptible smile. "Very good, ma'am." She had had the advantage of seeing Sir Francis Coplestone many times in the course of the winter, and if she did not know quite as much about his relations with her employer as she thought she did, she had at least learnt that she was expected to withdraw out of earshot as often as he made his appearance. Very likely she may have thought him a fool for continuing to dance attendance upon an invalid who would never be anything but an invalid, and may have considered that he made his appearance more frequently than was to be expected under all the circumstances.

Such, however, was not the opinion of Miss Daisy Villiers who, as Frank advanced, holding out his hand, exclaimed peevishly: "At last! I thought you had forgotten me altogether."

"I'm awfully sorry," he answered; "but I couldn't get away from home sooner. There are so many troublesome little engagements which one is more or less bound to accept; and then, as you know, I have had to ask a few men down to stay with me. But now that the shooting is over I shall have rather more spare time I hope. And how are you, Daisy?"

She jerked up her shoulders. "A little worse, I think—not much. I might be as sound as a bell and yet long for death to release me from this hideous, interminable routine. Day after day, week after week, always the same thing! Breakfast, lunch, dinner,

trundling up and down for an hour or two in the sunshine (when there is any), with nobody but that idiot Johnson to speak a word to! No wonder I haven't a word to say to a civilised being when he does condescend to turn up! Come and sit down and try to be amusing. I can't walk or stand, and God knows I haven't it in me to amuse anybody!"

She had led the way to a covered bench, sheltered from the wind by glazed sides, and now sat staring away from her companion across the shimmering sea. She was in one of her bad moods—moods to which he had become accustomed, which he accepted with infinite compassion as a part of her malady, and which the only plan was to ignore.

If she sometimes repined and sometimes seemed to upbraid him, she was surely entitled to that poor solace; for nothing could have been more unselfish than her conduct throughout those long winter months. He would have spent them with her if she would have had it so; but to this she could in no wise be brought to consent, insisting upon it that he must not scandalise Malling and its neighbourhood by a course of action so liable to be misinterpreted. It was by her wish and injunction that he had taken up his residence upon his property, had invited his aunt to play hostess for him, and had fulfilled the various duties belonging to his station in life. Occasional flying visits to Brighton, accounted for upon the not wholly mendacious plea that his old feverish attacks

had to be staved off by change of air, had given rise to no suspicions—or, if they had, suspicion had fallen wide enough of the mark to be harmless. All manner of things are said about bachelors, and all manner of excuses are made for them, when they are young, tolerably well-to-do and obviously destined to marry in the county. So, although Frank was not a bachelor, he consented to pass for one, and had indeed almost forgotten that the friend who, to do him justice, was seldom absent from his thoughts was his wife.

Daisy was not going to recover; that much, after some brief glimmer of hope, had now passed into the category of accepted facts. All that he could do for her was to attempt to raise her spirits, and—the subjects in which she took an interest being, unfortunately, so few—he began on this occasion, as he had often done before, to retail the latest theatrical news for her benefit. But she checked him with a petulant wave of the hand.

“Do you suppose I haven’t read all that in the newspapers until I am sick of hearing about it,” she exclaimed. “Do you suppose I enjoy being reminded that I am a thing of the past, and that half a dozen clumsy little Lotties and Totties have taken my place? Haven’t you anything to say about yourself, and what you have been doing all this long time? What sort of men have you been having to stay with you? How do you amuse yourselves in the evenings? Do you

bear-fight, or do you all drop asleep after dinner and nod at one another till bed-time?"

He tried to give as graphic a description as he could of the former brother-officers who had lately been his guests; but there was not, in truth, very much to be said about them, and she soon interrupted him.

"And the widow?" she asked. "Have you seen anything of her? Is she engaged to her statesman yet?"

Frank shook his head. "She is still in London," he answered, "and so far as I know, she is not engaged yet; but I don't often hear of her. She was at the Abbey for a short time at Christmas, but that was when I was here with you, you know."

He was not very fond of talking about Mrs. Trafford, whom it was true that he had not seen and had heard very little of since the autumn; but Daisy seldom failed to make some inquiry respecting that lady.

"I am sure you could tell me a lot more, if you chose," she went on querulously now; "but you are so beastly secretive! After all, I don't care much; it is nothing to me whether your friend marries again or remains a widow. I know which I should do if I were in her place; but most likely I've had a rather larger experience of men than she has. I suppose she never troubles herself to ask what has become of me, does she?"

Frank could only repeat that Mrs. Trafford had had no recent opportunity of so doing. He changed the subject by mentioning that he had secured a box at the theatre for that evening, upon the chance of its being required, and this proved to have been a most happy inspiration. Jockeys who have given up riding cannot keep away from a racecourse; actors and actresses, when they have a spare night, are pretty sure to spend it on the spectators' side of the curtain, and Daisy, who had no longer energy enough to turn out after dinner all by herself, jumped at the idea of the proposed entertainment. Her face lightened, her dejection and fractiousness were dispelled, in a moment she became her old self again, and Frank, with a sigh of satisfaction, perceived that the remainder of the day was not going to be so bad, after all. The days that he spent in her society were sometimes bad and sometimes tolerably good; there was never any certainty as to how she would receive him, nor could he ever count upon pleasing her, although he did his best. Glad enough was he if by chance he was able to make her forget for a few hours the inevitable sadness and solitude of her lot.

By the time that Johnson and the bath-chairman returned, their employer was as brisk as a bee and quite ready for an afternoon drive with Sir Francis Coplestone—that form of amusement having been the suggestion of a gentleman who, it must be confessed, was not very prolific in original suggestions. And,

indeed, if driving in an open fly was rather poor fun for her, it was probably even worse for a healthy young man. She remembered that, and during their subsequent slow progress she exerted herself to make him laugh, as she was still very well able to do when she took the trouble, so that the way did not strike him as long or weary. Odd and incongruous as their present companionship was, there were moments when she contrived to render it easy—even enjoyable.

An incident which occurred just before the end of the drive recalled one of them abruptly from a more or less dreamy state of contentment to the realisation of highly unpleasant possibilities, while it drew an excited ejaculation from the other.

“Your widow in person, unless the wrong woman was pointed out to me as Mrs. Trafford before I left London!” cried Daisy, extending her forefinger towards the victoria, drawn by a pair of high-stepping cobs, which had dashed past them, and in which was seated a lady whose head was turned the other way. “What can have brought her here? Did she see us, I wonder? If so, you’ll have to lie freely the next time you meet her.”

There was no doubt as to the identity of the equipage or its owner. Frank could have sworn to both, and what gave him food for very disagreeable reflection was the circumstance that Mrs. Trafford had brought her carriage to Brighton. That could only mean that she intended to make a prolonged

stay, and as he himself had arranged to remain where he was for the next three weeks, there could be no hope of her failing to recognise him upon some future occasion, even if she had not already done so. What was he to say in answer to the question which she would naturally ask? To "lie freely" was not a course which commended itself favourably to him; yet, to tell the truth, would be all the more painful because he would appear to be telling it only under compulsion. He may perhaps be pardoned for having momentarily contemplated a change of plans and a prompt departure—especially as this inclination was but momentary. Much and often as one may long to run away, it is very seldom possible to do that, consistently with self-respect, and Frank felt that he was bound to face whatever Fate might hold in reserve for him.

"It would be rather a joke if she were to be at the theatre to-night," Daisy remarked. "She wouldn't think quite so highly of me off the stage as on it, I'm afraid, unless you could get her to believe that ours is a platonic friendship."

But that joke (the excellence of which was obviously dependent, as the excellence of most jokes is, upon the point of view from which it might be regarded) did not come off; for Mrs. Trafford was not at the theatre to mar Frank's enjoyment of a cheerful evening. None the less was it a matter of sheer necessity that he should find out on the following day

where she was staying and hasten to pay his respects to her. It is always better to take the bull by the horns than to wait until he notices your vicinity and tosses you over his head, by way of prelude to further parley.

Mrs. Trafford subjected her visitor to no such rough treatment. He ascertained, of course, without difficulty that she had taken a house near the hotel where he was staying, and although she did not affect to feel any surprise at seeing him, it was only after she had explained at some length how weariness of London life and London atmosphere had driven her down to the seaside for a week or two that she said, in a perfectly matter of course tone :

“I caught a glimpse of you yesterday, driving with somebody whom I thought I recognised as that poor girl, Daisy Villiers, whose last public appearance we saw together. Was it really she? You never told me that you knew her.”

“Yes it was she,” answered Frank, steadily. “I daresay I should have told you before that I have known her for some years if you hadn’t always intimidated me by expressing such profound contempt for her class. Her health has completely broken down, I am sorry to say, and she is so alone in the world that she naturally enjoys seeing any old friends who may take the trouble to look her up. I have been down here once or twice during the winter, as you know, and I have made a point of calling upon her.”

This was a trifle disingenuous; but Frank, being convinced that his explanation would not be accepted as conclusive, felt entitled to take up a defensive position at starting. Mrs. Trafford, however, surprised him by the equanimity with which she received a palpably incomplete statement. She only said:

“How kind of you! I can quite understand the poor girl’s loneliness and her gratitude to the old friends who don’t forget her. Although I am not an old friend—or indeed a friend at all—I have been very much interested in her ever since that evening, and I should like to be of some small service to her, if I could. Would it be impossible for you to introduce me?”

Frank endeavoured, not very successfully, to keep his countenance from falling. “It wouldn’t be impossible,” he replied; “but I am afraid you would hardly hit it off with her. You see, she isn’t—well, in short, she isn’t exactly a lady by birth, and you are rather fastidious—as you have every right to be. You wouldn’t find that you had much in common with her.”

“More than I have with a good many women who are ladies by birth, I suspect—perhaps even a little more than you have, although you say you have known her so long. Didn’t I tell you at the theatre that I saw something in her to which you were apparently blind? But if you would rather not introduce me, it

doesn't matter; very likely I may discover some excuse for introducing myself."

She was looking him straight in the face, and he perceived that she meant to have her own way. When she added, "I shall probably stay in Brighton until after Easter, so that excuses ought to be discoverable without any great effort," he thought it best to reply: "Very well; I'll tell her that you want to make her acquaintance, and I'll take you to her house in Eaton Gardens any afternoon that you like to fix."

He would have given a good deal to keep Daisy and Mrs. Trafford apart; but since that evidently could not be contrived, he preferred being present at their first interview to raising objections for which no colourable pretext was ready to his hand. After all, the chances were that a single interview would suffice to check curiosity on both sides.

Mrs. Trafford thanked him and proceeded to make minute inquiries as to the state of his health, of which she said that she had not heard a very good report from Miss Coplestone. "You are quite right to give yourself plenty of change of air," she remarked, "and now that I am here, I shall be personally interested in keeping you away from home as long as possible."

Clever and quick-sighted though she was, it did not seem to have occurred to her that he was at Brighton for reasons unconnected with health. There were so many things which she did not seem to have

guessed, yet might surely have been expected to guess! Not, of course, that he wished her to do so; only he was a little surprised that she had not. Lister's name was mentioned but once, when she said, in answer to Frank's question, that she believed he had returned to London for the re-opening of Parliament, but that she had not seen him for a long time. It was impossible to tell from her face what her real feelings were with regard to the man; still she could not yet be engaged to him—and that was something, Frank thought.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DAISY FINDS A FRIEND.

“THIS is indeed condescension and affability!” Daisy exclaimed when she was informed that Mrs. Trafford had requested permission to call upon her. “There you have the consequences of breaking down upon the stage in a nutshell. Your own set gives you a parting kick and looks about for your successor; but aristocracy and respectability stoops at once to pick you up and pour oil and wine into your wounds. One has ceased to be in any way formidable to these good Samaritans, you see, so they can afford to be generous.”

But although she affected to sneer at Mrs. Trafford’s advances, it was evident that she was pleased and a little excited by them.

“Of course,” she went on, “I shall be charmed to see the lady; things have come to such a pass with me that I should be charmed to see anybody. I hope you took care to explain to her that I am hopelessly ill, and that my character won’t bear looking into. The one consideration is a sort of excuse for the other—it

will excuse her, I mean, from providing herself with moral disinfectants."

"I told Mrs. Trafford nothing that was not true," answered Frank, rather moodily. "You are not hopelessly ill, and your husband is scarcely the right person to throw doubts upon your innocence."

"Not even if he entertained a few himself, eh? But I presume you didn't carry your love of truth to quite the length of telling her that you were my husband. How did you account to her for your being upon such intimate terms with me, I wonder!"

"I didn't account for it; I merely said that I had known you for some years, and that appeared to satisfy her. If you wish me to tell her, or anybody else, that we are married, Daisy, I am ready to do so. I have always been ready to do so, as I think you must acknowledge."

"And willing?" asked Daisy, laughing. "No; I don't wish you to make startling revelations at this time of day, and I don't even wish to tease you more than I can help, you poor old boy! Let her think what she pleases about us, and let her come and be introduced, since she has set her heart upon meeting a disreputable fellow-creature face to face. It's rather imprudent of her; but that's her look-out, not ours."

Mrs. Trafford's motives, as Frank knew, were not of the low order imputed to them; but he was not concerned to take up the cudgels on her behalf. The whole project was eminently distasteful to him; he

could not see what good purpose was likely to be served by this meeting; only he did see that both women were bent upon its taking place. There was, therefore, nothing to be done but to play the part assigned to him and trust that it might not prove insupportable.

It did not prove to be that, although the half-hour which Mrs. Trafford subsequently spent in Daisy's drawing-room was a somewhat embarrassing and comfortless one for him. Sympathy was expressed, thanks were duly returned, a good deal was said about the beauty of skirt-dancing and the wonderful skill displayed by the former chief exponent of that art; then, after a few remarks upon the climate of Brighton and the recent mildness of the weather, conversational topics seemed to be pretty well exhausted. Mrs. Trafford was shy; Daisy was on her best behaviour; it was very obvious that the presence of a third person was spoiling everything, and yet the third person could not make his mind to rise and go away. At length Mrs. Trafford took matters into her own hands by saying:

"You sometimes go out driving, don't you, Miss Villiers? I wonder whether you would care to come with me this afternoon, if you have nothing better to do? I feel bound to give the horses their daily amount of exercise, and a companion would be a real boon to me."

Daisy's eyes sparkled, and her lips curved them-

selves into a smile. "I should like it awfully," she answered; "words can't express the ghastly dullness of my usual afternoons nowadays." Then she asked abruptly, "But you are sure you won't mind being seen with me? Everybody in the place knows who I am, you must remember."

It was the first dreadful speech that she had made, and Frank, who had been fully expecting her to make dreadful speeches, felt his blood run cold as she spoke. He was at once relieved and puzzled to hear Mrs. Trafford reply composedly:

"I think I will take my chance, if you will allow me."

Something rather more flattering and rather more decisive might have been said, he thought, if indeed anything was to be said in answer to a question of such atrocious taste. Mrs. Trafford's response, however, seemed to be found satisfactory by Daisy, who, after a rapid glance at her visitor and a short laugh, rang the bell for her hat and wraps.

Many and many must have been the blessings invoked upon the head of the man who invented victorias, those delightful vehicles which hold but two persons, and into which a third cannot by any stretch of politeness be invited to step; but Sir Francis Coplestone, being nervously uncertain as to what was going to happen next, could not feel very thankful for an arrangement which left him his own master. He turned away from the door, after Mrs. Trafford's

carriage had been driven off at a smart trot, wondering what in the world those two would say to one another, and hoping almost against hope that they would say very little. The situation, as it stood, was preposterous, and could not be prolonged. Sooner or later the truth would have to come out; in all probability Mrs. Trafford intended to discover what the truth was; and it would be so infinitely better that she should hear his confession from his own lips than that she should discover through Daisy what he would have the air of having done his best to conceal! And Daisy could have no imaginable motive for holding her peace, now that she had finally quitted the stage. It occurred to Frank—oddly enough, for the first time—as he paced along the pavement with bent head and knitted brows, that of late it had been he at least as much as Daisy who had acquiesced in a state of things by which she had nothing to gain and a good deal to lose.

He got through the afternoon as best he could, strolling up and down in the sunshine, finding the time very long, surveying with somewhat misanthropical eyes the nursemaids and perambulators, and the queer-looking, over-dressed people who passed and re-passed, listening to the soothing murmur of breaking and slowly withdrawing wavelets upon the shingle, which altogether failed to soothe him. The more he reflected upon his position the more clearly he foresaw that he was about to suffer and be blamed

for having been singularly unfortunate. That is, indeed, the common fate of the unfortunate in an ill-balanced world ; but the fact of its being common does not render it acceptable.

By the time that the sun was sinking, and the air becoming disagreeably chilly, he thought himself entitled to return to Eaton Gardens, beg for a cup of tea, and receive any information that Daisy might have to give him. He learnt, on inquiry at her door, that she had come home, and the first thing that she said to him when he entered the drawing-room was :

“ Frank, if you have fallen in love with Mrs. Trafford, I forgive you and sympathise with you ; for I have fallen in love with her myself. I didn't know that women of that kind existed out of plays and novels.”

She looked so radiant, so childishly and pathetically contented that he felt like a brute for being vexed with her ; yet he could not help remarking, with a forced smile : “ I suppose that means that you have told Mrs. Trafford everything.”

“ Well, I have told her lots of things that I never told to anybody else before, and she understood as well as if she had known me all my life. Oh, not about our marriage—that is a secret which had better be kept. Besides, it isn't of any consequence.”

Frank stared at her in perplexity ; if that was not of consequence, what was ? “ What sort of things do you mean ? ” he inquired, wonderingly.

“Cosas de España,” she answered, laughing. “You don’t speak Spanish, nor do I; but the meaning of that proverb isn’t beyond us. I suppose there’s a language which only women speak, and as you are a man I couldn’t for the life of me talk to you as I have been talking to her. I’m sorry I can’t, because you would think ever so much better of me than you do if I could; but no matter! She knows all about it, and I can’t give you any idea of what a comfort that is—just to feel that somebody knows!”

“How can she possibly know all about it if you haven’t even told her that we are married?” Frank asked.

“Our marriage is only one little incident; it fits in with the rest, and she wouldn’t have been astonished if I had mentioned it. But she would have been sorry—on your account I mean—and it would have been a poor return to her for all her kindness to make her sorry. We were talking about my life as a whole, about my dancing and about father and mother, and about my ways of going on since I’ve been on the stage, and—oh, heaps of subjects! Of course, when I say there’s a language which only women speak, I don’t mean that all of them use it to one another as she does. They can be as nasty as they like in it, and most of them do like to be nasty; that’s why I prefer men to women, as a rule. But I’d give a great many of you for one Cripps, and the whole lot of you for one Mrs. Trafford.”

It was, at all events, not by Frank that Mrs. Trafford's superiority to the rest of the human race, whether male or female, was likely to be called in question, and, somewhat enigmatical as Daisy's utterances were, he could not but rejoice that she had found so warm-hearted a sympathiser.

"Well," he said, after a pause, "I am glad you appreciate Mrs. Trafford."

"You speak as snappishly as if you were jealous," exclaimed Daisy, much amused. "How you must hate that man Lister!"

"Did she say anything about him?" asked Frank, quickly.

"You really are jealous, then! No; his name wasn't mentioned. Now that I come to think of it I believe I did almost all the talking."

He could not induce her to be more explicit than that, and he took his leave slightly mystified—perhaps even slightly jealous, though not of Mr. Lister. What was there in Daisy which Mrs. Trafford had apparently discovered at a glance, but which he had failed to detect throughout their interrupted married life? Was it really at all his fault that that married life had proved such a disastrous failure? Had he had the smallest reason for reproaching himself from first to last? Was there a key to his wife's vagaries for which he ought to have known where to look, but which had eluded his dull masculine vision? Mrs. Trafford, when he saw her the next day, could not, or did not,

answer these questions for him; but she gave him to understand that the poor little ex-danseuse was in her opinion a person to be deeply compassionated.

“I don't think I have felt so sorry for anyone before,” she said. “It is bad enough that she should be deprived of the one thing that meant life to her—so bad that we, who have second and third and fourth strings to our bows, can only realise with an effort how bad it must be—but what seems to me even more cruel is her absolute loneliness. Her father and mother dead, her brothers and sisters never taking the trouble to write to her, except when they want money, her friends treating her as though she were already non-existent—nothing but poverty is wanting to make her the most miserable of women. And she bears it all so bravely and cheerfully!”

“Yes, I think she does,” agreed Frank, looking down at his fingers, which were beating a nervous tattoo upon his knees; “I think she bears it bravely, upon the whole. Sometimes, of course, she is a little down on her luck, and—and peevish.”

“And what would you be if, by an impossibility, you were situated as she is? How would you like to be always ill, often in pain, to have literally no resources to fall back upon, and to be deserted by every friend you had had in the world?”

“Oh, I know! I'm not blaming her for being occasionally cross. I myself am sound in wind and limb, and I suppose agriculture must be counted as a

resource; otherwise, I don't see that my own case differs very much from hers; so I ought to be able to feel for her."

"But do you?"

"Well," answered Frank, looking up at his questioner, "I think my being here might be taken as some small evidence that I do. At least you can't include me amongst the former friends who, you say, have deserted her."

"Perhaps not," assented Mrs. Trafford, with a smile. "After all, you can't give the poor girl what you haven't got; you can't be expected to regard her as anything but a broken-down music-hall dancer, who is unhappy and forlorn because she is only a memory now to the patrons of music-halls."

"But what more or what else is she?" asked Frank. "That is just what it would be so interesting and instructive to hear. You have found your way to her heart, I know, and what, I must confess, strikes me as a good deal more strange is that she has evidently found her way to yours. I was sure that you would pity her; but I should have thought you would set her down as altogether vulgar and commonplace."

"Oh, she is vulgar, if you like to call her so; I don't consider her by any means commonplace. If you feel any curiosity respecting the real woman—but perhaps you don't?—you might try to divest your mind of all prejudice with regard to her, and encour-

age her to talk to you about her history. She is willing enough to talk, with a little encouragement, poor thing !”

Yet there was one important chapter in her history which she had omitted to confide to Mrs. Trafford. To be sure, she had described it as being “of no consequence;” but it was scarcely to be supposed that her confidante would have concurred in that view. Frank thought that for the present he would pursue the subject no farther. He had an uneasy impression that both these women held him to blame, and he could not for the life of him see what he had done to merit the disapproval of either of them. Mrs. Trafford, at all events, knowing nothing about his share in Daisy’s past, had no business to be surveying him—as he fancied that she was—with compassionate disdain.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE IMPERTINENCE OF MR. LISTER.

A MAN who finds himself in a position at once so unusual, so perilous and so ridiculous as that into which Frank had been forced by perverse Fate may be excused for imagining all sorts of things; but an evening of solitary rumination convinced him that he must have been mistaken in supposing that Mrs. Trafford either pitied or despised him for his inability to see Daisy with her eyes. Why on earth should she? According to a statement which she had accepted without any sign of incredulity, he was only a former acquaintance of the once renowned Dancer in Yellow, who had shown himself rather more mindful of the claims of old acquaintanceship than other people, and who had done what in him lay to comfort the afflicted. It was curious, no doubt, that she should have accepted that statement so unhesitatingly; still she had accepted it, and any curiosity that might be connected therewith did not apparently extend to her mental attitude.

The events of the two succeeding days, indeed,

furnished additional evidence that Mrs. Trafford was neither unduly nor even ordinarily inquisitive. On both afternoons she took Daisy out driving; on the second evening she persuaded Miss Villiers and Sir Francis Coplestone to dine with her; her kindly interest in the former increased with development of intimacy, while she took, or seemed to take, it for granted that the latter was animated by sentiments of pure benevolence akin to her own. If Frank did not enjoy his dinner, the fault was none of hers; if he was silent and ill at ease, nothing in her manner betrayed the slightest consciousness of his being so. As for Daisy, whose spirits had immensely improved, she chattered almost without a break from start to finish; so that the attention of her hostess may very well have been diverted from the taciturnity of the embarrassed third person.

“I suppose all I have got to do is to sit tight,” mused Frank, in the course of the evening; “but it doesn’t seem quite honest, and it’s a horrid strain! I sha’n’t be able to keep it up much longer, that’s certain. I think, if Daisy doesn’t mind, I’ll tell the whole truth to-morrow and have done with it.”

He was, perhaps, not without some unacknowledged hope that Daisy would mind when he broached the subject to her, while seeing her home.

“I don’t know how you feel about all this,” he began, “but it seems to me that we are accepting hospitality under false pretences. Mrs. Trafford ought

to know who it is that she is entertaining—don't you think so yourself?"

"She doesn't appear to think so," answered Daisy, talking through a yawn. "Oh, how tired I am!—though I've had a pleasant evening, too, in spite of your being such a wet blanket. No, she doesn't appear to think so, and that's just the beauty of her! Anybody else in the wide world would have wanted some explanation of our so-called friendship—which does look a bit suspicious, it must be owned."

"Exactly so; and for that very reason we have no right to abuse her generosity and confidence. Has she never asked you for any explanation?"

"She asked the first day, how long I had known you, and I told her; I believe that's the only time that we have spoken about you at all. She may have formed her own conclusions or she may not. What does it matter, since she hasn't dropped me, and doesn't mean to drop me?"

"I think it matters," said Frank, gravely; "I think that, for your sake as well as for hers—a good deal more for your sake than for hers, indeed—I am bound to tell her that you are not—well, what she may very likely assume that you are."

"Just as you choose," answered Daisy, indifferently. "I should have thought, from what you have said once or twice, that you yourself would have hesitated about giving me a character; but so far as I am concerned, you are quite welcome to inform Mrs.

Trafford that you and I went through the form of marriage once upon a time. Please yourself and you'll please me; only if I were in your place I should leave well alone."

He might have anticipated some such reply. What objection, in truth, could Daisy have to an announcement which could do her no possible injury? Nevertheless, it was scarcely welcome to him, nor did the strong inclination which he felt at the moment to take her advice, and "leave well alone," help him towards a decision. After a pause, he said rather coldly:

"I have your permission to speak, then?"

"Oh, dear, yes!—fire away as soon as you like. But don't trouble yourself on my account; Mrs. Trafford and I can understand one another without your help, I'm thankful to say!"

"That may be," said Frank, to himself, reflecting upon the terms of this gracious concession, as he walked away from Eaton Gardens; "but will Mrs. Trafford understand me when the murder is out? Will she understand that my wife separated herself from me?—that I didn't separate myself from her because I had found out what a dreadful mistake our marriage had been, and that the concealment was not of my choosing? Above all, will she understand—but of course I don't want her to understand that. The whole business is becoming horribly complicated!"

That it was capable of being rendered even more

so was the first thought that came into his mind when, on entering the court-yard of his hotel, he was greeted by a gentleman who was seated there, smoking a cigar. It was a Saturday night, and nothing was more natural than that the Honourable George Lister, in company with other weary legislators, should have run down to Brighton to refresh himself with invigorating sea-breezes during the coming day of rest; but Frank, who had not been thinking about the man, was taken aback and showed that he was so. Mr. Lister, it must be assumed, either had his nerves under better control or did not recognise a possible rival in Sir Francis Coplestone; for he was quite pleasant and friendly.

“Enjoying this foretaste of spring, like the rest of us?” he asked. “Well, I don’t know any better place than Brighton to make for in fine weather. Of course you know that our friend Mrs. Trafford is here. You have seen her, no doubt?”

“Oh, yes, I have seen her,” answered Frank, with an absurd sense of irritation at the other’s good humour.

“And how do you think her looking?” Mr. Lister inquired. “I was afraid, from the way in which she wrote to me, that she had been rather over-doing it in London—wearing herself out with visits to the East End and other benevolent exertions which one hasn’t the heart to dissuade these dear, good ladies from undertaking, although they are really of so very little

use. I was very glad to hear that she had decided to give herself a holiday, and I should have been here to look her up before now, only my own holidays have, unfortunately, to be few and far between."

Did he mean to be offensive, or was he really under the impression that he was entitled to be apprehensive when Mrs. Trafford over-exerted herself, and glad when she took a rest? Perhaps he was so entitled; at any rate, this was the first intimation that Frank had received of letters having passed between Mr. Lister and the lady about whose health he professed to be so solicitous.

"As far as I know there is nothing the matter with Mrs. Trafford," sounded a somewhat curt and uncivil reply to make; but if the incivility was noticed it was not resented. Mr. Lister merely remarked in a satisfied tone, "That's well," and proceeded to talk politics very cleverly and amusingly for a quarter of an hour, at the end of which time Frank wished him good-night.

There was a certain church which Frank happened to know that Mrs. Trafford frequented; and thither he betook himself on the following morning, in the full expectation of encountering not only her but the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for War at that place of worship. He was, however, disappointed; amongst the bowed heads of the ladies on the opposite side of the aisle the well-shaped one for which his roving eyes sought was not discernible, and Mr. Lister

possibly preferred to perform his devotions in private.

The latter, who had just sat down to luncheon when Frank returned to the hotel, got up at once and made signs that there was an unoccupied place at his little round table. The invitation could not very well be declined, nor would it have been polite to do otherwise than assent to a proposition which he was presently kind enough to make.

“I was thinking of strolling round to call upon Mrs. Trafford this afternoon,” he announced. “Perhaps, if you have nothing else to do, you might be inclined to go with me, and show me the way to her house.”

There was a generosity about the suggestion which was the reverse of flattering; but why, after all, should one wish to be flattered by suspicions for which no foundation exists? Frank replied quite truthfully, that he had intended to call upon Mrs. Trafford in any case; he might have added with equal truth that he was extremely anxious to see how she would receive his companion.

What he had been anything but anxious to see, and what he did see when they were admitted into her drawing-room, was Daisy, seated beside her. He was so vexed and disconcerted (divining Lister's amazement and a hundred unpleasant results thereof), that he omitted to notice whether that self-possessed gentleman was greeted with cordiality or not.

He heard Mrs. Trafford pronounce the name of "Miss Villiers," saw the familiar little bob of the head which Daisy was pleased to accord to the new-comer, and fancied that there was a very slight suggestion of irony about Mr. Lister's profound bow; but for the explanatory statement on the part of his hostess which might have been expected to follow, he waited in vain.

"I have been a good girl to-day!" Daisy broke the silence, which was upon the verge of becoming awkward, by announcing. "Mrs. Trafford has been taking me to church—what do you think of that? Not the ritualistic church that she generally attends; one must do things by degrees, and I warned her that I had been brought up on strictly Calvinistic principles. So we went to a place which, I believe, combines orthodoxy with Protestantism, and I feel ever so much the better for it—although I did distinguish myself by fainting during the sermon and having to be carried out toes first."

"Did you really faint?" asked Frank, trying to look concerned, and indeed feeling so.

"Yes, she really did," answered Mrs. Trafford. "I ought to have known better than to make her stand and kneel through that long service, and although she has revived a little since luncheon, I want her to lie down and rest now. I was just going to take her home when you came in."

The two men could do no less than offer to

withdraw; but Daisy declared that nothing would induce her to put everybody to so much inconvenience.

“I assure you I don’t want all that looking after,” she said. “I expect I had better go home; but fainting doesn’t mean much with me, and I scarcely ever do it a second time in one day. If the carriage is there I’ll be off at once.”

There was some further parley about the subject, but the end of it was that Mrs. Trafford’s carriage having been announced, Frank escorted his wife downstairs. He was prepared also to escort her to her own door, but of this she would not hear.

“Don’t bother about me; I’m all right,” she said. “Go back and hear what Mr. Lister is saying about the *Dancer in Yellow*; you can report his observations—which are sure to be amusing—to me afterwards. He is quite pained and shocked to think that his future wife should have taken up with such low associates; that much I could see in his face. But it will be interesting to learn whether he has the cheek to rebuke her, and how she treats him if he does.”

“Is it so certain, then, that Mrs. Trafford is his future wife?” Frank asked with rather more eagerness, perhaps, than was either prudent or becoming.

But Daisy only laughed, as she seated herself in the carriage and answered, “I’m sure I don’t know; go back and find out.”

His return to the drawing-room did not furnish him with the information specified; but it did—not a little to his displeasure—demonstrate to him that Daisy's prevision had not been at fault, and that the history of the Dancer in Yellow was being made the subject of an animated discussion.

"I only repeat what all the world knows—for the matter of that, a very small part of what all the world knows," Lister was saying as he entered. "I don't say that the girl is any worse than others of her class, still less that your compassion and kindness aren't admirable; yet—the line has to be drawn somewhere."

"Do you think I ought to draw the line at admitting Miss Villiers into my house?" asked Mrs. Trafford, addressing Frank composedly. "You are better acquainted with her than I am, and no doubt you know a good deal more about her."

"I am not so impertinent," answered Frank, with a grim delight in seizing this opening for being impertinent to the other man, "as to dictate to you whom you shall choose as your acquaintances. As for Miss Villiers, she is an old friend of mine, and I am not aware that she has ever done anything to render her unfit for the society of decent people."

Mr. Lister declined to take offence. "My dear fellow," he said, "I wouldn't for the world breath a word against the young lady's character, especially if she is a friend of yours. There have been rumours,

and I should have thought you would have heard of them; but that, after all, is not the question. You and I, of course, can make any friends that we please; I merely venture to point out that, while society is constituted upon its present basis, Mrs. Trafford can't very well afford to make a friend of a Daisy Villiers. And I am sure you must agree with me."

"Strange as it may appear, I don't," returned Frank doggedly.

Lister shrugged his shoulders, while Mrs. Trafford remarked, without any visible sign of annoyance, "Sir Francis so far agrees with you that he warned me I should never hit it off with his old friend, who, he said, was not a lady by birth. I myself have always had a very strong prejudice against women who exhibit themselves at music-halls; but prejudice generally arises out of ignorance, doesn't it? Besides, I suppose there are exceptions to every rule."

"But even assuming her to be exceptional," protested Lister, "I still think——"

"Oh, yes, of course you do; nothing could be more natural. Nevertheless, I am afraid you won't convince me in this particular instance; so we'll say no more about it. Sir Francis Coplestone's testimony to character satisfies me—the more so as he doesn't seem to be a very willing witness."

If she was satisfied, Frank was not. She had, to

be sure, snubbed Lister; but the snub had been a decidedly mild one, and had been almost tantamount to an admission that the man had some right to speak as he had done. Moreover, it was not altogether pleasant to be described as an unwilling witness. Everything, in short, pointed to the conclusion that the time had come for him to avow what ought, perhaps, to have been avowed much earlier.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FRANK EXPLAINS.

IF there was one quality above another for which Mr. Lister was distinguished in public life, it was that of cool combativeness. He had the reputation of being a hard hitter, as well as a brilliant one, and any attack made upon him in the course of debate was very apt to result in the speedy discomfiture of the attacking member. But perhaps he kept the resources of a quick intelligence and an incisive wit for his political opponents, or possibly he considered Mrs. Trafford a privileged person. At all events he accepted his snubbing with much apparent good humour, and for the next half hour chatted very agreeably upon a variety of topics quite unconnected with Dancers in Yellow.

As for Frank, his contributions to a conversation which was easily sustained without any aid from him were few and far between. Some dim idea of sitting out his fellow-visitor prevented him from taking his leave; but when the latter rose he mechanically

did likewise, and he could not detect in his hostess's manner any indication of a wish to detain him.

"If I can possibly manage it," Mr. Lister was saying, "I shall slip down to Brighton again next Saturday. Couldn't we make up a little party to dine together that evening, and perhaps go on to the theatre afterwards? I suppose there is a theatre?"

"Oh, yes, there is a theatre, I believe," answered Mrs. Trafford; "I am not so sure about there being a little party. Unfortunately, I know nobody here."

"Well, you know Sir Francis Coplestone, at all events," rejoined Mr. Lister, cheerfully. "If you and he will do me the honour to dine with me at the Hôtel Métropole on Saturday night, I'll contrive to collect a lady from somewhere or other to establish an equilibrium."

Frank marvelled at the cool audacity of the man in adding with a laugh, "But my lady shall be altogether unexceptionable. She shall not be Miss Daisy Villiers, for instance."

"You hardly know her well enough to invite her," remarked Mrs. Trafford, with a smiling composure which, all things considered, was scarcely less marvellous. "For my own part, I shall like very much to dine with you and your unexceptionable friend, whoever she may be. It will make a pleasant little break in the monotony of my present existence."

Frank wished her good-bye somewhat curtly.

He could not help being provoked with her, although he had, of course, no business to be provoked. If she really liked this insufferable fellow, and was willing to submit to his impudence, there was nothing more to be said.

Something more, however, might very well be said to the insufferable one, and as he walked away from the house in company with Mr. Lister, he endeavoured to say it.

“Please don’t count upon me for Saturday,” he began; “I am not sure that I shall be still here then, and even if I am——”

“My dear Coplestone,” interrupted Mr. Lister, “I am quite conscious of owing you an apology, and I hope you will be good enough to accept it. Naturally, I should not have spoken as I did about Miss Villiers in your presence if I had had any idea that you were—er—interested in her; but I couldn’t well apologise or retract at the moment, because I thought—and, I am bound to confess, I still think—that Mrs. Trafford may do herself harm by seeming to be intimate with a lady of that peculiar notoriety. I am sure you must understand what I mean, and that I may hold such an opinion without the slightest intentional insult to—the very charming personage in question.”

“You are entitled to hold and express any opinions that you choose respecting the charming personage; everybody is entitled to think and say what he chooses about a professional dancer,” replied Frank,

with ill-suppressed bitterness. "Your apology implies that you hold other opinions concerning me and her which happen to be mistaken; but you are entitled to them too, I suppose. I really have no excuse for quarrelling with you."

"I am sincerely glad to hear you say that," Mr. Lister declared, with good-tempered heartiness, "and I hope you won't disappoint me and Mrs. Trafford by turning your back upon us at the end of the week. The little contretemps which occurred just now was quite as unpleasant to me as it was to you, I assure you; but we are both of us men of the world, and we know better than to take offence where none is meant, don't we?"

As soon as he could, Frank got rid of the gentleman who obviously did not mean to offend him, but whose very existence, unluckily, was an offence, and who, moreover, had not disavowed certain suspicions ascribed to him. Those suspicions, it was no longer permissible to doubt, must be removed from his mind and from the minds of other people without further delay. Frank stood for a few minutes, frowning and biting his lips, upon the steps of the hotel, where his companion had quitted him; then, with the air of one who has made up his mind to have a large double-tooth extracted, he marched straight back to Mrs. Trafford's door.

She did not seem in the least surprised to see him when he re-entered her drawing-room; on the con-

trary, her first words, as she laid down the book which she had been reading, were: "I was expecting you."

"I can't think why you should have expected me," returned Frank, with a touch of excusable irritation, "except that you always seem to know more about me than I do about myself."

"That," Mrs. Trafford remarked, smiling, "doesn't prove me to be possessed of any extraordinary powers of penetration."

"It would if you knew why I am here. Of course I can guess what you think, but you are mistaken. I haven't come to abuse Mr. Lister. He certainly appears to me to allow himself considerable liberties; still if you don't object to them it isn't for me to protest. Besides, from the moment it is admitted that he has a right to take up that sort of tone in speaking to you at all, one can hardly blame him for saying what he did. Nine men out of ten would think the same and say the same—always supposing they had the right."

"I don't blame him," answered Mrs. Trafford quietly, "and I am glad to hear that you don't. But you didn't hasten back to talk about him, you say?"

"No, not about him—although it is he who has made me feel that I must talk to you now about somebody else and—and tell the truth at last. It will cost me your friendship, I daresay, but there's no help for that. All I beg you to remember is that you asked

me no questions, and that at least I told you no direct lies, even if I have been deceiving you all this time. You wouldn't be dissuaded from taking Daisy up; you never seemed to feel the smallest curiosity respecting her and me—and yet you must surely have had conjectures!”

“Convictions would be a better word,” observed Mrs. Trafford, calmly; “but, whatever they are to be called, I undoubtedly had them, and I presume that they are about to be confirmed.”

“I don't think so,” replied Frank; “I don't see how it is possible for you to have been convinced of the real state of the case, which is perhaps in one way less discreditable to me than you may imagine. The woman whom you know as Daisy Villiers is my wife, that's all. We were married long ago, before I went out to India—before you and I ever met.”

Viewed in the light of a *coup de théâtre*, this announcement was so complete a failure as to be downright ludicrous. An interrogative “Yes?” was the sole comment of Mrs. Trafford, who was leaning back in her chair, and whose eyes, as she raised them for a moment to meet Frank's, expressed neither astonishment nor displeasure.

“Ah, she has told you all about it then!” he cried.

“Not a word; I have no more asked for her confidence than I have for yours. But, if you will consider for a moment, no other explanation of your being here

with her would hold water. You are both of you honourable people——”

“Are we?” interrupted Frank. “Well, if you still think that!—and if you actually mean to say that you don’t condemn me——”

“Oh, you are getting on a little too fast now. I don’t condemn you for having, as you say, ‘deceived’ me; you were not bound to tell me that you were married. But whether you have been justified in deceiving the rest of the world, and whether you have been justified in ignoring your wife as you have done is exactly what I don’t know. I suppose that is exactly what you are going to explain.”

“I suppose so,” assented Frank, with a sigh.

He narrated the whole history of his married life, concealing nothing that could tell against himself, acknowledging that his passion for Daisy had been a short-lived affair, and laying no more stress than was necessary upon the many causes that she had given him for doubting her constancy. Mrs. Trafford listened attentively, and when he had made an end of speaking, held out her hand to him.

“Didn’t I tell you that you were an honourable man?” she said. “You have been very patient—a little stupid, perhaps. I don’t think any impartial person would say that you had been much to blame up to the present time; but now, I am afraid, there is only one honourable course for you to adopt.”

Frank nodded despondently. “Oh, yes; if it were

only for your sake, Daisy must take the name that she is entitled to now. But she won't consent to live at Malling, you know, and I can't pretend that I want her to do so."

"That may come later; but I think you ought to live together somewhere, and I think you will find that she will consent to that. If I were you, I should take her abroad in the first instance; it would be the best plan in every way—the best for her health, amongst other things. Go at once and make the suggestion to her; only please don't say that you are making it on my account, or on anybody's account, except yours and her own. I may be very arrogant, but I really do not think that I shall suffer any more from being seen in public with Miss Daisy Villiers than with Lady Coplestone."

Frank made no rejoinder; but, after a long pause, he could not help saying, "You are probably right—but I didn't expect you to take it quite like this, somehow."

"Do you complain?" she asked.

"Oh no; you tell me that I have acted like an honourable man, which is an indulgent view to take, I suppose. Only you don't seem to be a bit sorry for me."

"Well, I am sorry for her too, you see," Mrs. Trafford answered. Then—softened, perhaps by a glance at Frank's dejected visage—she added quickly. "Oh, I am sorry for you—more sorry than words can

tell. It is all so unfortunate, and so irremediable! But what is the use of moaning when things are irremediable? All one can do then is to make the best of them, and that ought to be easier for you than it is for many people, because you have nothing—or, at any rate, very little—to reproach yourself with. Two little scraps of comfort I can give you. One of them is that your wife is not, and never has been, a bad woman—you may take my word for that; the other, which you won't think much of, though it's rather important in reality, is that she cares a good deal more for you than you do for her."

"Oh, I believe she likes me," said Frank; "she has always assured me that she did. I can't see why it's important, though."

"No; and you wouldn't even if I told you—which there isn't time to do. I must send you away now, because I have to go out; but I daresay you will let me know to-morrow how you have sped."

"You don't mean to drop us, then?" said Frank, rather foolishly.

"Why in the world should I? If ever we cease to be friends, it will be by your choice, not mine."

"Or by Lister's choice," thought Frank. But it was scarcely worth while to make such a speech as that to a lady who seemed desirous of maintaining amicable relations with him; so he sadly and silently went his way.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SOME PAINFUL EXPERIENCES.

FRANK, as he walked off to Eaton Gardens to do his duty, was a very unhappy man indeed. Mrs. Trafford (whose placability had left him more sore than any verbal castigation could have done) had, to be sure, declared that she was sorry for him; but it was impossible for her to be half as sorry for him as he was himself, because she had only been made acquainted with a small part of the misery that he had to bear. If he had told her that he loved her—and he almost wished he had—would she, he wondered, have been angry or amused or merely indifferent? Well, it did not much signify. She was going to marry another man; she was going, he hoped, to be happy; and his own future fate must, in any case, have been the same. To suffer in silence was the lot marked out for him; the only thing to be wished for now was that he might be permitted also to suffer in solitude.

Nevertheless, it behoved him to offer Daisy once more the companionship to which she was legally

entitled and which she had repeatedly declined. He was disposed to believe, in spite of an incidental assertion of Mrs. Trafford's, that that offer would again be refused, and although he was resolved that his wife should now take the name of Lady Coplestone, whether she wished it or not, he was more than ready to acquiesce in any scheme for a separate mode of existence that it might please her to suggest.

He found her extended upon a sofa with an open novel lying, face downwards, upon her knees, and she greeted him with a long, weary yawn.

"So here you are at last!" she said. "Well, what's the news? Mr. Lister had some flattering remarks to make to Mrs. Trafford about me, I suppose? How did she receive them?"

"He told her that the line ought to be drawn somewhere, and she gave him to understand that she would draw it where she chose," replied Frank succinctly.

"Well done she! Not that I expected her to say anything else. And then?"

"As far as he was concerned that closed the incident; but I daresay you will understand how I felt about it. Anyhow, I did feel that she must now hear all there was to be heard; so, after Lister and I had gone away, I went straight back to her house and made a full confession."

"The more fool you, dear boy! Still your intentions, no doubt, were excellent, as they always

are, and I don't suppose you shocked her very much."

"Not in the least; I didn't even surprise her. But she quite agreed with me that the time had come for us to acknowledge publicly that we are husband and wife. I mentioned, of course, that I had your permission to make that acknowledgment. I couldn't say that you were likely, in my opinion, to be willing to take up your abode under the same roof with me—which she appeared to think indispensable."

"And I daresay you added that you yourself weren't exactly consumed with anxiety to lead me to your ancestral mansion and receive an address of congratulation from the tenantry."

"I believe I did. You have spoken to me so very plainly at various times, Daisy, that you can hardly be hurt or offended at anything that I may say to you upon that subject, and the truth is that I would rather not take you to Malling. All the same, I am prepared to do just what you wish. We don't love one another; we can never be husband and wife again, except nominally; but we shall have to announce that we are married, and it seems to me that there will be a little less scandal and a little less gossip if we don't have to announce at the same time that we have agreed to an amicable separation. However, as I say, I place myself unreservedly in your hands, and we will live together or apart, just as you may decide."

“Thanks, so much! It is only a question of the roof being a sufficiently extensive one, then? Well, I really don’t think I care a straw, one way or the other. We’ll bar Malling for the present, anyhow; but if you like to send for your portmanteau and your hat-box, you can be accommodated here. Or we might go abroad for a time, so as to let the cold blast of censure blow itself out during our absence.”

“That was what Mrs. Trafford suggested,” observed Frank rather ruefully; for, indeed, this matter-of-course assent was scarcely what he had anticipated or desired. “She fancied, too, that the change might be good for your health.”

“Mrs. Trafford’s suggestions are as excellent as your intentions,” Daisy remarked; “we can’t do better than act upon them. As for the state of my health, I doubt whether it will be changed by any change of climate or scene—and so does the doctor. He’ll order me abroad though, if you ask him. He’s a clever little man, and I expect he’d rather lose a paying patient than have her die upon his hands.”

“You must not talk about dying, Daisy!”

“All right; we won’t talk about it. It isn’t a very lively subject, I confess, and we may as well assume, for the sake of convenience, that you wish me to live many years. When all’s said, why shouldn’t we be just as good friends as the majority of married people?”

“I think we are good friends,” said Frank. “We

might be better friends, perhaps, if we knew a little more about one another than we do."

"Ah, I wouldn't answer for that! There's such a thing as knowing too much."

She began to sing in her queer little scrap of a voice: "*Du hast Diamanten und Perlen*"—wouldn't you like to be told where they came from? Well, you ain't going to be told, and I'm not going to ask questions which you might consider indiscreet. '*Du hast doch die schönsten Augen—Mein Liebchen, was willst du mehr?*' Once upon a time, I remember, you had a great admiration for my eyes, and were quite satisfied with the knowledge that they were your lawful property. They have gone off colour a little bit since those days—like other things, eh? Come, old boy, we'll do the best we can, and we won't attempt what can't be done. We'll bear and forbear; you shall have all the liberty you can wish for and, on my side, I'll promise not to disgrace you. '*Mein Liebchen, was willst du mehr?*'"

He was, at all events, not likely to get more, nor was he, perhaps, at the bottom of his heart very eager for revelations which could serve no satisfactory purpose. Moreover, it would be anything but satisfactory to be called upon for a reciprocal revelation, the nature of which Daisy showed some sign of anticipating. He, therefore, replied:

"So be it! I'll write to my relations and to a few friends at once. I daresay that will suffice in

the way of publication. And as soon as you have interviewed your doctor we'll go—where shall we go?"

"Monte Carlo, for choice," answered Daisy; "but really I'm not particular. My relations will also have to be informed; but I don't think they will bother you much. In fact, I'll undertake to say that they shall not. Upon second thoughts, I would rather you stayed at the hotel until we fly the country hand in hand. There would be something a little ridiculous in your transporting yourself and your belongings to this house all of a sudden, wouldn't there? Or do you think Mrs. Trafford would be contented with nothing less?"

Frank said he did not see what Mrs. Trafford had to do with the question; but Daisy returned, laughing: "Oh, she has a good deal to do with it—everything, indeed. Isn't it in order to make things smooth and comfortable for her that I am about to have visiting-cards engraved with the august title of Lady Coplestone? Well, I would do more than that to make things smooth and comfortable for her—though, between ourselves, I am sorry that she should want to marry that cold-blooded prig. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll ask you to go away. I'm too tired to go on talking; added to which, there's no more to be said."

There was not much more to be said; but there were, of course, a good many things to be done—

most of them of an unpleasant nature. Frank spent the evening in writing letters in his own room, thus avoiding any further parley with Mr. Lister, and if this occupation, together with planning arrangements for a prolonged absence from home, kept him out of bed until a very late hour, that was no great misfortune, seeing that he had little inclination for sleep.

When he betook himself to Eaton Gardens, the next day, he found Mrs. Trafford already seated with his wife, and was cheerfully greeted by the former. The latter's eyes, he was sorry to see, were red; she seemed listless, and took scarcely any part in the conversation that followed, although, after a time, she made some effort to re-assume her usual lively manner. The doctor, he was told, had called, and had recommended the south of France—Italy—any place, in short, that his patient might fancy. Daisy would be ready to make a start in a few days' time. "And I should think," added Mrs. Trafford, "you will want to run back to Malling, and perhaps to London, before you leave England, will you not?"

He was not conscious of a desire to run anywhere, except (if only such a thing were practicable!) to the uttermost ends of the earth; but he perceived that these two ladies were anxious to get rid of him, and he made the reply which they apparently wished him to make. Subsequently Mrs. Trafford was good enough to drive him back to his hotel, profiting by

that brief opportunity for confidential intercourse to make an appeal to his generosity.

“You will be kind to her, won’t you?” she pleaded. “She is ill and unhappy, and—she is going, for the first time, to be in your power.”

“I really can’t accuse myself of ever having been unkind to her,” was Frank’s somewhat cold answer.

“Well, perhaps you haven’t had the chance; but you will have it now, and I hope you are too much of a gentleman to take advantage of it.”

“I hope so, I’m sure,” said Frank. “I don’t exactly understand what you mean; but I suppose I may safely promise not to be brutal, if that’s all.”

“You will come to understand in the long run; you may even come to understand that you have been a little brutal, without in the least intending it. Oh, I don’t say that the fault has been all on your side; still you can’t hit a woman when she is down, and your wife is down now, poor soul! The doctor told her plainly to-day that she would never be anything but an invalid: that ought to make you forgive her, if you have anything to forgive.”

Perhaps so; but it made him wince, nevertheless, to be reminded of his conjugal duties by the woman whom he loved, and he was glad enough to escape from a possible repetition of such experiences. Experiences only a few degrees less painful awaited him in Kent and in London, where he curtly announced what had to be announced and bore, with such phi-

logy as he could command, the amazed, compassionate or indignant comments to which his news gave rise. Miss Coplestone's comments, it is scarcely necessary to say, were of the latter description. He had written to her; but, being in London, and having a sort of perverse craving to drink the cup of humiliation to its dregs, he called upon his aunt, who metaphorically tore him limb from limb for his pains.

"I never thought," said she, with appalling calmness, "that I should live to be thankful for your dear father's death; but I am more than thankful now that he was spared this terrible disgrace. Some of our ancestors, I believe, were guilty of certain crimes of violence—that has been so in every family that I ever heard of. But you are the very first of our name who has stooped to take a wife out of the gutter. I hope you enjoy the peculiar distinction, and I hope you are prepared to enjoy it in comparative solitude; for you may rest assured that no decent man or woman will ever cross the threshold of Malling again while you live."

"Mrs. Trafford will," said Frank. "That is, if we ever return to Malling—which seems rather doubtful at present."

"Oh, you'll return," answered Miss Coplestone, with a short laugh; "your wife will insist upon that, you will find. But Mrs. Trafford won't call upon her; because, for one thing, there won't be a Mrs.

Trafford much longer. There will be a Mrs. Lister, whose husband, let me tell you, will be far too wide awake to patronise disreputable people, with neither money nor influence in the country. For my own part, I can only say—as, of course, you will have expected me to say—that it will be quite impossible for me ever to receive or acknowledge the present Lady Coplestone. My one hope is that you will soon sue for the divorce which, by all accounts, you should have no difficulty in obtaining.”

To these amenities Frank submitted without protest or attempt at retaliation. What was the use of quarrelling? He went about his business, transacting it methodically and as silently as might be; then he returned to Brighton to say that he was quite ready, and to be informed in reply that Daisy wished for another week's delay. She, too, it seemed, had been receiving visits and letters, congratulatory and other; she was rather tired after it all, and she was not feeling very well, and she was reluctant to quit Mrs. Trafford, to whom she clung with something of the peevish stubbornness of a sick child.

“What a pity it is,” she exclaimed, “that I can't put everything straight by dying at once! But the doctor, you will be sorry to hear, does not think my life in any danger.”

CHAPTER XXX.

MR. LISTER COMES TO THE POINT.

FRANK, who had planned to leave Brighton with his wife on the Saturday morning, so as to give Mr. Lister and his projected dinner the slip, was not best pleased to find that he would now have to kick his heels for another week in a place where he was known by sight, and where he might expect to be stared at with some curiosity. Already paragraphs had appeared in the newspapers; already the half-forgotten Dancer in Yellow had acquired fresh notoriety through her proclaimed union with a young country baronet; nothing could be more certain than that the baronet in question, as well as his somewhat inexplicable conduct in living apart from his wife, though close to her temporary residence, would be made the theme of endless gossip. But the greater swallows up the less, and Frank, vexed at first by the prospect of pin-pricks which he thought that he might very well have been spared, soon forgot the general public in brooding over grievances of a more directly personal character.

The truth is that neither Mrs. Trafford nor Daisy seemed to have much sympathy to bestow upon him. They were constantly together; his entrance invariably had the appearance of interrupting a confidential interchange of views; he was usually given to understand, in more or less plain terms, that the sooner he went away the better they would both be pleased. Upon the whole he could not help feeling—and what was worse, suspecting they meant him to feel—his present position to be not only painful, but undignified and ridiculous. They had the air of thinking uncommonly little of him—which, all things considered, was really rather too bad!

“I don’t claim any credit for acting as I have done,” he was moved to say to Mrs. Trafford, when, for a few minutes, he obtained possession of her ear; “but at the same time I think my convenience might have been consulted to some extent, seeing that from the very first I have been perfectly ready to acknowledge Daisy as my wife. Surely she must understand that this delay in making ourselves scarce is not very pleasant for me!”

“Have patience,” Mrs. Trafford returned; “she is scarcely fit to travel yet, and if she seems to you to be selfish, you should try to realise what you would be in her place. The future, I am afraid, does not look much more attractive to her than it does to you; but you at least have good health—besides occupations to fall back upon.”

“I have no occupation here,” said Frank, rather sullenly, “and how I am going to occupy myself in some foreign watering-place heaven alone knows! However, it doesn’t much signify what becomes of me. I have, at all events, the consolation of knowing that I may hang myself as soon as I please without leaving anybody inconsolable.”

Mrs. Trafford received this little outburst with an indulgent smile, and he walked away to repent of his foolish petulance. Of course, it would make no difference to her whether he hanged himself or not; he had altogether misunderstood what he had supposed to be her friendship for him. At one time he had, no doubt, interested her; but now that she knew all about him, he was no more worthy of further study than a finished novel which may be returned to the circulating library forthwith. What, after all, was he? A commonplace young man who had made a very great ass of himself and had incurred the penalty which commonplace young asses deserve. Daisy and her history were, it might be assumed, more complicated and therefore more likely to repay investigation. Thus Frank went his way, meditating bitterly, as he scowled at the loungers who turned to look at him—for indeed it is always about those whom we love that we harbour the hardest and most unjust thoughts.

He reached his hotel in time to be accosted by

Mr. Lister, who had just arrived from London, and who, after shaking hands with him, said :

“Somebody told me you had left Brighton. Does our engagement for this evening hold good?”

“How do you do?” answered Frank, curtly. “No, I shall not be able to dine with you this evening, thanks. I dare say you know why.”

Mr. Lister responded by a polite smile, and by one of those incoherent, disjointed murmurs to which our language and our customs lend themselves so conveniently. “Oh, of course, more attractive engagement elsewhere—very sorry we are not to have the pleasure of seeing you—quite understand!”

He could hardly have dealt better with an uncomfortable situation, seeing that he evidently had no notion of inviting Lady Coplestone to join the party. He had at least the good taste to refrain both from congratulations and from renewed apologies for his remarks of the previous week, and Frank, who longed to pull the man’s nose, was fain to acknowledge that no shadow of an excuse existed for any such hostile demonstration. It presently transpired that Mr. Lister had secured a lady of irreproachable position to meet Mrs. Trafford, and that he thought he knew where he could lay hands upon a substitute for Sir Francis Coplestone.

The project was not to fall through, then, and arrangements had been made (doubtless after epistolary consultation with Mrs. Trafford) to fill up a

vacancy which had been foreseen. There was nothing in that which should have hurt Frank's feelings, or increase his wrath against a lady from whom he had received a great deal of kindness, first and last; but as a matter of fact, it had the effect of a last straw upon him, and he had to march off rather rudely and abruptly, lest he should say something downright insulting before he could stop himself.

He dined with Daisy that evening, and learned from her that Mrs. Trafford had spoken, with every appearance of agreeable anticipation, about the little entertainment which Mr. Lister had been so kind as to organise.

"I should imagine," Daisy added, "that there will be news for us all to-morrow. Putting this and that together, I feel pretty sure that the eminent statesman means to take this opportunity of avowing his tender sentiments, and I'm afraid there is a very poor chance of his avowing them in vain."

She was looking her husband full in the face. There was a slight smile upon her lips, and her voice had an intonation of mockery which did not escape him.

"I don't know why you say that you are afraid," he responded, a trifle defiantly. "Is there any reason why Mrs. Trafford shouldn't marry this man, if she likes him?"

"Oh, yes; lots. Firstly, he isn't worthy to black her boots; secondly, he is a fortune-hunter; thirdly,

he will bore her to death—though I suppose she doesn't think so. Those are real good reasons, and I could add to the list if I chose. Personally and selfishly, I object to this match because I know she won't be allowed to speak to me again after her marriage, and she happens to be the only person in the world who has the knack of consoling me. Perhaps you also might have a few personal and selfish objections to raise, if you were consulted?"

"I shall not be consulted," Frank answered; "but if I ventured to put forward my objections, I don't think they would be personal or selfish ones. Mrs. Trafford has been a very good friend to me; it is natural enough that I should not wish to see her throw herself away. However, I presume that she knows what she is about, and that she doesn't look at Lister with your eyes or mine. Did she—er—give you to understand that——"

"She—er—gave me to understand that she declined to be questioned upon the subject," answered Daisy, with laughing mimicry. "As far as I can make out, she is going to accept him; but I may be mistaken. You see, she doesn't like to speak quite openly to me, because she is afraid of stirring up my jealousy. Yet Lord knows I'm free enough from that vice!"

"Your jealousy?"

"Come, now, Frank!—that air of exaggerated innocence wouldn't deceive a baby in arms. I'm really

and truly sorry for you, and if I could set you free this moment, free you should be; but, as I can't, we'll say no more about it. After all, it isn't a matter of absolute certainty that your freedom would have been of any use to you. One thing I can do, and that is to allow you a very long tether. You mustn't suppose that we are going to live together to the end of our days. I consented to this foreign trip, partly to please that dear woman, who has religious prejudices upon the subject of matrimony, and partly because it seemed to me that you would be better out of the country until people had stopped talking about you; but I am not quite such a brute as you think me. I shall settle myself down at Cannes or Monte Carlo or somewhere and spend my summers in Switzerland. Every now and then you can run out and see me, just to show that there's no ill-feeling; but the state of poor Lady Coplestone's health, you understand, will always prevent her from accompanying you to England. You will be your own master, in short, and live your own life."

He was a little touched and a little ashamed of himself; yet he felt that he had a right to say, "Some such arrangement would probably suit you quite as well as it would suit me."

"Quite as well," Daisy agreed, cheerfully. "County society wouldn't suit me at all, even if I had a chance of being admitted into it—which I haven't. On the other hand, Tommy Fellowes and the rest of

one's old pals are pretty safe to turn up on the Riviera from time to time. Oh, I shall be all right!"

She was feeling well that evening, and it was long since he had seen her in such good spirits. After dinner she suddenly proposed that they should go to the theatre and take their chance of securing seats. It would be rather fun, she said, to watch the Lister-Trafford party from afar and "hear what they are saying to one another through a pair of opera-glasses." But by the time that she had put on her cloak and a cab had been sent for she had changed her mind.

"It isn't good enough," she said; "upon second thoughts, I believe I'd rather go to bed. Do you know what it is to feel as if the mattress and the bed and the floor and everything else were sinking away from under you?"

Frank shook his head; he could not say that he did.

"Well, for your sake, I hope you never will. It's a beastly sensation—almost worse than pain. But that's how I feel sometimes when I'm tired, and that's why it isn't worth while to tire myself. Come back to-morrow and tell me the news. You'll hear it from one or the other of those good people, I suppose, and we'll mingle our tears, preparatory to buying them a very nice joint wedding-present."

If Mr. Lister had any news to communicate, he did not impart it to Frank, whom he encountered at

breakfast on the ensuing day, and to whom he casually mentioned that he was going to drive out into the country with Mrs. Trafford that afternoon. His manner seemed to indicate that he had not yet proposed, but that he was about to do so, and that he was not at all nervous as to the nature of the reply that awaited him. There was, indeed, an air of placid, smiling self-confidence about this highly successful gentleman which his experience probably justified, but which was nothing short of infuriating to one who was conscious of having irretrievably mismanaged his own affairs. That, Frank reflected morosely, as soon as he had made his escape, is the one and only sin which Destiny never pardons. All things come to the man who waits, and who is wise enough to be consistently selfish: the arrant fools who love their neighbours—especially their female neighbours—must look for a reward elsewhere than in the midst of this very practical and material community.

Having arrived at that agreeable conclusion, he naturally did not go to church (where he might have been vexed by hearing his views confirmed), nor did he pay the visit to Eaton Gardens which Daisy, perhaps, expected. He had nothing to tell her; he would very likely have something to tell her by dinner time, and he was, to confess the truth, in such a vile temper that he was best alone. So he spent the entire day in roaming restlessly to and fro out of doors, in objurgating itinerant preachers, in glaring at innocent

holiday-makers and in wishing with all his heart that he had never been born.

Yet consolation of a sort was in store for him, had he but known it. Returning to his hotel in the waning light of evening, he had to stand aside to make room for a porter who carried a portmanteau upon his shoulder, and behind the porter walked the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for War with pale face and knitted brows.

“Hullo!—are you off?” ejaculated Frank, involuntarily.

Mr. Lister stopped short, surveyed his questioner from head to foot, and then—perhaps for the first time in his life—permitted himself the luxury of putting his exact thoughts into words.

“Yes,” he replied, “I am off. I came down here, as you are doubtless well aware, for a special purpose, and I am sure you will be glad to hear that I have failed in that purpose. Your friend, Mrs. Trafford, will, I know, give you her opinion of me; possibly it may interest you to be told my opinion of you. My opinion is that a married man who, by passing himself off as a bachelor until concealment is no longer possible, contrives to win the heart of an unsuspecting woman, is a scoundrel beneath contempt. Pray do not trouble yourself to put on a look of bewilderment; I am under no illusion as to the cause of my having been rejected and insulted. If what I have just said should chance to strike you as insulting, you can take

what notice you please of it. Whatever Mrs. Trafford may choose to call me, neither she nor anybody else, I believe, has as yet accused me of being a coward."

He paused for a moment after making this provocative speech; but, receiving no reply, he turned on his heel and stepped into the cab that was waiting for him. Not until Mr. Lister was out of sight did Frank realise that he ought, of course, to have knocked the man down; not until a good deal later could he take in the meaning of the amazing revelation to which he had just listened.

CHAPTER XXXI.

DAISY TAKES LEAVE.

It must be owned that Frank's first impulse was to rush off to Mrs. Trafford's house and ascertain from her own lips how much or how little of truth there was in the statement made by her rejected suitor. But a very little reflection made it plain to him that that would never do. It was permissible to rejoice over Mr. Lister's dismissal; it was scarcely permissible to express his joy; it was altogether out of the question to ask her whether the cause assigned for her action was indeed the true one, while every consideration of duty and honour enjoined upon him to hope that it was not. In all probability it was not. Angry men are apt to say foolish things, which reasonable men forget, or at least treat as meaning nothing; and if Frank did not feel quite capable of doing the former, it was certainly within his power to do the latter. So, by the time that he had dressed for dinner and had presented himself in Eaton Gardens, he was able to say, and almost to think, that his eyes

were sparkling and he was smiling all over because a very good friend of his had been mercifully preserved from falling into an irremediable mistake.

“Three cheers!” cried Daisy, as soon as the good news had been imparted to her. “If I had a kick left in me—which I haven’t—I’d dance the house down! I don’t mind telling you, between ourselves, that I didn’t expect this; it would have been so much more like her to accept the man because it was so important for him to be accepted and because she herself didn’t particularly care, one way or the other. It really looks as if she must care—the other way I mean.”

It was perhaps only a guilty conscience that made Frank fancy his wife was scrutinizing him somewhat shrewdly and interrogatively, and caused his ears to grow uncomfortably hot. Anyhow, she refrained from further speculations as to Mrs. Trafford’s motives for declining a brilliant alliance, and during the remainder of the evening she was so cheery, lively and talkative that she drew more than one smothered sigh from him. Why could he not be at least resigned to a fate which many a man would have envied? Why could he not recall the past, pass the sponge over painful intervening incidents and live happily with a wife who could be charming when she liked? Well, he could not because he could not, and because, although the order of Nature demands incessant death and renewal, that which is renewed never is and never

can be that which has died. There was no more to be said about it.

For the rest, he tried to be, and succeeded in being, far more friendly and pleasant than he had been of late. Daisy's prattle amused him and made him laugh almost as of yore; he managed to talk as if he quite enjoyed the prospect about visiting Paris and Rome and Naples; he recognized that she, on her side, was taking some steps to meet him, and he was very glad to hear from her that she was now well-nigh ready to set off upon her travels.

"I think," she said, "if it's all the same to you, we'll cross from Newhaven to Dieppe on Tuesday night. I'd rather be sea-sick than take that long, weary railway journey by Dover and Calais, and I'm a heroic sort of sailor if I ain't a very good one. I wonder whether you remember telling me once, a hundred years ago, that I looked charming even when I was sea-sick?"

"Yes, I remember," answered Frank, rather sadly. "You used to play the banjo and sing in those old days, and the hands on board the poor little Mon-goose used to creep up on deck after dark and listen to you. I wish——"

"Oh, no, you don't," interrupted Daisy, laughing; "and it's just as well that you don't, because there wouldn't be much use in wishing, would there? Every dog has his day, and I've had mine. Taking it altogether, it has been a better one than yours, old

boy ; so it don't become me to grumble. I do grumble sometimes, I know, and make myself so uncommonly nasty that you can't tell what I would be at ; but that's bad health, not vice. It always used to be said of me that I had a good temper—even father and mother acknowledged that I was good-tempered—but when one is seedy one goes to pieces all over, within and without. However, I'm going to turn over a new leaf now."

Frank sighed. She had scarcely the right to reproach him—though she seemed, somehow, to be reproaching him—and he did not desire to insist upon any right that he might have to reproach her. The best plan was, as she suggested, to "turn over a new leaf," and he could but hope that the next leaf of their joint lives might prove moderately pleasant reading.

Mrs. Trafford, upon whom it was only proper and fitting that he should call early the next afternoon, was of opinion that there ought to be no real difficulty in rendering it so. She was very glad, she said, to hear that the date of his departure from England was now definitely fixed, she was sure that he would never regret having taken a step which he was bound in honour to take, and she added that, with a little forbearance and good-will on both sides, all would yet go far more smoothly than he seemed to expect.

"What I hardly like to say to you, and what, perhaps, there is not much use in saying, is that she

has cared for you and been true to you all along. You provoked her by your lectures, and she was proud and independent—very likely she said and did some foolish things. But I am certain that she has never been guilty of anything worse than foolishness.”

“Well,” answered Frank, “I hope you are right; but, as you say, there isn’t much use in telling me such things. Whether the fault is with her or with me, it is an unquestionable fact that a great gulf is fixed between us, and neither of us has the slightest wish to throw anything but a conventional bridge across it. However, we are going to make the best we can of a bad job.”

He was silent for a moment, and then—partly by way of carrying the war into the enemy’s country, partly because absolute reticence was more than he could bring himself to concede to her—he resumed: “I saw Mr. Lister just before he left yesterday evening.”

“And I suppose,” said Mrs. Trafford, quite composedly, “he told you why he was leaving. He was so angry that he was capable of telling anybody anything.”

“He told me that you had refused him,” answered Frank. “To me that was very good news, and all the better because I had quite made up my mind to hear the contrary.”

“You thought I should marry him, then?”

“Why not? You seemed to me to be giving him

every encouragement; you told me long ago that—that you loved him once. Why should you not marry him, now that nothing stands in your way or his?”

“You must have forgotten what I told you long ago, or else you disbelieved in my sincerity. How can you say, how can you possibly think, that nothing stands between me and a man who turned his back upon me when I was poor, but who is not too proud to swear that he has never ceased to love me, now that somebody else’s money has made me rich! It is indeed salutary and instructive to learn at what a low level one stands in the estimation of one’s best friends!”

“I saw no reason why you should not have forgiven him,” said Frank, who was determined not to apologise. “Are you not always impressing the beauty of forgiveness upon me?”

“Oh, if I had cared for him I should have forgiven him, no doubt—what doesn’t one forgive to those whom one loves? But although I can’t deny—I wish I could!—that I loved him once, an end came to that when I found out what he really was, and before I married Mr. Trafford. He has chosen to pay his addresses to me again lately, scarcely even taking the trouble to conceal his motives for doing so, and I did not think that it was any business of mine to warn him off. I am not in the least sorry for him; I can’t even pay him the compliment of

being angry with him, though he certainly did his best to stir up my indignation."

"He did his best to stir up mine," remarked Frank. "He was abominably insolent, and I shouldn't have let him escape as I did; only the truth is that I was too much taken aback by what he said to have any reply, verbal or other, ready. Perhaps I ought to follow him up to London and give him a hiding."

Mrs. Trafford laughed. "Oh, I don't think you need postpone your journey for that purpose," she said; "a personal encounter with a member of the Ministry would be scandalous, as well as slightly ridiculous, and I dare say he is aware that you would be quite capable of giving him a black eye, or making his nose bleed, if you thought it worth while. I suppose he told you, as he told me, that nothing short of an infatuated attachment to yourself could account for my having refused him?"

Frank signified assent, and she appeared to be a good deal more diverted than annoyed by this confirmation of her surmise. It was doubtless well that she should take it in that way; but Frank, for his part, did not find the joke a very excellent one, and presently she also became grave once more.

"I never supposed that he would understand, but I should have thought you would understand," said she, "why it is, and always will be, out of the question for me to marry again. At

any rate, you have been told, for I well remember telling you."

"Yes; but you didn't convince me. You talked about 'smudges' upon your history—as if there were one man in ten thousand whose history would bear looking into!—you certainly gave me no reason in the world to believe that you would reject Lister, if you still cared for him. As far as that goes, you would have been very foolish and very wrong to reject him on account of such a foolish scruple, and I am glad to know that he was dismissed on his merits—or demerits."

"It is a matter of no great consequence, either way," Mrs. Trafford remarked. "Very likely, if I had cared for him, I should have wished him to forgive me, and, as I said just now, I should have forgiven him, though I doubt whether I should have married him. The case of those who are married already is altogether different. One sees the possibility, not to say the necessity, of mutual pardon and a fresh start there."

"I am ready to do what is possible and necessary," said Frank. "I think I have given proof of that."

"Oh, you are behaving well. Only you might behave a little better, and I am sure you would, if you realised what I almost despair of bringing you to realise."

"That Daisy has been a model wife to me, do you

mean? No; I am afraid that I can neither realise nor idealise her quite to that extent."

"Nobody asks you to do anything so absurd; but, although you repent of your bargain, and are to some extent justified, I daresay, in repenting, you might remember that you made it with your eyes open. She seems to have laid down conditions which you accepted at the time, and I can't help hoping that you will see the cruelty of deserting her, now that she is ill and solitary and almost forgotten."

"I don't know what you call desertion; it is her own wish that we should have separate establishments," said Frank, rather coldly.

"She is bound to say so to you; she says so even to me. But, at the risk of doing more harm than good, I must tell you, just for this once, that she isn't speaking the truth. When she talks about you her voice and her face change, in spite of herself; I know for certain, by a hundred trifling signs which it isn't worth while to enumerate, that it is not because she is anxious to get rid of you that she is so determined to leave you free. Why, after all, should you both be lonely and unhappy, when such a simple and natural remedy lies ready to your hands? There! I have obeyed my conscience now, and I won't add another word. All I beg of you and her is that you will allow an old friend to see you sometimes—either together or separately; but together, for choice."

If Mrs. Trafford had a conscience, Frank was similarly equipped; and it was for that reason, amongst others, that he went away sorrowful. It might be true that Daisy, notwithstanding her apparent aberrations, had remained-faithful to him; it might even be true that she still loved him. But he could no more wish such things to be true than he could desire to carry Mrs. Trafford's well-meant suggestion into effect. Yet the suggestion would probably have to be made by him; that terrible conscience of his assured him that it must, and refused him the permission for which he pleaded to tell a few little lies, in order to insure its acceptance. Of all the distressing dilemmas in which his hasty marriage had placed him this final one was the very worst, and that for which he had been least prepared. He was sure to be questioned; he was sure to be forced to confess to Daisy that he loved another woman; even the melancholy satisfaction of reflecting that he had done his duty to his own detriment was likely to be denied him. No wonder he was seized, as he stood on the steps of the house in Eaton Gardens, with a desperate inclination to take to his heels, ship himself off for Central Africa, and never be heard of again!

Instead of doing that, he resignedly rang the doorbell. Is it not a fact—and a very fortunate one—that only men of abnormal audacity have the courage to run away?

Almost immediately the door was flung open, not by the man-servant, but by Daisy's maid, a somewhat familiar and impertinent person, whom Frank did not like, and whose manner had become additionally offensive since her mistress's true name and title had been divulged. He frowned now, and perceiving that she had something to say, was about to wave her impatiently aside, when, to his astonishment, she clutched him by the arm.

"Oh, sir!" gasped the woman, whose face was white and scared, "oh, Sir Francis—her ladyship's dead!"

"What! dead? Who is dead? I don't know what you mean," Frank stammered out stupidly.

"Indeed it's true, sir, and James has gone off to the hotel to fetch you, and you'll find the doctor in the drawing-room, where he said he'd wait till you came. Her ladyship went to lay down as soon as she'd had her lunch and said she was feeling tired and didn't wish to be disturbed. So I didn't think to go to her room, not till rather more than an hour ago, to ask her if she'd like a cup of tea, and—oh, dear! it did give me such a turn! Soon as ever I see her laying there on the bed, with her face like marble, I knew what it was, and I run out upon the landing and called to Susan and——"

"Did you send for the doctor?" interrupted Frank.

"I should have done, sir, though it was easy to

be seen she was beyond the help of doctors: but, as chance would have it, he came in to pay his usual visit at that very moment, and he says at once, 'It's all over,' he says 'life has been extinct this hour or more!' And he tells me it don't surprise him. 'She was in that state as death might come at any moment,' were his words. I really thought I should have dropped!—not having had no notion of such danger, and being so fond of her ladyship, and her, I may say, more attached to me than to anyone else in the world, unless it was yourself. Oh, Sir Francis!—"

Frank did not wait to hear more, but hastened upstairs to the drawing-room, where the doctor, who was grave and sympathetic, but who had the air, somehow, of suspecting that he was not in the presence of an inconsolable widower, confirmed what had been related.

"I fear this is a terrible shock to you, my dear sir, and you may think perhaps that I ought to have prepared you for the possibility of such an occurrence. But, for her sake as well as for your own, it would have been unwise to do that. In these cases of organic disease life may be, and often is, prolonged for many years; no precautions beyond those which I enjoined upon her could have been taken; I should only have saddened and depressed you both by saying more than I did."

"You don't think," said Frank, recovering the

use of his tongue with some difficulty, "that if anyone had been with her at the time her life might have been saved?"

"Oh, dear, no! The chances are that she turned over in her sleep upon her left side—a thing which I had warned her not to do—and the end, as far as one can tell, must have been instantaneous and painless."

Only to a favoured few does the end come after that fashion. Most of us must needs watch the slow decay of our physical and mental powers, must bear as best we may weeks and months of suffering and perish inch by inch, those who love us being forbidden by inexorable social and religious laws to show us that mercy which it is considered to be the grossest inhumanity to withhold from a horse or a dog. The *Dancer in Yellow*, who had finished her earthly task, whose experience of the joys of existence was almost certainly over and who had already lived long enough to survive her reputation, was perhaps rather to be envied than pitied. Without doubt, she was likely to be more mourned than if she had made her exit from this tiny mundane stage at a less opportune moment.

All these reflections passed through Frank's mind as he stood gazing sadly down at the white, placid, smiling face which had once been so dear to him. The dead, of whom by common consent no ill must be spoken, appeal in their pathetic silence and help-

lessness not so much to our indulgence as to our sense of justice. Now that they can never again vex or interfere with us, we recognise a little remorsefully that they were in all probability neither better nor worse people than we ourselves. As for Frank, if his remorse was at the outset somewhat exaggerated, it was at least more to his credit that he should grieve than that he should rejoice. The maid, who presently came to draw him away from the death-chamber, and who judged the occasion appropriate for mentioning that her dear late mistress had promised to provide handsomely for her, was led by his reply to the conclusion that Sir Francis Coplestone was a real gentleman; and as such the reader will be glad to hear she has not ceased to proclaim him from that day to this. Being a conscientious woman she cannot, of course, affirm that her dear late mistress (who died intestate) was a real lady; but she says that many ladies of high degree will find themselves compelled to walk behind Daisy Villiers in the Kingdom of Heaven. And this may possibly be true.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MISS COPLESTONE IS NOT SURPRISED.

“OH, indeed! Well, I can't say that I am surprised,” observed Miss Coplestone. “It is a subject for congratulation, no doubt; but coming, as it does, so soon after events which one can't quite forget, and upon which it was impossible to congratulate anybody, I really don't feel equal to raising the shout of triumph that you seem to expect of me.”

Rather more than a year had elapsed since the news of Lady Coplestone's sudden death had brought about a partial reconciliation between Miss Coplestone and her nephew. Almost immediately afterwards he had set forth on one of those journeys to the far East and the far West which are common enough in these days of abolished distances, and now, having circumnavigated the globe, he had called upon her in her little London house to report his return and communicate a piece of intelligence which had elicited the above somewhat ungracious reply from her.

“I really think you must be rather surprised,” said Frank, in a tone of gentle remonstrance.

“Surprised at what? At your good fortune, or at your having lost so little time? I assure you I was quite prepared for both. I have noticed that you—unlike certain other people whom I could name— invariably fall upon your feet, and as for precipitation—well, I scarcely expected you to beat about the bush very long after your return. A year’s absence satisfies the demand for decency, and I presume that you and she understood one another pretty well before you left the country. So there would have been no particular object in further postponement.”

“You are quite mistaken,” Frank declared. “When I went away I had no more idea of ever asking Mrs. Trafford to be my wife than she had of taking me for her husband. Much less, indeed—for although I knew long before then that I should never marry any one else, she only thought of me as a friend until a short time ago. That I know from herself.”

“Ah,” observed Miss Coplestone, drily.

“Come, Aunt Lucy!—you have always been rather prejudiced against her; but you surely won’t go so far as to assert that she has been spreading her net to catch such a very small fish as I am! You must be aware that she has had as many opportunities as she could covet of doing infinitely better for herself from a worldly point of view.”

“She might have married Mr. Lister, they say. It stands to reason that a woman so well provided with money, and with an average share of good looks,

might have picked and chosen. I don't for a moment doubt that her young—more or less young—affections have been bestowed upon you."

"Only you think, perhaps, that they have been bestowed somewhat unworthily? There, at all events, I can agree with you," said Frank, modestly, yet with a tinge of mortification in his tone.

Miss Coplestone shrugged her shoulders. "There is no accounting for tastes. I confess that, if I had been in her place, I should have preferred single blessedness to following so closely upon the heels of a ballet-girl, and I don't think, either, that I could have brought myself to face all the gossip that there will be about this match, and the amiable remarks that her friends will be sure to make to her. But I suppose she has counted the cost."

"I suppose so," said Frank. And then, after a short pause—"Aunt Lucy, is there any good in being nasty about it? We haven't a great many relations, and we don't want to be upon unfriendly terms with the few that we have. I quite hoped and thought that you would be pleased."

"Oh, I am pleased," Miss Coplestone answered, relenting a little; "it is an excellent thing for the family, and it is just what poor Harry would have wished, and it is far better luck than you deserve. Don't ask me to jump the roof off for joy, that's all. Don't you understand how you exasperate me, with your sunburnt smiling face, and your air of having

everything that the heart of man could desire? I am a penurious old maid, who has done her duty all the days of her life, and has reaped neither thanks nor reward; whereas you are a young wretch, whose conduct has been simply outrageous, and to whom everything—even losses and misfortunes—have brought gain. Heaven knows, I don't want to quarrel with my relations! I could hardly afford it. But you must allow me the privilege of saying sharp things to you every now and then. They will do you no harm, and they may serve to remind you of what you have no business to forget."

"You may say anything you like to me," replied Frank, "though I don't think my memory will be quite so short as you imagine. But please don't speak harshly to her! If you really knew her, you would know how sensitive she is, and how extraordinarily humble and good! I suppose you won't believe me; but I had all the trouble in the world to wring her consent from her, even after she had owned that she did love me. And that, not because of my unfortunate first marriage, but because she considered herself eternally disgraced by her own! I don't believe there is another woman like her in the world; I don't believe——"

"Oh, that will do!" interrupted Miss Coplestone, laughing; "spare me the rhapsodies. I am not going to be rude or disagreeable to her, and though I can't quite go the length of calling her unique, I am will-

ing to believe that she is quite as good as most of us and better than some. Now go back to your paragon and give her the nicest message from me that you can concoct on the way. Of course she has been in love with you ever since she nursed you through that illness; even in my poor dear Gerard's time I had suspicions, which I kept to myself."

That no ground for such suspicions could have existed Frank had already been assured upon the best authority, and when he returned to Curzon Street, whence he had been despatched to say what had to be said to the redoubtable Aunt Lucy, that assurance was emphatically renewed.

"I can't think what she can have meant!" Mrs. Trafford declared. "If there was one thing of which I was absolutely certain at the time you mention, it was that I should live and die alone. Only a few weeks—or perhaps it may have been a few months—ago did it dawn upon me that I was an even greater idiot than I had taken myself for; and even then I had not the remotest intention of ever marrying you. However, if it makes Miss Coplestone any happier to think that she knew me better than I knew myself, by all means let her think so. We shall have to let a great many people say and think things which aren't true, I am afraid."

"So long as we know the whole truth about one another," said Frank, "that won't matter very much, will it? The only thing I regret is that

I didn't tell you the whole truth about myself long ago."

"Ah, we have more than that to regret, both of us! We have left undone what we ought to have done, and we have done what we ought not to have done; it seems scarcely fair or right that we should have so much health and capacity for happiness left in us."

"Well, we are fortunate; there is no use in denying that we are fortunate—I, of course, much more so than you. But I don't think that those who are dead would grudge us our good fortune."

"It might occur to them that we are enjoying it at their expense, and that we had done remarkably little to deserve it. It is true that I never deceived Mr. Trafford, and that he was under no illusion at all respecting me; yet I wish—oh, I can't tell you how I wish!—that I had never married him!"

"If it comes to that," said Frank, "I wish with all my heart that I had never married poor Daisy."

"That was quite different. You married her because you loved her."

"Because I thought I loved her."

"No; because you really did. I, too, as you know, once really loved another man. Don't let us try to make ourselves out less fickle than we are; we can't be humble enough or thankful enough nowadays. But I daresay," she added, with a short, involuntary

laugh, "we may be looked upon as having sown our wild oats by this time, you and I."

If the present Lady Coplestone reaps what she has sown, she will probably have no great reason to be dissatisfied with her harvest when the time comes to gather it in. As for Frank, it is pleasant to be able to speak of him as a model landlord, an active J. P. and an efficient member of the County Council. Perhaps, as he pursues his smooth, busy course through life, he does not throw many backward glances over his shoulder: why, indeed, should he? The present claims the attention of every practical man; the future is in some degree manageable by him; the past is irrevocable, and in many respects unimportant. But every year, when spring comes round, his wife and he visit a cemetery in the neighbourhood of Brighton, where a certain grave is kept gay with waving daffodils. It may safely be asserted that they are the only two persons now living who ever bestow a thought upon the once famous *Dancer in Yellow*.

THE END.

